

**“THE PLACE OF IMAGINATION”:
HUMPHREY JENNINGS AND THE BIPOETICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE**

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to reanimate discussion of British artist and documentary filmmaker Humphrey Jennings by reconsidering his body of work in light of the biopolitical transformations of modern life. While biopolitics is a familiar paradigm in the humanities and social sciences that understands how the category of life, in the figure of the population, became the primary object of political management and control, Jennings is famous for his poetic documentary films about the everyday life of resistance during the Second World War. Remembered as the cinematic poet of ordinary people, Jennings combined his concern with everyday life with his ongoing interest in Classical and Romantic traditions of poetry and painting modulated by the formative influence of Surrealism, to become perhaps the most significant British documentary filmmaker of the first half of the twentieth century. Bringing together a concern with everyday life with questions of poetic form and meaning, then, I use the concept of *biopoetics* to examine how Jennings repeatedly returns to an animating tension between the poetic imagination of *the people*, on the one hand, and the management of *the population* on the other. I argue that it is as a biopoetic vision devoted to documenting the emergence of the people as the collective subject of poetry and modernity (and simultaneously the population as expropriated object of power and information) that everyday life took on its urgency for Jennings as the “place of imagination.”

In order to draw out how Jennings’s oeuvre is animated by tensions within the people/population, my argument moves roughly chronologically through a selection of his projects, including his critical writing, poetry, painting, and documentary films considered against the background of their institutional and historical contexts. This includes Jennings’s artistic,

editorial and organizational contributions to British Surrealism and the social research organization Mass-Observation in the 1930s; his unfinished “imaginative history” of the Industrial Revolution, *Pandaemonium* (which preoccupied him until his death in 1950 at the age of 43); and his documentary films made under the auspices of the Crown Film Unit during the war. In each case I examine how Jennings’s use of an array of poetic and cinematic techniques emerges from a biopoetic desire to at once document *and* transform the everyday life of the people.

Dedication

For my grandparents, Chuck and Georgie Birdwise and Bill and Stasia Limebeer.

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Preface

“This is for Everyone”

“This is for everyone.” Sir Timothy Berners-Lee tweeted this message from a home office revealed inside a modest household at the centre of Stratford Stadium during *Isles of Wonder*, the widely praised historical pageant designed by filmmaker Danny Boyle and author Frank Cottrell-Boyce that opened the London 2012 Olympics Games. Linking the domestic space of the home — a little suburban castle — to a vision of the public sphere, the tweet, typed on the vintage NeXT Computer Berners-Lee himself used to launch the first site on the World Wide Web 1.0, was screened on thousands of LCD lights across the stadium’s stands (see Image A.1). As one journalist’s headline put it, the real-time “landscape video” transformed the attendees from “people into pixels for multimedia spectacular.”¹ The utopian technological spectacle, visible to a billion viewers on television and millions of followers on social media, arrived as the culmination of the sequence devoted to the “pandaemonium” of the Industrial Revolution, announcing a transition to the “Dawn of the Digital Age” — the ultimate realization of the “British genius” emerging from the social and industrial toil endured by generations past.²

It is significant that a filmmaker was tasked with directing the multimedia spectacular of *Isles of Wonder*. Danny Boyle, known for the popular neo-noir *Trainspotting* (1996) and the global phenomenon *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), has made a career of representing multicultural, international Britain, celebrating (and sometimes critiquing) the diverse flows of images, bodies,

¹ Karen Friar, “Olympics opener turns people into pixels for multimedia spectacular,” *ZDNet* (July 28, 2012) https://www.zdnet.com/article/olympics-opener-turns-people-into-pixels-for-multimedia-spectacular/?fbclid=IwAR3E2dahD_U2gJVapIdM_AKjzY6_68GaL%E2%80%A6 (accessed September 1, 2018).

² The ceremony, as Danny Boyle writes in the programme accompanying the event, “celebrates the creativity, eccentricity, daring and openness of the British genius.” Danny Boyle, “Welcome to the Isles of Wonder,” in *London 2012 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony Official Programme* (London: Haymarket Network, 2012) 11.

capital, drugs, music, and energy — in short, culture — that traverse the political boundaries of the postcolonial nation. Boyle’s vision of present-day Britain likewise informs his staging of the history of the Industrial Revolution. According to the programme for the Olympic Ceremony, there is a narrative of progress, what he calls a “golden thread,” weaving together the spectacle and energy of the scenes of the Industrial Revolution inaugurated in the late seventeenth century with the “digital revolution” of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Situating the design for *Isles of Wonder* in a redemptive social-technological *telos*, Boyle writes:

But we hope, too, that through all the noise and excitement you’ll glimpse a single golden thread of purpose — the idea of Jerusalem — of the better world, the world of real freedom and true equality, a world that can be built through the prosperity of industry, through the caring nation that built the welfare state, through the joyous energy of popular culture, through the dream of universal communication. A belief that we can build Jerusalem. And that it will be for everyone.³

In *Isles of Wonder*, Christopher Bryant argues, Boyle presented a “people’s history” of modern Britain, a story of the nation that “really was about the people.”⁴ In this sense, Boyle’s popular ceremony thus realized one of the central mythopoeic dreams of the cinema. As Georges Didi-Huberman reminds us, filmmakers in the so-called primitive and modern periods, from the Lumière brothers to Sergei Eisenstein to Leni Riefenstahl and beyond, were obsessed with

³ Boyle, “Welcome to the Isles of Wonder,” 11. British Library curator Luke McKernan considers this moment the unification of the various threads of the pageant, illustrating how a digitally “interconnected society...overrides the forces that have divided it in the past, moving forward to — perhaps — Jerusalem.” Luke McKernan, “Pandaemonium and the Isles of Wonder,” *Moving Image: Blog about the British Library and Moving Images*, July 29, 2012, <http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/sound-and-vision/2012/07/pandaemonium-and-the-isles-of-wonder.html> (accessed August 10, 2018).

⁴ Christopher G.A. Bryant, “National Art and Britain Made Real: The London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony,” *National Identities* (2015): 9. Bryant goes on: “His story of the nation omitted great imperial, political and military figures; his economic history featured the workers as much as Brunel; and his version of the digital revolution celebrated the possibilities it opened up for everyone as much as Berners-Lee” (9).

representing, with figuring and exposing, *the people*.⁵ Testifying to the undeniable existence of a national-collective body by identifying it in the image, filmmakers contributed to realizing — and exercised fantasies about realizing — that gloriously integrated body of the community, whether republican, communist, fascist, and so on. Boyle’s multimedia pageant updated this dream of the modern cinema, then, by choreographing a mass body bonded together through the energy of industry, technology and popular culture, combined with a liberal (inclusive, multicultural) fantasy of contemporary Britain made available to a global home-viewing audience.



Image A.1. “This is for everyone.” *Isles of Wonder*, London 2012 Olympic Ceremony.

⁵ See Georges Didi-Huberman, “People Exposed, People as Extras,” *Radical Philosophy* 156 (July/August 2009): 16-22. Didi-Huberman writes: “The question remains to know, finally, *by what means and with a view to what these ‘views’ were exposed*. We know that the figuration of the people was a crucial question for the ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ cinema, beyond – or starting with – ‘Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory’” (17). Emphasis in original. In *Cinema 2*, Gilles Deleuze contends that a fundamental difference between the classical and modern political cinemas turns on the question of the representation of the people — its presupposition and presence (classical) or its void and absence (modern). “In classical cinema,” Deleuze writes, “the people are there, even though they are oppressed, tricked, subject, even though blind or unconscious.” And he goes on: “if there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet ... *the people are missing*.” Thus the task of modern political cinema is to articulate this missing people as a gap in representation. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 216. Emphasis in original.

Sent out to social media and then emanating from the 80,000 attendees of the Olympic Ceremony, Berners-Lee's tweet is also significant in the way it fed back into the theme of the people. If, as Boyle suggests, Jerusalem is realized *in potentia* in the activity of social networking on the internet, then Berners-Lee's message that "This is for everyone" (reflecting the spirit of decentralized democratic access he intended in 1990) also served as a prophetic statement, calling forth the presence of the *pandemos*, that which is "of or belonging to all the people" — an everyone that realizes itself precisely through "open border" participation in the universal exchange of information.⁶ In *Isles of Wonder* Boyle thus drew on the mythical image of Berners-Lee as the architect of the internet to make him into the digital prophet of Jerusalem, using his mass-illuminated tweet to transubstantiate a crowd of bodies and private interests into a choreographed people, a cooperative community of light.⁷ Predicated on the fantasy of collapsing the distance between the material and immaterial as an achievement of technologically mediated co-participation and co-witnessing, this phantasmagoria of the people as the *medium of themselves*, then, generated what Bryant, drawing on Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, refers to as "collective effervescence," an experience of the shared energy of a collective identity — of *many lives* coming together as *one life* — that only ritual celebration can produce.⁸

⁶ While Berners-Lee sought a public, non-proprietary commons of the internet, it is ironic that the opening ceremony was not "royalty-free," as the history of the people it celebrated was punctuated by a royal exception: the presence of the queen (accompanied by James Bond, the nostalgic fantasy figure performed by Daniel Craig).

⁷ As Boyle and Cottrell-Boyce put it in the Olympic ceremony programme: "For changing the way we live, he sought no personal gain. He's the origin of the theme of this ceremony, 'this is for everyone.'" Boyle and Cottrell-Boyce, "Thanks Tim," in *London 2012 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony Official Programme*, 25.

⁸ Bryant writes of Durkheim on the "collective effervescence" of Australian aboriginal bands: "The shared experience reminded them that they were one people distinct from others and its very intensity ensured that that lesson of the coming together continued to live in the memory after the event was over." Bryant, "National Art and Britain Made Real," 12-13. As I write this, the waves of mass protest across the United States sparked by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police can be seen as further confirmation of the continuing relevance of Durkheim's insight.

While *Isles of Wonder* might have inspired a near-religious feeling of euphoria and optimism in 2012, from the vantage point of the post-Brexit referendum (and the 2019 defeat of the Labour Party) it appears in a somewhat different, perhaps more sinister, light. In retrospect, the glorious summoning of the people smacks of nostalgia if not of dangerously narcissistic national-collective self-worship.⁹ The unity of “everyone” imagined by the ceremony now seems to alternate between two incommensurate, yet mutually reinforcing, configurations: the liberal-democratic ideal of cultural pluralism, open borders, global communication, and trade and commerce; and the populist-nationalist ideal of a strong, sovereign nation, a unified Britain proud of its history, imperial and otherwise.¹⁰ While the former is predicated on a massive disavowal of social antagonism and economic inequality, in the latter the reactionary dimensions of “collective effervescence” reveal themselves in what Bryant understands as the “renewal of communal bonds and the reaffirmation of collective identity.”¹¹ In addition, commercial and state

⁹ For a critical view of the authoritarian background of the Olympics see Andrew Manley and Michael Silk, “Liquid London: Sporting Spectacle, Britishness and Ban-optic Surveillance,” *Surveillance & Society* 11.4 (2014): 360-376. For the latter view, one which celebrates the ceremony precisely for what its unabashed patriotism and popular pageantry offers leftists, see Steven Baxter, “The Olympic opening ceremony shows why lefties should embrace pageantry,” *New Statesman America* (28 July, 2012). <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/steven-baxter/2012/07/olympic-opening-ceremony-shows-why-lefties-should-embrace-pageantry> (accessed July 28, 2018).

¹⁰ In his study *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, William Davies describes Brexit as “the revenge of politics on economics.” He explains: “The UK government assumed that the more they repeated expert economic analysis in favour of European Union (EU) membership, and the more economists, technocrats and world leaders they could find to agree with them...the more people would vote to remain in the EU. This now appears to have been the opposite of the case.” William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (revised edition) London: Sage, 2017), xiv.

¹¹ Bryant, “National Art and Britain Made Real,” 13. In a 2016 article on the EU referendum, the philosopher Peter Hallward argues that Brexit not only posed an economic-rational question about EU membership and national borders; it also became the occasion for asking a different but related question about popular sovereignty, a notion at odds with politics conceived of as merely the aggregation of private interests into “popular opinion.” Thus the referendum raised what Hallward calls a “question about exploitation, austerity, and the brutally disempowering impact of neoliberal capitalism.” “Denied any direct chance to say ‘no’ to harrowing levels of inequality and precarity,” he writes, “a huge fraction of the electorate used the referendum to say just that, and with very good reason.” Nevertheless, Hallward concludes, mass determination did not lead to emancipation; rather, “relying on deceit, nostalgia, and fear, the leading Leave campaigners did everything they could to divide people against each other, leaving us even more fragmented and disempowered than we were before.” Peter Hallward, “The Will to Leave?,” *Jacobin* (June 30, 2016). <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/brexit-eu-uk-leave-farage-johnson-lexit-referendum-vote-sovereign-will/> (accessed March 15, 2018).

surveillance, including data-mining, the digital enclosure of information and the maximization of profit on the internet, further undercuts Boyle's monumental vision of a networked Jerusalem and Berners-Lee's promise of a digital commons equally available to an abstract everyone.¹²

From Isles of Wonder to Pandaemonium

That said, Boyle also drew from a tradition of British art and literature in *Isles of Wonder's* people's history. His vision of Jerusalem is taken, of course, from William Blake's "And did those feet in ancient time," the preface to his epic poem devoted to his predecessor, the seventeenth century Republican poet and statesman John Milton.¹³ While the idea of Jerusalem is familiar to British audiences in particular from Sir Hubert Parry's popular 1916 hymn, Boyle's historical pageant had an even more recent source of inspiration: Humphrey Jennings's *Pandaemonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*. Born in 1907, Jennings was a British poet and artist who died in 1950 at the age of 43 while scouting locations in Greece for a documentary film on the status of international health in postwar Europe (posthumously released in 1951 as *The Good Life*). He began working on what he described as his "imaginative history" of the Industrial Revolution in the late 1930s. Combining documentary realism and history with the visionary tradition of Blake, *Pandaemonium* builds on Jennings's Surrealism-informed poetic and artistic practice along with

¹² Already in 2002, Geert Lovink argued that this vision of the internet was little more than a wishful dream from the past: "The early, mythological phase of digital culture is rapidly running out of its utopian energies. The Internet as a global economic model has replaced the libertarian-hippie model of a network architecture and culture that was so prominent in the early to mid 1990s. But this merely replaces one essentialist view with another. There are hardly any signs left of cyberspace as an autonomous, supranational, transgender sphere." Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002): 331. This is of course why in 2012 Berners-Lee reasserted his earlier intention (in 1990) that the internet must be understood as a *common* property.

¹³ Simply titled *Milton*, Blake's poem intersects with Milton's *Paradise Lost* in myriad ways, notably in its appeal to Jerusalem — a "Kingdom of God" beyond the scourge of petty nationalisms — whose hoped-for historical destiny, by way of unceasing "mental fight," is to triumphantly emerge from social and economic strife and the domination of earthly tyrants.

his organizational and editorial contributions to the social research organization Mass-Observation in the 1930s and his work in documentary film for the General Post Office and the Crown Film Unit (for which he made his famous wartime films).

Jennings, the subject of this dissertation, made *Pandaemonium* by collaging together observations — what he calls “images” — from a diverse array of texts written by those who lived through the epochal ruptures and chaotic social transformations of the Industrial Revolution. Adapting cinematic methods of montage in his editorial approach, Jennings presents a cumulative but internally varied assemblage of images, discovering latent connections (and contradictions) through the juxtaposition of disparate viewpoints and subjects. In the course of reading *Pandaemonium*, images possess their own value, but they also set up and refract one another, intersecting and feeding back in their meanings over time. In this light, the images and the relations between them embody how conflict is constitutive of, and not merely contingent to, the historical path from the past to the present. The book’s inaugural image of industry and the “demonic” exploitation of the earth taken from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, then, transfers its allegorical power to the texts that follow it, which retrospectively reframe its meanings in turn.

Jennings’s study took its name from Milton’s allegorical City of Hell: Pandaemonium, a neologism for the “Palace of All the Devils” built under the orders of Mammon. Jennings thus invested Milton’s demonic image with a powerful prognostic value for the historical period that followed it, writing in a note: “The building of Pandaemonium is the real history of Britain for the last three hundred years.” And in a point that surely informed Boyle and Cottrell-Boyce in their conceptualization of *Isles of Wonder*, Jennings argues that, “Its building began c.1660. It

will never be finished – it has to be transformed into Jerusalem.”¹⁴ Due to Jennings’s untimely death, *Pandaemonium* itself remained unfinished in his lifetime; and it would not be until 1985, when his daughter Marie-Louise Jennings and his friend Charles Madge edited and prepared a selection of Jennings’s mass of material, that it would be made available to the public in incomplete form. Thanks to its inspirational effect on Boyle and Cottrell-Boyce, a new edition of *Pandaemonium*, including a new Foreword by Cottrell-Boyce, was reprinted as a tie-in with the Olympic Ceremony in 2012.¹⁵

In his emphasis on the conflicts of “the coming of the machine,” however, Jennings presents a somewhat different vision from the rosy picture of an inevitable Jerusalem that Boyle paints in *Isles of Wonder*.¹⁶ For while Boyle’s “golden thread” of progress appears near-realized in its self-fulfilling prophecy, offering one dominant vision of the Industrial Revolution in its celebratory image of contemporary Britain, Jennings’s *Pandaemonium* never finally closes its materialist dialectic of images: bearing the marks (conflicts, contradictions, compromises, condensations) of the combinative process through which it was made, it continues to suggest

¹⁴ Humphrey Jennings, note for image 1 “The Building of Pandaemonium (c. 1660),” in *Pandaemonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, ed. Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (New York: The Free Press, 1985) 5. Indeed, as Jennings and Blake understand it, the Industrial Revolution brought massive social and political change, including exploitation and misery for the underclasses and industrial proletariat alongside the vast accumulation of wealth for property-owning capitalists.

¹⁵ Other twenty-first century media works inspired by Jennings include Kevin Macdonald’s biographical documentary, *The Man Who Listened to Britain* (2000), and *Life in a Day* (2011), Macdonald’s globally crowdsourced compilation film about everyday life; *How Little We Know of Our Neighbours* (2005), Rebecca Baron’s experimental documentary on the legacy of Mass-Observation and its relation to contemporary surveillance culture; and Adam Kossoff’s *Through the Bloody Mists of Time* (2019), an essay film premised upon the idea of an imaginary conversation that took place between Jennings and Walter Benjamin while both were attending the 1937 Paris Exposition.

¹⁶ Åke Bergvall argues, for instance, that Boyle and Cottrell-Boyce misappropriate Blake’s vision of a new Jerusalem, turning his critical view of the Industrial Revolution into praise. See Åke Bergvall, “The Blake Syndrome: The Case of “Jerusalem,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 41.4 (2013): 261. Situating their analysis of *Pandaemonium* in relation to contemporary discourse around the anthropocene, furthermore, Nicola Whyte and Axel Goodbody argue that “Jennings’s account of the Industrial Revolution is richer and more complex than Boyle’s adaptation, for it gives space to the fragmented and contradictory nature of human experience and interpretation of change.” Nicola Whyte and Axel Goodbody, “Pandaemonium: Narratives of Energy-System Change in Historical and Literary Perspective,” *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 6.2-3, *Stories of Energy: Narrative in the Energy Humanities* (Spring-Fall 2019): 27.

different routes through the material, and, therefore, latent meanings and possible futures. It is here, in Jennings's activation of the principles of collage and montage as historical method, in the conflicts and contingencies of seeing and re-seeing an event from multiple perspectives and distances, that a key difference between his poetic vision and that of Boyle resides. That is, where Boyle's spectacular event presents a fantasy of material struggle progressing into the flows of immaterial culture, Jennings's assemblage of material — what he refers to as "knots in a great net of tangled time and space" — threatens (and promises!) to explode or untangle at any given time due to its internal differences.¹⁷ In a seemingly paradoxical way, it is this internal combustibility that also gives *Pandaemonium* its power to engage readers in an imaginative process of historical recovery, a poetics in which readers must themselves tie the threads between image-citations in order to generate their own vision of the "coming of the machine."¹⁸

It is not simply that the idealized pageantry of *Isles of Wonder* does not accord with Jennings's more dialectical vision, then, but that it leaves little space — no *place* — for the imaginative encounter with the everyday as, at once, *ordinary and extraordinary* in its contradictions *for everyone* — a paradox so crucial to *Pandaemonium*'s poetics of history. As I argue in this dissertation, it is in the shadow cast by the contradictions of our everyday lives that it is necessary to reconsider the poetic — or *biopoetic* — imagination of Humphrey Jennings.

¹⁷ Jennings, "Introduction," in *Pandaemonium*, xxxv. It is not the popular pageantry, nor the unabashedly patriotic celebration of the welfare state (or whatever is left of it) represented by the NHS sequence, for instance, that diverges so much from Jennings's historical and political project; it is, rather, that the linearity and consensus of Boyle's and Cottrell-Boyce's design ultimately amounts to a banal acceptance of the status quo, one adopting certain of its terms in its glorification of multicultural, postmodern Britain. My criticism of *Isles of Wonder* thus shares a lot with Jennings's own 1936 critique of critic Herbert Read's reduction of Surrealism to the tradition of British Romanticism, serving what Jennings calls a "romantic-cultural-*soi-disant* cooperative-new uplift racket." See Humphrey Jennings, "Surrealism," *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* (December 1936): 168; reprinted in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 220-221. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter One of this dissertation.

¹⁸ In this sense, the gaps between the images in *Pandaemonium* are a gateway through which poetic transformation may occur, causing the images to flicker with documentary-historical value and poetic ambiguity. As the building blocks of a historical *and* utopian imagination, the gaps and the images gesture toward a *future* constellation.

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Introduction

“The Method of Poetry”: Toward a Biopoetics of Everyday Life

The fox knows many things; the hedgehog, one big thing.

— Archilochus

Humphrey Jennings has been described as a humanist, a socialist, and as a radical innovator of forms: an avant-gardist with a social conscience, a cosmopolitan artist with a passion for British culture. He is also remembered as a gifted propagandist, a poet who, in a series of remarkable documentary films made during the Second World War, put images of everyday life into the service of the British state and the myth of “the people’s war.” Other critics, however, who also consider his art and criticism of the 1930s, take Jennings to be little more than an aesthete who failed to commit himself to a coherent artistic or social vision.¹ For these two camps, it seems, Jennings was either too institutionally contained and ideologically uniform, or too romantically naive and artistically inconsistent to warrant a more dialectical approach to his work.²

¹ It is relevant to note that Jennings certainly inspired conflicting feelings and criticism during his own lifetime. John Grierson, for instance, while appreciative of Jennings’s talents as a filmmaker, nevertheless once described him as an “intellectual dilettante.” Grierson cited in Jim Hillier, “Humphrey Jennings,” in *Studies in Documentary* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 68. Edgar Anstey, meanwhile, dismissed Jennings’s *Listen to Britain* (1942) as “the rarest piece of fiddling since the days of Nero.” Edgar Anstey, “The Cinema: *Listen to Britain*,” *The Spectator* (March 13, 1942): 282. Anstey also criticized *The Silent Village* (1943), Jennings’s documentary reenactment of the Nazi massacre of a Czech village. He took particular umbrage with the film’s poetic conceit of combining the naturalistic representation of the everyday life of a Welsh village with these same villagers’ performance as their deceased Czech counterparts. “It is difficult to see,” Anstey sceptically observes, “what useful propaganda the Ministry of Information believed would emerge from asking for the performance of such a solemn charade in the guise of a documentary film.” Edgar Anstey, “The Cinema: *The Silent Village*. At the Regal and the Empire,” *The Spectator* (June 1943): 10.

² For a range of contrasting perspectives on Jennings that reconsider the ideological dimensions of his films, especially those produced during the Second World War, see, for example, James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939–45* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co., 1998); Andrew Britton, “Their Finest Hour: Humphrey Jennings and the British Imperial Myth of World War II,” in *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 302-313; Thomas S. Davis, “The Last Snapshot of the British Intelligentsia: Documentary, Mass-Observation, and the Fate of the Liberal Avant-Garde,” in *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 27-67; and Kent Puckett’s brief but insightful discussion of *London Can Take It!* (1940) in *War Pictures: Cinema, Violence and Style in Britain, 1939-1945* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 13-15.

In contrast to these reductive and polarizing lenses, Jennings's daughter, the historian Marie-Louise Jennings, remembers a more deliberate and capacious sense of purpose, a method that questions and complicates outward appearances, that informed her father's ostensibly eclectic oeuvre. As she argues in her introduction to the 1985 publication of *Pandaemonium*, Jennings's unfinished historical collage of texts — or “images,” as he puts it — about the epochal transformations of the Industrial Revolution,

My father's method of working on *Pandaemonium* has been compared with Isaiah Berlin's artist who hopped from subject to subject: the fox who had no continuity of thought and aesthetic approach, no evolution. I believe that although on the surface he gave the impression of being foxlike, my father was inwardly more like Berlin's hedgehog: he might seem to be hopping about, but in fact he was in pursuit of one end: the purpose of the poet.³

Extending this observation to include Jennings's larger corpus, we might better understand how he was neither simply a wartime ideologue nor an artist without a coherent practice.

Jennings's poetic documentary “purpose” took shape over a period of protracted crisis in modern Britain, involving the social turmoil of the 1930s (including economic depression and labour unrest, the Abdication Crisis, and politically heated debates surrounding British involvement in the Spanish Civil War), the national emergency of the Second World War in the first half of the 1940s, and postwar reconstruction in the latter part of the decade — and all of this in the twilight of the British Empire and rising decolonization. The intellectual and artistic culture of Britain reflected, if in at times displaced or contested forms, the contradictions and

³ Mary-Louise Jennings, “Humphrey Jennings and this Book,” in Humphrey Jennings, *Pandaemonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, ed. Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (New York: The Free Press, 1985), xii. Regarding “the image,” Jennings discusses the two spheres of sensuous of activity: the “means of vision” — “matter (sense impressions) transformed and reborn by Imagination: turned into an image” — and the “means of production” — “matter is transformed and reborn by Labour.” Humphrey Jennings, “Introduction,” in *Pandaemonium*, xxxviii.

complexities of the period.⁴ For his part, Jennings followed up his training in English at Cambridge in the late 1920s, where, under the supervision of I. A. Richards, he pursued but never attained his PhD, by working in theatrical and commercial design and documentary film production in the early to mid-1930s. Alongside his evolving interests in documentary film, the history of the industrial revolution, working-class history, and the analysis of popular culture and everyday life, Jennings, like many British artists and poets of the interwar period, was drawn to Surrealism in his effort to rethink and redraw the lines of encounter between modernist and avant-garde experimentation and the realities of the contemporary world.⁵

Bearing this in mind, it was during his increasing disillusionment with the British Surrealist Group in early 1937, that Jennings, along with the poet Charles Madge and the anthropologist Tom Harrisson, co-founded Mass-Observation (hereafter M-O), the avant-garde social research group dedicated to the “democratic” collection and distribution of information — in an exhaustive (and exhausting) sense — about the public and private lives of modern British subjects.⁶ Jennings’s editorial work with Madge on *May the Twelfth, Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937, by over two hundred observers*, a post-Surrealist and para-anthropological collage

⁴ As Philip C. Logan puts it: “From the mid 1930s, until the outbreak of war in 1939, the value of art and artistic freedom became part of a broader political and ideological struggle. [...] With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936 the international scene grew darker and the field of the arts became increasingly contentious.” Philip C. Logan, *Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film: A Re-assessment* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 37.

⁵ For discussion of the political and aesthetic debates of the 1930s in Britain, see: Adrian Caesar, *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class, and Ideology in the 1930s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991); Steven Connor, “British Surrealist Poetry in the 1930s,” in *British Poetry, 1900-50: Aspects of Tradition*, ed. Gary Day and Brian Docherty (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995), 169-192; *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, ed. Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (Edinburgh: Longman, 1997); Lara Feigel, *Literature, Cinema and Politics 1930-1945: Reading Between the Frames* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2010); Benjamin Kohlmann, *Committed Styles: Modernism, Politics, and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton, “Introduction: The Long 1930s,” in *A History of 1930s British Literature*, ed. Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1-14.

⁶ On M-O and Surrealism see, for example, Jeremy MacClancy, “Brief Encounter: The Meeting, in Mass-Observation, of British Surrealism and Popular Anthropology,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1.3 (September 1995): 495-512. M-O continued to operate during the war, eventually becoming a public relations firm in the 1950s.

of “observations” on the coronation of King George VI, is exemplary in this regard. These concerns continued in the wake of Jennings’s departure from M-O in late 1937, when he began making documentary films specifically devoted to contemporary everyday life — particularly life during moments of collective excitement, anxiety and agitation, including the national emergency of the war and postwar reconstruction.

In light of Marie-Louise Jennings’s insight that Jennings is more akin to the hedgehog than the fox, it becomes clearer how he directed his “method of poetry” — as a paradigm of artistic practice and as a research methodology — toward an at once more unified yet prismatic objective, what Ben Jones and Rebecca Searle describe in their perceptive discussion of *Pandaemonium* as “the attempt to document the British experience of modernity.”⁷ In their view, one of Jennings’s most significant contributions was, like his German contemporary Walter Benjamin in the *Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*), to use montage to “construct a dialectical, polyvocal” account of this experience as “a solution to the representational crisis posed by modernity.”⁸ Benjamin’s critique of the expropriation and destruction of the ability to articulate the *collective* dimensions, in particular, of the experience of modern life is relevant here. As Susan Buck-Morss writes of Benjamin’s sense of this “representational crisis”:

Here was a fundamental contradiction of capitalist-industrial culture. A mode of production that privileged private life and based its conception of the subject on the

⁷ Ben Jones and Rebecca Searle, “Humphrey Jennings, the Left and the Experience of Modernity in mid twentieth-century Britain,” *History Workshop Journal* 75 (2013): 191. I return to Jones and Searle’s analysis of *Pandaemonium* in Chapter Three. Jennings uses the phrase “method of poetry” in the “Introduction” to *Pandaemonium*, xxxvi. The “Introduction” was assembled posthumously by Jennings’s friend and colleague, Charles Madge.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 195. See also Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). For a comparison between Jennings’s and Benjamin’s historical projects see, for example, Michael Saler, “Whigs and Surrealists: The ‘Subtle Links’ of Humphrey Jennings’s *Pandaemonium*,” in *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia and Identity in Modern British Culture*, ed. George K. Behlmer and Fred. W. Leventhal (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 123-142. I discuss Jennings and Benjamin further in Chapters Two and Three.

isolated individual had created brand new forms of social existence — urban spaces, architectural forms, mass-produced commodities, and infinitely reproduced “individual” experiences — that engendered identities and conformities in people’s lives, but not social solidarity, no new level of collective consciousness of their commonality and thus no way of waking up from the dream in which they were enveloped.⁹

Montage, as well as collage, then, is for Jennings part of a conceptual and ethical framework as much as a technique, indicating something *qualitative* and *intensive* about the ways it can be used to engender — to reveal and construct — collective consciousness, a sense of commonality from a diverse body of social and historical materials (experiences, identities, etc.).¹⁰

Indeed, this material, as Jennings develops it via montage and collage, represents a vast repository of the unconscious. “The cornerstone of Jennings’s aesthetic,” as Kenneth Robson argues, “is his belief in a ‘legacy of feeling’ that can be detected in the subliminal stirrings of the collective unconscious of a people.”¹¹ Used as a chapter epigraph by Jennings and Madge in *May the Twelfth*, this concept is taken from Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, and it is used to help explain the intergenerational *transmission* and *inheritance* of unconscious emotions and ideas as discovered in the intersections of historical customs, social institutions, cultural habits, and material artifacts of a people. In this way, again, Jennings shares much with Benjamin, as both were heterodox Marxists inspired by the subversive scientific breakthrough of Freud in their conviction that grappling with the unconscious must, alongside the methods of montage and

⁹ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 261.

¹⁰ In *A Nomadic Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), Pierre Joris provides a useful discussion of what he calls the “epistemic change” of the twentieth century as registered in collage and montage: “there isn’t a 20thC art that was not touched, rethought or merely revamped by the use of these techniques — be they called collage or *décollage*, *montaz* or *montage*, *photomontage* or *assemblage*, *découpage* or *cut-up*, etc” (86). Marjorie Perloff has also made the intriguing observation that collage “has been the most important mode for representing a ‘reality’ no longer quite believed in and therefore all the more challenging.” See Marjorie Perloff, “Collage and Poetry,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Vol. 1, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 386.

¹¹ Kenneth J. Robson, “Humphrey Jennings: The Legacy of Feeling,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 7.1 (1982): 38.

collage, be considered a key component of any attempt to understand modern experience. The method of poetry thus involves a questioning of forms of conscious *and* unconscious historical transmission and how they represent, repress or otherwise distort collective experience relative to, that is, in dynamic collaboration with, a people's "legacy of feeling."¹²

Consider, in this regard, Jennings's discussion of the poet's role in analyzing what he calls the "*everyday* emotion" of the people captured in newsreel footage showing the funeral of King George V and the coronation of King George VI:

"The film captured in a peculiar way the emotion of the people at this event, and represented it *to* the people. [...] I suggest what [the poet] can do is to make an analysis of this emotion which the camera photographs, an analysis of the 'feel' of an event like the Coronation, when people sat by their radio sets and suddenly burst into tears *and didn't know why*."¹³

Here we see how Jennings positions the poet in the role of the social psychoanalyst, who *uses* the the cinematic image to generate knowledge about, an "awakening" to, the unconscious dimensions of both the emotional and the social aspects of an event and its representations.

In Jennings's hands, then, the ethical and epistemic intensifications of poetry (notably via montage and collage) generate what can be understood as a practice of documentation *and/as* transformation in the face of a generalized crisis of feeling, that is, of what is conscious and what is unconscious in a given system of libidinal investment and cultural reproduction. "One aim of *Pandaemonium*," as Keith Beattie argues in this respect, "was the documentation of the deleterious effects of the Industrial Revolution as *a way of transforming* 'pandaemonium' (the

¹² We could compare Jennings's Freudian "legacy of feeling" to Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling," his concept for the hegemonic and affective interrelation between the "dominant," "residual" and "emergent" formations of thought and feeling in historical moments. See Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).

¹³ Humphrey Jennings, "The Poet Laureateship," in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 275-276. Emphasis in original. Later in this radio talk, Jennings discusses T. S. Eliot's "analysis of *everyday* emotion" in his 1915 poem "The Boston Evening Transcript" (280).

city of demons) into a civilized place.”¹⁴ This has been described as Jennings’s “imaginative materialism,” indicating his great poetic documentary engagement with the inherited material of history and the contemporary images and sounds of everyday life: the shapes and forms, systems and norms that animate *and* alienate the hearts and minds of the living.¹⁵ In his use of images and texts appropriated from the past and present British cultural-historical system — both conscious and unconscious in its manifest and latent meanings — Jennings thus develops an imaginative materialist poetics for recognizing constellations of common life, for uncovering the subterranean slippages and migrations of meaning that, as such, contain the potential for collective analysis and solidarity in sharing them. Jennings’s concern with the transformative potential contained inside the material of everyday life thus includes him in the tradition of what Jonathan Epstein refers to as “radical everyday life poetics.”¹⁶

The idea of “imaginative materialism,” in this light, also informs Jennings’s concern with what in *Pandaemonium* he explains is “mankind’s greatest problem”: “the relationship of production to vision and vision to production.”¹⁷ We can see the relationship of production and vision energizing Jennings’s meta-poetic montage of historical materials in *Pandaemonium*, for instance, giving body and form to his insight that with the birth of industrial capitalism and

¹⁴ Keith Beattie, *Humphrey Jennings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 19. My emphasis.

¹⁵ See James Merralls, “Humphrey Jennings: A Biographical Sketch,” *Film Quarterly* 15.2, Special Humphrey Jennings Issue (Winter, 1961-1962): 29-34. He writes: “Jennings was attracted by the imaginative materialism of Marxism, though he was far from being at any time in his life a dogmatic political Marxist” (31). Michel Remy also argues that “Jennings, one might say, should go down in history not only as the author of eminently poetic documentary films ... but more so for having developed within British surrealism a most perceptive ‘imaginative materialism.’” Michel Remy, “Surrealism’s Vertiginous Descent on Britain,” in *Angels of Anarchy and Machines for Making Clouds: Surrealism in Britain in the Thirties* (Leeds: Leeds City Art Galleries, 1986): 45.

¹⁶ Jonathan Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16. While Epstein is critical of what he calls the “transformation trope” as a cliché that belies this tradition’s ostensible “thirst for the quotidian,” Jennings, I argue, was also well aware of the elusive and complex nature of the everyday as both object and subject of knowledge.

¹⁷ Jennings, “Introduction,” *Pandaemonium*, xxxix. As Jennings puts it: “by 1750 the struggle — like that of the peasants — was over. *In other words poetry has been expropriated*” (xxxvii). Emphasis in original.

modernity, science and poetry separated from each other as social practices and systems of knowledge — that is, as ways of addressing life. It was, according to Jennings, by way of various conflicts unfolding over the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, that science and poetry consolidated themselves into competing regimes of *organizing* and *evaluating* experience, with the materialism of science and the ruthless rationalization of production ultimately coming to dominate and displace poetic vision.¹⁸ In this way, the dialectic of production and vision must also be understood as a constitutive tension informing Jennings’s articulation of the transformations of the “legacy of feeling” that accompanied the representational crisis of his own time. Indeed, *May the Twelfth* as well as his documentaries show evidence of this tension.

In this dissertation I reconsider Jennings’s understanding of the dialectic of vision and production by reframing it through an analytical lens that takes into account the *biopolitical* transformations of modern life. Reanimating Jennings’s work through the concept of *biopoetics*, I seek to critically unfold some of the ways that his concern with what Jones and Searle refer to as the “British experience of modernity” are also necessarily engagements with questions of biopolitical governance and the social and collective imaginary that formed contemporaneously with it. Taking into account his imaginative materialism, which attempts to establish a more dynamic relationship between the visionary imagination and scientific observation and analysis, I consider the ways Jennings’s method of poetry was directed toward a biopoetic investigation into

¹⁸ Jennings’s approach to the question of science and poetry echoes, with some significant revisions, that of I. A. Richards, Jennings’s mentor at Cambridge in the late 1920s. In a 1931 essay “A Reconsideration of Herrick,” Jennings refers to Richards’s 1926 *Poetry and Science*. He specifically draws from the chapter entitled “The Neutralization of Nature,” in which Richards explains how, in contrast to science’s concern with verification and the production of factual statements, poetry does not simply represent the world but rather deploys words in certain arrangements in order to stimulate emotional meanings and experiences. See Humphrey Jennings and J. M. Reeves, “A Reconsideration of Herrick,” *Experiment* 7 (Spring 1931): 50-56; reprinted in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 195-202. I discuss this further in Chapter Three.

what can be called, *pace* Fredric Jameson, the *biopolitical unconscious* of modern life.¹⁹ I will further explain what I mean by biopoetics below, but it is useful here to briefly suggest that if Jameson’s conception of the political unconscious understands narrative to be a “socially symbolic act” that solves a real but unconscious social problem, in describing Jennings’s method (including his films, paintings and poetry) as a biopoetics I am suggesting that it performs a “socially symbolic act” that attempts to provide a *poetic solution* to a real but (largely) unconscious *biopolitical problem*.

As I outline here and develop throughout this dissertation, the biopolitical problem that Jennings’s method of poetry responds to pertains to the *imaginary* and *symbolic* dimensions of biopolitical modernity. In referring to the “imaginary” and “symbolic” dimensions of biopolitics, I mean to inquire into how poetic and aesthetic forms variously enfold, modulate, evade and/or overlap with biopolitical concerns, such as how to envision, (re)value and (re)organize “life” as a “productive” object of knowledge and investment. I thus approach Jennings’s imaginative materialism as a biopoetic response — sometimes counterpoint, sometimes counterpart — to the biopolitical deployment of vision and production in everyday life; a method of poetry that draws attention to the unconscious, emotional and collective dimensions of modern life that might exceed or otherwise elude the analytical parameters of biopolitical governance. In this way, I argue that the unconscious dimensions of what I call the biopolitical unconscious are (at least) twofold: firstly, in that biopolitics, in its systematic application of scientific knowledge to the government of life, necessarily excludes and represses whatever does not serve the immediate

¹⁹ See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). That said, while I follow Jameson in attempting to understand the real but unconscious problem that the method of poetry “solves” through *form*, I also try to take into account how poetic texts and images produce *meaning*. For me, then, the question of the imbrication of form and meaning (or content) is far from settled.

interest of its rationalizing and technocratic gaze (even as this gaze itself becomes pathological and destructive), thus generating its own forms of unconscious activity; and secondly, that the forms and practices, habits and customs of everyday life, including artistic and representational forms that emerge from and feed back into it, possess, often without being fully aware of it, their own biological and biopolitical components and resonances.²⁰ In other words, both biopolitics and biopoetics pay attention to the vitality of everyday life and the “species character” of the people, thus raising questions about the relationship between governmental (productive) and poetic (imaginative) forms of managing, documenting and transforming it.²¹

It is not, therefore, that poetry is necessarily the most efficient or effective way to transmit an idea or capture an identity or document an event that makes it biopoetic, but the way poetry (according to Jennings) participates in the formation of a potentially collective image or memory; how its *bringing together* of material enacts an imaginative materialist process of transformation, one that suggests a necessary link between (unconscious) cultural and historical

²⁰ The sense in which this “biopolitical problem” is unconscious is a complex issue that I grapple with throughout this dissertation. Although they do not explicitly use the term biopolitics, two recent critical essays on Jennings’s later films also draw critical attention to what we can understand as the biopolitical imagination of his work. Leo Mellor, for one, discusses Jennings’s 1945 film *A Diary for Timothy* in terms of its dialectic between a body without words (an infant) and words without a body (an unnamed narrator addressing the infant) and how this informs the film’s rhetorical appeal to the future. See Leo Mellor, “It’s Only Chance That You’re Safe and Sound’: Meanings of the Body in Humphrey Jennings’ *A Diary for Timothy*,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies* (August 2019): 1-16. Katerina Loukopoulou has also written insightfully about Jennings’s posthumously released documentary about the Marshall Plan and national health in Greece, *The Good Life* (1951), an entry in “The Changing Face of Europe” film series. Through a montage of images of living bodies and painted figures, Loukopoulou argues, Jennings constructs a transhistorical association between contemporary (postwar) Greece and its ancient ancestors. See Katerina Loukopoulou, “Classical Antiquity as Humanitarian Narrative: The Marshall Plan Films about Greece,” in *Global Humanitarianism and Media Culture*, ed. Michael Lawrence and Rachel Tavernor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 39-58. In addition, Glyn Salton-Cox has also recently critiqued the heteronormative reproductive futurism of *A Diary for Timothy*. See Glyn Salton-Cox, *Queer Communism and the Ministry of Love: Sexual Revolution in British Writing of the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 39-41.

²¹ Steven Connor approaches what I am interested in here with what calls “cultural phenomenology,” from which Cultural Studies would eventually emerge as the academic discipline we know today: “Cultural studies began as the inheritor of a desire to pay attention to forms of popular culture which themselves had seemed to require — for instance in some of the work of Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Georges Bataille and Humphrey Jennings — new ways of conceiving what it meant to pay attention.” See Steven Connor, “CP; or, A Few Don’ts (and Dos) by a Cultural Phenomenologist,” *stevenconnor.com*, n.d., http://www.stevenconnor.com/cp/incubism.htm?fbclid=IwAR1dTqNoK1yHF12wCgOdJowgJx4G9MqLpG9grBe-XDPUE1ITnA1r7x_C_iQ (accessed October 8, 2019).

forms, aesthetic practices that tap into and cultivate emotions and public feelings, and the composition of life processes — including processes of community formation, cohesion and conflict. From this perspective, then, what Marie-Louise Jennings calls her father’s “purpose of the poet” was directed toward the documentation — the *transformation* — of a *people’s* “legacy of feeling” in the context of mass culture and the biopolitics of *populations*. The biopoetic logic of this becomes particularly evident, for instance, when Jennings’s method of poetry begins to pick up on the signs of impending (total) war in everyday life, thus giving his documentary films a sense of what Tyrus Miller, in his insightful analysis of the M-O dream reports from the Blitz, calls “the *affective* and *phantasy* life of biopower.”²²

In the remainder of this Introduction, I flesh out how biopolitics and biopoetics interconnect *and* oppose one another by bringing the two into dialogue around the figures of the people and the population in Jennings’s work; I further put this dialogue in relation to questions of cultural *inheritance* and the adoption of a symbolic form of life, the complexities and contradictions involved in the people’s appropriation of and investment in social-historical forms in their *normative* dimensions, and, finally, the human being’s development of an *imaginative* or poetic *capacity* as way of adapting to the crises of modern life. These I connect to recent critical work done in modernism studies and anthropology that reconsiders Jennings’s contributions to M-O and documentary film through the critical lenses of everyday life and governmentality. I conclude with an outline of how the chapters of this dissertation expand upon this discussion.

²² Tyrus Miller, “In the Blitz of Dreams: Mass-Observation and the Historical Uses of Dream Reports,” *New Formations* 44 (2001): 39. Emphasis in original. Miller explains: “If biopolitical theory has primarily asked how the classification, quantification, and processing of data about life and death has led to new structures of knowledge/power that Foucault called ‘governmentality,’ I am asking what affects might be occasioned in individuals living within the emerging biopolitical order” (Ibid.).

A Legacy of Feeling in a Biopolitical Age

Biopolitics is a well-established paradigm in the humanities and social sciences that understands how “life” became the primary, if still ultimately obscure, object of political management and control in modern systems of government. In the modern form of biopolitics, as Foucault puts it in his well-known definition in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, “power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population.”²³ In the lecture series entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault reiterates that the biopolitical normalization of life is an attempt to “rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, race.”²⁴ Through a long process, extending from its origins in the early modern reforms of the sixteenth century and the wars of the seventeenth century to demographic expansion linked to increases in farming productivity and industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, biopolitical governmentality thus came to displace the older order of monarchical power embodied in the figure of the sovereign.

By way of various political struggles and social transformations that emerged from the same period in Europe, sovereign power was also transferred to the collective body of the people, taking on the form of what came to be called popular sovereignty and representative democracy. Following Foucault, as the people became the bearer of its own sovereignty so too

²³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), 137.

²⁴ See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 317. For more on the emergence of biopolitics and the people/population see, for example, Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macy, ed. François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003), especially 239-264; and Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). For an insightful discussion of what she terms “sentimental biopower” that contrasts in intriguing ways with my biopoetic reading of Jennings’s interest in a “legacy of feeling” see Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

did it become, along with the developing relations of governmentality, a statistical object of information and biopower: the population. According to Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, then, biopolitics names the litigious dimensions and debates operative within the calculative and rationalizing regime of modern biopower and its “governmental” operations as they pertain to the population. “Within the field of biopower,” they write, “we can use the term ‘biopolitics’ to embrace all the specific strategies and contestations over problematizations of collective human vitality, morbidity and mortality; over the forms of knowledge, regimes of authority and practices of intervention that are desirable, legitimate and efficacious.”²⁵

With Foucault’s analysis in mind, my discussion of Jennings’s work is focussed on investigating how poetic processes and aesthetic forms, as articulated in Jennings’s practice, variously enfold, modulate, and otherwise respond (in some respects unconsciously) to questions of authority and contestation within biopolitics, such as those concerning how species and race became effectively deployed as objects of knowledge and power — concerns that we can understand by way of the categories of *the people* and *the population*, the collective subjects and objects of biopolitical investment and intensification in modern Britain (particularly in the interwar and wartime periods).²⁶ Indeed, historically speaking, Britain was at the vanguard of the processes of modernization in which power was redistributed from the sovereignty of the

²⁵ See Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, “Biopower Today,” *Biosocieties* 1.2 (June 2006): 197. They also note that while Foucault made certain distinctions between biopolitics and biopower he could also, at times, be imprecise in their use. Throughout this dissertation, I too refer to biopolitics and biopower, sometimes perhaps with little nuance.

²⁶ Important work in critical race theory has been done on questions of race (and gender), for instance, that extends and critiques Foucault’s analyses of biopolitics as well as Agamben’s archaeology of sovereign power in the modern world. On questions of race and biopolitics, see, for example, Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* 28.2 (103) (2010): 31-56; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); and Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), an expanded version of his previously published essay “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes *Public Culture* 15.1 (Winter 2003): 11-40. In different ways, these authors draw attention to the imbrication of biopolitics and imperial and colonial power, providing a counterpoint to the perceived Eurocentrism of previous histories and theorizations of modern biopolitics.

monarch to the people and its democratic representational forms of government (even as the sovereign remained the symbolic head of state). But, as the historian James Vernon points out in agreement with Foucault, no sooner did the people emerge on the national stage than did they also become a population caught in the abstract systems of information and administration. On the social level this process of “becoming modern” produced what Vernon calls “a society of strangers,” in which the people were not the *immediate* authority governing their lives:

The so-called revolutions in government depended upon the abstraction of the state’s authority away from the figure of the monarch and his or her court ... into faceless bureaucratic systems. [...] Critical here, as Foucault taught us, was the capacity of these systems to map the population and territories over which its power extended and on whose security its claim to legitimacy rested. As place became space, people became populations, we moderns were conceived as objects of government in ways that meant we would never meet or know those who governed us.²⁷

A number of philosophers and theorists have developed Foucault’s analysis of the state’s obsession with appeals to “the people” while deploying techniques of managing “the population” in terms terms that resonate with Vernon’s account of the modernization of Britain, bringing into further relief the links between the “representational crisis” of the authority of “the people” and the biopolitical transformations of modern government. Indeed, much blood and ink has been spilled in attempting to define (to secure) *what* and *who* “the people,” that ubiquitous yet ever elusive object/subject of political desire, *really* are. Without rehearsing the complicated history of the concept here, I will quickly note three ways of approaching it that are relevant to any analysis of the complicated biopolitical interplay of the symbolism of “the people” and the materialism of “the population.” The first approach, exemplified by Giorgio Agamben, takes the concept of “the people” itself to be wholly implicated in the nihilism of modern nationalism and

²⁷ James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 51.

ultimately determined by the biopolitical logic of populations; the second, as illustrated in the work of Jacques Rancière, takes some appeals to “the people” as potentially liberating political formations that can articulate a sense of community opposed to the biopolitics — or anti-politics — of the population. The third approach, taken up by Eric Santner, reconsiders the biopolitical analyses of Agamben and Foucault through a critical lens that combines psychoanalysis with modernism studies, taking the semiotic indeterminacy of “the people” to be symptomatic of the migration of sovereign power to the biopolitical management of the population in modernity.

The concept of “the people,” according to Agamben, can refer to either the stateless and the oppressed, the disqualified and the socially fragmented *people*, on the one hand, or the integrated body politic of the citizenry, the socially and politically recognized life of *the People*, on the other. In this way, the *people/People* “necessarily contains within itself the fundamental biopolitical fracture” that Agamben refers to as “naked” or “bare life,” that biological substrate of the person separated from its meaningful form and thus subject to death at the hands of sovereign power.²⁸ “Bare life” thus names the latent or disavowed *thanatopolitical* foundation upon which the biopolitical investment in the *vitality* of *the population* depends.²⁹ By contrast, Rancière argues that while “the people” is used to designate both those recognized and those abandoned by the state, it can also be used to refer to a form of community other than that

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, “What is a People?,” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 32.

²⁹ For a discussion of thanatopolitics, see Stuart J. Murray, “Thanatopolitics: Reading in Agamben a Rejoinder to Biopolitical Life,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5.2 (2008): 203–07. For a critique of the concept of “the people” that shares much with Agamben, see, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004). A fundamental difference between Hardt/Negri and Agamben, however, is that when Hardt/Negri pose their counter-concept of “the multitude” to “the people,” they affirm, in a Spinozist fashion, the immanent power and *productivity* of the multitude that “can never be reduced to a single or unitary identity” (xiv). Agamben, to put it succinctly, has little investment in such a “productivist” conception; instead of emphasizing the immanent productivity of the multitude, for instance, Agamben proposes the concept of “form-of-life” to name a life that cannot be separated from its form, its (*im*)*potentiality*. See Agamben “Form-of-Life,” in *Means Without End*, 2-11.

controlled by the state. Rancière proposes that what makes “the people” a *political* community is the way it performs a “supplementary symbolization” to the state, which seeks to account for and delimit all parts of the bodies and identities it governs, on the one hand, and to ignore and abandon all that it excludes, on the other. “A political community is in effect a community that is structurally divided,” Rancière writes, “not between divergent interest groups and opinions, but divided in relation to itself. A political ‘people’ is never the same thing as the sum of a population.”³⁰ The political valence of the concept of “the people,” then, is that it names something that interrupts the consensus of the state formation and the count of the population; introducing a space of antagonism that intercedes within (and against) the operations of representation, “the people” thus stages a dissensus over and through collective forms, symbols and meanings — in a word, an aesthetics of politics, a theatre of *(im)possible* communities.³¹

Finally, in *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*, Eric Santner provides a perspective on “the people” that expressly situates its emergence within the context of biopolitical modernity and the transformations of sovereign power into modern forms of government. Santner explores how the latent energies and imaginaries of sovereign power continue to exert influence in fragmented and diffuse ways, particularly within the seemingly secularized and democratic norms and practices of everyday life. Referring to what he calls “the royal remains,” Santner investigates modernist texts for the ways they exhibit symptoms of “the transformation of the complex tensions belonging to the

³⁰ See Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), 115.

³¹ For more on the concept of “the people,” see Alain Badiou, et al., *What Is a People?* trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). See also Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*. New York: Verso, 2005; and “Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics,” *Critical Inquiry* 32.4 (2006): 646–80. The differences in their approaches notwithstanding, Rancière’s affirmation of the political value of the litigious concept of “the people” overlaps in some interesting ways with Ernesto Laclau’s discussion of its role in hegemonic struggle.

political theology of royal sovereignty into the *biopolitical pressures* of popular sovereignty.”³² These “biopolitical pressures” at once constitute, invade and agitate everyday life, for they include “not simply the biological life or health of populations but the ‘sublime’ life-substance of the People who at least in principle become the bearer of sovereignty, assume the dignity of the *prince*.”³³ What Santner call “the *flesh*” of the people thus speaks to problems pertaining to the symbolic and imaginary dimensions of biopolitics and biopower, to questions of how the people libidinally “invest” in the inherited values and normative structures and relations that animate and “secure,” that “lend” meaning to, the vitality of their daily existence. “Postmonarchical societies,” Santner writes,

are then faced with the problem of *securing the flesh* of the new bearer of the principle of sovereignty, the People. Biopolitics — and its near relative disciplinary power — can be grasped as the strategies deployed by modern societies to secure this new underwriting arrangement, this new backing for the signs and values circulating across new kinds of networks and relays.³⁴

In having seemingly surpassed sovereignty’s representational regime — its metaphysics of the national-collective body, its hierarchal but ordered forms of existence, its securing of semiotic transmission between the past the present — and entered into the age of democratic biopolitics, then, we have, to link Santner’s analysis to that of James Vernon discussed above, entered into an

³² Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xi. Emphasis in original.

³³ Ibid., xi-xii. Emphasis in original. Santner cites a well-known passage from *Discipline and Punish*: “The body of the king, with its *strange material and physical presence*, with the *force* that he himself deploys or transmits to some few others, is at the opposite extreme of this *new physics of power*. . . : a physics of a relational and multiple power, which has its maximum intensity *not in the person of the king, but in the bodies that can be individualized by these relations*.” Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 208; cited in Ibid., xv. The emphases are Santner’s.

³⁴ Ibid., 5. Emphasis in original. Regarding “the flesh,” Santner explains: “I would propose that the notion of the ‘flesh’ refers to the substantial pressures, the semiotic and somatic stresses, of what I have elsewhere characterized as ‘creaturely life’” (Ibid.). For his discussion of creaturely life, a concept taken in part from Walter Benjamin, see Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

age in which the *abstraction* of governmental power intersects with an *aesthetics* of existence in which the people are at once a “society of strangers” and, indeed, *strangers to themselves*.³⁵

Recent scholarship on Jennings and M-O has taken up his work in dialogue with questions of aesthetic and politics that share much with the above discussions of “the people” and “the population.” This scholarship, as I argue below, however, while insightful and instructive in its critique of the biopolitical dimensions of Jennings’s poetics of everyday life, neglects what I consider to be a fundamental (complicating) factor in his work, what I see as his vision and his engagement of the people’s *biopoetic capacities of imagination* (I return to this below). In his analysis of M-O and the production of wartime morale, for instance, Rodney Harrison focusses his discussion on how the social research group, alongside Jennings’s wartime documentary films produced for the Ministry of Information, participated in taking the population as an object of knowledge through what he understands to be the imbrication of a set of aesthetic forms and textual practices with a system of social management and self-monitoring, the “liberal technology of government” that Foucault called governmentality.³⁶ Of particular importance is how Harrison zeroes in on the decisive role of *montage* for “both getting hold of and representing ‘mass’ culture which dominates in the early work of M-O and helps shape its distinctive conception of *population*.”³⁷ The technique of montage, he argues, forms part of a *dispositif* with a certain political rationality and ideological utility: exceeding the constraints of

³⁵ Drawing on T. J. Clark’s analysis of Jacques-Louis David’s *Death of Marat* (1793), a painting Clark takes as inaugurating visual modernism through the explosion of abstraction from within the space of representation, Santner refers to the “representational deadlock” facing post-revolutionary artists who sought to represent, to give form to, the *presentness* of the modern democratic people. See Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 93.

³⁶ See Rodney Harrison, “Observing, Collecting and Governing ‘Ourselves’ and ‘Others’: Mass-Observation’s Fieldwork Agencements,” *History and Anthropology* 25:2 (2014): 227-245. See also Tony Bennett, Fiona Cameron, Nélia Dias, Ben Dibley, Rodney Harrison, Ira Jacknis, and Conal McCarthy, *Collecting, Ordering, Governing: Anthropology, Museums, and Liberal Government* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

³⁷ Harrison, “Observing, Collecting and Governing,” 240. My emphasis.

place, the materialist and para-representational science of montage brings the heterogeneous objects — bodies and identities — of the nation together into what he terms an “oligoptic visual economy.” This economy thus extracts, manipulates and circulates information about the population — and its corollary, the liberal citizen-subject — in a spatialized and abstracted anthropological-governmental network.³⁸

Scholars working in the field of late modernism studies have also directed attention to how British artists and writers of the interwar and wartime periods responded to the “representational crisis” of their time by way of a “turn” to everyday life as well as appeals to the rhetorical figure of the British people.³⁹ Jed Esty, for example, understands what he calls the “anthropological turn” as an attempt on the part of British artists and intellectuals to salvage something from the decline of the British Empire and transform it into a new basis for community. The turn to everyday life in the British isles was in this way part of a “discursive process by which English intellectuals translated the end of empire into a resurgent concept of national culture.”⁴⁰ More recently, Thomas S. Davis has developed an analysis of late modernism

³⁸ Ibid., 228. On M-O as a modernist engagement with network aesthetics and information, see James Purdon, *Modernist Informatics: Literature, Information, and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Purdon writes, for instance, of what he calls the “problem of pathological connectivity” in M-O: “Against the confusion of ‘a mass of unrelated facts,’ Mass-Observation had posited a social solution, but it had attempted to do so by defining the social field as a network rather than a hierarchy” (108).

³⁹ For discussion of “late modernism” and the “outward turn” of the interwar period, see, for example: Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Tyrus Miller, “Documentary/Modernism: Convergence and Complementarity in the 1930s,” *Modernism/modernity* 9.2 (April 2002): 225-241; Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton University Press, 2004); Peter Brooker, “Afterword: ‘Newness’ in Modernisms, Early and Late,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gasiorek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1012-1036; Thomas S. Davis, “Late Modernism: British Literature at Midcentury,” *Literature Compass* 9.4 (April 2012): 326-337; Thomas S. Davis, *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Leo Mellor, “The 1930s, the Second World War, and Late Modernism,” in *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 142-160; and Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton, “Introduction: The Long 1930s,” in *A History of 1930s British Literature*, ed. Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1-14.

⁴⁰ Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, 2.

as a response to the following intriguing question: “why would writers in a historical period plagued by extraordinary crises divert their attention away from those crises and focus instead on the everyday?”⁴¹ In answering this question, Davis reconsiders late modernism’s “outward turn” in terms of how it “constitutes a dialectical twist in a long trajectory of modernist aesthetics, one that significantly affects the mediating powers of modernist forms, genres, and techniques.”⁴² In shifting away from the hermetic formalism, play with fragmented consciousness isolated from the demands of the outside world, and obsession with “exotic” objects and “occult” experiences of the high modernism of previous decades, the late modernists of the 1930s and ‘40s developed practices of documentary, auto-ethnography, vernacular fiction, diary-writing, and so on, combining self-conscious aesthetic experimentation and encyclopaedic forms with systematic attention to everyday life.⁴³ But this structural and phenomenological turn to the public, the domestic and the habitual, Davis maintains, did not serve to simply neutralize the disturbances and contradictions of modern life by sublimating them into aestheticized representations of the quotidian; rather, late modernists “figure[d] everyday life as the scene where structural changes in the world-system attain[ed] *legibility*.”⁴⁴

Jennings’s effort to bring production and vision together into an “imaginative materialism,” one in which science *and* poetry together organize our knowledge of modern life,

⁴¹ Davis, *The Extinct Scene*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³ These transformations in late modernism also played out in debates regarding Romanticism and Classicism regarding the disenchantment of everyday life and the role of the artist and tradition in responding to this condition. In this sense, Classicism and Romanticism both present, imagine or model an enchanted world that modernity has either abandoned or disfigured. Classicism might be construed as a hierarchical enchanted order disrupted by modern enlightenment (namely democracy), while Romanticism can be seen as a modern counter-response to modernity’s overly-rationalized world. For further discussion of Classicism and Romanticism see Chapter One.

⁴⁴ Davis, *The Extinct Scene*, 4. My emphasis. For an in-depth discussion of M-O in this light, see James Buzard, ‘Mass-Observation, Modernism, and Auto-Ethnography’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 4.3 (1997): 93–122.

can thus be understood as a late modernist attempt to both locate the disconnected signs of change and disorder in everyday life and to gather, to reorganize that often unconscious material into some kind of conscious or “legible” form. For Jennings as for other late modernists, then, everyday life became the site of what Davis refers to as a “simultaneously aesthetic *and* political” encounter.⁴⁵ Here, however, Davis argues that Jennings’s wartime documentaries contributed to the normalization of the imperial and domestic policies of the British state precisely through the aesthetic resolution of social conflict. As he writes of *Listen to Britain* (1942), Jennings’s most Surrealist wartime film, for how its lyrical montage of a day-in-the-life during the Blitz contributed to the mobilization of wartime morale: “the point is not to erase conflict but to draw it into the film, manage it, and thereby defuse it.”⁴⁶ In this way, Davis’s critique of Jennings’s aesthetic management of the state of emergency overlaps with Harrison’s argument that in M-O the poet effectively became a node in a governmental-informational network, a functionary whose instrumentalization of the appropriative and apportioning operations of montage married the late modernist production of “legibility” to modern systems of biopolitical governance. For both Davis and Harrison, then, Jennings’s method of poetry connected, indeed *networked* the sampled and documented *forms* of everyday life to the rationalized *norms* of biopolitical administration.

In this light, Jennings’s editorial work on *May the Twelfth*, for example, certainly manifests late modernism’s “outward turn” to everyday life in his arrangement of hundreds of “observations” into systematic and poetic associations. Indeed, early M-O’s aspiration to produce

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 45.

an “anthropology of ourselves” also intersects with what Laura Winkiel has discussed in terms of “late imperial” anthropology’s shifting of its gaze from the “exotic” colonial other in the 1920s to the British people themselves (a new “indigenous” object of inquiry) in the 1930s.⁴⁷ But in concretizing collecting as *mass* (collective and cumulative) knowledge, Jennings also hoped to use his (post-)Surrealist collage of fragments to generate insights about the strange thresholds *between* the public and private feelings of ordinary British subjects during a national symbolic event — a modern version of a sacred ritual involving the maintenance and continuity of immortal and institutional power as it transfers from one mortal *and* symbolic body to another.

If biopolitical governance converts the ambiguity of the people into the positivist object of the population, taking its forms and desires as the transitive information-material of management, then Jennings’s method of poetry in *May the Twelfth* might be seen as performing a productively paradoxical operation in response to the late modern “crisis of representation” — an imaginative materialist process that *interrupts* the system of governmental sampling and conversion without, however, giving up on assembling an *image* of its “observers,” that is, of saying something about the social and emotional life of *the people*, their cultural and libidinal feelings and investments in their own time and place. In this way, as Ben Highmore has argued, Jennings can be said to conceive of society as “a *totality of fragments*,” for through his “admix of Surrealism and anthropology...the ‘will to order’ of anthropology is seriously undermined, while at the same time Surrealism’s tendency to revel in mythic individualism is effectively countered.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See Laura Winkiel, “Imperial Fictions: Writing the End of Empire,” in *A History of 1930s British Literature*, 391-404.

⁴⁸ See Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 82. Emphasis in original.

May the Twelfth can thus be taken as an intriguing response to what Santner calls “the biopolitical pressures of popular sovereignty,” particularly in the way it uses the coronation of King George VI as an occasion to turn away from the monarch and toward the habits and interests of the people, to the ways these “observers” record how they and their community — their family members, neighbours and other “strangers” around them — alternately embrace, ignore or outright reject the royal event. *May the Twelfth*, then, pays attention to the *fleshy* material of everyday life — the dense network of conscious and unconscious forces that structure the lives and activities of ordinary people. In framing this portrait of the people around the national-symbolic event of the coronation and the movement of life circulating around it, however, this is nevertheless a collective subject that is haunted by the remnants of royal power and the *imaginary* as well as *ontological* security it once promised (but failed to deliver) in its biopolitical unconscious. For *May the Twelfth* is also about how a *living* community appropriates (both *adapts* and *adapts to*) an inherited network of symbols, rituals, meanings, values, norms, and so on; how it integrates (or not) a historical form of life into its own lived experience (and, vice versa, how a historical form or social norm refuses the living being, rejects it). Demonstrating this process of appropriation and inheritance, and exhibiting the ways it succeeds and fails in its transmission, *May the Twelfth* thus provides an opportunity for its “observers” and readers to glimpse, as it were, the “floating signifier” of *the people*, what Santner describes as “a mode of *exposure* that distinguishes human beings from other kinds of life: not exposure simply to the elements or to the fragility and precariousness of our mortal, finite lives, but rather to an ultimate lack of foundation for the historical forms of life that distinguish human community.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 5. Emphasis in original.

Rather than taking this *exposed* material of human community as simply another opportunity to absorb the “bare life” of the population into an apparatus of biopolitical governance, then, I argue that Jennings seizes on the ambiguous dynamics of inheritance and appropriation to reflect on everyday life as the complicated space where the British people’s “legacy of feeling” critically and poetically intersects with its “ontological vulnerability.”⁵⁰ Jennings’s important contribution is thus to bring to consciousness what otherwise might have remained unconscious in this exposure; to reframe the entangled vulnerability and ambiguity of the people and everyday life as *the place of imagination*, a site of potentially collective adaptation and transformation.⁵¹ Jennings thus demonstrates *and* documents that it is the faculty, indeed, the *capacity* of the imagination that serves the living people in either assimilating or resisting, affirming or rejecting, investing in or divesting from, the normative dimensions of an inherited form of life. It is in this way that I understand Jennings to have developed what I call a *biopoetics of everyday life*. Seen through the lens of biopoetics, then, the purpose of Jennings’s method of poetry was not only the creation of an image of the people, but to document and thus inspire the people’s exercise of the imagination as a communal effort and a collective good.

If Jennings was creating a poetic system over the course of his life, thus making him a “hedgehog” as Marie-Louise Jennings put it, he nevertheless seemed to compose this system in the style of a “fox” or *bricoleur*. *Bricolage*, as Deleuze and Guattari once explained (citing Claude Lévi-Strauss’s definition of the term in *The Savage Mind*), involves “the ability to

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵¹ I am adapting the phrase “place of imagination” from Jennings’s “Introduction” to *Pandaemonium*, in which he writes: “In this book ... it is assumed that the poet’s vision does exist, that the imagination is a part of life, that the exercise of the imagination is an indispensable function of man like work, eating, sleeping, loving. I do not propose to ask the obvious next question ‘What then is the place of imagination in the world of today?’ I prefer to inquire what may have *been* the place of imagination in the making of the modern world” (xxxiv).

continually introduce fragments into new patterns of fragmentation; and as a consequence, a tendency not to distinguish between the act of producing and the product, between the ensemble of instruments to be used and ensemble of results to be achieved.”⁵² In combining montage and collage with a diverse body of materials drawn from contemporary life and British history, then, Jennings’s method of poetry would seem to be, in part, a *mythical* system that imaginatively and “productively” *confuses* “building” and “production” with “transformation”; that transforms production; that *builds* from “found” materials and thereby produces transformations. This connects with Jennings’s conviction, informing and informed by his encounter with Surrealism, that the latent meanings of documents can reveal themselves and new associations will emerge from the sheer act of juxtaposing them: in bringing things together, inanimate objects and “dead” letters will come alive and transform, as if by their will alone. In such strange animations, Jennings’s collages and montages of texts and images contain the potential for both the retrieval *and* the subversion of historical memory and collective experience, of inheritance and adaptation.

This type of operation also takes place in Jennings’s vision of the people’s “legacy of feeling,” discovered in what Kenneth Robson describes as “the unity of apparent contradictions” emerging from “the diversity, apparent confusion and seeming irreconcilability of experience.”⁵³ Moreover, the image of community that is said to emerge from his films, the sense of the people united in common purpose that one might feel when watching *Listen to Britain*, for instance, thus comes from something more than the way fragments aesthetically cohere into a legible form; it comes from an invitation *to* the people watching the film to exercise an imaginative capacity that

⁵² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 7.

⁵³ See Robson, “The Legacy of Feeling,” 38.

they at once *already possess* and *develop with* the poetic image. For it is precisely by way of witnessing *and* affirming the people's imaginative capacities — a poetic “bringing together” — that Jennings is in turn able to conjure the possibility of further transformation. In this sense, Jennings does not presuppose any ultimately stable division *or* identity between the affective *and* the semiotic, the material *and* the meaningful, the passive *and* the active dimensions of bodies and experiences.⁵⁴ In other words, his poetic documentary project is not predicated upon a debased *people* that must be educated into political existence or managed as a population; but neither does it disavow conflict or even the prospect of social disintegration. It is in light of this systematic vision of the people in its *potential-for-transformation*, a vision that emerges from the democratic discipline of suspended judgement, then, that I reconsider Jennings's method of poetry as a biopoetic response to (adaptation *of*) the contradictions of biopolitical modernity.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ I note that there are essentially two basic models or methods of biopoetics: the first, developed in a self-conscious way at the turn of the twenty-first century, deploys scientific concepts and biological models to understand the working of literature; the second, developed in part as a response to the first and drawing from the work of philosophers and cultural critics like Foucault, Agamben and Roberto Esposito, looks at literature as itself generative of models of life. For examples of the former camp, see: *Biopoetics*, ed. Brett Cooke and Frederick Turner (Lexington: ICUS, 1999); Brett Cooke, “Literary Biopoetics: An Introduction,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 2.2 (2001): 1–8; Andreas Weber, *Biopoetics: Towards an Existential Ecology* (Dordrecht et al.: Springer, 2016). For the latter: Sara Guyer, “Biopoetics, or Romanticism,” *Romantic Circles* (December 2012), <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/biopolitics/HTML/praxis.2012.guyer> (accessed August 2, 2019); Arnie De Boever, *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Sara Guyer, *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); Carsten Strathausen, *Bioaesthetics: Making Sense of Life in Science and the Arts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Julieta Yelin, “From Biopolitics to Biopoetics: A Hypothesis on the Relationship between Life and Writing,” *CLC Web* 20.4 (2018), <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss4/5/> (accessed August 2, 2019); *Life After Literature: Perspectives on Biopoetics in Literature and Theory*, ed. Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabo, Tamás Lénárt, Attila Simon, Roland Végső (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020); Vittoria Borsò, “Bio-poetics and the Dynamic Multiplicity of Bios: How Literature Challenges the Politics, Economics and Sciences of Life,” in *Life After Literature*, 17-32. My approach to biopoetics is closer to the latter. That said, following scholars of biopolitics like Thomas Lemke, I too am skeptical about the overuse or fetishization of the “bio” in contemporary critical discourse. My aim in using the concept of biopoetics in discussing Jennings, however, seeks to draw out the importance of the intersection of concerns between historical and symbolic forms as they intersect with everyday struggles and lived experience, how these are ever-present but not immediately obvious or available to analysis in everyday life. See Thomas Lemke, “Rethinking Biopolitics: The New Materialism and the Political Economy of Life,” in *Resisting Biopolitics: Philosophical, Political, and Performative Strategies*, ed. S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė (London: Routledge, 2016), 57-73.

⁵⁵ An example of this “democratic discipline of suspended judgement” can be seen in *Listen to Britain*, which, as Rancière puts it, deploys a “Romantic poetics of double significance” — meaning that the film “constantly converts the significant into the insignificant and the insignificant into the significant.” See Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 24.

Chapter Outlines

In Chapter One I discuss the poetic dimensions of social knowledge in Jennings's practice through a reconsideration of his encounter with Surrealism in the early to mid-1930s and his contributions to Mass-Observation (M-O) in the middle to later part of the decade. Surrealism was a foundational contribution to Jennings's evolving poetic methodology, which he took to the city streets and developed into what I understand as a biopoetics of everyday life. While Surrealist methods of juxtaposition informed Jennings's interest in what he calls "the coincidence," he brought to Surrealism an approach attuned to the strange and complicated interplay between personal investments and public experience. In his work with M-O, as we will see, Jennings combined his Surrealist and anthropological concerns into a practice that linked the imagination to the social and historical world; and it was through poetic modes of attention, composition and knowledge production explored in the wake of Surrealism that the poet as social researcher documented the latent meanings and collective feelings in the normative rituals, events and experiences of modern life, as evinced in the M-O publication *May the Twelfth* and his prewar film *Spare Time* (1939).

Chapter Two further explores Jennings's relationship to Surrealism through a comparative analysis between a selection of his work in painting and collage alongside that of Belgian Surrealist René Magritte. Situating their work in the context of the late interwar period, I argue that both artists developed a concept of the poetic *image* in response to the crisis of representation in modernity and in counterpoint to the rising "representational" and perverted "ethical" regimes of biopolitical fascism, which, parallel to the aesthetic marketplace of the capitalist-bourgeois representational regime, sought to monopolize representational forms and

images for its own weaponized biological-nationalist norms. By way of a close reading of Jennings's 1938 critical text on Magritte, "In Magritte's Paintings," I reconsider the complex relationship between the poetic text and the visual image; through this I argue that both Jennings and Magritte were "poet-researchers" looking into the aesthetic conditions of referring to and producing knowledge of the mysterious "object" of everyday life. While on the surface Jennings's and Magritte's "research" might appear to be divorced from ethical concerns and devoid of political content, then, I argue that it cannot in fact be isolated from — indeed, that each is in its way an expression of and engagement with — the biopolitical struggles and anxieties of the period.

Pandaemonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers, Jennings's incomplete "imaginative history" of the Industrial Revolution, is the subject of Chapter Three. Whereas the previous chapters are, relatively speaking, narrowly focussed on work from a specific decade in Jennings's life, this chapter has a much wider scope in terms of both the historical period covered in the book and the duration of time in which Jennings gathered and assembled his vast array of materials for it — a period spanning roughly 1937 to his death in 1950 (with some significant interruptions along the way). *Pandaemonium* thus represents something of a bridge between Jennings's early interest in Classicism, his Surrealist research and experiments, and his wartime and postwar films. Given this, *Pandaemonium* allows me to reframe his earlier writings by following a through-line in his work concerning the transformative elements of what I call *the movement of life*. This idea can be located in Jennings's 1931 essay on Surrealism and Paleolithic cave-painting as well as curatorial projects like his 1938 exhibition on "The Impact of Machines" alongside a host of other ancillary

texts. The transformative nature of the imagination, too, what Jennings calls “the means of vision,” is here even more emphatically connected to historical events and changes in metaphysical and scientific systems of knowledge. *Conflict* also emerges as a major theme in my reading of *Pandaemonium*; in this light, I draw out a constellation of “images” from the text that illustrate Jennings’s dialectic of vision and production. The conflicts of industrial modernity thus take on many forms in the text’s many images: one standout being that between what I understand to be the biopolitical dialectic of the people and the population, the ramifications of which I explore through Jennings’s argument about the loss of poetry’s “vital” (and mythical) connection to the everyday lives of the people. While *Pandaemonium* represents a more critical and political perspective on the struggle of the people than we see in any other Jennings text, in its utopian gesture toward *a people to come* it nevertheless reflects back to his other more open-ended visions of the people as well.

In Chapter Four I reconsider the image of Jennings that is perhaps best-known to posterity — that of the cinematic poet of “the people’s war.” My discussion of Jennings’s wartime biopoetics focusses on one film, *London Can Take It!* (1940), and two poems, “I See London” (1941) and “I Saw Harlequin” (1943), made during the early to midpoint of the Second World War. I contextualize his representation of the everyday life of the people during the emergency of the Blitz through reference to the dialectic of the people and the population as a legacy inherited from the biopolitical transformations of the Industrial Revolution. In this way, I argue that Jennings’s most significant contribution to wartime morale resides in the way he affirms the people’s imaginative capacity to collectively *adapt* to the conditions of total war — extraordinary conditions that, as Jennings shows, also possess their own (extra)ordinary aspects

of rhythm and routine. Rather than simply normalizing wartime contradictions, however, I suggest that Jennings appeals to the biopoetic imagination to *protect* the historical and symbolic dimensions of the form of life of the people, thus resisting their reduction to the bare life of the population. That said, I also address some of the unresolved contradictions and paradoxes animating Jennings's biopoetics of the people's *total* war.

Finally, in my Conclusion I briefly consider Jennings's ongoing legacy by re-examining his work in light of the racial biopolitics of the present. Recalling my discussion of Danny Boyle's (mis)appropriation of *Pandaemonium* in the opening pageant for the London 2012 Olympics Games, I approach interconnected questions of inheritance, adaptation and legitimacy in some of the ways contemporary British artist John Akomfrah responds to — that is, critically *reimagines* — the “legacy of feeling” biopoetically emanating from Jennings's documentary films.

1

“The Promise of the Unknown”: Humphrey Jennings, Surrealism, Mass-Observation

The time has come for poets to proclaim their right and duty to maintain that they are deeply involved in the life of other men, in communal life.

— Paul Eluard, “Poetic Evidence”

Everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate.

— Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Humphrey Jennings, as his biographer Kevin Jackson once put it, was “an intransigent poet of surrealism — a hunter and gatherer of the uncanny in the everyday.”¹ Like so many artists, poets and committed left-wing intellectuals of his time, Jennings was decisively marked by his encounter with Surrealism.² While the legacy of Surrealism in Britain has attracted an impressive body of scholarly attention, it is still an undeveloped area of inquiry given the magnitude of Surrealism’s influence in the 1930s both within and beyond the European continent. As one of the first British artists to seriously engage with the movement *before* it was popularly received in Britain in 1936 (after a more-than-decade-long lag since André Breton published the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924), perhaps Jennings’s take on Surrealism itself appeared as an uncanny object in the landscape of British modernism.

At the forefront of intellectual and artistic currents in the late 1920s, Jennings had already encountered Surrealism when he was still a graduate student at Cambridge studying under the

¹ Kevin Jackson, “Humphrey Jennings: The Poet and the Public,” *Contemporary Record* 7:3 (1993): 671-672.

² Throughout this dissertation I capitalize the first letter in “Surrealism” to identify it as a movement; the same basic principle holds for all artistic movements, including, for instance, “Romanticism” and “Classicism.”

literary theorist I. A. Richards.³ In his role as a co-editor and contributor to *Experiment*, the avant-garde journal he co-founded with fellow Cambridge students William Empson and Jacob Bronowski, he brought his interest in Surrealism into critical dialogue with the larger currents of European and British modernism. Launched from the springboard of the intellectual ferment of Cambridge in the 1920s, Jennings's role in the international Surrealist "revolution" took shape throughout the interwar period, informing his studies in the history of British culture and poetry (particularly in the form of his unfinished PhD dissertation on the sixteenth-century poet Thomas Gray) as well as his practical work in theatrical design, painting and poetic composition. In the meeting of two major intellectual and artistic currents (Surrealism and Cambridge English), and in the conjunction of theoretical and practical activity that informed his method from its beginning, Jennings performed an ongoing dialectical operation. On the one hand, he would find in Surrealism a means, a tool for rethinking the relationship of poetry, broadly put, to everyday

³ On Surrealism in Britain see: J. H. Matthews, "Surrealism and England," *Comparative Literature Studies* 1.1 (1964): 55-72; Paul C. Ray, "Sir Herbert Read and English Surrealism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24.3 (Spring, 1966): 401-413; Paul C. Ray, *The Surrealist Movement in England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971); Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Bodley Head 1979); Alan Young, *Dada and After: Extremist Modernism and English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981); Alexander Robertson et al., *Angels of Anarchy and Machines for Making Clouds: Surrealism in Britain in the Thirties* (Leeds: Leeds City Art Galleries, 1986); Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Humphrey Jennings: Surrealist Observer," in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. Charles Barr (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 321-333; Rob Jackaman, *The Course of English Surrealist Poetry Since the 1930s* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1989); Steven Connor, "British Surrealist Poetry in the 1930s," in *British Poetry, 1900-50: Aspects of Tradition*, ed. Gary Day and Brian Docherty (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), 169-192; Jeremy MacClancy, "Brief Encounter: The Meeting, in Mass-Observation, of British Surrealism and Popular Anthropology," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1:3 (September 1995): 495-512; David Alan Mellor, "Mass Observation: The Intellectual Climate," in *The Camerawork Essays: Context and Meaning in Photography*, ed. Jessica Evans (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997), 132-144; Michel Remy, *Surrealism in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002); Neil Matheson, "The Phantom of Surrealism: Photography, Cultural Identity and the Reception of Surrealism in England," *History of Photography* 29:2 (2005): 149-162; Ian Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and Documentary Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Ben Highmore, "Itinerant Surrealism: British Surrealism either side of the Second World War," in *A Companion to British Art: 1600 to the Present*, ed. Dana Arnold and David Peters Corbett. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 241-264; Benjamin Kohlmann, *Committed Styles: Modernism, Politics, and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Matthew Chambers, *Modernism, Periodicals, and Cultural Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Jeremy Noel-Tod, "Mass illuminations: Jennings, Madge, Rimbaud and the 'Popular' Prose Poem," *Critical Quarterly* 57.3 (2015): 51-65; and Sam Cooper, *The Situationist International in Britain: Modernism, Surrealism and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

life; and on the other hand, he would discover uses of Surrealism (its methods of automatism and collage, for instance, or its rethinking and problematization of authorship) for both socio-historical research and poetic composition in the British interwar context. In this respect, as Hannah Arendt once observed of Walter Benjamin, Jennings had “the gift of thinking poetically,” for nowhere is the poetry of Jennings’s thinking more clearly expressed than in the way he developed his own method and style of Surrealist experimentation throughout the 1930s.⁴

With his already-established knowledge of and contacts with French Surrealism, Jennings was a natural fit on the organizing committee of the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1936, held from June 11 to July 4 at New Burlington Galleries in London.⁵ While there were a small handful of critical pieces about Surrealism published in Britain prior to 1936, including two insightful articles published in *New Verse* by Jennings’s later Mass-Observation colleague Charles Madge, it was the exhibition that finally announced the arrival of Surrealism upon British shores, providing it with a mass forum with wide public attention.⁶ Along with the exhibition, in June 1936, the British periodical *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* published a “Double Surrealist Number,” including contributions from André Breton, Luis Buñuel, Jennings, and poet David Gascoyne, among others; and in September of that year the newly-formed British Surrealist Group also helmed the fourth *International Surrealist Bulletin*, which detailed the events of the exhibition and included a transcription of British poet and art historian Herbert

⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Introduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 38. Indeed, there are compelling reasons to argue that Jennings staged what was, effectively, a “revolution” within the “Surrealist revolution,” applying and developing its methods and insights for his own unique social and historical inquiry into the conditions of modern everyday life.

⁵ The English organizing committee for the exhibition included Hugh Sykes Davies, David Gascoyne, Humphrey Jennings, McKnight Kauffer, Rupert Lee, Diana Brinton Lee, Henry Moore, Paul Nash, Roland Penrose, and Herbert Read; and the French organizing committee were: André Breton, Paul Éluard, Georges Hugnet, and Man Ray.

⁶ See Charles Madge, “Surrealism for the English,” *New Verse* 6 (December 1933): 14-18 and “The Meaning of Surrealism,” *New Verse* 10 (August 1934): 13-15. See also Paul C. Ray, “Sir Herbert Read and English Surrealism.”

Read's lecture to the Artists International Association on June 23, 1936. The photograph of Sheila Legge taken during the exhibition, her face and head completely covered by a mask of roses, in a tableau vivant in Trafalgar Square with the National Gallery behind her, adorned the cover of the bulletin (see Image 1.1). Described as the "Surrealist phantom," this image of Legge clearly, that is, enigmatically but emphatically, told readers that Surrealism had arrived, and that it was already making fashionable waves in British art and culture.



Image 1.1. *International Surrealist Bulletin 4* (September 1936); photograph of Sheila Legge in mask of roses in Trafalgar Square by Claude Cahun.

The delayed reception of Surrealism in Britain, however, raised a host of issues around what exactly Surrealism meant in Britain at that time. Among the complicated and intertwined questions involved, two in particular should be stressed: first, the question of how British artists and poets were to introduce or adapt Surrealists ideas and methods to already existing practices, to the specific pictorial and literary traditions of Britain that artists, poets and intellectuals of the

1930s were already negotiating in various ways. Second, and related to the first, given the delay it took for Surrealism to consolidate itself in Britain, was the question of to what extent Surrealism itself could be taken as a unified totality, an internally coherent body of ideas.⁷ Clearly Surrealism was not merely an aesthetic, a style, nor a set of themes (although certain obsessions and patterns were nevertheless present), for over the course of its development to that point, André Breton, the movement's main ideologue and theoretician, had already published two significant manifestoes outlining the changes of course Surrealism had taken (and must take) in response to both its own internal contradictions and its relationship to the pressing social and political issues of the 1920s and early '30s.⁸ Many interested parties in Britain were of course aware of Surrealism's own historical and quasi-institutional evolution over the last decade, what with the furor surrounding the ongoing debates and expulsions within the movement, including, for instance, the famous "Aragon Affair" of 1932. When one adds to these questions the cultural, social and political developments and crises of the 1930s, including the rise of Fascism, economic depression, and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936 (in which many committed British intellectuals and artists participated, fighting in various left-wing and

⁷ Years before the exhibition, Charles Madge, in his 1933 essay "Surrealism for the English," had already struck a cautionary tone regarding the assimilation of Surrealism into Britain: "Surrealism is, like all the offspring of Hegel, dialectical in its nature. That is to say, its aims are not best served if English writers imitate the work of French ones, nor if they simply adopt the name of 'surrealist.' Close study of the philosophical position of the French surrealists is needed to extract the essential purpose from the formal appearance of their work. But English writers will need something more: namely, a knowledge of their own language and literature" (14). Steven Connor provides a brief but useful discussion of the reception of Surrealism in Britain in "British Surrealist Poetry in the 1930s," in *British Poetry, 1900-50: Aspects of Tradition*, ed. Gary Day and Brian Docherty (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), 169-192.

⁸ According to Peter Bürger, as opposed to modernism, Surrealism, as an avant-garde movement, did not in fact have a style; rather, it presented a social and aesthetic mission, a set of experimental methods and a collective spirit of action. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 53.

Republican factions), the issue of what Surrealism specifically offered left-wing artists and poets is further complicated, further imbricated with the struggles of the period in the shadow of war.⁹

In this chapter, I argue that rather than simply absorbing Surrealism into a homegrown tradition of British art and literature (whether Classical, Romantic, or modernist), or, conversely, imposing Surrealism as a new despotic system upon British art and culture, Jennings brought Surrealist methods and concerns into dialectical contact with British social and cultural life. He did this in the form of both reworking historical texts and artifacts (what he called “reports”) and integrating contemporary everyday experience into poetic images and assemblages. This was done with the aim of transforming his own culture’s self-perception: renewing and, more radically, reevaluating its traditions and ways of life precisely by seeing them again in new constellations and from different angles, making them strange in the process. This “making strange” was not limited to an aesthetic exercise, however, but was linked, through poetry and the imagination, to epistemological and hermeneutic questions of discovery, knowledge and meaning; to the social and political consequences of the imaginative reviewing (re-seeing,

⁹ As Michel Remy argues: “The politics of surrealism in Britain have ceaselessly shown how crucial it is for man’s poetic faculties that he commit himself to History and grapple with it, safeguarding his intransigence by not yielding to it. British surrealism clearly illustrates that surrealism at large is political not in its meaning but in its production of meaning, in the very process of its questioning. British surrealism has been a non-condensing engine for the politics of international surrealism.” Michel Remy, “Surrealism’s Vertiginous Descent on Britain,” in *Angels of Anarchy and Machines for Making Clouds*, 34. Ben Highmore also makes a compelling case for how the delayed engagement with Surrealism in Britain served to both reconnect the British Surrealists to the movement’s “initial energy and critical potential” and, in light of the political crises of the mid-1930s, marked their intervention as “from the start an art movement affected by war, a ‘war art.’” Ben Highmore, “Itinerant Surrealism: British Surrealism either side of the Second World War,” 243. In an overt instance of the political commitments of the British Surrealists in light of war, Jennings was amongst a group of British Surrealists who signed a “Declaration on Spain,” distributed in the November 1936 issue of *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*. Here the group called for international solidarity with the Spanish people in their struggle against fascism. The tract is reprinted in the catalogue *Angels of Anarchy and Machines for Making Clouds: Surrealism in Britain in the Thirties*, 76.

rethinking) of everyday life — a zone of human reality that Jennings, after André Breton, refers to as “the promise of the unknown.”¹⁰

Jennings’s interest in the “unknown,” as I will show, is redolent of Breton’s appeal to the 19th century visionary poet Arthur Rimbaud, who famously sought to “change life” through the risky encounter between poetic vision and the vitality of the world.¹¹ Presaging Jennings’s interest in the “unknown,” in “What is Surrealism?” Breton writes, “At the point where surrealism has taken up the problem, its only guide has been Rimbaud’s sibylline pronouncement: ‘I say that one must be a seer, one must make oneself a seer.’ As you know, this was Rimbaud’s only means of reaching the *unknown*.”¹² This resonates not only with the Surrealists’ well-known adoption of Lautréamont’s aphorism that “poetry must be created by everyone” but with what Breton affirms as its “indispensable counterpart”: the injunction, as he puts it, that “*poetry must be understood by everyone*.”¹³ The idea of *everyone* understanding poetry raises it up to the realm of knowledge, and, as Michel Foucault pointed out in a 1966 interview regarding the legacy of Breton upon his death, Breton bequeathed to (French) culture a new relationship between writing, knowledge and life-experience, one based on *discovery* rather

¹⁰ Humphrey Jennings, “Surrealism,” *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* (December 1936): 168; reprinted in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 220-221.

¹¹ As Breton puts it, “‘Transform the world,’ Marx said; ‘change life,’ Rimbaud said. These two watchwords are one for us.” André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969): 241. Michael Sheringham adds an insightful point: “Surrealism involved tapping into the unrealized possibilities harboured by the ordinary life we lead rather than rejecting it for another life.” Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 66.

¹² André Breton, “What is Surrealism?” quoted in Robert Ray, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 40. Italics in original.

¹³ André Breton, “Surrealist Situation of the Object,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 262. Italics in original.

than mere invention.¹⁴ Breton's call for "poetic knowledge," then, brings into relief the question of *where* it can be said to reside or emerge, and, further, of how it is to be identified, interpreted and experienced by this "everyone," this mass, at once singular and plural, in question.

The unknown is encountered precisely in the *coincidence* (a term I will return to) of an act of imagination (an interior experience) with a vision or perception of the outside world, with what hides, often in plain sight, in the interstices of meaning but is nevertheless "out there." In this way, Jennings's method of poetry intersected with Breton's argument that art in the 1930s should be neither fully *disinterested*, as in Romantic conceptions of art for art's sake or high modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy, nor entirely *determined* by political command or instrumental rationality, as in Social Realism or the commercial advertisements and state propaganda of the time. Jennings, like Breton, thus sought out a social practice of art as *labour* and as *research*: a method of knowledge creation concerned, as Walter L. Adamson puts it, with "how the work of art could be reconceived as a potentially universalizable act of imagination that at once embodied both a critique of the desiccated, overly rationalized, and instrumentalized culture of modern capitalism and a way beyond it."¹⁵ While Jennings was critical of the British reception of the movement for the ways its revolutionary energies were being recuperated by the emerging culture industry, then, it nevertheless contributed to what the poet Kathleen Raine

¹⁴ See Michel Foucault, "A Swimmer Between Two Words," in *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 2: Aesthetics, Method, Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New York Press, 2000), 171-174. Foucault argues, among other things, that "[t]here is an image that needs to be obliterated, I think — that of Breton as a poet of unreason. A different one should be placed, not over against it, but on top of it, that of Breton as a writer of knowledge" (172). Foucault also argues, in terms echoing Breton's bringing together of Marx and Rimbaud, that "what is at issue in [Breton's] work is not history but revolution; not politics but the absolute power to change life" (173).

¹⁵ Walter L. Adamson, *Embattled Avant-Gardes: Modernism's Resistance to Commodity Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 302.

describes as the “twofold intensity of observation and imagination” that animated his *practical* work with poetic and historical collages and documentary films.¹⁶

Against what he considers the Romantic poet’s turn inward, into a private realm of personal artistic expression, Jennings proffers an observer, a “poet-reporter” whose affective and intellectual capacities are turned outward, drawing on the mutual entanglements of perception and representation to produce poetic “reports” on the “marvellous” real. The “found” image — taken by photographic means or assembled from found objects like advertisements — contributed greatly to Jennings’s evolving project, for, as Paul C. Ray puts it, “Jennings thought that the image must be *discovered* not invented; it must be sought for — visually in the external world, in literature, or in history [...] the image is impersonal by deliberate assumption: it communicates truth only in the degree that it is collective, public, historical.”¹⁷ Jennings’s images can thus be understood in the same terms that Ben Highmore uses when he describes Surrealism as “a form of social research into everyday life” in which “artistic techniques such as collage become methodologies for attending to the social.” In this way, the products of Surrealist social research are taken “not as works of art but as *documents* of this social research.”¹⁸

Working beyond the narrow methods of “literature” in order to expand the epistemic power of poetry, Jennings’s interest in images was part of a larger, developing dialectic between poetry, photography and the observation of everyday life. The Surrealist use of photography as

¹⁶ Kathleen Raine, “Humphrey Jennings,” in *Humphrey Jennings: Filmmaker, Painter, Poet*, 2nd Edition, ed. Marie-Louise Jennings (London: British Film Institute, 2014), 85. As James Merralls further explains, Jennings “attempted a new kind of fusion of prose (statement) with poetry (association and form).” See James Merralls, “Humphrey Jennings: A Biographical Sketch,” *Film Quarterly* 15.2, Special Humphrey Jennings Issue (Winter, 1961-1962) 31. In addition, Michel Remy also observes: “If one may discern a scientific trend and a concern for images from everyday life in Jennings’s approach, it is always balanced by poetic gestures, a paradoxical but fruitful combination.” Michel Remy, “Surrealism’s Vertiginous Descent on Britain,” 44.

¹⁷ Ray, *The Surrealist Movement in England*, 179-180. My emphasis.

¹⁸ Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 46. My italics. See also Derek Sayer, *Making Trouble: Surrealism and the Human Sciences* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2017).

an instrument of knowledge thus had a significant impact on the prose poem and the development of documentary reportage, so popular in Britain in the 1930s. This conjunction of the poem and the documentary informed by the photographic image was of particular importance to Jennings, who became increasingly interested in exploring the relationship between poetic form, historical events and the links between subjective (or individual) and collective experience.¹⁹ Furthermore, while poetic techniques and ways of looking were increasingly used as a means of accessing and assembling the material realities and experiences of everyday life, the movements and transformations of everyday life were themselves also coming to inform how Jennings's poetry could itself take shape, providing him not only with subject matter but feedback into his methods and forms of composition. Photography, too, in its automatism and its production of materialized images available for collage, informed Jennings's evolving conception of the social use of poetry. Working inside an inter-zone of poetry and documentary, and through the discovery of the "unknown" material of everyday life, Jennings sought to intervene in the social-symbolic fabric of British cultural experience in the 1930s.

Poetic experimentation becomes in this context what I call biopoetic in its attention to the forms and energies, voices and subjects, of everyday life as a problem of poetic form. Biopoetics also helps me to parse an operative tension in Jennings's oeuvre, that between claiming special attributes for the poet at the same time that he seeks to make all people poets, or that between arguing for an exceptional status for poetry while finding poetic subject matter in all facets of everyday life. This is a tension that takes many forms, such as that between Romanticism and

¹⁹ Jennings's interest in documents and reports of everyday life would find its strongest realization in *May the Twelfth* and, posthumously, *Pandaemonium*, but throughout the latter part of the 1930s Jennings and Madge experimented with a variety collage texts published in a number of art and poetry journals.

Classicism — two polarities that structure Jennings’s interest in Surrealism. This is where Jennings’s “use” of Surrealism becomes what I understand to be a biopoetics of industrial modern life: whether he is fixing his gaze on an excess or a deficit of meaning in a given normative symbolic event or object, Jennings is constantly probing into questions of meaning and revealing investments of desire in social experience. This informs my discussion of Jennings’s work with Mass-Observation, which took collage as one of its key methodologies for gathering and assembling its findings, as well as his film-portrait of working class leisure, *Spare Time* (1939).²⁰ My argument proceeds, then, by working-through Jennings’s relationship to Surrealism before finally arriving at a discussion of Mass-Observation and *Spare Time*.

The “Use” of Surrealism

It is in his review of Herbert Read’s 1936 edited collection, *Surrealism*, that Jennings most explicitly develops the political aspects of his interest in Surrealism as well as the promises and failures it presented within the British context (see Image 1.2). In his review, Jennings effectively lays out a proleptic critique of the *uses* to which Surrealism will be put in England. As he puts it, the mixture of nostalgia and hysteria surrounding the London International Surrealist Exhibition of June 1936 failed to live up to the “passion [sic] terror and excitement” of Surrealism as it had developed to that point.²¹ Instead, the exhibition and the attendant collection edited by Read, which includes essays by English critics Read and Hugh Sykes Davies alongside contributions from the likes of André Breton and Paul Éluard among others, “corroborates really grave doubts

²⁰ A number of critics and historians have argued that Jennings sought to democratize Surrealism, to draw it away from private visions and obsession toward the shared social world of modern Britain. While the latter is certainly true, the premise is overstated: Surrealism always had a concern with everyday life (among its various interests), and it certainly increased in the late 1920s with the publication of the second manifesto. Jennings’s contribution was to draw the Surrealist impulses closer to the ordinary life of all people, with even greater class consciousness. *May the Twelfth* is one outcome of this.

²¹ Jennings, “*Surrealism*,” 167; *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 219.

already existent about the *use* of Surrealism in this country.”²² Emphasizing the role of *use* in Surrealism, Jennings takes Read and Davies to task for effectively assimilating its breakthroughs to the English Romantic tradition of the 19th century. Rejecting Classicism and insisting on a perfect compatibility between the “universal truths” of Romanticism and Surrealism, Read reifies the latter into an aesthetic tradition.

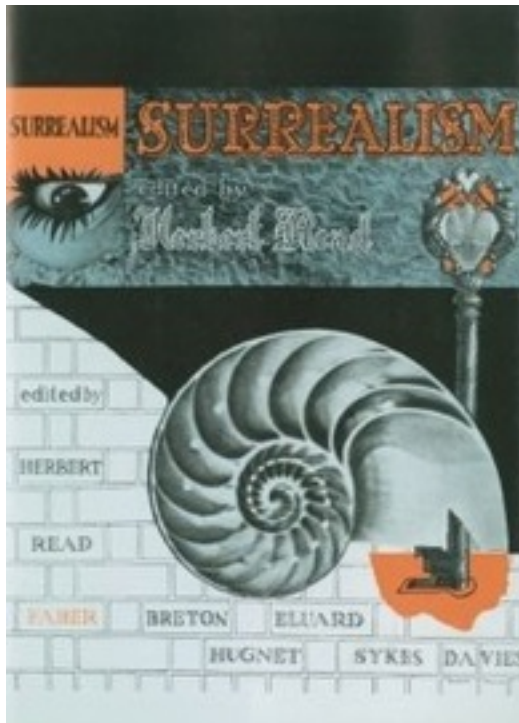


Image 1.2. *Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Faber & Faber, 1936); cover design: Roland Penrose.

Jennings’s primary criticism has to do with Read’s outright rejection of any connection Surrealism shares with Classicism in favour of an over-investment in a certain ideologically naive and historically overdetermined understanding of Romanticism. This problem is further linked to what Jennings sees as Read’s subsumption of the Surrealist breakthrough to the legacy

²² Ibid. Emphasis in original. It must be mentioned here that the question of “use” in Surrealism is fraught, given how the term is deployed in common sense notions of utility and instrumentality. In response to such limiting conceptions of use, Breton writes in his 1936 essay, “Crisis of the Object”: “It is important at all costs to fortify the means of defence which can be set up against the invasion of the tangible world by things that, rather by habit than by necessity, people make use of. Here as elsewhere we need to hunt down the mad beast of *use*.” André Breton, “Crisis of the Object” cited in Julia Kelly, *Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects, Paris, c. 1925-35* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 125. Emphasis in original.

of the English Romantic tradition, and thus a negation of its radical, avant-garde interest in revolutionizing the relationship between art and everyday life in the present. While Jennings expresses agreement with Read in his critique of the nationalistic and militaristic applications of Classicism, for which it has served a historically significant aesthetic and ideological role in a “classical-military-capitalist-ecclesiastical racket,” he nevertheless argues that Read’s single-minded embrace of Romanticism might itself deliver Surrealism over to a force of capitalism linked to the interests of a newly emerging corporate power. Jennings:

Is it possible that in place of a classical-military-capitalist-ecclesiastical racket there has come into being a romantic-cultural-*soi-disant* cooperative-new uplift racket ready and delighted to use the “universal truths of romanticism — co-eval with the evolving consciousness of mankind” as symbols and tools for its own ends? Our “advanced” poster designers and “emancipated” business men — what a gift Surrealism is to them when it is presented in the auras of “necessity,” “culture” and “truth” with which Read and Sykes Davies invest it.²³

Recalling I.A. Richards’s earlier concerns over what governing body will make the “decisions” for the people in the highly rationalized and stratified organization of modern life, this “romantic-cultural-*soi-disant* cooperative-new uplift racket” threatens to appropriate Surrealism — its *means* hardened into a stock of aesthetic conventions — toward the *ends* of a corporate monopoly over the popular imagination.²⁴

Jennings key point, then, is that Surrealism is a *means* and is to be of *use* — a use not always known in advance — and not an *end* in itself. Such a concern with the domestication of the experimental aspects of Surrealism in the name of “truth” is echoed by the Belgian Surrealist theorist Paul Nougé, who, in his essay “Final Advice” dedicated to Jennings, critically reflects on

²³ Jennings, “*Surrealism*,” 168 (220).

²⁴ See I.A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (London: Norton, 1926). Jennings mentions Richards’s *Science and Poetry* in his essay, “A Reconsideration of Herrick,” in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 202.

how theories and movements like Surrealism (along with psychoanalysis and Marxism) can “crystallize into dogmas, form a kind of prison from which thought has no escape.” And he explains: “This is because theories and doctrines are double-edged weapons. Although they are the instruments of all our conquests, the moment they cease to be tools and become ‘truths,’ they can be seen turning against the system of thought which constructed them for its own purposes, and working to destroy it.”²⁵ Anticipating this advice, Jennings takes Read to task for his confusion of a tool — with all of the questions of contingency, historicity, and praxis a tool implies — with a “universal truth.” Rather than an uncritical and nostalgic endorsement of the “universal truths” of Romanticism and Classicism, then, Jennings calls for what Rod Mengham describes as “a re-use, or a new use, of Classicism, which in his view is currently being misused by a ‘classical-military-capitalist-ecclesiastical racket’ (by which he can only mean T.S. Eliot).”²⁶ “Surrealism is only a *means*,” Jennings affirms, and it is as a *means* that Surrealism serves to focus on the customs and latent myths of the people in industrial modernity, searching for symbols and monuments of collective experience unconsciously deposited in the terrain of everyday life.²⁷

Such a re-use or new use of Classicism brings out some of the historical aspects of Surrealism in useful counterpoint to what Stephen Bronner calls its “romantic impulse” which “emphasized the new against the dictates of tradition, the intensity of lived experience against

²⁵ Paul Nougé, “Final Advice,” *London Bulletin* 1 (1938): 5.

²⁶ Rod Mengham, “Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge,” *New Formations* 44 (Autumn 2001): 30. Mengham has also insightfully discussed Jennings’s “re-use” of Classicism and Surrealism along with his methods of “re-representation” and historical collage in “‘National Papers Please Reprint’: Surrealist Magazines in Britain: *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* (1936–7), *London Bulletin* (1938–40), and *Arson: An Ardent Review* (1942),” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume I: Britain and Ireland 1880-1955*, ed. Peter Brooker, and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 688-703; and “Ambiguity Run Riot: Film-Mindedness in the 1930s Avant-Garde,” in *A History of 1930s British Literature*, ed. Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 211-226.

²⁷ Jennings, “*Surrealism*,” 168 (220). My emphasis.

passive contemplation, subjectivity against the consensually real, and the imagination against the instrumentally rational.”²⁸ By contrast, Jennings’s interest in Classicism alongside Romanticism is directed toward a Surrealist and documentary interest in what Anthony Hodgkinson and Rodney Sheratsky describe as a “repertoire of public images.”²⁹ In this way, Jennings’s concern with Classicism is not a conservative historical maneuver; it is, rather, a *profane* attempt to intervene at the very heart of the common space of meaning for British subjects. Jennings thus reveals the everyday as a site of contestation, rather than obscuring it and filling it up with subjective meaning, as Romanticism is said to do. This is why Read’s turn to Romanticism as “truth” cannot address the social problems of poetry: it displaces a collective and historical problem onto the individual, forgoing an experimental encounter with the real of industrial capitalism and the cultural crises of the modern world.

We can already see in Jennings’s review of Read’s *Surrealism* an anxiety he will further explore in his contribution to *Mass-Observation* in 1937 regarding how the “problems” of everyday life were being obscured or redirected for the purposes of profit and consensus. Suspicious of Read’s tacit endorsement of what Jennings derisively calls the “romantic-cultural-*soi-disant* cooperative-new uplift racket,” Jennings quotes from “a recent query in a film-paper”: “Is it possible that the business of national education is passing, by default, from the offices of Whitehall to the public relations departments of the great corporations?”³⁰ The mass mobilization of the “engineering of consent” would reach a fever pitch as the Second World War approached,

²⁸ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 93.

²⁹ Anthony W. Hodgkinson and Rodney E. Sheratsky, *Humphrey Jennings: More Than a Maker of Films* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1982), 25. I develop this point below.

³⁰ Jennings, “*Surrealism*,” 167 (220). The film paper in question is *World Film News* (October 1936), and the article pertains to the film *Enough to Eat?* (Edgar Anstey, 1936) on the topic of malnutrition and national food policy.

but throughout the 1930s, Jennings argues, commercial and ideological interests recuperated the breakthroughs of Surrealism as “symbols and tools for [their] own ends.”³¹ That Romanticist Surrealism became merely a tool of design and advertising only confirms his belief that, in the context of England in the 1930s, it could only obscure the crises of its time, it could only (attempt to) immunize the people from reality. In this respect, it would not be incorrect to see Jennings’s critique of Read and his counter-affirmation of “the creative powers of non-selectivity” as an instance of a broader move on the part of artists and intellectuals in the early to mid-twentieth century to make a fundamental break with Romanticism.³²

While Jennings criticizes Read's hasty domestication of Surrealism as merely yet another instance of English Romanticism, then, he also resists simply applying Surrealism (of the French form) in the English context tout court. Indeed, Jennings’s confrontations with the lingering “individualism” and subjectivism of Romanticism in modern art and poetry (including Surrealism) are spread throughout his critical oeuvre.³³ A common theme is his rejection of the centrality Romanticism placed on the artist’s subjectivity and its manifestation in the work of art over its links to the social and historical world. As Hodgkinson and Sheratsky argue, this explicit turn to the social as well as natural world, to historical and collective issues of meaning and experience, differentiates Jennings from a number of his Surrealist contemporaries in France, for

³¹ Ibid. 168 (221). I take the concept of the “engineering of consent” from Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (Horace Liveright, New York: 1928).

³² Alain Badiou describes Romanticism’s central component as the entwined sacralization of the artist’s subjectivity and the artwork that emerges from that subjectivity’s encounter with the infinite. Rejecting the sacredness and the separateness of the artist from the people and everyday life, avant-garde artists of the twentieth century, he argues, embraced instead a “passion for the real,” meeting the great social and historical crises of their time with a range of diverse formal and aesthetic crises and experiments of their own, including the use of found objects, appropriation and automatic writing. See Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

³³ See, for example, Humphrey Jennings, “Eliot and Auden and Shakespeare,” *New Verse* 18 (December 1935): 4-7; and Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, “Poetic Description and Mass-Observation,” *New Verse* 24 (February-March 1937): 1-6.

“Jennings deliberately renounced [the] use of private imagery from the unconscious and adopted instead a repertoire of public images that were accessible to *almost* every English person.”³⁴ Jennings’s criticisms of contemporary British poetry in his 1935 essay “Eliot and Auden and Shakespeare” is a further case in point. Here he scolds contemporary poets for putting too much of themselves into their poetry (as with T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden).³⁵ Jennings’s Surrealism, by contrast, is concerned with how the “poet-reporter” is moved by an encounter with the real of the world, and understands the poet as a distributed (if professionalized) function in adaptation to a transforming world. Inspired by the Surrealist turn toward the unconscious and the hidden, Jennings sought to relink and reimagine poetry and everyday life, to position poetry as emerging from within, or at the very least speaking to, the customs and crises of his time. The point, then, is not that it is incorrect for poets to subjectivize themselves with and through poetry, per se, but that they do so as “poets,” as preordained agents of expropriation in a hierarchical cultural system of exclusion. This is why, in the conclusion of his review of *Surrealism*, Jennings puts the traditional, “stock” roles of the artist into question: “And,” he writes, “to be *already* a ‘painter,’ a ‘writer,’ an ‘artist,’ a ‘surrealist,’ what a handicap.”³⁶

The Regal Action of Poetry

Regarding the question of the function of the poet in relation to his professionalized role in articulating (or not) mass desire, it is worthwhile jumping back in time to Jennings’s 1935 essay

³⁴ Hodgkinson and Sheratsky, *Humphrey Jennings*, 25. My emphasis. The role of the “almost” as it applies to the English people must be noted, as it hints at the class, racial, sexual and gender dynamics of difference in modern England.

³⁵ Jennings, “Eliot and Auden and Shakespeare”: “every writer in the world puts his horrid self into his hateful works: the problem now is how to present more of the world, by itself” (6). The problems of the contemporary world, that extend from the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, had created, for Jennings, a society “in far too muddled a state for its poets to afford to waste their energies in the pleasantly limited worlds of clean fun and self-torture” (6).

³⁶ Jennings, “*Surrealism*,” 168 (220). Emphasis in original.

“The Theatre Today,” where he argues, much as he later does in *Pandaemonium*, that in seventeenth century England poetry became severed from its historical mission to address the life of the people. This rupture had decisive effects on popular culture, now increasingly understood and experienced under the purview of leisure. Popular theatre, in Jennings’s understanding, became a mere entertainment and distraction, populated by “stock theatrical behaviour” that had no poetic bearing on the lived realities of its audience.³⁷ The gestures and attitudes of the actors in their roles merely reproduced a closed set of actions in a limited, conventionalized theatrical repertoire.³⁸ In the mutually related categories of culture and economy, everyday life became an object of control drained of mystery and “mass desire.” By contrast, Jennings provides an understanding of how poetry *did* engage the desire of the people through the concept of “poetry *in action*.” This idea is presented in the following historical series:

- (a) Direct realization of desires in war, conquest and the apotheosis of the conqueror, which was once the action of Kingship.
- (b) “Imitation” of above through the medium of the theatre by the poet (his desires not free) of which the degeneration has already been traced.
- (c) Realization of free desires through the medium of words only: regal action of poetry (Rimbaud).
- (d) Realization of free desires through the medium of the theatre: poetry *in action*.³⁹

Running counter to the rupture within popular English theatre, this series is for Jennings found in the poetic-theatrical work of the Irish poet W.B. Yeats, in which the work of the poet “is at least

³⁷ Humphrey Jennings, “The Theatre Today,” *The Arts Today* (1935); reprinted in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 211.

³⁸ Poetry, meanwhile, increasingly retreated into itself and abandoned its connection to “vital everyday facts and necessities.” Both theatre and poetry, then, had effectively become separated from manifesting popular desire and emotion: theatre, in the form of leisure; and poetry, in the form of “poetic subject matter.” This set of conventions in the emerging bourgeois theatre corresponded with the development of the study of populations in terms of probability and prediction. See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³⁹ Jennings, “The Theatre Today,” in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 213. Emphasis in original.

not acted for anybody's exploitation but with the poet actually in the position of the King, and poetry realizing free desires."⁴⁰ Opposing the "poet-king" to the "poet-subject," Jennings maintains that a "free" and "popular" theatre manifests the poetic vocation for speaking to and of the people not only in words, but through emotionally invested actions and gestures that excite the audience's "mass desires." In such "poetry *in action*," poetry would seem to transcend or exceed its enclosure in high culture and relink to the vitality of everyday life. As Benjamin Kohlmann observes, however, the ambiguity in the transition from category (c) "regal action of poetry" to category (d) "poetry *in action*" again raises the question of whether "the poet is presented as the passive mouthpiece of 'free [mass] desires' or whether he is thought of as actively shaping and manipulating them."⁴¹ In any case, British poets drawing inspiration from Rimbaud moved increasingly toward an interest in "objective" historical reality at the same time as realizing "the French poet's proto-Surrealist dream of a visionary writing in which the controlling consciousness of the author has been subject to a 'rational *derangement*.'"⁴²

In this sense, Jennings's interest in poetry and everyday life is engaged not merely with conflicts over *what* events mean, per se, but *that* events mean (and *how* they mean). Romanticism fills this gap or lack in the everyday space of meaning with subjectivity; Jennings's Surrealist redeployment of Classicism does something different: it redistributes poetry as a strange poetic capacity for all. Thus, in his more aggressive Surrealist mode, Jennings aggravates the lack (and its dialectical underside, excess) in the space of meaning in everyday life. The effects of Jennings's experiments with authorial control, poetic style and the problem of shared

⁴⁰ Ibid., 212-213.

⁴¹ Kohlmann, *Committed Styles*, 134.

⁴² Noel-Tod, "Mass Illuminations," 52. Emphasis in original. Noel-Tod observes of Jennings's poetic "reports" of the 1930s: "The decentred omniscience achieved by Jennings's prose segues of reverie and image strongly recalls Rimbaud's ironic, polyphonic channelling of post-Enlightenment Europe in *Illuminations*" (55).

meaning in some of his shorter Surrealist texts of the 1930s are both intriguing and confusing in this regard.⁴³

The Promise of the Unknown

It is significant that while Jennings strongly criticizes Read for the “short-sighted horror” of his “use” of Surrealism in the English context, André Breton’s contribution to the *Surrealism* collection, “Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism,” is met with far greater favour.⁴⁴ Written only a few months after the London exhibition and making reference to recent events such as the Spanish Civil War and the occupation of factories by protesting French workers, Breton makes in the article an eloquent and impassioned plea for international solidarity in the face of the “*miserable* national aspirations of France and Germany, ready again like dogs to tear each other’s people to pieces.”⁴⁵ “Surrealism,” by contrast to nationalism, “now tends to unify in one name the aspirations of the inventive writers and artists of all countries...This unification, far from being simply a unification of style, corresponds to a new consciousness of life *common to all*.”⁴⁶ Mentioning Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll in the same breath as Alfred Jarry, Breton calls on English artists and poets to keep drawing from their respective traditions of visionary poetry and the like so that they may continue to contribute to an international, if not global, “collective myth” — an avant-garde pooling of diverse energies, ideas, visions and forms that might outmatch the contradictions of capitalism and the seductive allure of nationalism, militarism and,

⁴³ See, for example, the generically titled “Prose Poem,” a 1937 “report” that describes “a chaos of elemental and artificial lights” taking place during a sunset encounter between two men. Humphrey Jennings, “Prose Poem,” *London Bulletin 2* (1938): 8. Jennings’s fondness for the strange is also apparent in the famous “kazoo band sequence” in *Spare Time*. for instance.

⁴⁴ Jennings, “*Surrealism*,” 167 (219).

⁴⁵ André Breton, “Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism,” in *Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), 114. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 99. Emphasis in original.

notably, fascism (which draws its own energies from appeals to mythology). “No attempt at intimidation will cause us to renounce this self-allotted task,” Breton affirms, “which, as we have already made clear, is the elaboration of the *collective myth* belonging to our period.”⁴⁷

What Jennings discerns in Breton is both an appeal to past tradition and an affirmation of the radically contemporary, which must by necessity embrace an experimental approach to poetry — one that, for Jennings, displaces Romanticism’s conservative fixation on style and the notion of the sovereign creativity of the individual, of works of the imagination as the expression of merely one person’s creative genius. While Jennings does not mention “collective myth” in his discussion, it is nevertheless apparent that it informs his reading of Breton, particularly when he contrasts his notion of “the real poet” to Read’s narrow vision of poetry in his defence of Romanticism. “To the real poet,” Jennings contends, “the front of the Bank of England may be as excellent a site for the appearance of poetry as the depths of the sea.”⁴⁸ Jennings continues: “Note the careful distinction made by Breton in his article (pp. 112-113): ‘Human psychism in its most universal aspect has found in the Gothic castle and its accessories a point of fixation so precise that it becomes *essential to discover what would be the equivalent for our own period.*’”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 109. Italics in original.

⁴⁸ Jennings, “*Surrealism*,” 168 (220).

⁴⁹ Ibid. The italics belong to Jennings. It is important to note here that Jennings does not quote the line that immediately follows Breton’s statement that “it becomes essential to discover what would be the equivalent for our own period.” The line, written in parentheses, is “(Everything leads us to believe that it is not a factory).” Breton, “Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism,” 112. Susan Rubin Suleiman argues that Breton’s rejection of the factory as a site capable of producing mythical effects and investments is “highly overdetermined and symptomatic” not only because it can be read as yet another dismissal of socialist realism, but for the further reason that workers in France were at that precise time *occupying factories* — a fact that Breton himself mentions in the introduction of his essay! See Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Between the Street and the *Salon*: The Dilemma of Surrealist Politics in the 1930s,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 7.1 (Spring 1991): 41.

Breton refers to the “roman noir” or Gothic novel — the Gothic castle as imagined in Horace Walpole’s 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto* in particular — for the ways it may be considered “pathognomonic of the great social troubles in which Europe was enveloped at the end of the eighteenth century.”⁵⁰ The dark visions of Gothic novels, in which modern-day keepers of ruined castles are haunted by apparitions of sovereigns past, Michael Richardson notes, were admired by the Surrealists not for their fantastical scenarios per se, but for the “quality of immediacy” they establish between perception and representation, social-historical event and imagination, a short-circuit between “two worlds where contradictions tend to melt away and reality and imaginary merge into one another. ‘What is admirable about the fantastic,’ wrote Breton in the first *Manifesto*, ‘is that there is no longer anything fantastic: there is only the real.’”⁵¹ Drawn to the “real,” Breton argues that no artwork or analysis can be useful to the Surrealist if it is satisfied with “expressing only the *manifest content* of an age. On the contrary, Surrealism proposes to express its *latent content*.”⁵² Breton’s pathognomonic conception of the Gothic novel is quintessentially Surrealist in its attention to physical and material symptoms of repressed or emergent psychological, spiritual and social energies. Through obsessive attention to uncanny objects and discrete details that stick out, he could construct a composite image of wider historical processes, transformations and crises. The Gothic novel, in this respect, is

⁵⁰ Breton, “Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism,” 109.

⁵¹ Michael Richardson, “Afterword,” in *The Myth of the World: The Dedalus Book of Surrealism 2* (Sawtry, Cambs: Dedalus, 1994), 275. Colin Davis writes of the ghostly apparition: “The ghost’s appearance is the sign of a disturbance in the symbolic, moral or epistemological order. Once that disturbance has been corrected, the ghost will depart again, this (all being well) for good. So the ghost returns in order to be sent away again.” Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2. For more on ghosts and Surrealism see Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013). See also the transcript of Jennings’s 1938 BBC radio broadcast “The Disappearance of Ghosts,” published in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 251-255.

⁵² Breton, “Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism,” 106. Italics in original. The question is thus whether the “real” dimension of the pathognomonic can be interpreted in terms of a social-historical register. Can the supernatural aspect of the ghost intervene in the ways that history itself is attended to and imagined?

pathognomonic for Breton of “the great social upheavals of its time,” including the transition from the last vestiges of feudalism to capitalism.

Jennings then turns to the most important part of his review, where he boldly separates his understanding of Surrealism from that of Read by focussing on the radically democratic promise Breton’s notion of the “coincidence” holds for poetry and everyday life:

[Breton] continues to say that Surrealism has replaced the “coincidence” for the “apparition,” and that we must “allow ourselves to be guided towards the unknown by this newest *promise*.” Now that is talking; and to settle Surrealism down as Romanticism only is to deny this promise. It is to cling to the apparition with its special “haunt.” It is to look for ghosts only on battlements, and on battlements only for ghosts. “Coincidences” have the infinite freedom of appearing anywhere, anytime, to anyone: in broad daylight to those whom we most despise in places we have most loathed: not even to *us* at all: probably least to petty seekers after mystery and poetry on deserted sea-shores and in misty junk-shops.⁵³

Jennings’s experimentation with poetry and photography in the mid- to late 1930s can be understood in similar terms, for there is a clear affiliation between Breton’s appeal to uncovering “latent content” and discovering “coincidences” and Jennings’s curious interest in the social customs and habits of people from various classes, an interest which will become even more intense in his contribution to *Mass-Observation* and in his wartime documentary films. As I will show, we can also see this in his passion for both the strange and the banal artifacts of modern popular and material culture, such as advertisements and scientific/natural historical texts from the past, which are often the basic material of his photography as well as his poetic collage assemblages.

The coincidence, as Breton explains in “Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism,” appears to be a permutation of the more well-established concept of *hasard objectif* or “objective chance,”

⁵³ Jennings, “*Surrealism*,” 168 (220). The emphases belong to Jennings.

exhibiting, as Michael Sheringham puts it, “a ‘magical’ convergence between the inner, subjective desires of the individual and the seemingly independent pathways of causation determining circumstances in the outer, objective world.”⁵⁴ Discussing the relationship between Jennings’s notion of the image (which I take up below) and objective chance, Jeremy MacClancy elaborates on the social, public dimensions of the intersection of “inner desire” and external objects in coincidences:

Since he regarded the workings of the unconscious as, to an important degree, impersonal, the image, if it was to have any worth, had to be equally impersonal. Poets were not to create, and could only communicate a kind of truth to the extent that the images they employed were public, collective and historical. Thus an image was not to be thought up by a gifted person but rather, to be sought out in the external world, in literature, or in the past. It was to be taken as a manifestation, not of the individual working outside of time, but of the community acting within time.⁵⁵

The collective observation of coincidences from daily life further draws out the egalitarian social and aesthetic relations implied within Kevin Jackson’s description of Jennings as a “hunter and gatherer of the uncanny in the everyday.” Rather than being drawn to great works and spaces as private properties, Jennings nomadically moves across them as objects of collective ownership, using them and then moving on. This at once modern and primitively collectivist approach to the objects of the everyday allows him to bring together disparate feelings and ideas simultaneously. Indeed, we can see this kind of roaming, foraging, hunting, and gathering present in Jennings’s approach to questions of authorship — to textual collaboration, scavenging or theft — as much

⁵⁴ Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 115. Charles Madge has written of the relationship between “magic” and “coincidence” in the image in his article “Magic and Materialism”: “The observer is to ask himself at the end of each day what image has been dominant in it. The image should, if possible, be one which has forced itself on him and which has confirmed its importance by recurrence of some kind. The image may occur in a series of varying forms or may take the form of coincidence. For example, the same name or object may forcibly strike the observer’s notice, from within or without, several times on the same day.” Charles Madge, “Magic and Materialism,” *Left Review* 3.1 (February 1937): 34. In this sense, modern scientific reason meets traditional (or magical) forms of knowledge.

⁵⁵ Jeremy MacClancy, “Brief Encounter,” 497.

as to space, as suggested, among many other possible examples, by the title of one of his 1937 BBC radio broadcasts: “Plagiarism in Poetry.”⁵⁶

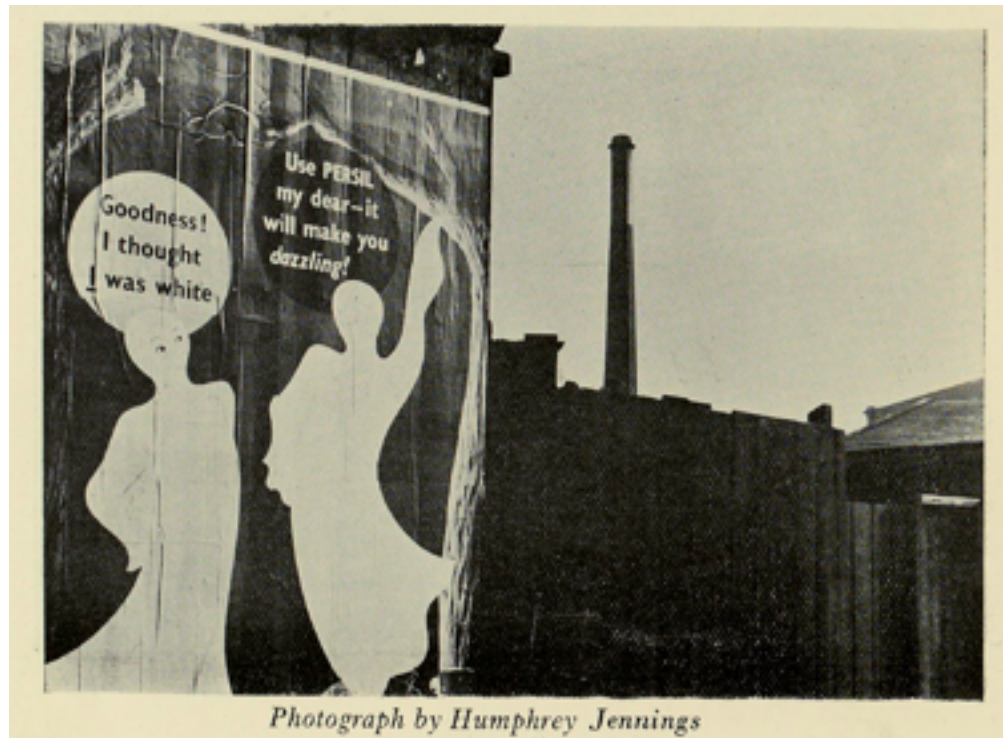


Image 1.3. “English Landscape” (Humphrey Jennings, 1938); published in *London Bulletin* 3 (1938): 14.

The transition from the Gothic castle as a point of fixation (site of apparition) to the space of everyday life as a field of potential coincidences further entails that power and desire are invested in the everyday, potentially everywhere.⁵⁷ When Jennings turns from ghosts and castles to coincidences and everyday life, then, he is not in some absolute way discarding these previous

⁵⁶ See Kevin Jackson, “Humphrey Jennings: The Poet and the Public,” 663-684. Taking another, perhaps less flattering example, Michel Remy writes of a dispute that broke out at the London Surrealist Exhibition in 1936 between Jennings and Mrs. Tait, a miniature painter, when Jennings used one of her works in a satirical collage of Lord Kitchener (*Le Minotaure*). Apparently, Tait did not appreciate the satire or the use of her work without her permission. “Jennings brushed the complaint aside,” Remy notes, “by saying that, from a surrealist point of view, as far as he knew, the collage was not properly *his*.” Michel Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, 77. Emphasis in original. Jennings’s appeal to Surrealism in his response provokes a follow-up question: To what extent does anyone’s unconscious “belong” to them? In what ways are they responsible for it and in what, if any, ways can it be said to be “possessed” by them? Psychoanalysis has much of interest to say about this, of course, but perhaps there is also something social, even political to say as well.

⁵⁷ This includes the social and creative power of collective myth, but also what can be understood as biopower.

forms and obsessions — he is, rather, discovering the marvellous and the strange, the object-manifestation of desire, that is transmuted and hidden in plain sight. If one of the keys to coincidences resides in how they place the emphasis on discovery rather than invention, then Jennings, by means of the coincidence, has no need to invent ghosts; he discovers them in the uncanny convergence of advertisement (consumption) and industry (production) found on the streets of north English cities, as in his photograph “English Landscape” (1938) (see Image 1.3).

Where Surrealism to some extent liberated language through automatic writing, allowing the poet to move inside language more freely (and more manically, often to the point of disintegrating its referentiality and legibility) and to fix on certain words and subject matter as it emerged from the unconscious movement of thought, so Jennings extends this automatism outward, seeing in the mechanically-(re)produced image an object that allows for further investigation of the unconscious fantasies and wishes that inform and energize people’s relations to the objects they interact with and the spaces they live in.⁵⁸ Considering “English Landscape,” then, we can suggest that “to the real poet” the coincidence of the side of a building with a billboard on it near an industrial smokestack in the empty streets of Bolton is as pathognomonic of strange yet revelatory meanings “as the depths of the sea.” Perhaps more so, for “English Landscape” not only frames a “fact” about everyday life in an industrial centre — the economy that brings together mass production and rubbish with the marketing and consumption of brand

⁵⁸ As Steven Harris argues in *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), it was in the 1930s that Surrealism began to move beyond “a confidence in the self-sufficiency and superiority of an autonomous, unconscious thought process (such as is expressed in automatic writing and other surrealist techniques), to an acknowledgement of the interdependence of thought and the phenomenal world. This was in keeping with an imperative shared by many revolutionary intellectuals in the 1930s to make thought active, to relate the hitherto separate spheres of thought and action, action and dream, a separation that had been understood to be the hallmark of a separate, modernist art and literature since the time of Baudelaire” (2).

name industrial detergent — but, like the desolate landscape of Giorgio de Chirico's *Love Song* (1914), communicates an uncanny sense of longing and loss. Here, in this enigmatic “report” in which the people are missing, a lonely subject is interpellated by the impossible sovereign desire to *get clean*; and here, in this ghostly city, the viewer is haunted by its own abjection.⁵⁹

In his discussion of Jennings’s notion of the image, Charles Madge explained that it was the impersonal nature of photography that could be used for “liberating human perceptions from the literature that surrounds them.”⁶⁰ That is, if “literature” is understood as the domination of the present by a rigidified set of representational values, of the repression of the realities of contingency and change by clichés cloaked in the aura of necessity and categorical thinking, then the enigmatic image (or the image of the object) can be *used* to disrupt the labels of the already-

⁵⁹ There are racial implications to this desire to rid oneself of filth: a strange pastoral/pop culture vision of racial purity and sovereignty. This leads me to interpret the ghosts in the Persil advertisement in “English Landscape” as symptomatic of the biopolitical pressures haunting the people of industrial England: the ghosts and the image of cleanliness (self-possession, appearance) they project thus manifest a desire for the sovereign people in reified (spectral) form. I would also suggest that there is something akin to a “parallax effect” in “English Landscape” in the way it reframes an epistemological-ontological relationship between the subject and the object. As Slavoj Žižek writes, the parallax object is “the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical twist to be added, of course, is that the observed difference is not simply “subjective,” due to the fact that the same object which exists “out there” is seen from two different stations, or points of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently ‘mediated,’ so that an ‘epistemological’ shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an ‘ontological’ shift in the object itself.” See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 17. In this respect, “English Landscape” can be interpreted in terms of the latent experience of the modern-democratic-industrial subject of consumerist popular culture, haunted by ghosts (as depicted in the soap advertisement) that are themselves subject to consumerism. The subject of this coincidence in popular culture perceives his own *thingified* existence in the absence (or decay) of the symbolic-imaginary of the sovereign (monarchical and high culture) and its “legible” (hierarchical) organization of life. The troubling Surrealist intervention to make here, of course, is to recognize that one’s failure to appropriate one’s space is a weird index of modernity. In this way, public space and popular culture — the democracy and weirdness of public life — is precisely conditioned by the breakdown of the monarchical-transcendent order of things; and the foreignness and surreal nature of modern life — its popular culture and spaces — is also the necessary displacements of democracy (in addition to its structuring by capital). The coincidence of the *thing* is, then, to be both an object and an agent of modern systems like opinion polls and representational politics, of forms of repetition and desire. The subject of “English Landscape” is thus neither natural nor supernatural, but unnatural (or perhaps *dis-natural*): mobile, industrial, commercial, and polluting.

⁶⁰ Charles Madge, “A Note on Images,” in *Humphrey Jennings: Filmmaker, Painter, Poet*, 80. In a manner similar to Walter Benjamin, Jennings sees in mechanical reproduction’s destruction of the aura something approaching a “profane illumination” — what can also be called a new realism, one that breaks down certain hierarchies (and assurances) of perception policed by language and tradition (its systems of labels, classifications, etc.). On Benjamin and profane illumination see Margaret Cohen, “The Art of Profane Illumination,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 10.1 (March 1994): 44-49.

given. In this sense, “liberating human perceptions” means stripping things of their value, of their meaning (at least in so far as they are meaningful in a certain regime of value). It means, moreover, somehow opening up the human sensorium through the image. This can mean, for example, using photography to escape from the aesthetic prison house that keeps art’s aesthetic powers separate from the perceived pollution of life. This is related to using the image beyond its function as a mere symbol, that is, as a vehicle subordinate to (or guaranteed by) a preexistent (transcendent) message (truth). It means, then, using the image to reveal dimensions of the *real* productive tensions — social as well as psychic — that work unconsciously around or beneath the appearances of already-classified, already-known objects and events in the world.⁶¹

In his review of *Surrealism*, Jennings follows this same line of thought when he praises artists who observe the “creative powers of non-selectivity.” When discussing artists like de Chirico, Duchamp, Klee, and Magritte he is as much concerned with their “automatic” (or irrational, mechanical or non-judgemental) process of image-making as he is with their (largely non-imitative) images.⁶² “Creation is *not* the re-presentation of ‘the truth,’ however much it may at times look like it,” Jennings writes. In this way, he affirms their “unquestioning acceptance of *all* the conditions of the moment: forgetting all ‘beliefs’ preceding the picture, which would deny the promise of the unknown.⁶³ This ethos of “non-selectivity” can be understood to mean that artists are only up to the challenge of the modern world precisely when they relinquish control, when they abandon themselves to a process of discovery in very their process of making, privileging in this way experience over the finished product. Here Jennings is again in accord

⁶¹ Of course, this new terrain of images and their relations of desire and knowledge also presents itself as a territory of capitalist expansion, a new resource for speculation and the extraction of value.

⁶² Jennings, “*Surrealism*,” 168 (220).

⁶³ *Ibid.* Emphasis in original. This links with Steven Connor’s observation regarding British Surrealism’s dialectic of “knowingness and unknowing, intention and performance.” See Connor, “British Surrealist Poetry in the 1930s,” 183.

with Walter Benjamin, who writes of Surrealism that “image and language take precedence ... Not only before meaning. Also before the self.”⁶⁴ The discovery of poetic images, in this sense, has little to do with questions of style, let alone individual artistic genius; it has to do with operations of objective chance and coincidence, and, therefore, with collectivity. In this sense, poetic images challenge the division between self and world that informs both Classicism (which takes art as representation of the world: object) and Romanticism (which takes art as presentation of self: subject). Against Read’s aestheticism, Jennings thus affirms the disruptive and collaborative potential of these artists’ encounters with something of the *real* — call it the pressure of life — in their practice.

It is for this reason, then, that the *interpretative* act on the part of viewers or readers of poetic images is so crucial, for they share the very same world, the same manifest and latent content, with the artist and the image. Thus for Jennings the question of sharing in the democracy that simultaneously emerges from and authorizes subjects’ capacities for developing coincidences means paying attention to our individual and collective unconscious fantasies and desires. It means drawing attention to what Eric Santner refers to as the “signifying stress” subjects both bear (carry) and bare (reveal or expose) in the “never-ceasing work of symbolization and failure at symbolization, translation and failure at translation.”⁶⁵ Jennings’s poetic experiments of the 1930s, in particular, are nothing if not devoted precisely to symbolizing and failing to symbolize — or better, *imagine* — the enigmas of an essentially

⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism — The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 179.

⁶⁵ Eric L. Santner, “Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud, and the Matter of the Neighbour,” in Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbour: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 92.

modern condition, of translating and falling to translate individual feeling into collective experience and shareable knowledge.

“Three Reports”

In this regard, take for example “Three Reports,” a trilogy of prose poems published in the June 1936 Surrealist double-issue of *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*. Here Jennings transmutes Rimbaud’s “derangement of the senses” into what we can consider a quasi-documentary derangement of the *sources*.⁶⁶ In these prose poems, Jennings textually manifests the existence of life in the interstices of social-historical meaning not merely in the content of the prose, which itself bears the markers of both subjectivity *and* social custom, but in the very act of poetic exposition. Each of the “reports” documents an encounter between an ostensible “observer” and an “event” in the world, presenting an uncanny doubling of natural forces (including animals) and historical and artificial processes. Horses in particular carry a symbolic role: the first two reports describe horse races, and the third a funeral procession involving a horse-drawn carriage transporting the body of Lord Byron. Horses are significant in Jennings’s own image of the transformations of the industrial revolution, as can be evinced by comparing “Three Reports” with “The Iron Horse,” for instance, which opens with the pronouncement that “machines are animals created by man.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ My emphasis. I discuss the significant influence of Rimbaud on Jennings’s poetic practice further in Chapter Four.

⁶⁷ Humphrey Jennings, “The Iron Horse,” *London Bulletin* 3 (1938): 22; reprinted in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 226. It is the interplay, the sharing of properties and the associations drawn between the animal (horse) and machine (train engine, for example) that is of interest. Jennings goes on: “The idea of a machine which would *go by itself* (automatically—without the help of an animal) has long obsessed man because then it could be considered to have a life of its own—to have become a complete pseudo-animal. Cp. Milton *Paradise Lost* VI [...] And as man is related to the real animals so every machine has a latent human content” (22-23). It follows that animals in “Three Reports” are understood in some respects as machines that run on their own, automatically, thus prefiguring the modern use of the machine at the same time that the logic of the machine casts a retrospective gaze back at them, making them “pseudo-machines.” Horses thus serve as condensations, “carriers” not only of representational content within their respective reports (as horse-power for riders, for example), but themselves as symbolic-metaphorical transports (“reports”) of socio-historical-technological processes.

In addition, remnants of pre-modern metaphysical systems are apparent in the world(s) of the poems, as Jennings writes in the second report: “The flower-laden horse that figured in this ceremony was the symbol of the Divine Mind or Reason, and resolves itself into the light of EK HU—the great mind, soul, or spirit.”⁶⁸ Such observations turn from the strictly historical (collectively conscious) or phenomenological (individual experience) to the mythical, as Remy understands it, confronting the reader with “the not-yet-visible.”⁶⁹ Poised between the past and future, each report is in this way *obscure* in what it reports of the phenomenological encounter between the observer and the observed; and the report itself, as a discursive event, is marked, stylistically and symptomatically, by this inconclusive obscurity. It is not by accident, then, that Jennings concludes each report with a turn toward the expanses of the sky and the horizon: the first report concludes, “It was always evident that the most attenuated light of the Aurora sensibly dimmed the stars, like a thin veil drawn over them. We frequently listened for any sound proceeding from this phenomenon, but never heard any;” and the second, “When the king returned into the castle, the company soon dispersed: the setting sun also was rapidly withdrawing its rays and the face of nature was about to be enveloped in the shades of darkness;” and the third, “From the tomb seawards may be seen Brighton afar off, Worthing nearer, and closer in, in the valley, the village of Salvington.”⁷⁰

The reports are plainly heterogeneous, composed of disparate pieces of information transposed from larger texts and contexts. They do not, however, function only through what they exclude, that is, as found objects suggesting what they exclude through the fragments of

⁶⁸ Humphrey Jennings, “Three Reports,” *Contemporary Poetry and Prose 2* (June 1936): 40.

⁶⁹ Michel Remy, “‘For the Snark was a Boojum, You See.’ An Assessment of Surrealist Poetry in Britain,” in *On the Thirteenth Stroke of Midnight: Surrealist Poetry in Britain*, ed. Michel Remy. (Manchester: Carcanet, 2013), 12.

⁷⁰ Jennings, “Three Reports,” 39-41. The appeals to metaphysical systems in the reports, furthermore, also mark the contemporary reader’s distance from their historical sites of meaning. The reader lacks conviction in their “world.”

what they include. In a more “active” register, the points of view assembled in “Three Reports” put the poetic “excess” of the act of “reporting” on display. That said, this logic of inclusion (rather than mere exclusion) presents its own problems of transmission and legibility. As Tyrus Miller argues in regard to the “*generic* inclusiveness” of “Three Reports,” such inclusivity brings out the “basic difficulties of context and significance, of the very status of the text generically and ontologically.”⁷¹ The “generic” in question here pertains to both the distinct genres brought together — including the diary, poetry and documentary record — and to the strange non-specificity or commonality of “Three Reports” itself, to its exemplary status as a *document*.⁷²

The excessiveness and inclusiveness of the reports also throws into question the “authority” of their documentary character. “These prose poems,” Benjamin Kohlmann observes, “test the limits of the decade’s favourite literary genre, the documentary reportage: the failure of their mimetic strategies is paradoxically produced by their own myopic vision, by the fact that they are looking too closely to make sense of what they see.”⁷³ Drawing attention to their point of view as well as to the act of enunciation, the myopia of the reports would seem to make them turn away from a discursively legible claim on the world, thus bringing them closer to the poetic “pseudo-statement” as conceptualized by I. A. Richards: they tell the reader little to nothing about the factual world, and more about our desires and capacities to be affected by an

⁷¹ Tyrus Miller, “Documentary/Modernism: Convergence and Complementarity in the 1930s,” *Modernism/modernity*, 9.2 (April 2002): 231. Italics in original. Miller elaborates: “this genre can embrace oneiric narrative, found objects, irrational juxtapositions, satirical mimicry of outmoded books, dysfunctional machines, and distortions of textual logic introduced through chance and automatic practices” (231-232). Curiously, while Miller situates “Three Reports” amidst the other texts in the magazine, notably poems and short screenplays by André Breton and Luis Buñuel, amongst other Surrealists, as well as texts attributed to anonymous children, he does not look at the interrelationship between the three “reports” themselves.

⁷² In this way, “Three Reports” functions in much the same way that Agamben understands the exceptionality of the example: “What an example shows is its belonging to a class, but for this very reason, it steps out of this class at the very moment in which it exhibits and defines it. Showing its belonging to a class, it steps out from it and is excluded.” Giorgio Agamben, “What is a Paradigm?,” *European Graduate School*, 2002, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-what-is-a-paradigm-2002.html>

⁷³ Benjamin Kohlmann, *Committed Styles*, 156.

experience of language.⁷⁴ That said, the collage-like generic inclusivity of the reports and their appeal to visually observed fact, if only to “fail” in representing those facts by seeing too much and too close, complicates the poetic suspension of belief as Richards understands it. In other words, the reports simultaneously make a claim on describing phenomenological reality in prose and estrange our access to it by poetic means.⁷⁵

Jennings’s “reports,” Miller argues, “are puzzling so long as we are seeking to make them ‘reports of’ something and do not see that these are ‘reports’ to be viewed as objects whose referential or functional aspects have been rendered ambiguous, though not fully effaced.”⁷⁶ In their very ambiguity, the prose poems of “Three Reports” hold the documentary and its claim of authority up as an uncanny object, invested with both knowledge *of* and desire *for* the real.⁷ While the myopic vision devoid of contextual-denotative markers in the reports makes their mimetic referentiality illegible, and is a significant part of what makes them difficult to ontologically define, it is also what paradoxically brings into relief their generic (and Surrealist) classification *as* reports, focussing attention upon the very act of seeing, and of transcribing/inscribing the process of seeing (reporting), in the social and discursive context of the 1930s.

Like Rimbaud’s prose poems before them, then, “Three Reports” arrive at the limits of language and communicability. Excluded from their status as merely informative reports, they

⁷⁴ As Stephen Heath explains: “We must not, in other words, read poetry as though it were truth or knowledge, bringing it into line with some ready-made idea or reference; on the contrary, it is pure pseudo-statement, unlike religion demanding no belief as true and valuable precisely for its plasticity, the suppleness with which it can balance heterogeneous impulses. [Poetry] does not tell you anything; it models this balancing, frees up capacity for organization, disconcerts stock responses.” Stephen Heath, “I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis and Cambridge English,” in *Cambridge Minds*, ed. Richard Mason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 27.

⁷⁵ In deploying and deactivating the signifiers of phenomenological and documentary description (seeing too much without context) alongside reactivating anachronistic modes of writing (mythical narrative), Jennings makes the obscurity of poetic vision and scientific reference *obvious*.

⁷⁶ Miller, “Documentary/Modernism,” 232.

⁷⁷ “Three Reports” thus anticipates Jennings’s further intervention into textual documentary reportage in *May the Twelfth*. In this “report,” however, he extends the “use” of vision to a much larger body of “reporters.”

enter into contact with the realm of poetry. This has two social effects: first, they slip into what Jennings calls the “regal action of poetry,” the play of language, thereby displacing the restricted utility of documentary representation; second, they make the poem illegible, not only in terms of empirical-denotative reference but in an emotional-connotative sense as well. As Kohlmann argues, this is not necessarily an “illuminating” demonstration: “The failure to couch events in familiar terms, Jennings implies, far from effecting an emancipatory bracketing of stock responses, can lead to a comprehensive failure to make sense, to a total breakdown of ‘readability.’”⁷⁸ In bringing to the fore such “breakdowns” of “readability” that are the effect of poetic estrangement, the discontinuous reportage of “Three Reports” further speaks to Richards’s concerns about those aspects of human experience *unknown* by scientific rationality and poetic organization. Remembering that Breton maintains that the Gothic novel is of interest to the Surrealist only in so far as that in its fantastical images “there is no longer anything fantastic: there is only the real,” the breakdown of meaning in “Three Reports” compels me to return to Jennings’s invocation of “the real poet” in his review of *Surrealism* to suggest that in “Three Reports” he gestures toward perhaps two more radical notions, what we might call *the poet of the real* and *the real of poetry*.⁷⁹

As an encounter with the unknown *as* unknown, then, the “empty space” of meaning in the “reports” is experienced *as such*, before it is disavowed (as in repression) or it is made immediately legible and obvious (as in a cliché). In terms Jennings himself might have used, “Three Reports” (taken together as a single prose poem) is an image that profanes the “stock”

⁷⁸ Kohlmann, *Committed Styles*, 155.

⁷⁹ While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the implications of these ideas, I will simply note the obvious Lacanian resonance of these notions.

conventions of documentary reportage, thereby allowing the reader to experience them as something poetically and generically strange, as uncanny historical artifacts, *in their own time*. Such textual and poetic concerns also inform, albeit in a different arena of social responsibility, Jennings's involvement in Mass-Observation. For it was in his work with Mass-Observation that Jennings redirected both the democratic and the hermetic impulses of Surrealism toward a specific "problem" of everyday life, what we can call the latent content of collective experience.

Mass-Observation: A Poetic Anthropology of Everyday Life

Jennings was already making documentary films under the stewardship of John Grierson at the film unit for the General Post Office (GPO) and Charles Madge was working as a journalist at the *Daily Mirror* when they began conceiving of what would become Mass-Observation (hereafter abbreviated to M-O) in early 1937. According to historians of M-O, two events from the end of 1936 in particular sparked their recognition of the need for such an organization: the burning of the Crystal Palace on November 30th and the Abdication Crisis of Edward VIII, who officially confirmed his plan to pass the crown to his brother, Albert (making him King George VI), on December 10th. These two events were somehow linked together as symptoms of what historian David Thomson has described as a "sense of helplessness and drift," indicative of both a gnawing sense of disturbance and a social imaginary that could find no practical or symbolically convincing outlet through which to meaningfully respond to the problems and disturbances of the day.⁸⁰ That said, in much the same way that the aesthetic debates of the 1930s

⁸⁰ Thomson describes this social and political deadlock as "an incorrigible *immobilisme* in State and society, a structural resistance to change, and especially to any radical improvement. Far from being apathetic, opinion of many kinds was exasperated and despondent, made so by repeated experience of inability to impose any effective control either on policies or on the sheer course of events. Consciences were deeply stirred, but they could find no outlet in constructive action." David Thomson, *England in the Twentieth Century* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), 181. Italicized in original.

played themselves out in art journals and literary periodicals, Madge announced the formation of a group intent on developing “an anthropology of our own people” in a letter in *The New Statesman and Nation* on January 2nd, 1937.⁸¹ Declaring that “only mass observations can create mass science,” Madge describes the still nameless groups’s research project as a combination of principles drawn from anthropology and psychoanalysis along with the “sciences dealing with the behaviour of man.” In addition to noting that the group’s first object of analysis was what he refers to as “the Crystal Palace-Abdication symbolic situation,” Madge puts out a public request for “voluntary observers” to participate in “establishing observation points on as widely a front as can at present be organized.”⁸²

In a follow-up letter, co-signed by Madge, Jennings and the anthropologist Tom Harrison, published in the same magazine on January 30th, the fledging social research group fleshes out how its approach combines the methodologies of the naturalist Darwin with the economic analyses of Marx together with the anthropological studies of Tylor and the psychological insights of Freud and Breuer — all devoted to taking “man” as the “subject of scientific investigation.”⁸³ Building on the radical anthropological promise of the first letter, the authors confirm that their “science of Mass Observation” (here unhyphenated) has already expanded from its centre in London to include another group in the northern industrial county of Lancashire. Noting that fieldwork and theory are now consolidated, the group seeks to expand its

⁸¹ On the foundational role of periodicals in British artistic and cultural life in the 1930s see Chambers, *Modernism, Periodicals, and Cultural Poetics*.

⁸² Charles Madge, “Anthropology at Home,” *The New Statesman and Nation* (2 January, 1937): 12; reprinted in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 146. Madge’s letter is framed as a response to a schoolteacher, Geoffrey Pike, who wrote a letter the previous week on the prospects for an “anthropology of our own people” in light of the “primitive” reaction of the British public to the “constitutional crisis.”

⁸³ Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings and Tom Harrison, “Anthropology at Home,” *The New Statesman and Nation* (30 January, 1937): 155; reprinted in *Everyday Life Reader*, 146.

“mass of observers” to the study of a diverse array of social and cultural “problems.” They provide a sample of such “problems” in a list that appears to so overtly reveal the influence of Surrealist poetry that it can be seen to be approaching parody or caricature:

Behaviour of people at war memorials.
Shouts and gestures of motorists.
The aspidistra cult.
Anthropology of football pools.
Bathroom behaviour.
Beards, armpits, eyebrows.
Anti-semitism.
Distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke.
Funerals and undertakers.
Female taboos about eating.
The private lives of midwives.⁸⁴

Like traditional anthropologists, the mass observers study and gather data on the strange and exotic habits of their subjects, only these subjects include their family members and neighbours, their coworkers and strangers encountered in public spaces, themselves the subjects and objects of observation.⁸⁵

In this way, M-O for a time provided Jennings with an institutional-collective space from which to conduct an unprecedented poetic and social experiment, one that provocatively combined his avant-garde and documentary interests in a way reminiscent of the three-way

⁸⁴ Ibid., 155 (147). It has been noted that Jennings himself did not fully approve of the list. Indeed, while the list is somewhat Surrealist in its apparently incongruous assemblage of items of interest, it is nevertheless more vulgar, empirical and brutally fetishistic than Jennings’ particular take on Surrealism. That said, Sam Cooper makes an interesting point when he argues that M-O’s list of willfully incongruent objects “remaps ‘the political’ to include everyday experiences and desires, and to diminish that which constitutes politics in the mainstream media.” Cooper, *The Situationist International in Britain*, 37.

⁸⁵ One thing that repeatedly comes up regarding M-O is the question of what has been termed “poetic authority” relative to “social fact.” David Chaney and Michael Pickering understand this power relation in terms of cultural production and authorship, arguing that the apparent division between modernism (poetic authority) and documentary (social fact) is the central aesthetic and social issue in media representations of the interwar period. They contend that we should in fact understand the relationship between modernist “aesthetic autonomy” and documentary “social command” as existing on a continuum rather than a dichotomy. See David Chaney and Michael Pickering, “Authorship in Documentary: Sociology as an Art form in Mass Observation,” *Journal of Communication* 36.1 (March 1986), 34.

association between writing, knowledge and life that Foucault saw in the work of André Breton. M-O was, for Jennings, an attempt to put to *use* the dialectical tension between the “non-imitative” poetic imagination of Surrealism (as per Éluard) and the uncanny referentiality of the prose poem “reports” as a means of producing social-cultural knowledge of British everyday life. Matthew Chapman describes early M-O as signalling the potential for “a new radical poetics,” a promise that was soon abandoned after Jennings (in late 1937/early 1938, following the publication of M-O’s first major study, *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys* [1937]) left the group. While Jennings was still involved, however, M-O approached “British society textually, as one would a poem.”⁸⁶ But this was to be a form of poetic knowledge, an embodied textuality, both *made* and *understood* by those who produced it, as Breton defined the social objective of Surrealism. Rather than simply abandoning Surrealism, then, Jennings redirected its concern with the imagination “outward” as a way of encountering, of paying attention to social-historical objects, events and everyday experiences.⁸⁷ Jennings thus *placed* the unconscious, its attachments and its distortions, within history and everyday life as both an engine *of* and a disturbance *to* inherited customs and their conscious, traditional or otherwise dominant meanings.

This “radical new poetics” of everyday life was equally premised upon what Ian Walker understands as Jennings’s “radically democratic project” of transforming the social and cultural conditions of literary production and authorship, finding a use of British Surrealism for

⁸⁶ Chambers, *Modernism, Periodicals, and Cultural Poetics*, 79. Chambers also notes that Madge once referred to M-O as “Popular Poetry” in one of his diaries.

⁸⁷ It is worthwhile remembering, however, that by the mid-1930s, Parisian Surrealism had already moved beyond its concern with subjectivity, what André Breton in the first Surrealist manifesto called the “pure psychic automatism,” toward the “fundamental crisis of the object” and everyday life. As Rod Mengham writes, “The second manifesto showed much more interest in the surrealism of everyday life, in the attempt to discover where surreality resides in reality itself — in material reality and in a public, social world.” Rod Mengham, “Bourgeois News,” 26.

“something other than romanticised escapism, and of documentary [for] something other than realist usefulness.”⁸⁸ Disturbing the distinction between the aesthetic autonomy of modernism or the materialist objectivity of science, on the one hand, and the habits, ordinariness and practical realities of everyday life, on the other, Jennings’s and Madge’s “poet-reporter,” in Benjamin Kohlmann’s words, was informed by the “expectation that there was a popular poetry hidden in the structures of everyday life.”⁸⁹ Indeed, British poets’ interest in Rimbaud and Surrealism moved them increasingly toward an interest in “objective” historical reality. In this respect, according to Kathleen Raine, Jennings “went a stage beyond the surrealists, for whom the mental elaboration of images was sufficient in itself; for [him] the final test of an image was its objective reality.”⁹⁰ Drawing from “objective reality” for images and latent public feelings, Jennings thus “expose[d] to critical view the stigmata where mass politics and urban life left their forceful signatures,” as Tyrus Miller writes of late modernists more generally.⁹¹

That said, Kohlmann discusses how Jennings’s goal of producing a “popular poetry” from the material of everyday life in early M-O was undermined by the organization’s class structure, particularly evident in the ways editorial control was centralized in the hands of a few professionals rather than democratically distributed amongst its hundreds of “observers.” “As a consequence,” Kohlmann argues, “the examples of ‘popular poetry’ offered by Jennings and Madge privilege metaphorically over-determined facts over the messier data which Mass-Observation was trawling from the depths of English society, and they continue to be troublingly

⁸⁸ Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade*, 99.

⁸⁹ Kohlmann, *Committed Styles*, 142.

⁹⁰ Raine, “Humphrey Jennings,” 84. And she further observes, “History must realize, or it is mere literature” (85).

⁹¹ Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 6.

bound up with the bourgeois idea of the poet.”⁹² Similarly, Thomas S. Davis critiques M-O precisely for what he calls the group’s “aesthetic of reconciliation,” a “repurposing” of avant-garde aesthetics with attention to ordinary (and extraordinary) experience that serves to manage and contain the contradictions of everyday life.⁹³ Indeed, Davis’s analysis leads one to think that Jennings was a key representative of the late modernist (or “liberal avant-garde”) wing of what Louis Althusser famously termed the “ideological state apparatus,” which, as he put it, “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”⁹⁴

Nevertheless, responding to the Surrealist call to “change life” and rethink “use,” Jennings threw himself into redeploying poetic form in relation to the connections between language and life, representation and referent, science and desire, object and subject. In order to revive poetry’s social power, Jennings redirected Surrealist automatism and recording away from a strict concern with the interior discourse of the self and subjectivity toward “problems” of collective or cultural meaning and conscious and unconscious expressions of history. This meant that Jennings’s experiments with prose poetry, breaking down distinctions between Romantic and Classical modes of expression in a quasi-documentary form of collage, found a social purpose. “For the left-wing Madge and Jennings,” Noel-Tod writes, “the idea of a poetry liberated from the restraints of verse form, lyric voice and logical argument had opened up the possibility of *democratically transcribing*, rather than authorial ‘inscrib[ing]’, the poetic consciousness of a people.”⁹⁵ Romantic lyricism in poetry is in strong respects a question of personal expression and

⁹² Kohlmann, *Committed Styles*, 128.

⁹³ Thomas S. Davis, *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 47.

⁹⁴ See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” trans. Ben Brewster in *Essays on Ideology*, (London & New York: Verso, 1993), 36.

⁹⁵ Noel-Tod, “Mass Illuminations,” 57. My emphasis.

sentiment — two uses of poetry which the Surrealists often scorned. In composing poetic bodies of words from observations, diary entries, newspaper clippings, and snatches of advertising — all brought together by collage — Jennings’s practice in M-O was part of this liberation of poetry from the lyric. This critical move away from lyricism in poetry was also a modernist gesture informed by Freud’s intervention into the realm of intention and chance in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which uncovered a whole realm of symptomatic meaning beneath the surface appearance of harmony and order, on the one hand, and chance and disorder on the other. The latent expressions discovered in the hustle and bustle of modern everyday life thus provided another venue for poetic vision, another site of meaning not simply grounded in sentiment and the conscious designs of the transcendental subject. In this sense, the turn away from the well-established lyric verse of Romanticism became a turn toward the prose of observations as the poetry of everyday life.

Madge provides a version of the M-O approach to poetic observation and its textual form that actually blends the authorial-democratic roles of inscription and transcription in an essay he co-prepared with Jennings (who provided extracts of literary and diaristic “observations”) in early 1937. Published in the literary magazine *New Verse*, “Poetic Description and Mass-Observation” outlines their vision of how the “Mass-Observer” — the everyday chronicler of the people in the contemporary moment — is at once *of* the everyday world (an example of the mass) and, in observing and documenting it, is *apart* from it (an exceptional observer, an artist): “In taking up the role of observer, each person becomes like Courbet at his easel, Cuvier with his cadaver, and Humboldt with his continent. The process of observing raises him from subjectivity to objectivity. What has become unnoticed through familiarity is raised into consciousness

again.” For Jennings and Madge, in blending the objectivity of science with the distributed speech and point-of-view of the people, poet-reporters “produce a poetry which is not, as at present, restricted to a handful of esoteric performers. The immediate effect of MASS-OBSERVATION is to de-value considerably the status of the ‘poet.’ It makes the term ‘poet’ apply, not to his performance, but to his profession, like ‘footballer.’”⁹⁶ The contradictions and tensions between “us” and “them,” subject and object, however, are not so easily overcome, and they will continue to haunt M-O throughout its existence. To Jennings’s credit, however, these contradictions are openly and poetically elaborated upon and explored in *May the Twelfth*.

May the Twelfth

Jennings’s major contribution to M-O was assuming editorial duties for their first major research publication devoted to the Coronation of King George VI on May the twelfth, 1937, entitled, appropriately and matter-of-factly enough, *May the Twelfth* (see Image 1.4). A massive collection of “observations” (popular press clippings, diary entries, brief visual “snapshots” rendered in words, images of public spectacles and social interaction alongside private habits), the book provides a collective portrait of popular responses to the ritual event. The area covered by the book extends beyond London to include people’s activities (including listening to radio coverage of the Coronation) from Leeds, Watford and Hertford, among other places. What makes *May the Twelfth* particularly unique in the media landscape of 1930s Britain, however, is its general irreverence toward and disinterest in the spectacle of the Coronation itself; instead, Jennings and his fellow M-O editors and observers are more interested in the various (non-)events surrounding

⁹⁶ Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, “Poetic Description and Mass-Observation,” *New Verse* 24 (February-March 1937), 3. All caps in original. The scare quotes around the terms “poet” and “footballer” suggest that such “professions” are in some measure on equal par as activities in everyday life undergoing the conflicts endemic to the legacy of the Industrial Revolution.

the ritualized procession of kingship, including preparations for the event in the weeks and days leading up to it and the multitude of particular activities and behaviours of “ordinary people” on the margins of the Coronation itself. All of these “observations” are presented in a strangely systematic yet overwhelming montage-collage that covers a spectrum of divergent and disagreeing points of view, with editorial notes and commentary (including excerpts from literature and social theory) interspersed among the entries.

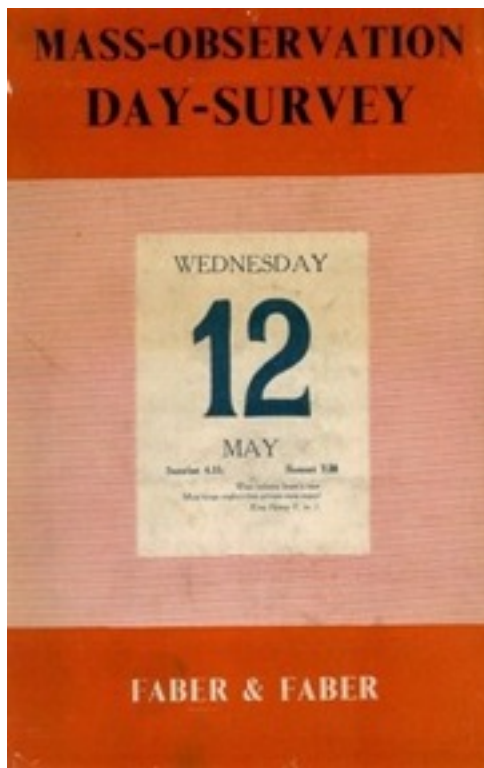


Image 1.4. *May the Twelfth*, ed. Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge (London: Faber & Faber, 1937).

May the Twelfth also includes in its assemblage some recorded dreams and other normally ancillary artifacts that possess what Jennings describes as a “disturbing quality,” what he explains as “that residuum of the day which at present defeats precise analysis or explanation, but which is important as giving it its dominant tone or character, a character which is made up

of the totality of the fantasy and image-making of all the individuals.”⁹⁷ In its focus on a contemporary symbolic event in British cultural life, and in both its radical inclusivity of subject matter and its non-hierarchical method of presentation, then, *May the Twelfth* built on the research project of a democratized social anthropology and cultural poetics promised by the fledgling M-O group in *The New Statesman and Nation* in early 1937.

Following from the proposition that M-O is an “anthropology of ourselves,” *May the Twelfth* thus took into its form how a *lack of self-evidence* became a problem of taking oneself and one’s culture (in both its unexamined and unconscious investments and meanings) as a question of “poetic” interpretation, an opportunity to examine and consider the evidence of everyday life for oneself. Directed toward and generated by the people themselves, with the editorial-curatorial role performed by the “poet” (Jennings and others), *May the Twelfth* responded to a social-symbolic crisis in which the foundations of one’s own society and civilization were no longer self-evident. In the crisis of the self-evident, then, “ourselves” were thus taken as a *problem of observation*. At the same time, however, Jennings and Madge posit that this “problem” also provides a space for anonymous observers to review and analyze the material themselves, thus heightening their “power of seeing what is around [them]” and giving them “new interest in and understanding of it.”⁹⁸

Following this line of reasoning, if “literature” is the name Jennings uses for model of representational authority and hierarchy that is no longer convincing and stable, no longer

⁹⁷ Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, “Note 102,” in *May the Twelfth, Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937, by over two hundred observers*, ed. Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), 328.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, iv. Jennings and Madge later note in a similar appeal to the democratic goals of M-O and *May the Twelfth*: “By publishing this book at this stage we are fulfilling another of the tasks of MASS-OBSERVATION, that of inviting observers and potential observers to contribute both to the analysis of material here presented and also to the future construction of MASS-OBSERVATION on a truly democratic basis” (414).

legitimate in the production and maintenance of meaning under conditions of modern urban-industrial transformation and symbolic crisis, then his appeal to the subject-perceiver's capacity for making connections across established "literary" boundaries in the complex (perhaps even systematically chaotic) collage of *May the Twelfth* lays the responsibility of meaning upon that very subject. Jennings's theory and practice of poetic "coincidences" is thus present here, and it speaks to the pathologies and the hopes invested in a politics and aesthetics of collective sensation and intelligence, of an organization of social and cultural life whose legitimacy emerges from the peoples' capacity for, as it were, poetic self-governance and interpretation without the benefits *and* the burdens of the traditional distribution of self-evident authority and meaning. Along these lines, in the Preface to *May the Twelfth*, the editors state that "Mass-Observation depends for its vitality on the criticisms and suggestions of the whole body of its Observers, who must be more than mere recording instruments."⁹⁹

While clearly restating the collaborative-democratic aims of M-O, this connection between the "vitality" of the project and the "whole body of its Observers" also resonates with a text included as the Epigraph to Chapter Two, "London on May 12": Shakespeare's *Henry V*, scene IV, I, in which the king soliloquizes on the decline of what has come to be understood as the doctrine of "the king's two bodies." The noteworthy passage from *Henry V* included in the Epigraph develops a corporeal-mystical metaphor for a doubling in the personage of the King of the personal, mortal body (the body natural) and the immortal, divine body (the body politic) that

⁹⁹ Jennings and Madge, "Preface," in *May the Twelfth*, iv. This reference to Observers being "more than mere recording instruments" can be seen as a response to Breton's own (affirmative) invocation of the poet who uses the techniques of automatism such that one becomes a "recording instrument." Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, 27-28.

sustains the continuity of the royal reign beyond the physical death of the former (as the ritualist saying goes, “the king is dead — long live the king!”). The passage:

Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
But his own wringing! What infinite heart's-ease
Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!
And what have kings, that privates have not too,
Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
And what art thou, thou idle ceremony?
What kind of god art thou, that suffer'st more
Of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers.¹⁰⁰

In his classic analysis of the late medieval doctrine of *The King's Two Bodies*, Ernst Kantorowicz emphasizes how the “king’s two-natured being” not only maintains the sublime body politic of the Crown but secures the consistency and legitimacy of the community that surrounds it.¹⁰¹

This community composed of “private men,” as Henry V complains, who subject the King to “the breath of every fool,” is precisely that mass of people attending, and further listening to on the radio and watching on television, the Coronation ritual. As the editors of *May the Twelfth* suggest elsewhere in the text:

On the great public occasion of his Coronation [the King] exhibits himself *in the flesh* to thousands of his subjects. This is obviously of the greatest importance as a means of establishing his position at the centre of the entire social system. Hence it is that broadcasting plays so vital a role ... to be effected on a far wider scale than has ever been possible hitherto. It is this too which gives potential significance to the added use of television, by whose agency the King is not only heard but actually seen in the process of exhibiting himself to the masses.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, scene IV, I, cited in *May the Twelfth*, 87.

¹⁰¹ Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 26.

¹⁰² Jennings, *May the Twelfth*, 14. Emphasis in original.

That said, the editors of *May the Twelfth*, as noted above, shift their focus away from the King as the supposed centre of attention and meaning toward the multitudinous interests of the “ordinary people” surrounding the events of the Coronation.

We can go further and suggest that the corporate body of the people and its “criticisms and suggestions” — upon whom the “vitality” of M-O depends — can be further interpreted in terms of what Eric Santner calls “the people’s two bodies.” Santner argues that by paying careful attention to the fraught dispersal of power that follows the displacement of the King as the symbolic centre of society, the “crucial features of modernity” can be revealed. It is here, Santner argues, “that biopolitics assumes its particular urgency and expansiveness ... because what is at issue in it is not simply the biological life or health of populations but the ‘sublime’ life-substance of the People who at least in principle become the bearer of sovereignty, assume the dignity of the prince.”¹⁰³ “One of the central problems for modernity,” Santner also observes, “is to learn how to track the vicissitudes of these royal remains in their now-dispersed and ostensibly secularized, disenchanting locations.”¹⁰⁴ In its dependence on the “whole body of its Observers,” then, M-O gathers up “the breath of every fool” into its own expansive media-body, transforming the voices of “private men” into something strangely and democratically public.¹⁰⁵ This new economy of meaning in *May the Twelfth* thus shifts the centre of attention away from the King to the people, in what Ian Walker refers to as Jennings’s “tactics of looking away from the main

¹⁰³ Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xi-xii.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁰⁵ Where the King is exhibited to the people as a privileged and hierarchical centre of meaning and attention, the people, in principle at least, redistribute this power of exhibition amongst themselves. The modern people, then, faces the recurrent issue of its own sovereignty, that is, the nagging problem of where its authority resides and how it is expressed, not only as population-object (perhaps the modern version of the body natural), but as people-subject (the modern body politic).

event of the day.”¹⁰⁶ It is Jennings’s significant contribution to a biopoetics of everyday life, then, to have made the extraordinary event of the Coronation something *radically ordinary*.

The surreal nature of the “vicissitudes” of the day is further suggested by Jennings’s inclusion of a figure, “House and Flag,” on the page facing the *Henry V* quotation (see Image 1.5). Symptomatic, perhaps, of the blurred boundaries between national and personal space with the media’s broadcasting of the Coronation into people’s homes across the country, the figure would seem to resonate with some of the research questions posed in *May the Twelfth* regarding participants listening from the privacy of their homes:

Is it permissible to eat during a “sacred” broadcast?

Is it better to give one’s whole attention to the broadcast, or to occupy a part of it with knitting, sewing, reading, bridge, housework, etc?

With what completeness is the listener participating in the ceremonies, and how far should he behave as if he was actually present at them; should he, for example, stand up for the playing of the National Anthem?¹⁰⁷

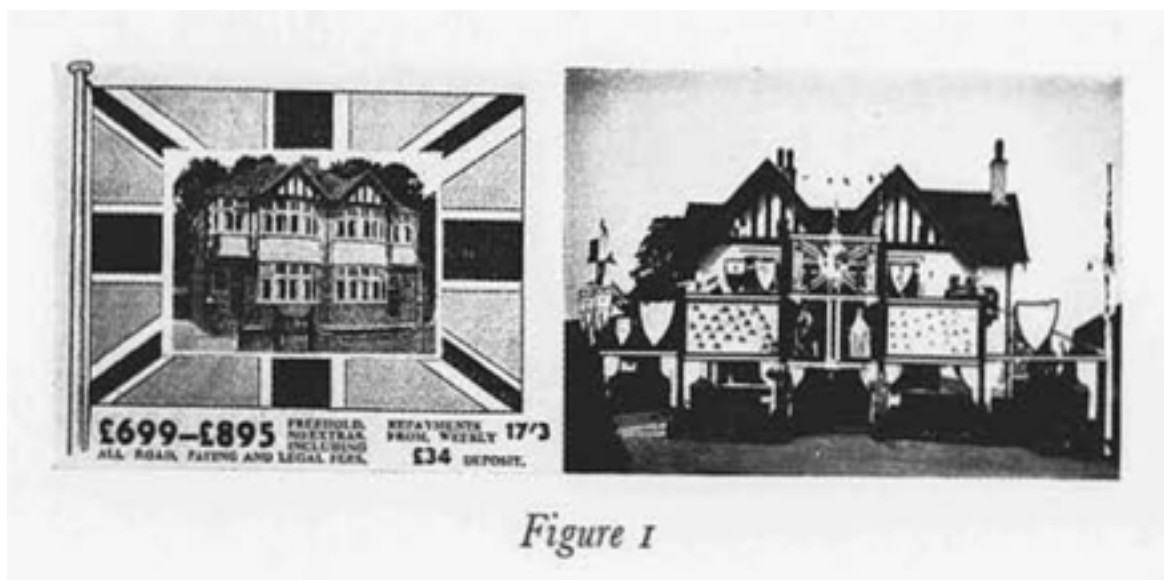


Image 1.5. “House and Flag.” *May the Twelfth*, ed. Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge (London: Faber & Faber, 1937).

¹⁰⁶ Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade*, 103.

¹⁰⁷ Jennings, *May the Twelfth*, 270.

That said, the figure remains enigmatic, its obscure reason for inclusion subtly displacing the more obvious literary, sociological and ethnographic value to be found in *May the Twelfth*.¹ In this respect, the *coincidence* of the collaged image-object observes Jennings's edict discussed above regarding "the creative powers of non-selectivity," and in this way it is akin to the newspapers and rubbish strewn about the streets that Observers repeatedly make reference to in their descriptions of the day. "House and Flag" is also of a piece, then, with the mud and debris that practically fills (or litters) a photomontage Jennings constructed from the photographs he shot on the day of the Coronation (see Image 1.6).¹⁰⁹

Withdrawing from any clearly defined meaning or message, these images and objects nevertheless insist on the fact that *something* was there, and they bluntly assert its right to be brought to light simply because it was there. These images are significant precisely in their insignificance; they are *about looking*. As Jennings states in his 1938 article "Who Does That Remind You Of?": "Intellectually the importance of the camera lies clearly in the way in which it deals with problems of choice — choice and avoidance of choice."¹¹⁰ These blunt, unexceptional images, then, approach "the promise of the unknown" at the heart of everyday life by cultivating a poetic and a documentary sensibility that, so to speak, draws one's attention to attention; in the process they encourage people to see the unconscious activity, used materials

¹⁰⁸ The simplicity and suggestiveness of "House and Flag" is similar to other Jennings collages of the period, such as "Life and Death" (1934) and "Fireside Interior and Nude" (1937), which juxtapose two objects into a relationship of coincidence, bringing out the latent content of familiar objects.

¹⁰⁹ For a more in-depth analysis of Jennings's photomontage see Anna Cotrell, "An Album of Small, Clear Pictures: George Buchanan, Humphrey Jennings's *May the Twelfth*, and the Practice of Looking Away from the Main Event in 1930s London," *Image and Narrative* 15.3 (2014). See also Steven Connor, "A Door Half Open to Surprise": Charles Madge's Immanences," *New Formations* 44 (2001): 52-62. The imagery of symptomatic "royal" rubbish can also be seen in Julian Trevelyan's combination of Surrealism and documentary in his collage, *Rubbish May be Shot Here* (1937). See, for example, Annette Joy Jemison, "Barrenness and Abjection?: The Iconography of the Wasteland in the Photographs and Collages of Julian Trevelyan, 1937–1938," *Visual Resources* 25.3 (September 2009): 169-191. Trevelyan's photographs of the depopulated streets of Bolton also recalls Jennings's "English Landscape." In both Jennings's and Trevelyan's photographs, the people, literally, are missing.

¹¹⁰ Humphrey Jennings, "Who Does That Remind You Of?" *London Bulletin* 6 (October 1938): 22.

and background objects that always necessarily accompany and support the manifest content of a “main event.”¹¹¹ Such a process may generate feelings of the uncanny or the weird in the viewer.¹¹² If this is so, it may have to do with the fact that what such images finally draw one’s attention to is something very familiar. To conclude, then, I turn to *Spare Time*, another example of Jennings’s deceptively straightforward approach to drawing one’s attention to everyday life.



Image 1.6. “May the Twelfth” (Humphrey Jennings, 1937).

¹¹¹ For an insightful discussion of M-O as alternative media see Ben Highmore, “Mass-Observation: A Science of Everyday Life,” in *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 75-112; 85-89 in particular.

¹¹² As Jennings will write of déjà vu, the photograph allows him to analyze the objects — or relations between objects and the subject’s own desires — that provoked the feeling of coincidence. Photography and coincidence, then, come to form a circuit in the economy of the people’s two bodies. “English Landscape” is haunted by the people’s two bodies: on the one hand, the privacy and mortality of labour and grime attached to the body natural; on the other, the sublime calling to be an integrated and public (clean) subject of public power and communication, a citizen in the body politic. The two sides of the people’s two bodies thus uncannily reside in the coincidence-image of “English Landscape.”

***Spare Time*: “a chance to be most ourselves”**

Made for exhibition at the New York World Fair of 1939, *Spare Time* can be seen as building on M-O’s account of the national-symbolic rupture of the Abdication Crisis of 1936 and the subsequent coronation of King Georg VI. While Jennings left M-O before he began production on the film, it nevertheless bears the strong imprint of his time spent with the group and its concern with everyday life and so-called ordinary people. The fifteen-minute short shows how people spend their leisure time in relation to three different industries (steel, cotton, coal) in three different industrial centres in Britain. Each place is discovered to possess a kind of “everyday Surrealism” that mixes together with the necessities of industrial labour and everyday life. The surreal everydayness of *Spare Time* is particularly important when one considers that the film emerges from a historical moment in which the abstract notion of “the people” was increasingly employed as a rhetorical device by political leaders and the media, in the process making the actual people increasingly abstract and subject to the machinations of what Jennings has called the “classical-military-capitalist-ecclesiastical racket” and the “romantic-cultural-*soi-disant* cooperative-new uplift racket” — soon leading, of course, to the many catastrophic events of the Second World War.¹¹³ From this perspective, *Spare Time* registers the body politic’s conflicted and transforming relationship to the nation as manifest in the exceptionally quotidian and ordinary ways the people inhabit their times and spaces of leisure through ritualized (and increasingly commodified) gestures, dances, pageantry, games, and the like.

¹¹³ My consideration of the film resonates with Nick Hubble’s work on Mass-Observation, who concludes his historically grounded overview of the movement in its historical context and conditions with a politically-inflected psychoanalytic discussion, in order to articulate how the new wave of contemporary interest in the work of Mass-Observation is connected not to nostalgia for a glorious past nor an appeal to a facile notion of reality, so much as how its methods and concerns tap into the underlying “Real,” in the Lacanian sense of the term — that which makes the home unhomey, uncanny; that which disturbs the apparently closed system of the symbolic order. See Nick Hubble, *Mass Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 240-253.

Spare Time is organized into three sections: the first section, coal, is set in Sheffield; the second, cotton, in Manchester and Bolton; and finally coal, in Pontypridd, South Wales. Each region is visually and orally considered in its material specificity, located in its landscape and fleshed out by associating it with a mode of popular musical expression: a brass band in Sheffield for coal, the Victoria Jazz Band in Manchester, and the Handel Male Voice Choir, who performs Handel's Largo in Pontypridd. The expository narration for the film was written by Jennings and voiced by poet Laurie Lee, but it refrains from the didacticism typical of documentary films of the period. The narration is spare and merely serves to introduce and conclude the film, along with setting up each segment with the briefest and most suggestive of information. As the film opens, "This is a film about the way people spend their spare time." And it goes on: "Between work and sleep comes the time we call our own. What do we do with it?" Concluding in Pontypridd with a shot of miners returning to work by entering a cage that will descend deep into the pit of the earth, Lee asks rhetorically, "As things are, spare time is a time when we have a chance to do what we like, a chance to be most ourselves."

Spare Time has a snapshot quality, composed as it is of many short takes of people engaged in various aspects of leisure activity; it is also redolent of beautifully and suggestively composed landscape photography. At the same time, in odd combination with the energy of the snapshot aesthetic and the quasi-Romanticism of the landscape, there is a flatness to the cinematography of the film, an affectlessness and objectivity that treats the spaces very much in the Surrealist tradition of the "outmoded" and the "document" as exemplified by the work of

Eugène Atget and Jacques-André Boiffard.¹¹⁴ Arranged into a kind of associative montage, Jennings takes up his subject matter as objets trouvés. Through this he finds spatial, temporal, and metaphorical links between his captured fragments of evidence. Aside from musical forms of social interaction and expression, such as the dancehall sequence shot in Bolton (where M-O photographer Humphrey Spender was shooting at approximately the same time), Jennings is particularly interested in scenes of popular spectacle, including spectators enjoying popular amusements: football, basketball and dog racing, along with caged animals at the zoo and men wrestling in a ring. He is also interested in various other forms of quotidian social interaction, such as families sitting together for dinner or, typically, men joining together in the pub. For such reasons David Mellor regards *Spare Time* as displaying "the strongest concentration of pop iconography in any work by a British artist until the emergence of Tom Philips and the Independent Group in the 1950s."¹¹⁵

Recalling the composition of Jennings's "English Landscape" photograph, it also is important to consider the verticality of industrial smokestacks so often in the distance — the towers of production and alienated labour a constant looming presence in *Spare Time* — never failing to remind the subjects of the film of the norms and necessities under which they live (see Image 1.7). In this respect, *Spare Time* would seem to "correct" Breton's dismissal of the factory as an object worthy of Surrealist concern. It was this interest in arranging material details into

¹¹⁴ As Ian Walker writes of this alien (non-auratic) vision of urban space, "If anything, the gaze of the camera...is steady, flat and rather neutral. Perhaps it was actually that impassive neutrality which unnerved the film's first viewers and it is an attitude that Jennings may have picked up from Surrealist documentary — Boiffard's photographs in *Nadja* or Bunuel's film *Land Without Bread*. Thought it must be admitted that this gaze was that of an outsider, nevertheless, it did not necessarily assume a position of superiority." Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade*, 110; and as Philip C. Logan puts it, Jennings "attempts to provide an artless representation of social reality, where authorial intent is minimized and, in literal and metaphorical terms, the people speak and represent themselves on the screen to the people." Logan, *Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film: A Re-assessment* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 107.

¹¹⁵ David Mellor, "Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings," in *Humphrey Jennings: Filmmaker, Painter, Poet*, 116.

constellations of visually poetic and social meaning that Jennings brought to the social project of the film.



Image 1.7. *Spare Time* (Humphrey Jennings, 1939).

Spare Time is true to its M-O and Surrealist precedents in how it treats, through a snapshot aesthetic, its images as *objets trouvés* or “found objects” — documentary evidence not invented but discovered. They are discovered, moreover, not in exotic locales (as in traditional anthropology) or in castles or antique stores (as in Romanticism or tourism), but in the profane streets and spaces of ordinary cities and towns. The composite “neighbourhood” imagined in the film is, furthermore, both spatial (because of mass industrialization and the creation of cities through collectivization, enclosures and land reforms) and topological (through various industrial-media forms of communication and travel: radio, telephone, train, etc.). Social life, then, is found in the “spare time” that is lived in the ever-present shadow of the factory. Jennings thus suggests that we can only understand “our” everyday lives — one’s own life and one’s neighbours’ — if we understand the dialectic between spare time in the home (and in public space) and labour time in the mine, the mill and the factory — how they mutually constitute each

other; and how, in this sense, the one is the truth of the other. In this light, it becomes clear how Jennings's emphasis on the "being-in-the-midst-of-life" of the everyday in its strangeness — that is, the ambivalence of everyday life — is a concrete, material expression of a certain predicament facing the people on the brink of the Second World War: an experience of time-space composed of the abstract logic of capital and alienating industrial rationalization, on the one hand, and the oddities and wonders of a national and regional culture, on the other.

In this light, *Spare Time*'s so-called "kazoo band" scene is the most obvious (and commented upon) instance of the film's ironic approach to a nationalist-patriotic imaginary. But it is also of interest for the way it taps into and uncovers the fantasy life, the "biopoetic unconscious" perhaps, of a people in the midst of a national crisis. As Kathleen Raine recalls of Jennings's prophetic vision of the national unconscious on the brink of war: "Humphrey recognized the signs everywhere, took marvellous photographs of those significant images that seemed to speak to us, as do dream-symbols from within."¹¹⁶ In the scene, Jennings trains his curious anthropological gaze on the "found" image of a girl costumed and raised up as the figure of Britannia, part of the youthful Victoria Jazz Band's march as they perform "Rule, Britannia" in Manchester (see Image 1.8).¹¹⁷ A national personification embodied in the flesh of a child, a symbol from the past marshalled together with the promise of a future generation, this strange

¹¹⁶ Kathleen Raine, *The Land Unknown* (London: H. Hamilton, 1975), 85.

¹¹⁷ Shot in 1938 for exhibition at the 1939 New York World Fair, *Spare Time* was released in Britain just before what was called the "phoney war" began in September 1939. While the film has since found many enthusiastic responses, it also provoked its share of critics. The documentary filmmaker Basil Wright, for example, recalls his critical attitude toward what he perceived as Jennings's elitism in the following way: "Humphrey seemed to show, in our opinion, a patronizing, sometimes almost sneering attitude towards the efforts of the lower-income groups to entertain themselves." Basil Wright cited in Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary: The Story of the Film Movement Founded by John Grierson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 110. Brian Winston echoes Wright in his harsh assessment of the film, writing specifically of the "kazoo band" sequence that it "contains what are easily the movement's most alienated and alienating images of the working class in the pre-war period." Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 53.

and revealing image of a living statue is emblematic of a nation at once consciously and unconsciously preparing itself for battle.



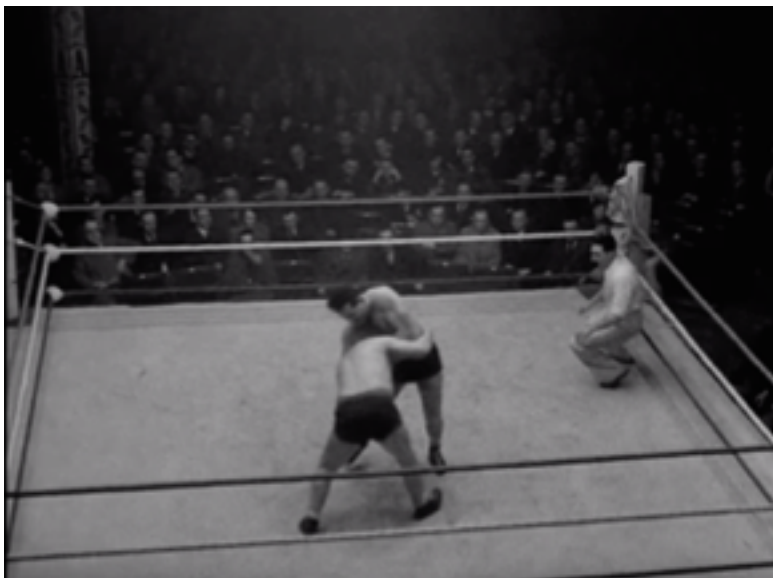
Image 1.8. *Spare Time* (Humphrey Jennings, 1939).

The last shot of *Spare Time* showing the Welsh miners returning to work, entering the cage in order to descend into the mines, is also illuminating in this regard.¹¹⁸ Through his poetic attention to this “point of fixation” drawn from an everyday reality, it is activated in its latent content as an *image* in Jennings’ sense of the term. The shot becomes part of a system of coincidences, a constellation at once found and assembled, pathognomonic in its significance. The image of the men in the cage (subject to the organization of industrial labour “as things are”) thus coincides with previous shots of everyday life in the film, including those of men wrestling in a ring surrounded by spectators and caged lions at the zoo (see Images 1.9-1.11). This constellation of shots forms a poetic *report* on the interrelationship between labour in the late 1930s, on the one hand, and the work, indeed, the *movement of life* harnessed for popular

¹¹⁸ Lee’s narration reflects on both the historical necessity and contingency of the means and mode of production: “As things are...” (the social fact) and “A chance to be most ourselves” (the contingent possibilities of freedom in everyday life) are thus interrelated in the poetic assemblage of images.

entertainment during leisure time (itself a space of exploitation and labour) on the other. This dialectical image of labour and entertainment is the effect of the recognition of a pattern, a contingent whole, drawn from the objective world; at the same time, it is an imaginative procedure that concatenates man, animal and machine into an ambivalent assemblage. It is a vision formed by a relationship between the manifold environments framed and focalized by the vertical and horizontal lines of the industrial organization of space and the particular vantage point of a subject that sees these elements and *brings them together* into an image.

In composing its poetic vision of the vicissitudes of everyday working-class life, *Spare Time* thus performs a Surrealist twist on colonial anthropology, at once implicating the desire of the filmmaker in its images while standing apart from what it documents — both aspects put into the service of communicating with the referent, revealing it to itself in its strange and ordinary familiarity. As in M-O’s anthropological “weather-map” of public feeling, then, the image in *Spare Time* might then return to the collective imagination of the people, and thus feed back into their own already existing understanding of both the *necessities* that structure and the *possibilities* that punctuate their lives.



**Image 1.9. *Spare Time*
(Humphrey Jennings, 1939).**



Image 1.10. *Spare Time* (Humphrey Jennings, 1939).



Image 1.11. *Spare Time* (Humphrey Jennings, 1939).

While the documentary evidence of *Spare Time* contributes to an understanding of the modern world *as things are*, the film also benefits in latent revelatory value from the juxtaposition and coincidence of scenes from ordinary life in such a way that they are not entirely contained as normative objects of knowledge. This gathering thus allows another sense of the phrase “a chance to be most ourselves” to emerge, one that taps into the indeterminacy —

the *chance* — that, alongside necessity and labour, also conditions everyday life as a space of ambiguity and of (potential) *freedom*. It is in this way, in maintaining some sense of *mystery* from within the documentary (a medium of knowledge), that everyday life continues to hold the promise of the unknown.¹¹⁹ I further develop Jennings's relationship to the unknown in the interwar period in the next chapter. My analysis is inspired by his critical writing on (as well as his poetic and artistic work around) the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte, whose preoccupation with the nature of the imagination and the image shares much with Jennings's own concerns regarding the intersection of poetry, knowledge and life in a time of national uncertainty and on the precipice of global conflict.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Certainly more has been, and must be, said about *Mass-Observation*, *May the Twelfth* and *Spare Time*. For further discussion of *Spare Time* in particular see, for example, Lara Feigel, *Literature, Cinema and Politics 1930-1945: Reading Between the Frames* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); Michael McCluskey, "Humphrey Jennings: The Customs of the Country," in *The Projection of Britain: A History of the GPO Film Unit*, ed. Scott Anthony and James G. Mansell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 62-71.

¹²⁰ With the Second World War, Jennings's Surrealist eye for coincidences took another twist, becoming an instrument for the biopoetic defence of everyday life in a state of national emergency. I discuss Jennings's wartime biopoetics in Chapter Four.

2

“Only an Image”:

Humphrey Jennings, René Magritte and the Poetics of Suspension in the Interwar Period

*Stairs of the eye
Through the bars of forms*

— Paul Éluard, “René Magritte”

In an article entitled “In Magritte’s Paintings,” commissioned by editor E.L.T Mesens for the inaugural issue of *London Gallery Bulletin*, Humphrey Jennings devotes two dense paragraphs to the Belgian artist René Magritte, specifically addressing his 1933 painting *The Human Condition* (Jennings leaves the title in its original French: *La condition humaine*).¹ Later shortened to just *London Bulletin*, the journal would quickly become the preeminent British Surrealist publication of the late 1930s, providing an internationalist perspective on modern art and culture in the years leading up to the Second World War. The April 1938 issue was put together to accompany the first solo exhibition of Magritte in England; in addition to Jennings, it includes cover art by the artist as well as contributions on the Belgian Surrealist from such notable figures as the British critic Herbert Read, the Belgian theorist Paul Nougé, and the French Surrealist poet Paul Éluard (see Image 2.1). Immediately following Jennings’s article, the journal also includes a report on “Degenerate Art” as “Arranged and Codified by the Culture Service of Dr. Goebbels.”² The inclusion of this text not only alerts readers of *London Bulletin* to the world-famous “Exhibition of ‘Degenerate Art’” that took place in Germany in 1937, but, in its stark juxtaposition to the rest

¹ Magritte's close relations with the Paris Surrealists lasted only for three years, from 1927 to 1930, and he ultimately came to regret his connection. But his work was always admired by Breton. Regarding the painting, specifically, Magritte created a series of paintings with the title *La Condition Humaine*, first in 1933 and then in 1935 and so on. All of the “human condition” paintings take up similar issues of representation, imitation and perception.

² See *London Gallery Bulletin* 1 (April 1938): 16.

of the articles on the Surrealist painter, provides a chilling sense of the existential stakes of art and the crucial decisions over life and death behind debates over the politics of aesthetics and culture in the interwar period (see Image 2.2).³

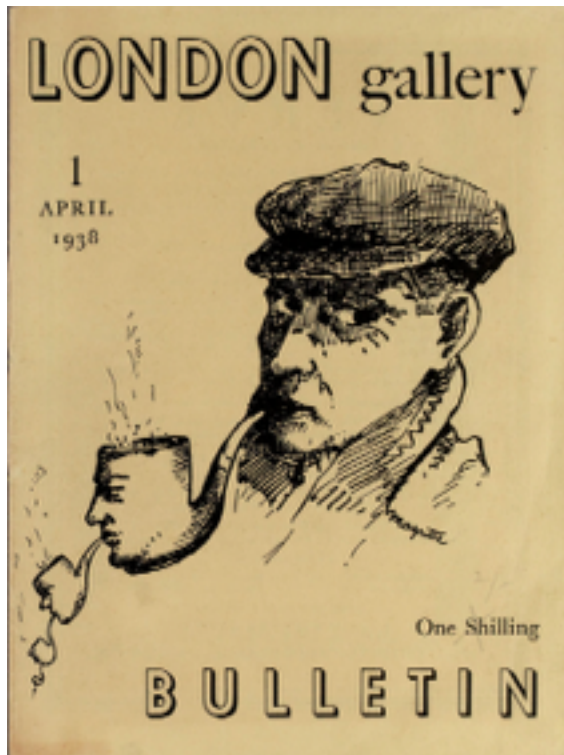


Image 2.1. *London Gallery Bulletin 1* (April 1938); cover art by René Magritte.

More specifically, the inclusion of this report on the Nazi codification of contemporary art in the first issue of *London Bulletin* suggests something about the biopolitical stakes of Magritte's work — the intervention it made in such a biologically and ideologically charged moment in history — that I consider through the lens of biopoetics. For if Michel Foucault is correct that in the biopolitical arrangement of modern society wars are “waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity,” then Goebbel's programmatic view on “degenerate art” is itself a

³ Thus, when considered against how "Degenerate Art" frames its objects, even the seemingly silly image that Magritte provided for the cover of *London Bulletin* of a man smoking a pipe smoking a pipe smoking a pipe etc. takes on a more suggestive complexion.

biopolitical statement of war, one that fundamentally links aesthetics to the moral and biological health of a society, a population, a species, that, following Foucault, *must be defended*.⁴ While not mentioned by name here, it is clear that Magritte, like the other Surrealist artists of Europe, would be classified as belonging to that group of artists who are “lunatics” participating in the moral degradation and aesthetic impoverishment of modern art, those who must therefore be excluded from official culture (and later destroyed) for the good health of the German people. In this way, Magritte’s work would be brought together with other classified groupings of art that pose a threat to the “biological heritage” of Europe, including so-called “primitive art” and art made by Jewish people.⁵



Image 2.2. “Degenerate Art” Exhibition Guide (Munich, 1937); the sculpture on the cover is *The New Man* (Otto Freundlich, 1912).

⁴ Michel Foucault, “The Will to Knowledge,” in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), 137. See also Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended, Lecture Series at the College de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), where Foucault describes “[A] battle that has to be waged not between races, but by a race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage” (61).

⁵ The article lists nine groups of “degenerate art” that are “classed in a dictatorial way.” See “Degenerate Art,” 16.

It is in light of this strange proximity to “Degenerate Art” that we can discern the relevance of Magritte’s rethinking of the image for insight into the biopoetics of Jennings’s own practice. Such an undertaking, I argue, can help elucidate aspects of Jennings’s work in documentary and adjacent practices that might go otherwise overlooked or be too quickly assimilated into representational realism and its attendant assumptions about the world.⁶ It can help us to understand how Jennings’s imagination — his obsession with the image — emerges together with the contradictions and mutations of everyday life under industrial capitalism and the efforts of institutions, often violent and destructive, to maintain their authority. The central motivation of this chapter, then, is to provide insight into how in the 1930s Jennings can be described by art historian Michel Remy as “in the most active and experimental sense...the poet of the deconstruction of visuality” and become the preeminent documentary chronicler of wartime Britain only a few years later.⁷

It is significant that both Jennings and Magritte share the idea that life, as revealed in the realm of the image, is invested with imagination, where objects — persons and things, figures and environments — crystallize the workings of history and desire, normalization and shock, continuity and rupture. What is at stake in Jennings’s analysis of Magritte, I argue, is an understanding of the way the image both addresses life in its mystery and produces a poetic means of *knowing* that mystery in its mysteriousness. The poetry of Jennings and Magritte thus responds to a world made unrecognizable through biopolitical control by shifting between what

⁶ Jennings’s documentary combination of fragmentary specificity and cumulative vision is prefigured in his “bringing together” of elements in his montages, collages, paintings of the late 1930s as well as in his poetry. This is also apparent in his article on Magritte.

⁷ Michel Remy, “Biography of Humphrey Jennings,” *Leicester Galleries*, n.d., http://www.leicestergalleries.com/index.pl?isa=Metadot::SystemApp::ArtistSearch;op=detail;artist=1297;show_bio=1;print=1 (accessed September 18, 2018).

the image shows of things and what it shows of itself, as an image, so that thought may consider its own material and perceptual conditions in everyday life.

In order to work through some of the ways Magritte responded to the biopolitical concerns over the image in the interwar period, I draw from Jennings's "In Magritte's Paintings" as my primary reference point. While Jennings's piece is short, it is nevertheless quite poetic in its own right and highly suggestive in its references and allusions. Indeed, "In Magritte's paintings" can itself be understood as an ekphrastic prose poem, in the tradition of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, dedicated to the artist. I use Jennings's poetic analysis as a generator for producing links between his insights into various aspects of the artist's themes and methods alongside Magritte's and his interlocutors' own thoughts on the image in relation to broader questions of life, aesthetics and knowledge. Thus I read one artist through the other in order to establish what I understand as the biopoetic imaginary that connects Jennings and Magritte.

My argument begins with some conceptual points about the image, imagination and everyday life in both of their work more generally. It then proceeds into a reading of Jennings's article on Magritte, approaching various aspects of it throughout the remainder of the chapter, analyzing relevant works from both artists along the way, including Magritte's paintings *The Portrait* (*Le Portrait*, 1935), *The Human Condition* and *The Treachery of Images* (*La Trahison des images*, 1929) (also known as *This is Not a Pipe* [*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*]); as well as Jennings's response to Baudelaire, *Tableaux Parisiens* (1938-1939) and his 1936 collage *Swiss Roll*. Before turning to Jennings's thoughts on Magritte, however, it is necessary to first devote a little more time to considering the link between biopolitics and aesthetics in "Degenerate Art" in order to establish Magritte as a biopoetic artist for the interwar period.

Art and Biopolitics

In the Nazis' biologically charged paradigm of art we find the expression of a dialectic between what Foucault understands as the classical model of sovereign power and the modern form of governmental power he calls biopolitics that emerged over a period covering the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries — a period that, we should add, corresponds with the transformations of the Industrial Revolution, which brought both the development of modern industry and capitalism along with massive transformations in politics, such as the decline of monarchies and the democratic-bourgeois revolutions in Europe and North America. For Foucault, sovereignty is the negative and prohibitive power concentrated in the figure of the monarch endowed with symbolic authority over a people, giving them “the right to decide life and death.”⁸ Biopolitical power, by contrast, is distributed horizontally, working immanently on the very life of citizens, combining the “disciplinary” function of “subjectification” with “a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and regulations.”⁹ The dialectic between the symbolic and spectacular sovereign power of death and the biopolitical normalization of life (functioning in part through self-monitoring subjects) plays out in the discourse on “degenerate art” in terms of what Foucault identifies in *Society Must Be Defended* as “a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products [...] the internal racism of permanent purification...one of the basic dimensions of social normalization.”¹⁰

⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 135.

⁹ Ibid. 137. On subjectification see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Penguin, 1995).

¹⁰ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 62.

Beyond its obvious totalitarianism, fascist “permanent purification” expresses a peculiarly modern anxiety, one shared with democratic nations like France and Britain, about not only how to manage the increasing amount of images that circulate throughout the social body, but also about the types of transformations, the forms of expression, that allow such images to cut cross traditionally established boundaries of sense and meaning. It was precisely as a nation like other nations wholly implicated in modern communication systems, international capitalism and the art market, that Nazi Germany necessarily participated in the circulation of images (for propaganda, for culture, for entertainment, for profit, etc.). Thus what Roberto Esposito calls the “immunization paradigm” of modernity — which, broadly put, seeks to “inoculate” the community against “contagion” by managing and controlling its relations with its outside as well as its own perceived internal excesses — functions not simply through the sovereign ban but by way of the biopolitical *classification* of “degenerate” lives and images. Through their exhibition in representational systems of negation and affirmation, comparison and affiliation, aberrant and threatening images can be processed and contained as objects of knowledge.¹¹

That is, before being protected from this or that identity, this or that image, the community has to be immunized against anxieties surrounding the promiscuity of the circulating image itself; for images, like the forms of life of people, must be identified and classified, made self-evident, before they can be destroyed. The “state racism” embodied in “Degenerate Art” is symptomatic, then, of an immunological anxiety in how it attempts to collapse any and all distance between the aesthetic, the social and the biological in its understanding of the image: the spectacular form this collapse takes is “Degenerate Art.” From this perspective, what Walter

¹¹ For an introduction to his theory of immunization see Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Benjamin diagnosed as the fascist aestheticization of politics includes not only the creation of extravagant pageants and enjoyable spectacles of mass destruction, but the assimilation of perceived socio-biological difference into a total political apparatus through a codified regime of appearance, i.e., art.¹² Thus the “Degenerate Art” exhibition introjects the “full” negativity of the “impure” image — here categorized and assembled in the unified whole of an exhibition — into the social body of the German people as “art” in order to inoculate it against the perceived threat, ultimately in the service of further purification through the isolation and expulsion of the art as well as the identities linked, genetically, to it.

For the Third Reich’s Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, such efforts at aesthetic classification (as part of a process of annihilation) were established as a bulwark of knowledge, of what can be known and how it can be known, against the presence of images that were threatening precisely in their ubiquity and their mysteriousness. In a perverse twist on the ethical and representational regimes of art as Jacques Rancière explains them, the logic here was one that worried over the value of the image in terms of the truthfulness of its biological or moral essence and thus classified it as art in terms of an established set of internally coherent representational norms.¹³ The Nazi fantasy was to make images — images otherwise so overwhelming in their uncanny social resonances and unruly in their aesthetic miscegenation — short-circuited with the “truth” of biological imperatives so that they could be delimited, made intelligible and containable in terms of the *already known*. If biological factors could be

¹² On the distinction between the fascist aestheticization of politics and the communist politicization of aesthetics, see Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217-251.

¹³ On the ethical, representative and aesthetic regimes of art, see among his many texts on the subject, Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004).

articulated in terms of racial and social types classified according to a representational schema of art, then images could themselves be normalized and controlled, and thus put into the employ of the state for its biopolitical objectives. Precisely by understanding art in this strictly representational way, Nazism could use the image as a biopolitical tool of classification while closing off its other possible functions, powers, ambiguities. In other words, the problem of how to identify the impure, ubiquitous and undetermined image with the ethos of a people, with the biological enemy, was solved through representation, which conferred upon the image its immunological value as a “pure” (legible) expression of degeneracy. It was through the biopolitical and aesthetic identification of lives with codified images that sovereign decisions over life and death could be made.

That said, it is important to further note another aspect of the immunological management of knowledge and anxiety in the “Exhibition of ‘Degenerate Art.’” As art historians have observed, the exhibition itself was a shambles that displayed outright and wilful contempt for the protocols of curation; its many mistake included the misattribution of quotes, hanging artworks too closely together, and grouping artists incorrectly. As Neil Levi argues, “Whatever else they reveal about the function of modernist art in Nazi propaganda, the mistakes must also be seen as integral to the exhibition, displays by the National Socialist state of its power to exercise its will with impunity.”¹⁴ The ideological stakes of such orchestrated mistakes (whether produced by ineptitude or by design) pertain to the propagandistic function of the exhibition in its display of stupid, sovereign negligence: by both biologically classifying and stratifying and then lumping the various forms of “degenerate art” together haphazardly, the state demonstrates for its citizens

¹⁴ Neil Levi, “‘Judge for Yourselves!’ — The ‘Degenerate Art’ Exhibition as Political Spectacle,” *October* 85 (Summer 1998): 41.

the level of consideration such culture deserves. Mocking and derisive, prurient and ignorant, “Degenerate Art” not only (mis-)manages the objects in question, then, but conditions the ways they are to be both recognized and affectively responded to. The Nazi state thus not only brutally *knows* its biological enemy in degenerate art, but *performs* the appropriate affective response to it.

In this way, the exhibition seemed to be trying to beat the interwar avant-garde at its own game by absorbing into its biopolitical controls the negativity and transgressive power of modern art.¹⁵ The gambit here is that whatever shock-value Surrealist provocations, for instance, may have had, the exhibition both reveals them as hostile to the health of the people and neutralizes them through its own violent management of knowledge and spectacle. The ultimate spectacle, of course, being that of the populist image of multitudes of Germans “seeing for themselves” the weakness, degeneracy and decadence of modern art.¹⁶ Thus, in its biopolitical management of image and identity, “Degenerate Art” is itself a spectacle of history and culture, a weaponization and bastardization of knowledge designed to classify and degrade the bad object of “degenerate art” and to titillate and debilitate the exhibition’s over two million visitors. Through the ideological feedback loop established between the exhibition and its visitors, the German people could thus see for themselves their unified purity (or purified unity) against the managed

¹⁵ When the Nazis occupied Belgium, for example, Magritte wrote: “The confusion and panic that Surrealism wanted to create in order to bring everything into question were achieved much better by the Nazi idiots than by us.” Magritte quoted in Jonathan Griffin, “What René Magritte did when Surrealism was trumped by ‘Nazi idiots,’” *The Art Newspaper* May 17, 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/preview/what-rene-magritte-did-when-surrealism-was-trumped-by-nazi-idiots?fbclid=IwAR0GbNFsGYqX3Ns3o6tSwSPIYqPZEA7veOg7mn6R4KAIAG-RBFL-qwZZuPM> (accessed May 10, 2019).

¹⁶ As Levi writes: “If we understand the Degenerate Art exhibition as a political event on par with Nazi party rallies and festivals, then we can infer that more important for the Nazis than the sight of the art on display inside the exhibition itself is the spectacle made by the constant stream of visitors that crowd through it, witnessing *themselves* as horrified ‘decent Germans’ and deceived ‘German working *Volk*’ invited to ‘judge for themselves’ under what the Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda had ensured were precisely the kinds of conditions that make autonomous reflection impossible.” Levi, “‘Judge for Yourselves!’,” 64.

impurity of the enemy. The assumption that fuels the fascist imaginary here is that the abject display of the morass of “degenerate art” brings into relief the beauty and history of approved art and the healthy culture identified with it. Again, then, we see how the immunological paradigm is linked to a biopolitics of representation whose controls function through the elaborate construction of apparently self-evident images (whether of degeneracy or of health, the other or the self) that unite knowledge and affect in the subjectification of the people.¹⁷ Here the sovereign imaginary of biopolitics deals with the anxiety of the image by identifying life with an image “purified” through representation, the means by which “degenerate” life can thus be judged and decided upon. A counter-exhibition that ghettoizes objects into a debased knowledge-form, it is perhaps only a slight exaggeration to suggest that what we see in “Degenerate Art” is a preview of what was to come in the concentration camps.¹⁸

Poetry, Mystery, Life

For these reasons, the inclusion of “Degenerate Art” amongst the articles on Magritte in *London Bulletin* encourages a critical reflection that opens up the boundaries between the workings of biopolitical control and the disruptive potential of the Surrealists’ work on the image. For while Surrealism, as Benjamin argues, sought “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution,” it failed in its revolutionary objectives precisely by neglecting the necessary dialectical counterpoint to its investment in emancipatory irrationalism, that of a rational and pessimistic

¹⁷ Again, the sovereign dimension of such biopolitical control turns on an investment in the fantasy of the self-evident image.

¹⁸ This is not to suggest any simple analogy between the camps and the art exhibition, for a significant difference resides in the fact that the German people did *not* witness the camps *for themselves* (although the degree to which the Nazis actually publicized their aims and the people were aware of the camps, and condoned them, is coming to light). For an analysis of the question of public awareness and support for the camps see, for example, Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

sobriety.¹⁹ In a historical epoch where art is either divested of all critical effectivity (as in the bourgeois conception of art) or brutally rationalized under fascism, a “histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious,” Benjamin writes, can only go so far; as we have seen with the fascist expropriation of art, mystery and madness can all too easily be recuperated into a spectacle of knowledge-power. Instead, as Benjamin puts it, “we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.”²⁰ With Benjamin’s criticism of Surrealism in mind, it is important to gauge to the extent to which Magritte’s practice conforms to or evades such an over-investment in the emancipatory potential of the irrational or a fetishistic attachment to a non-dialectical investment in intoxication. For it is to mystery and the impenetrability of the everyday, to the interconnected problems of use and knowledge, desire and vision, that Magritte directs his “poetics of suspension.”

Indeed, it is precisely through the concept of *mystery*, as a dialectical point of fixation, that Magritte makes his at once irrational and deliberate intervention into the practical and existential problems of everyday life. In contrast to fascism’s biopolitical investment in closing the gap between life and the image through a system of aesthetic control, Magritte’s biopoetics, as I understand it here, presents a variety of disjunctive connections between the two, always turning, however, on the question of thought. As he writes in an article co-authored with André Bosmans, “A means to knowledge, poetry helps us to live in the mystery where we exist; it would only have a very relative value if it were merely a delight to the senses or the spirit.”²¹ It is

¹⁹ See Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 215.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 216

²¹ René Magritte and André Bosmans, “Knowledge of the World,” trans. Jo Levy, in *René Magritte: Selected Writings*, ed. Kathleen Rooney and Eric Plattner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 258.

a poor reading that sees only one man's fantasies in Magritte's work, for it is resolutely a world that *exists*, a real world illuminated by the disturbing reality of human presence, that he presents to us. He shows us an alien world that is all too familiar, then, and it is precisely the strange feelings he conjures that betrays our secret solidarity with the objects that surround us: it is the uncanniness that tells us this is home. As a means to knowledge, Magritte's poetic approach to the impenetrability of the everyday is thus perhaps best understood as a kind of Surrealist rationality directed toward the irrationality of his time. For while it is still possible to see Magritte in the abstract (and this is still the way he is mostly understood today), and to understand his paintings only indirectly in terms of social experience (dealing as they do in enigmatic exchanges of interior and exterior life), it is equally important to think about how his work symptomatically speaks to the historical moment in which he was alive; the period of years leading up to the Second World War being of particular relevance here. From this historically motivated point of view, it can be argued that Magritte challenges art's contribution to biopolitical regimes of control by bringing out the ontological insecurity of the image and the symptomatic ways it is used for assessing the value of life. It is for this reason that I argue for bringing out the biopoetic dimensions of Magritte's highly lucid interest in the ludic power of the image.

Where biopower, then, as Franco "Bifo" Berardi argues, "designates that which brings life and its mechanisms within the realm of calculus, in other words, that which makes knowledge an agent of the technical transformation of human life," Magritte's biopoetics acknowledges how, for those living within an emergent biopolitical capitalism, the image has

entered life and fundamentally transformed it.²² By taking the image's strange relationship to life as his starting point, Magritte uses it as an agent to redirect knowledge away from the management of life and the certitudes of the known world toward the powers of the unknown that reside within the heart of the familiar world. In other words, Magritte gives us back our expropriated experience of the world in the form of mystery. On the hand, then, Magritte realizes how the image can be a tool of oppression and diversion. As Magritte scholar Marcel Paquet describes the alienated and targeted life of modernity:

While the mystery of the world is ultimately invincible, it is nonetheless only too vulnerable to greed and the lust for power. Life, the greatest mystery of them all, is threatened and damaged by forces from science and politics, forces regarding themselves as chosen and empowered to supervise and run this life — that is, to dominate and manipulate it.²³

On the other hand, as Paquet goes on to suggest, the image can be a means of thoughtful observation and speculation. When seen historically and located in the context of the 1930s, for instance, Magritte's work reveals itself as the product of an attentive diagnostician, one whose images also include premonitory visions of civilization on the brink of total war.

Moreover, Magritte, like Jennings, understands that there is more to how power works in modern life than sheer calculation and violence; there are also vital questions of affect, enjoyment and anxiety. Indeed, Magritte's "object lessons" can be seen as working through the damaged and disordered psychosocial life of the modern subject. Magritte's breakthrough, here, is to reveal the ways that objects communicate between themselves and the subject — ways that

²² Franco "Bifo" Berardi, "Biopolitics and Connective Mutation," *Culture Machine* 7 (2005), <https://libcom.org/library/biopolitics-connective-mutation> (accessed January 18, 2018).

²³ Marcel Paquet, *René Magritte: Thought Rendered Visible* (London: Taschen, 1994), 80-82. Life is not understood here in a strictly biological sense, of course, but rather in its phenomenological, but not only its phenomenological, ways of living and being.

we no longer or are only just beginning to understand. His paintings describe a world where weirdness and opacity have seeped into all things, where subjectivity finds its alien reflection in the gaze of external objects, and where life is made an object of surveillance and calculation: such is the world transformed by both the commodity and modern communications systems. Magritte gives form and space, then, to our feelings and suspicions that there is always more to see, more to know; and the space between vision and knowledge, words and images, he explores interrupts life necessity, suggesting that there is always another way of seeing and knowing the world. Of course, he also unsettles these feelings and suspicions, the drive to see and know more, by calling attention to our desire to know so that we might better know our desire.

If Magritte's use of poetry "helps us to live in the mystery where we exist," then this means that, rather than seeking to liberate humanity from mystery, it is mystery itself that he seeks to liberate as a path to liberty — that is, to linking knowledge with modern life. In this way, Magritte's interest in the mysterious conditions of life is also a concern with problems of sovereignty and meaning, with questions of how the subject's affective investments in symbolic value and social meaning unite — or fail to unite — objects, indeed, human life, into a coherent form. The psychopolitical dimensions of Magritte's use of the poetic image become apparent when seen alongside Eric Santner's concern in *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life* with releasing human life from its (self-)subjection to biopolitical control and the imaginary of sovereign authority. Framing his question from within the terrain where psychoanalysis intersects with biopolitics, Santner argues that "we might say that the life that is of concern to psychoanalysis is *biopolitical* life, life that has been *thrown by the enigma of its legitimacy*, the

question of its place and authorization within a meaningful order.”²⁴ It is precisely the enigmatic excitations and affects of everyday life — the ways life is solicited by power, animated by fantasy in a world of objects — that provide the biopoetic material of his images. This is connected to how Magritte poetically thematizes the mysteries and ontological anxieties of modern life — anxieties that compel institutions like “Degenerate Art” to immunize themselves, with their own dogmatic images of life, against the mysterious life of the image. As I will show here, without reducing them to being a mere effect of context, and far from being esoteric, Magritte’s paintings are a response, one not actually that far away from a kind of documentary impulse to point at the real, to modern life’s obsession with the enigma of its legitimacy.

Thinking Life

Echoing the warning of I. A. Richards, Jennings’s mentor from his time as a graduate student at Cambridge in the late 1920s, on what he understood as the catastrophic potential for a “biological crisis” should the poetic imagination be wholly abandoned to the instrumental reason of positivistic science (or given over to fascism, as was the case with the exhibition on “degenerate art”), Jennings’s concerns with poetry are consonant with Magritte’s own thoughts on art and its relationship to the contradictions of modern life.²⁵ In a 1938 lecture entitled “Life Line,” for instance, Magritte joins the ranks of those socialist and dystopian interwar modernists looking toward the horizon of war: “We are the subjects of this incoherent and absurd world, where weapons are made to prevent war, where science is devoted to destruction, to killing, to

²⁴ Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 31. Italics in original.

²⁵ I. A. Richards develops the idea of “biological crisis” in *Science and Poetry* (London: Norton, 1926), a significant text for Jennings.

prolonging the life of the dying, where the most frenzied activity is misdirected.”²⁶ Although he does not make use of the concept, Magritte is speaking to something akin to the biopolitics of the “human condition” in much the same fashion that Agamben describes the sovereign power that produces bare life — the archaic political division between life (*zoē*) and the forms it takes (*bios*) that exposes life in all its nudity, leaving it abandoned, externalized and excluded, only to then be re-internalized and included in the political and social order as an alien object, the presupposed and problematic foundation for identity.²⁷

As his “Life Line” lecture suggests, Magritte’s interest in the “human condition” includes the ways modern life is violently divided up in his contemporary moment, thus giving him an interest in the social and historical conditions that frame human life as well. Magritte’s criticism of the “frenzied activity” in the “absurd world” of the late 1930s interestingly intersects with Jennings’s unfinished *Pandaemonium* project, the historical study he began in the interwar period on the emergence of what he calls “the coming of the machine.”²⁸ As he outlines in his introductory notes, Jennings understands modern life as split between productive forces (the means of production) and imaginative-poetic forces (the means of vision) — the two modes of life, or ways of organizing life, increasingly at odds with one another with the widespread social transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution and capitalism. For Jennings, the quality of human life is linked to the species’ anthropogenic capacity for creating and responding to images, which suggests a necessary relationship between the human form of life and the

²⁶ René Magritte, “Life Line” lecture delivered November 20, 1938 at the Musee Royal des Beaux-Arts, Antwerp. Unpublished in his lifetime, the lecture is available in a translated version in *René Magritte: Selected Writings*, 58.

²⁷ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²⁸ Humphrey Jennings, “Introduction,” in *Pandaemonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, ed. Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (New York: The Free Press, 1985). *Pandaemonium* and Jennings’s concept of the “the means of vision” is the topic of my next chapter.

imagination. Jennings's project thus centres on the question of how to realize the symbolic and communicative potential of the imagination from within the conditions of industrial modernity and its systems of mass culture and communications, conditions which expropriate the image as an object through which to effectively manipulate and direct the everyday life of the population.

With Magritte we thus have neither a positivism nor a realism that holds that reality has some independent existence that can be represented more or less accurately as an *object* of knowledge, nor an idealism that positions consciousness as the unproblematic *subject* of knowledge, the sole organizing factor of meaning in the world. On the contrary, affirming the constitutive role of *appearance* in the formation of the subject of desire, Magritte's "object-lesson" is informed by what he identifies as three transcendental-material conditions or "givens." "My research," he states, "was like an attempt to solve a problem with three 'givens': the object, the thing tied to it in the shadow of my consciousness and the light into which this thing had to emerge."²⁹ Magritte's description here anticipates Foucault's archaeological research into the audiovisual conditions and effects of knowledge, what he calls "the seeable and the sayable."³⁰ Presenting the viewer with more (and less) than an external exposition of the given object, that is, constituting the object of knowledge through a visual process that blends representation (language, reworked visual and semiotic codes and artistic traditions) and perception (points of

²⁹ Magritte, "Life Line," 65.

³⁰ In addition to his study of Magritte, *This is Not a Pipe*, which I discuss below, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977), whose original French title, *Les Mots et les choses*, also recalls Magritte's 1929 text, "Les Mots et les images" originally published in *La Révolution surréaliste* 12 (1929): 32-33; reprinted and translated in *René Magritte: Selected Writings*, 33-34. See also Gilles Deleuze's study, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), where he writes: "Visibilities are not to be confused with elements that are visible or more generally perceptible, such as qualities, things, objects, compounds of objects. In this respect Foucault constructs a function that is no less original than that of the statement. We must break things open. Visibilities are not forms of objects, nor even forms that would show up under light, but rather forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer" (52).

view, associations, arrangements of light), Magritte visualizes thought: he gives it a form that is both thought through the medium, the process of painting, and that is made available to thought through paint. Both Jennings and Magritte, in this sense, think *in* and *with* images.

Magritte's visual and conceptual research was in this sense carried out with the deliberateness of a scientist, but one who used poetic experimentation as a means of investigation. For Jennings, this makes Magritte an intriguing version of that rare figure in the modern world: the poet-scientist, a concept that alludes to Rimbaud's vision of the poet as the "Supreme Scientist," one whose research includes taking his own sensory apparatus as an object of experimentation and observation.³¹ Jennings provides an important distinction in one of his notes in *Pandaemonium* that is relevant in this context: "Most scientific work is incompatible with poetic expression for one simple reason, that our interest in poetry does not lie in things, discoveries, inventions, formulae themselves but in their effect on people."³² While science offers poetry an explicit concern with knowledge and the observation of the material world, poetry is of concern to science in its emphasis on feeling, on the situatedness of knowledge from within the midst of life, among the circulation of objects and images.³³ Magritte thus shows objects with the thought, the desire, "in" them; they are not just objects, then, but objects exhibited as they appear to people who desire (and fear) them. From this point of view, Magritte is interested in the form of life — the whole phenomenological complex of feelings and

³¹ See Arthur Rimbaud, "Letter to Paul Demeny, Charleville May 15, 1871," in *Arthur Rimbaud: Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper Collins, 1975), 116. Rimbaud's "disorganization of the senses" is relevant to my discussion of the concept of the unknown in Chapter One.

³² Jennings, note for image 72 "The Composition of Water — April 26, 1783," in *Pandaemonium*, 78. Leaving aside, for the moment, the notion of "poetic expression" — because for Magritte "expression" is entirely beside the point of his research — Jennings's note is of value to understanding Magritte's thinking together of poetry and science in the space of the image and its effects.

³³ Such a conception of the poet-scientist resonates with Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's valorization of what they call "nomad science" against the disciplinary formation of "royal science" in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Press, 1987), 361.

processes that the painting (the image and its objects) is embedded within — and the real which it in turn expresses and comments upon through the “internal” distance of poetry (including the distribution of “light” noted above).

In Defence of Images

As Paul Nougé, Magritte’s friend and colleague, argues in “René Magritte or Images Defended,” while the painter’s approach shares some common interests with the scientific method, it differs in how his visual and logical experiments emphasize the interaction between the interested observer and the observed object. For Nougé, this emphasis on the interplay of subject and object radically breaks from the abstractions of modern instrumental (scientific) reason:

As we know, when a scientist examines an object, he always begins by a process of abstraction that enables him to fit the object into the compass of his science. Here, it is the real that is envisaged; it is not some aggregate of abstract qualities but the dialectical system of almost infinite richness that a *thing* forms with *ourselves* at the very moment we are considering it. In such a dynamic whole, exchanges take place between innumerable sensory, affective and intellectual sources.³⁴

Where the realism of science depends upon abstraction and the reduction of the object of analysis, Nougé discerns in Magritte’s approach a multidimensional activity operative in numerous symbolic and sensible registers in order to touch upon what he calls “the real.” The unity of the experience in Nougé’s account, however, is held together through a dynamic that equally works to shatter it, to defy its own self-identity through its dialectic of “exchanges.” The dialectical system of the image makes it intimate with, but not reducible to, everyday life. As Magritte puts it in “Life Line,” “The pictures painted during the following years, from 1925 to 1936, were also the result of a systematic search for a disturbing poetic effect, which, if created

³⁴ Paul Nougé, “René Magritte or Images Defended,” in Jemima Montagu, *The Surrealists: Revolutionaries in Art and Writing, 1919-35* (London: Tate Gallery, 2002), 87. Emphasis in original.

by setting objects from reality out of context, would give the real world from which these objects were borrowed a disturbing poetic sense by a natural exchange.”³⁵

The significance of Magritte’s practice for Jennings’s biopoetics thus resides in how Magritte understands painting, or the poetic image more generally, as the illuminated encounter between the realm of everyday life (a *bios* or form of life) and the mysterious world (unconscious, unknown, illogical, paradoxical, incomplete) that encompasses it and displaces it. Mystery is, then, an “outside” that inheres from within everyday life: it is the “invisible” to the “visible” of ordinary experience and habit. But Magritte’s poetic disturbance also challenges the disinterestedness of the modern approach to aesthetics. As Nougé explains in “Final Advice,” his article addressed to Jennings from the same issue of *London Bulletin* in which his own text on Magritte appears:

Magritte is not a painter in the sense understood by the aesthetes, but a man who uses painting to perfect astonishing experiences in which all forms of our existence find themselves taking part [...] Magritte appeals to our everyday life, to the limits of our consciousness, and not to theoretical abstractions which we may have constructed or assimilated with less or more ingenuity.³⁶

As with his critique of scientific abstraction, Nougé is dismissive of the bourgeois-aesthetic approach to art because it reduces the image to being a mere object of contemplation detached from what gives it urgency and vitality. The biopoetic ethos of Magritte’s paintings thus shifts concern away from any narrow sense of aesthetics or knowledge as mastery and toward the poetic subject of mystery.

Magritte’s work thus raises the interconnected questions of how the aesthetic cannot be separated from the interestedness of everyday life and of how the poetic image can be a means of

³⁵ Magritte, “Life Line,” 64.

³⁶ Paul Nougé, “Final Advice,” *London Gallery Bulletin* 1 (April 1938): 6.

generating a peculiar form of knowledge — a knowledge that does not abandon the human form of life to being a mere object of biopower in the form of scientific abstraction. Thinking thought and life coherently with the image means getting past the idea of biological essences overdetermining the image (a eugenic ethical regime), or of thinking life as simply external to the image only to be taken into its representational regime and made an object of imitation. It is precisely from within his concern with the mystery of everyday life that Magritte's interruption of the knowledge function of the image from *within* the iconic forms of representational art can be understood through the lens of what Agamben calls the form-of-life of destituent power. "The constitution of a form-of-life coincides," Agamben writes, "completely with the destitution of the social and biological conditions into which it finds itself thrown. The form-of-life is, in this sense, the revocation of all factual vocations, which deposes and puts in tension from within the same gesture by which it is maintained and dwells in them."³⁷ Emphasized, exaggerated, relativized, obstructed, and so on, but always represented in traditional iconic appearance, Magritte's objects are of *interest* precisely for the qualities that make them what they are, for their "being thus" in everyday life, but they are also *images* and thus *dis-possessed* as objects.

Magritte's experiments with prosaic objects have been understood by what the Surrealists refer to as "dépaysement," a displacement charged with the task of "transforming the familiar or everyday into something extraordinary or unexpected that challenges expectation and changes

³⁷ Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Destituent Power?" trans. Stephanie Wakefield, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (1): 74. What Agamben refers to as form-of-life is an adaptation of Wittgenstein's notion of form of life; the dashes between the words indicate the interconnection between the way of being and the life that is always in question in that way of being. Form-of-life for Agamben is a life (*zoē*) that is always in question in its way of life (*bios*). Magritte's acknowledgement of "the mystery where we exist" in everyday life is very close to this conception of life.

one's perception of the world."³⁸ While a number of Surrealist artists' efforts at releasing objects from their submission to instrumental utility, or a restricted use-value ultimately subservient to exchange-value, might be well-described in Agamben's sense of the revocation of factual vocations, the fantastic and otherworldly nature of some Surrealist imagery would seem to veer away from Agamben's interest in how destituent power operates (or makes things inoperative) from within everyday life.³⁹ Unlike many of his Surrealist peers who delve into the unconscious in order to unearth monsters, then, the objects in Magritte's images are often much more ordinary in appearance. As Jennings points out, Magritte's images typically make the world appear strange and unfamiliar through the conjunction of familiar objects displaced into unsettling assemblages in environments that generate an uncanny feeling of recognition. Thus Magritte finds both the extraordinary within the ordinary and the ordinary within the extraordinary.

It is in this way that Magritte "defends" images against both the fascist and the bourgeois conceptions of art. To the fascist identification of biological essence with the image, to its scientific abstraction and its brutal irrationalism put into the service of biopolitical control, Magritte thus poses the mystery of the object, its phenomenological resistance to any *one* normalized, exclusive use. And in response to the bourgeois notion of aesthetic disinterest, that "extreme confusion deprived of all contact with the world of necessity," as Magritte puts it, he offers images that are *actively interested* in the problems of use and desire that animate our

³⁸ Jemima Montagu, *The Surrealists: Revolutionaries in Art and Writing, 1919-35*, 43. For Montagu, Magritte's visual poetry "merges exterior and interior, the real and the painted, past and present. For the Surrealists this had the added implication of brining together exterior and interior worlds, the waking, rational mind and the unconscious" (92).

³⁹ This is a complex question that exceeds the bounds of my inquiry here. It would be useful to look at the appropriated collages of an artist like Max Ernst, for instance, in this context.

⁴⁰ René Magritte and Jean Scutenaire, "Bourgeois Art," *London Bulletin* 12 (March 1939): 13; reprinted in *René Magritte: Selected Writings*, 68.

encounters with the objects of everyday life.⁴⁰ Jennings, too, is interested in the relationship between the image and the problems of modern life in his piece on Magritte in *London Bulletin*.

Beauty and Terror Meet

In his article, Jennings describes Magritte as a paradoxically *practical* thinker of the visual, a poet who repurposes academic means of pictorial representation, combined with the displacement of ordinary objects, to create images that challenge naturalized habits of perception. Jennings writes:

In Magritte's paintings beauty and terror meet. But their poetry is not necessarily derived from the known regions of romance — a plate of ham will become as frightening as a lion — a brick wall as mysterious as night. His painting is thus essentially *modern* in the sense required by Baudelaire. Simultaneously Magritte never allows himself to be seduced by the immediate pleasures of imitation. Precisely his passionate interest in the concrete world has made him remember that a painting itself is only an *image*.

Poetry, according to Aristotle, implies a “bringing together.” But the elements in a picture by Magritte are not *forced* together. Their “bringing together” *occurs* in a passive sense in the painter's imagination. Hence their simultaneous irrationality — since nothing is chosen “on purpose” — and their evident truth — since their “bringing together” is in fact an “event” beyond choice. It is of the likenesses and discrepancies between the image and the reality that these events are composed, and it is in the relentless logic of these likenesses and discrepancies that Magritte sees the central human situation: *La Condition Humaine*.⁴¹

At the threshold of art *and* life, Magritte establishes contact with objects or “elements” — a plate of ham, a lion, a brick wall, the night — which are at once themselves and not themselves. He does so in the *image*, in a way that undoes their routine (and often arbitrary) subordination to the theoretical-scientific abstractions and pre-established associations of conventional logic and

⁴¹ Humphrey Jennings, “In Magritte’s Paintings,” *London Bulletin* 1 (April 1938): 15; reprinted in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 225-6. Emphases in original.

utility. The poetic work of juxtaposition makes imaginative contact between elements and consciousness in a mode of revealing and disclosure, a kind of saying in showing that undermines conventional logic. By turns enigmatic and shocking, Magritte's paintings can be said to induce both mis-recognition — a hesitation in the space between the visual and whatever it signifies, or a disjuncture between the object and its conventional value — and an immediate feeling of recognition, a sudden burst of knowledge connected to the realization of something all too familiar. When “beauty and terror meet,” then, Jennings is describing the threshold Magritte conjures between two otherwise incompatible impulses: attraction, the impulse to draw nearer to the object; and fear, the impulse to flee in terror. Jennings considers how the painter stages an encounter — a “romance” — between two apparently incongruous object-impulses, what he calls “elements,” aimed at providing a shock to thought, a jostling of the imaginative capacities of the viewer in a time when the imagination was constrained by narrow aesthetic categories and ideological abstractions.

Where many modern artists responded to the transformations brought by industrialized communications media by turning their aesthetic investigations toward painterly or minimalist abstraction, and others toward collage and multimedia experimentation, Magritte, by contrast, worked almost exclusively with traditional methods of classical academic easel painting. He did so, Jennings suggests here, in order to poetically reflect and comment on, as well as disrupt, both the presuppositions informing the referentiality of the realist image in painting as well as the cultural values and assumptions attached to the ideology of representation itself. In effect, for Magritte, the painted representational image (and the tradition of taste and elite culture surrounding it) had become one of those Surrealist obsessions: a junk object that, in its

outmodedness, could finally be investigated for what other latent forms of use and desire it could excite.

In *Surrealism and Painting*, André Breton explicitly connects Magritte's "object-lessons" to both his traditional, realistic representational style and, importantly, his interest in revealing what he calls the "latent life" of objects. "Certainly," Breton writes,

Magritte's initial concern is to reproduce the objects, sites and living creatures which make up our everyday world in order to reconstitute its appearances for us with absolute fidelity. But far beyond this, Magritte is concerned to make us conscious of the latent life of all these components by drawing attention to the constant fluctuation of their interrelationships, and in this lies the total originality and capital importance of his intervention.⁴²

If the viewer of a Magritte painting sees in it some revelation of the secret fluctuations of life and death whose repression sustains ordinary reality, this is in part because of how his images fix on and disturb the realm of appearance, bringing the question of *appearance* — of how things depend upon an angle, a light, to be the way they are — to the forefront of his investigation. Magritte's paintings, like dreams or the unconscious (but not reducible to either), think things (objects, elements) beyond their mere appearance, in terms of their "giving-appearance-to" other things, and in terms of their relations and their associations.

It is with good reason, moreover, that Jennings establishes the "poetry" of Magritte's images through an Aristotelean conception of "bringing together," as the philosopher from Classical antiquity established the foundations of how we moderns think about the intersections of life and form.⁴³ However, when Jennings argues that "the elements in a picture by Magritte are not *forced* together" he is subtly subverting Aristotle's hylomorphic model of being. Articulating

⁴² André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper & Row: 1972), 269-270.

⁴³ See Randa Dubnick, "Visible Poetry: Metaphor and Metonymy in the Paintings of René Magritte," *Contemporary Literature* 21.3 (Summer 1980): 407-419.

this subversion is helpful to understanding the philosophical underpinnings of Jennings's "method of poetry" — a poetics of form and the image emerging from the mysteries and inarticulate (or yet-to-be-articulated) desires of everyday life. Magritte's "bringing together" involves a process of imaginative displacement, linked to a sensitivity as well as indifference to Aristotle's categorical ontology which seeks to preserve the "natural" consistency of hierarchies of class, genus, species, etc. In distinction to the Aristotelean *telos* that exhausts potentiality in the privileging of actuality, and in doing so subordinates unique existences and objects to being instantiations of broader categories of identity, Magritte's poetic method suggests how a certain suspension of categorization takes place. Where Aristotle's hylomorphic model imposes (or contains) the *actual* difference of *form* upon (or within) the *potentiality* of indifferent *matter* in a hierarchical, deterministic logic, thus making form (actuality) primary to matter (potentiality), Magritte's elements retain and maintain some of their material potentiality while nevertheless possessing form and inhabiting appearance. Moving beyond simplistic and comforting distinctions between objects, Magritte's poetics allows for their uncanny, para-categorical correspondence. Thus Magritte's "bringing together" is a generative disturbance that allows his elements to be recognizable as a plate of ham or a brick wall while still retaining something of their potentiality, their ability to communicate, in unpredictable ways.⁴⁴

The communication between opposites and appearances takes place in the image, a medium that can make immediately co-present and communicative two otherwise conflicting

⁴⁴ Bringing into play categorical suspension, Magritte's elements transfer both manifest (actual, symbolic) and latent (potential, affective) values on the levels of metaphor (figurative association, abstract meaning), metonymy (contiguous relationships and associations) and similitude (shape and morphology, colour and pattern), while nevertheless remaining somehow distinct. It is precisely as categorically indifferent (or exaggerated) yet potential and communicative singularities that such elements retain their distinctiveness, their ability to present themselves in their uniqueness. Otherwise, such elemental singularities would be obscured by their capture in established categories of belonging and their logically prescribed ways of relating to (and withdrawing from) objects in other categories.

terms, and exhibit them in a light that reveals their latent life. Magritte's understanding of the image recalls Breton's statement of Surrealist principles and methods in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism*, where, drawing from the French poet Pierre Reverdy, Breton understands the image in terms of juxtaposition and collision. "The image," Reverdy pronounces, "cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be — the greater its emotional power and poetic reality."⁴⁵ Magritte's "bringing together" is not *forced* by the logos, a truth of binding-together under a consensual regime of knowledge and power. Thus when Jennings refers to the simultaneous "irrationality" and "evident truth" of Magritte's images, he is rephrasing a point he made two years earlier regarding the "unquestioning acceptance of *all* the conditions of the moment: forgetting all 'beliefs' preceding the picture, which would deny the promise of the unknown."⁴⁶ But Magritte's method is not for all that *automatic* in the Surrealist sense; it is, rather, a deliberate kind of decoding, motivated by a logic of comparison and resemblance.⁴⁷

In addition to Surrealism, I.A. Richards's understanding of the poetic imagination's ability to hold different terms in equilibrium is in the background of Jennings's thoughts on Magritte and the poetic activity of "bringing together." For Richards, as Denis Donoghue

⁴⁵ Pierre Reverdy quoted in André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 20. Reverdy's formulations originally appeared in "The Image," published in the art journal *Nord-Sud* (1918). It is worth mentioning that the term "juxtaposition" can also be translated as "brought together." The language of "brought together" distinctly resonates with Jennings's own understanding of Magritte's poetry as a "bringing together" of elements. I discuss this below.

⁴⁶ Humphrey Jennings, "Surrealism," *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* (December 1936): 168. Italics in original.

⁴⁷ Breton notes this in *Surrealism and Painting*: "Magritte's approach, which, far from automatic was, on the contrary, perfectly deliberate, offered support to surrealism from an entirely different direction. Alone in adopting this particular method, Magritte approached painting as though it constituted a series of 'object-lessons,' and from this point of departure he has proceeded to put the visual image systematically on trial, taking pleasure in stressing its lapses and in demonstrating the extent to which it depends upon figures of language and thought" (72).

explains, “The imagination holds simultaneously and without suppression many impulses which are intrinsically and in ordinary experience opposed; not merely heterogeneous but specifically at war.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, modern poetry not only brings together opposed terms and impulses into a perceptual-imaginative armistice, but is itself an expression of this increasing collapse of distance, the latent conditions of war, endemic to modern life; it is itself a product of, as much as reflection on, or an escape from, such conditions. Such is the dialectical standstill — the revelatory suspension of hostilities operative in common perception — that Jennings seeks in the poetic means of vision. Looking at his work from this angle, Magritte’s challenge is to rethink the role of the image within modern conditions of escalating conflict.

In their own way, Magritte’s image-objects thus participate in the strange existence of what Agamben calls “whatever singularities,” those beings he describes in *The Coming Community* that affirm their belonging-together without a clearly recognizable identity, thus posing an “insurmountable disjunction” between themselves and the representations of “the State organization.”⁴⁹ Again, the essence of such “whatever singularities” is not that it does not matter *what* they are; rather, it is that they always matter *whatever* and *however* they are. So *how* are Magritte’s objects in this condition of “bringing together”? His objects are indeed specific to the social and historical conditions of the time and place he found himself thrown into. But through

⁴⁸ Denis Donoghue, *The Sovereign Ghost: Studies in Imagination* (New York: Ecco Press, 1990), 2.

⁴⁹ See Giorgio Agamben, “Tiananmen,” in *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 84-86. As Agamben puts it, “Whatever singularity, which wants to appropriate belonging itself, its own being-in-language, and thus rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, is the principal enemy of the State” (86). State biopolitics and emancipatory biopoetics thus share interest in the existence of life and the use of the image. On the one hand, then, we have a sovereign power that excites its citizen-subjects with spectacles of abjection and glory, combined with a state biopolitics that increasingly includes all aspects of life as objects to administer, optimize and multiply, all against an often invisible background of exclusion, violence and death. On the other hand, we find Magritte’s strangely ordinary images through which, as Paul Nougé argues, “all forms of our existence find themselves taking part” (“Final Advice,” 6) precisely by bringing life into contact with its own most mysterious being.

their exhibition in the image, they are in one and the same gesture maintained and suspended in their existent, recognizable identities, both dwelling in and commenting on their (not) being thus. Magritte's images thus bring into critical consciousness two sides of the same dialectical coin: the extraordinary nature of the "commonplace" values of use and exchange that accompany objects in everyday life, and the ordinary nature of the strange, even pathological, impulses and affects that lurk in the shadows with those same everyday objects. Arousing desire and fear, then, Magritte's "bringing together" is a biopoetic suspension of identity through which elements both disturbingly play out and amusingly comment on the fantasy structures and controls that sustain and restrain the modern imagination and its economy of objects (or subject-object relations).

Portraits of the Human Condition

Although it is not named, it is obvious that one of the paintings Jennings is alluding to in terms of beauty and terror is Magritte's 1935 painting *The Portrait*, which depicts a slice of ham on a plate, laid-out with cutlery, a wine bottle and a glass on a dinner table. All is normal, with the exception of an unblinking eye staring out from the centre of the meat, transforming the still life into a perverse portrait of a face (see Image 2.3). With the simple addition of an eye to an otherwise banal object, then, Magritte collapses together two seemingly contradictory experiences. The effect is a Surrealist displacement that seems to swap back and forth the roles of subject and object: while it presents an ordinary plate of ham for the subject's routine consumption, the gaze of the eye startlingly calls attention to the display as something displayed for the perspective of a subject, revealing that this everyday object-to-be-used is an object-to-be-seen, and that the subject, the viewer, looking the meat in the eye, is himself subjected, an object of vision. Unmooring the scene from its secure foundations, the gaze insinuates: *you are being*

watched (but by who or what, and for what purpose, remains obscure). In this sense, the paranoid relativity of objects in *The Portrait* conveys the anxiety of a totalitarian (dis)organization of the world.



Image 2.3. *The Portrait (Le Portrait)*, René Magritte, 1935).

The reciprocity of seeing and being seen is of course a constituent element of any ethical encounter; like a confrontation or a romance, such experiences involve looking the other in the eye. It is in this vein that Georges Bataille describes the contrary feelings of seduction and horror that the eye evokes as a “cannibal delicacy.”⁵⁰ In her essay on the painting, Janine Catalano argues that “while *The Portrait* conjures up all of the Bataillian anxiety of eating eyes, compounded by the viewer’s self-identification with the eye made edible on the plate, the piece’s

⁵⁰ See Georges Bataille, “The Eye,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985): 17-19. It would be worthwhile to compare *The Portrait* with Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), which includes, of course, another famous eyeball.

integrity simultaneously implicates and incapacitates viewers who must reckon with its tensions.”⁵¹ The painting thus possesses or communicates an aura, a coherence (beauty) that addresses the subject and provides a place for it, but the eye induces anxiety in the way it solicits the subject’s attention. In this way, *The Portrait* is paradoxically generative of the contradictory effect of shock (terror). The perverse meeting of beauty and terror generates the disturbing experience of what Hal Foster terms the “*punctum* of the uncanny” — the eye is the piercing or pricking detail that affirms and excites the subject while also throwing that subject into crisis.⁵²

In themselves, the eye and the ham are ordinary objects, so it is the bringing together of the two, without mediation, that produces the uncanny results. As Silvano Levy usefully explains, Magritte often achieves his defamiliarizing effects through two different, but ultimately interconnected ways: either by bringing together distant objects, thus defying utilitarian instrumentality through the displacement of “objective distance” in the image, or by explicitly transgressing the “subjective dissociation” established between the familiar and the secret, thus highlighting, if not outright transgressing, the taboos that sustain ordinary reality.⁵³ An example of the former can be seen in the surreal simultaneity of night and day in *The Empire of Light* (*L’empire des lumières*, 1949), privileging neither in their mutual coexistence; the latter in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (*La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, 1948), which reveals the uncanny

⁵¹ Janine Catalano, “Distasteful: An Investigation of Food’s Subversive Function in René Magritte’s *The Portrait* and Meret Oppenheim’s *Ma Gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen*,” *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture* (January 1, 2010), <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/distasteful-an-investigation-of-foods-subversive-function-in-rene-magrittes-the-portrait-and-meret-oppenheims-ma-gouvernante-my-nurse-mein-kindermadchen/#fn-3726-25> (accessed March 10, 2019).

⁵² Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 102. The *punctum* is of course the concept that Roland Barthes uses to describe the detail in a photograph that “pricks” the viewer. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982). However, as Foster deploys it and I use it here, the disturbing effect of the *punctum* is not necessarily restricted to photography.

⁵³ For his lucid explication of the distinct yet “fundamentally common principles” shared between the irrational logic of the Surrealist image, as Breton defined it in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism*, and the Freudian uncanny, see Silvano Levy, “Magritte: The Uncanny and the Image,” *French Studies Bulletin* 13.46 (1993): 15-17.

presence of the sex organs both hidden within and erotically testified to by a nightdress. In both cases, two elements taken to be unrelated to (or subordinated by, or having no communication with) each other, whether through the strictures of conventional logic, the laws of physics, or the psychological mechanisms of repression, are shown to be intimately connected. In *The Portrait* Magritte utilizes both of these strategies: placing the eye in the centre of the ham, he both collapses two distinct objects together in the same space (much like a collage) and brings out latent (metonymic) associations each object carries with it but that are normally repressed, such as the activity (the disavowed violence) of turning an animal into an object of consumption.

In Nougé's terms, the object here is a *thing* existing in dynamic tension with the subject who envisages it.⁵⁴ Far from existing in the abstract, then, the thing is obvious in its presentness to, or in its withdrawal from, an intentional point of view. But this thing also gazes back as it affirms and negates, exhibits and refuses, its use-value, triggering a spiralling process of displacement. Once disturbed and displaced by the eye, the whole assemblage of the still life takes on an uncanny countenance as the latent life of all the objects in the painting is activated on the surface of the canvas. Encountering a setting that refuses one's place engenders a subject that experiences itself as a thing. *The Portrait* thus presents not so much a world coloured by and expressive of human consciousness, as in Romanticism, but a *thingified* consciousness, a subjectivity displaced and dispossessed of itself. In this way, Magritte is not only bringing objects together in order to reveal their secret affinity and *show* us something beautiful and

⁵⁴ The *thing* is the object as it appears in its transformed — from present to retreating, functional to broken — relation with the observer. "We begin to confront the thingness of objects," as Bill Brown puts it, "when they stop working for us [...] The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation." Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn, 2001): 4. Thus, while the image can give the subject a glimpse of its own unconscious fantasies and anxieties through its encounter with the obstinacy of the thing, that very same object, in its ordinary commonality, cannot be possessed.

horrific; rather, by giving an accusatory eye to a common and banal object, he is *demonstrating* how our own desire is implicated in constituting a world that *refuses* us. The biopoetic object-lesson of *The Portrait* resides precisely in the *destitution* of the being that experiences itself as a thing — a modern subject learning to live in the mystery of the object-world.⁵⁵



Image 2.4. *The Human Condition* (*La condition humaine*, René Magritte, 1929).

Magritte explores a similar anxiety in his painting *The Human Condition* (see Image 2.4), the painting Jennings refers to at the end of his article. Here Magritte conducts research into what he calls “the problem of the window” in a painting that seems to observe all of the precepts of Classical representation except for the fact that they have lost their naturalness and their imaginary conviction. He describes the “problem” of his painting in the “Life Line” lecture thus:

⁵⁵ This can be opposed to the enjoyment of an imaginary identification with an object, as in fascist aesthetics, as well as to the disinterested exercise of taste in bourgeois aesthetics.

The problem of the window gave rise to *The Human Condition*. In front of a window seen from inside a room, I placed a painting representing exactly that portion of the landscape covered by the painting. Thus, the tree in the picture hid the tree behind it, outside the room. For the spectator, it was both inside the room within the painting and outside in the real landscape. This simultaneous existence in two different spaces is like living simultaneously in the past and in the present, as in cases of *déjà-vu*.⁵⁶

The point of contact, the nexus of “beauty and terror” that Jennings identifies in *The Human Condition*, then, is the “evental” site where the invisible becomes the visible, in the mysterious displacements that make thought and feeling present beyond disinterested aesthetic contemplation of the sensible.

This does not mean, however, that the aesthetic as a category for explaining the particular role of sense perception in making judgements is not important to a consideration of Magritte’s work; but it does mean that it is crucial to consider the enigma of sensory presentation: that everything we see hides something behind it, that the visible is always and necessarily supported by the invisible. As Magritte explains in a 1965 interview: “Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an *interest* in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This *interest* can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.”⁵⁷ Neutralizing certain of the premises or plenitudes of *aisthesis* in his formulation of the “window problem,” Magritte’s “relentless logic” stresses how, in the absence of presence, sensation and perception give themselves over to imagination, which in turn leads to *noesis*, the intellection of the not-given. Bringing interest to bear on the invisible, the unavailable and the

⁵⁶ Magritte quoted in Jemima Montagu, *The Surrealists: Revolutionaries in Art and Writing*, 92. Italics in original. I address the question of *déjà vu* below in my discussion of Jennings’s writings on photography and everyday life. See below.

⁵⁷ Magritte in a 1965 radio interview with Jean Neyens, cited in Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, trans. Richard Millen (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), 172. My italics.

hidden, Magritte is concerned not only with how the hidden supports the visible, then, but how the unthought is both hidden by and supports thought. With the neutralization of vision, “I see” thus becomes “I cannot see,” which can then suddenly erupt into “I think”: the consciousness of one’s desire and one’s knowledge relative to and implied in both what is made visible and what refuses visibility. Through the work of imagination rendered, inspired and frustrated by the painting, the tension between the visible and the hidden in everyday life compels the *interest* of the subject. Magritte brings this reciprocity and this conflict to light, illuminating how the desire of the subject is excited precisely through what refuses its vision and remains unknowable.⁵⁸

While *The Human Condition* takes up the dialectic of the visible and the hidden, or what Jennings describes as the “likenesses and discrepancies between the image and the reality,” it is also significant how the painting demonstrates that reality is not something representable “out there,” an object for a subject who views it from a position of mastery, but is in fact a condition that the subject is exposed to from “inside.” Magritte, as Jennings understands his work, performs a similar operation in his critique of the Aristotelean hierarchy between form and matter, concept and object, instrument and thing, in order to disrupt, as he puts it, the “immediate pleasures of imitation.” This approach also intersects with what Steven Z. Levine describes as Jacques Lacan’s “desire to liberate twentieth-century culture from the Imaginary shackles of realist representation.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ This point is inspired by and resonant with psychoanalytic theory. In this sense, Magritte’s painting is not simply aesthetic because aesthetics applies to the senses, to what is given to the senses, whereas Magritte is concerned with what is hidden, with what is withheld from vision. This withholding, however, is conditioned by the effect of representation: the represented is hidden by what represents it. Magritte makes this fact of representation obvious, apparent. In this way, Magritte does not in fact “hide” anything in his painting.

⁵⁹ Steven Z. Levine, *Lacan Reframed* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 107.

Discussing how *The Human Condition* is a “representative of representation,” Levine focusses on the Lacanian implications of the trompe l’oeil effect in the painting, which is activated and disrupted by the canvas inside the painting that is twisted just enough so as to reveal its edges. Producing a slight shift in perspective and a difference between the imaginary representation and the world it represents, the edge of the canvas inside the painting marks the gap of the Real.⁶⁰ Comparing the effect to Lacan’s well-known analysis of the anamorphic skull revealed by a shift of perspective in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533), Levine argues that Magritte confronts the subject with the stain of the objet a, a “gaping wound in the human condition”:

Seen from the side in this fashion, like Holbein’s anamorphic skull, Magritte’s painting within the painting was freed from the ideological duty of ratifying the conventional representation of reality. Instead, the canvas openly proclaimed the artificial status of the work as a Symbolic representative of an Imaginary representation of the world. And the Real distortion produced by the slightly skewed angle of vision opened up an irreducible gap between the eye and the gaze, between the Imaginary representation of the view through the window and the Symbolic representative of the painted surface of the canvas. This gaping wound in the human condition is the lost place of the object ‘a.’⁶¹

A “Symbolic representative of an Imaginary representation of the world,” *The Human Condition* critically reflects on both the Classical and the Romantic traditions of representation and their respective reliances on the subject/object division. “In Surrealist aesthetics,” Margaret Cohen writes, “the very notion of art as a relation between subject and object comes under

⁶⁰ Interestingly, Foucault, in his analysis of *The Human Condition*, makes the exact opposite case, arguing that rather than affirming an “interior distance” inside the painting, and thus ultimately maintaining a distinction between it and the model it represents, “there exists from the painting to the model a perfect continuity of scene, a linearity, a continuous overflowing of one into the other.” Such an “overflow” of representation serves what Foucault understands as the logic of similitude, which puts the classical representational regime into crisis. Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 50. I discuss Foucault’s analysis of Magritte further below.

⁶¹ Levine, *Lacan Reframed*, 108.

attack. Surrealism pursues an art of practice, dissolving objects into the processes which produce them.”⁶² Magritte undoes the privileged but unacknowledged subject of vision in Classical perspectival painting by calling attention to the place of the subject “in” the portrait, thus challenging representation’s apparent objectivity, its arrangement of an objective world as a scene to-be-viewed. Referring to Kaspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818) as emblematic of Romanticism’s inversion of Classicism, Cohen explains how Romantic art reveals the hidden subject (the “blind spot”) at the centre of Classical representation, but as a result obscures access to the greater phenomenal reality of the world:

Rather the blind spot is placed all too visibly before our eyes, taking the form of the back of the head of the viewer composing the scene before him as landscape. With this inversion, Romantic art draws attention to the constitutive role of the subject in transforming phenomenal reality into an object for contemplation and representation. And in Romanticism’s exposure of the classical episteme, it is the pure availability not of the *subject* but rather of the *object*, that suffers, the object both as referent and representation. For the subject gazing at the landscape simultaneously blocks the viewer’s access to the focal point of the scene. The price of revealing the crucial role of the subject in constituting the object of representation is to dismantle the classical availability of representation in unhindered form.⁶³

In the post-Romantic Surrealism of *The Human Condition*, then, the twisted canvas as object is the site, or the gap, where both the subject is stressed in its co-constitutive role in forming an imaginary perspective of the world *and* the object insists in spite of that imaginary unity as the pressure of the Real on Symbolic representation.

Turning to another example in order to further illustrate the disjunctive connection of subject and object that interested Jennings in Magritte’s paintings, it is useful to consider Magritte’s *On the Threshold of Liberty* (*Au seuil de la liberté*, 1929). This painting is significant

⁶² Margaret Cohen, “The Art of Profane Illumination,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 10.1 (March 1994): 46.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

for a variety of reasons, notable among them the fact that it held pride of place in Jennings's own personal art collection (see Image 2.5).⁶⁴ The painting depicts a room, likely the domestic interior of a bourgeois home, with a variety of images laid out, as if they formed a screen or a series of windows, before a cannon which is pointed at them. The images include, among others, a woman's naked torso, the surface of wood, clouds in the sky, flames, a forest, and a window facade — all surfaces or spaces of visibility, representations of the world, sites of desire for a subject.⁶⁵ Putting these commonplace objects into conditions of knowability through visibility in the image, framing them as representative appearances for a subject (the cannon serving as an avatar for the viewer), only to reveal their mystery, or their ability to be known differently *as images*, Magritte *dispossesses* them as objects of consensus. He thereby releases objects from the narrow confines of utility or spectacle, exaggerating and agitating the desire that is always already (but often invisibly, by force of habit) haunting them in everyday life.

In his essay "Magritte and the Impossible," John Berger reads *On the Threshold of Liberty* in terms of an impulse to liberate perception from representation, one that situates the painting temporally, in the moment before an activity, anticipating and soliciting a yet-to-occur act of destruction and revelation. "When the cannon fires," Berger writes, "the panels of the

⁶⁴ In her autobiography, *The Land Unknown* (London: H. Hamilton, 1975), Kathleen Raine notes that Jennings hung *On the Threshold of Liberty* (1929) in his home in Blackheath in the late 1930s. While Raine does not state if the painting Jennings possessed was the 1929 or 1937 version, for Magritte produced two paintings with that title, it is safe to say that it was the 1929 version, as the latter was commissioned by the British art collector Edward James (who himself appeared in at least two Magritte paintings). In addition, Herbert Read's 1936 edited collection, *Surrealism*, lists the painting as part of the "Humphrey Jennings collection." Finally, a 2015 obituary for the historian and scholar Marie-Louise Jennings, Jennings's daughter, describes how the family sold an unnamed Magritte painting in order to pay a dental bill for Marie-Louise when she was a child. It is safe to assume that this painting was *On the Threshold of Liberty*. See the obituary published in *The Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/editor-of-18th-century-texts-and-historian-of-the-provincial-press-1.2340791> (accessed May 10, 2019).

⁶⁵ According to the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, where the painting now hangs in its permanent collection, the title of the work was suggested to Magritte by Paul Nougé. The title is likely taken from the 1910 novel *Prester John* by John Buchanan, which includes the line: "The clear air of dawn was like wine in my blood. I was not free, but I was on the threshold of freedom." See *Au seuil de la liberté*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, <http://collectie.boijmans.nl/en/object/3805/Au-seuil-de-la-libert%C3%A9/Ren%C3%A9-Magritte> (accessed May 10, 2019).

apparent world will fall down.”⁶⁶ Understood in its historical context, Magritte’s painting can be interpreted as being symptomatic of an anxious desire that was growing in the interwar period, that of uncovering the discrepancies between the official realities and images of peace and progress (as they were disseminated by modern media systems like the radio and the cinema) and the underlying realities of disillusionment and depression, and, ultimately, of fascism and coming war. By the late 1930s, the painting could be seen as articulating a certain transformation in the form of life of modern Europeans, allowing, as Eric Santner puts it in a different context, “the community to engage, in some fashion, with the very edge of the intelligibility of their world and so with the ontological vulnerability that ultimately informs every form of life.”⁶⁷



Image 2.5. *On the Threshold of Liberty (Au seuil de la liberté, René Magritte, 1929).*

⁶⁶ John Berger, “Magritte and the Impossible,” in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 160. It should be further noted that the cannon is pointed at the image of the woman’s naked torso, the display of the naked female body as a metaphor for desire, lust, fantasy, and the like — a common trope in Surrealism. Jennings’s daughter, Marie-Louise, has also reflected on how the painting caused, for her, a certain embarrassment in her childhood. See her comments in Kevin Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings* (London: Picador, 2004), 218.

⁶⁷ Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 159. Santner deploys the concept of “ontological vulnerability” to discuss the transformation from a sovereign (monarchical) organization of life and culture to that of modern forms of biopolitics and democracy. He gets the concept, and how it is worked through in the “dream-image” of a community, from Jonathan Lear, who discusses it in *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) in reference to Plenty Coups, the chief of the indigenous community of the Crow Nation as it was undergoing what he calls “cultural collapse.”

Ontological vulnerability is one half of the dynamic that informs Jennings's interest in *On the Threshold of Liberty*, the other, connected to this, is the poetic imagination's desire for the revolutionary transformation, social and aesthetic, of everyday life. As Jennings's friend, the poet Kathleen Raine suggests in her autobiography *The Land Unknown*, for Jennings and his colleagues in Mass-Observation the painting was an emblem of the hopes and anxieties that "possessed" them in the late 1930s, a representation of their Surrealism-informed search for images of the collective unconscious hidden beneath or behind official appearances, scattered across the terrain of everyday life. "For all our intoxicating sense of undisclosed marvels under the thin surface of consciousness," Raine writes, "we yet saw in that gun pointed at the flimsy fabric of a painted scene the true emblem of the future of our world. It did not dismay us; that is how the spirit of Revolution wanted it to be; the cannon, now about to fire, was our will."⁶⁸ However, as Raine goes on in her retrospective look at the sense of possibility emblemized in the painting, the fevered desire for a revolutionary transformation of the modern world also opened a Pandora's box of both phantasmagoric images and traumatic encounters with the real. Indeed, the intoxicated dream of touching the realities of the world beneath appearances, and the obsession with the collective image, found an even stronger subject in Nazism. As Raine puts it, "our possession was akin not only to French *Surréalisme* but to the more violent upsurge of the irrational forces in Nazi Germany. None of those Surrealists or Mass Observers at that time engaged in opening the dungeons of the unconscious and freeing energies imprisoned there had the wisdom to gauge, or the power to control or to transmute what came to light."⁶⁹ Referring to Jennings's passionate search for what she calls "dream-images," Raine confesses that she felt

⁶⁸ Raine, *The Land Unknown*, 85.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

herself “being in the power of a life beyond my small humanity and, above all, beyond good and evil.”⁷⁰ This sense of life, collective and otherworldly, outside morality and the bounds of reason, is exemplary of a totalitarianism of the communitarian biopoetics of everyday life, its sovereign power to both create and destroy the symbolic organization of an imaginary sphere of meaning.

Jennings himself provides no concrete evidence that he saw in Magritte’s *On the Threshold of Liberty* a premonition of war, but it is worthwhile to consider how the processes of thought and desire materialized and engaged by Magritte’s paintings may possess a certain visionary, anticipatory power — a vision manifest in the deep connections between unconscious life and historical-collective transformation, indicating a knowledge or foresight of something that is only latent in the consciousness of civilization. Jennings affirms as much when he argues for the “simultaneous irrationality” and “evident truth” of the “event” in Magritte’s poetic process of “bringing together.” Furthermore, as the above quotes from Raine suggest, such pictorial encounters between disparate objects and desires (such as destruction and creation) embody an interaction between interior and exterior processes (psychical and social, biological and historical), and the premonitory and enigmatic visions of these poetically rendered processes can serve emancipatory or reactionary ends: they can renew perception, awakening it to possibility, or they can deaden it, annihilating it through spectacle.

Following Santner’s and Cohen’s insights, the point is not that Magritte’s paintings dissolve the subject in some absolute process (or post-human object-oriented ontology), but that they exhibit the potential of thought not abstracted from life, affirming the poetic encounter between the human being, imagination and the ontological vulnerability of its form of life.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Rooted in an encounter (a “light”) embedded in material conditions (which themselves have a history and a set of values), Magritte is thus not simply presenting a dissensus that dissolves categories for the sake of ambiguity; he is concentrating into a poetic image a sensory manifestation of thought that thinks beyond the given mode of presentation (what is sensorially given to perception and consciousness as distinct objects, what is symbolically given to the subject as an object with a specified value). Through this concentration, this “bringing together,” he both focuses the viewer's attention on the material reality of the picture plane as well as on the dream or thought-image of something not empirically or sensorially available. For what is at stake in the intermingling of representation and perception, in making thought visible beyond a mode of communication that observes the bounds of consensual-perceptual reality, is our ability to think not only the mediated conditions of reality, but the future itself. And for Magritte as for Jennings, this ability to refocus and rethink what we *can* see in the strange light cast by what we *cannot* see is ultimately linked to the role of the imagination in adapting to the ontological vulnerability of modern life.

Baudelaire and Modernity

Magritte's depiction of the world of objects is, of course, filtered through his imagination — which is his protection as well as his alienation from that world. In this, he is self-consciously part of the tradition of the *poète maudit*, the alienated dandy as accursed poet, that extends back to nineteenth century figures like Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Arthur Rimbaud — poets from whom Magritte has borrowed titles and themes for a number of his paintings. The experience of oneself as an alien *thing* in a mysterious world, then, is perhaps what Jennings is driving at when he suggests that “his painting is thus essentially *modern* in the sense required by

Baudelaire.”⁷¹ Considered by the Surrealists as one of their ancestors, Baudelaire has been credited with being one of the first to use the term “modernity” in order to capture the widespread transformations of contemporary life brought by commodification and the mechanization of the modern city.⁷² “By modernity,” Baudelaire explains in “The Painter of Modern Life,” “I mean the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent which make up one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable.”⁷³ In an early, perhaps the first, articulation of what has since been termed the “modernity thesis,” Baudelaire argues that the poet, in response to the transformed conditions of perception in modernity, “makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distill the eternal from the transitory.”⁷⁴ In Jennings’s and Baudelaire’s terms, Magritte’s paintings are modern in how the double experience of beauty and terror combines something fundamental to human nature (eternal in Baudelaire’s words) with the transitory and changeable historical conditions, the fashions, of the present. In this respect, Magritte distills art, a poetic experience, from the careful description of the material reality of artifacts drawn from everyday life by combining them with something that relativizes their apparent givenness (a givenness which is, itself, relative). This element that estranges the artifact invites contemplation of the very conditions, perceptual and material, of the *appearance* (the visibility and display) of the object.

⁷¹ Jennings, “In Magritte’s Paintings,” 15; reprinted in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 225-6. Italics in original.

⁷² On the “modernity thesis” see Ben Singer, “Making Sense of the Modernity Thesis,” in *Melodrama and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); for a critique of this position see Charlie Keil, “‘To Here From Modernity.’ Style, Historiography, and Transitional Cinema,” in *American Cinema’s Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, ed. Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁷³ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), 13.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

For Magritte as for Baudelaire, then, modern art cannot simply proceed as if its customary aesthetic protocols were intact, but must adapt to the perceived corruption and disenchantment of modernity by taking into itself the intrusion of its transitoriness and shocks. Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire is relevant here, particularly his articulation of Baudelaire's complicated modernist sensibility by way of the dialectical interplay of two notions or modalities of experience: *Erfahrung*, a long experience that is communicable and shareable, embedded in a social milieu that exists in historical time and that is subject to voluntary collective recollection in ritual; and *Erlebnis*, an instantaneous experience, the unique affective condition of reactivity to environmental stimuli as "something lived through."⁷⁵ Succinctly put, *Erfahrung* absorbs and emplaces the changes a person (and a civilization) undergoes into a coherent, continuous trajectory, a whole, such that the effects undergone can properly be called experiences, while *Erlebnis* is something endured and survived, not necessarily integrated into a coherent order. The key is to see how the two notions interconnect in terms of the subject's ability to absorb or reject, integrate or repress, events (change, external stimuli, etc.) and how cultural and artistic works reflect this. Baudelaire's achievement, for Benjamin, was to describe the *decline* of experience — the disconnection of *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* — that was happening under the conditions of modern industrial capitalism while avoiding reductive nostalgic appeals to the unity of premodern experience.

Benjamin goes on in his analysis of Baudelaire to relate the decline of experience to the disintegration of the aura, the phenomenon of interconnectedness and reciprocity one experiences between oneself and another member of the community or a significant work of

⁷⁵ See Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 194.

art.⁷⁶ If the aura is “the unique manifestation of a distance,” that is, a proper distance that affords mutual recognition and conscious intelligibility, otherwise understood as an experience of the beautiful, then, as it erodes, shock effects come to take its place.⁷⁷ Shock, in Benjamin’s appropriation of Freud, involves the exposure to stimuli without the “protective shield” of the distance that consciousness affords, thus generating effects of fear, revulsion, and terror.⁷⁸ Such unreflective feelings are traumatic and destructive insofar as they cannot be integrated into the subject’s conscious, experiential life. Benjamin reads Baudelaire’s lyric poetry as a self-conscious working-through of such shocks as they occur in the alienated space of the modern city — in particular, in the poet’s anxiety-ridden encounters with the urban phenomenon of the crowd. What strikes or shocks Baudelaire so strongly is precisely that while so many glances are exchanged back and forth between members of the crowd as they navigate the streets, there is no auratic or shared experience among them. The capacity of vision connected to the aura is traumatically displaced by the shock of the empty gaze. As Benjamin puts it, “What is involved here is that the expectation roused by the look of the human eye is not fulfilled. Baudelaire describes eyes of which one is inclined to say that they have lost their ability to look.”⁷⁹ If, following Benjamin, Baudelaire is of interest precisely because of his obsession with the shocks of modernity, then Magritte’s combination of beauty and terror is “essentially *modern*,” as Jennings describes it, precisely in its concern with the destruction of the aura and the creation of

⁷⁶ For a discussion of Benjamin’s theory of experience in relation to the concept of the aura, see in particular Andrew Benjamin, “The Decline of Art: Benjamin’s Aura,” *Oxford Art Journal* 9.2 (1986): 30–35; Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). For an overview on Baudelaire and modernity, see Françoise Meltzer *Seeing Double: Baudelaire’s Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁷⁷ Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 188.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 189. In his compelling analysis of the films of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg in *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), Eric Santner succinctly explains Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire’s understanding of the crowd as “the first public sphere in which one is systematically trained not to return the gaze of the other” (123).

a *thingified* experience in its commodified ruins. If the blank gaze of the urban crowd is the shocking element at the centre of Baudelaire's poetry, then we can suggest that in the case of *The Portrait* the aura disintegrates in the empty gaze that refuses mutual recognition, in the eye that looks but does not see (or that sees only a *thing*). *The Portrait*, in other words, is *crowded*.

Tableaux Parisiens

In a different but parallel way, Jennings investigates the dynamic between modernity and experience, shock and aura, in a brief text that accompanies one of his paintings inspired by Baudelaire's "Parisian Scenes" ("Tableaux Parisiens") from *The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleurs du mal)*, first published in 1857). Jennings describes how an encounter with some etchings depicting nineteenth century Paris conjured for him an experience of *déjà vu*, which sent him on a mental journey into his own time spent in Paris in the late 1920s and early '30s.⁸⁰ Memories of places he visited and the poets he read there leads Jennings to imagine Baudelaire's response to the transforming urban landscape and its disorienting effect on his psyche. He is particularly interested in Baudelaire's nostalgia for a bygone Paris in his lyric poem "The Swan" ("La Cygne"), which combines allusions to figures from classical antiquity with references to the destruction wrought by the Haussmanization of specific locales and symbolic structures in his present. Jennings quotes from the first two stanzas:

Andromaque, je pense a vous! Ce petit fleuve,
Pauvre et triste miroir ou jadis resplendit
L'immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve,
Ce Siamois menteur qui par vos pleurs grandit,

Ah féconde soudain ma mémoire fertile,

⁸⁰ See also Humphrey Jennings, "Who Does That Remind You Of?," *London Bulletin* 6 (October 1938): 21-22; reprinted in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 230-231. I discuss Jennings's interest in the phenomenon of *déjà vu* below.

Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel.
Le vieux Paris n'est pas (la forme d'une ville
Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel).

[Andromache! — This shallow stream, the brief
Mirror you once so grandly overcharged
With your vast majesty of widowed grief,
This lying Simois your tears enlarged,

Evoked your name, and made me think of you,
As I was crossing the new Carrousel.
— Old Paris is no more (cities renew,
Quicker than human hearts, their changing spell).]⁸¹

As an allegory of the transformative destruction of the modern city and the shock it engenders, “The Swan” both embodies Baudelaire’s disorientation and anxiety and distils it into the fundamental apperceptive material of his poetry. Through jumps of perception and fleeting impressions of Paris alongside historical-poetic references, Baudelaire exhibits the displacement of human experience and temporality as it wanders through a space undergoing the rapid transformations of commodification and redevelopment. As his melancholic gaze attests, the modern city seems to reverse the traditional qualities of subjects and objects, where objective material structures like the Place Carrousel and the Louvre are far more changeable and adaptable, more fluid and communicative amongst themselves, than they are for, and in comparison with, an isolated human being. Whatever authenticity the poet has, then, emerges precisely from the destruction of his experience in a shocking, impenetrable world. “In Baudelaire,” as Agamben explains, “a man expropriated from experience exposes himself to the

⁸¹ Charles Baudelaire, “The Swan,” cited in Humphrey Jennings, “Tableaux Parisiens,” in *Humphrey Jennings: Filmmaker, Painter, Poet, 2nd Edition*, ed. Marie-Louise Jennings (London: British Film Institute, 2014), 29. One of the structures alluded to here is the Place Carrousel, which was demolished, Jennings notes, “(in 1848 and onwards) for the rebuilding of the Louvre.” English translation from “The Swan” by Roy Campbell, *Poems of Baudelaire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952), 116.

force of shock. Poetry responds to the expropriation of experience by converting this expropriation into a reason for surviving and making the inexperience its normal condition.”⁸²

It is in the lyric form that Baudelaire thus develops what can be understood as a fetishist’s response to the alien developments he encounters but cannot integrate into his experience of the city.⁸³ Whatever aura is communicated in “The Swan,” whatever beauty Baudelaire achieves in the poem, then, emanates from a disconnected subject, an *exile* (as he refers to himself at the end of the poem), who makes of his own alienation an aesthetic experience of the first order.

In his letter “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,” Freud provides two clinical terms that can help explain what I understand through the notion of the destruction of experience and the way it is both symptomatically manifest in and negotiated by Baudelaire’s poetry. Freud uses the terms *derealization* and *depersonalization* to describe that psychological disorder when “the subject feels either that a piece of reality or that a piece of his own self is strange to him.”⁸⁴ These two “intimately connected” symptoms of the destruction of experience overlap with my analysis of “The Swan,” in which Baudelaire responds to the spatial and temporal dislocations of modernity by splitting his gaze between the external and transitory shocks of the present (immediate insofar as they are without the mediation of tradition) and an interior journey into the layers of the past, drawing from memory a reserve of cultural references and mediations — including an apostrophic appeal to Andromache, that mythological Greek figure of melancholy

⁸² Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: An Essay on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Verso, 1993), 41.

⁸³ Agamben provides further insight into Baudelaire’s poetic confrontation with the commodification of everyday life in “Baudelaire; or, The Absolute Commodity,” in *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in the Western World*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 41-46.

⁸⁴ Sigmund Freud, “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,” in *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*, ed. Ernest L. Freud (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 119.

and exile that Baudelaire makes his muse.⁸⁵ Indeed, Baudelaire's dissociative fantasy of himself as in exile is perhaps the clearest expression of this dual-process of derealization and depersonalization, indicating a split point of view that paradoxically finds the mediation of the aura, that is, something beautiful (if melancholic), in a simultaneous retreat from *and* anguished confrontation with the immediate shock of the present. Considering the importance of the poetic image, broadly put, as both an expression of and defence against the shocks of modernity, it is worthwhile to consider how Jennings's thoughts about the image as he presents them in his piece on *Parisian Scenes* (and related texts) represent both an extension of and a divergence from Baudelaire's influential and symptomatic insights from a century earlier.

On the one hand, Baudelaire famously reacted to photography in much the same fashion as he did the shocking stimuli of the industrialized city. As he puts it in a review of the 1859 Paris Salon, the first exhibition in which photographic images were included among other works of art: "In these sorry days, a new industry has arisen that has done not a little to strengthen the asinine belief . . . that art is and can be nothing other than the accurate reflection of nature . . . A vengeful god has hearkened to the voice of this multitude. Daguerre is his messiah."⁸⁶ Baudelaire's dispute with photography, and realism in the arts more generally, fundamentally turns on how what he takes to be the mere (re)production of mimetic resemblance lacks the mediation of artistic intervention and imagination, essentially, the aura. However much we may now consider it a naive belief, for Baudelaire the photograph is a traumatic image of the world

⁸⁵ On the relationship between melancholy and memory and the figure of Andromache in Baudelaire's "The Swan" see Ross Chambers, "Memory and Melancholy," in *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism*, trans. Mary Seidman Trouille (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 153-173.

⁸⁶ Charles Baudelaire cited in Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," trans. Rodney Livingston, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Wiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 1999), 527.

without meaning, brutal in its statement of bare actuality and destructive in its reduction of art's aesthetic and even moral value to that of mere verisimilitude, the representation of the surface of the things of the world. Intriguingly, Baudelaire's vision of photography's reduction of the value of art to a mere semblance deprived of meaning, a bare object-thing exposed to (and refusing) the look of the perceiver, prefigures Agamben's understanding of bare life separated from its meaningful form by the biopolitical apparatuses of sovereign power. In both cases, the objectified image of the naked thing is not a return to some pre-cultural or natural condition, some essence of life, but is the artificial result of a mechanism of power.⁸⁷

Jennings, on the other hand, turns to Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in his reflections on *Parisian Scenes*, transfiguring Baudelaire's aestheticized alienation into a materialist meditation on the image. This takes the form of an analysis of the sensation of *déjà vu* Jennings had when he found himself in Paris before the Louvre, that very site that triggered Baudelaire's reaction in "The Swan." He theorizes that the sense that he had been to that place before was in part an effect of his unconscious memory of the image of Paris that he had seen in the etchings years before; but more than that, he argues that his feeling of *déjà vu* pertains to "the image fulfilling the already existent fantasy."⁸⁸ Referring to the etchings as well as to photography, Jennings considers how feelings of doubling and repetition are themselves doubled in images and serial objects, which afford "a far more detached analysis" than available before

⁸⁷ As Alys Eve Weinbaum writes in "Ways of Not Seeing: (En)gendered Optics in Benjamin, Baudelaire, and Freud," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), "Though the Baudelairean idea of photography as a 'purely objective transcript of reality,' a 'message without a code,' or as Roland Barthes would later express it, an 'analogon of the world,' no longer has much currency in an age savvy to the manipulation of so-called reality by photographic processes, in the period in which Baudelaire wrote, photographs were being widely used to augment perception and to capture the "secrets" of life that were obscured from view in fast-paced, crowded, and rapidly industrializing cities" (411-412).

⁸⁸ Humphrey Jennings, "Tableaux Parisiens," 29.

“an actual scene.” Claiming mechanically reproduced images for the “cause of materialism,” Jennings’s interest in such objects overlaps with Benjamin’s conception of the “optical unconscious,” which links photography’s automatic inscription of the material world to psychoanalysis’s interest in the instinctual and perceptual unconscious. As Benjamin writes in the “Artwork” essay, “Since the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception.”⁸⁹ The feeling of *déjà vu* one may experience with images, Jennings argues, can be rationally analyzed because “with an image the parts of the image which correspond to the fantasy can be separated from those which do not.”⁹⁰ In this respect, Jennings seems to indeed be following Baudelaire’s lead in considering how the realist image captures the naked reality of the world, a thing-world desymbolized and detached from human meaning, parallel to conscious experience.

It is apparent that such an encounter with the image and the serial object intersects with Benjamin’s diagnosis of the “decay of the aura,” in which, as Agamben succinctly puts it, “the traditional value and authority of the work of art began to vacillate.”⁹¹ Displacing the older hierarchies of presence, singularity and distance manifest in the traditional work of art, the mutating exchange of values performed by the image is symptomatic of the “adjustment of reality to the masses and the masses to reality,” connected as much to machinic techniques of

⁸⁹ See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 237. A number of critics have noted the obvious similarities between Jennings and Benjamin on photography. See, for example, David Alan Mellor, in “Mass Observation: The Intellectual Climate,” in *The Camerawork Essays: Context and Meaning in Photography*, ed. Jessica Evans (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997), who writes, “Jennings’s acute understanding of the effects of photo-chemical reproduction and the effects of mass circulation was made from a standpoint close to that of Walter Benjamin (Jennings actually wrote on the optical unconsciousness along similar lines to Benjamin)” (141).

⁹⁰ Jennings, “Tableaux Parisiens,” 29.

⁹¹ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 44-45.

mass reproduction such as photography and cinema as to the commodification of everyday life.⁹ For Jennings, however, it is precisely because of this objectified reality that an image can actually tell the subject something about himself in terms of how it excites or refuses his feelings of recognition, and of what it says about an event or an object the subject did not consciously experience but was nevertheless affected by. Jennings's *use* of the image and the serial object thus takes what is for Baudelaire a shattering experience of a *thingified* world and an empty gaze and makes of it a scene of analysis, an opportunity for experiment. Whereas Baudelaire's anguish leads him to exile himself (or realize his exile) from something disorientingly present (pushing away the unmediated *thing* that is brutally close), Jennings's sensation of the already-seen but not (fully) remembered or experienced compels him to look again at the mediated object for more than visual confirmation, but for what it evokes of that uncanny feeling — a feeling he desires to recognize, to consciously claim, as his own. While the image can be utilized as an object for “detached analysis,” then, it can also be appropriated for the purposes of the poetic imagination.

Inspired by his reading of Baudelaire and the sensation of *déjà vu* he felt before the Parisian scenes in the etchings, Jennings's painting *Tableaux Parisiens* is an example of his poetic experimentation with depersonalization and derealization in the late 1930s (see Image 2.6). Bringing together realism and abstraction in an unmediated way, the painting conjures and comments on the feeling of a doubled experience where perception meets representation. In this respect, Jennings's painting performs a disjunctive depersonalizing operation similar to *The Human Condition*, where, as Magritte explains, the “simultaneous existence in two different

⁹² Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 223.

spaces is like living simultaneously in the past and in the present, as in cases of *déjà vu*.”⁹³ As Patrick Rumble describes the feeling of *déjà vu*, “one experiences the uncanny sensation of adopting a forced perspective. The spontaneity of vision, the everyday illusion of the freedom of vision, or of ‘unfettered sight,’ collapses with the consciousness of repetition.”⁹⁴ In this way, *Tableaux Parisiens* explicitly thematizes the poet’s vision of a shocking, derealized landscape and the attempt to block it out by aestheticizing it.⁹⁵ It also recalls Magritte’s experiments in perception from the same period in the way it generates, as quoted above, “a disturbing poetic effect ... created by setting objects from reality out of context.”⁹⁶



Image 2.6. *Tableaux Parisiens* (Humphrey Jennings, 1938-1939).

⁹³ Magritte, “Life Line,” 92.

⁹⁴ Patrick Rumble, *Allegories of Contamination: Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Trilogy of Life* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 17.

⁹⁵ As we see in “The Swan,” Baudelaire developed his internal phantasmagoria as a way of aesthetically working through the shock-effects of modernity on bodies and space, allegorically absorbing and rejecting the destruction of the aura; and he criticized the emerging authority of realism for what he saw of commodification and empire in it.

⁹⁶ Magritte, “Life Line,” 64.

Like the nineteenth century etchings he was initially taken by in the early 1930s, the Parisian landscape is represented in a muted quasi-realist, post-Cubist style and tone, with the *exception* of an abstract square, four differently coloured triangles meeting inside it, at the centre of the composition. The anomalous object is placed squarely where the entrance to the Place Carrousel or the Louvre would be located, at once blocking the site out and calling attention to it as an object of vision and desire. Jennings depicts what would be the site of the Place Carrousel/ the Louvre, that point of fixation in “The Swan,” through what would be the gaze of the *flâneur*, that dandified wanderer of the streets of the modern city who merely enjoys what Baudelaire calls “the fugitive pleasures of circumstance,” *except* that the point of view in the painting self-consciously belongs to that of the *poet*, that figure tasked with devoting himself to “distilling from fashion the mysterious element of beauty that it may contain.”⁹⁷

Jennings’s use of the square as an alien presence in the otherwise coherent representational space of *Tableaux Parisiens* overtly introduces questions of fantasy and desire, repression and disavowal, in short, subjectivity, into the realist painting (or, vice versa, brings a mental representation into the realism of an external perception).⁹⁸ The object both calls attention to itself and fetishistically covers a void, marking an indistinct space that is neither the Place Carrousel nor the Louvre. In Lacanian terms, this piece of the visible world estranged from the apparent unity of the rest of the painting is the objet a, a remainder of the Real that marks the subject’s lack upon entry into the Symbolic constitution of reality. And like the eye in Magritte’s *The Portrait*, it is a figure of the gaze, of the latent content resonant in the doubled feeling of

⁹⁷ Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 13.

⁹⁸ The use of the alien object, a prism, recalls other visual experiments Jennings undertook in the 1930s, such as *The Origin of Colour* (1937), which presents a blooming flower with a colourful prismatic egg at its centre. Jennings’s experiments with colour can be productively considered alongside filmmaker and artist Len Lye’s contemporaneous experiments — modernist experiments with a certain Utopian and democratic sensibility.

déjà vu. In this way, the object is also a *prism*, a *thing* that suspends and disturbs the realist coherence of the scene, derealizing it into an enigmatic picture puzzle, an image of mystery that cannot be solved by logic, but must be experienced as a sensory event of perception. In its bold address to the perceiver, then, the prism marks the presence of the absence (or disavowed presence) of the viewer that representation depends upon in order to function. The Magrittean object-lesson of *Tableaux Parisiens* is not that the prism reveals a hidden meaning beneath the surface appearance of reality, but that reality itself depends upon something necessarily hidden.

In different terms, closer perhaps to Jennings's self-conscious adoption of the poet's vision as a mode of enunciation in the painting, the inconsistent element that throws the entire scene of *Tableaux Parisiens* into a new light can be described as a prism that, as Michel Remy puts it, "fragments and diffracts the 'Being' of things, [in] an attempt, derived from surrealism, to emblemize the actual process of creation."⁹⁹ Prismatic vision belongs to that of the poet because while it says something about the world it also shows the poet's own desire and investment in attending to the world as image. As a crystallization of memory (something no longer present) and fantasy (something that might be), the uncanny presence of the prism also projects the desire for something unrealized, invisible or emerging to-be-seen. It displaces the realist representation with an objectified figure of both repression (resistance) and the perceptual work of exchange, evoking if not outright exhibiting the constitutive tension of the visible world: that of making a coherent image for a subject. In this way, the prism is Jennings's Baudelairean apostrophe to the perceiver. Colour also plays a significant role in this dynamic, putting the visibility of the world itself on display. "In the Jennings-text from the late 1930s," as David

⁹⁹ Remy, "Biography of Humphrey Jennings."

Mellor writes, “light discloses truth, or is decomposed and, in splitting or in recomposition through a prism, reveals colour. There recurs a symbolic opposition between greyness (associated with funereality and the industrial landscape) and colour as a productive force.”¹ Jennings thus extracts aesthetic value and possibility (recomposition, colour) from the alienated, doubled shock of modern experience, but he also suggests a way of seeing and making connections, developing the imaginative means for thinking together different modes of perception and representation.

The Psychophotography of Everyday Life

Returning to Jennings’s interest in photography, we can thus see more clearly how it became at once biopoetic material and analytical instrument. This is particularly evident in photography’s links with both the fantasy image and the uncanny feeling of the already-seen. This also made it useful for transforming privatizing and consumerist acts of self-actualization — present in the enjoyment of poetry as much as in the consumption of popular media — into social processes of mass analysis and collective imagination. Here the sensation of *déjà vu* can be understood as a cornerstone of Jennings’s aesthetic democracy, as it prompts him to ask how, through the analysis of an image, a subjective-psychological experience is (or can be) shared and made communicable. It informs his evolving feedback loop between poetic form, broadly put, and a collective unconscious, both becoming increasingly self-conscious of their own traditions, tensions and internal dynamics. That Classicism and an abiding but complicated respect for history has a major part to play in this dynamic is further proof of the unique insight of Jennings’s biopoetics.

¹⁰⁰ David Mellor, “Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings,” in *Humphrey Jennings: Filmmaker, Painter, Poet*, 112.

Likewise, in his article “Who Does That Remind You Of?” from the sixth issue of *London Bulletin*, Jennings draws from both his photographic practice and Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* to explore the feeling of *déjà vu* for what it offers to thinking about the psycho-social life of memory and sensation. Following a consideration of realism and the popular use of photography for self-imaging, Jennings turns to Freud’s analysis of how different objects come to be invested with meaning and associated together by the subject.¹⁰¹ The question pertains to what extent a given set of associations is “arbitrary” or is in fact informed by a deeper fantasy structure connected to unconscious desire. Asserting that “Freud insists on the impossibility of a voluntarily ‘arbitrary’ choice or association of objects,” Jennings proceeds to explain the composition of a chart of associations between words and images he has produced to diagram the links his unconscious fantasy produces between them (see Image 2.7):

Below is an unfinished (or incomplete) chart of certain words and images (evidently a personal list) with dotted-line indications of the relationships ordinarily assumed to exist between them (between “sea” and “blue” for instance). Clearly it is a problem just how far these “common sense” relationships differ from or overlap the relationships (between “prism” and “fir tree” for example) established in a painting, or dictated by “unconscious fantasy.”¹⁰²

The unconscious associations Jennings explores between the disparate objects and images can be understood as a post-Romantic version of what Baudelaire identified as “correspondences” in a poem of the same name.¹⁰³ But whereas Baudelaire’s poem presents the seer’s synesthetic vision of the reciprocal analogies between humans and nature, Jennings charts a course between the familiarities of “common sense” and the singularities of “unconscious fantasy,” an assemblage of natural, historical and artificially produced objects.

¹⁰¹ Humphrey Jennings, “Who Does That Remind You Of?” *London Bulletin* 6 (October 1938): 21-22.

¹⁰² Jennings, “Who Does That Remind You Of?,” 22.

¹⁰³ See Charles Baudelaire, “Correspondences,” from *The Flowers of Evil in Poems of Baudelaire*, 8.

equality by way of its propensity for mutation and mutability. In this regard, however, it might also be said to share in the commodity's quasi-mystical properties of exchange-value. But where the commodity-image of the 1930s conceals the forces of change that make it what it is (or promises change in the most superficial of terms), Jennings brings forth the animus of transformation beneath familiar appearances, offering something beyond the comforting virtue of stability, the complacency of stasis.

To this end, in a text unpublished in his lifetime entitled "Beyond the Life of Man," for example, Jennings explains his understanding of the phantasmagoric mutability of the image in modern painting and poetry in terms that resonate with Marx on use-value and exchange-value: "An object cannot immediately exchange its being with another object. An apple cannot immediately become a coal. But an *image* of an object is immediately exchangeable with another *image*. An image of a horse can become an image of a locomotive."¹⁰⁴ Rather than being "literary" symbols of a transcendental "God, or divine Wisdom" or composed of "pure forms," he goes on, images are (dis-)located within an immanent continuum of exchange with one another. This is not to say that Jennings's images here are free of reference or symbolism entirely; on the contrary, as Nick Hubble clarifies, "rather freely signifying and so perhaps evading the imposition of external meaning, the image holds both one meaning and the sense of its self-transition to another meaning, equally its own."¹⁰⁵ Madge further explains that the "magical potency" of the image resides in the way it brings together and sets into relation its

¹⁰⁴ Humphrey Jennings, "Beyond the Life of Man," in *Humphrey Jennings: Film-maker, Painter, Poet*, 77. Italics in original.

¹⁰⁵ Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 74.

various elements temporally, or in that instant that might decisively explode from within temporality, “in their coming together at a particular moment.”¹⁰⁶

The (unconscious) fantasy of connection explored here, which can be analyzed in paintings and photography, may indeed generate a new sense of the aura in how objects “come together.”¹⁰⁷ But if this is so, it is the aura of objects that have passed beyond the authority of tradition and its natural phenomenological distances into a world dominated by the commodity; it is the uncanny beauty of a communicative network or association of things that cannot be said to be necessarily or naturally connected but are made both equivalent in the commodity and equal in aesthetic experience. Given the importance of repetition in Jennings’s discussion of the image, it may also be that the psychological event of *déjà vu* is the fold or link between the exchangeability of the image (as Jennings understands it in “Beyond the Life of Man”) and the referentiality of photography. Seeing what is and seeing again what was already seen in a new light thus becomes a *common* activity of looking at *common* things with potentially *common* feelings.

Jennings’s chart thus speaks to his desire to develop a *capacity* — call it the method of poetry or the means of vision or perhaps “psychophotography” (my term) — to make connections between perceptions and representations, and further, to democratize this capacity, to make of it a public resource. In this sense, correspondences and coincidences herald the potential for collective acts of memory and imagination. Jennings’s chart of signifiers drawn from his

¹⁰⁶ Madge, “A Note on Images,” 79.

¹⁰⁷ Tyrus Miller usefully describes Jennings’s image in the following terms: “it translates a sign-system that is not necessarily pictorially evocative into a visually striking image, and it allows a dispersed or hidden pattern to be discerned and rendered explicit as a visible whole, a *gestalt*.” Miller, “In the Blitz of Dreams: Mass-Observation and the Historical Uses of Dream Reports,” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 44: Mass-Observation as Poetics and Science (2001): 35.

unconscious thus forms an open-ended itinerary, a psycho-graphic map that parallels the constellations of images in his later imaginative history of the Industrial Revolution, *Pandaemonium*, and anticipates the urban wanderings and experimental cartographies of fellow travellers like the postwar Situationist psychogeographers.¹⁰⁸ For Jennings, then, the question of participating in the democratic *self-legitimacy* that simultaneously emerges from and authorizes subjects' capacities for developing connections means paying public attention to — charting, mapping and transforming — our individual and collective unconscious fantasies and desires.

Only an *Image*

In a way comparable to Jennings, then, Magritte's practice is a self-conscious development, practically programmatic, of Baudelaire's modern sensibility, for Magritte radicalizes the Baudelairean problematic of alienation and exile, finding in that alienation a new understanding of — and ultimately poetic *use* for — the image. What Jennings identifies as Magritte's concern with what he calls “the concrete world” relative to the image as such speaks to the transformation of art that came with the commodification of everyday life — the extension of the same process of commodification that led Baudelaire to fixate on the destruction of experience in the mid-nineteenth century. For like Baudelaire who grappled with the ephemeral and the eternal before him, Magritte's aesthetic response to the decay of the aura is not to retreat into the false security of tradition, but to adapt representational painting to the modern conditions of the disenchanting

¹⁰⁸ For an overview and selection of Situationist theories and practices, see Tom McDonough's edited collection, *The Situationists and the City* (New York: Verso, 2010).

image and what Marx referred to as the commodity fetish.¹⁰⁹ Not only does the commodity transcend the “sensuousness” of the object, but its displacement in the abstract system of exchange at once crystallizes and obscures the labour and social relations involved in its construction and circulation.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, in its very exchange-value, the object as commodity enters into an ever-fluctuating relationship of exchange with other commodities, while the human dimension acquires a thing-like character. In commodity fetishism, as Hal Foster explains, “producers and products trade semblances: social relations take on ‘the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things,’ and commodities assume the active agency of people.”¹¹¹ As I argued earlier, Baudelaire responded to the commodity fetish with an artistic fetishism of his own, one that *aestheticizes* his alienated experience as means of keeping poetry alive and authentic; Magritte, as I am arguing Jennings helps us to see, seizes on the shock and mystery of the modern object in order to put an aesthetics of alienation to *use*.

However strange they may at first appear, then, Magritte’s objects are sampled from everyday life and dwell within quotidian experience. “What then are the objects that are most important to man?” Nougé writes in “Images Defended.” “Without fail, the most common ones.

¹⁰⁹ As Marx writes in a rather surreal passage in *Capital* on the superimposition of exchange-value on use-value in the commodity: “It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.” Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 163-164.

¹¹⁰ I consider the notion of the commodity “crystallizing” social relations in my analysis of Jennings’s “image” of the Crystal Palace in Chapter Three.

¹¹¹ Hal Foster, “Exquisite Corpses,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 7.1 (Spring 1991): 160. However, as Marc Lowenthal points out in his Introduction to Benjamin Péret’s *The Leg of Lamb*, what André Breton calls “black humour” “could be said to begin when humans are treated like things (and things like humans). Breton defined such ‘treatment’ as the dreamer’s ‘revenge’ against his corrective (that is, laughing, socialized) audience.” In Benjamin Péret, *The Leg of Lamb: Its Life and Works*, trans. Marc Lowenthal (Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2011), xix.

The importance of an object for a human being is in direct relation to its banality.”¹¹² In Magritte’s images, banal objects emerge from everyday life with all of the attendant desires and uses that accompany them, only, in Agamben’s terms, to have their very determinateness in the social and biological conditions into which they have been thrown made destitute, that is, exhibited and suspended. While they are clearly depicted in the most obvious classical conventions of representation, it is in the way Magritte’s banal objects gather themselves together without, in a certain sense, *identity*, that a questioning of the visual economy of biopolitical and bourgeois subjectification takes place.¹¹³ In other words, in Magritte’s paintings things are indeed *what* they appear to be, but *how* they are what they are, as objects of use and desire, is exhibited and put into question.



Image 2.8. *The Treachery of Images* (*La Trahison des images*, René Magritte, 1929).

¹¹² Nougé, “René Magritte or Images Defended,” 87.

¹¹³ The form of identity that is suspended in Magritte is not that of an imagined (painted) object’s visual resemblance to its conventional material counterpart; rather, what is destituted is the representational logic which assumes and enforces that the object is self-same and self-evident, that is, that the object has a way of appearing that must be commensurate with what it is or what it is used for. Magritte’s images always refer to the everyday world and its ordinary appearances, to its objects and their conventional uses, but they also neutralize some aspect, visual or useful-practical, of that world.

We can observe such a dynamic of appearance and destitution, of resemblance and negation, in what is perhaps the best known example of Magritte's visual puzzles, *The Treachery of Images*. The painting depicts in realistic detail a conventional smoking pipe, lit from above in high key lighting, suggesting a studio environment (See Image 2.8). The pipe, as a serial object and a fetish object, floats in an artificial space, while beneath it, as if an advertising slogan, is the phrase, "Ceci nest past use pipe" ("This is not a pipe"). At once a commentary on and a negation of the painted representation of the pipe, the deictic statement ("this") contributes to the visual composition of the painting at the exact same time as it proclaims its internal, irresolvable difference, functioning as it does in a different register of signification and reference. Thus Magritte's composition disrupts the habitual, ontological claim on reality that the painting makes from within appearance through the real of its own pictorial-textual displacement.

In his well-known study of the painting, Foucault analyzes how Magritte subverts the traditional operations of representation by bringing resemblance into the realm of simulation, making the pipe an image of itself. The simulacrum of the image transforms resemblance, which functions like a copy that refers to an original, into similitude, a system of copies that refer to other copies.¹¹⁴ For Foucault, Magritte's calligram upsets the classical stratification of discourse by disrupting the dialectic between the visible and the sayable, disturbing the "natural" unity that secures the visible object by means of the invisible concept. Considering Magritte's use and exhibition of the declarative statement in the painting, Foucault argues that in placing emphasis on language *inside* pictorial space, "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe* exemplifies the penetration of

¹¹⁴ See Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*. Written in response to a letter from Magritte, in which the artist explains his understanding of the iconographic economy of imitation, Foucault argues that *The Treachery of Images* articulates the epistemological shift he observes in *The Order of Things* between the classical and modern epistemes.

discourse into the form of things; it reveals discourse's ambiguous power to deny and to redouble."¹¹⁵

In his commentary on Foucault's analysis of *The Treachery of Images*, however, D. N. Rodowick cautions that while art's entry into the simulacrum of the image can liberate it from the confines of representational realism, it also means that art detaches from life as the image itself becomes a *thing* invested with the exchange-value of the commodity. As he puts it:

When the relation between resemblance and affirmation collapses, so too does the identity of a convincing plastic space. This does not mean, however, that painting or any other form of art disappears, or that art is obligated to refer only to itself. The extent to which "the image" insists on its self-identity — or to the extent that this relation is insisted on by arts institutions — is a measure of the degree to which the image has ceased to refer to things, by becoming a thing of a particular order. Nonobjective art? Such an idea is no longer possible. What Clement Greenberg heralded as the utopian function of modernism only marked its progressive transformation into a commodity governed by exchange-value and the laws of capital. The quality of similitude has a utopian face, but it is also the figure of an increasing reification of signs.¹¹⁶

In this respect, the "quality of similitude" that displaces representation in *The Treachery of Images* should also be understood as the artwork's symptomatic registration of what Baudelaire and Benjamin take as the modern experience of shock, a rupture between the subject and his place in a historical tradition, one that legislates the transmission of signs and governs coherent identities. Such shocks and crises of transmission are, of course, also engines of capital and the fuel for reactionary counter-formations.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, 37.

¹¹⁶ D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, Or, Philosophy after the New Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 70.

¹¹⁷ It is important to remember here that while Jennings was writing about Magritte, the Spanish Civil War was raging on, with the forces of fascism in ascendance. For an in-depth discussion of Surrealism's response to the war, see Robin Adele Greeley, *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); and for British artists' and poets' responses see Hugh D. Ford, *A Poet's War: British Poets and the Spanish Civil War* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965) and Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

While the endless process of simulation and displacement in the image is a symptom of the destruction of experience, it is, at the same time, not entirely unconscious or unintentional on the part of the artist. As Agamben writes,

Baudelaire understood that if art wished to survive industrial civilization, the artist had to attempt to reproduce that destruction of use-value and traditional intelligibility that was at the origin of the experience of shock. In this way the artist would succeed in making the work the vehicle of the unattainable and would restore in unattainability itself a new value and a new authority. This meant, however, that art had to begin to give up the guarantees that derived from its insertion in a tradition, for whose sake artists constructed the places and the objects in which the incessant welding of past and present, old and new, was accomplished, in order to make of its own self-negation its sole possibility of survival.¹¹⁸

In a post-Baudelairean way, then, Magritte disrupts the hierarchy that subjugates art to the realm of mere appearance, using the similitude of the image to play out an internal dispute within the artwork — a dispute that functions precisely to allow it to survive *as art* (“only an *image*”) in the world of the commodity and instrumental rationality. Magritte goes beyond Baudelaire’s melancholic modernism, however, in his emphasis on how the *use* of that experience of the image extends beyond a retreat into the aesthetic realm.

The Treachery of Images, in accord with Nougé’s understanding in “Images Defended,” then, works through an ever-shifting relationship of distance and proximity with reality as we consciously and symbolically apprehend it, disjunctively connecting it with and separating it from the concrete interests and activities of life. Which is to say, Magritte’s *use* of the image raises up to the level of experience and knowledge the existential problem of the *value* of the object in a way that affirms and suspends, that *destitutes*, its functional value. This is why Nougé stresses how a banal object like a pipe, commonly used as a mere object of utility, is highlighted

¹¹⁸ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 42-43.

and neutralized (this is *not* a pipe) as an unattainable *thing* of desire. This destitution does not, of course, escape the commodification of the artwork; in fact, it openly acknowledges it.¹¹⁹

The Poetics of Suspension

Magritte's explorations of the image thus possess a timely character, particularly relevant to the developments of capitalist media power in the interwar period. As Roger Rothman argues, for example, Magritte's experience as a graphic designer for advertising firms in the 1920s made him cannily aware of how a certain instrumentalization of the aesthetic can help determine or disrupt social behaviour. Rothman explains how Magritte's paintings "were designed not as representations of a dreamworld but rather as tools to disrupt established patterns of visual experience — patterns established by the commodity culture of urban capitalism."¹²⁰ Linking Rothman's insights with those of Jennings, it is important to maintain that there is something disorienting, simultaneously ironic and intentionally banal, in the surface realism of Magritte's paintings that both links and separates them from the certitudes of ordinary banalities. For it is precisely from within the disorienting space opened by the image manifest in a Classical style (with a Surrealist sensibility) that his paintings make contact with, if sometimes only in the manner of negation, the problems of life. Thus when Jennings argues that "a painting itself is only an *image*," he is in part formulating how Magritte's art can exist, asking what its constraints are and what it can do, in the age of mass commodification. In this respect, Jennings is

¹¹⁹ Putting objects into display as things in this way, Magritte's paintings can be said to be "theatrical" in the sense used by Michael Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and *Art and Objecthood: Essay and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). If objecthood is antithetical to art because of its theatricality, as Fried argues, then the "latent life" of objects exhibited in Magritte's paintings is decidedly theatrical in the way it explicitly revokes the presentness of the object, dispossessing it, making it a thing.

¹²⁰ Roger Rothman, "René Magritte and the 'Shop-Window Quality of Things,'" *The Space Between* 3:1 (2007): 12.

particularly sensitive to Magritte's background in commercial design, as he too, like so many avant-garde artists of the period, worked in the advertising and industrial sector in the 1930s.

As I have argued, through the notion of "bringing together" Jennings describes a form of analogy, a paradoxical logic and desire that repositions the *poiesis* of the artwork in a way parallel to, rather than in outright rejection of, the strictly instrumental or aesthetic value of traditional representation. He outlines a kind of poetic activity that suspends or neutralizes activity from within, but that does not for this reason simply fall into the pretence of purely aesthetic disinterest. Instead, as I have argued, this neutralization opens a space for thinking about the idea of "interest," exploring the perceptual conditions for a profane or democratic redistribution of value, for a new *use* of elements (objects, conventions, clichés) and their ways of appearing. Jennings's collages of the mid to late 1930s illustrate this "poetics of suspension" well.¹²¹

Take, for example, Jennings's 1936 piece, *Swiss Roll*. In this minimalist collage, Jennings brings together two objects — a Lyons Swiss Roll (a popular confection for English people) conspicuously suspended against the backdrop of the Matterhorn, a popular tourist site in the Swiss mountains — so that commonplace assumptions and associations can be brought to light (see Image 2.9). Bringing together "two images or objects referring to entirely different domains, the animate and inanimate, the natural and man-made, the domestic and the public," as Michel Remy argues, Jennings is obviously not interested in creating an illusionistic space, but instead calling attention to the act of looking itself in the epoch of ubiquitous mechanically reproduced

¹²¹ See Michel Remy, "The Visual Poetics of British Surrealism," in *Surrealism: Surrealist Visuality*, ed. Silvano Levy (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 158.

images.¹²² As an object of vision, the mass-produced confection (originally photographed in an advertising close-up) is displaced as a manipulable image-object by being reset, superimposed within the natural environment (captured in a picture postcard long shot), thus allowing the handheld object of consumption to borrow (adapt) the monumental size and scale of the mountain. At the same time, Jennings's displacement brings into relief how the postcard makes the mountains into a familiar, handy image. In this way, Remy notes, "the familiar quality of two objects ... is suspended and superseded by the essentially linguistic humour underlying the precipitation suggested in the title. The two objects are made to exceed their own limits, creating an indissociable duality."¹²³



**Image 2.9. *Swiss Roll*
(Humphrey Jennings, 1936).**

Rather than *denigrating* vision, to borrow Martin Jay's term from his well-known analysis of the Surrealist critique of "ocularcentrism," in collage works like *Swiss Roll* Jennings can be said to be *trivializing* vision (the objects of vision, or vision as an object of mastery).¹

¹²² Michel Remy, "British Surrealist Writing and Painting," in *Surrealism: Crossing/Frontiers*, ed. Elza Adamowicz (Pieterlen and Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 176.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

“Trivia,” following the etymology of the term, is plural for the Latin *trivium*, the “place where three roads meet,” suggesting “an open place, a public place,” that is, something “common, commonplace.”¹²⁵ *Swiss Roll* is trivializing, then, not only in how it brings together various artificial and natural, private and public, small and large objects, but also in its mixing of the mechanical automatism of the photographic medium with the handiwork and free association of collage. It is also trivial in this sense in terms of its internationalist (English and Swiss) boundary crossing, making a “common place” in the space of the image. Furthermore, *Swiss Roll* is of *interest* precisely in Nougé’s sense of banality as I have outlined it above, for its objects are provocative precisely because of their degree of ordinariness, emphasizing and disorienting the viewing subject’s attachment to them in the reorganized (re)presentation of their very banality.

But perhaps even more importantly, the trivializing operation of *Swiss Roll* makes of the collage-image a statement and its suspension in what Remy refers to as its “essentially linguistic humour” — that is, through its visual pun on a “rolling Swiss mountain” it both sets off and disrupts its chain of signification in a way similar to Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images*. In his analysis of how Magritte’s painting suspends the utility of resemblance and representation, James Harkness suggests in a translator’s note that Foucault’s use of the complex pun “Lieu common” (common place) “signifies the common ground or shared conceptual site of language and drawing, visual and verbal representation; it also signifies the *commonplace*, that is, the ordinary. Foucault’s point is that by effacing the former, Magritte also undermines the latter, enabling him to use quotidian objects to evoke mystery.”¹²⁶ Where *The Treachery of Images* neutralizes the circulation of meaning and reference between (and by way of) word and image,

¹²⁵ See trivia (n.) *Online Etymology Dictionary*: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/trivia> (accessed May 10, 2019).

¹²⁶ James Harkness in Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, 61 (note 5). Italics in original.

Swiss Roll makes of the iconic and referential image of a Swiss Roll and the Matterhorn a strange scene of language, a metamorphic space of signification. These two objects — one natural and singular, the other artificial and mass-produced — are disjunctively but associatively brought together as terms in a visual-linguistic pun, in which their objecthood is (revealed to be) inflected (and infected) by the word.

Playing upon the Magrittean sense of mystery at the heart of both ordinary objects and ordinary forms of communication (photography, postcards, advertisements), Jennings exercises objects in their semiotic potentiality as images. It is from within the “common place” of the image, then, that Jennings invests objects with the linguistic value of the pun, but, following his own analysis of Magritte, this common place is also “only an *image*.” Thus it is in the *figural* image of a “rolling” Swiss mountain that Jennings conjugates (brings together) commonplace objects as if they were words, composing them into something like a visual poem.¹²⁷ Here Jennings escapes from the confines of literary techniques not in order to purge perception of language or signification outright, but to experiment with the poetic use of the image for drawing out both new and common associations, emergent and latent meanings from the commodified objects, banal representations and trivial realities of everyday life.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Stamos Metzidakis, in “Semiotic Intersections in Baudelaire and Magritte,” *L'Esprit Créateur*, 39.1 (Spring 1999), makes an interesting case for the poetic and linguistic capacities of Magritte’s paintings in a way similar to my argument here. He argues that “in Magritte’s paintings one finds a sort of semiotic continuum between the mechanisms and the objectives of his painting and those of the prose poem” (72). And he goes on: “the pictorial questioning that Magritte inflicts upon the objects of everyday life is to painting what the prose poem’s manipulation of language is to literature. These two ways of calling into question the foundations of two different artistic realms lead, in both cases, to a subversion of the hierarchical organization of their respective aesthetic objects” (75). Metzidakis also discusses how both Magritte and Baudelaire share in what Barbara Johnson has termed the “poeticization of the trivial” and the “trivialization of the poetic.”

¹²⁸ Jennings also produced a painting inspired by his collage, also entitled *Swiss Roll*, in 1939, taking the collision of objects from the collage into the medium of paint.

Conclusion: An Emotional Idea

As David Mellor points out, Jennings's artistic practice took a turn toward advertising and documentary in the mid-1930s, as "corporate mega-visual forms, especially documentary — representations for the newly emerging corporate agencies such as GPO, Shell, BP, Milk Marketing Board, London Transport, etc. — appeared to be increasingly occupying new central ground in pictorial practice, marginalizing the more traditional manual art media and their private functions."¹²⁹ Jennings's "documentary turn," as exemplified by his work with the social research group Mass-Observation in 1937, would unfold the more collective dimensions of his concern with the everyday lives of modern Britons and the public forms through which such lives find expression.¹³⁰ It was precisely through his turn to the documentary that Jennings could address his doubts about the critical and public value of Surrealism, particularly in the individualist-Romantic guise English critics like Herbert Read gave it, as it was deployed in the capitalist corporate culture of modern Britain.¹³¹ To conclude, then, it is useful to consider an example of Jennings's turn to documentary in the context of industrial advertising in order to discern its biopoetic resonance with Magritte.

In 1934, Jennings's friend and sometimes co-author from his student days at Cambridge, Gerald Noxon, hired him to direct a film about automobile maintenance and motor oil for a large American oil company. Tasked with the problem of visually rendering the sludgy build-up of oil

¹²⁹ David Mellor, "Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings," 110. Mellor goes on to discuss how Jennings's "documentary turn" both looked back to his Classical interests and anticipated his later poetic and populist propaganda films made for the war effort: "In effect, and paradoxically, his new role returned him to his earlier, scholarly concerns with the the classical rhetorics of public address and spectacle — the triumph and elegy — but now inflected within a populist frame" (110).

¹³⁰ I take up Jennings's role in Mass-Observation, notably his editorial work on the publication *May the Twelfth* (1937), which dealt with the diverse responses and "public feelings" of ordinary Britons to the coronation of King George VI, in Chapter One.

¹³¹ See Humphrey Jennings, "Surrealism," 167-168. For a more in-depth discussion of Jennings's review of *Surrealism* and the question of Romanticism see Chapter One.

in a car's engine, what the advertisement referred to as "Slum," Jennings, Noxon explains, developed a distinctively poetic approach that cut to the essentially visual and mythical power of the substance as it would appear on film: "'Slum,' Jennings said, 'is not a real substance. It is an idea, and what is more it is essentially an emotional idea. Therefore its nature must be demonstrated in a way which will produce a direct emotional response from the audience.'"¹ Jennings understood that the ideological-commercial value of "Slum" worked in the way that it combined abstract ideas and public sentiments with a brute material object that had to be invested with certain emotional associations. The appellation "Slum," it must be noted, suggests that the toxic build-up of the substance is akin to the squalid conditions of an actual slum. Indeed, on an ideological level, the term functions to simultaneously acknowledge that the operation of the engine necessarily generates "Slum" as an excessive byproduct while downplaying precisely how it depends upon it in its everyday functioning. The underside of the promise of the optimal machine is, here, the accursed object of "Slum," a biopolitical material of the industrialized world. An "emotional idea," "Slum" thus brings together the optimism of modernity embodied in the engine with the repressed anxiety of falling into the squalor that systematically accompanies that same progress.

As this example indicates, Jennings further realized that to produce the convincing appearance and emotional resonance necessary to achieve this marriage of a concept with a substance, he would have to embrace artifice, an exaggeration designed for the medium of the

¹³² Gerald Noxon, "How Humphrey Jennings Came to Film," *Film Quarterly* 15.2 (Winter 1961-1962): 24. To take another example, Jennings collaborated with director and animator Len Lye on the animated documentary *The Birth of the Robot* (1936) for Shell-Mex oil. This film, along with Jennings's *English Harvest* (1938) and *Making Fashion* (1938), was an early experiment with colour film: Gasparcolor in the former and the Dufaycolor system in the latter two films. For a discussion of *The Birth of the Robot* relevant to the question of representing oil in the context of technological progress and industrial modernity, what is now called petromodernity, see Thomas S. Davis, "Fossils of Tomorrow: Len Lye, J. G. Ballard, and Planetary Futures," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 64.4 (Winter 2018): 659-679.

cinematic image. Jennings thus understood how advertising takes up ordinary objects (or ideas of objects, or combinations of ideas and objects) into exceptional circumstances by virtue of their being exhibited as images imbued with visual desire, what Benjamin contemporaneously termed “exhibition-value.”¹³³ If, in Jennings’s terms, “Slum” is “not a real substance” and “only an *image*” but works effectively as an “emotional idea,” it is in large measure because it has been given a “second life,” a new aura simultaneously dematerialized and reified in the artificial light of the spectacular cinematic image exhibited for mass consumption.

As the example of Jennings’s “Slum” suggests, aesthetic strategies inspired by and developed parallel to Magritte’s Surrealist experiments with objects and perception could, of course, be redeployed not so much as weapons of disruption, disputing the surface appearance of reality in order to go deeper into the mystery of the real, but as tools of communication or propaganda, linking the vitality of the imaginary, of fantasy, together with the symbolic and public feeling. The concept of the “emotional idea” Jennings develops in a commercial context will, I argue, find civic use in the popular life of his wartime documentary films, where the problem becomes that of turning an inchoate affect (such as terror and the fear of death) into a poetic vision, an emotional idea of the everyday life of collective resistance against destruction, thus transforming something traumatic, irreducibly singular and unsharable into something social, common and symbolic.¹³⁴

¹³³ As Benjamin understood clearly, industrial capitalism not only destroys the aura, then, but creates a new fetishism — what he terms “exhibition-value.” Neither use-value nor exchange-value, exhibition-value marks the transformation of the cult-value of the object through commodification and the mass circulation of images: no longer possessing a privileged singularity or authenticity, the aura of the object is both dissolved by the diffusion of copies without originals and exaggerated by the displacement of habitual-phenomenological distance. See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 217-251.

¹³⁴ The exploration of Jennings’s “emotional idea” and related concepts in mass media and culture is something other chapters of this dissertation focus on, in particular in Jennings’s involvement with Mass-Observation (Chapter One) and his wartime documentary films (Chapter Four).

This effort to transform an alienated and atomizing experience into something collectively meaningful, this desire to “bring together” material of multitudinous variety into a contingent and dynamic whole, is also the primary impulse that informs *Pandaemonium*, Jennings’s “imaginative history” of the Industrial Revolution that he began researching and preparing contemporaneously with his article on Magritte in the late 1930s and that he continued working on until his death.¹³⁵ A sprawling literary montage that he once described as about “the ancient and bitter problems of art and Marxism, and working-class poetry and poetry and science,” *Pandaemonium* is the culmination of Jennings’s experiments in perception of the 1930s.¹³⁶ A book of “images” composed of words, of historical documents fuelled by the imagination, it combines Jennings’s interest in Surrealism and artists like Magritte with his passion for British history, everyday life and the imaginative capacities of the people under the conditions of modern capitalism. With Magritte’s mysterious biopoetics in mind, it becomes more apparent how *Pandaemonium* is an embodiment of Jennings’s life’s work: that of using poetry to transform the object of necessity (life in the industrial world) into an *image*, but *not* only an image, of desire. It is to *Pandaemonium* that I turn in the next chapter.

¹³⁵ Humphrey Jennings, “Introduction,” in *Pandaemonium*, xxxv.

¹³⁶ Humphrey Jennings, “Letter to Cicely Jennings” (10 February 1941) in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 12.

3

“The Means of Vision”: Biopolitical Modernity and the Transformation of Life in *Pandaemonium*

Now I will speak of forms changed into new bodies.

— Ovid, *Metamorphosis*

To bring together is to transform.

— Humphrey Jennings, “Beyond the Life of Man”

In the previous chapter I examined Humphrey Jennings’s critical writing on René Magritte in order to situate his artistic practice in the context of developments in Surrealism in the 1930s. Looking at Jennings through the lens of what Michel Remy calls the “poetics of suspension,” I considered how he uses the image to exhibit and suspend the “commonplace” meanings of ordinary objects.¹ His suspension of familiar associations, I argued, was a response to, and an articulation of, the diffuse anxieties and mass desires of everyday life in the interwar period. Jennings’s Surrealist experiments in perception and his editorial work with the avant-garde social research group Mass-Observation, as I demonstrated in Chapter One, were also directed toward uncovering and remobilizing the objects and spaces of everyday life for signs of collective imagination. In texts like *May the Twelfth* (1937) Jennings collected hundreds of observations from ordinary people and assembled them into a literary montage devoted to the overlapping “coincidences” of a mass ritual; and in paintings like *Tableaux Parisiens* (1938-39) he emblemized his search for sharable experience by visualizing the poet’s defamiliarizing look at the city as a counter-response to the alienating shocks of industrial modernity. In such works,

¹ See Michel Remy, “The Visual Poetics of British Surrealism,” in *Surrealism: Surrealist Visuality*, ed. Silvano Levy (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 158.

Jennings brought together his various influences from his studies in English at Cambridge in the 1920s with those of Surrealism and visual and literary European modernism. Jennings's development in the 1930s can be seen as forming a bridge between a diverse, international body of cultural, historical and philosophical criticism, all of it, intriguingly, sharing an express interest in some idea of "life."

Jennings's artistic and literary studies brought him into contact with some of the most significant representatives of the older generation of British modernists, including the philosopher T. E. Hulme, a major English proponent of the Bergsonian philosophy of life and inspiration for the "Imagist" movement in poetry, and T. S. Eliot, the famed poet and critic who wrote the fragmentary modernist poem *The Waste Land* (1922) in response to the slaughter of the First World War and the disenchantment of modern life; as well as those from a younger generation, such as the literary theorist I. A. Richards, Jennings's mentor during his years as a graduate student at Cambridge in the late 1920s, who studied the relationship between poetic language and the organization of emotion. As Philip Logan observes in his reassessment of Jennings, alongside the influence of his readings of Darwin and Freud, these three figures contributed to Jennings's synthetic modernist sensibility, combining humanistic and literary interests in aesthetics, imagination and psychology with scientific and technical concerns with questions of objectivity, knowledge and detached analysis.² Jennings's contribution to *Mass-Observation* can be understood as, in part, a synthesis of this broad set of concerns and

² Philip C. Logan, *Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film: A Re-assessment* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 11-26. Included among Jennings's more immediate contemporaries and friends is also an array of significant British poets and critics, such as William Empson, Kathleen Raine, David Gascoyne, and Roland Penrose; he also worked closely with the poet Charles Madge (and somewhat acrimoniously with Tom Harrisson) in the early days of *Mass-Observation*.

approaches, bringing them to bear on its hybrid poetic-anthropological study of the everyday life of the British people. As I have argued in this dissertation, rather than forcing Jennings to abandon his education in what Raymond Williams has referred to as the English “Culture and Society” tradition, Surrealism was significant for how it inflected his earlier influences, redirecting them toward a more aggressive and playful interest in the transformation of the relationship between aesthetic activity and everyday life.³ As Jennings’s 1938 *London Bulletin* article on Magritte attests, the Surrealists were clearly more militant in their attack on the authoritarian tendencies of modern European life. It was this spirit of confrontation and experimentation that appealed to Jennings in the 1930s, speaking as it did to his own sense of dissatisfaction with the more conservative and insular aspects of English art and culture.

Surrealism, then, represented not only the reinvigoration of the more empirically oriented English concerns with science and psychology, but the possibility of a more direct, provocative link between poetry and the world it inhabits. In the aesthetic displacements and social confrontations of the Surrealists, as Logan writes, “Jennings could recognize an attempt to deconstruct the routine of everyday existence and ‘life’ could be uncovered.”⁴ For Jennings, the artistic and social liberation of this “life” included an investment in the idea of rupture, of pulling back the curtain on those aspects (behaviours, interests, desires) of everyday experience traditionally deemed unworthy of consideration. But this also meant a dialectical interest in the idea of continuity, as breaking down false appearances and hierarchical divisions of knowledge could also lead to the uncovering of deeper connections between the different classes and spaces

³ See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958). Interestingly, at one point Williams was under consideration as a prospective editor of *Pandaemonium*. See Kevin Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings* (London: Picador, 2004), 367-368.

⁴ Logan, *Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film*, 20.

of contemporary life not otherwise observable on the managed surfaces of official culture or attended to by professional social scientists.

If the English tradition of social thought expanded the means of science and rationality in its effort to understand and to heal a damaged culture, Surrealism responded in turn by intensifying the crises of modern life, seizing them for whatever revolutionary potential they might contain. Both of these aspects are present in Jennings's practice in the 1930s, and it was if he transformed one by means of the other. That is, Jennings took the "scientific" interest in public speech, custom and culture from the English tradition only to further demonstrate that it needed the Surrealist and Freudian concern with the unconscious in order to reveal the hidden significance of everyday life. At the same time, Jennings redirected Surrealist Romanticism away from the individual unconscious toward the English concern with the public values and shared meanings of "Culture and Society" Classicism, leading to a vision of the popular life of the unconscious and the imagination.⁵ This also extends to notions like the collective unconscious as well as the mass-wish and the collective dream — all of which reflected Jennings's desire to make connections between left-wing politics, everyday life and popular culture.

Jennings's *Pandaemonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, the subject of this chapter, also reflects his combination of influences, from British social thought and Romanticism to working class history and the Surrealist tradition, including Baudelaire's and Rimbaud's experimentation with the prose poem. A sprawling montage of "images" made of words, of fragments of texts from diverse writers and traditions collected and juxtaposed into contingent constellations of subject and theme, Jennings

⁵ See Jeremy MacClancy, "Brief Encounter: The Meeting, in Mass-Observation, of British Surrealism and Popular Anthropology," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1:3 (September 1995): 497.

describes *Pandaemonium* in his Introduction as an “imaginative history” of the Industrial Revolution as told by those who lived through it.⁶ Jennings began researching *Pandaemonium* roughly contemporaneously with his work on *May the Twelfth* for Mass-Observation, during the social crises of the late 1930s, so it is unsurprising that a number of the same methods and concerns inform both projects, including textual montage and collage, first-person reports on public rituals and events, history as told from the point of the view of individual observers, and the workings of fantasy and desire in collective life. In this light, Jennings’s use of the image in *Pandaemonium*’s montage structure can be thought of as the historical-archaeological extension of Mass-Observation’s “anthropology of ourselves.”⁷ Where *May the Twelfth* presents a prismatic assemblage of hundreds of “reports” providing myriad angles on the coronation of King George VI, *Pandaemonium* chronicles the emotional and imaginative texture of the experience of everyday life undergoing transformations implicated in the technological developments and social conflicts of the long Industrial Revolution. Given that he continued researching it until his sudden death in 1950 (and thus did not live to see its eventual publication in 1985), *Pandaemonium* also informed (and was itself informed by) Jennings’s ongoing work in radio and documentary film throughout the 1940s. From this perspective it is apparent that a number of his wartime films, as well as his postwar *Family Portrait* (1950), were also in dialogue with its themes of industry and imagination, poetry and national life.

⁶ Humphrey Jennings, “Introduction,” in *Pandaemonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, ed. Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (New York: The Free Press, 1985), xxxv.

⁷ As Rod Mengham puts it: “What Jennings was doing, effectively, with this project was awarding Mass-Observation, retrospectively, to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — treating the authors whose words he borrowed as if they were members of one of the survey teams.” Mengham, “Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge,” *New Formations* 44 (Autumn 2001): 32.

In their wide-ranging contextualization of *Pandaemonium* within Jennings's larger corpus, Kevin Robins and Frank Webster argue that his key contribution to twentieth century progressive thought is his recasting of "the 'Culture and Society' argument within the discourse of Surrealism and Modernism. It is this achievement that brings scientific issues within the sphere of critical and innovative cultural discourse."⁸ Through his Surrealist re-visioning of British history, Jennings developed a critically *cultural* understanding of the Industrial Revolution, one devoted to registering and communicating the powers and effects of industrial modernity in *imaginative* and *materialist* terms. It was through this cultural lens that Jennings struggled to "reinstatate science and technology within the domain of public discourse."⁹ While informed by a broadly Marxist understanding of history, Jennings's distinctive cultural politics of everyday life reside in his emphasis on the social and psychological relations of industrial transformation, the symbolic and emotional meanings of "the machine" and the people's ability to articulate them.¹⁰ "For Jennings," Robins and Webster write, "the fundamental political issue was the ways in which science and technology, through the Industrial Revolution, had not only shaped the natural and industrial landscape, but also informed the ideas, language, perceptions, emotions and imagination of the inner landscape."¹¹

⁸ Kevin Robins and Frank Webster, "Science, Poetry and Utopia: Humphrey Jennings' *Pandaemonium*," *Science as Culture* 1:S1 (1987): 74-75. Paul Dave also notes this, as well links between Jennings's "non-reductive Marxism" and the Communist Party Historians Group, in "Tragedy, Ethics and History in *Contemporary British Social Realist Film*," in *British Social Realism in the Arts since 1940*, ed. David Tucker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17-56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁰ As John Hartley puts it, "Jennings's history is Marxist in two fundamental ways. It is based on an acceptance of the determining force of the means of production, the form of ownership and the division of labour; and it is committed to a political socialism corresponding to the interests of the industrial productive classes." Hartley, *Tele-ology: Studies in Television* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 148. Hartley goes on to argue that Jennings's history is also post-Marxist in that it does not treat the imagination and the politics of culture as merely superstructural reflections of the base; the imagination, rather, is itself basic, a constitutive element of human material reality.

¹¹ Robins and Webster, "Science, Poetry and Utopia," 74. They continue, "Behind the immediate political crises of the 1930s, [Jennings] suggests, is the more fundamental crisis of Rationalism and Industrialism, the dissociation of science and poetry" (74).

In a recent article that builds on Robins's and Webster's earlier insights, Ben Jones and Rebecca Searle argue for the thematic consistency of Jennings's oeuvre, what they identify as a "polymorphous attempt...to capture the profound impact on everyday life of a range of overlapping economic, social and cultural transformations since the mid seventeenth century." Noting that although Jennings himself never used the term modernity, his work is best described as "the attempt to document the British experience of modernity."¹² In this respect, *Pandaemonium* is Jennings's most ambitious political work, taking into its expansive imaginative history "the birth of industrial capitalism, significant technological developments and the emergence of new modes of perception which had fundamentally altered the way that people understood the world and their place within it."¹³ It is this last link between the new modes of perception and the transformed conditions in which the people found themselves that is of particular significance to understanding the social and cultural politics of Jennings's vision of the Industrial Revolution. In this way, *Pandaemonium* is the (unfinished) outcome of Jennings's effort to reconfigure the relationship between Surrealism and English social thought that began in the late 1930s and continued until his death. In his ongoing poetic and historical study, Jennings redirects the Surrealist passion for "deconstructing" what Philip Logan calls "the routine of everyday existence" toward documenting the use of the imagination, in both poetic texts as well

¹² Ben Jones and Rebecca Searle, "Humphrey Jennings, the Left and the Experience of Modernity in mid twentieth-century Britain," *History Workshop Journal* 75 (2013): 191. Jones and Searle go on: "Indeed we argue that all Jennings's films, from about 1937 onwards, need to be understood as but one part of a wider, polymorphous attempt to comprehend modern Britain" (191).

¹³ Ibid. Jonathan Sawday also sees *Pandaemonium* as a resource for alternative ways of accessing historical experience. As he writes in *Engines of the Imagination: Renaissance Culture and the Rise of the Machine* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007): "For all its occasionally gnomic quality, *Pandaemonium* provides an immense stimulus for any cultural historian who seeks to fathom a subject as nebulous as the imaginative texture of the machine and mechanical labour in the past" (xvi).

as ostensibly non-poetic prose like journal articles and scientific manuals, in order to present people's experiences of the changing conditions of modern life.¹⁴

In this chapter, I discuss how Jennings understands *Pandaemonium* as both a documentation *of* as well as an imaginative response *to* a crisis in poetry that came with the epistemic and material transformations of the industrial age. As Jennings's explains it, and as I discuss below, alongside the enclosure and expropriation of land and labour by the rising power of capitalism, the Industrial Revolution also brought about poetry's separation from the concerns of everyday life. In *Pandaemonium* Jennings responds to poetry's narrowing vision as a separate category of social-aesthetic activity by expanding its sense to include a wide variety of modes and activities of seeing and writing across hierarchies of class, region and profession. Importantly, when texts from various sources, genres, and writing practices and institutions are considered through the framework of poetry, they are reconfigured as not merely *effects of* but *creative responses to* the Industrial Revolution — what I will discuss as forms of *adaptation* that link questions of knowledge and epistemology to the human faculties of emotion and imagination in relation to the use of language. Conceptualized as both documents and poems, Jennings's "images" give contemporary readers a feeling for the exertions of subjectivity within the social world, for how reality is structured by uses of language that are fuelled by the imagination, and, at the same time, a sense of the social and historical realities that impress themselves upon and through subjective expression within images. Such concerns compel

¹⁴ In his note for image 15 "Sound (1675-76)," from *The Diary of Robert Hooke*, Jennings discusses the diary, its links to the novel, poetry and scientific observation, and argues that "The idea of the diary as a form of expression is present in the design of this book, since it consists of 'images' — pages from a mass-diary." See *Pandaemonium*, 17.

Jennings to subjunctively frame his documentary collage around the question of “*what may have been* the place of imagination in the making of the modern world.”¹⁵

In recognizing the capacity of a diverse range of persons and sites distributed across everyday life to generate poetic images, Jennings develops a radical way of accessing history and social experience, what I referred to above as “imaginative history.” Through the lens of what he calls “the means of vision,” which I discuss below, Jennings demonstrates how the Industrial Revolution also transformed how we can construct (read, narrate, interpret) history. *Pandaemonium* can thus be productively considered alongside a body of philosophy, history and poetry that extends beyond a specific interest in the history of the Industrial Revolution. Some of the figures that came after Jennings whose work more obviously intersects with *Pandaemonium* in terms of its historical and cultural objects are British social historians and thinkers of various leftwing persuasions, including Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Richard Hoggart. But in his emphasis on the imagination and the transformation of life as found in fragments of texts gleaned from the dustbin of history, a host of other social thinkers present themselves. It is, for example, almost an inevitability in discussions of *Pandaemonium* to compare it with Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*), his own unfinished archaeology of modern experience.¹⁶ Beyond their shared historical imaginary (a dialectic of

¹⁵ Jennings, “Introduction,” *Pandaemonium*, xxxiv. Italics in original.

¹⁶ See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). For a comparison between Jennings’s and Benjamin’s historical projects see Michael Saler, “Whigs and Surrealists: The ‘Subtle Links’ of Humphrey Jennings’s *Pandaemonium*,” in *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia and Identity in Modern British Culture*, ed. George K. Behlmer and Fred. W. Leventhal (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 123-142. One could also productively read *Pandaemonium* alongside other unorthodox approaches to historical struggle, including documentation of the dream life of people during a historical or traumatic event, for instance, or research into the poetic and imaginative writing of industrial workers. For an example of the former see Charlotte Beradt, *The Third Reich of Dreams: The Nightmares of a Nation, 1933–1939*, trans. Adriane Gottwald (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968); and of the latter see Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Worker’s Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

destruction and development), important to both are methodological questions about how to present the contradictions between individual and collective experience in industrial modernity; and their solutions are remarkably similar: the montage/collage of citations and points of view juxtaposed together with little (but still evocative) commentary.

While I too make comparisons with Benjamin below, I am also drawn to the work of Michel Foucault in my analysis of *Pandaemonium*. Through his discussion of biopolitical modernity and the transformations of techniques of power, Foucault provides a useful framework for considering Jennings's presentation of images of "life" in its encounter with "the machine." Foucault's diagnosis of how biological functions entered into political discourse and the administration of power helps me to unravel some of the biopolitical stakes of Jennings's understanding of the expropriation of poetry's links to everyday life. In this respect, I read Jennings's images for their biopoetic resonances, including his significant assertion that "the poet's vision does exist, that the imagination is a part of life, [and] that the exercise of the imagination is an indispensable function of man like work, eating, sleeping, loving."¹⁷ In this way, *Pandaemonium* is a "book of life" — one that repeatedly returns to themes and questions — to *images* — of what can be understood as biopower from multiple points of view, encompassing an optics of both the people and the population.

My argument begins with a discussion of a group of texts and exhibitions from the 1930s that prepared the ground for the larger project that was *Pandaemonium*. Looking at these objects from the retrospective vantage point of *Pandaemonium* helps me to bring out what I argue is a fundamental theme that extends from at least the early 1930s to Jennings's later study: *the*

¹⁷ Jennings, "Introduction," *Pandaemonium*, xxxiv.

transformation of life. This theme is expressed through a number of different terms throughout Jennings's career, from mutation to adaptation to conflict, but in each iteration, I argue, Jennings asserts the struggles and, ultimately, the emancipatory powers of transformation that must be recognized and taken up in the human imagination. Indeed, Jennings sees transformation as constitutive of the human being in its imaginative capacities for self-organization and transmitting experience, in both poetic and historical terms. Following this, I take up how, in his Introduction to *Pandaemonium*, Jennings frames the history of the Industrial Revolution as a series of conflicts that came with the transformation of a premodern society organized around the libidinal-symbolic centre of the king and agriculture to capitalism and the fraught social relations brought with democratic struggles over the legitimate distribution of power. Here I delve into the concept of the means of vision relative to the means of production and relate these to the industrial expropriation of poetry. This is also where Foucault's biopolitical terms come into my analysis of Jennings's dialectical presentation of images of the people and the population. I conclude, then, by considering how Jennings takes the theme of transformation into the political realm by linking it to what I argue is the *emergent* historical subject, the mythical protagonist even, of *Pandaemonium*: the people as *the power to come*.¹⁸

While Jennings names Pandaemonium (Milton's infernal city from *Paradise Lost* [1667]) as the central emblematic structure of his study, and "the machine" and its "contemporary observers" are announced as the main subjects (and often antagonists) circulating around this structure, it is precisely through the decentred (open-ended) reading strategy Jennings's poetic montage encourages that this transforming protagonist, this subject of transformation, comes

¹⁸ See image 347 "The Power to Come," in *Pandaemonium*, 332-333. I discuss this image below.

historically and imaginatively into view. While this appeal to the people may strike contemporary readers as historically naive, utopian fantasy or so vague as to be of little meaningful political purchase, I maintain that it is nevertheless a crucial aspect of the biopolitical imaginary informing Jennings's vision of history in *Pandaemonium* — one that still speaks to us in the present about the emancipatory potential of imagining ourselves differently.

A World of Heroic Mutations

Examples of Jennings's interest in themes of anthropological transformation and the transmission of experience across history can be seen in a number of his writings from the 1930s. In a 1931 article he co-authored with Gerald Noxon entitled "Rock-Painting and *La Jeune Peinture*," for example, Jennings discusses contemporary paintings made by post-Cubist and Surrealist artists alongside Paleolithic rock paintings from South Africa shown at the Frobenius Exhibit at the Salle Pleyel in the late 1920s (see Image 3.1). Published in *Experiment*, the student journal he co-edited in his student days at Cambridge, the article is informed by Jennings's encounter with Surrealism and its interest in myth, which draws from the various domains of art, ethnography, anthropology, and psychology in the late 1920s. In periodicals like *Documents* (1929-1931), *Minotaure* (1933–39) and *Acéphale* (1936-1939), Surrealists and fellow travellers as different as André Breton and Georges Bataille became increasingly interested in the role of myth and the sacred in community formation and cohesion.¹⁹ This appeal to myth, however, was different from the traditionally religious view of the sacred. As Michael Löwy notes, "The importance of

¹⁹ For an overview of myth and Surrealism see Whitney Chadwick, *Myth in Surrealist Painting, 1929–39* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980); Michael Richardson, "Afterword," in *The Myth of the World: The Dedalus Book of Surrealism 2* (Cambridgeshire: Dedalus, 1994), 265-292; and for a useful historical discussion of the politics of myth and Surrealism see Daniel Zamani, "Melusina Triumphant: Matriarchy and the Politics of Anti-Fascist Mythmaking in André Breton's *Arcane 17* (1945)," in *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous*, ed. Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou and Daniel Zamani (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 95-117.

myth to the Surrealists lies ... in the fact that it constitutes (along with the esoteric traditions) a profane alternative to the irrational grip of religion.”²⁰ The notion of myth that informed the Surrealists is of evidence in Jennings’s diverse body of interests, including prehistoric and pagan animism as well as modern scientific materialism. It is also present in his concern in the “Rock-Painting” essay with the relationship between the attempt to render life — a “directional feeling,” as Jennings puts it — and formal questions of technique in image-making from its prehistoric to modern variations.²¹ These concerns are fixed on the intersection of what Jennings understands as the mythic and the heroic in the rendering of human emotion. Myth, as Jennings uses it here, thus denotes an anthropological-aesthetic relationship between a set of themes (particularly as developed in the human figure and its environment) and techniques (notably distortion and superimposition) which combine to produce a range of emotional values that resonate with, and are co-constitutive of, the collective experience of a people.

In the “Rock-Painting” essay, Jennings’s analysis crosses thousands of years and great distances to compare the “heroic proportions” of the human figures depicted in the South African cave paintings with those of the “heroic mutations” he observes in the early modern paintings of Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens. Like Rubens, Jennings suggests, the cave artists possessed a grasp of the “heroic sense” of painting stronger than that of many twentieth-century artists, prompting him to expound upon what such a “world of heroic mutations” means for his moment:

²⁰ Michael Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 15. Löwy’s invocation of the profane is, of course, drawn from Walter Benjamin’s notion of “profane illumination” in his essay “Surrealism,” in *Reflections; Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 177-192 Benjamin writes: The true, creative overcoming of religious illumination ... resides in *profane illumination*, a materialist, anthropological inspiration” (179). Italics in original. For an in-depth discussion of Benjamin and his relation to French Surrealism see Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²¹ Humphrey Jennings, “Rock-Painting and *La Jeune Peinture*” *Experiment* 7 (Spring 1931): 37; reprinted in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 191.

By heroic we mean the co-ordination of a greater number of emotions than painting has for some time managed to use; a grasp of problems as complete as that which Rubens had of the muddle of sixteenth-century painting, and as in Rubens, the use of technique as technique, to create mutations in the subject, and the subject thereby to be in its proper place, as the basis of a metamorphosis by paint and not by literary substitution: producing a world of heroic mutations parallel to the heroic proportions of African painting.²²

While Jennings praises the innovations of artists like André Masson and other Surrealists, he also argues that at the present time certain limitations prevent them from moving past what he sees as the primary, but reactive, emotion of fear. By contrast, the cave paintings communicate vitality in their depiction of both the dangers and the excitements of the natural environment in terms of the human being's experience of it.



Image 3.1. “Large eland and human figures.” Rock Painting. Khotsa Cave, Basutoland, South Africa. From Leo Frobenius and Douglas C. Fox, *Prehistoric rock pictures in Europe and Africa* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1937); originally published by Leo Frobenius and Abbé Breuil as *L’Afrique* in *Cahiers d’art* 8-9 (1930).

²² Ibid., 40 (194).

Jennings's analysis of the "spiritual significance" of the rhythms and distortions of the human body in the cave paintings recalls Georges Bataille's contemporaneous review of the Frobenius exhibition, in which he observes that "the human body appears as a Cartesian diver, like a toy of the wind and the grass, like a cluster of dust charged with an activity that decomposes it."²³ Although their emphases are different, for Bataille observes entropic processes of formlessness and destruction while Jennings describes the dynamism suggested by the distortion of the human figure, both thinkers find in the cave paintings a certain vital process operative in the deformation of the human form, a power of overlapping movement that is rare in modern representation. A sense of velocity and "directional feeling" is achieved alongside and through the perceptual distortions of multiple figures and superimpositions, suggesting the transformative movement of life within a sense of place.

In his description of what he sees as the "revolt against architectural composition" that Masson shares with the prehistoric artists, Jennings approvingly observes of the cave paintings that "a single work may have been painted at different times by different men with no apparent consciousness of the consequences of superimposition. Figures overlay, definite planes are abandoned, rhythms intersect and above all, scale is widely varied. Space in these paintings is not bounded; they have no planes, but this does in no way exclude depth."²⁴ The process of experiential transmission and anonymous-collective creation manifest in the cave paintings presents, for Jennings, a stark contrast with the self-conscious mannerism of modern European

²³ Georges Bataille, "The Frobenius Exhibit at the Salle Pleyel," in *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 46. See also Bataille's review of Georges-Henri Luquet's *L'Art primitif* in "L'Art primitif," *Documents* 7 (1930): 389-97; reprinted in *The Cradle of Humanity*, 35-44.

²⁴ Jennings, "Rock-Painting," 37 (192).

artistic movements like Cubism. He argues that through the “enslavement of technique” manifest in the flatness and formalism of pattern-making, Cubism “killed the naturalist myths (landscape, still-life, portrait) upon which painting has for the most part relied since Poussin.”²⁵ In contrast, the strata of superimposed layers in the rock paintings provides Jennings with a way into observing collective experience and the means of recording and preserving it through time and movement registered in space. The point of view adopted by the modern observer attentive to such sheets of collective experience, as Rod Mengham suggests, is “a constantly shifting temporal point, which means that the observation of the spatial arrangements has to be constantly revised.”²⁶ This process of constant revision is sustained by an ongoing dialectical movement between the diachronic accumulation of layers in historical time and the synchronic work of collage and montage in the present-time perception of the observer.

The dynamic relationship of distortion and figuration, of superimposed layers and mobile vision, that moved Jennings in the rock paintings would go on to inform his use of the “image” in *Pandaemonium*. These images, Jennings explains in *Pandaemonium*, “contain in little a whole world — they are the knots in a great net of tangled time and space ... And just as the usual history does not consist of isolated events, occurrences — so this 'imaginative history' does not consist of isolated images, but each is in a particular place in an unrolling film.”²⁷ As in a film, then, Jennings’s method of co-registering and assembling images is also directed at introducing a feeling of movement (and a movement of feeling) to history. Combining a sensory-perceptual

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39 (193).

²⁶ Mengham, “Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge,” 29.

²⁷ Jennings, *Pandaemonium*, xxxv. Jennings goes on to contrast the poetic approach to history with that of the analytical historian: “The analytical historian’s business is to disentangle shred by shred like plucking the strand out of a rope. The result is the length of the rope but only one strand’s thickness, and although the strand may still be twisted from its position among the other strands it is presented nevertheless alone. The poet might be compared to a man who cuts a short section of the whole rope. The only thing is he must cut it where it will not fall to pieces” (xxxvi).

strategy (a proto-cinematic montage technique) with an anthropological-aesthetic notion of myth (or theme) and emotion, the transformation of the subject Jennings discerns in the multiple temporal layers of the rock paintings is further explored in the historical strata of experiential images in *Pandaemonium*, in which humanity's fall into the profanity of capitalist modernity is at once the source of its exploitation and its potential redemption. Such is the ongoing "world of heroic mutations."²⁸ As Philip Logan points out, quoting Jennings's own definition of the image, "It is this heroic sense that Jennings wanted to capture in his own artistic practice where, as he puts it, 'matter (sense impressions) is transformed and reborn by Imagination: *turned into an image*.'"²⁹ The heroism of mutation (as experienced in the image) is thus both an aesthetic-historical *means* of sharing collective experience and the theme, the *subject*, of that experience.

Collaboration with the Dead

Jennings deploys the language of myth and mutation in some of his later Surrealist writings, but his emphasis becomes increasingly on the the role of the machine and the mechanism in the transformation of human life. By the late 1930s, one of Jennings's main obsessions was the question of how the human being, as an individual and as a species, imagines a world increasingly organized by the movements of the machine. This theme is explored in a variety of texts and projects, taking a more socially engaged form as the decade came to a close. Before turning to the more critical and socially-oriented texts like "The Iron Horse" from 1938, it is useful to contextualize how they developed by looking at Jennings's experiments in prose poems, what he also calls "reports" and "popular narratives," for their juxtaposition of textual objets

²⁸ Jennings, "Rock-Painting," 40 (194).

²⁹ Logan, *Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film*, 24; Jennings, *Pandaemonium*, xxxviii. Italics in original.

trouvé and the innovative use of citation. These reports, as Tyrus Miller observes, “detoured the activity of documentary finding and reporting through the literary practice of the prose poem.”³⁰

Jennings wrote and collaged together an expanding corpus of such detoured documents from the mid-1930s on, including his “Report on the Industrial Revolution,” published in the Spring 1937 issue of *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*.

In this report, Jennings describes an artificial object, what appears to be a locomotive in protean form, in quasi-naturalistic, organic terms combined with supernatural and mythological imagery:

The material transformer of the world had just been born. It was trotted out in its skeleton, to the music of a mineral train from the black country, with heart and lungs and muscles exposed to view in complex hideosity. It once ranged wild in the marshy forests of the Netherlands, where the electrical phenomenon and the pale blue eyes connected it with apparitions, demons, wizards and divinities.³¹

In drawing attention to the artificial body of the train and its organs, one of the surreal effects of this report is the anatomical defamiliarization of ordinary objects. By extension, the report brings into consciousness the way of life such an object represents, a way of life that has since been taken for granted and, for this reason, disappears into the managed continuum of history. The report also humorously reimagines the naive sense of fear and wonder this newborn machine might have provoked in a “contemporary observer,” only to further twist itself into an ironic commentary on its own formal language and clichéd images, deconstructing the pretence of accessing the past through well-worn generic tropes. In this Surrealist activity of transmission,

³⁰ Tyrus Miller, “Documentary/Modernism: Convergence and Complementarity in the 1930s,” *Modernism/modernity* 9:2 (April 2002): 233.

³¹ Humphrey Jennings, “Report on the Industrial Revolution,” *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* 9 (Spring 1937): 41-42; reprinted in *On the Thirteenth Stroke of Midnight: Surrealist Poetry in Britain*, ed. Michel Remy (Manchester: Carcanet, 2013), 113.

Jennings does not exhaust the past through its full and transparent communication or realization; which is to say, Jennings has not presumed to *rid himself of history*: in the ambivalence of the report, the past remains, it insists, and it lives in the internal movements of the text, the slippages of meaning that both energize and detour the object of the report and the act of reporting.

Michel Remy, in his analysis of a collection of prose poems including “Report on the Industrial Revolution,” describes how Jennings “sees the ephemerality of human activities at the core of the permanence of natural forces, and vice versa.”³² Through a concern with both historical customs and their enigmas, with the transmission and rupture of meaning, Jennings delves into the poetic power of myth as something between natural and historical processes. Remy fleshes out the “natural historical” impulse that gives Jennings’s reports their strange mythical power:

His poems are moments in time, experiences of the instant, monuments in which the past records its own meanderings. Mostly entitled ‘reports,’ Jennings’ texts both pretend to adopt the objectivity of an observer and start a slow movement of descent towards hidden layers of meaning, as if they were taking advantage of the fractures and interstices of reality. The reader slips from one category to another, reaching down to a kind of collective memory, beyond history into myth, revealing the creative energy of humankind, confronted not so much with the invisible as with the not-yet-visible.³³

Suspended between a vision of a past event or object and the present of its telling or description, each report is in this way obscure in what it reports of the phenomenological encounter between the observer and the event/object, while the report itself, as a discursive event or record of a speech act, is marked, stylistically and symptomatically, by this hermetic obscurity as an object, a material artifact with a strange life of its own. This opaque, materialized object of pseudo-

³² Michel Remy, “‘For the Snark was a Boojum, You See.’ An Assessment of Surrealist Poetry in Britain,” in *On the Thirteenth Stroke of Midnight*, 12.

³³ *Ibid.*

description also theatrically displays the act of “reporting” as well as the persona that accompanies it. “The new experimental formats of ‘Reports’ and ‘Popular Narratives,’” David Mellor explains, “depended on objectified word-collages, very often modified Surrealist narratives enunciated through the persona of a mock 18th-century mandarin or encyclopaedist, an inventor of History as well as its recorder.”³⁴ In a self-consciously Surrealist way, then, Jennings’s reports bring to light how the transmission of history through shared symbols is a poetic problem, one connected to the tension between individual and collective experience undergoing mutation in the long transformations of the Industrial Revolution.

Discussing Jennings’s 1937 BBC radio broadcast “Plagiarism in Poetry,” which draws from his doctoral work on eighteenth century poet Thomas Gray, Kevin Jackson takes up the question of historical transmission and access as it takes the form of quotation — what can be variously understood as plagiarism, allusion, collaboration, sampling, etc. — in Jennings’s conception of the poetic report. Here, Jackson argues, Jennings imagines the poet’s engagement with works from the past as “a collaboration with the dead” and “suggests (albeit obliquely) that poetic composition is less a matter of summoning up fresh words and notions than it is of arranging pre-existing phrases and notions into a more or less novel form.”³⁵ Through the medium of material objects (written documents, images), poets not only delve into the historical subjectivities of other writers, but interact with found and readymade phrases as the means for new poetic works, themselves available for future reuse and collaboration in their afterlife. Jennings, then, as Hannah Arendt once observed of Walter Benjamin, “discovered that the

³⁴ David Mellor, “Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings,” in *Humphrey Jennings: Filmmaker, Painter, Poet, 2nd Edition*, ed. Marie-Louise Jennings (London: British Film Institute, 2014), 111.

³⁵ Kevin Jackson, “Humphrey Jennings: The Poet and the Public,” *Contemporary Record* 7:3 (1993): 674.

transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its citability and that in place of its authority there had arisen a strange power to settle down, piecemeal, in the present and to deprive it of ‘peace of mind,’ the mindless peace of complacency.”³⁶

Jennings develops his version of “citability” in terms reminiscent of Benjamin in his 1938 collage-report “The Boyhood of Byron.” The opening section is abridged, without attribution, from Samuel Bailey’s *Essays on the Formation and Publication of Opinions* (1821):

The labours of the antiquary, the verbal critic, the collator of mouldering manuscripts, may be preparing the way for the achievements of some splendid genius, who may combine their minute details into a magnificent system, or evolve from a multitude of particulars some general principle destined to illuminate the career of future ages.³⁷

It is precisely the fragmented and detoured citability of the “multitude of particulars” that at once causes the reader to struggle with the emplacement of quotations into an authoritative historical narrative or coherent memory formation and that highlights, however obliquely, the very historicity of the citations. The quotations, then, are recognized both as artifacts from history and as objects subject to the play of appropriation in their citability, their use, in the present. Using texts in their citability, Jennings brings the interpretability of the past into the open while showing the contingency constitutive of the present’s deployment of that past in “preparing the way” for the future.

Adaptation and the Machine

Jennings’s strategy of juxtaposing disparate experiences through assemblages of citations is developed in “The Iron Horse,” an essay that helped prepare the stage for “The Impact of

³⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Introduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 38.

³⁷ Humphrey Jennings, “The Boyhood of Byron,” *London Bulletin* 12 (1939): 7. It is surely a happy coincidence (following Jennings’s use of the term), that Jennings’s articulation of the virtues of plagiarism is itself an act of plagiarism.

Machines,” an exhibition Jennings co-curated with Arthur Elton and E.L.T. Mesens at the London Gallery in July 1938 (see Image 3.2).³⁸ It is in “The Iron Horse” and the text accompanying “The Impact of Machines,” “DO NOT LEAN OUT THE WINDOW!” published in the *London Bulletin*, that Jennings takes his formal and poetic interest in citability and mutation in a more social and anthropological direction.³⁹ In hindsight, these texts should be understood as early instances of Jennings’s interest in the historical and imaginative transformation of the relationship between machines, humans and animals later developed in *Pandaemonium*. This historical and anthropological process, as Jennings shows in “The Iron Horse,” also realized itself in the transformation of ways of seeing and experiencing the world relative to the ways writing about those experiences themselves transformed. These changes occurred in a variety of artistic and scientific discourses and discursive practices informed by, and themselves contributing to, an emerging materialism and realism.⁴⁰ What is important to stress here, though, is that the materialist vision of life that was coming into being with modern science also reflected the breakdown of an older symbolic order (religious systems of meaning) and the more immediate — but also differently mediated — encounter between the new subject

³⁸ See Humphrey Jennings, “The Iron Horse,” *London Bulletin* 3 (1938), 22, 27-28; reprinted in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 226-229. Jennings includes the following in a note included with the text: “In July the London Gallery will present an exhibition of 19th Century Drawings and Engravings of Machines; also a complementary show of Cubist, Dadaist and Surrealist paintings” (22 [226]).

³⁹ Jennings brought the material collected for “The Impact of Machines” with him to a series of talks on poetry and the Industrial Revolution given to miners in Wales, where he was shooting his film *The Silent Village* (1943). It was Jennings’s return to the material for this talk during the war that renewed his commitment to the great historical project that eventually became *Pandaemonium*. One should also note indications of Jennings’s interest in the “impact of machines on everyday life” in his early documentary shorts, *Post-Haste*, *Locomotives* and *The Story of the Wheel*, all released in 1934. For an illuminating analysis of *Post Haste* and *Locomotives* for their links to *Pandaemonium* see Keith Beattie, *Humphrey Jennings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 14-19.

⁴⁰ As Jennings writes in a note to image 34 of *Pandaemonium*, “Effects of Lightning in Northamptonshire (1725),” the realist attitude was instrumental to the scientific study of a host of new objects: “Electricity was studied among other ways by the study of thunder and lightning. Before these phenomena could be studied a radically new attitude had to be developed towards them, and to all natural phenomena. One of strict realism ... To do this required a new attitude. This new attitude is so clear and so marked as to constitute, I believe, a fundamental alteration of ‘vision’ parallel to that being developed by Defoe. Realism ... Here then is a case of an alteration in vision already being achieved not merely as the result of changing means of production, but also making them possible” (37-38).

of scientific materialism and the real of the world this subject found itself both observing and living within.⁴¹ For while Jennings is interested in how new ways of seeing and writing about life were developing in the modern world, he also shows how certain aspects of the older, magical-animist order themselves clung to life through the changes, taking on new shapes and forms of expression in the process.

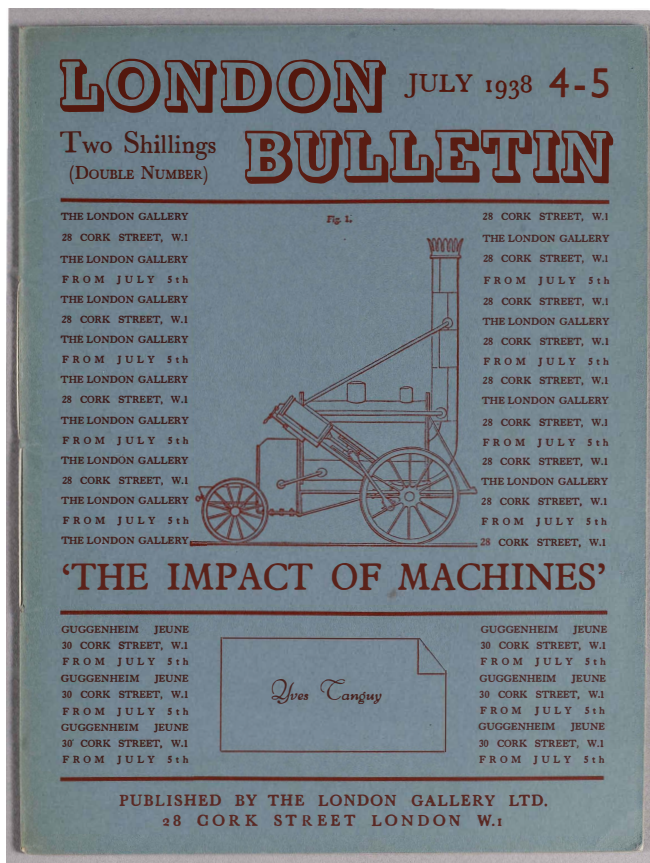


Image 3.2. *London Bulletin* 4-5 (July 1938); the cover illustration of an “iron horse” is for “The Impact of Machines” exhibition.

There is a duality in industrial modernity, Jennings suggests, one that operates by bringing the world further under the rational control of human beings while at the same time dehumanizing people and altering and destroying that world in the process; materialism brings

⁴¹ For discussion of the intersection of poetic and scientific ways of seeing, see Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, “Poetic Description and Mass Observations” *New Verse* 24 (February-March 1937). Madge writes: “In taking up the role of observer, each person becomes like Courbet at his easel, Cuvier with his cadaver, and Humboldt with his continent. The process of observing raises him from subjectivity to objectivity. What has become unnoticed through familiarity is raised into consciousness again” (3).

an increasing number of objects under the purview of reason and consciousness while at the same time pushes other objects and energies into the recesses of the unconscious. Human beings' relationships to language, the choices available to them and the innovations they make inside of speech and writing, then, communicate more than information and conscious intentions; they also express (unconscious) libidinal and emotional investments. Humanity develops its capacities of understanding, inhabiting and possessing the world inside of language, then, but language is also the site of signs that symptomatically express the pressures of the world. Thus historical and biological experience reside in language, and in this way transformations in language reflect and engender changes in both the sensible life of the individual and the collective life of a people. In the transformations of language one can track the destiny of the species.⁴²

In "The Iron Horse" Jennings juxtaposes poetic, artistic and scientific texts to demonstrate the kinds of materialist-realist observation playing out in aesthetic and scientific practices, as well as other modern modes of democratized and secularized literary production. Jennings shows, on the one hand, how scientists and artists deconsecrated and objectified (their experience of) the world of animals and nature through scientific language and modes of observation. On the other hand, he argues that latent inside the language (and images) used by scientists and artists are displacements of knowledge and affect that can be located in the use of metaphors that express and satisfy deep spiritual and psychological needs and cultural investments. Take, for example, Jennings's opening claim in "The Iron Horse":

⁴² Here I am considering the use of language to be a key factor, alongside productive activity, in what Marx calls "species-being." In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* Marx explains what he means by the term: "It is life-begetting life. In the mode of life activity lies the entire character of a species, its species-character, and free conscious activity is the species-character of man. Life itself appears only as a means of life." Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 294.

Machines are animals created by man. In recognition of this many machines have been given animals' names by him ... The idea of a machine which would go by *itself* (automatically — without the help of an animal) has long obsessed man because then it could be considered to have a life of its own — to have become a complete pseudo-animal ... And as man is related to the real animals so every machine has a latent human content.⁴³

We can see this analysis of the machine-animal-human trinity as an anticipation of Jennings's argument in *Pandaemonium* about transformations in the means of seeing and interpreting life-forms, from eighteenth century descriptions of natural phenomena in terms of machines to the use of natural objects to describe machines and industrial phenomena in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

Alongside his analysis of how poets, both modern and premodern, have often identified humans with animals, as well as his consideration of the industrial “pseudo-animals” that follow in the wake of these poetic identifications, Jennings discusses what he terms “pseudo-machines,” modern creations in which artists redeploy machinic technologies and imagery for the purposes of realizing desires that reflect the dissolution of traditional taboos.⁴⁵ “The point of creating pseudo-machines,” Jennings argues in reference to Marcel Duchamp's “bachelor machines,” “was not as an exploitation of machinery but as a ‘profanation’ of ‘Art’ parallel to the engineers’

⁴³ Jennings, “The Iron Horse,” 22, 27 (226-227). Emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ Compare, for example, image 9 in *Pandaemonium*, “The Water Insect or Gnat (September 1663),” in which the early modern scientist Robert Hooke describes the creatures he sees in his microscope in terms of larger animals, with images 340 (“A Living Optical Instrument (Autumn 1871)”) and 341 (“An Affectionate Machine-Tickling Aphid (before 1872)”), in which Charles Darwin and Samuel Butler describe artificial objects and machines in terms of natural organisms. In his note to image 9, Jennings looks ahead to that period in the Industrial Revolution when “human labour begins to be organised on a ruthlessly rational basis” according to the realist-materialist principles of the machine and the automaton, taking natural phenomena as a machine (11-12).

⁴⁵ On the strange qualities such pseudo-machines evoke, Jennings quotes Sigmund Freud on the so-called “omnipotence of thought”: “Only in one field has the omnipotence of thought been retained in our own civilization, namely in art. In art alone it still happens that man, consumed by his wishes, produces something similar to the gratification of these wishes, and this playing, thanks to artistic illusion, calls forth effects as if it were something real.” Freud, *Totem and Taboo* cited in Jennings, “The Iron Horse,” 28 (229).

‘profanation’ of the primitive ‘sacred spaces’ of the earth.”⁴⁶ The “artistengineer,” as Tyrus Miller points out, “retains a residual connection with the sacred as well — like a modern magician presiding over the final descent of magic into profane life.”⁴⁷ Where modern engineers “neutralized” the sacred power of nature through the application of scientific materialism, modern artists rerouted such materialisms to question the protocols and established hierarchies surrounding art objects. In this way, artistic works like Duchamp’s bachelor machines function at the intersection of imagination, unconscious interior and libidinal processes and objective transformations and interventions in the environment (such as electricity and automation) that structure modern-industrial everyday life. A curious thing about what we might consider as Jennings’s poetic reenchantment of modernity, then, is that it passes through the profanation of the sacred in order to arrive at a new, materialist deployment of myth, that is, of the imaginary in its encounter with developments in science and technology.

In this way, “The Iron Horse” and “DO NOT LEAN OUT THE WINDOW!” register transformations in the material and productive world of industry through the mediation of changes in the tropes and metaphors people, notably artists and writers, deployed in describing, in *adapting* to, those developments. As Jennings puts it in the explanatory introduction of “DO NOT LEAN OUT THE WINDOW!”:

⁴⁶ Jennings, “The Iron Horse,” 28 (229). Pseudo-machines do not simply return the artwork to some authentic, original condition; rather, Jennings detours the “neutralization” of the artwork itself as a means of use. “Profanation,” as Giorgio Agamben explains in his philosophical discussion of the topic, has a political function in how it “neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use ... [Profanation] deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized.” Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation,” in *Profanations*, trans. Kevin Attell (New York: Verso, 2007), 77.

⁴⁷ Miller, “Documentary/Modernism,” 233-234. Miller also argues that “Jennings’s adoption of the ‘readymade’ model moved it distinctly towards the *hermeneutic* concerns of surrealism rather than the cool, derisive mechanization of Duchamp’s ‘pseudo-machines’ (as Jennings called them)” (233). Emphasis in original. This is important in how it looks ahead to Jennings’s concern with the emotional and social-imaginative meaning of machines for human beings.

The following texts are presented not in any sense as a picture of the development of Machinery itself, but to suggest rapidly some of the varying situations of MAN in this country in having to adapt himself rapidly to a world altered by the INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, and in particular to THE IMPACT OF MACHINES on everyday life.⁴⁸

Jennings includes among the various texts that he draws from a diverse corpus of authors: William Blake, Fanny Kemble, Friedrich Engels, Samuel Smiles, John Ruskin, and R.M. Ballantine (whose text *The Iron Horse* [1871] was used as the name for Jennings's prior essay). On the first level of interpretation, as the Blake text included (*Vala* [1797]) in "DO NOT LEAN OUT THE WINDOW!" indicates, poetry is used by Jennings for how its metaphorical qualities register the emotional and mythical dimensions of the human response to the machine, while personal letters, such as that of Kemble (c. 1835), and political manuscripts, like Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), are deployed in their documentary character and diagnostic value. But the real importance of Jennings's intervention resides in the *bringing together* of these fragments of texts, so that poetry and prose mingle in their visions of adaptation, thus establishing the material and epistemological conditions for unearthing the animating metaphors and poetic images latent in realist prose, on the one hand, and the reading of poems and works of art for their realist-historical-documentary value, on the other.

Finding both poetic and anthropological-historical resonances in a disparate assemblage of texts, Jennings is here anticipating his method in *Pandaemonium* of expanding the sense of the poetic document across the imaginative terrain of everyday life. This is significantly different from the much more conventional view, such as can be found in the edited poetry collection *The Industrial Muse* (1958) for instance, that poets, on the whole, *did* in fact effectively adapt to and

⁴⁸ Humphrey Jennings, "DO NOT LEAN OUT THE WINDOW!" *London Bulletin* 4-5 (1938): 13; reprinted in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 221. Capitalized in original.

communicate the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution.⁴⁹ As I will show, Jennings's imaginative approach to British history is a response to the paradoxical combination of a poetic deficit (a symbolic void in poetry proper) *and* an explosion of language, of scientific discourse and various forms of writing, unfolding from within the social relations brought with the *conflicts* of the Industrial Revolution.

The Building of Pandaemonium

In *Pandaemonium*, Jennings further develops the relationship between the themes and techniques of mutation and adaptation discussed above by linking them to a visionary poetic tradition that extends back to William Blake and John Milton. The tradition of Milton and Blake involves using poetic illumination to address a people on the threshold of a new socio-metaphysical organization of the world, taking the ordinary features of life as microcosmic reflections of broader political and social changes. Ostensibly mundane aspects of life are revealed to possess the qualities of marvellous, even numinous, macrocosmic events. This way of conceiving of the link between epochal changes and everyday life hinges on the poet's ability to produce more than the static description of objects; it involves using the poetic image to capture events at the point of their emergence, as they are unfolding in movement. It also means investing events that have already happened with a renewed sense of vitality and possibility. In the visionary tradition of Blake, Jennings's *Pandaemonium* bestows dynamic form — in this case, the montage and superimposition of images — to the epochal ruptures and chaotic social transformations of the

⁴⁹ See *The Industrial Muse: The Industrial Revolution in English Poetry*, ed. Jeremy Warburg (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

Industrial Revolution.⁵⁰ And following Milton, the inaugural image of the conflicts brought with industry and science is taken from *Paradise Lost*, his epic allegory of fallen angels and revolution in Heaven and Earth. Jonathan Sawday provides a useful description of the importance of *Paradise Lost* to *Pandaemonium*'s demonic vision of industrial life: "At the heart of *Paradise Lost*, which Humphrey Jennings for one saw as the foundational text of all subsequent writings on industry and the machine, lies the spectre not of a ghost in the machine, but of human beings who, divorced from God, have become machine-like."⁵¹ In this "fallen" sense of the man-machine, *Pandaemonium*, as Jennings notes in regard to the first image of his book, stands for the "Palace of All the Devils. Its building began c.1660. It will never be finished — it has to be transformed into Jerusalem. The building of *Pandaemonium* is the real history of Britain for the last three hundred years."⁵² From this infernal catastrophe, Jennings constructs his imaginative history of industrial — and, I argue, biopolitical — modernity.

As Jennings explains, the fallen experience of the Industrial Revolution documented in *Pandaemonium* was preconditioned by the transformation from a pre- or early modern culture organized around the libidinal-symbolic power of the the king to a modern society organized

⁵⁰ As Jennings observes in his note for image 98, "The Song of the King of Asia (1795)," in *Pandaemonium*, in poems like *The Song of Los* (1795) Blake imaginatively captured the famine, misery and social struggles and contradictions of his time. Jennings explains that "one man—a London engraver — wrote a poem in which the whole situation, both its origins and its results, were made clear; a poem in which, seventy years before Marx, was shown the relationship of economics to the human situation and of the human situation to economics" (107).

⁵¹ Sawday, *Engines of the Imagination*, 292. Sawday continues: "Responding imaginatively to the world of mechanism that had come into being around him in seventeenth-century London, Milton's poetry also looked forwards to an alternative vision of human existence. At the close of *Paradise Lost*, the world of *Pandaemonium* has invaded Eden. Glancing over their shoulders, Adam and Eve are witnesses to the collapse of the first garden of the world, overrun by a terrible new force" (292).

⁵² Jennings, note for image 1 "The Building of *Pandaemonium* (c. 1660)," in *Pandaemonium*, 5.

according to the depersonalized forces of industry and capital.⁵³ In the premodern world, poetry was wedded to the way of life of a people, symbolically integrating all aspects of life in prayer, song and ritual. A significant aspect of this poetic activity involved appealing to what Jennings refers to after Charles Darwin as “the emotional side of our nature.”⁵⁴ Anthropological and ontogenetic, the appeal to “emotion” and “nature” in Jennings’s understanding here situates poetry in a feedback loop with the experiential milieu, the material ethos, of the human being in its lived social reality. In Jennings’s Darwinian terms, the “subject matter” of poetry in premodern societies was the very “life” of the people as it circulated around the symbolic centre of the king. As Jennings writes:

Poetry was created in primitive and feudal societies — patriarchal societies — and in these societies the subjects with which the poet dealt were not then poetical subjects; they were vital everyday facts and necessities — *religion* — the cosmos and the fate of the human soul. . . *kingship* — the character of the man in power and the fate of the people under him. As agriculture was the principal means of subsistence of these societies, the language and metaphors of poetry (what is called “flowery” language) are full of agricultural memories.⁵⁵

In Jennings’s account, in patriarchal pre-industrial societies poetry united the realm of meaning (religion, metaphysics, etc.) with the realm of material existence and reproduction (agriculture, war, etc.). These two dimensions of human life — the symbolic-imaginary and the biological — were intimately and organically entwined in animism, such that any distinction between so-called poetic subject matter and matters of everyday life — whether that of the king or his subjects, cosmic and metaphysical dimensions of the soul or terrestrial matters of the body — would make

⁵³ As Justin Clemens argues in “Mining Hell,” *Arena Magazine* 124 (June/July 2013) in regard to *Paradise Lost*: “Milton’s epic is tied to his turbulent epoch, which is commonly understood as the birth of modernity proper, characterised by its religious, scientific, technological, economic and political revolutions. Milton’s life is not only marked by the conceptual innovations of Francis Bacon, Descartes, and Galileo, but is coterminous with the growth of the first multinational corporations, military and economic colonialism, and the beginnings of industrialisation” (47).

⁵⁴ Jennings, “Introduction,” in *Pandaemonium*, xxxviii.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xxxvii.

no sense. In such a mythical time, matters of life and death were as much the material of poetry as they were everyday realities, and it was poetry that helped decide upon them.

In his 1938 BBC broadcast “The Poet and the Public” devoted to the topic of “Poetry and National Life,” Jennings further explains his understanding of the social and historical function of poetry by comparing two civilizations: the tribespeople of the Trobriand Islands and the citizens of modern England.⁵⁶ In his comparative anthropology of these two island peoples, Jennings further develops his image of historical transmission in terms of what Kevin Jackson refers to as a “collaboration with the dead.”⁵⁷ Drawing on the ethnographic studies of Bronislaw Malinowski — who contributed his “Essay on a Nation-Wide Intelligence Service” to the Mass-Observation publication *First Year’s Work, 1937-38* — Jennings argues that for the Trobriand Islanders poetry has “never been considered as a special thing and therefore hasn’t had the opportunity of getting cut away from the public.”⁵⁸ He discusses how the “national life” of the Trobriand people is performatively constituted and maintained in various activities and rituals, especially gardening or agriculture. In language similar to that of his earlier essay “The Theatre Today,” Jennings describes the conjunction of poetic and practical activity as “poetry in action,” for through ritual the poet is actually “bringing practical, everyday things into poetry” and “dealing with things which are well-known to the Islanders,” such as the necessities of tending the garden.⁵⁹ In such poetic and practical activity, and the continuity between past and present

⁵⁶ Humphrey Jennings, “The Poet and the Public: Poetry and National Life,” BBC National Programme, 28 June 1938; also in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 276-282.

⁵⁷ Jackson, “Humphrey Jennings: The Poet and the Public,” 674.

⁵⁸ Jennings, “The Poet and the Public: Poetry and National Life,” 276. It is likely that Jennings is here drawing his ideas on poetry, agriculture and cultural transmission from Malinowski’s *Coral Gardens and Their Magic: A Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands* (London: Routledge, 1935).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 277.

such acts maintain, the people and the poet are intimately connected in practico-symbolic production, mutually legitimized in a shared way of life.

By contrast, Jennings argues that with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and the concomitant social, political and economic changes it brought forth in seventeenth-century England, poetry became separated from the realm of everyday experience and increasingly lost its symbolic authority to bestow ritual meaning and holistic knowledge upon productive (economic) activity. The “agricultural memories” of poets in feudal society gave way to the scientific and materialist understanding of the population and the desacralized environment, while poetry retreated into romantic visions symptomatically detached from the pressures of an everyday life increasingly under the command of capital. Under such conditions, poetry lost both its mythical function as well as its referential character that made it of practical use for the people. In such a way, in early modernity the people and poetry became the subjects of a missed encounter. This division extended into the twentieth century, as Jennings points out in a 1938 BBC radio broadcast devoted to the topic of “The Poet and the Public”: “The two things that have got out of touch with each other are modern poetry and everyday life. The modern poet certainly has his or her own little public, but they’re not representative of the public at large.”⁶⁰

Biopolitics: The People and the Population

Intriguingly, Jennings’s understanding of the historical development/rupture of “the coming of the machine” also shares a number of similar concerns with Michel Foucault’s genealogy of

⁶⁰ Humphrey Jennings, “The Poet and the Public: The Modern Poet and the Public,” BBC National Programme, 26 April 1938; also in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 255.

modern biopolitics.⁶¹ In his well-known analysis developed and revised throughout the 1970s, Foucault describes modernity as taking shape through the displacement of sovereign power into what he calls disciplinary power, and, following that, biopolitics and biopower. According to Foucault, where sovereign power wielded the right of life and death over its subjects, and disciplinary power focussed on the body of the individual through modern institutions like the prison and the factory, “the new non-disciplinary power” of biopolitics “is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-having-being; ultimately, if you like, to man-as-species.”⁶² Understood as emerging at some point in the second half of the eighteenth century, and so overlapping with the previous sovereign and disciplinary arrangements of power while increasingly displacing them, modern biopolitics introduced a new science or “technology of power” that deployed the regulative mechanism of the norm, whose function was to maximize the effectivity and efficiency of human capacities within a delimited range of observable phenomena and practices. Through the “positivity” of the norm and developments in scientific (realist, materialist) experiment and control, knowledge-power included under its purview — or rather, more effectively interpenetrated — a diverse range of habits, skills, potentialities, pleasures, etc. at both the micro and macro levels of the detail and the mass.⁶³ Biopolitical

⁶¹ Foucault’s conceptualization of biopolitics can be traced through his analysis of the nature and function of the norm and normalization in his courses of the 1970s, including *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973-1974*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); “*Society Must be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1976-76*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. David Macey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁶² Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 242.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 249.

modernity, as Foucault has succinctly put it, thus names that period in history in which a “whole political network became interwoven with the fabric of everyday life.”⁶⁴

The significance of Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics and everyday life for Jennings’s understanding of the fate of poetry during the Industrial Revolution becomes clear when we consider how one of the central arguments outlined in *Pandaemonium* concerns the increasing power of materialism and modern science relative to the decline of poetry’s interest in, and relevance to, life. “The history of poetry is itself a history of mechanisation and specialisation,” Jennings writes, and he draws on a lineage of “poet-sages,” extending from Homer to Lao-Tze and beyond, to argue that while poetry’s premodern vocation included “*all* problems of life — religious, scientific, social and personal,” modern poetry transformed into a specialized discipline that parallels the division of labour brought with industrialization.⁶⁵ Instead of bringing together all facets of life into its “universal” vision, modern poetry retreated into a separate sphere of aesthetic activity, becoming increasingly confined to self-consciously “poetic” subject-matter — “the subject of poetry itself” being one of the preferred topics. As Jennings notes, this was a historical and social process that is as difficult to imagine as it is to document:

It would take a large work on its own to show, in the great period of English poets 1570-1750, the desperate struggle that poets had to keep poetry head into the wind: to keep it facing life. But by 1750 the struggle — like that of the peasants — was over.”⁶⁶

At that moment when the population was becoming the object of power, then, the people were losing their connection to the social-biological activity of poetry. Issues of life and death that

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 2000), 159.

⁶⁵ Jennings, “Introduction,” in *Pandaemonium*, xxxvi-xxxvii. Italics in original.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxvii.

were previously dealt with in and by poetry became the substance of both biopolitics and unconscious impulses. “*In other words,*” Jennings argues, “*poetry has been expropriated.*”⁶⁷ The expropriations of the Industrial Revolution initiated the modern separation of the people from its collective experience rooted in a poetically mediated relationship with itself and with the land, transforming what can be understood as the *pandemos* (from the Greek for that which is “common to all the people”) into the demonic experience of Pandaemonium, the dwelling place of all the demons in the age of the innervations (to use a Benjaminian term) of the machine.

As I outlined above, Jennings argues that in premodern societies poetry functioned as part of the holistic totality of the culture, centred around the king or spiritual leader and practiced in all aspects of productive activity. Developments (expropriation) in industry and agriculture linked to the emergence of capitalism destroyed that way of life. As Jennings explains: “in a process (conflict) which culminated between 1660 and 1880 the peasants were destroyed and the land capitalised — the power of money — capital — substituted for the power of the Crown and religion. The poet — as an individual — reacted to this major crisis of his career in many differing ways but it must be admitted not very successfully.”⁶⁸ In addition, concomitant social and political transformations displaced the centre of power away from the figure of the king into the dispersed authority of the people.⁶⁹ The process of relocating the ground of symbolic meaning away from its legitimation in the royal centre to the the people could only take effect

⁶⁷ Ibid. Italicized in original.

⁶⁸ Ibid., xxxvii. As Jennings also puts it in his note for image 34 “Effects of Lightning in Northamptonshire (1725)”: “when the ‘bourgeoisie’ took over in 1660, they began the final subjugation and exploitation of this island. They had amassed the necessary capital, ‘fixed’ the church on the laws of usury, tamed the power of the feudal monarchy” (37).

⁶⁹ As Michael McKeon observes in *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), this process presented “a progressive detachment of the normatively absolute from its presumed locale in royal absolutism and its experimental relocation in ‘the people,’ the family, women, the individual, personal identity, and the absolute subject” (xxii).

through a fundamental division within the organic totality of society. This division would lead to the modern bourgeois notion of the public sphere and popular sovereignty as composed of a mass of individual wills and interests. At the same time, what Jennings describes, literally and metaphorically, as “the machine” further displaced the royal personage of the king as the central symbolic principle around which society was organized. In other words, during the Industrial Revolution the people were subjected to impersonal controls, operationalizing life through an increasingly less personalized “technology of power.”⁷⁰ This links with Foucault’s analysis which, as Anna Kornbluh has put it, “anatomizes the way the ascension of ‘the people’ as the subject of power unfortunately also entails that the mass or ‘population’ becomes the object of power par excellence.”⁷¹

It was in the realm of everyday life, then, that the paradoxes and conflicts of power relocated themselves within the split subject of the people/population. Where in premodern society the fate of a whole way of life was connected with the life of the king and orchestrated in prayer and ritual, in biopolitical modernity a whole regime of power is linked to the biological capacities of the species, of the population, as it encounters the machine. Further, while industry made life — the life of the species — the object of power in the form of the population, modern poetry, as Jennings understands it, abandoned its traditional role in dealing with the material and spiritual matters of the everyday life of the people. No longer organized together in this symbolic mediation, the people were at a loss in attending to the facts of life, and, as a consequence, were

⁷⁰ Of course, this “depersonalization” of power also entailed its own counter-formations, new forms of (re)investment in the display of authority, legitimacy and expertise. It meant that, in the absence of the iconic power of royal personage, the people of modern nations were susceptible to new figures of charismatic and totalitarian leadership — the most obvious example, but certainly not the only one, being that of Adolf Hitler in Germany in the interwar period.

⁷¹ Anna Kornbluh, “Enjoying Law: Psychoanalysis and Sovereign Bodies,” *JCRT* 12.1 (Spring 2012): 17.

more immediately *exposed* (as a population, a species) to the power of the industrial organization of labour. This exposure, Jennings further argues, was at the same time an *enclosure* of the object of life.⁷² It is in his stress on the expropriation and enclosure of poetry's traditional role in the social imaginary of the people that Jennings's project takes on its biopoetic urgency, compelling readers of *Pandaemonium* to rethink the nature — the source, the location, the means — of the poetic image and its relation to everyday life. How did (and how do) the microphysics of power intersect (or not) with the metaphysics of poetry in modern life?

The Means of Vision

As I showed above, Jennings argues that the contradictions of capitalism play out on all levels of social life, including the cultural sphere of poetry. Linking this contradiction to the separation of poetry from everyday life in early industrial modernity, *Pandaemonium*, as Jennings explains, is foremost a “collection of documents which illuminate — in one way or another — the *conflicts* of the Industrial Revolution in Britain.” These conflicts are schematically presented as:

1. Class conflicts — in their simplest form Luddite riots, Peterloo
2. The conflict of animism and materialism
3. The conflict of the expropriated individual with his environment
4. Conflicts of ideas
5. Conflicts of systems — religious systems
political systems
moral systems⁷³

With the mechanization and specialization of industrial modernity and the conflicts that accompanied it, the question of production and the division of labour in relation to the poetic

⁷² See for example image 102 in *Pandaemonium*, “The Reverie of Poor Susan (Spring 1797)” by William Wordsworth. Jennings notes: “When the enclosures forced the country-dwellers off the land they not only expropriated the people but also expropriated poetry, which has its roots in the emotional links of man to the land and of man to man in a common society” (109-110).

⁷³ Jennings, “Introduction,” in *Pandaemonium*, xxxvi. My emphasis.

imagination came increasingly to the fore. Jennings suggests that the issue can be understood by considering it in terms of two fundamental modes of transforming the material of the world, two *means* that have separated into different spheres of sensuous activity: the “means of vision” — “matter (sense impressions) transformed and reborn by Imagination: turned into an image” — and the “means of production” — “matter is transformed and reborn by Labour.”⁷⁴ While these two modes of activity might have once happily coincided in the premodern world, with the dominance of the machine they have increasingly come into conflict, with the means of production coming to dominate the means of vision. “The relationship of production to vision and vision to production,” Jennings writes, “has been mankind's greatest problem.”⁷⁵

Nowhere is the stark conflict between the means of vision and the means of production more apparent than in the duality of misery and efficiency in the factory. Jennings describes how the modern factory was envisioned as an automaton, a corporate body that subsumes the bodies and labour-power of workers in a totalizing, idealized vision of the machine:

Man as we see him today lives by production and by vision. It is doubtful if he can live by one alone. He has occasionally however tried. Dr Ure speaks of a factory as ideally ‘a vast automaton, composed of various mechanical and intellectual organs, acting in an uninterrupted concern for the production of a common object, all of them being subordinated to a self-regulated moving force.’⁷⁶

Jennings contrasts the ruthlessly rationalized organization of industrial labour, in which the means of vision are effectively dominated by production, with the image of a Buddhist Yogi who devotes himself to nonproductive contemplation and depends on the productive activity, the labour, of others for survival. In their analysis of the same image of the automaton that Jennings

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, xxxix.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxviii. Jennings includes a footnote with a reference to Marx, who, in *Capital*, calls Ure “the Pindar of the automatic factory” (xxxviii).

cites in *Pandaemonium*, François Guéry and Didier Deleule argue that the effort to maintain an illusory “pure act” in the service of an “ideal model of the productive body” is one of the central ideological struggles of modern power.⁷⁷ Jennings’s interest in working through, while realizing the difficulty of resolving, the fraught relationship between vision and production, contemplation and productivity, speaks to his awareness of the ideological illusions and dehumanizing processes Guéry and Deleule discuss.

Jennings seeks a renewed use for the means of vision, then, and an aesthetic liberation to accompany the social and political liberation of the means of production. But, as we have already seen, central to the historical and imaginative intervention of *Pandaemonium* is Jennings’s argument that traditional poetry did not, on the whole, effectively adapt to the the conflicts and transformations of the Industrial Revolution. While certain poets, like Milton, Blake, and Shelley, for example, did respond and take into their poetry the events of their time, many of them retreated into subjectivity and formalism. The important point for Jennings is how the conflicts transformed the very role of poetry itself. Conflict and expropriation in the mode of production became poetry’s determining condition:

At a certain period in human development the means of vision and the means of production were intimately connected — or were felt to be by the people concerned — I refer to the Magical systems under which it was not possible to plow the ground without a prayer — to eat without a blessing, to hunt an animal without a magic formula. To build without a sense of glory.

In the two hundred years 1660-1860 the means of production were violently and fundamentally altered — altered by the accumulation of capital, the freedom of trade, the invention of machines, the philosophy of materialism, the discoveries of science.

⁷⁷ François Guéry and Didier Deleule, *The Productive Body*, trans. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Alresford: Zero Books, 2014), 131-132.

In what sense have the Means of Vision kept pace with these alterations?⁷⁸

As the subtitle of *Pandaemonium* underscores, Jennings's study is about the encounter between a life-form, one that possesses a faculty or capacity of vision as a "contemporary observer" (linking the imagination to sight as registered in writing), and "the coming of the machine," suggesting an epochal and alien event in emergence, underway, and yet to be fully decided or determined. The "life" of interest to Jennings, then, is one sustained by the imagination in terms of "moments of Vision" and "Illuminations" that emerge from, and in turn transform, people's lived experience. What Jennings calls the "method of poetry" addresses the internal dynamics of subjective experience from within the broader social conditions of cultural expression, all exposed to a new form of power, a new organization of society, and new scientific and realist visions of life.⁷⁹

Jennings's concern with the division between the means of vision and the means of production speaks to his understanding of the cultural enclosure of poetry, making it into something that is irrelevant to life as it is lived by the people as a collective power, becoming a "sort of specialized activity...that most people are rather ashamed of."⁸⁰ The concept of the means of vision is, then, part of Jennings's attempt to expand the notion of poetry beyond the confines of escapism and entertainment in the emerging culture industry, to locate visionary images in persons, places and prose not otherwise conventionally associated with poetry as we know it in modern life. Opposing the means of vision to a list of contemporary alienated forms of culture, Jennings writes: "I am referring not to the Arts as a commodity for Bond Street, or as a

⁷⁸ Jennings, "Introduction," in *Pandaemonium*, xxxviii.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxvi.

⁸⁰ Jennings, "The Poet and the Public," 279.

piece of snobbery in Mayfair, or as a means of propaganda in Bloomsbury, or as a method of escapism in Hampstead.”⁸¹ Poetry, or the poetic function, then, must not merely supplement the division between productive labour and biological existence, but engage with the very sensuous terrain of everyday life itself as a practical problem of knowledge and meaning, what Jennings goes on to explain is “our nature as Human Beings in the anthracite drifts of South Wales, in the cotton belt of Lancashire, in the forges of Motherwell — how the emotional side of [our] nature has been used, altered, tempered, appealed to in these two hundred years.”⁸²

In this way, Jennings’s means of vision shares much with the Marxist critique of the alienation of everyday life in the capitalist mode of production. John Roberts argues that aesthetic experience — including the linguistic and visionary experience of poetry — is not to be understood as absolutely distinct from productive labour. Instead, aesthetic experience should be seen as the means through which alienated activity (labour) bound to necessity can be transformed into an experience of creativity with purpose. Roberts:

In Marx, there is no critique of political economy, no critique of the value-form (the technical division of labour; necessary labour) without the collective aesthetic and sensuous reappropriation of everyday experience. The status of the aesthetic, then, is quite distinct in his writing from its position within the Romantic tradition, although of course Marx freely borrowed from this tradition. Aesthetic experience is not to be imposed on the alienations of labour or presented as a substitute for labour, but has to enter and transform the heteronomous functions of productive and non-productive labour itself.⁸³

⁸¹ Jennings, “Introduction,” in *Pandaemonium*, xxxiv.

⁸² *Ibid.* In a more modest sense, Jennings simply affirms that poetry needs to find a way of discussing topics and subjects relevant to modern readers, so that it may spark their imaginations. This means that poetry must deal with science and technology, among other subjects.

⁸³ John Roberts, *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 13.

One of Jennings's contributions to this legacy of Marxist thought is to insist that the imagination, the means of vision, is itself a modality of transforming the sensuous experience of matter, and specifically the matter of everyday life, into something forged by human creativity and emotion. "Images," Jennings writes, "represent human experience. They are the record of mental events. Events of the heart. They are facts (the historian's kind of facts) which have been passed through the feelings and the mind of an individual and have forced him to write."⁸⁴

If the symbolic is an interruption and a rerouting of biological processes and libidinal energies into social practices, and the imaginary (or imagination) is fundamental to how the life-form attaches its psychical and emotional energy to its own physical and biographical experiences, then the fragmentation of the symbolic and the imaginary reveals the pulse of the biological existence that subtends social and emotional life, throwing a people's way of life into crisis. This crisis resonates with Roberts's understanding of the "distinction between the everyday as that which is *familiar* (ordinary), and the everyday as that which is *remaindered*, that which is left behind after the structured activities of science, technology and social administration have defined and regulated daily experience."⁸⁵ The life of concern to Jennings's means of vision must be understood as the life of the human being that *cannot be remaindered* or separated from how it lives its everyday life (unless the human is to be abandoned to a

⁸⁴ Jennings, "Introduction," in *Pandaemonium*, xxxv.

⁸⁵ Roberts, *Philosophizing the Everyday*, 63. Italics in original. Here Roberts is following Henri Lefebvre, who writes in "What is Possible?": "The relations between groups and individuals in everyday life interact in a manner which in part escapes the specialized sciences. By a process of abstraction these sciences infer certain relations, certain essential aspects, from the extraordinary complexities of human reality. But have they completed this task? It seems that once the relations identified by history, political economy or biology have been extracted from human reality, a kind of enormous, shapeless, ill-defined mass remains. This is the murky background from which known relations and superior activities (scientific, political, aesthetic) are picked out. It is this 'human raw material' that the study of everyday life takes as its proper object. It studies it both in itself and in its relation with the differentiated, superior forms that it underpins." Lefebvre, "What is Possible?" in *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1*, trans. John Moore (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 252.

population). This life cannot be reduced to scientific or administrative regulation, because while Jennings's imaginative history deals with the everyday vital facts and necessities of life, it does so by way of the imagination and a shared symbolic investment that itself is transforming and feeding back into that life. The means of vision, in other words, takes life not simply as that which is familiar and ordinary as a fact in itself, or as that which remains after governance and technology have had their way with it, but as the site of imaginative and biopoetic transformation, where life-processes and the reflection on those processes are united. The ordinary has an important role in this vision, of course, but it is an ordinary that possesses the qualities of the extraordinary, of mutation or changeability, as with Blake and Milton, inside itself; and it is a power of the ordinary that both appreciates the popular investment in collective symbols while undercutting the pretensions and snobbery of those who dominate the distribution and discernment of those symbols.

There is in Jennings's means of vision, then, a kind of micropoetics to be found in diaries and snapshots, for example, that accompanies a macropoetics traditionally found in epic poetry; there is a sense of how the small reflects the large, and the mundane contains the exception, and vice versa. In this respect, Jennings's vision of the poetic imagination as a necessary dimension of human existence (if it is to be such a thing) anticipates Henri Lefebvre's conception of everyday life when he argues that "it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human — and every human being — a whole takes its shape and its form. In it are expressed and fulfilled those relations which bring into play the totality of the real, albeit in a certain manner which is always partial and incomplete: friendship, comradeship, love, the need

to communicate, play, etc.”⁸⁶ Thus when Jennings imagines how the individual is forced to write, to create an image as a result of something that has passed through his heart and mind, he is describing part of a democratic and distributed process that is significant to a larger collective and historical transformation. This transformative process is necessarily incomplete.⁸⁷

The processes and conflicts of the Industrial Revolution and the historical dialectic of the means of vision and the means of production are documented in a wide array of images in *Pandaemonium*. Many of these images, as I noted above, can be grouped by theme or read as constellations, mapping out specific trajectories of transformation and directional feeling. The “theme sequences” Charles Madge prepared in the index of *Pandaemonium* explicitly reflect this dialectic in terms of the people and the population: there are twenty-eight texts placed under the heading of “Population and Subsistence” and thirty-one under “The Power to Come.”⁸⁸ In the next section, I will consider a variation of these two constellations, working through how it takes up the dialectic of the means of vision and the means of production, for what it can further tell us about how Jennings imagines the emergent biopolitical conflicts centred on the people and the population of industrial modernity.

Architectures of Desire, Discipline and Control

“Biopolitics,” as Peter Sloterdijk writes in *In the World Interior of Capital*, “begins as enclosure-building.”⁸⁹ As an imaginative historical study that opens with the metaphorical construction of a

⁸⁶ Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, 97.

⁸⁷ There is in *Pandaemonium*, then, a double discourse, one pertaining to the changes documented in the various images, and the other regarding the transformations of writing itself, including the self-address of the people as a historical actor. The texts are thus re-conceived as documents in this double sense, both of and about the transformations of the Industrial Revolution, making them at once a locus of sedimentation *and* reorientation, thus allowing Jennings to create new links between existing materials, redistributing and refocusing their meanings.

⁸⁸ See Charles Madge, “Editorial Tasks and Methods,” in *Pandaemonium*, xix.

⁸⁹ Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 170.

demonic building, it is not surprising that a significant number of the images in *Pandaemonium* constellate around architectural structures standing for the transformations of the Industrial Revolution and their symbolic consequences for the everyday life of the people. As manifestations of power these structures function in material ways, of course, but they also help Jennings to elaborate a collective image of modern England. This image links objects and functions at a level of imaginative abstraction that can help explain, or give symbolic form to, both an everyday experience and a larger historical transformation. Jennings's images, then, contribute to a symbolic correlative, a framework of meaning, for the people as they undergo what, as he puts it in the "Rock-Painting" essay, can be called their collective mutation.

Jennings's assemblage of images of three buildings constellated across three centuries illustrates well this conjunction of structure and symbol. In his note to image 91 "Panopticon," Jennings folds Bentham's disciplinary apparatus into a series of historical structures, forming an assemblage-image, a constellation that charts the collective experience of their respective periods:

Saint Paul's — Panopticon — The Crystal Palace: these three inventions were each symbolic of an epoch but also each the culmination of the period before; St Paul's the culmination of the protestantism of the 17th century; Panopticon the culmination of the rationalism of the 18th century; the Crystal Palace the culmination of the human energy and warmth of the 19th century.⁹⁰

From this point of view, each image-structure, from the cathedral to the prison to the palace, conditions the next as its culmination in a developing historical trajectory. This trajectory, however, is not a simple, direct, linear vector; it reveals itself through Jennings's method of montage and superimposition. Furthermore, the mythical dimensions of these structures not only

⁹⁰ Jennings, note for image 91 "Panopticon (1791-92)" from Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon*, in *Pandaemonium*, 99.

symbolize their respective epochs in terms of their conscious or manifest desires but also, hidden within their architectural confines, a feeling of frustration and disillusionment in latent form.

In their own historical moment, each structure embodied and imposed an image of rationality and control, power and visibility. In this way, Saint Paul's Cathedral, the Panopticon and the Crystal Palace were concerned with harnessing and directing what Marx and Engels refer to as the "production and reproduction of life itself."⁹¹ Considering these architectural structures together, we can discern, analogically, the broad continuities and transformations of power in the modern industrialized capitalist world as it confronted and controlled the movement of life: from sovereign power as manifest in the theological-political structure of the Church/Monarchy in Saint Paul's Cathedral (itself undergoing a process of protestant secularization), to industrial and disciplinary power in the institutional architecture of the Panopticon, to a nascent post-industrial governmental biopower in the "human energy" and visibility of the Crystal Palace. Discussing Jennings's note on the Panopticon that links "1789 — the fall of the Bastille" to "1791 — Panopticon, the New Bastille," Lucy D. Curzon argues that Jennings implies that "though the

⁹¹ The "production and reproduction of life itself" is attributed to Marx and Engels's *Etudes Philosophiques* by André Breton in "Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism (1936)," in *Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 100. Breton discusses this notion in order to justify Surrealism's interest in issues beyond the economic factor. Breton sees revolutionary potential for "chances" in what Marxists call the superstructure and what Surrealists see as the "movement of life" in its various forms: "intellectual effort cannot be used more profitably than to enrich this superstructure, which will only be able to reveal the secret of its elaboration at this price. It is important to point out the path which leads to the heart of these 'chances' (to use the terminology of the same authors) through whose multiplicity the 'complementary action and reaction' of the factors which determine the *movement of life* proceed. It is this path that Surrealism claims to have laid open" (100-101). My emphasis. As I discuss in Chapter One, Jennings refers to Breton's essay in his review of *Surrealism* in the December 1936 issue of *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, and although he makes no mention of this reference in Breton's essay I think it is relevant to Jennings's own interest in images (or what he elsewhere calls "coincidences") as some sense of the movement of life is what Jennings is drawn to in art and poetry, from the rock-paintings to the "unrolling film" in *Pandaemonium*. The movement of life, then, seems to me as significant as the means of vision in understanding Jennings's work. Importantly, Michel Foucault will also refer to the "movements of life" in his definitions of bio-history and bio-power: "If one can apply the term bio-history to the pressures through which the *movements of life* and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of bio-power to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life." Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1978), 143. Italics mine.

physical Bastille was destroyed, post-revolutionary panoptic designs — including hospitals, schools, other prisons, etc. — nonetheless maintained, in the abstract at least, the Bastille’s carceral function (and that is implied by the *Ancien Regime*) by systematizing surveillance as a mode of social control.”⁹² She further argues that the images of surveillance and control implied in the respective domes of these architectural structures resonate throughout *Pandaemonium*’s images, from Coleridge’s omnipotent God to the camera obscura.⁹³ In such authoritative buildings, logics of vision become concrete institutions of power and knowledge.

In a much-referenced passage from *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault rhetorically asks, “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?”⁹⁴ In establishing a system of resemblance between various architectural structures and their shared disciplinary functions, Foucault is able to present the underlying logic informing Bentham’s panopticon: “the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use.”⁹⁵ As a kind of ideal form or abstract machine, the panopticon is here a paradigm, a diagram of

⁹² Lucy D. Curzon, *Mass-Observation and Visual Culture: Depicting Everyday Lives in Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 137. Curzon goes on: “In this context, St. Paul’s Cathedral, the Bastille’s forebear, and the Crystal Palace, its successor, as images, become emblems of power, whether made manifest through the predominance of protestant values in British society, or, in the case of the latter, colonization and industrialization as instigators of world order” (138).

⁹³ The architectural structure and symbol of the dome — St. Paul’s Cathedral, specifically — reemerges in Jennings’s imaginary in his wartime poem, “I See London,” which combines a kind of sovereign power of the imagination with everyday life during the Second World War. I discuss “I See London” in Chapter Four.

⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Penguin, 1995), 228.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 205. Foucault develops this point: “As opposed to the ruined prisons, littered with mechanisms of torture, to be seen in Piranesi’s engravings, the Panopticon presents a cruel, ingenious cage. The fact that it should have given rise, even in our own time, to so many variations, projected or realized, is evidence of the imaginary intensity that it has possessed for almost two hundred years” (205).

power-knowledge that, much like the image, is detached from its applied use, its embeddedness in the everyday material world. In this way, the paradigm-diagram is like the means of vision, for it sets up and establishes relationships of force and desire, that is, *potential use*, between material entities (architecture) and visibility (optics), producing distinct distributions of bodies, light, space, and time. In the concrete instance of the prison, the panoptic means of vision join with the efforts of knowledge-production to make the prisoner into what Foucault calls an “object of information” in place of the “subject of communication.”⁹⁶ The political technology of Bentham’s panopticon, operative in the chain of resemblance established between the various disciplinary institutions, thus contributed to a dialectic in industrial modernity between the people as the bearer of popular sovereignty and the prisoner (or worker, patient, etc.) as part of the population, an object increasingly becoming the biopolitical material of control.

Perhaps a key difference between Foucault’s diagram and Jennings’s image of the panopticon resides in how Jennings deals with its imaginary and affective dimensions for the people. His image of the panopticon as enclosure emerges not only from Bentham, from the top-down or centre-outward, but, so to speak, from below and from within the imagination and experience of those who lived with it and endured it. In reference to image 38 of *Pandaemonium*, for example, “The Derby Silk-Mil c. 1730” excerpted from William Hutton’s *History of Derby* (1817), Jennings not only anticipates Foucault’s diagram of the panopticon, but contextualizes its effects on the population from the point of view of the people.⁹⁷ He notes: “The abstract horror of this image derives in part from the unspoken acknowledgement of the truth that as far as the

⁹⁶ Ibid., 200.

⁹⁷ In this way, Jennings’s images might be seen as counterpoints or correctives to what some critics see as Foucault’s monolithic, top-down model of power and panoptic visibility in disciplinary societies.

18th century poor were concerned 1. the factory; 2. the school; 3. the workhouse; 4. the prison, were all the *same building*.”⁹⁸ What Foucault calls disciplinary mechanisms (and biopolitics), on the one hand, and what I understand as Jennings’s biopoetics, on the other, thus name two approaches to the same object, two aspects of the industrialization of everyday life that intersect in the image. Through his concern with both the point of view of the people and with power’s governance of populations, then, Jennings brings together the conflicts of everyday life as they realized themselves in images *and* in structures, both active in the transformation of life.

Thus when Jennings understands such architectures of desire and control through the image he moves beyond a concern with the hardened materiality of the buildings in question toward the imaginative conditions that inform both the reception and the creation of such structures. In his attention to “architectural symbols,” Jennings’s method of poetry asks how these structures affect us not only in how they manage our movements, but in how they guide our emotional lives as both individuals and collectivities.⁹⁹ Such an “imagistic” concern with the “elemental forces” behind objects and structures opens up, again, the possibility of transformation, of reimagining the ways of life and arrangements of space and time that institutions *paradigmatically* reproduce. This also applies to the power of images to redirect these structures as they currently exist, putting them to use in a different way. This is simultaneously a question of poetic transformation and social and biopolitical struggle.

It is in the series of images (262-270) constellated around Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace and the 1851 International London Exposition (or the “Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry

⁹⁸ Jennings, note for image 38 “The Derby Silk-Mil (c. 1730),” in *Pandaemonium*, 47-48. Emphasis in original.

⁹⁹ Jennings discusses “architectural symbols” like St. Paul’s Cathedral and the Panopticon in his note for image 13 “The New Theater (July 9, 1669),” in *Pandaemonium*, 15.

of all Nations” as it was called at the time) that Jennings registers “a strong feeling of disillusionment and compromise: a recognition of how short reality falls from the dream and the dream also from the reality.”¹⁰⁰ Building on Benjamin’s critique of the phantasmagoria of the nineteenth century, Agamben understands the 1851 Exposition as an exemplary exhibition of the logic of commodity fetishism and exchange-value: “Thus at the Universal Exposition was celebrated, for the first time, the mystery that has now become familiar to anyone who has entered a supermarket or been exposed to the manipulation of an advertisement: the epiphany of the unattainable.”¹⁰¹ Such a description powerfully resonates with Jennings’s diagnosis of the alienating effects of the Crystal Palace: how it promised a popular commons and democratic assembly but ultimately proved to be a mere phantom agora, the fantasy site of an ultimately unachievable communion. In this sense, the Crystal Palace is itself a phantasmagoria — a public gathering, a ghostly crowd — of hopes and desires that never quite grasp their object.¹⁰²

In this way, the great Victorian structure of the Crystal Palace was, for Jennings, symbolic of the nineteenth century for both the freedom and visibility it promised and for its failure to deliver on those promises. Similarly, Sloterdijk takes “the crystal palace metaphor as an emblem for the final ambitions of modernity.”¹⁰³ These biopolitical ambitions included “a new aesthetics of immersion [that] began its triumphal march through modernity.” As Sloterdijk puts it: “the

¹⁰⁰ Jennings, note for image 262 “The Great Eggs and Bacon (1851),” in *Pandaemonium*, 253.

¹⁰¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in the Western World*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 38. Margaret Cohen develops a brilliant reading of Benjamin on the phantasmagoria of modernity in her essay “Walter Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria,” *New German Critique* 48 (Autumn 1989): 87-107.

¹⁰² Jennings includes an image in *Pandaemonium* — 365: “Phantasmagoria,” taken from Francis Galton’s 1883 *Inquiries into Human Faculty* — which describes “the appearance of a crowd of phantoms” (349) that haunts otherwise apparently rational, scientific subjects. This image also belongs to a constellation of images that deal with the relationship between science and poetry in terms of their mutual descriptions of “men and molecules,” individuals and crowds. See, for instance, image 362 “The Crowd and the Runner (1882),” in *Pandaemonium*, 347-348.

¹⁰³ Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 176.

gigantic Crystal Palace — the valid prophetic building form of the nineteenth century (which was immediately copied all over the world) — already anticipated an integral, experience-oriented, popular capitalism in which no less than the comprehensive absorption of the outside world in a fully calculated interior was at stake.”¹⁰⁴ Image 265 in *Pandaemonium*, “I Can’t Get Out,” written by Thomas Carlyle on April 21, 1851, documents this sense of dream and reality, promise and failure, embodied by the Crystal Palace for an “observer” who experienced it on the ground. His “image” is also xenophobic in its anxiety-ridden vision of the gathering masses:

Crystal Palace — bless the mark! — is fast getting ready, and bearded figures already grow frequent in the streets; ‘all nations’ crowding to us with their so-called industry or ostentatious frothery. All the loose population of London pours itself every holiday into Hyde Park round this strange edifice. Over in Surrey there is a strange agreeable solitude in the walks one has. My mad humour is urging me to flight from this monstrous place — flight ‘over to Denmark to learn Norse,’ for example. Every season my suffering and resistance drives me on to some such mad project and every season it fails. ‘I can’t get out’ . . .¹⁰⁵

Additionally, image 269, “Only Magic,” from a letter Charlotte Brontë wrote to her father on June 7, 1851 captures the seductive spell cast by the phantasmagoria of the Crystal Palace:

It seems as if only magic could have gathered this mass of wealth from all the ends of the earth — as if none but supernatural hands could have arranged it thus, with such a blaze and contrast of colours and marvellous power of effect. The multitude filling the great aisles seems ruled and subdued by some invisible influence. Amongst the thirty thousand souls that peopled it the day I was there not one loud noise was to be heard, not one irregular movement seen; the living tide rolls on quietly, with a deep hum like the sea heard from the distance.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 169, 175. This is also why the burning of the Crystal Palace on November 30th, 1936 was significant for Jennings and Madge as they began conceptualizing the research mandate for Mass-Observation. With its destruction, the optimistic dream of the nineteenth century, a promise of the future embodied in the very form and structure of the Crystal Palace that extended into the twentieth century, came to a sudden, startling end. On the social symbolism of this, see Charles Madge, “Anthropology at Home,” *The New Statesman and Nation* (2 January, 1937): 12; reprinted in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 146.

¹⁰⁵ *Pandaemonium*, 257.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 261-262.

Between the enraptured population that cannot escape envisioned by Carlyle and the ominous murmur of the spellbound multitude moving among the wealth of the world documented by Brontë, the Crystal Palace would seem to have near realized what Sloterdijk concludes was “the idea of an enclosure so spacious that one might never have to leave it.”¹⁰⁷ We can see in these images, in the redistributions of movement and visibility they document, then, a prophetic glance at the nascent form of what Deleuze, in his analysis of the intersecting logics of biopower and informational-consumer capitalism in the late twentieth century, calls the society of control.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion: The Power to Come

Jennings’s goal in *Pandaemonium* is not to celebrate transformation as a value in and of itself, for as we see in the cumulative effect of its many images, so many of the changes brought with “the coming of the machine” were as destructive as they were productive in the exploitation of the naked life of the population in the biopolitical enclosures of the factory and other apparatuses of power. An important conflict in this regard was that which took place within the means of vision between the imagination of the people and the enclosure of the population. It is here that conflict comes to take its place alongside mutation and adaptation as a theme and engine of history; and it is in this sense that Jennings follows Milton and Blake who developed a sense of poetic messianism that transforms the corruption and conflict into a new sense of collective possibility, a new life. After Blake, Jennings refers to this life and this relationship to the land free from exploitation and enclosure as *Jerusalem*.¹⁰⁹ In this way, Jennings does not simply celebrate transformation nor decry the loss of innocence, the fallenness, of the people that came

¹⁰⁷ Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 175.

¹⁰⁸ See Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3-7.

¹⁰⁹ See image 128 “Jerusalem (1804-08),” from William Blake’s *Milton* (1804-1808), in *Pandaemonium*, 127.

with the machine; on the contrary, *Pandaemonium* articulates a kind of radical socialist vision for the future that is based on bringing the present imagination to bear on historical documents which possess a poetic function. The images in *Pandaemonium* affirm that the conflicts of the Industrial Revolution did not happen in an emotional vacuum but were experienced in ways deeply felt by the people, bringing the epic conflicts of history and generations of struggle into the seemingly more mundane struggles of everyday life (and vice versa). These images are used by Jennings as documents of the desire of the people and the despair of living in conflict and change; some of these images also document, if only for a moment, the class struggle which was taking shape in the Industrial Revolution and which must be considered integral to the history of modern Britain.

This dual function of the image as both document *and* poetry, record of the past *and* hope for the future, is clearly expressed in image 347 in *Pandaemonium*, what Jennings names “The Power to Come,” from *Beauchamp's Career* (c. 1875) by George Meredith:

The people are the power to come. Oppressed, unprotected, abandoned; left to the ebb and flow of the tides of the market, now taken on to work, now cast off to starve, committed to the shifting laws of demand and supply, slaves of Capital — the whited name for old accursed Mammon; and of all the ranked and black-uniformed host no pastor to come out of the association of shepherds, and proclaim before heaven and man the primary claim of their cause; — they are, I say, the power, worth the seduction by another Power not mighty in England now; and likely in time to come to set up yet another Power not existing in England now.¹¹⁰

If the people are “the power to come,” they are, then, an emergent or latent protagonist in *Pandaemonium*, one that only comes into being as a collective power through a process of self-

¹¹⁰ *Pandaemonium*, 332-333. Ben Jones and Rebecca Searle also discuss this image in “Humphrey Jennings, the Left and the Experience of Modernity in mid twentieth-century Britain,” noting how “*Pandaemonium* portentously broods on the power to come. Its history of modernity is characterized by rupture, conflict and exploitation. It looks back via William Morris and the radical socialists of the late nineteenth century to a uchronic past to find inspiration for a revolutionary future when such conflicts are resolved after class struggle” (208).

formation, of assuming agency in transformation and in historical conflict claimed from the breakdown of an older order.¹¹¹ *Pandaemonium* is thus a poem forged from the bewildered and responsive imagination of a people wresting a prophetic image from its encounter with chaos.

Pandaemonium is also a historical study where the people speak for themselves, in their own words and in the name of their own self-legitimacy. But these words in and for themselves, drawn from the life-writing of the people, are also subject to citability, to the appropriation and assemblage of Jennings. The communication of the self-determination of the people formed in conflict depends on the historical index (record) and poetic illumination of the images brought together, then, but it also depends on the poetic reading strategy, the technique of superimposition and montage, that Jennings sets up. Furthermore, *Pandaemonium* both instructs and depends on contemporary readers who must activate its means of vision by using their own capacities of imagination. For Jennings, like Benjamin, developed an image of historical transmission that does not fetishize the artifact as something self-identical in its significance, in how it communicates the meanings of the past. Instead, he conceives of the past's relation to the present as dialectical, at once hesitantly and insistently materialized in the document. Fragments and traces of texts aggregate into an image, simultaneously revealing and concealing the experiences they carry, thus making the past itself incomplete relative to the present that seeks to interpret it. *Pandaemonium* emphasizes how these dialectical documents enter into a relationship with both the poetic imagination of Jennings himself as the editor/collator of images as well as the future reader who activates them; at the same time, and from the opposite direction, rapid

¹¹¹ The people is the emergent protagonist in *Pandaemonium* that seeks to overturn the very alienating conditions that gave birth to it. In this way, the people struggle to build a future where they are no longer what they are and will no longer reproduce itself in its exploitation. In this sense, the people seek transformation rather than building.

flashes of images theatricalize how the fragment itself is charged with a power that disseminates meaning, spurring new poetic connections, new images drawn from the life of historical conflict.



Image 3.3. Photograph of Humphrey Jennings taken during the making of *A Diary for Timothy* (1945) by Walter Bird; included in *Pandaemonium*, 357.

In a striking passage from his 1938 “Poetry and National Life” broadcast pertaining to the visionary role of the poet, Jennings states, with reference to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*:

Just as the Trobriand Islander invokes his ancestors as part of his digging in the garden, so the bits of the past that turn up in *The Waste Land* are necessary to give the present its meaning. You see, however industrialised we are, we have ancestors — whether we like them or not — and how they come in here is (I think) best expressed by the French poet Apollinaire, who said that unlike other men he didn't stand with his back to the past and face the future; on the contrary, he stood with his back to the future, because he was unable to see it, and with his face to the past because it was in the past that he could discover who he was and how he had come to be him.¹¹²

¹¹² Jennings, “The Poet and the Public: Poetry and National Life,” 281-282.

This image of the poet-historian bears some obvious similarity with Benjamin's image of the so-called "Angel of History" from his "Theses on the Philosophy of History."¹¹³ Benjamin's angel, inspired by Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), is blasted away from paradise as he overlooks the ruins of history. There is also a production still of Jennings taken during the shooting of *A Diary for Timothy* (1945), near the end of the Second World War, that visually echoes his Apollinairean description of the poet (see Image 3.3). The shot presents Jennings in silhouette, standing with his back to the camera and gazing into a murky distance. Where Klee's "Angel of History" looks out directly from the painting, thus positioning the viewer among the debris of the past (following Benjamin's reading), the photograph of Jennings, his back turned away from the future, positions the perceiver in the present becoming the future (as it is for the newborn Timothy in the film dedicated to him).¹¹⁴

This Gothic vision of the wartime filmmaker turned away from the viewer also visually recalls Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818). But where the German Romantic's painting might be interpreted in terms of depicting the subjective point of view of a traveller contemplating the vast expanse of the unknown future, the photograph of Jennings, as understood in this context, shows the figure of the poet peering into the mysterious, smokey landscape for what it *might* tell him about how the past became the present. In all of these cases, however, the seer uses the means of vision to transform the immediate horizon of the visible world, a world of smoke and mystery, into a direction of feeling that extends beyond the

¹¹³ See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 253-264.

¹¹⁴ For an illuminating discussion of *A Diary for Timothy* in terms of how Jennings imagines the infant Timothy (a body without a voice) in complex relation to the potentiality of the future — an uncertain, unknown postwar future which fills the narrator (a voice without a body) with both hope and anxiety — see Leo Mellor, "It's Only Chance That You're Safe and Sound': Meanings of the Body in Humphrey Jennings' *A Diary for Timothy*," *Journal of War & Culture Studies* (August 2019): 1-16.

immediately given into a mythical, prophetic vision. The image, then, is the nexus where the documentarian's or historian's power of observation intersects with the poet's power of imagination, where a remnant of what has been meets the question of communication with the *unseen* future. *Pandaemonium*'s image-documents thus form a threshold between mythical prophecy (the unseen) and historical record (the seen). As Giorgio Agamben argues in way that resonates with Jennings's own redemptive project, in which the "imaginative history" of "the machine" names a history, a gathering of documents at once nourished and haunted, animated and destabilized, by myth and metaphor (the poetic image):

The history of humanity is always a history of phantasms and of images, because it is within the imagination that the fracture between individual and impersonal, the multiple and the unique, the sensible and the intelligible takes place. At the same time, imagination is the place of the dialectical recomposition of this fracture. The images are the remnant, the trace of what men who preceded us have wished and desired, feared and repressed. And because it is within the imagination that something like a (hi)story became possible, it is through imagination that, at every new juncture, history has to be decided.¹¹⁵

My argument in this chapter has been that while Jennings might privilege the image of the poet-historian's retrospective gaze in *Pandaemonium*, the very notion of the poet's necessary turn away from the future also conditions his ongoing demand and desire for the people. In this sense, as much as Jennings looks to the past for what *might* have been the place of the imagination in the making of the modern world, the past itself returns like a phantasm (an image) to disturb both the symbolic complacency and the hopelessness of the present. As Jennings demonstrates in *Pandaemonium*, through the poetic "collaboration with the dead" by way of the citability of "bits of the past," a dialectical space is opened up for the democratic (self-directed,

¹¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, "Nymphs," in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media*, ed. Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 79-80.

semi-autonomous, collaborative) reading of images in the present. This more immediate encounter between the people's imaginative faculties as they engage an expanded sense of poetry is itself part of a historical transformation of the relationship between the life of the people and the means of vision. Looking to the past from the contingency and exigency of the present, then, *Pandaemonium* composes from its documents of conflict an unwritten apostrophe addressed to *a people that might come*. And as in a prism, the act of looking at images from multiple angles — past experiences, dreams and buildings — transforms into a multi-layered vector of desire aimed at the mythic unity of experience.¹¹⁶

The combination of the heroic and mythic with the everyday is the subject of the next chapter on Jennings's wartime documentaries. Here, in a state of emergency, we will see again how Jennings combines what I have considered as the rationality and Classicism of the "Culture and Society" tradition with a post-Romantic Surrealist passion for both myth and rupture. While Jennings is indeed interested in a Surrealist kind of rupture of routine in *Pandaemonium* and the wartime films, then, he is also concerned with presenting the imagination as a function of human life, of the people (and of the species), as it adapts to the strange routinization of emergency (in the form of expropriation, alienation, the Blitz, etc.) brought about by industrialization and the sweeping social and cultural changes that came with it, including both democracy and the potential for industrialized war carried out at all levels of life. In the next chapter we will also see how the poet documents and transforms the population as the targeted life of total war into the collective experience of the people: adaptive agents of conflict who take their everyday (national) life as the site of resistance against death.

¹¹⁶ We might see this new myth as a hope for the future. For more on the importance of the prism as an emblem of the poet's vision see Chapter Two of this dissertation, where I discuss Jennings's painting *Tableaux Parisiens* (1939).

4

States of Emergency and Enchantment: The Biopoetics of the People's Total War

*...great cites, such as London, will be attacked from the air
... Picture, if you will, what the result will be: London for
several days will be one vast raving Bedlam, the hospitals
will be stormed, traffic will cease, the homeless will shriek for
help, the city will be in Pandemonium.*

— J.F.C. Fuller, *The Reformation of War*

*I say that one must be a seer, one must make oneself a
seer.*

— Arthur Rimbaud, "Letter to Paul Demeny,
Charleville May 15, 1871"

In what has become the single most cited appraisal of his body of work, filmmaker and critic Lindsay Anderson opined that "it might reasonably be contended that Humphrey Jennings is the only real poet the British cinema has yet produced." As Anderson's 1961 pronouncement suggests, it is for his wartime documentary films that Jennings is still best remembered, for "it was the war [the Second World War] that fertilized his talent and created the conditions in which his best work was produced."¹ Jennings was already working for the General Post Office when he made *Spare Time* (1939), his portrait of leisure time and everyday life in the industrial north of England, so he had already established himself as an accomplished documentarian when, alongside other cultural workers, he transitioned to contributing to the war effort. Under the auspices of the Crown Film Unit, newly commissioned by the British Government's Ministry of Information in 1940, Jennings would produce a number of the best-known documentary films of

¹ Lindsay Anderson, "Only Connect: Some Aspects of the Work of Humphrey Jennings," *Film Quarterly* 15.2 Special Humphrey Jennings Issue (Winter 1961-1962): 5; reprinted in *Humphrey Jennings: Film-maker, Painter, Poet, 2nd Edition*, ed. Marie-Louise Jennings (London: British Film Institute, 2014), 87.

the period, including *Listen to Britain* (1942) and *Fires Were Started* (1943).² These films are now considered canonical works in their contribution to what is understood as the “myth” of “the people’s war.”³

As Angus Calder points out in his classic study, and later historians also agree, the notion of “the people’s war” was an ideological construction developed during the Second World War to unite the nation (England and the United Kingdom) under the banner of a collective identity with a shared sense of purpose in resisting a common enemy. Quoting from one of Churchill’s

² John Grierson recruited Jennings to the General Post Office (GPO) with Alberto Cavalcanti’s recommendation in 1934. The GPO became the Crown Film Unit in 1940 under the British Government’s Ministry of Information during the Second World War. For an overview of British cinema during the war see, for example, Roger Mavell, *Films and the Second World War* (New York: Dell 1976); Tom Harrisson, “Films and the Home Front – The Evaluation of their effectiveness by Mass Observation,” *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918–45*, ed. Nicholas Pronay and D. W. Spring (London: Macmillan, 1982), 234-245; Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, “Representing the Nation: British Documentary Film, 1930-1945,” *Screen* xxvi.1 (1985): 21-33; Sam Kula, “Theatres of War: Propaganda 1918–45,” *Archivaria* 20 (Summer 1985): 172-178; Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War* (Oxford, 1986); *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Philip M. Taylor (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988); Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1939–48* (London: Routledge, 1989); James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939–45* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co., 1998); and Neil Rattigan, *This Is England: British Film and the People’s War, 1939–1945* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001). There has been extensive discussion of Jennings’s wartime films. See, for example, Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, ‘Representing the Nation: British Documentary Film, 1930–45’, *Screen* 26 (1985): 21-33; Malcolm Smith, “Narrative and Ideology in *Listen to Britain*,” in *Narrative: From Malory to Motion Pictures*, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), 145–57; Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “Humphrey Jennings: Surrealist Observer,” in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. Charles Barr (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 321-333; Bjorn Sorensen, “The Documentary Aesthetics of Humphrey Jennings,” in *Documentary and the Mass Media*, ed. John Corner (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), 47-64; Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *London’s Burning: Life, Death and Art in the Second World War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 71–125; Jim Leach, “The Poetics of Propaganda: Humphrey Jennings and *Listen to Britain*,” in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 154-170; Brian Winston, *Fires Were Started* (London: British Film Institute, 1999); Geoff Eley, “Finding the People’s War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II,” *American Historical Review* 106:3 (2001): 818-38; Adrian Smith, “Humphrey Jennings’s *Heart of Britain* (1941): A Reassessment,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 23: 2 (2003): 133–51; Jeffrey Richards, “Humphrey Jennings: The Poet as Propagandist,” in *War and the Media: Reportage and Propaganda, 1900–2003*, ed. Mark Connelly and David Welch (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 127–38; Keith Beattie, *Humphrey Jennings* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010); Philip C. Logan, *Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film: A Re-Assessment* (Farnham, 2011), 121–282; Wendy Webster, “*The Silent Village*: The GPO Film Unit Goes to War,” in *The Projection of Britain: A History of the GPO Film Unit*, ed. Scott Anthony and James G. Mansell (London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2011), 263–71; and James Chapman, “Documentary at War,” in *A New History of British Documentary* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 90–122.

³ Don Macpherson summarizes this reading of Jennings’s films when he argues that “[Jennings] drew upon a timeless myth of an essential Britishness, a ‘national unconscious’ which united the nation seemingly without itself being conscious of it.” See Don Macpherson, “Nation, Mandate, Memory,” in *The Camerawork Essays: Context and Meaning in Photography*, ed. Jessica Evans (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997), 150.

speeches from the early days of the war, Calder captures this mythical vision in its inclusive, totalizing logic:

“This is a war of the unknown warriors,” Churchill told the world in the summer of 1940. Subsequently, he contrasted this Second World War with the First. “The whole of the warring nations are engaged, not only soldiers, but the entire population, men, women and children. The fronts are everywhere. The trenches are dug in the towns and streets. Every village is fortified. Every road is barred. The front lines run through the factories. The workmen are soldiers with different weapons but the same courage.” In 1940 and the years which followed, the people of Britain were protagonists in their own history in a fashion never known before; hence the title of this book, *The People’s War*.⁴

Churchill’s image of a united Britain, Calder argues, depended upon a disavowal of internal divisions (of class, region, race, sex, etc.) in the country. The exigencies of the war relied on this mythical notion of the people as a force that could transcend its differences and realize a deeper national essence of shared “Britishness.” George Orwell, in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, describes this as “the tendency of nearly all [the nation’s] inhabitants to feel alike and act together in moments of supreme crisis.”⁵ The “emotional unity” that finds expression during the crisis of war, Orwell argues, emerges from the ordinary, unheroic character of British everyday life in spite of the class divisions and internal diversity of the people. As Sonya Rose observes, “Such portraits of national unity suggested...that those who best represented Britain at war were not exceptional individuals but rather were everyday, ordinary people; those who were ‘doing their bit.’”⁶ Thus the Second World War brought into immediate contact the exceptional event — the

⁴ Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1969), 17. See also Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1994), in which he takes a more critical view of the British state’s wartime mythologies.

⁵ George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*; cited in Sonya O. Rose, *Which People’s War?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

⁶ Rose, *Which People’s War?*, 5. In her incisive historical analysis, Rose unpacks the myth of national unity deployed in wartime Britain, particularly the image of “the people” embodied in an idealized image of English manhood. This privileged image was predicated on the subordination and marginalization of other social groups, including women and colonial immigrants. Issues of gender and race, alongside those of region and class, are certainly of fundamental concern to any analysis of Jennings’s biopoetics of everyday life; and while space does not permit me to explicitly develop that analysis here, these issues nevertheless inform the biopolitical background of this chapter.

“supreme crisis” of war — with the most quotidian dimensions of modern British life exemplified in the rhetorical figure of “ordinary people.”

With this sense of the “ordinary” protagonist (and, in a sense, the ordinary *as* protagonist) in mind, my understanding of the conditions for Jennings’s cinema of poetry extends beyond the immediate circumstances of wartime mobilization and the mythical distinction of national character into the legacy of the Industrial Revolution and its effects on the everyday life of the British people. As I showed in the previous chapter on *Pandaemonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, Jennings argues that poetry and the experience of the people in everyday life were separated from each other in the conflicts of industrial modernity. Through a montage of “images” as if taken from an “unrolling film,” *Pandaemonium* presents how technology, scientific observation and instrumental rationality and realism displaced the poetic transmission of knowledge and experience.⁷ I read *Pandaemonium* for how it also articulates a struggle parallel to that between poetry and science: the emerging biopolitical conflict between the people as democratic authority and self-determining subject, on the one hand, and the population as mass (and micro) object of power on the other. In the process of constructing *Pandaemonium*, however, Jennings also attempted to redeem what he calls the poetic “means of vision” by bringing science and poetry together, making them co-constitutive of his “imaginative history.” This led to my conclusion that, by bringing together a diverse range of texts as images, Jennings also imagines the people as the historically emergent protagonist of industrial modernity, developing a shareable and intergenerational image of itself as the “heroic” subject of transformation preparing for a future *to come*.

⁷ Humphrey Jennings, “Introduction,” in *Pandaemonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, ed. Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (New York: The Free Press, 1985), xxxv.

With the conflicts documented in *Pandaemonium* in the background, then, in this chapter I seek to understand the relationship between Jennings's documentary films and the industrial-wartime conditions that allowed for his poetic vision of "the people's war" to flourish. If *Pandaemonium* is about how poetry and the people adapted to "the coming of the machine," then, following Anderson's point, it becomes clearer how Britain's declaration of war on Germany on September 3, 1939, and the events that followed (including the Blitz of 1940-41), was, for Jennings, conditioned by the massive social and cultural transformations of everyday life brought about by the Industrial Revolution. It is also relevant to remind ourselves, then, that Jennings began compiling his images for *Pandaemonium* in the late 1930s, with the prospect of total war looming on the horizon.⁸ Conditioned by the modern conjunction of industry, economy, nationalism and empire, the infernal war machine of the twentieth century turned its all-encompassing vision toward entire populations as both the agent and target of destruction.⁹ The monuments of the Industrial Revolution, in this respect, are to be found in more than railways, airplanes, automobiles and the great urban architectural achievements that combine prosperity with blight; they are equally to be found in the industrial objects of modern warfare like machine guns and fallout shelters, tanks and toxic gases, concentration camps and atomic bombs — the

⁸ Paul K. Saint-Amour argues that the "expression 'total war' appears to have been coined by the right-wing French editor Léon Daudet in March 1916, during the early weeks of the Battle of Verdun" (58). And he further explains the expansive scale and biopolitical intensity of the concept: "For Daudet, with his blood-and-soil organicist view of the nation, modern war-fare had become total partly in intensity, demanding that one extinguish rather than merely defeat the enemy. But it was the metaphors of extent — the claim that war must encompass every space, every civil system, every aspect of national life — that was uppermost in his definition of total war, and would preoccupy military theorists for most of the interwar period" (59). See Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.).

⁹ See Richard Overy, "Front Line II: Civilians at War," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of World War II* ed. Richard Overy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): "The concept of 'total war,' elaborated in the inter-war years, endorsed the view that in any future conflict national war would be fought between whole populations and not just the fighting services. Those who produced arms, drove trains, ploughed the fields, or ran the bureaucracy were regarded as contributors to the national war effort, and as such legitimate objects of war. National governments also viewed their own societies that way" (293).

mass mobilization of technologies of war for the purposes of national defence and the obliteration of the enemy. The extreme and exceptional measures of war, that is, *total war*, share the same genealogical-archaeological background in “the machine” as the ordinary features of modern life.

This chapter looks at Jennings’s poetic contribution to the British war effort through the dual lens of *emergency* and *enchantment*, two notions I expand upon below. Through these two concepts, in addition to related notions like the coincidence and the (Rimbaud-inspired) seer, I consider how Jennings’s poetic work developed into what I call a biopoetic vision of the everyday life of the people in a state of total war. Thinking Jennings’s biopoetics both parallel and in contrast to the conjunction of state sovereignty and biopolitics, my analysis focusses on a selection of Jennings’s work for how its visionary encounter with the exigencies of wartime emergency generates possibilities for sharing in collective experience, in democratic, popular and aesthetic — in short, poetic — terms. The two poems and one film I concentrate on — “I See London” (1941), “I Saw Harlequin” (1943) and *London Can Take It!* (1940), respectively — are from the early to middle stages of the war, and in this way they represent (for Jennings) the height of both the danger as well as the optimism that enduring and surviving the bombings inspired in the people. While not all of these works were made during the Blitz, most of them were, and so the experience of (the enduring menace of) aerial bombing and its attendant social and psychological effects plays a role in my analysis. The war *effort* of the people, then, is shown in Jennings’s work to be simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, interconnected with both the labour and leisure of everyday life and with poetry’s ability to respond to, to metabolize, sudden and emergent affects and events. Before turning to Jennings’s work specifically, my argument

proceeds by considering the biopolitical landscape of wartime emergency in Britain, drawing out some of its consequences for the poetic representation of the everyday life of the people.

The People's Total War

Total war, as Michel Foucault has pointed out, fulfills the biopolitical ambitions of industrial modernity and its technologies of power, in which democratic and totalitarian (absolutist) forms of government intersect at the point of taking *life itself* (that of the species and the population) as their object. "And through a turn that closes the circle," Foucault writes, "as the technology of wars has caused [societies] to tend increasingly toward all-out destruction, the decision that initiates them and the one that terminates them are in fact increasingly informed by *the naked question of survival*."¹⁰ Under the biopolitical conditions of total war, as Julien Reid suggests, this "naked question of survival" collapses the life-struggle of a people into that of the care of — and for — the modern nation-state:

The dominant discourse of war is no longer that of a subjugated group whose politics is an expression of a will to destroy the unity of the state and subject it to its own particular ends. The newly dominant discourse is that of a society conceived in alliance with the state, that pertains to serve the state, and which duly assumes the position of the state itself; under threat the nation/population/society is constituted in danger, imperilled by enemies whose threat is defined by the degrees to which they differ from whatever biopolitical principles define the society of the state. Hence the coming into being of the idea that "society must be defended."¹¹

While Foucault sees the dynamics of total war in terms of a biopolitical inscription of life that displaces the older order of sovereign power's decisions upon life and death, on the homefront of Britain a hybrid of sovereign and biopolitical power took effect in the declaration

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "The Will to Knowledge," in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), 137. My emphasis. See also Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended, Lecture Series at the College de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

¹¹ Julian Reid, "Life Struggles: War, Discipline, and Biopolitics in the Thought of Michel Foucault," *Social Text* 86, 24:1 (Spring 2006): 147.

of the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act by the British government on August 24, 1939. This act is of particular significance in that it authorized the state to regulate a wide swathe of activities and objects in everyday life, precisely deciding on matters of life and death in the name of national security. With the declaration of these emergency measures, the British government was tasked with overseeing virtually all aspects of life pertaining to "public safety, the defence of the realm, the maintenance of public order, the efficient prosecution of the war, and the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community."¹² In this way, the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act brought into the open the latent condition of sovereign power behind both modern totalitarian and democratic forms of government, that of what Giorgio Agamben identifies as the decision on the state of exception.¹³

The biopolitical logic of exception, as Agamben understands it, suspends the ordinary workings of the juridical order in order to respond to a perceived threat, whether external or internal, to the *nomos* of the state. In the state of the suspension of law, in which the executive power seizes sovereign control over the other bodies and functions of government, sovereign power directly applies itself to "bare life," taking it into a "zone of indistinction" that blurs the division between what the ancient Greeks called *bios*, the qualified life of the citizen, and *zoe*, the life common to all living things.¹⁴ This blurring of boundaries further encompasses what in modern life is understood as the distinction between public and private existence. In extending its power directly over the everyday life of the people, then, the state reveals itself as a

¹² John Eaves, Jr., *Emergency Powers and the Parliamentary Watchdog: Parliament and the Executive in Great Britain, 1939-1951* (London, 1957), 15-16. See also W. I. Jennings, "The Rule of Law in Total War," *The Yale Law Journal*, 50:3 (1941): 365-386.

¹³ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1.

technology of biopower in the service of sovereignty: “Placing biological life at the center of its calculations, the modern State [...] does nothing other than bring to light the secret tie uniting [sovereign] power and bare life.”¹⁵

Under the conditions of total war and the state of emergency and exception realized to better perpetrate the war against Germany (and quash internal strife), the British state effectively transformed the nation into what Agamben calls “the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West”: the camp.¹⁶ Among the ways that Agamben defines the camp is how, in contrast to otherwise similar spaces and logics like the prison, it topologically unfolds as a “dislocating localization” within the normal order, occupying (colonizing) the same spaces as the home, the workplace, the city square and the public park, for example. “The juridical constellation that guides the camp is martial law and the state of siege,” Agamben writes, and in this way its logic of surveillance and enclosure extends across the terrain of everyday life to include, in principle, any and all resources of the country and its inhabitants.¹⁷ The state of siege, moreover, is particularly notable in this context for how it confers upon the British nation a perhaps more specific variation of the camp as *nomos*: the *war camp*. Military and industrial goals coalesce in the war camp, harnessing together the life and labour of the people as war workers. As war

¹⁵ Ibid., 6. In *State of Exception*, Agamben further argues: “This transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government threatens radically to alter — in fact, has already palpably altered — the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms. Indeed, from this perspective, the state of exception appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism” (3). For a critical overview of the extended life of emergency powers as a (bio-)political technique of government in postwar Britain see Tony Bunyan, *The Political Police in Britain* (London: Quartet Books, 1977).

¹⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20. Agamben further argues: “The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (168-9). In *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Patrick Deer makes a powerful argument for how the British state’s use of emergency and exceptional powers on the home front and in everyday life followed the same “strategic” perspective of power deployed in the “policing” of the indigenous populations of the British colonies. For a history of the development of the camp as a ubiquitous tool of governance and biopolitical control in the British imperial project see Aidan Forth, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain’s Empire Of Camps, 1876-1903* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

historian Richard Overy notes, “Mobilization of labour resources, personal wealth, and essential supplies transformed the home fronts temporarily into large war camps in which all citizens were supposed to share in the hardships and sacrifices that total war required of them. The national community became an exclusive zone, committed to the search for national victory.”¹⁸ A troubling question: Did democratic Britain have to become totalitarian in order to combat totalitarianism?

There are two further biopolitical points to add to Overy’s observation: the first is that, for the people whose bare life was exposed to both sovereign power and the threat of imminent destruction by the enemy, survival meant national victory; and the second is that, as Selina Todd argues in *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class*, the life that was sacrificed for the hardships of war in Britain was firstly that of the working class.¹⁹ At the same time, Todd further argues, working people (what she calls the “war workers”) “were now recognized by politicians and the press as being the backbone of the nation, on whose labour Britain depended. Their interests became synonymous with those of the country.”²⁰ Here, then, we see both the modern biopolitical *distinction between* and the exception’s *blurring of* the categories of the people (the citizen) and the population (the worker) as the interests and needs of the worker came to intersect with the state’s care for the life of the citizen and its symbolic place in the nation. Todd’s point is

¹⁸ Richard Overy, “Front Line II,” 293. Overy adds: “Those deemed not to belong to that community were rounded up and deported or sent to camps, or, in the most extreme case of the European Jews, exterminated” (293).

¹⁹ Todd states: “To call the Second World War ‘the people’s war’ does not mean that Britain became classless. The government sought to win the war by demanding ever greater sacrifice and effort from the workers in the factories and from the ordinary troops. Only when the crisis absolutely demanded it did they oblige middle- and upper-class people to share in some of these sacrifices. Most politicians had little interest in making Britain a more equal society. In fact, their notion of how to win the war was predicated on the assumption that economic inequality was a natural and helpful part of British life. The country had millions of people who needed to work for a living, therefore they could be the war workers” (120). Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class* (London: John Murray, 2001).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

particularly important for my argument, however, because it helps me connect the sovereign biopolitics of total war and national emergency to Jennings's poetic project as he outlines it in *Pandaemonium* and practices it in his wartime films: that of reestablishing the link between the poetic imagination (the means of vision) and the everyday life of the people.

The history of the Industrial Revolution, as Jennings presents it in *Pandaemonium*, is driven by a series of conflicts between classes and systems of belief. These conflicts were themselves conditioned by the breakdown of the premodern belief system that united the life of the people, its biological and meaningful existence, with the symbolic figure of the king through the mediation of poetry, which took as its subject matter what Jennings refers to as "vital everyday facts and necessities — *religion* — the cosmos and the fate of the human soul. . . . *kingship* — the character of the man in power and the fate of the people under him."²¹ Following this line of reasoning, in bringing the very life of the people and the population into the open, its care and its survival immediately into state power's area of concern, I argue that the Second World War represented for Jennings the culmination of certain of the conflicts of the Industrial Revolution, including the fraught relationship between poetry and science.²²

In this sense, the sovereign decision operative in the state of emergency and total war seemed at once to exacerbate and to provide a possibility for addressing the division formed in the Industrial Revolution between the life of the people and the use-value of poetry to that life. And further, perhaps the conditions of total war brought into the open, in a way only the First World War previously suggested on the European continent, the full stakes of the industrially-conditioned struggle between (images of) the people and the population. If, as Todd argues, the

²¹ Jennings, "Introduction," in *Pandaemonium*, xxxvii.

²² On this problematic see I. A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (London: Norton, 1926).

British state instrumentalized the life and labour of the industrial proletariat in its technologies of total war while at the same time realizing how its interests depended upon the consent of that same proletariat, then Jennings would seem to have found an institutional base (the Crown Film Unit) from which to give his vision of poetry's use a renewed connection to the life of the people. Recognizing the central importance of the people in the war effort, the state realized that it needed to garner support for the war as well as maintain morale amongst the people. This is where Jennings's vision of poetry found its decisive sense of purpose, for with the declaration of the state of exception poetry became imbricated with the problem of biopolitical sovereignty (as well as that of democratic governance) in engaging with the people's needs and imaginations.

In becoming connected to the "vital everyday facts and necessities" of the people as the subjects *and* objects of total war, that which was previously excluded from poetry and from politics as usual became its *raison d'être*. In this light, Jennings's wartime documentaries can be considered to be a significant contribution to the biopolitical state apparatus's production of what Nikolas Rose calls "governable subjectivities," helping to make citizen-workers more compliant in personally and collectively consenting to and sacrificing themselves for the war effort.²³ But at the same time, Jennings's films, finding meaning and use in the exigencies of national crisis, must also be considered part of a process of reconnecting the imaginative power of poetry to the experience of the people. In their links with the machinery of the state *and* the life of the people, then, Jennings's wartime cinematic poems embody that particularly modern democratic struggle

²³ Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 47. For an analysis of Mass-Observation's role in making "citizen-workers" amenable to the *total* war effort relevant to my discussion of the morale work of Jennings's films see Tony Bennett, Fiona Cameron, Nélia Dias, Ben Dibley, Rodney Harrison, Ira Jacknis, and Conal McCarthy, *Collecting, Ordering, Governing: Anthropology, Museums, and Liberal Government* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

to find, as Agamben puts it, "the *bios* of *zoe*," that is, humanity's irreducible form-of-life.²⁴ While this form-of-life might be an unreachable horizon for any representation, Jennings nevertheless locates the war effort — *what* is being fought for as well as *how* it is fought for — in the people's everyday lives and habits, including its imaginative capacities as they find expression in ordinary activities charged with a sense of emergency. Total war had become a reality of modern life and poetry had to respond.

Taking the imagination as fundamental to the human experience, Jennings's poetic images thus care for the form, the way of life of the people as it adapts to a moment of danger. In this way, Jennings draws attention to more than just the bodies and activities of the population devoted to the discipline of the total war camp; he imagines the movement of the people in the state of emergency as a meaningful biopoetic experience of life.²⁵ I use the notion of enchantment, then, as both a companion and a counterpoint to emergency, as a way of articulating this renewed interconnectedness between imagination and life, poetry and collective experience, in the state of total war.²⁶ Observations of otherwise ordinary events and objects acquire a heightened power of scrutiny and purpose, interconnectedness and value, in this state

²⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9. "By the term form-of-life," as Agamben writes elsewhere, "I mean a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked [bare] life." See Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3-4.

²⁵ In this respect, Jennings's grasp of the revelatory experience of the wartime state of emergency as an uncovering of the normalization of life under the domination of the machine bears similarity with Martin Heidegger's criticism of modernity for its forgetting of Being and life's domination by technological enframing. In the 1930s, after the Nazis came to power, Heidegger also aligned himself (for a period) with the state-form of his nation (National Socialism), seeing in it some embodiment of the spirit of the people. In this way, Heidegger's own attempt to move beyond the nihilism of modern philosophy through poetry intersects with Jennings's own distinctive project — and both can be seen to have developed a biopoetic response to the biopolitics of industrial modernity. For an important discussion of Heidegger's philosophical conception of poetry (and vice versa) in relation to the concept of the people see James Phillips, *Heidegger's Volk: Between National Socialism and Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

²⁶ The most well-known use of the term enchantment still belongs to Max Weber, who argued that because of increasing rationalization and secularization "the fate of our times is characterized, above all, by the disenchantment of the world." This means that modern people are losing a sense of the religious and the sacred — of enchantment — in their institutions and their everyday lives. See Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" [1918-1919], in *For Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 155.

of emergency and enchantment. In this sense, enchantment is a biopoetic twist on the reemergence and reassertion of sovereignty and its rationalizing decisions on the life and death of the exposed life of the people.²⁷ Before turning to examples of Jennings's poetic care for the "enchanted" form of life of the people in his wartime poetry and documentary films, then, let us first more clearly establish the nature of his biopoetic vocation, including the ideological and biopolitical tensions running through it, by considering how it has been conceptualized in recent critical literature on his films.

The Uses and Abuses of Poetry in Wartime

In many ways the ideology of "the people's war" and the realist principles of the British documentary film tradition as it was established under John Grierson in the 1930s mutually validated one another in their shared concern with bringing the working class into the national-symbolic fold of citizenship. In this consensus, documentary realism helped propagate the state's agenda of integrating the quotidian and the ordinary into the war effort and the national state of emergency. With its well-established focus on the working classes and ordinary life, documentary realism thus provided a useful set of tools for naturalizing the myth of an essential ("real") British identity beneath the fleeting surface of difference and division. James Chapman argues along these lines that "the ideology of the people's war which emerges from wartime films is one of national unity and social cohesion: class differences have all but disappeared and have been replaced instead by a democratic sense of community and comradeship."²⁸

²⁷ Michael Saler argues that, alongside thinkers and artists like Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and the French Surrealists, Jennings was "among the early-twentieth-century intellectuals in Europe who tried to reconcile the processes of modernity with the idea of enchantment, although until recently their project tended to be overshadowed by the greater attention given to the 'cultural pessimists'" (705). Michael Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review," *The American Historical Review* 111.3 (June 2006): 692-716.

²⁸ James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda*, 161.

On a certain level, Jennings also participated in the conjunction of documentary realism, broadly speaking, and the ideology of the people's war and its focus on the ordinary and the idea of community, particularly in his earlier wartime films. But his most significant contribution was to bring avant-garde aesthetic strategies, particularly those he developed in the late 1930s from his participation in the British Surrealist movement and his experiments with historical collage and poetic reports, to the documentary representation of everyday life under the conditions of national emergency. While the ideological underpinnings of British national cinema's alignment with realism have been well-documented and discussed (and often at the expense of excluding or misrepresenting films and filmmakers that do not fall into the neat category of realism), the intersection of other modes of cinematic engagement (including more complex or contradictory forms of realism, such as Jennings's particular documentary development of Surrealism) with questions of the nation and citizenship has thus far received less attention. That said, it is precisely for aligning his avant-gardism with the purposes of the state during the Second World War that Jennings has been criticized.

Three important critiques of Jennings have been developed in this regard by Andrew Britton, Thomas S. Davis and Benjamin Kohlmann. While Britton's critique was originally published in the 1980s and focusses almost exclusively on Jennings's wartime films, Davis's and Kohlmann's more recent work in modernism studies expands the discussion to include Jennings's Surrealist visual and literary activities in the 1930s, including his time spent with the avant-garde social research organization Mass-Observation (M-O). Nevertheless, each of their different approaches share common concerns. Britton and Davis, for instance, both argue that Jennings appropriated modernist and avant-garde aesthetic strategies for the ultimate purpose of

controlling and managing the contradictions and revolutionary potential of everyday life. Linking Jennings's films to the conservative legacy of the Griersonian documentary tradition, Britton argues that Jennings's "enthusiasm for 'the people' and 'the common Man' and [his] conviction of 'the dignity of the worker' absolutely depended on the common Man's being safely contained by the social order of the capitalist nation state."²⁹ In a similar fashion, Davis positions Jennings's wartime films relative to his earlier involvement with M-O and its "outward turn" of deploying avant-garde strategies to the study of everyday life. Echoing Foucault's diagnosis of biopolitical modernity, Davis argues that M-O's "published works draw on the aesthetic energies of surrealism to measure (and extend) the reach of political power into everyday life."³⁰ He contends that the aesthetic innovations of Jennings's wartime film *Listen to Britain*, in particular, served to "normalize the imperial and domestic policies of the British state" in the interest of what he calls "the documentary's liberal avant-garde project" of "reconciliation" between contesting political actors.³¹ Reconciliation, in contrast to the critical aesthetics of "emancipation" and "separation," Davis argues, "deprives the aesthetic of its adversarial position" and promotes the rationalizing function of art, a depoliticized consensus.³² Finally, in his analysis of M-O and Jennings's interest in transforming alienated modern experience into "popular poetry" (which anticipates his work in documentary film), Kohlmann recognizes that

²⁹ Andrew Britton, "Their Finest Hour: Humphrey Jennings and the British Imperial Myth of World War II," in *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 311.

³⁰ Thomas S. Davis, *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 22. As Michel Foucault puts it in "Lives of Infamous Men," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 2000), in biopolitical modernity a "whole political network became interwoven with the fabric of everyday life" (159).

³¹ Davis, *The Extinct Scene*, 22, 31.

³² *Ibid.*, 31. It is important to note, however, that in his critique of Jennings as a liberal avant-garde conformist Davis never mentions Jennings's *Pandaemonium* project — a project that, arguably, does indeed generate dissensus regarding the effects of the industrial revolution through both its editorial selections and comments as well as its compositional method of montage and collage.

Jennings did indeed hold “Surrealist and utopian hopes for an emancipation of subjectivity from social constraints.” However, in putting the experience of ordinary people into the service of such “extraneous political and aesthetic rationales” as Surrealism, Kohlmann argues, Jennings nevertheless continued “to be troublingly bound up with the bourgeois idea of the poet.”³³ This is to say that, despite, and perhaps even because of, Jennings’s investment in the transformative dimensions of the encounter between poetry and everyday experience, he in fact reproduced the historical division between the poet (or the intellectual) as the privileged, professionalized *subject* (“the one who knows”), on the one hand, and the common people and everyday life as the *object* of knowledge (“the fact that is”) on the other.

While some critics of Jennings's wartime films argue that they displace the internal contradictions of British society onto the struggle against a foreign enemy in the name of a mythical national-imperial consensus, as Britton and Davis do for instance, or reproduce class hierarchies in spite of themselves, as Kohlmann’s critique implies, there are other contemporary critics who see his particular approach in a different light. Kevin Jackson, Jennings’s biographer and the editor of a collection of his critical writings, for example, argues in his essay “The Poet and the Public” that “the possibility of seeing British culture destroyed certainly quickened Jennings’s deep-seated patriotism — like Orwell, he was scornful of those intellectuals who were frightened of the taint of jingoism — and his films can be seen to cherish the fragility of British institutions as much as celebrate their strength.”³⁴ According to Jackson, it was the unique combination of his love of British history, an assemblage of his studies of Classicism and popular

³³ Benjamin Kohlmann, *Committed Styles: Modernism, Politics, and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 129.

³⁴ Kevin Jackson, “Humphrey Jennings: The Poet and the Public,” *Contemporary Record* 7:3 (1993): 673.

and common culture (as can be evinced in *Pandaemonium*), with his interest in Surrealist practice that “gave Jennings the eyes and ears to produce work which was visionary rather than propagandist.”³⁵ I will return to the question of the “visionary” dimension of Jennings wartime poetry and films in a moment, but it is worth stressing how Jennings, in the face of ridicule from his documentary filmmaker contemporaries (including Grierson), was committed to documenting (what he considered to be) the poetic and meaningful aspects of British everyday life in a moment of crisis. As Jackson further argues, “his opponents did not so much deny that his films were poetic as deny that he had any right to indulge in anything as footling as poetry at a time of national emergency.”³⁶

Grounding his analysis in a similar understanding of the aesthetic *and* social value of the poetic approach for wartime morale as Jackson’s, Ben Highmore argues that Jennings structured *Listen to Britain* around the pedagogical and affective use of sound; in particular, a kind of anticipatory sound relative to the image that performs the kinds of attention required for people to remain vigilant for signs of danger.³⁷ Highmore observes that while *Listen to Britain* makes use of a system of cultural symbols that signify “Englishness” and “Britishness” (from the pastoral and industrial settings to the scenes of ordinary people mobilized for war), the “sensory work of images and sound” in the film provides a “phenomenological pedagogy” of attention that differs from the more assertive forms of wartime propaganda. Highmore’s point is significant to understanding Jennings’s poetic documentaries on at least two counts: first, that Jennings’s contribution to the work of maintaining wartime morale was not only more poetically

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ben Highmore, *Cultural Feelings: Mood, Mediation and Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 54-73; see, in particular, 66-73.

and formally innovative than the more traditional realism and didacticism of his documentary contemporaries but also perhaps more effective in achieving its goals; and second, that opposed to merely propagating and appealing to the mythical idea of a “national character” that simply exists and insists in the face of destruction, Jennings demonstrates the necessary “day-to-day labour of morale work, which included ‘experience feeling itself.’”³⁸ It was not an essential national character that helped maintain wartime morale, Highmore tell us, but the cultivation and maintenance of forms of habit and routine that could respond and adapt to the new conditions of national emergency. Jennings’s biopoetic films provide sounds and images of those habits and routines, reflecting the cultural feelings — the transformed sensorium and emotional space — of what we can understand as the phenomenological emergency of everyday life during total war.

Highmore’s conception of “experience feeling itself” resonates with Kent Puckett’s recent discussion of Jennings’s films in *War Pictures: Cinema, Violence and Style in Britain*. In his analysis, Puckett draws on Agamben’s understanding of the state of exception when he describes how the Emergency Powers (Defence) Acts of 1939 and 1940 “did much to blur the line between totalitarianism and democracy in wartime Britain, a fact that aligns Churchill’s government with what Agamben takes as contradictions broadly characteristic of the modern state.”³⁹ But he parts with Agamben’s analysis in the way he considers how the wartime state of emergency in Britain brought the life of the people under the purview of absolutist sovereign power in a self-conscious and paradoxical way. The paradox he describes can be understood in terms of what I referred to earlier as that of fighting totalitarianism in the name of democracy by way of totalitarian (or

³⁸ Ibid., 73.

³⁹ Kent Puckett, *War Pictures: Cinema, Violence and Style in Britain, 1939-1945* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 14.

absolutist and totalizing) means. “What is striking about the British experience of paradox,” Puckett writes,

is that it was experienced as a known, conscious, quotidian, but no less painful thing. The shared and mind-bending sense that cherished values would have to be suspended in order to protect exactly those values was not an unconscious or distorted or latent content during the war. It was...what a lot of ordinary people thought and to one another about the war while it was happening.⁴⁰

Puckett contends that some of the strongest examples of this paradox are to be found in Jennings’s wartime films, which are informed by what he understands as a dialectic of democratic particularity and national homogeneity. In films such as *London Can Take it!*, *Words for Battle*, *Listen to Britain* and *Fires Were Started*, Jennings (alongside his editor Stewart McAllister) constructs an image of Britain as an “internally differentiated and democratic totality.” “In each case,” he goes on, “Jennings uses techniques of collage, montage, conceptual juxtaposition, and the chance encounter in order to capture the feel of particulars that both add up to and critically exceed a particular aesthetic, social, or historical whole.”⁴¹ An open totality composed of contradictions and coincidences, but a totality nonetheless, Jennings’s films provided a mediated poetic space where the experience of wartime paradoxes could itself be reflected on.

Bringing Highmore’s insights together with Puckett’s “internally differentiated and democratic totality” and Jackson’s emphasis on Jennings’s unashamed care for the “fragility” and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 19. Puckett adds: “As opposed, then, to following Agamben and seeing the double bind of total war as a kind of structuring and preconditional secret, as wartime Britain’s political unconscious, I want rather to understand what it meant that so difficult a paradox could and did circulate as the articulate and confounding stuff of everyday life during the war” (19).

⁴¹ Ibid., 13-14. On Jennings’s *London Can Take It!*, for example, Puckett observes: “Individual images — of people walking, sleeping, shopping, talking, stepping through a shattered storefront, clearing away rubble — produce a sense not only of London’s ability to ‘take it’ but also of its sheer democratic variety” (14). For a contrasting view of *London Can Take It!*, one that argues that the film’s rhetoric of a city stoically “taking it” serves in fact to displace and disavow the violence and injury of total war into national myths and abstractions, see Patrick Deer, “Culture in the Blackout: Living through the Blitz, 1940-4,” in *Culture in Camouflage*, 112-119.

“strength” of British institutions brings me back to David Mellor’s important observation that “in effect, and paradoxically, [Jennings’s] new role [as wartime documentarian] returned him to his earlier, scholarly concerns with the classical rhetorics of public address and spectacle — the triumph and elegy — but now inflected within a populist frame.”⁴² Mellor refers here to Jennings’s studies of seventeenth century protestant poets like John Milton and Andrew Marvell, poets who participated in the public affairs of their time through both their poetry and their political tracts.⁴³ Assuming the role of what Mellor calls the poet as “martial laureate,” Jennings drew from Classical poetics — its images and rhetoric of siege and heroism — in order to infuse the struggle of the people in wartime with a sense of historical magnitude. Imbuing the conflict with this sense of Classical heroism, however, does not mean that Jennings neglected the realities of the people and their everyday lives; nor did the internal differences of modern Britain escape his vision. In principle at least, it is not simply that Jennings impressed his heroic vision upon the people’s war, but that the movement of history was itself realized in the democratic habits and morale work of the people themselves. In Jennings’s view, the struggles and triumphs of history are present in the contemporary world, one need only pay attention — this is where his poetic vocation realizes itself. “The cultural plurality of the wartime totality was summed up by Jennings,” Mellor affirms, “as the paradox of the recombined nation: ‘When everybody is in uniform, nobody is; just as punishment creates crime, so also restriction creates freedom.’”⁴⁴ In

⁴² David Mellor, “Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings,” in *Humphrey Jennings: Film-maker, Painter, Poet*, 110.

⁴³ See for example Humphrey Jennings, “Notes on Marvell ‘To His Coy Mistress,’” *Experiment 5* (February 1930): 14-19; reprinted in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1993), 186-191. See also Jennings’s letter to William Empson (n.d.) included in the appendix of Kevin Jackson’s biography of Jennings, in which Jennings discusses how poetry and painting function as mediators or “protectors” between the microcosm (humanity) and the macrocosm (nature) as well as odes to the “combats” of the king as the embodiment of society. Kevin Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings* (London: Picador, 2004), 387-390.

⁴⁴ Mellor, “Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings,” 117-118.

Jennings's poetic vision of wartime emergency, then, the "paradox" of the people's total war is operative in the way the ordinary intersects with the Classical triumph. It can be discerned in those thresholds where the pastoral meets the urban, where popular entertainments communicate with aristocratic sensibilities, and where the humble and the familiar brush up against or overlap with the glorified triumphs of the sovereign. In other terms, democratic everyday life meets the absolutism of total war as the biopolitical governance of the population paradoxically coincides with the popular power of the people seeing themselves in their ordinary heroism.

That said, taking seriously the biopolitical stakes of Davis's criticisms pertaining to the increasing interpenetration of power and everyday life in Jennings's films means considering how his wartime films did indeed cross into that territory of modernism, broadly put, that extended biopolitical power into everyday life. But considered biopoetically alongside the insights of Jackson, Highmore and Puckett, we also see how Jennings's work ran in the opposite direction, extending the power of everyday life into the previously enclosed spheres of poetry and aesthetic activity, acknowledging and registering the democratic weight of the lives and cultures of the modern British people. Thinking about his wartime documentaries as film poems, for example, we better understand how Jennings is able to take into poetry, through the means of documentary recording, the sensory fabric of the modern and popular world of the people, from the sounds of the radio and the music hall, to classic music and political speeches, to the vernacular speech of firemen and soldiers enjoying leisure time. At the same, time, we see how the documentary is itself transformed by a poetic sensibility that *enjoys* the very sensuous texture of the "ordinary" speech of the world. Indeed, it may be Jennings's interest in and respect for the

(extra-)ordinary in a time of emergency and exception that irks those critics more invested in the violent negativity and ruptures of the historical avant-garde and certain strains of modernism.

Along these lines, in *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Liesl Olson considers the relationship between the experience of everyday life and notions of aesthetic autonomy and negativity in modernist fiction, contrasting what she terms the “ordinariness of modernism” with Victor Shklovsky’s notion of *ostranenie*, or defamiliarization, which attempts to “upset habitual modes of perception.” She argues that “the representation of the ordinary *as* ordinary counterbalances the understanding of it as something that demands aesthetic defamiliarization.”⁴⁵ Following the broad contours of Olson’s point, then, I argue that Jennings is a biopoetic “sampler” of aspects of ordinary life, but he is not a radical formalist of total decontextualization (that violent gesture of formalism and the avant-garde) for the purposes of raising life up into art or dissolving art into the shock and flux of life.⁴⁶ Instead, Jennings’s biopoetic vision takes everyday life as something both ordinary and, via poetic transformation (and the revivification of poetry via life), extraordinary. In this way, Jennings’s wartime poetry functions as the biopoetic parallel to that other sampling modality of modernity, biopolitics or biopower, in the way it confronts and adapts to the paradoxes of the British state of wartime emergency.

The Wartime Poet as Seer

The paradox of Jennings, a Surrealist-cum-martial laureate making poetic state documentary films for wartime morale, can be further illuminated by adding to Mellor’s point regarding Jennings’s interest in the magnitudes of Classical triumphs and heroism another of his key

⁴⁵ Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4-5. Italics in original.

⁴⁶ For a classic account of the relationship between the avant-garde and everyday life see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

influences in the 1930s: the prose poetry of the nineteenth century poet Arthur Rimbaud.⁴⁷ Jennings's interest in Rimbaud would also find a new scope of concern in the national emergency of total war, lending what I am here calling his procedure of "sampling" a sense of "enchantment." As I have shown in the previous chapters, Jennings developed a critique of modern poetry and its disconnection from life based, in part, around rethinking the interconnection of imagination and the referential (or documentary) value of poetry.⁴⁸ For it is in his role as a Rimbaudian-documentarian *seer* that Jennings envisions the paradox of the people's total war as a poetic question as much as a social and political reality.⁴⁹ Through a consideration of the Rimbaudian resonances in his wartime poetry, then, we can better understand the syncretic dynamic Jennings explores between patriotic state documentary and internationalist Surrealism.

One of the ways Jennings's wartime poetry partakes of a Rimbaudian vision of everyday life that works as a form of biopoetic sampling parallel to that of biopolitical inscription is in how it approaches the state of emergency as a problem of what can be called the "objective poetry" of the seer. Rimbaud's conception of the seer depended upon the poet's commitment to capturing both the transformative events of his time and the vitality of those events in the very

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the importance of Rimbaud to 1930s British poetry see Jeremy Noel-Tod, "Mass illuminations: Jennings, Madge, Rimbaud and the 'popular' prose poem," *Critical Quarterly* 57.3 (2015): 51-65.

⁴⁸ One of the critiques from the 1930s pertained to the hegemony of Romanticism, to the poet's personality or subjectivity taking central place in the poem. See, for example, Humphrey Jennings, "Eliot and Auden and Shakespeare," *New Verse* 18 (Dec. 1935): 4-7; and Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, "Poetic Description and Mass-Observation," *New Verse* 24 (February-March 1937): 1-6. See Chapter One of this dissertation for an elaboration of this argument. Another critique, articulated clearly in his Introduction to *Pandaemonium*, was that modern poetry turned way from life towards its own self-enclosure. See Chapter Three for more on this point.

⁴⁹ What I seek to understand is how Jennings's wartime films can be criticized in their own time for being too poetic, or of little use, by his documentary comrades, while his fellow Surrealists might think him an all too dutiful agent of the state. If Jennings's wartime films are his great poetic achievement, then it is perhaps because they are themselves estranged from the categories that seek to make them one thing (documentary film, propaganda) or another (poetry, avant-garde experimentation). The people, meanwhile, seemed to have little trouble enjoying his films. So it is with the intention of working through this paradox — or a paradox that is one only insofar as we subscribe to the categories and consensus surrounding documentary or the avant-garde laboured over by the intellectual class — that I consider Jennings's interest in Rimbaud.

form (and deformation) of his poetry — the relations of prosodic and poetic writing, the transfigurations of metaphorical language, the rapid-fire registration of subjects and events as part-objects and flows relative to totalities. As Georges Didi-Huberman explains (citing the poet's own words) in *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions*, Rimbaud conceived of himself as a kind of “reporter,” a “worker” developing an “objective poetry” in response to the revolutionary events surrounding the Paris Commune of 1871:

Against the “insipid ... subjective poetry” of the Romantics, he sought instead (in 1871, at the same time as the “battle of Paris — where so many workers are dying”) to create an “objective poetry” that would be like a “psalm about current events,” like the “Parisian war song” that Rimbaud wrote in tribute to the Communards. For this, it was a matter of “working to make [him] self a seer” and, inseparably, a matter of critiquing the poet's subjectivist position, by assuming his role as an illuminator of history: “It's false to say: I think; one ought to say I am thought. — Forgive the play on words. I is somebody else.”⁵⁰

When the seer is conceived here as an “I” that *is* “thought” and a “somebody else” rather than an autonomous subject, Rimbaud is not merely declaring the poet's role in recording a history-making struggle; just as importantly, he is placing emphasis on the *act* of vision and enunciation, on how “poetic illumination” cannot force the event into already established systems of meaning but calls forth a potentially (self-)destructive activity on the part of the poet-reporter who risks himself in his vital encounter with the referent through language. As an encounter with the unknown powers unleashed by the Communards during the events of 1871, the real of everyday life is observed and declared as such before it is disavowed, as in repression, or its meaning is made immediately legible and obvious, as in the clichés and the stock responses of traditional history. Drawing inspiration from the transformative flux of collective struggle,

⁵⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2018), 227.

Rimbaud's sampled poetic assemblages intermingle linguistic metamorphosis and fevered visions of the body in various stages of disintegration with phrases and slogans picked up from the streets — affect mixed with the “documentary authority” of fragmented scenes caught on the fly. The point of view manifest in Rimbaud's poetry, then, is that of what he calls the “Supreme Scientist,” shocked by the (relatively) immediate charge of a revolutionary transformation in the world; and if the poet brings “illumination” to this event it is because his own powers of vision and energy (as sources of heat and light) are both provoked by and implicated in the very thing he is exposed to and to which he seeks (and works) to bear witness.⁵¹

Jennings pursued a similar although less ecstatic and more Classically modulated strategy of using documentary material in his “impersonal” poetic sensibility based on montage, collage and juxtaposition. Many of his wartime poems were composed by bringing together found objects and visions sampled from the realities of total war (notably the experience of aerial bombing), whose latent social and historical resonances could be illuminated by juxtaposition in the poetic image. “Jennings thought that the image must be discovered not invented,” as Paul C. Ray puts it, and so “the image is impersonal by deliberate assumption: it communicates truth only in the degree that it is collective, public, historical.”⁵² What Jennings has called “coincidences” are at once objectively present (“out there” in the world) and contingent upon a seer in inventorying their emergence. In this sense, Jennings's own power of vision, his own place of enunciation, paradoxically functions to “objectively” register the coincidences of the things of the world — a capacity he both commonly and anonymously shares with anyone else.

⁵¹ On the “Supreme Scientist” see Arthur Rimbaud, “Letter to Paul Demeny, Charleville May 15, 1871,” in *Arthur Rimbaud: Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper Collins, 1975), 116. For more on the seer as a poetic and political activity intimately concerned with transforming production see Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London and New York: Verso, 1989).

⁵² Paul C. Ray, *The Surrealist Movement in England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 179-180.

“Coincidences,” as Jennings wrote in a 1936 article on Surrealism in Britain, “have the infinite freedom of appearing anywhere, anytime, to anyone.”⁵³ Coincidences are thus “discovered” through the imaginative powers of comparison and contrast that anyone, in principle, possesses; and they are shared by way of a logic of juxtaposition based on the internal variations of a poetic assemblage that differs from itself in its very coherence as an image. The recognition of coincidences, then, is less the expression of some kind of national character than the experimental exercise of a *capacity* developed through a historical process of adaptation. This also informed the seer’s vision of a *coming* egalitarian future latent in the horror of war.

As a “heroic” image of the national state of emergency endured as a collective paradox, then, Jennings’s wartime poetry was composed under the strange sign of the coincidence. Discovering a web of coexisting events, times and spaces through a poetic logic of juxtaposition, Jennings brought together an image (or totality) of the people in its democratic difference from itself. If in the 1930s Jennings was “the poet of the deconstruction of visibility,” as Michel Remy put it in reference to Jennings’s experimentation with Classical representational codes and poetic reportage, then this deconstruction was repurposed in total war as a means of collective illumination and mobilization.⁵⁴ In this respect, Jennings’s vision of a wartime Britain linked together through coincidences corresponds with what Elizabeth Sewall understands as Rimbaud’s desire “to create a poem-universe that should contain everything.” An ultimately unachievable goal, this “poem-universe” depends on approximation and coincidence in order to approach its aims:

⁵³ Humphrey Jennings, “Surrealism,” *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* 8 (December 1936): 168; reprinted in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 219-221.

⁵⁴ See Michel Remy, “Biography of Humphrey Jennings” Leicester Galleries: http://www.leicestergalleries.com/index.pl?isa=Metadot::SystemApp::ArtistSearch;op=detail;artist=1297;show_bio=1;print=1

It [would] have to be a universe containing as many things as possible, and since, as we have seen, the actual number of things [would] inevitably be limited, each thing must connect with as many other things as possible. It [would] be a universe in which everything is related to everything else in every possible way, and relevant, i.e. related into the whole. Ideally it would make one perfect system in which each thing was related wholly and perfectly to every other thing. The main characteristics of this universe, then, are that it is all-embracing and multiply interrelated.⁵⁵

This ideal (all-)inclusive system is, in its way, what critics like Davis and Kohlmann focus on in their analyses of the biopolitical (Davis) and class-based (Kohlmann) power dynamics informing Jennings's vision of what Mellor calls "the paradox of the recombined nation."⁵⁶ But this vision is "heroic" precisely in its at once totalizing *and* radically democratic will to inclusivity and non-selectivity. It partakes of the modern question of the legitimacy of the people in how its "all-embracing and multiply interrelated" connections are non-hierarchically distributed between all things. Here, in the emergent form of a poetry shaped by the people's ordinary habits and customs, the sensory and ideological fabric of everyday life communicates meanings on the same stage that was previously reserved for "great men" and their historical triumphs and tragedies.

In this sense, this poem-universe is at once enabled and troubled by the displacement of the master signifier of the monarch as the sovereign symbolic authority presiding over the interconnections between its subjects. This means that the people, as the name for the collective subject that seizes upon and asserts its right to both the sign and the system that includes it, becomes an immanent power for itself. It also means, however, that when all things interconnect and possess equal signifying authority, the symbolic and imaginary relations between all things can themselves become the site of endless competition and dispossession, of civil war, for the

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Sewall, *The Structure of Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1951), 104; cited in Gerard L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Study* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001 [1974]), 162.

⁵⁶ Mellor, "Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings," 117-118.

people in the very system that was made to include them. The modern people have inherited this problem of signification and legitimacy, then, and for this reason they are also haunted by the promise of a new variation on transcendental power, such as a “national essence” (a biopolitical master signifier that takes the place of monarchical subjection), that can ground or mediate the otherwise democratic and anarchic movements of authority and meaning. In this light, enchantment (as interconnection and shared feeling) and the coincidence (as simultaneity and capacity) are means of exercising the radical equality of interrelations and contingent meanings in this reticular poem-universe, but they can also be used by the people themselves in reaction to a crisis of authority brought about by that very equality, becoming themselves instruments of biopolitical enclosure.⁵⁷

Enchanted Visions of Life: “I See London” and “I Saw Harlequin”

We can see Jennings’s development of his own version of the seer, inflected by both his Surrealist and Classical influences, in two of his wartime poems: “I See London” (1941), perhaps his best-known prose poem, and the pastoral ode “I Saw Harlequin” (1943). As their titles clearly announce, both poems are explicitly focussed on the visionary power of the first-person encounter with an object-event — the bombsites and monuments of a city following a night of the Blitz in the former; a cultural-metaphorical figure in a time of both love and war in the latter. Jennings samples from a variety of strangely enchanted coincidences in both poems, creating an objective poetry structured around juxtapositions in order to imaginatively register a collective historical experience. In this way, the poems are all-embracing in Rimbaud’s terms, affirming the

⁵⁷ On the idea of biopolitical enclosure see Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013). I discuss this in Chapter Three.

multiple meanings and interconnections of objects and events in the seer's historically and phenomenologically charged poem-universe.

In "I See London" Jennings structures his poem around acts of seeing, repeatedly returning to the anaphoric phrasing of "I see..." in each of the poem's three sections. The accumulation of sites as sights in the poem generates an image that speaks to both the surface effects and events of the damage brought with the nightly air raids as well as the city's deeper endurance and continuity, shared between historical architectural structures (St Paul's Cathedral) and natural bodies and forces (the River Thames). The first section of the poem is a striking example of how Jennings's use of repetition and juxtaposition communicates the sense of both an observer documenting an objective fact (a place and its monuments) and the event of the poetic imagination experiencing its own powers of vision as part of an emergent, inclusive dialogue with the world it regards:

I see London
I see the dome of Saint Paul's like the forehead of
Darwin
I see London stretching away North and North-East,
along dockside roads and balloon-haunted allotments
Where the black plumes of the horses precede and the
white helmets of the rescue-squad follow.
I see London
I see the grey waters of Thames, like a loving nurse,
unchanged, unruffled, flooding between bridges and washing
up wharf steps — an endless flowing eternity that smooths
away the sorrows of beautiful churches — the pains of time —
the wrecks of artistry along her divine banks — to whom the
strongest towers are but a moment's mark and the deepest-
cleaving bomb an untold regret.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Humphrey Jennings, "I See London," in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 296-297. Leo Mellor usefully discusses the poem in terms of how the wartime context provided Jennings's Surrealism with an overt social content in *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 131-137.

There are a number of clear precedents for Jennings emphasis on the poet's synoptic encounter with the multitudinous sights and sprawling spaces of the city in "I See London." One of the more obvious is William Blake, who wrote "I behold London; a Human awful wonder of God!" in his vision of the city as a giant body in *Jerusalem* (1804) and who deployed anaphoric strategies in his poem "London" from *Songs of Experience* (1794).⁵⁹ Consider the first two stanzas of "London," in which Blake develops his mobile account of desperate urban lives into a multi-sensorial image of the anguish of the multitudes:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear⁶⁰

The first three lines of the second stanza, each one starting with "In every...", are all-embracing in their attempt to account for, to hear and to include, every voice, indeed, every experience of suffering, in the city of London. Blake's vision shares much with Jennings's "I See London," then, from a common set of objective reference points (London, the Thames, etc.) to a similar rhetorical anaphoric style, based on the juxtaposition of a multitude of particularities brought together as vital (stretching, flooding, flowing, wandering, crying) audio-visual phenomena.

⁵⁹ Kenneth J. Robson suggests another possible influence on Jennings's use of anaphoric patterns in "I See London": nursery rhymes. Kenneth J. Robson, "Humphrey Jennings: The Legacy of Feeling," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 7.1 (1982): 42. I will add another possible influence on the anaphor: André Breton's 1931 poem "L'Union Libre" ("Free Union" or "Freedom of Love"), whose use of the repeated phrase "Ma femme..." ("Woman of mine..." or "My woman...") is echoed in Jennings's "I see..."

⁶⁰ William Blake, "London," from *Songs of Experience* (1794) republished in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), 26.

Another precedent, by no means exhaustive, for Jennings's use of the anaphor connected to a vision of national-historical struggle is the famous "One Third of a Nation" speech given by American President Franklin D. Roosevelt as his second inaugural address on January 20, 1937. Anticipating Jennings's emphatically visual survey of the damages wrought by enemy bombs in "I See London," Roosevelt rhetorically casts a synoptic vision across the national terrain, including all of the beleaguered masses of the United States under the presidential gaze as he lays out the stakes of the New Deal. In its repeated refrain of "I see millions..." building up a chain of association to "I see one-third of a nation..." Roosevelt's speech is particularly effective in linking the power of visual identification with government and the magnitude of a national emergency:

I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meagre that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day.

I see millions whose daily lives in city and on farm continue under conditions labeled indecent by a so-called polite society half a century ago. ...

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.⁶¹

As a kind of poetic and political technology, the rhetorical and poetic qualities of anaphoric repetition in the speech embody Roosevelt's democratic vision of social reform. Roosevelt's prose thus takes on the heightened power of poetry in how it addresses the internal disparities of the nation's multitudes by taking them up in a symbolic totality of care — a poem-universe that includes difference precisely through its continuous variations on a national-popular theme.

⁶¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Second Inaugural Address. 'I See One-Third of a Nation Ill-Housed, Ill-Clad, Ill-Nourished,' January 20, 1937," in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, ed. Samuel Rosenman (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 4-5; cited in Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

“I See London” shares in the exhaustive articulation of inclusivity of Blake and Roosevelt, and while, like them, it depicts the destruction and devastation of a place and a people, it also redirects both Blake’s ecstatic vision of an exploited and anguished London and Roosevelt’s publicly alarmist call to the national body toward the wonder and power generated by the strange coincidences that accompanied the bombsites. For Jennings, it was as if the Blitz presented itself as a test of his Surrealist experiments in the 1930s, challenging him to transform the textual and hermeneutic play with reference in his “reports” into “objective poems” addressed to the contemporary struggles of the people. Discussing the juxtaposed coincidences of the third section of “I See London,” Kenneth J. Robson argues that it “conveys Jennings’s style at its purest and most convincing. It combines the emotional detachment of the earlier poems (frequently titled, simply, ‘Reports’) with the deep sympathy for a war-ravaged city.”⁶² While the first part of “I See London” explicitly evokes the continuity of British tradition and history in the image of “the dome of Saint Paul’s like the forehead of Darwin” as part of a shared *mise-en-scène* that endures the ecstatic and terrifying contingency of the nightly air raids, the final section delves into the phenomenological emergency of the aftereffects of the bombing, sampling from a mix of extraordinary visions, notes taken from a surreal journey in the rubble:

I see a thousand strange sights in the streets of London
I see the clock on Bow Church burning in daytime
I see a one-legged man crossing the fire on crutches
I see three negroes and a woman with white face-powder
reading music at half-past three in the morning
I see an ambulance girl with her arms full of roses
I see the burnt drums of the Philharmonic
I see the green leaves of Lincolnshire carried through
London on the wrecked body of an aircraft.⁶³

⁶² Robson, “Humphrey Jennings: Legacy of Feeling,” 42.

⁶³ Jennings, “I See London,” 297.

While commentary on “I See London,” and the third section in particular, typically focusses on the surreal and uncanny dimensions of its imagery, its dissociated and fragmented visions, the poem’s juxtapositions of observations drawn from the realities of the bombsites must be further understood in terms of Jennings’s particular documentary twist on Surrealism. As Paul C. Ray argues, “Jennings seems, then, to be turning surrealism upside down: he finds in the real, concrete object an image of the collective imagination.”⁶⁴ Encountering and transcribing concrete objects and events as images of the collective imagination, Jennings develops an ecstatic vision of documentary reportage. This is paralleled by another dialectic, what Robson understands as the coexistence of “deep sympathy” and “emotional detachment” in the poem, producing images that “convey the sense of something half imagined or dreamed.”⁶⁵ Is this strange poem composed of documentary and half-dreamed visions of London on fire symptomatic of Jennings’s inability to unify experience and feeling around the real threat of death and destruction? Perhaps, but through the anaphoric juxtaposition of these images he also transforms that very experience of destruction into a set of superimpositions, a dream-document, a poem-universe existing precariously between formal dissociation and reference.

“I See London” is thus an important example of the way Jennings articulates the paradoxes of the people’s collective experience of total war — in this instance through the poet’s strangely impersonal declaration of “I see...” In this light, Jennings imagines a metropolis in a state of (extra-)ordinary emergency. This is Blake’s London as it is lived in the contemporary

⁶⁴ Paul C. Ray, *The Surrealist Movement in England*, 180.

⁶⁵ Robson, “Humphrey Jennings: Legacy of Feeling,” 42. Does the poem resolve this tension between sympathy and detachment, document and dream? Difficult to say, for Jennings’s vision is at once obsessive and objective in its mixture of curiosity, sympathy and impersonal distance. It might even be useful to think of the poem in terms of how it uses an aestheticized form of dissociation as a means of psychical and emotional defence against an external threat. Moreover, does the poem’s reference to “three negroes and a woman” reproduce what Rose criticizes as the gendered and racialized myth of the people’s war? Does Jennings mobilize a post-panoptic gaze in the city as camp?

moment: a city of objects and events and people, of collective energy and exhaustion, of the movement of life and its exposure to death, assembled together as referential fragments in the equality of coincidences. “I See London” is thus the document of a seer, one who, alongside a network of public symbols, historical structures and shared meanings and affects, lends his “impersonal” powers of vision and speech to the coincidence of vitality and destruction brought with the bombs.⁶⁶

That said, for all the sense of a spontaneous encounter with images of London during the Blitz conjured in the poem, “I See London” is nevertheless a selected pageantry of samples from everyday life, carefully composed as a meeting point between Classicism and the rapid registration of “objective” visions. In this way, the poem is significant in terms of what I understand as the biopoetic relationship between poetic form and design, on the one hand, and the vitality and contingency, but also the necessity, of life, on the other. It is here that the question of Jennings’s repurposed Classicism comes into play in his poetic compositions and coincidences, his dual commitment to working with shared symbols, historical experiences and public forms alongside contemporary observations sampled from the dynamic flux of ordinary life in a state of emergency. What “I See London” demonstrates, then, is the three-way encounter between an individual with the capacity of vision, a multitude of events and objects (some damaged historical structures, others emergent and mutating forms of life, those that survive in a city transformed by the bomb), and poetic form, a technology of words that must be able to sense and meaningfully process the material, perceptual and psychic realities of life. This dialectic of life and form, reference and composition, informs another of Jennings’s poems explicitly

⁶⁶ If Jennings sees the active presence of the past in the everyday experience of wartime, he nevertheless also confronts the ecstatic and terrifying contingency of the present, that which cannot be totally controlled or predicted.

structured around an act of vision during wartime, the romantic and revolutionary international-pastoral ode, “I Saw Harlequin”.

In this poem, Jennings juxtaposes two different reference points and temporalities into a paratactic pattern based around the use of the anaphor “I saw...” and variations on an apostrophic refrain addressing an unidentified lover. The poem propels itself forward rhythmically by alternating between these two different registers of time and space. The first register draws on visions of various sightings of Harlequin, a comic-romantic figure originating in the Italian Commedia dell’arte (and that migrated to Britain in the seventeenth century), who moves through a series of different historical and geographical sites of popular social and political struggle. The second register, as I already noted, directly addresses a loved one from within the idyllic (but undefined) space of an intimate here and now. In this way, “I Saw Harlequin” disjunctively communicates between the two registers, suggesting links between the historical, public and metaphorical resonances of the first set of references and the embodied contemporaneity and sensuality of the second. The poem, in its entirety:

I saw Harlequin dancing by the factory chimney
 Lay your head low on my arm love
And his name was Chartism
 Close your eyes and rest
I saw Harlequin stepping through the machine-shops
 Hold your breath and wait
I saw Harlequin peeping in the fox-holes of Kharkov
 Hold your hands tight in mine
And his name was the Russian guerrilla
 Open your eyes and watch
I saw Harlequin marching to the Curzon Line
 Raise your head high in the light love
And his name was the Red Army
 Open your eyes and cry
I saw Harlequin waltzing in the cornfields

Lay your head low on my arm love
And his name was the true people
Close your eyes and dream⁶⁷

In her analysis of Rimbaud's late poems, Kristin Ross identifies "a distinct proliferation of geographical terms and proper names: poles and climates, countries, continents and cities — a kind of charting of social movement in geographical terms."⁶⁸ "I Saw Harlequin" includes in its own poem-universe a proliferation of historical events and geo-temporal coordinates, all linked to working-class struggle in some shape or form, including references to spaces of labour like the factory (the chimney and machine-shops) and the farm (cornfields) as well as the Chartist rebellion, a mid-nineteenth century English working-class movement devoted to radical social and political reform. As David Mellor points out, however, it is to the brutal, ongoing struggle between the Nazi war machine and the Red Army on the eastern front (Kharkov, the Curzon Line) that Jennings devotes the most attention.⁶⁹ In a September 1934 letter to his wife, Jennings wrote of the sense of admiration that the Red Army inspired in the British people, indicating a feeling of popular solidarity that seemed to promise international comradeship between nations as the possibility of an end to the war began to appear on the horizon:

The present resilience of Russia — the sheer performance — from Stalingrad to Kharkov and beyond has had an effect I think even greater on us than the original heroic resistance and scorched earth. We ourselves were good at taking a beating. But with all due respect to our great 8th Army — the dazzling Russian advances of this summer: done by mere sheer military means — invoking neither winter, nor mud nor snow nor heat nor terrain nor poor allies nor internal collapse — but by the art of war — this has really opened our mouths. I do not think it has been sufficiently appreciated publicly — but in our hearts we know now that not only have the

⁶⁷ Humphrey Jennings, "I Saw Harlequin" (1943), in *Humphrey Jennings: Film-maker, Painter, Poet*, 57-58.

⁶⁸ Kristin Ross, "Rimbaud and Spatial History," *New Formations* 5 (Summer 1988): 53.

⁶⁹ Mellor, "Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings," 117. As Mellor points out, Jennings accompanied the British Commandos in the first wave of the assault in Sicily in 1943, describing them in a letter to his wife as "artist-warriors" (117).

Russians saved us from the Nazis, but also that they are beating them for us all. I hope and trust we shall not forget.⁷⁰

Jennings's emphasis on what he refers to as "the sheer performance" of the Russian advance provides insight into the other element brought together with the geospatial imaginary of the poem: the dance of Harlequin. A testament to Rimbaud's maxim that "I is somebody else," Harlequin is the threshold figure interposed between the poem's references to the "objective" and social facts of collective struggle and resistance, on the one hand, and the amorous co-presence of the poet and his lover, on the other. In this way, "I Saw Harlequin" is not a haphazard mixing of signs, but a democracy of reference recalibrating the meanings of the world in a state of emergency. Jennings's friend, the British Surrealist and art critic Roland Penrose, provides an image that neatly encapsulates what I understand as the biopoetic significance of this gesture. In his description of Picasso's 1905 painting *Les Saltimbanques*, in which the artist portrays himself in the guise of Harlequin, Penrose observes: "His diamond coat of many colours gives the clue to his nature — *he juggles with the material of life while he himself remains detached.*"⁷¹ Mellor argues that Jennings found visual inspiration for his new role of the martial laureate in the "Heroic Renaissance" of "post-Cubist art," transposing its "additive, free space and revived mythologies" into the poetic utterances of "I Saw Harlequin."⁷² In this sense, in the poem's post-Cubist "juggling" with symbolism and space, Harlequin is a personification of the multitude, paradoxically singular and plural in his "many colours": a dancing image of heroic transformation and international solidarity. The poem thus imagines the political meaning of

⁷⁰ Humphrey Jennings, "Letter to Cicely Jennings, 3 September, 1943," in *Humphrey Jennings: Film-maker, Painter, Poet*, 57.

⁷¹ Roland Penrose, *Picasso: Four Themes* (London: The Folio Society, 1961), n.p. My emphasis.

⁷² Mellor, "Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings," 117.

struggle from within the immediacy of intimate movements; and, vice versa, it disjunctively situates the abstracted pastoral love scene against the socio-historical background of war.

In his study of the tradition of British pantomime and popular culture, John O'Brien argues that the figure of Harlequin in particular is associated with the realm of the body. "No character in the commedia tradition," he writes, "enjoyed a closer relationship to the most elemental needs of the body — eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, rest — than Harlequin, a figure of pure neediness, whose tricks were always in the service of his basic desires for food and sex."⁷³ Mute but expressive in his playful gestures and gags (*lazzi*), Harlequin is devoted to both satisfying his vital needs as well as using them as the very material basis of his performance. Harlequin thus dances with what Penrose calls "the material of life": he is at once driven by bodily needs and, in shamelessly exhibiting and communicating those needs, turns them into objects of enjoyment and means of expression. In other words, Harlequin is the creature who immediately brings together life necessity and pleasure, transforming biological processes into culture and back again. Significantly, O'Brien also notes the lower-class status of Harlequin's vitality, which contributes to his ability to entertain popular audiences "across the divides of nationality and class."⁷⁴ In this way, we can perhaps see in Harlequin an example of what Agamben calls "form-of-life," for the comical figure performs his *zoe*, the basic needs and energies common to (human) life, as a kind of force-material that lends itself to the *bios* of culture, the various ways of life of "the true people."⁷⁵ The cultural and symbolic dimensions of Harlequin's performance equally immanently exhaust themselves in his vital, biological activity,

⁷³ John O'Brien, *Harlequin Britain: Pantomime and Entertainment, 1690-1760* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 58.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁵ See Agamben's recent study of another commedia dell'arte character in *Pulcinella: Or Entertainment for Children*, trans. Kevin Attell (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2018).

maintaining a paradoxical set of coincidences between bodies of collective existence and individual need and desire.

“I Saw Harlequin” is, then, a rhythmic image of the people’s organized spontaneity in a theatre of total war. Dancing, marching and peeking across international coordinates and shifting war zones, Harlequin’s gestures also emblemize the poem’s biopoetic relation to life in its disjunctive-connective rhythm of samples, juggling with the possibilities of reference and signification, denotation and connotation, citation and allusion, parataxis and juxtaposition. In tracking Harlequin’s joyful activity of nimbly stepping into and over national and temporal divisions, the poem’s paratactic rhythm recomposes labour and struggle as performance, as dance. The poem is a dance of magnitudes, then, including that of the macrocosm and the microcosm, of historical events and lived experience, of world-forces and subjective perceptions, of distance and proximity, of necessity and play. A dance of tenses as well: between the past (“I saw...”), the present (“Hold your hands tight in mine”) and dreams of the future. Jennings’s enchanted poem-universe thus brings the discipline of the “art of war” together with the playful gestures of making love and leisure, suggesting a certain vital intimacy in their otherwise contrasting movements. Reimagining the magnitudes of play in the midst of a world at war, the entertaining gestures of Harlequin’s amorous body trace the outlines of a new vision of life, a new organization of love.

Turning from these two visionary poems to Jennings’s wartime filmmaking, we will see how he deployed a similar set of poetic means for creating his “objective poetry” of the people’s war, particularly in the shape it took on the homefront around the events referred to as the Blitz. Following Jennings’s “method of poetry” (collage, montage, juxtaposition, citation) as

exemplified in the above poems and articulated in *Pandaemonium*, my strategy for reading the film in question is to move rapidly, seizing on specific constellations of images which themselves form a larger image or theme. The theme I am drawn to that unites the film I discuss — *London Can Take It!* — with the poems is that of what I call the “poetic state of emergency.” I understand this “emergency” as the seer’s response to the biopolitical conditions of total war, a poetic-documentary vision that brings together the wartime state of emergency with the everyday life of the people paralleling that of the state of exception. In this way, Jennings composes images of “heroic” resistance from references to the “ordinary” dimensions of daily existence.

A City in a State of Siege: *London Can Take It!*

The nightly firebombing of London and other major cities and targets by the German Air Force in what came to be called the Blitz began on September 7, 1940 and continued for a period of approximately eight months until May 11, 1941. The “myth of the Blitz” was already being forged during the war, stressing the unity, resiliency and courage of the British people in the face of the ongoing barrage. A letter that Jennings wrote his wife on November 3, 1940 is indicative of the rhetoric of collective solidarity and “keeping one’s spirit up” of the period:

Some of the damage in London is pretty heart-breaking but what an effect it has had on the people! What warmth — what courage! what determination. [...] Everybody absolutely determined: secretly delighted with the *privilege* of holding up Hitler. Certain of beating him: a certainty which no amount of bombing can weaken, only strengthen. [...] Maybe by the time you get this one or two more 18th cent. churches will be smashed up in London: some civilians killed: some personal loves and treasures wrecked — but it means nothing; a curious kind of unselfishness is developing which can stand all that and more. We have found ourselves on the right side and on the right track at last!⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Humphrey Jennings, “Letter to Cicely Jennings, 3 November, 1940,” in *Humphrey Jennings: Film-maker, Painter, Poet*, 39-40. Emphasis in original.

London Can Take It!, co-directed by Jennings and Harry Watt, emerges precisely from this period of the Blitz, and one of its significant functions, apart from its primary purpose as an international appeal to audiences in the United States (the market for which the film was initially made and where it was first distributed) to support the British war effort, was the work of maintaining popular morale domestically.⁷⁷ Narrated by the American war correspondent Quentin Reynolds, the nine-minute film follows the routine of events before, during and after a nightly bombing raid during the Blitz. Beginning in the late afternoon as preparations are made for the imminent attack on the city, we see commuters heading home from work and the streets emptying of civilian life as defensive artillery is mobilized and searchlights extend what Reynolds describes as their “white fingers” into the evening sky. With darkness falling, the “nightly visitors” come in the form of German bombers. “The nightly siege of London has begun,” Reynolds intones, and “the city is dressed for battle.” Images of war on the surface, from structures exploding into fire from the falling incendiaries to British soldiers diligently responding by putting out those fires and firing their own cannons in return, are intercut with images from below the surface of people huddled together in the underground and sleeping in public shelters (see Images 4.1-4.4).

With the arrival of morning the people return to their waking lives and reemerge upon the surface to resume the daily activities of metropolitan life with firm, unspectacular resolve. In a famous line from *London Can Take It!*, Reynolds quips,

Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels said recently that the nightly air raids have had a terrific effect upon the morale of the people of London. The good doctor is absolutely right;

⁷⁷ In a letter dated 20 October 1940 to his wife, Jennings describes the film as “specially for you in the States!”; reprinted in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 7. A slightly revised version of the film, retitled *Britain Can Take It!* (1940), was also made for domestic audiences. Nevertheless, I refer to the international version of the film.

today the morale of the people is higher than ever before. They are fused together not by fear, but by a surging spirit of courage the like of which the world has never known.

Spoken over images of civilian-soldiers walking through the rubble-strewn streets and damaged buildings of the city as they return to their daily lives, the message is clear: this “spirit of courage” belongs to the ordinary people doing ordinary things in an extraordinary time.



Images 4.1 and 4.2. Searchlights are projected into the night sky (4.1) and a bomb hits a building (4.2) during the Blitz in *London Can Take It!* (Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt, 1940).



Images 4.3 and 4.4. Civilians sleep in the underground and public shelters during the Blitz in *London Can Take It!* (Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt, 1940).

The sense of ritual in a state of emergency, the mundane and heroic qualities of routine, is crucial to the morale work of the film. The “battle of London” imagined in *London Can Take It!* depends upon how the people adapt to a situation of total industrial war, integrating the Blitz into the diurnal and nocturnal rhythms of their everyday lives. Indeed, the film chronicles how it is precisely the way that the people maintain a sense of rhythm, of interconnection between habits and duties, of contingency and necessity, that enables them to endure the bombing. London, the film shows us, is, for all of its diversity, composed of unity of purpose: *survival*. But, the film tells us, there is also something that exceeds mere survival in total war, or that coexists and insists within it. This excess, which is not in fact excess but necessary to survival on a fundamental level, is the maintenance of collective symbols in the service of solidarity and the national-civic imaginary. In this way, *London Can Take It!* documents how the everyday life of the people resists on a number of different fronts, in the movement of life above ground and at moments of rest below. While the Nazi bombs target the “bare life” of the population along with its cultural artifacts and structures, Jennings’s biopoetics imagines how the people reject this division in their way of life (beyond mere survival), in the conduct of their daily routines, even as the state of emergency declared by their own government also placed them in a biopolitical enclosure of exception and security. It is important to a biopoetic understanding of the film’s morale work, then, to appreciate this “surreal” coincidence of the ordinary and the exception, of democratic discipline and sovereign subjection, and so I consider it in two interconnected ways: first, as the poetic composition of disparate objects into a totality; and second, as the rhythmic relation between states of movement and rest. The film’s “poem-universe” hinges on these senses of totality and rhythm in its imagination of *security* and its concomitant sense of *siege*.

Considering the enduring influence of Surrealism on Jennings's wartime poetics, Kevin Jackson argues that "the surrealist aspect of the films is demonstrable [...] The war itself could be regarded as bringing out the latent surrealist dimension of daily life, and as one critic has neatly suggested, a bomb hitting a big city hospital might easily bring about Lautremont's ideal image of beauty from *Les Chants de Maldoror*, a 'chance meeting, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella.'"78 While Jackson fixes on the aesthetic possibilities bombsites might have suggested to Jennings, *London Can Take It!* also moves beyond the aesthetic sublimation of destruction toward the question of the *use* of such images. In this respect, Jennings's work in *Mass-Observation* and documentary film came from many of the same crises of the 1920s and '30s that informed the Griersonian (realist) tradition of documentary; and both Surrealism and documentary, in contrast to the aestheticism of certain strands of high modernism, demanded some kind of social or psychological purpose, some reformist or revolutionary value, from art. Jennings's Surrealist interest in the social and psychological meanings of coincidences and juxtaposition, for instance, contributed to the films's rhetorical strategy of gathering up the fragmented sites/sights of London into something more than the mere "chance meeting" of Lautremont's ideal of beauty; rather, Surrealist strategies were put into the service of what Leo Mellor refers to as "a view of the city where shards of experience can be unified into a patriotic purpose."79 In other words, Surrealism was repurposed as "a tool for war work and moral use," a means for bringing together images and everyday life, cultural forms and the immediacy of experience, as part of a process of *adaptation* to the emergency of total war.80

78 Kevin Jackson, "Introduction," in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, xii.

79 Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, 132.

80 *Ibid.*, 133.

Although it was initially made to encourage support for the war effort in the United States, *London Can Take It!* was inward-looking in its contribution to wartime morale in Britain. This inward turn was a key defensive manoeuvre in response to the external enemy which threatened to expose the bare life of the people amidst the ruin and rubble of the Blitz. The film turns inward in a variety of ways, most significantly in terms of how it gathers up its internal differences, its fragments, to construct an image of the unified people. But the film also makes this move inward in two other important ways: firstly, in how it enters the interior spaces of London to witness the people in the underground shelters (which, as I will show, also rhythmically relates to a sense of relative outwardness in the movement of the people on the city streets), and, secondly, in the symbolism and historical value of two images given pride of place in its composition: the shot of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral that opens the film and the shot of the *Richard Coeur de Lion* statue that closes it. Before getting into the second point, it is worthwhile elaborating a bit more on the first.

Speaking to the first point, the imagination of inwardness in *London Can Take It!* draws from an archaic, premodern imaginary, based on the idea of *the castle* in a state of siege. The Gothic castle, as Neil Matheson points out in his study *Surrealism and the Gothic*, was one of Surrealism's central obsessional objects. André Breton, amongst others, was particularly drawn to the castle for how it transmits latent desires and energies (drives) as well as for how its crumbling structures are "pathognomonic" of larger, intergenerational social and historical forces, what he calls "collective myth."⁸¹ The feelings associated with certain encounters with

⁸¹ See André Breton, "Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism," in *Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Read (New York: Praeger 1971 [1936]), 109. As Breton puts it, "No attempt at intimidation will cause us to abandon this self-allotted task, which, as we have already made clear, is the elaboration of the *collective myth* belonging to our period in the same way that, whether we like it or not, the style of the 'roman noir' may be considered as pathognomonic of the great social troubles in which Europe was enveloped at the end of the eighteenth century" (109). Italicized in original.

the castle, for Breton, can provoke the stirrings of repressed emotions and ideas from unconscious life (in the subject as well as the modern nation-state), such that they might disrupt the consensus of, or suggest alternative possibilities to the deadlocks of, the contemporary moment. With what Breton called “the castle problem” in mind, Matheson explains the function that the castle has performed historically, as well as its potentially strange resonances in the present:

The primary function of any castle was to provide defence against assault or invasion, hence its association with security and protective retreat, whether physical or psychic, while in another direction the castle is associated with the fairy-tale and the magical. But it also signifies that which endures — the continuation of the past in the present, or the return of some haunting remnant of the past.⁸²

The archaism of the castle in the modern world is crucial here, for its anachronism carries the lingering traces of an older symbolic order of kings, an absolutist socio-metaphysics that includes the sovereign decision over life and death that haunts the modern world, especially in the state of emergency.⁸³ It is in the interest of understanding, if not of exorcising, these sovereign ghosts that Eric Santner argues that “one of the central problems for modernity is to learn how to track the vicissitudes of these *royal remains* in their now-dispersed and ostensibly secularized, disenchanting locations.”⁸⁴

If by enchantment we mean the totality of connections between otherwise dispersed experiences and locations, then the strange poetry of *London Can Take It!* comes from how it

⁸² Neil Matheson, *Surrealism and the Gothic: Castles of the Interior* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 205-206. This haunting can, of course, also be aggressively conservative in its mythical bearings.

⁸³ Jennings alerts us to the importance of ghosts and spectres from the (forgotten) past for his conception of poetry in his 1938 BBC radio broadcast “The Disappearance of Ghosts.” A transcript of the broadcast is published in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 251-255. Justin Pfefferle provides an insightful discussion of the role of ghosts in Jennings’s wartime films in his doctoral dissertation, “Surrealism and Documentary in Britain during the Second World War” (Montreal: McGill University, 2015).

⁸⁴ Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 245. Emphasis in original.

celebrates, as it documents, the transformation of the modern city into the securitized space of the war camp, a zone that is at once resolutely modern in its biopolitical dimensions and yet recalls the archaic world of the castle. The spectre of the castle under siege contributes to the enchanted sense of internal unity, of interconnected struggles and experiences, in the wartime city.⁸⁵ In this way, the film's rhetoric of siege imagines total war as something uncannily familiar, paradoxically traditional in how the collective experience of what Reynolds describes in the film's narration as "the greatest civilian army ever to be assembled" responds to the exceptional exposure of life to death. By invoking the latent content of the castle within the ostensibly disenchanted spaces of the modern city, Jennings thus attempts to reconcile the apparent opposites of the exception and the everyday, the magical and the mundane, as part of the unifying myth of the people's war.⁸⁶

What might be most significant for thinking about how *London Can Take It!* reimagines the defensive function of the castle is the part it plays in the protection of the imaginary or psychic life of the city. In her analysis of photographer Lee Miller's contemporaneous images of the London bombsites in Ernestine Carter's edited collection *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain*

⁸⁵ To be clear: I am not saying the film is "about" a castle. What I am saying is that the poetics of siege draws inspiration from the legacy of the castle, and the sovereignty that accompanies it, in the modern world. It is an archaic exposure and defence of life that is in question here; how the film lingers on the exposed and securitized lives and spaces of the people of London. Through the film's rhetoric of siege, its poem-universe "reenchants" the modern, disenchanted spaces of London and the people's courageous *and* ordinary experience of life and death in a state total war.

⁸⁶ In light of this anachronistic, paradoxical even, conjunction of the archaic and the modern, Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan describe the common experience of the underground shelters in terms of how it represented a unique vision of collective existence, particularly in the ways it both recalled and reconfigured premodern forms of community. "During [the] winter [of 1940-41]," they write, "this country saw the first stages of the formation of a new community; perhaps one of the strangest communities in recorded history. In vast caverns tens and hundreds of feet underground civilised people of all sorts and classes were gathered — not just now and then, as an emergency measure, but for months on end. For the first time in many hundreds of years civilised families conducted the whole of their leisure and domestic lives in full view of each other. To anyone of a sociological turn of mind the situation was full of possibilities — for the first time sociologists could watch the living process of highly civilised individuals adjusting themselves to a pre-civilised, communal form of society" (102). *Speak For Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology, 1937-1949*, ed. Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Under Fire (1941), Sharon Sliwinski describes what she calls the “profound wounding” that bombing perpetrates upon the psyche of the civilian population. Drawing inspiration from W. G. Sebald’s essay “Air War and Literature,” Sliwinski suggests that “the primary target of air war — indeed, perhaps of all violence — is the human mind. This hypothesis repositions air war’s manifest threat to bodies and the built environment as, in fact, a radical attack upon the psyche — and more specifically, an attempt to destroy the human being’s capacity to freely assign meaning to experience.”⁸⁷ *London Can Take It!*, from this perspective, draws from the mythical imaginary of the castle in a state of siege as a means of psychic defence, using its powers of enchanted interconnectivity as a means of shoring up collective feeling, psychic and physical space, against what Lewis Mumford has called the “collective psychosis” of total war.⁸⁸ Positioned at the threshold where biopolitics and psychopolitics meet, then, the castle-image is crucial to the film’s morale work: the preservation of a collective — shareable, historical, mythical, monumental — experience of life as the people suffer the violence of the bombings.

In this respect, the “objective poetry” of *London Can Take It!* is also informed by the ontology of the photographic (and cinematographic) image, the automatism of which serves as a kind of a protective shield, an associative fortification against the emergent, sudden threat of destruction and dissociation — in material, biological, existential and psychic terms. As Sliwinski argues, photography made an important contribution to the “dream-work” of the people in adapting to the nightmarish threat of annihilation brought with the Blitz. “In response to this aggressive attack on the mind,” she writes,

⁸⁷ Sharon Sliwinski, *Dreaming in Dark Times: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 71-72.

⁸⁸ For an insightful discussion of Mumford’s notion of “collective psychosis” and total war see Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*, 6-13.

photography offered a special kind of defence-by-representation. Photographic film provides a sensitive surface capable of registering perceptual traces and impressions. These impressions, in turn, can be developed into images endowed with an illusory reality that can help fill the holes that this form of political violence attempts to rip in the fabric of human experience. In this early era of air war, photography became one of the civilian's best defences.⁸⁹

As a means of representation and defence, photography inscribes both events and objects as well as subjective feelings and experiences into its images, and it potentially reconciles imagination with fact by absorbing the violent shock of destruction into aesthetic forms, structures and routines. In Breton's terms, the photographic basis of *London Can Take It!* was an ideal support for the "latent content" of the people's war, for through its indexical and combinative powers it cinematographically brings together human feeling and the built environment, psychical and physical space, into an associative vision of the "collective myth" of the city-as-castle.⁹⁰

It is clear, then, that the "psychic shield" constructed by the enchanted fortification of images in *London Can Take It!* does more than merely preserve the bare life of the citizen-soldiers of London. As a kind of cultural "archive" of images and feelings, the symbolic density of the assembled fragments in the film is part of the defence of the "collective psyche" of the city. In this way, the film participates in the protection of the specific form of life and ways of being of the people — what Eric Santner identifies as the "ontological vulnerability" of human existence — from both its material destruction *and* its symbolic-imaginary violation by the

⁸⁹ Sliwinski, *Dreaming in Dark Times*, 72.

⁹⁰ The ontology of photography and cinema also affords the recombination of images across films, a practice particularly important to British wartime filmmaking, where shortages in film stock necessitated the re-use of images from one film to the next. This material limitation led to forms of aesthetic innovation in the compilation film, broadly put, of which Jennings's wartime films are perhaps the ultimate poetic example.

German bombs.⁹¹ Some of these images more overtly draw from pre- or early modern symbols of heroism (like the monuments and statues) while others are more mundane (like the huddled masses sleeping in the public shelters), but nevertheless powerful, in their vision of historical event and everyday life coming together in *total* resistance to the biopolitical terror of the Blitz.

It is the way *London Can Take It!* envisages the relationship between movement and rest, however, that is most significant here. Following a battery of defensive cannons firing a barrage into the sky, for example, the film turns to the civilians underground, showing a family of three asleep in a bed (see Image 4.5). The narrator comments: “The very young and the very old, with that deep wisdom given only to the very young and the very old, sleep in the shelters. Do you see any signs of fear on these faces?” In the networked vitality of siege, biological need and collective mobilization immediately interact. Rest and active struggle share in the film’s dream-work of resistance, then, as the exposed intimacy and inwardness of the family and the disciplined response to an external threat are foregrounded as constitutive elements of total war.

The nocturnal visions of sleeping dreamers in *London Can Take It!* soon give way to the movements of the people as they return to their diurnal lives aboveground. In a series of images of people going about their business in the streets of London in the morning, the film captures the strange juxtaposition of life and destruction that Jennings describes in “I See London.” As in the poem, smouldering rubble and ruined buildings and storefronts are shown to be ordinary features of the city following a night of the Blitz. While Reynold’s narration provides optimistic and ironic commentary in the film, the images themselves suggest a more ambiguous sense of

⁹¹ Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 18. Justin Pfferle argues that the technical and formal dimensions of assemblage also contribute to the ideological and poetic dimensions of the film. “As well as being motivated by necessity, collage and compilation support the poetics of fragmentation and re-assemblage that Jennings offers as an allegory of wartime British society” (“Surrealism and Documentary in Britain during the Second World War,” 115).

both ontological vulnerability and recovery. In a letter dated March 27, 1941 to his wife, Jennings describes the disturbing experience of encountering the devastation wrought by the nightly air raids: “The blitz is [a] queer thing; it’s not the danger itself that bothers one — but the mess afterwards — the smell of death and ruin and ambiguity meeting the daylight again. The gaps in the landscape. The smoking horror. The next morning.”⁹² That said, the film’s depiction of the masses of people filling the streets ultimately conveys a sense of the adaptive rhythms of life and the heroism of the ordinary as it faces the ontological exposure of “the next morning.”



Image 4.5. A family sleeps in the shelter as war rages above. “Do you see any signs of fear on these faces?” *London Can Take It!* (Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt, 1940).

London Can Take It! then shifts from the horizontal positions of the civilians underground to the verticality of the aboveground world. “England is not taking its beating lying down,” Reynolds affirms, and soon after a familiar image from the Jennings poem-universe reappears — that of the dome of St Paul’s Cathedral. In this case, it is seen from ground level as

⁹² Humphrey Jennings, “Letter to Cicely Jennings (27 March 1941),” in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 15.

the camera looks eastward down Fleet Street (see Image 4.6).⁹³ Some figures pass by the camera horizontally in the foreground, but the bulk of the people are seen heading east, drawn centripetally toward the monumental structure at the centre of the frame. Showing the life of the people against the backdrop of St Paul's from this specific point of view, this image from *London Can Take It!* is also a variant of an "image" included in *Pandaemonium* entitled "The View Down Fleet Street (1880-81)" from Samuel Butler. Butler is interested in the symbolic and lyrical communication between the Ludgate Hill railway bridge (which is barely visible in the film due to the high traffic of bodies in the frame) and the majesty of St Paul's Cathedral. His emphasis on how these architectural structures bring into relief what he calls "the movement of life" within the vastness of the city is important to the emotional-mythical-historical resonance of this image (and point of view) in Jennings's poem-universe:

I know of nothing in any foreign city equal to the view down Fleet Street, walking along the north side from the corner of Fetter Lane. It is often said that this has been spoiled by the London, Chatham, and Dover Railway bridge over Ludgate Hill; I think, however, the effect is more imposing now than it was before the bridge was built. Time has already softened it; it does not obtrude itself; it adds greatly to the sense of size, and makes us doubly aware of *the movement of life*, the colossal circulation to which London owes so much of its impressiveness. We gain more by this than we lose by the infraction of some pedant's canon about the artistically correct intersection of right lines. Vast as is the world below the bridge, there is a vaster still on high, and when trains are passing, the steam from the engine will throw the dome of St. Paul's into clouds, and make it seem as though there was a commingling of earth and some far-off mysterious palace in dreamland.⁹⁴

⁹³ St Paul's Cathedral is also used a poignant image in Jennings's *Words for Battle* (1941) and *Family Portrait* (1950). Along these lines, it should be noted that perhaps the most famous wartime image of St Paul's Cathedral standing triumphant in the face of destruction is, of course, Herbert Mason's photograph published on the cover of the *Daily Mail*, December 31, 1940.

⁹⁴ Image 358, "The View Down Fleet Street 1880-81" from Samuel Butler, *Alps and Sanctuaries of Piedmont and the Canton Ticino* (1882), in *Pandaemonium*, 342. My emphasis. While the bridge over Ludgate Hill was closed in 1929, the structure remained until its demolition in 1990.



Image 4.6. The view of St Paul's Cathedral from Fleet Street in *London Can Take It!* (Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt, 1940).

On the page facing Butler's description in *Pandaemonium* Jennings also includes an image of Ludgate Hill drawn by Gustave Doré in 1870 (see Image 4.7).⁹⁵ In Doré's illustration, Fleet Street is filled with activity: people on horse-drawn carriages and on foot flood the space beneath the railway bridge. In their emphasis on the bridge as it horizontally cuts across the space before the verticality of St Paul's Cathedral, both Butler's and Doré's visions of the city seem to stage a meeting between the worlds of the city and the sky. Furthermore, considering how both of these images portray the multitudes of the people as an animated/animating force in the city of London, it is apparent how the similar image of the movement of life in *London Can Take It!* was deployed as a recognizable historical symbol of the resistance and resilience of the people. The sky — the scene of threat from which people fled underground only hours ago — is now imagined as the celestial dome beneath which the people may (relatively speaking) freely move. Following Butler, it is also the open space in which they may collectively daydream.

⁹⁵ First published in Doré's *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872). Although it presents a chaotic, crowded and altogether unpleasant vision of Fleet Street, including the black smoke of a train crossing the bridge, Doré's illustration nevertheless contributes to the collective "archive" of images of the city *before* the damage of the Blitz.



Image 4.7. The view of Ludgate Hill railway bridge and St Paul's Cathedral from Fleet Street by Gustave Doré (1870); included in *Pandaemonium*, 342.

Jennings is drawing from a cultural “archive” of references and shared meanings in employing an image of St Paul’s Cathedral as seen from Fleet Street, where the daily life of the city is in full view in its urban milieu, and the various associations this image conjures against the background of other such images suggests the *common* inheritance of such symbols of British life. The accrued historical meanings that such images collectively gather and release recalls Jennings’s insights from his 1931 essay “Rock-Painting and *La Jeune Peinture*,” in which he argues that the superimposed imagery of Paleolithic South African cave paintings communicates a transhistorical and intergenerational experience of the movement of life, what he calls a “world

of heroic mutations.”⁹⁶ As Jennings later argues in his 1937 BBC radio broadcast “Plagiarism in Poetry,” the process of historical transmission, of authorship and authority, that informs such images is, furthermore, anonymous, or at the very least collective, and in this way belongs to anyone and everyone — readers and viewers of such images merely have to read them to activate them and bring out their latent meanings.⁹⁷ The view of St Paul’s Cathedral in *London Can Take It!* is thus a particular image, a cinematographic index drawn from a specific historical moment of danger (the Blitz), and an instantiation of a deeper cultural complex of such images that belong to, and possibly bring together, the people across time. If one reads the image this way, then, the film has accomplished its task of morale work, helping people psychically adapt or heroically mutate to the conditions of wartime emergency.

The “inwardness” I have been describing in *London Can Take It!* speaks to how Jennings’s images delve into the past and the way meaning historically and symbolically emerges as a form of psychic defence. The opening and closing images of the film provide perhaps the clearest example of how mythical-historical symbols contribute to the psychic protection of a city, indeed, of a historical form of life, under siege. The opening image of *London Can Take It!*, over which the title of the film is boldly announced, is (unsurprisingly) the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral (see Image 4.8). Seen from below in a low-angle shot that emphasizes its monumentality, “the dome of St Paul’s acts as an initial and central locus,” as Leo Mellor puts it, “and as a synecdoche for the capital’s continued survival.”⁹⁸ A recurrent image in Jennings’s poem-universe, the dome of St Paul’s is “like the forehead of Darwin,” as he puts it in

⁹⁶ Humphrey Jennings, “Rock-Painting and *La Jeune Peinture*” *Experiment* 7 (Spring 1931): 40; reprinted in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 194.

⁹⁷ See Humphrey Jennings, “Plagiarism in Poetry,” BBC National Program, 8 December 1938; reprinted in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 247-250.

⁹⁸ Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, 132.

“I See London,” a material embodiment of resistance and collective intelligence. Describing it in *Pandaemonium* as the “culmination of the protestantism of the 17th century,” the dome is the key image from the medieval and early modern periods Jennings deploys in the “psychic defence” of the city.⁹⁹ From the endurance of the structure itself through Jennings’s association of it with Darwin and beyond, it is, then, more than just a historical relic; it is an image of the mythical continuity of the past with the present, coming into focus in a moment of historical danger: a state of emergency and enchantment.



Image 4.8. St Paul’s Cathedral in *London Can Take It!* (Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt, 1940).

The concluding image of the film, over which Reynolds declares that “London can take it,” is of the *Richard Coeur de Lion* statue framed against the background of a bomb-scarred Parliament (see Image 4.9). Damaged but not defeated, it stands as both a concrete instantiation of the endurance of the material structures of London and as a symbol of the people “taking it,” preserving a way of life in a state of siege. To be counted among the notable martial symbols of the film, the statue maintains a sense of enchanted immediacy between a previous age of

⁹⁹ Jennings, note for image 91 “Panopticon (1791-92),” in *Pandaemonium*, 99.

“heroic” absolutism and modern democracy. Jennings uses this image of the twelfth-century monarch (with Parliament behind him) in terms of what David Mellor calls a “re-representation,” adapting its sovereign claim over the life and death of the people for the purposes of the celebration and protection of that very life.¹⁰⁰ In this way, he performs a complex act of historical retrieval and revision in *London Can Take It!*, bringing together indexical inscription with layers of historical symbolism to produce a dialectical image of popular resistance. In other words, Jennings samples from the haunted remnant of Richard the Lionheart’s mythical royal power and democratically redistributes it amongst the people in the form of an image.



Image 4.9. The *Richard Coeur de Lion* statue framed against the background of a bomb-scarred Parliament in *London Can Take It!* (Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt, 1940).

Conclusion: “...of the people, by the people, and for the people”

While the Blitz made Jennings into a martial laureate who put poetry into the service of the war effort, it also gave poetry, or the vocation of the poet, a renewed sense of connection to the people, what, in *Pandaemonium*, he refers to as the “vital everyday facts and necessities” of life.¹⁰¹ Jennings’s distinctive contribution was to bring the wartime state of emergency and the

¹⁰⁰ Mellor, “Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings,” 108..

¹⁰¹ Jennings, “Introduction,” *Pandaemonium*, xxxvii.

mobilization of total war into immediate contact with the democratic vitality of everyday life. In this way, Jennings poetically imagined and documented the collective experience of the people while also drawing from a kind of cultural-historical archive of symbols for their poetic — sovereign and popular — resonances in the present. I interpreted this poetic sampling in terms of how it contributed to not just the material but also the psychic defence of the people in their ability to live meaningful lives as they endured the Blitz. Essentially, I total war brought various dimensions of life to the attention of power and Jennings's biopoetics responded in kind. This biopoetic attention to everyday life, as both morale work (propaganda) and popular poetry, was borne out in different but interconnected ways in all of Jennings's wartime poems and films. I have concentrated here on *London Can Take It!*, but it is also present in *Words for Battle* (1941), another example of Jennings's citational compilation documentaries.

In *Words for Battle*, Jennings combines poetic quotations (read by Laurence Olivier) drawn from the canon of English literature with images of rural and urban British life during wartime. Recalling Jennings's strategy of "re-representing" monuments and historical symbols in *London Can Take It!*, the final sequence of the film depicts the Lincoln memorial at Westminster while Olivier reads from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, describing a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (see Image 4.10).¹⁰² As the commentary calls forth the

¹⁰² Jennings's use of Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address and its specific rhetoric and phraseology — "by the people for the people" — resonates with his analysis of the popularity of photography in his article "Who Does That Remind You Of?": "Photography itself — 'photogenic drawing,'" he writes, "began simply as the mechanisation of realism, and it remains *the* system with which the people can be pictured by the people for the people: simple to operate, results capable of mass reproduction and circulation, effects generally considered truthful ('the camera cannot lie') and so on." Humphrey Jennings, "Who Does That Remind You Of?," *London Bulletin* 6 (October 1938): 22; reprinted in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 230. Emphasis in original. Photography would thus seem to be a properly *democratic* medium and technology par excellence, as the automatic and unconscious mechanisms it engages potentially give equal visibility to all "vital everyday facts and necessities" in the modern life of British citizens. Indeed, photography would seem to be the machinic-practical embodiment of both the promises and the perils of democracy in terms of how it throws all bodies and desires, from all classes and positions, into potential observation and consideration.

democratic authority of the people, the noise of a convoy of military tanks rumbling past the Lincoln memorial takes over the film's sonic landscape (see Image 4.11). Following this, in the film's coda, one of Handel's "Water Music" suites surges on the soundtrack over an observational panning shot of soldiers and civilians mingling on the busy streets of London (see Image 4.12). Jim Hillier describes the poetic-democratic redistribution of meaning in the scene:

The film becomes wordless, and the final images follow the faces of ordinary men and women, in and out of uniform, while the music and noise reach their climax. The values and the greatness implicit in the quotations is transferred to the ordinary people who represent continuity with the past and are both the source and embodiment of its values. The effect is irresistible.¹⁰³



Images 4.10 and 4.11. The Lincoln memorial at Westminster (4.10) followed by a convoy of military tanks noisily rumbling past it (4.11) in *Words for Battle* (Humphrey Jennings, 1941).



Image 4.12. Soldiers and civilians mingle on the busy streets of London in *Words for Battle* (Humphrey Jennings, 1941).

¹⁰³ Jim Hillier, "Humphrey Jennings," in *Studies in Documentary* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 85.

This shift to the visual and sonic imaginary of the tanks provides a sense of the noise of the machine that subtends the speech of the people, a glimpse of the industry that supports the space of democratic freedom. Associating the rhythms of the British war machine with the people's total war effort in this way, Jennings's poetic state of emergency again brings together things ordinarily perceived and lived as opposites.¹⁰⁴ The sonic coincidence of everyday life and wartime emergency in *Words for Battle* is further developed in what is perhaps Jennings's greatest montage cine-poem, *Listen to Britain*, his commentary-less "film about music in wartime."¹⁰⁵ Jennings's poetic image of British machinery in *Words for Battle* also anticipates his postwar film dedicated to the British "genius" for industry, *Family Portrait* (1950), made for the 1951 Festival of Britain.¹⁰⁶ In each of these works, Jennings unfolds paradoxical and insightful realities and possibilities, exploring the interstices of creation from the coincidence of worlds and experiences either far too quickly conflated (reactionary or progressive patriotism and popular symbols) or all too often considered in isolation (democratic speech and industrial noise).

Jennings received the Order of the British of Empire for his contributions to the war effort, and for this he was finally excommunicated from the British Surrealist Group in 1947.¹ As a wartime seer, Jennings certainly took on the mantle of patriotism without shame, invoking

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Deer, in his perceptive discussion of *Words for Battle*, understands Jennings's contribution to the imagination of the people's war in terms of an ideologically charged structural relationship between illumination and disavowal, democratic inclusion and "strategic" exclusion — a "wartime visual field" haunted by a range of social and psychological "blackouts": "Jennings's films make clear the enormous power of a distinctly English visual imaginary to incorporate contradictory elements in time of national crisis. In this visual universe, the national imagination is both an individual psychic resource for dealing with trauma and a collective repository of enlightened values and cultural traditions. The wartime visual field is at once hugely inclusive and also structured around strategic exclusions or blackouts." See Deer, *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature*, 119.

¹⁰⁵ Humphrey Jennings, "Letter to Cicely Jennings, 15 June 1941," in *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 29. I discuss Jennings's poetic use of the coincidence in *Listen to Britain* further in the Conclusion of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁶ For a discussion of *Family Portrait* in terms of its role in the self-imaging of Britain in the postwar context and its developing ecological consciousness see Janine Marchessault, *Ecstatic Worlds: Media, Utopias, Ecologies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 90-98.

¹⁰⁷ See Michel Remy, *Surrealism in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 220.

national symbols and appealing to the masses, to be sure; and his work, to its detriment according to some critics, never directly addressed political questions of the state as such. But Jennings was never interested in simply affirming what “is” as it appears to be, for it was objects and events in transformation, mutation and communication that interested him. While Jennings’s wartime films’ “inward turn” often neglected Britain’s colonial history, we also see how the use of national iconography pushes in different directions in *London Can Take It!*, affirming national-historical continuities but also uncovering and redrawing alternative meanings from images, meanings that push against their dominant function in cultural and social hierarchies.¹ It is in this sense that Jennings’s poem-universe is political, as it returns (and realizes) the power and value of symbols to (and for) the collective imagination as a common property, a developing poetic capacity to work with(in) images. Politics, then, is at once historical, symbolic and based in lived experience (conscious and unconscious) for Jennings, and it is rooted in a deeply democratic sensibility, a project committed to the value of everyday life and popular culture as much as to literature and avant-garde experimentation.¹⁰⁹ It is also a sensibility committed to ritual and the endurance of joy, even, and especially, during the struggle of war.

A passage from Jennings’s incomplete memoir, “Beyond the Life of Man,” captures the sense of something vital and meaningful about his depiction of the war that, while committed to its realities and sampling from national traditions, extends its meaning biopoetically, beyond its official historical and cultural boundaries, into a more inclusive and transformative vision:

¹⁰⁸ That said, *The Silent Village* does, for instance, make reference to the English colonial conquest of Wales.

¹⁰⁹ In Jennings’s films poetry, at least ostensibly, belongs to everyone, and alternative histories and popular struggles (as well as gestures of international solidarity, as in “I Saw Harlequin” and *The Silent Village* [1943]) are ever-present, even in his most patriotic images.

This is the story of a struggle taking place almost unnoticed in the background (in the clamour) of greater struggles (wars) — or so they seemed at the time. Because — distant as it appeared — it will be found in the end to be profounder, more enduring than they. Greater than the war against Napoleon, or the war against Hitler. Moreover, it began long before they were even dreamt of — profounder because its conquests will exist when theirs have been forgotten.¹¹⁰

The events of the war are, from this point of view, but one part — a stanza or paragraph — in a larger story: the historical becoming of the people. If, as Jennings points out in “Beyond the Life of Man,” the appeal to the people is universalist, then its unifying vision also names a counter-hegemonic struggle over the “we” of the nation, symptomatically bringing out Britain’s internal difference from itself in the very struggle to realize that inclusive vision. The struggle of (and over) the people preceded the Second World War, then, and it continues to “heroically” endure after it as well.¹¹¹

Postwar Britain did not fulfill the promise of democracy and socialism that Jennings saw in the wartime experience, of course, and his postwar films have been understood as reflecting aspects of this failure. In this sense, Jennings’s poetic vision of total war, his ideal of workers as the people (with all the rights and powers that suggests), did not ultimately succeed in transforming the state of emergency into what he refers to in *Pandaemonium* as the new Jerusalem.¹¹² While the seer sought to alchemically transform the basic materials of security and siege into an experience of freedom, to bring the exceptional violence of the war camp into contact with the pleasures of ordinary life, the securitized state of late capitalist Britain certainly betrays that dream and that hope. But the radical promise of Jennings’s wartime image of poetry

¹¹⁰ Humphrey Jennings, “Beyond the Life of Man,” cited in Kevin Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings*, 13.

¹¹¹ In this sense, Jennings’s metaphors and synecdoches for the people or the nation are themselves subject to fragmentation, to repurposing as images in other assemblages and compilations, other totalities and non-totalities.

¹¹² See, for instance, Jennings, note for image 1 “The Building of Pandaemonium (c. 1660),” in *Pandaemonium*, 5. The dialectical key to the “new Jerusalem” in this context, in my reading of Jennings at least, is to engage with and in turn transform the emergency declarations that were themselves used to completely transform wartime Britain.

and the people found another life in a later generation of British artists — including John Akomfrah, who unfolds other biopolitical dimensions from the transformative movement of life.¹¹³ I turn to Akomfrah’s biopoetic (re)vision of the (missing) people in contemporary Britain in the conclusion of this dissertation.

¹¹³ One can make a case, as Lindsay Anderson does, for the decisive effect that Jennings’s concern with everyday life had on a whole generation of postwar “realist” filmmakers, including the Free Cinema movement that emerged in the 1950s. In addition, the distinctly “poetic” aspects of Jennings’s cinematic oeuvre can also be seen as inspiration for a number of the most significant British artist-filmmakers to emerge in and after the 1970s, including, along with Akomfrah, the Berwick Street Film Collective, Derek Jarman, Terrence Davies, Patrick Keiller, Isaac Julien, Adam Curits, and Luke Fowler, among others.

Conclusion

On Documents and Monuments

If there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet ... the people are missing.

— Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*

Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it.

— Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

One of the central arguments of this dissertation, developed across all four chapters, has been that Humphrey Jennings's "method of poetry" was engaged in a questioning of the relationship between the living being and its inheritance of, exposure to and investment in (or divestment from) a historical and symbolic form (and norm) of life. As Jennings's oeuvre highlights, the question of inheritance is connected to intertwined notions of cultural and historical transmission, mythic and symbolic form, and (re/mis)appropriation. As I showed in Chapter One, then, Jennings took the Surrealist obsession with the unconscious and the libidinal powers of language into everyday life and the strange thresholds between the private and the public sphere. In Chapter Two, I explored how Jennings's experiments with perception and the image were themselves conditioned by as well as responses to the social (and biopolitical) crises of the interwar period. In Chapters Three and Four, furthermore, I took up Jennings's understanding of the anthropogenic dimension of the imagination and its relationship to social and historical processes in terms of how living generations — aesthetically, poetically, critically — appropriate historical forms as themselves part of a process of adaptation to the conflicts of industrial modernity, such as industrial labour and total war. Throughout the dissertation I also drew on the

concept of biopoetics, using it to link Jennings's anthropological and poetic concern with the documentary *and* transformative dimensions of the image to the biopolitical imaginary of the figures of the people and the population.

As I outlined in the Introduction, Jennings was drawn to what Freud called a “legacy of feeling,” the collective unconscious of a people transmitted and maintained through assemblages of social customs, rituals, institutions, and material artifacts. I connected this to what I call modern Britain's *biopolitical unconscious*, referring to the ways the national-collective imaginary negotiated what Eric Santner refers to as the “*biopolitical pressures* of popular sovereignty” in the wake of a “crisis of representation” following the epochal transformations of royal power in the modern world.¹ One of the significant through-lines in this dissertation related these “biopolitical pressures” to how material structures and forms variously excite, modulate, repress and control what I call *the movement of life* within and around their normative enclosures and fields of visibility. A quick sample of Jennings's encounters with such structures includes the spaces of industry and everyday life in “English Landscape” (1938), *May the Twelfth* (1937) and *Spare Time* (1939) in Chapter One; Jennings's memory of the Place Carrousel/the Louvre in his painting *Tableaux Parisiens* (1938-1939) in Chapter Two; the paradigmatic “image-structures” of St Paul's Cathedral, the Panopticon and the Crystal Palace in Chapter Three; and the enduring symbols of St Paul's Cathedral and the statue of *Richard Coeur de Lion* in *London Can Take It!* (1940) as well as the Lincoln memorial in *Words for Battle* (1941) in Chapter Four. In all of these sites I discerned a biopolitical *and* biopoetic encounter that raises questions about the people's

¹ See Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xi. Emphasis in original.

that raises questions about the people's inheritance and appropriation of — its investment and participation in — a symbolic form of life.

I would like to consider here a further example of such an encounter with the material structures of modern life in Jennings's biopoetics. In "To Walberswick" (1943), a prose poem written during the war as part of his unpublished memoir "Beyond the Life of Man," Jennings delves into his past and discovers latent resonances and collective energies from within a world undergoing devastation and destruction. He follows a description of the various natural disasters and historical oppressions that have befallen the people on the Suffolk coast of England, the place where Jennings was born and which feeds his memories of childhood, with an intriguing shift of emphasis and focus. First, he laments: "Unwritten the story of the people's resistance, uncelebrated in word their struggle and labour." But then, in the next remarkable sentence, a poetic montage full of imagery inside of prose, he outlines this story:

But the church towers from the past, the jetties and piers, the mills and lighthouses, the farms and cottages, the roads and the ridiculous railway — in whatever state they may be now — we must never forget that they were made and built and created and tended by the people — not by those powers for whom they were put up or whose names they bear or whose money allowed them to call them theirs — into the actual making they had little or no part — it was the people and the people alone who had the knowledge and strength and skill and love to fit the sails in the windmill, the thatch to the barn, the wings to the wooden angels, the flashing reflector to the lighthouse lamp.²

This conjugation of vision and collective memory, of generations of knowledge and fragments of experience condensed into the space of a single sentence, embodies what Andrzej Gąsiorek describes as "an idea of community," reflecting Jennings's "desire to build a different society

² Humphrey Jennings, "To Walberswick," in *Humphrey Jennings: Filmmaker, Painter, Poet, 2nd Edition*, ed. Marie-Louise Jennings (London: British Film Institute, 2014), 6-7.

from below,” a desire integrally connected to “a faith in the transformative power of the imagination.”³ It is of crucial significance, as Gąsiorek further notes, that Jennings’s act of memorialization explicitly composes its images from “the material means of production that underpinned the form of life he wanted to alter.”⁴

Jennings’s historical image in “To Walberswick” thus recalls that other part of “Beyond the Life Man” that I mentioned in Chapter Four, in which he contends that the inherited struggle of the people belongs to “the story of a struggle taking place almost unnoticed in the background (in the clamour) of greater struggles (wars) — or so they seemed at the time. Because — distant as it appeared — it will be found in the end to be profounder, more enduring than they. Greater than the war against Napoleon, or the war against Hitler.”⁵ Jennings thus reads what was never written, or rather, he discovers the labour and love of the everyday life of the people written upon and within objects — objects which themselves remember and transmit the experiences of the past if one exercises the imaginative capacity to hear them and to read them. In this way, Jennings is performing poetic-historical operation of recovery that, in Jacques Rancière’s terms, ceaselessly transforms the *monument*, “the thing that talks without words, that instructs us without intending to instruct us, that bears a memory through the very fact of having cared only for the present,” into the *document*, “the text ... intentionally written to make a memory official,” and then back again.⁶

³ Andrzej Gąsiorek, *A History of Modernist Literature* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015): 520.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 520. Gąsiorek explains how Jennings’s method of poetry penetrates the hardened opacity of objects — the ways we have come to know them and possess them — to engage the energy of their historicity as it communicates with the present: “It is the poet’s visionary eye that goes beyond surface phenomena here, as he strives for a perspective that will enable him to read history in the bricks and stones he surveys” (519).

⁵ See Humphrey Jennings, “Beyond the Life of Man,” cited in Kevin Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings* (London: Picador, 2004), 13.

⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 22. Rancière elaborates: “The new history, the history involving ‘the time of history’ ... can only maintain what it is saying at the cost of endlessly transforming monuments into documents and documents into monuments” (23-24).

Rancière's choice example of this conversion of monuments and documents, speechlessness and signification, takes place in *Listen to Britain* (1942), Jennings's film-poem about ordinary life during the Blitz. In his discussion of how *Listen to Britain* mingles the extraordinary with the ordinary in terms of what he calls "the Romantic poetics of double significance," Rancière turns to a scene early in the film in which two silhouettes enjoying the sunset on the English Channel transform into dutiful soldiers on the lookout for signs of the German enemy (see Images B.1 and B.2). He considers this transformation to be an instance of the way the film "can only maintain what it is saying through the Romantic poetics that constantly converts the significant into the insignificant and the insignificant into the significant."⁷ According to Rancière's reading, this aesthetic *and* political experience of equivalence is the backbone of the film's wartime message: "So what does the film do to testify to the historic mission of this nation of fighters? It presents what is extraordinary about their war as being exactly the same as what is ordinary about their peacetime life."⁸



Images B.1 and B.2. *Listen to Britain* (Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister, 1942).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26. For an elaborate reading of Jennings's work through Rancière's work, see Masashi Hoshino, "Humphrey Jennings's 'Film Fables': Democracy and Image in *The Silent Village*," *Modernist Cultures* 15.2 (2020): 133–154.

Kevin Jackson has also described *Listen to Britain* in terms of the resonances between past and present generations at once imagined and observed in the film's montage of ostensibly heterogeneous materials, a bricolage in which "the sights and rhythms of the average working day are orchestrated with snatches of ancient folk song, the statuary of ancestral wars, monumental buildings and the persistent ravages of the first Machine Age."⁹ In this way, Jennings conjures as he documents an enduring "legacy of feeling" from within the conflagration of war. In Chapter Four I approached this type of poetic operation through the notion of the "poem-universe," in which, in principle at least, all things are included and interrelated.¹⁰ While Jennings's "poem-universe" combined samples from everyday life with montage and collage as a response to the Second World War, a state of emergency that produced its own representational crises (and decisions) related to the people and the population, in "To Walberswick" and *Listen to Britain* — and other works like them that also seem to turn away from the absolute immediacy (necessity) of the war toward other times and popular experiences, that reads the faces and spaces of modern life for other histories and other struggles — Jennings is also attempting to develop an image (an exchange of *documents* and *monuments*) of the people that exceeds a narrow vision of the "myth" of "the people's war." Jennings's turn to the latent, to the "background," to an inheritance that emerges "from below," then, recalls his constellation of images in *Pandaemonium* that documents the structures of modern power — including the factory, the school, the workhouse, the prison, etc. — from the point of view of the people.

⁹ See Kevin Jackson, "Humphrey Jennings: The Poet and the Public," *Contemporary Record* 7:3 (1993): 680. In this sense, *Listen to Britain* uses its associative audiovisual montage to document and to monumentalize — nonverbally and sans expository narration, as if marrying the primary processes of the unconscious with cultural-historical forms — the collective experience of a people during a national emergency.

¹⁰ See Elizabeth Sewall, *The Structure of Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1951), 104; cited in Gerard L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Study* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), 162.

In spite of his belief that the Second World War was not really the whole story of the people, that its layers of history and imagination are part of a more enduring struggle that compels us to reframe the stakes of the war and its possible futures, Jennings's wartime images have nevertheless been themselves mythologized, made to serve the purposes of reactionary forces in the present. One of the legacies of Jennings's documentaries is that they have been taken up in a kind of cultural imaginary, an archival "reserve" of images, that contributes to a national mythology of unity and homogeneity in the face of what has been called the "postcolonial melancholia" of twenty-first century Britain. Paul Gilroy has argued, for instance, that the "continued citation of the anti-Nazi war" betrays "something neurotic" about the nation, a "desire to find a way back to the point where the national culture — operating on a more manageable scale of community and social life — was, irrespective of the suffering involved in the conflict, both comprehensible and habitable."¹¹ Gilroy connects this to what he calls "an ethnic myth," one that subtends what he describes as both an act of repression in contemporary Britain, that is, a "turning away from the perceived dangers of pluralism and from the irreversible fact of multiculturalism," on the one hand, and the actively securitized racial biopolitics of the state, on the other.¹² In this light, Jennings's images of "the people's war" should be critically reconsidered for how they have "looped back into the biopolitical administration of metropolitan spaces and populations that [are] charged with a novel world-historic mission."¹³ For, in spite of his own intentions, Jennings's poem-universe is not immune from being

¹¹ Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 89.

¹² *Ibid.*, 90.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

(mis)appropriated as a monument in what is effectively the fantasy structure of a national-racial imaginary put into the service of the biopolitical enclosure of modern life.

The contemporary British artist John Akomfrah is important to consider here, particularly for how his work both deconstructs the documentary tradition that Jennings belongs to and opens a breach through which to re-enter Jennings's biopoetic imagination of the people and everyday life to reconstruct it from it within. Akomfrah's poetic re-articulations of archival images of the colonial subjects and migrant workers of the post-1948 "Windrush Generation," those who arrived in Britain after the war, are particularly attentive to the latent meanings, structural exclusions and cultural contradictions of the British (post)colonial and (post)imperial racial and cultural imaginary. Since his time with the Black Audio Film Collective in the 1980s, Akomfrah has drawn heavily from the archive in de/reconstructing his prismatic archaeologies of diasporic experience. In his discussion of Akomfrah's practice, Kodwo Eshun argues that as the very legitimacy of the narratives and institutions of the nation are increasingly strained in the postcolonial transformations of modern Britain, "the poeticization of the archive might be understood as an intervention into the inheritance of post-war documentary made available by legitimization crisis."¹⁴ Consider, in this light, *Handsworth Songs* (1986), Akomfrah's collage-based deconstruction of the media narratives surrounding the 1985 Handsworth and London riots; 2010's *The Nine Muses*, a poetic hypertext about the Windrush Generation's "icy" reception upon their arrival on British shores in the postwar period; and the 2016 installation

¹⁴ Kodwo Eshun, "Archival Authority in *Handsworth Songs*: Modes of Citation and Methods of Poeticisation," *Otolith Group.org* (2007) (Accessed May 12, 2018) <http://otolithgroup.org/index.php?m=project&id=109>. For further discussion of Akomfrah's work in this vein, see, for example, Kodwo Eshun, "Drawing the Forms of Things Unknown," in *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective*, ed. Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 74-89, 94-99; Kodwo Eshun, "An Absence of Ruins: John Akomfrah in Conversation with Kodwo Eshun," in *The Ghosts of Songs*, 130-137.

Vertigo Sea, a triptych cine-portrait that combines images of the natural history of the ocean with fragments of migrant and slave narratives. In these and other films and installations, Akomfrah rereads and repurposes archival images for their latent meanings in order to uncover what he calls “lives without monuments” — images of the African, Caribbean and South Asian diaspora — from within a documentary regime of representation that registers and codifies at the same time as it represses, suppresses and restricts access to the past. As Akomfrah has written of *The Nine Muses*:

How does one begin to say something new about a story everyone claims to know? And in that process how does one fulfil what historian Carlo Ginzburg once called “our obligation to the dead” without sacrificing our equally pressing debt to the living? Finally what aesthetic and ethical considerations should govern how one constructs a “historical fiction” about events and lives that have been profoundly shaped by what the St Lucian poet Derek Walcott called, “the absence of ruins”? Lives without monuments, without the “official” signature of recognition and interest.¹⁵

In an essay entitled “Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora,” Akomfrah further links what Eshun terms the “legitimation crisis” of British documentary and its “official” forms of bestowing legitimacy to cultural objects and experiences to anxieties surrounding both the troubling of the sign-referent relation in the digital image and the “ontological insecurity” of the diasporic condition, in which migrants are themselves displaced and in degrees of exile from their past, travelling amongst the slippery and suppressed signs of a collective cultural memory.

¹⁵ See John Akomfrah, “Director’s Statement,” *The Nine Muses* Press Release, Icarus Films, 2011 (Accessed April 15, 2018) icarusfilms.com/press/pdfs/muse_pk.pdf. Akomfrah elaborates: “This film is my Proustian attempt to suggest what some of those ‘ruins’ might look like, a desire to look into that dark mirror of one’s own past in search of images, ideas, writers and musics with which to construct such a monument.” As Malini Guha writes of *The Nine Muses*, Akomfrah “foregrounds textual habitation as an aesthetic counterpart to the broader subject of the film: the question of physical habitation. Dislocation and discord are embedded in the very form of the film, mirroring both the physical and emotional aspects of dislocation that were experienced by migrant populations upon first arriving to Britain.” See Malini Guha, “Beyond the Archive: The Work of Remembrance in John Akomfrah’s *The Nine Muses*,” *Screening the Past* 43 (April 2018) http://www.screeningthepast.com/2018/02/beyond-the-archive-the-work-of-remembrance-in-john-akomfrahs-the-nine-muses/?fbclid=IwAR0nIRtRVU_mZoSr%E2%80%A6 (Accessed January 19, 2019).

Akomfrah conceptualizes this condition through the lens of what he calls “digipoetics,” a poetics engaged not only by the digital turn but by what happens when, as he puts it, “one brings diaspora and cinema together,” a mutual condition of migratory *and* digital displacement, diasporic and digital dissemination.¹⁶ This “bringing together” of digipoetics compels Akomfrah to reconsider film history as “implicated in a kind of biopolitics,” then, which begins with Bentham’s panopticon, moves through colonial ethnographic film in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and continues through various works implicated in a biopolitical imaginary, such as D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and beyond.¹⁷ Working between a poetics of the archive and a biopolitical history of cinema, furthermore, the concept of digipoetics helps Akomfrah articulate something beyond the official archive’s biopolitical inscription of the life of migrant peoples as populations. Indeed, while the digital and the diasporic may conjure referential anxieties and ontological insecurities, thought together they also present possibilities for rethinking institutional and archival logics by delinking and relinking signs and their referents, images, labels and their contingent meanings. It is precisely from within the “insecurity” of diaspora and the digital, in the interruptions and delays of established meanings and actualities of the digipoetic condition, that new conjunctions of image and meaning, document and experience, monument and memory, can be composed.

As Akomfrah's poetic interventions into documentary representation indicate, then, an act of counter-memory inside the archive involves more than merely rehearsing recognized perceptions and experiences and their official designations; it means embarking upon a

¹⁶ John Akomfrah, “Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora,” *Journal of Media Practice* 11.1 (2010): 28. He describes the “digipoetic” in terms of “the digital as promise, as reinvention, as a dissident echo in a tale of postcolonial becoming” (24).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

peripatetic journey through the repository of the national and archival unconscious, a mining of the latent content of the archival image. From within a questioning that rethinks the suture of image and meaning, Akomfrah thus deploys the digipoetic displacements of the digital and diaspora as poetic and historical method, one capable of releasing indexical images from their bonds to determinate meanings inscribed in the prose of colonial and imperialist relations. In *The Nine Muses*, for example, images of the Windrush Generation arriving in England in 1948 that are encoded with a certain “official” information-value linked to a postwar biopolitical-governmental machine in the state archive, enter a “digitopic” space of poetic *hesitation*, such that sociological *documents of a population* can be reread and re-experienced as displaced *monuments to a people*. Digipoetic memory is thus a creative act of the poetic imagination — a way of accessing and reassembling links between signs cum monuments — that can indicate future possibilities by drawing from the very historical dispossession of a “people that is missing” the futural potentiality of a *people to come*.

In a 2011 interview with Nina Power, Akomfrah further reflects on the dynamics of migration and media through the role of poetry in the legacy of British documentary. In so doing, he focusses on the poetic documentary films of Jennings as a major source of inspiration, describing his interest in the classical documentarian as itself an act of memory and re/discovery.¹⁸ For Akomfrah, Jennings’s poetic experimentation compels him to reimagine the

¹⁸ See Nina Power, “Counter-Media, Migration, Poetry: Interview with John Akomfrah,” *Film Quarterly* 65.2 (Winter 2011): 59-63. Akomfrah states: “Although I love the work of Chris Marker, and have loved it since I first came across it in the 1970s, and much as I respect it (and he has been an ally too), there are other modes of film essay that have kind of eclipsed it for me. I’m interested in Humphrey Jennings, and in the incredible kind of work that Betjeman and Dylan Thomas and others did with filmmakers like Jennings. It’s really a turn to those other traditions of the film essay, the more ‘poetic’ kinds, away from fabulist tales. [...] I’m trying to find another way of invoking the voice, away from the epistolary. We need to keep rethinking how the voice exists. Sometimes the rethink involves invoking something very old” (63).

stylistic possibilities of the image and the voice in the documentary, for instance, providing what is perhaps a surprising set of aesthetic coordinates through which to articulate the terms of his own practice. Seeing Jennings's films through Akomfrah's imaginative re-vision, then, also affords a reviewing of Akomfrah's work. More specifically, it compels us to focus on the monumental and poetic dimensions of Akomfrah's films, to emphasize how they engage in the work of memory and the questioning of inheritance and appropriation, of living generations and the recovery of the collective past from its restricted enclosure in the *already known* as well as its invisibility, its erasure from the shared (and shareable) memory of a people. As Akomfrah puts it in his recent essay "Memory and the Morphologies of Difference":

In the absence of the monument, in the absence of tangible fragments, diasporic artists face a monumental task: they are forced to connect with the question of memory, with the question of the ghost, with the question of the intangible — it is through these that the artist discovers the monumental, discovers the ways in which they are located in their culture and in their present.¹⁹

To conclude, then, I am drawn to an image from Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* in order to bring out one aspect of its latent content, something that links it to Jennings's biopoetics from over half a century earlier. One of the most distinctive motifs in *The Nine Muses* is the recurring tableaux of a figure (or couple of figures) posed with their back to the viewer, looking out into a vast arctic expanse (see Image B.3). Original footage shot by Akomfrah in the Alaskan wastelands, the sublime tableau nevertheless bears the (biopolitical) pressure of the archive in its imagery of an enigmatic figure looking away into the distance. While numerous commentaries have focussed on the inspiration of German Romanticism on the the image, such as Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818), another image serves as a more

¹⁹ John Akomfrah, "Memory and the Morphologies of Difference," in *Politics of Memory: Documentary and Archive*, ed. Marco Scotini and Elisabetta Galasso (Berlin: Archive Books, 2017), 28.

immediate predecessor, a citation with a more culturally and historically charged set of inherited meanings and associations — a “pattern of feeling” that is itself subject to appropriation and adaptation.²⁰ The image I am referring to is that of Jennings's civilian/soldier silhouettes leisurely and (then) vigilantly looking toward the horizon in *Listen to Britain*.



Image B.3. *The Nine Muses* (John Akomfrah, 2010).

If Jennings’s scene of transformation between the significant and the insignificant is part of his poetic sublimation of total war into an enchanted poem of the people *already present*, then Akomfrah’s haunted image is a monument to the displaced, ghostly presence of the *people to come* in the post-imperial world. Thus, while both Jennings’s and Akomfrah’s figures look toward a horizon or a landscape, reading what they see for a contingent meaning, it is important to recognize a difference that comes into light through their resonance: where Jennings’s soldiers look *away* from the fortified island toward the horizon for signs of *siege*, Akomfrah’s hooded

²⁰ On the inheritance and appropriation of a “pattern of feeling” in Akomfrah’s *The Nine Muses*, see Ben Highmore, *Cultural Feelings: Mood, Mediation and Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 108-116.

wanderers look *into* the landscape for signs of *home*. Akomfrah’s metaphorical tableau, then, is the dialectical other side to Jennings’s biopoetic image of securitized wartime Britain where soldiers and civilians alike defend not only the territory but a way of life. In this respect, moreover, Akomfrah’s act of remembrance and monumentalization contrasts with the spectacle of remembrance that I opened this dissertation with: *Isles of Wonder*, the elaborate historical pageant designed by Danny Boyle for the opening of the London 2012 Olympic Games. While *Isles of Wonder* included in its re-telling of the history of the nation an enormous model of the *Empire Windrush* passenger liner as part of the dramatization of the arrival of the Windrush Generation, it nevertheless seemed to do so as merely another entry — a historical amendment, an addition — in the great British postwar experiment.²¹ At once more faithful to and more transformative of Jennings’s vision of the people than *Isles of Wonder*, however, *The Nine Muses* presents us with a monumental, elegiac image of a *people to come* reconsidering that “wondrous” isle and finding a frozen, forbidding territory as the “place of imagination” instead.

²¹ A remembrance of the black Britons who came to the imperial centre from the colonies, this part of the pageant seemed to herald a possibility for collectively rethinking the mutually entwined legacies of nationalism, imperialism and colonialism in British modernity; and, with that, the opening of a space for other acts of national remembrance in the face of what for so long has remained the status quo: a lack of official, publicly funded monuments to these apparently “other” histories — the colonial, migrant, and diasporic memories and experiences that in fact make up a fundamental part of modern Britain. When asked in a 2019 interview if the 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony was a “last high water mark of multicultural serenity,” for instance, Paul Gilroy voiced skepticism regarding the pageant’s historical value: “The Windrush moment was visibly if belatedly acknowledged in Danny Boyle’s pageant, but the spectacle seemed to me to cement the arrival of colonial citizens as an invasive encroachment. If I remember correctly, the empire itself remained unrepresentable.” See Ben Thompson, “Still No Black in the Union Jack? An Interview with Paul Gilroy,” *Tribune* (January 26, 2019) <https://www.tribunemag.co.uk/2019/01/still-no-black-in-the-union-jack> (Accessed March 30, 2019).

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