

# British Culture and Society in the 1970s



British Culture and Society in the 1970s:  
The Lost Decade

Edited by

Laurel Forster and Sue Harper

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade,  
Edited by Laurel Forster and Sue Harper

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-1734-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-1734-9

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations .....	viii
Acknowledgements .....	ix
Preface .....	x
Introduction .....	1
<b>Part I: Narratives of Politics and Art</b>	
John Berger's Revolutionary Narratives Rochelle Simmons .....	14
Aesthetics and Politics: The Case of Raymond Williams and Herbert Marcuse Anthony Dunn .....	24
"New Age" Radicalism and the Social Imagination: Welfare State International in the Seventies Gillian Whiteley .....	35
Artists and the Labour Movement Kirsten Forkert.....	51
Pressing Demands: Labour Attitudes to Newspaper Ownership Sean Tunney .....	63
<b>Part II: The Media and Social Change</b>	
1970s Current Affairs: A Golden Age? David McQueen.....	76
Printing Liberation: The Women's Movement and Magazines in the 1970s Laurel Forster .....	93

Race on the Television: The Writing of Johnny Speight in the 1970s Gavin Schaffer.....	107
“You Are Awful ... But I Like You!”: The Politics of Camp in 1970s Television Peri Bradley.....	119
The Self-sufficiency Movement and the Apocalyptic Image in 1970s British Culture Gwilym Thear.....	131
<b>Part III: Youth Cultures</b>	
Cultural Adventurers Dave Allen.....	142
“Underground, Overground”: Remembering the Wombles Keith M. Johnston .....	154
“And finally ... news for children”: An Insight into the Institutional Development of the BBC Children’s News Programme, <i>John Craven’s Newsround</i> Julian Matthews.....	164
Lost in the Seventies: <i>Smash Hits</i> and the Televisual Aesthetics of British Pop Steven Hill.....	175
<b>Part IV: Film Production Contexts</b>	
The Precariousness of Production: Michael Klinger and the Role of the Film Producer in the British Film Industry during the 1970s Andrew Spicer.....	188
Music / Industry / Politics: Alan Price’s Roles in <i>O Lucky Man!</i> John Izod, Karl Magee, Kathryn Mackenzie and Isabelle Gourdin.....	201
Anglo Argento: A Critical Reassessment of the Films of Norman J. Warren Adam Locks .....	213

<i>The Boyfriend</i> : Ken Russell's "Anti-Musical" Adrian Garvey .....	225
--	-----

## **Part V: Social Spaces**

Alexandra Road and the Triumph of Architectural Modernism Tim Gough .....	236
--	-----

Concrete Dreams: Drama and Surveillance in the City Sue Evans .....	252
--	-----

Sex in the Sitting Room: Renegotiating the Fashionable British Domestic Interior for the Post-permissive Generation Jo Turney .....	263
---	-----

Bibliography .....	275
--------------------	-----

Contributors .....	295
--------------------	-----

Index .....	300
-------------	-----

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- 3-1 WSI: Parliament in flames (1976)
- 3-2 WSI: Brookhouse Summer Festival (1977)
- 3-3 WSI: The Loves, Lives and Murders of Lancelot Barrabas Quail (1977)
- 11-1 Portsmouth Mods outside The Birdcage Club
- 15-1 Michael Klinger on location with *Gold* (1974)
- 15-2 *Gold*: On-screen rugged action in the mine-flooding scene
- 15-3 The makers of *Gold*
- 17-1 Norman J. Warren with Glynis Barber on the set of *Terror* (1976)
- 17-2 Chivalry and shocks in a scene from *Satan's Slave* (1976)
- 17-3 Near-drowning in the lake in *Prey* (1978)
- 19-1 Alexandra Road: Main terrace
- 19-2 Alexandra Road: Cross-section
- 19-3 Alexandra Road: Geometric spaces
- 19-4 Alexandra Road: Children in the street
- 19-5 Alexandra Road: Office building



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We should like to acknowledge the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), under whose aegis the Portsmouth project on 1970s British Cinema was carried out. Their advice was invaluable throughout. We also profited from the support of the Centre For European and International Studies (CEISR) at the University of Portsmouth. Our Faculty of Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) and our School of Creative Arts, Film and Media (SCAFM) both provided substantial support.

Colleagues in the 1970s group at Portsmouth have been unfailingly encouraging, and have been both a stimulus and a resource. We should like to thank Dave Allen, Laurie Ede, Vincent Porter, Justin Smith and PhD students Sian Barber, Patti Gaal-Holmes and Sally Shaw. Special thanks must go to Peri Bradley for her tremendous input into the conference. Maria Fritsche coped with great good humour with our many “final” versions of the book. Thanks also to Verena Wright for her work on the index.

We should also like to acknowledge the support from our Head of School, Esther Sonnet, and our Associate Dean of Research, Paul McDonald.

We are grateful to Daniel Meadows, Norman J. Warren and Tony Klinger for permissions to reproduce photographs, and to James Woodward for allowing us to reproduce his drawing.

Finally, Laurel would like to thank Nick, Florine, Eden, Pierre and Hugo just for being themselves and making it all possible. Special thanks too to Janet Floyd for her consistently good advice. And Sue would like to thank Walter and Ted for putting up with the domestic chaos occasioned by this book.

## PREFACE

We are most grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for granting a major award to the University of Portsmouth, School of Film, Media and Creative Arts. This was to support a three-year project, led by Professor Sue Harper, to draw the map of British cinema in the 1970s. One of the designated outcomes of that project was a conference, but in order not to overlap with the conference on British cinema of the 1970s called “Don’t Look Now” at the University of Exeter 2007, we decided that a conference with a broader remit was appropriate both for the Portsmouth project and for the study of the 1970s as a whole. Accordingly we organised a large conference at the University of Portsmouth in July 2008, entitled “British Culture and Society in the 1970s”.

The conference had an array of panels and papers on a wide range of aspects of British culture and society of the decade: television, novels, drama, music, critical theory, film, journalism, political activism and radical culture. There were also showings of rare films, and plenary sessions with Sandy Lieberman, David Edgar, Richard Weight, Mark Kermode and Ken Russell. This collection had its inception in that wide-ranging conference. It provides a selection of those discussions to form an original and broad-based commentary on the decade. We wanted to produce sustained and coherent meditations on themes of specific significance to the 1970s in Britain. Alas, this meant it was necessary to be highly selective, and had to sacrifice many excellent papers. We have produced a volume with clear sections on: politics and art; media and social change; youth cultures; film production contexts; and social spaces. The essays set up dialogues and synergies with each other, interrogating some of the multifarious cultural interventions, social experiments and developments of this most exciting moment in British recent history: the 1970s.



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## INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the 1970s only existed in popular memory as a decade of embarrassing kitsch and tastelessness, and this has concealed many other important aspects of the culture of the decade. Until recently, the decade has been recalled only with uncomfortable humour and irony, and with only a few enduring but empty motifs such as flared trousers, the pop group ABBA, sexploitation movies and angry feminists in dungarees. These epitomise the ways in which this whole decade has been despised and misremembered. For example, a popular ‘talking heads’ style television programme, *I Love the ‘70s* (BBC1, 2000) follows a recognisable format, and led viewers down a media “memory lane” hour for ten weeks. Each episode covered popular culture year by year, and was hosted by different “personalities” of the 1970s, emphasising television programmes, music and ephemera. Dave Haslam’s book *Not Abba: The Real Story of the 1970s* (2005) comments on the blandness and repetitiveness of history remembered through television, as a result of the limited range of material available in television archives, recycled endlessly in such formulaic presentations of culture. The film *Mamma Mia!* (2008, Dir. Phyllida Lloyd), based on a popular theatre musical, is an important index of the enduring but powerful nature of these cultural topoi, and the enormous success of the film indicates that cultural memory of the 1970s still has considerable currency. The film brings the 1970s “alive” by performing a series of ABBA hits anew and weaving a fresh story round them, which can be performed in turn by the audience in sing-along mode. The finale of the film repays attention. The actors, gorgeously arrayed in 1970s glitter and platforms, provide an ironic, even camp, performance of themselves as members of the band. They seem to mock, yet hugely enjoy, the supposedly tasteless excesses of the decade. What is evoked is a sense of fun: the 1970s is powerfully presented not as a period of repression and difficulty but as one of expressiveness and spontaneity. This has been an incredibly persistent way of relating to and remembering the 1970s.

This volume seeks to present an alternative view of 1970s culture. If we conceptualise the period as “The Lost Decade,” this provides a useful framework for more rigorous discussions of the period. The 1970s may be considered ‘lost’ in a number of ways. Firstly, intense feelings were produced by the radical social changes of the period, and such social and

emotional trauma is often unsettling to reproduce or recall. The media deal unevenly with the subtleties of emotional response to social change. Secondly, the personal hardships endured make it a decade which many people would prefer to forget. Indeed 1970s television was awash with varieties of escapism from its disturbed present, with Edwardianism and nostalgic heritage dramas which allude to so-called “halcyon days”. And thirdly, the essence of the 1970s is more difficult to distil than that of the preceding 1960s and the subsequent 1980s. The 1960s seem easily recalled as the decade of hippies and youth cultures, where free love, music and pop art glamorously take priority in general recollection over the less palatable actualities of that time. The 1980s, in stark contrast, is remembered for ‘yuppie’ materialistic ostentation, as well as high levels of conflict and unemployment. This potentially leaves the 1970s open to the accusation of being a cultural vacuum, or merely the transitional moment when the youthful optimism of the 1960s degenerated into the socio-political rigidity and complacency of the 1980s. The breadth and range of cultural production illustrated in this volume points to a different story of the 1970s.

This collection appears at a time when a retrospective recovery of the 1970s is taking place through a number of popular television dramas. As those whose childhoods were most influenced by the 1970s now reach their mid-forties and the height of their influence in cultural production, so a less inhibited and perhaps more accurate recovery of the decade can become more likely, interrogating the 1970s in a more dispassionate way. One example is the highly successful police drama *Life on Mars* (BBC1 Jan 2006-Apr 2007), a two-series-long immersion in the 1970s, and indeed it owes much to the 1970s police procedural, *The Sweeney* (ITV, 1975-1978). *Life on Mars* revisits some uncomfortable aspects of the decade such as unprincipled policing methods, sexism in the workplace, and hierarchical social exploitation. Through well-crafted narrative structure and the devices of flashback and flashforward, *Life on Mars* cleverly, albeit patchily, reflects back to us just how far Britain has, and simultaneously has not, moved on since that decade. Less explicit about historical distance but more hard-hitting was *Red Riding* (Channel 4 2009), a series of three films for television. These films gradually and complexly reveal the underworld of a Northern community in the 1970s and 1980s beset by corruption and lawlessness. Involving and including the West Yorkshire Police Force, a tough, mean Britain is convincingly portrayed, where hypocrisy and racketeering are rife, and the ordinary, honest citizen is almost totally disempowered. In *Red Riding*, the 1970s is again being raided for a message about the way we were: the series

presents the past as a corrosive, bleak and smoke-filled dive, in which dreadful things were done and little could be redeemed.

Another example is *Survivors* (BBC 2008), which also demonstrates the continuing relevance of 1970s issues. Here the central apocalyptic premise of the programme—the human race all but wiping itself out—remains identical to the series of the same name three decades earlier (BBC 1975-1977). The underlying question of rebuilding our society remains compelling but unanswered, and offers the opportunity to imagine our world radically anew. This sense of the controlling centre of society being in flux, if not totally dysfunctional, was a prevalent theme in 1970s culture. However, in the 1970s series, the survivors' vision largely leans towards a utopian optimism, whereas in the 2008 version, the outlook is much less secure. These three recent series offer a much more nuanced view of 1970s Britain than previously available on the television. The time, it would seem, has finally come to reappraise cultural output of the period.

This volume, as a work of recovery and reappraisal, argues in favour of presenting the 1970s as a period of cultural exuberance and plenitude. We suggest that the essays in this volume prove that demands for change were made, forcefully and creatively, in a wide variety of ways through political, cultural and artistic routes. The range of material presented in these essays makes it clear that it is no longer adequate to conceptualise the period in a simplified or parodied manner. The depth of both protest and innovation has to be assessed if we want to engage with the decade in a meaningful way. It was, we suggest, a moment when artistic endeavour was considered to have true political purchase, and many of the essays in this volume, selected from different disciplines, reflect this combination of creativity and commitment. It is hoped that this collection will bring some of these lost causes and complex ideas back to centre stage.

The 1970s in Britain was a decade of immense complexity in almost every sphere. There were numerous contradictions which were, socially and politically speaking, born out of concerns about gender, race, class, living conditions and the workplace. It was a decade of great early optimism, which slid into a general sense of decline; changes were anticipated, worked towards, and sometimes unevenly achieved: it was a decade in flux. Most interestingly for our purposes here, it was a decade when there were significant, varied, and often highly politicised cultural responses to changes in the past, present and future.

The fluctuations in the political parties elected by the British public are one way of understanding the changing Britain of the 1970s. The decade started with Wilson's Labour government which had been elected in 1964,

but this was brought to a halt in 1970 when Edward Heath and the Conservatives came to power. Four years later in 1974, after much-publicised miners' strikes, Wilson was returned, only to give up the leadership to Callaghan after two years. Callaghan ran a competent government, but unemployment, racial tensions, the "troubles" in Northern Ireland and a wave of strikes in the 1978 "Winter of Discontent" led to a no-confidence motion being carried in the House of Commons, which then led to electoral defeat. In 1979, the Conservatives with Margaret Thatcher as their leader came to office, and the shape of British society changed utterly thereafter.

Despite fluctuating political parties in government, there was a consistently liberal direction in legislation during the decade, although the changes intended did not always have an immediate or straightforward impact. For example for women, the 1970 Equal Pay Act was an important first step, although it did not come into full force until 1975. It was followed by the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, a comprehensive anti-discrimination law; and the 1975 Employment Protection Act, which outlawed dismissal on grounds of pregnancy and introduced maternity pay. However, evasion by bureaucracy and cautious employers made real change a very slow process for many women. Other legislative changes, such as the 1971 Industrial Relations Bill, designed to regulate trade union activity, did not always have the desired effect. And the 1976 Race Relations Act, intended to make racial discrimination and segregation illegal, was widely seen to be ineffectual. Nonetheless, despite poor enforcement, there could be little doubt that in this decade quite radical legal change was afoot.

In many other ways too, the 1970s was a radical decade. We have found it curious that British popular cultural memory chooses to think of the 1960s as the radical decade, a time of renewal and rebirth, the "Age of Aquarius", and that it conceives of the 1970s as an age of cultural stagnation and decline. Our research leads us to the opposite view: that the 1960s was the decade of dreams, and that the 1970s was the decade where real effort, energy and creativity were engaged in ambitious projects which tried to harness those dreams into reality. The Women's Liberation Movement formed the now-called "second wave" of feminism in the 1970s and women organised themselves into petitioning, activist groups, at times radical and revolutionary, to lobby and gain publicity and support for equal rights and status for women. Another radical movement focussed on environmentalism, and aimed to gain entry into British politics as well as to educate the public away from consumerism. The Gay Liberation Front marched and demonstrated for the rights of homosexuals

against a persistent oppression, aiming to increase public awareness of homophobia. There were also movements which made pop festivals into politicised events, and others which advocated communal lifestyles, free from the nuclear family and with greater civil liberties. By the end of the decade, many of these groups had been assimilated into the mainstream culture in one way or another. Nonetheless, the 70s was a decade when different groups attempted, in their different ways, to effect change for the better.

We want to argue that there was a revolution in consciousness in the 1970s, as sub-cultural groups of the 1960s became more vociferously counter-cultural. This revolution in consciousness meant that social change was seen as necessary by a large part of the population, and this was an important driver for much of the political and personal activity in the 1970s. It became widely accepted that change was necessary, because the early 70s were tough times for many people with strikes, threatened food shortages, financial hardship and blatant inequalities for various sectors of society. There was high inflation, and from 1974 standards of living started to decrease. Despite there being greater social equality in the mid-70s, all sorts of conflicts arose which highlighted differences in class and education, religion and political allegiance. This tumultuous decade, with swings to the political Left and Right, with trade union strikes affecting the whole country, and with general uncertainty for the ordinary individual, has been difficult to document. For a long time, the 1970s has been a sort of “Bermuda Triangle” of historical analysis.

Recently however, some illuminating studies of the 1970s have been written, and these have very much helped with the serious recovery of the social and cultural history of this “lost” decade. Some have concentrated solely on the 1970s such as: Andy Beckett’s *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (2009). Beckett intersperses his account with a series of interviews of people, both famous and ordinary, who identified strongly with Britain in the 1970s. He offers an interpretation which elides the massive political upheavals with subjective experiences. Other texts have taken a longer historical view: Richard Weight’s *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940-2000* (2002) looks at the countries which comprise Britain, their economic and social histories. In his discussion of the 1970s he comments on the very divided nature of Britain at the time with a series of fractured perceptions contingent upon EEC membership, striking workers, Ireland, and shifting class ascription. Mark Garnett’s *From Anger to Apathy: The British Experience since 1975* (2007) divides the decade in half in order to tell a longer story about British consciousness up to the end of the twentieth century. The first portion of his book takes a

close look at what it felt like to be British in the second half of the 1970s, using cultural and political histories. In taking the emotional temperature of the nation, he diagnoses disillusionment with democracy, government and other agencies; concern at levels of lawlessness, sexual excesses, terrorism, and riots. In all, he notes high levels of anger, insecurity and loss of confidence.

In addition to work done on the social changes in the decade, there has been some on its cultural practices. A number of studies have addressed this, and influenced the ways in which we have reflected on the decade and conceived this volume. Robert Hewison's *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties* (1986) dispenses with the idea of periodising cultural history through discrete decades, and instead interprets the early 1970s as a logical consequence of the cultural ferments of the 1960s. This is a fruitful approach, since it provides a way of locating the long and the short roots of artistic innovation. But Hewison's view is that 1970s culture provides us with evidence about the dissipation of the energies of 1968, and this inevitably colours his views on the achievements of the latter decade. We want to argue that the cultural output of the 1970s, as well as following on from the 1960s, developed its own discrete identity and energy. We take the "long 1970s" view: that is, that it is not a separate period, but can be interpreted as beginning with the so-called revolutions of 1968 and ending with the rise of Thatcher in 1979.

Bart Moore-Gilbert's *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure?* which came out in 1994, remains one of the most competent analyses of the period. The essays in the collection are divided up strictly by medium: film, radio and so on, and are of a uniformly high quality. Moore-Gilbert's Introduction provides us with some useful pointers, as it does try to link political and artistic crises. The problem with Moore-Gilbert's essay is that, like many others, it concentrates exclusively on highbrow culture. It uses the explanatory model of "post-avantgardism" to characterise the culture of the period, interpreting the artistic production of marginal groups as an exasperated response to the higher reaches of Modernism. But the book does not interrogate low or middle-brow culture, and is hampered by the way that the articles remain strictly within their individual terrain. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach and a broad view of culture as a whole, we hope that our book will help to see connections between different cultural forms in a more comprehensive way.

In a sense, all the extant accounts of 1970s British culture concentrate on one aspect, and that exclusivity hampers them from coming to a full explanation of the culture. Moore-Gilbert's collection is highbrow in its



focus; Leon Hunt's book, *British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Exploitation* (1998) looks only at the lowbrow, as its title suggests, and it is poised between ruefulness and nostalgia. It is a lively interpretation of those cultural texts which are entirely without status and "hail" us loudly, reminding us of what it was to *be there*. And yet 1970s culture was characterised by the unusually permeable membranes between different cultural forms and works of different status and value. We see it as part of our task to allude to, and to account for, those "permeable membranes" which facilitate shifts between high and low culture; in the 1970s, these shifts occur in an unusually intense way.

The real issue is how to write a history of the culture—how to structure or proportion it. John A. Walker's *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (2002) was very important historiographically. It used a chronological approach, highlighting key cultural developments on a year-by-year basis. This could have ended up as a list of unrelated events, but the strength of Walker's book was that the spread of attention was broad, looking at a comprehensive range of avant-garde practices and media that hinted at the level of cultural exchange taking place between radical and mainstream art. Of course, the rationale of the book proscribes detailed engagement with the popular culture of the 1970s, but it does offer an analysis of the conditions for innovation in the decade.

Another way of writing the history of the 1970s is to use a kind of "snapshot" approach, in which discrete events are located in their social and ideological context. This is what drives Francis Wheen's *Strange Days Indeed: the Golden Age of Paranoia* (2009), and is a useful method, but the book presents the cultural as a logical consequence of the political, and we hope to produce a more nuanced account.

Some recent work on 1970s culture has shown partiality and undue selectivity. Alwyn Turner's *Crisis? What Crisis?* (2008) tends to focus on popular forms such as football and pop music, but does not construct an argument about the relationship between high and low cultural forms in the 1970s. In a sense the title of Howard Sounes' *Seventies: the Sights, Sounds and Ideas of a Brilliant Decade* (2006) says it all; it uses a case-study approach whose rationale tends to be personal, and the recollections range from the Isle of Wight Festival to memories of Diane Arbus and to the *aperçu* that several 1970s alumni died at the age of 27. The most intense "case-study" approach is Michael Bracewell's *Re-make/Re-Model: Art, Pop, Fashion and the Making of Roxy Music* (2007), which, in a painstaking way, disinters the cultural and biographical hinterland of a particularly eclectic group. Our collection provides a more diverse and less personalized approach.

We hope that our book will build on some of the existing scholarship, and take it a step further. We want to argue that the culture of the 1970s contributes an enormous amount to the history of consciousness of the decade, and that it should be given major currency in any debates about culture and society. The uncertainty and radical change at the social level shook free and gave permission to an astonishingly wide range of cultural forms. These both consolidated and experimented at the formal level.

Even if there could be such a thing as the *Zeitgeist*, it would be particularly difficult to define it for such a varied and fragmented period as the 1970s. We might playfully argue that the “spirit of the age” inheres in its cultural texts. But what is needed is a *materialist* and *detailed* interrogation of those texts, and that entails asking about their structure, sponsorship, their conditions of production, and the cultural competence required to decode them. The articles in this book begin that task, and adumbrate a culture which is allusive and risk-taking, and which embraces and transcends the notion of chaos.

We are addressing culture not as a “whole way of life” in the broadest sense of Cultural Studies. Rather, in this book we are giving attention to forms which are the result of creative endeavour, or political strife. All the essays in the book are studies of artifacts, media forms or cultural policies of one sort or another, which have authors, audiences and discourses. Accordingly, all our essays pay attention to *agency*, *style* and *intention*. Works of journalism, television programmes, novels, “happenings”, films, buildings, and plays are considered with regard to their sponsorship, the autonomy of their producers, their effect upon various groups and society in general, and the way in which their intentions were challenged or achieved within the constraints of the period.

The 1970s was, as we hope this volume will demonstrate, a period of extraordinary cultural ferment. In virtually every type of artistic production, new parameters were established, and there was a restless push against old boundaries and limitations. Even in cultural forms with minimal status, such as the *Confessions...* films or pornography, there was a qualitative shift, due in part to the shifting boundaries of taste and permission. In middle-brow or high-brow art forms, the transformation is even more marked. It is a period in which the old certainties about mood and form are called into question in the majority of cultural forms. Certainly, 1970s culture owed much to the fêted revolutions of the 1960s. But the decade has its own intrinsic messages too. Many 1970s art forms, including poetry and the novel, exhibit a sense of fracture far more acute than that which obtained in the 1960s. Many artistic texts broke down common assumptions about society and the self.

A metaphor which is commonly used for thinking through the relationship between culture and society is that of a “reflection”—that art offers a straightforward and predictable index of the social “background.” In this instance, this does not help us to account for the richness and variety of 1970s culture. The transformations which took place in the political, social and sexual arenas, through legislation and the increasing visibility of radical groups, did not appear *directly* in cultural forms. In the first place, media-specific but spasmodic attempts were made to allow more permeable boundaries between media forms. In the second place, in virtually every area of artistic production, previous organisational structures were in flux, and this gave a degree of autonomy to individuals who wanted to take risks. In the third place, new artists were coming to maturity, and came to their peak precisely when everything looked as though it was in meltdown. This seeming chaos led to a sort of over-stimulus in artistic production, and a sense that everything was up for grabs. Many cultural forms exhibit a playful, self-referential manner, which evinces a profound sense of disquiet.

Another metaphor which is often used as a way of accounting for culture is the Marxist one of the economic base determining and predicting the cultural superstructure. This may work well for other periods, but certainly not for the 1970s. In that period, there was a profound disjunction between economic provision and levels of artistic production. Some art-forms, such as community arts, experienced something of a bonanza in the decade. Others, the cinema for example, experienced penury and crisis. But all the cultural forms exhibit a sort of reckless, risk-taking, might-as-well-as-not attitude. This is the politics of emergency: and it leads to art which may be messy and inconsistent, but whose vitality is beyond doubt.

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We have tried to provide ways of thinking about such diversity and complexity by grouping essays into spheres of cultural activity. Our first theme, **Narratives of Politics and Art** looks at the spread and intensity of Marxist ideas in social and cultural practice. The 1970s was a period in which some parts of society expressed intensified interest in varieties of Marxism: the unions and the universities, for example. Marxism told silently on the minds of a whole generation, and extreme change in the political arena—varieties of Labour administrations, Heath’s governmental style, and the rise of Thatcherism—had unpredictable impacts on the cultural level. Rochelle Simmons’ essay on John Berger provides a precise focus on the work on a particular artist of the period, and asks how

Berger's radical ideas on visual perception and subjectivity filtered through into his creative writing. Anthony Dunn looks at the rise of Marxism in British academic and intellectual life and traces its roots in, and in turn its influence on, American and European Marxist theories. Dunn's approach is a broad and theoretical one, whereas the other essays focus on the interface between Marxist ideas and specific cultural practices. Gillian Whiteley's piece on Welfare State International captures the nomadic, eclectic nature of much 1970s cultural expression, and, based on new primary source material, demonstrates the capacity for innovation which characterises much avant-garde work in the period. Kirsten Forkert's essay on the Artists' Union—an attempt to set up a union for artists akin to the TUC—considers its work in relation to the labour movement of the 1970s. Finally, Sean Tunney examines the complex link between various Labour administrations and the newspaper industry, and he outlines the developments of a coherent “left current” in the Party. His analysis demonstrates the problems of political representation in the decade, showing the difficulty of achieving consensus and sustained momentum.

Our second section, **The Media and Social Change** raises the issue of the ways in which various media forms responded to social change. The relationship between the media and society is often damagingly oversimplified, and the old model of the “injection method” of media effects is still hoisted into use. What we wanted to do was to use a modified uses-and-gratifications model, and to show the *means whereby* innovative ideas about society were both inserted into, and developed by, media texts. 1970s television and journalism showed a sophisticated and selective awareness of innovation, and fashioned it to appear in a form which audiences would accept and internalise. All the essays in this section show how complex a procedure this was. David McQueen indicates the way in which current affairs programmes engaged urgently and deeply with political crisis and change, and had a clear understanding of the regulatory challenges they faced. The other essays in this section deal with the ways in which the media responded to minority or emergent issues—women's and gay liberation, racialised politics and the ecological movement. Laurel Forster's essay on women's magazines and second-wave feminism demonstrates how varied journalistic response was, and how carefully it was modified to fit the needs of readers from different backgrounds and cultural competence. *Till Death Us Do Part* is the focus of Gavin Schaffer's article, and he maps the way the series and its author Johnny Speight have an ambivalent attitude to racial politics and identity. The 1970s was a period in which discourses surrounding homosexuality emerged more frequently in the public domain, and Peri Bradley's article

examines the idea of “camp” and the way it was critically deployed in a range of television comedies of the period. The self-sufficiency movement was one which had long historical roots and came of age in the 1970s, and Gwilym Thear’s essay demonstrates its complexity and shows how television dealt selectively with it. All the essays in this section show that the media recognised the intensity of social change that was afoot, and played an important role in making the personal political.

Our third section is entitled **Youth Cultures**, and we hope goes some way to establishing the radical nature of generational transformation in the 1970s. The new youth culture was increasingly splintering in the period, and there was an increase in cultural texts which were *about* the young, as well as those which were *for* them. It was not just a matter of appearance: the uniforms of Punk and the moral panics which it engendered. Rather, the media in the 1970s made a serious attempt to provide entertainment for youth groups, and represented it in a more nuanced way than is often thought. Dave Allen takes *Quadrophenia* as a point of departure for thinking through the ways in which we conceptualise the past, and suggests that such cultural texts can conceal an understanding of the complexity of youth movements. Other essays in this section look at the new types of cultural provision for young people. Keith Johnson’s piece on the phenomenon of The Wombles shows how permeable it was to social influences, and that the furry creatures encompassed both conservative and liberal attitudes. Julian Matthews considers *John Craven’s Newsround*, a current affairs programme specially for the young, and shows what a major innovation it was in terms of material and approach. And Stephen Hill’s essay on the pop music magazine *Smash Hits* shows how it transformed its audience’s understanding of popular music throughout the decade, and exerted a modernising influence in terms of format and discourse. All these articles provide evidence for a change in media provision and media representation which cannot simply be accounted for by the desire for profit.

Section Four, **Film Production Contexts**, focuses on the film industry. 1970s British cinema is often neglected or demonised, and frequently misunderstood. There is one recent edited collection on *Seventies British Cinema*, Robert Shail (2008) and one forthcoming from the Portsmouth project, but the essays in the present volume represent substantially new work. The essays in Section Four are based on hitherto unused material—archives, interviews and diaries—and by using material close to the source, unearth a new understanding of British 1970s film. The essays provide important evidence about the industry and the way genres, authorship and funding were transformed in the decade. Andrew Spicer’s

piece on Michael Klinger studies him as an innovatory entrepreneur in the period, and fills in an important gap in our knowledge about mainstream producers. The other essays focus on directors. John Izod and his colleagues at Stirling use Lindsay Anderson's diaries as a source for a re-evaluation of *O Lucky Man!* and its motifs from popular culture. Adam Locks uses his interview with the "forgotten" director Norman J. Warren to develop an argument about the way in which British cinema of the period redeploys images of the rural and the gothic, and Adrian Garvey re-evaluates the work of Ken Russell. His *The Boy Friend* deploys a characteristically 1970s type of nostalgia which is located in its cultural context.

Section Five, **Social Spaces** focuses on urban and domestic experience, and examines the real, imagined and constructed spaces which were available for habitation by Britons of the 1970s. Tim Gough's article looks at a "real place", the Alexandra Road project, and locates it in relation to the concepts of brutalism and modernism. Sue Evans develops the idea of the concrete landscape and shows its importance for certain theatrical productions in the 1970s, having such currency that it is frequently recycled. Jo Turney's essay moves from the idea of the buildings themselves to the decoration within them, and she analyses the influences on 1970s interior design, accounting for the nostalgic, tactile and sexualised aspects of its *mise en scène*.

Much remains to be done. We have tried to indicate something of the complexity of 1970s culture and show how it responded, in faltering and unpredictable ways, to the social changes taking place. A further edited collection might include more work on the novel of the period (to show how types of experiment persisted across a range of novels), and would analyse developments in poetry and show how the idea of a "national" poetry was disrupted by a growing internationalism. It would be good, too, to examine the powerful links between the visual arts and other media, and to ask how far political debates about materiality extended into painting and sculpture. More work could be done on the way in which 1970s culture tried to narrow the gap between high and low art. And a consistent examination of the relationship between popular and classical music in the 1970s is long overdue.

But such an enterprise must be postponed for another time. For the moment, we hope we have produced a thought-provoking volume which stimulates debate about the connections, contradictions and (sometimes) confusions in a fascinating and under-researched period in British cultural history.

## **PART I:**

# **NARRATIVES OF POLITICS AND ART**

# JOHN BERGER'S REVOLUTIONARY NARRATIVES

ROCHELLE SIMMONS

Many people's most vivid memories of John Berger in the 1970s no doubt derive from the collaborative television series that he presented on BBC2, *Ways of Seeing* (1970), and the book that developed out of the series (1972), in which he presented a provocative Marxist critique of the relationship between art, class, and property. In the opening sequence of *Ways of Seeing*, the image of a long-haired Berger dressed in an exuberantly-patterned print shirt appearing to hack at Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* (1483) with a knife while it is hanging in the National Gallery testifies to his iconoclasm. It might also be said to offer a visual depiction of the barbarism Sir Kenneth Clark railed against in his television series *Civilization* (1969-70), in which the patrician Clark traced the rise of civilization through "great works by Western man." Indeed, *Ways of Seeing* provides a Marxist response to *Civilization*. But Berger's actions do not merely overturn traditional beliefs about art, for they arise out of a revolutionary impulse that lies behind much of Berger's cultural production over a thirty-year period.

Teasing out connections between Berger's art criticism of the 1960s and his television, fiction, and film of the 1970s reveals some of the ways in which intellectual and aesthetic innovations of the 1960s permeated British film culture of the 1970s, since, from the 1950s until the 1970s, Berger was engaged in various efforts to formulate a revolutionary aesthetic across these domains. My argument implicitly contradicts Robert Hewison's view of the 1970s as an era of "cultural closure"<sup>1</sup> and is in agreement with Bart Moore-Gilbert's counter-claim that "the mainstream was significantly changed by the legacy of the previous decade's experimental energy."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75* (London: Methuen, 1986), 230.

<sup>2</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure?* (London: Routledge, 1994), 15.



Berger's categorisation as a British writer requires some explanation. Although Berger has lived in Europe since 1960, and was therefore not resident in Britain during the 1970s, Berger's work was, and is, in dialogue with British culture. For example, *G.* (1972) is classified as an experimental British novel.<sup>3</sup> The two contemporaneous novels with which *G.* has most in common are B.S. Johnson's *Travelling People* (1963) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Johnson's novel shares *G.*'s self-conscious narration and stylistic experimentation, but these derive from eighteenth-century rather than Brechtian sources. Similarly, both Fowles's and Berger's novels exhibit features of the *nouveau roman*. Yet, if *G.* is considered within a British context, it is more by way of contrast than comparison, because, from the 1950s onwards, Berger's espousal of Sartrean commitment set him apart from most of his fellow writers. However, it allied him with left-wing filmmakers, like the French-Swiss director Alain Tanner (who worked briefly in London) and Lindsay Anderson. Only David Caute produced a comparably modernist, dialectical novel called *The Occupation* (1971).

Berger's efforts to formulate a revolutionary aesthetic over a thirty-year period demonstrate a consistent belief in the need for radical political action. For most of his career Berger has identified himself as a Marxist, and has campaigned against the inequalities of capitalism. But if Berger's political beliefs remain constant, the same could not be said for his sense of which kind of art best served his political ends. As art critic for the *New Statesman* in the 1950s, Berger worked tirelessly to bring about a realist revival in British painting, by advocating a social realism that adapts some of Georg Lukács's philosophical theories to the visual arts, since he believed that social realism provided the only radical alternative to the dominant formalist abstraction.<sup>4</sup> In his first novel, *A Painter of our Time* (1957), the work of its artist-hero, Janos Lavin, is based on that of the socialist painter Fernand Léger. Berger ultimately suggests that Lavin's attempts to bring about a socialist state by revolutionary means, as a

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of *G.* as an experimental novel, see Randall Stevenson, *The British Novel Since the Thirties: An Introduction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 216, and Moore-Gilbert, *The Arts in the 1970s*, 169–71.

<sup>4</sup> Berger's espousal of social realism is discussed by Geoff Dyer in *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger* (London: Pluto Press, 1986) and by James Hyman in *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain During the Cold War 1945–60* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). Berger pays tribute to Lukács's theories in *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the U.S.S.R.* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969).

painter, are equivalent to his activities as a political activist. Thus, both artist and activist are united in a revolutionary cause.

As a freelance art critic in the 1960s, Berger replaced his earlier ideas about social realism with theories about the revolutionary nature of modernist Cubist art.<sup>5</sup> These theories are set out in *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965) and "The Moment of Cubism" (1967). It is, of course, an art-history commonplace to assert that the Cubist painting of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque brought about a revolution in visual representation, by replacing the linear, one-point perspective, which had dominated Western art for five centuries, with simultaneous, multiple perspectives. Yet Berger ascribes political as well as stylistic significance to the revolutionary nature of Cubism, by emphasising the ideological aspects of the Cubist historical moment, during which the world underwent unprecedented philosophical and material change. According to Berger, many of these developments appeared to offer the possibility of a transformed world, and Cubism reflected this possibility, by altering "the nature of the relationship between the painted image and reality."<sup>6</sup> However, these paintings do not constitute a social or political blueprint. Berger states: "The content of these works is the relation between the seer and the seen. [...] They do not illustrate a human or social situation, they posit it."<sup>7</sup>

In writing *G.*, Berger draws upon his art critical writings to create an experimental Cubist narrative that is conspicuously modernist in its use of language and form. This novel is also an attempt to formulate a revolutionary Marxist modernist aesthetic, at a time when Britain was dominated by a Marxist realist tradition.<sup>8</sup> But before I discuss the revolutionary aspects of *G.* in detail, I should indicate that the connections Berger was drawing between modernist aesthetic practices and Marxist

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<sup>5</sup> In an article called "Cubism as Revolutionary Realism" (1983), David E. James takes a different position from the one that will be argued here, in that he approaches Berger's art criticism in general rather than specific terms, and defines Cubism as "[a] model of the artist's totalizing consciousness". David E. James, "Cubism as Revolutionary Realism: John Berger and *G.*," *Minnesota Review* 21 (1983): 98. My doctoral dissertation entitled *John Berger's G. as a Cubist Novel* (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1994) proposes a far more complex argument about Berger's theories than what I have presented in this chapter, since I argue that Berger exhibits—but does not reconcile—ideas of totality and heterogeneity within his dialectical writing in *G.*

<sup>6</sup> John Berger, "The Moment of Cubism," in: John Berger, *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), 171.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 25, 83.

politics are in keeping with James Hay's succinct description of the formation of Film Studies in the in the 1960s and 1970s. He writes:

Film Studies' emergence through post-structuralist literary criticism, particularly Marxist literary and film theory's shared valorization of a revolutionary and transformative aesthetic and, simultaneously, efforts to develop a Marxist critical theory of "film form" [...] occurred by recuperating the European avant-garde's discourse on modernity.<sup>9</sup>

Berger's participation in 1970s cinema culture will be discussed later, with respect to the films that he made with Tanner. However, the interest in revolutionary (and dialectical) form—which is evident in Berger's art criticism, fiction, television, and film from the late 1950s onwards—intersects with a larger development within film history and theory that includes ideological debate over films by Sergei Eisenstein, Jean-Luc Godard, and others in the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique* during and following May '68.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, the texts that Hay cites as being central to a "progressive" or "counter-" cinema during the 1960s and 1970s—Russian constructivist montage theories, Bertold Brecht's theatrical devices, and Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"—are all crucial to Berger's formulation of a revolutionary narrative within the above-cited domains. Thus, in relation to Berger's 1970s works, my use of the term "revolutionary" is informed by what I perceive to be Berger's interpretation of these debates and texts, as my following discussion of *Ways of Seeing* demonstrates in relation to Benjamin's essay.

*Ways of Seeing* manifests its revolutionary politics in a number of ways. By taking "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) as its starting point, it implicitly endorses Benjamin's revolutionary political agenda, since Benjamin begins his essay by invoking Marx's critique of capitalism and by anticipating the abolition of capitalism. Benjamin then discusses the transformative effects of mass media upon the work of art. He argues that mechanical reproduction results in a loss of aura, because, when the original is placed in inappropriate contexts, its presence is always depreciated.

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<sup>9</sup> James Hay, "Piecing Together What Remains of the Cinematic City," in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke, 214–15 (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> In *May '68 and Film Culture*, Harvey examines the debates over radical aesthetics and the construction of a materialist cinema within these journals.

The television series of *Ways of Seeing* puts many of Benjamin's ideas into practice.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Berger's literal selection of a "detail" from Botticelli's painting, to which I alluded earlier, serves to demonstrate Benjamin's point about how mass-produced images detract from the original. In addition, Benjamin's conception of the image has formed the basis for Berger's reconceived history of art, which augments the Western high art tradition with a history of images. Berger concludes the book of *Ways of Seeing* with a reproduction of René Magritte's painting *On the Threshold of Liberty* (1937) which shows a cannon aimed at a series of panels displaying a variety of figurative images, including a building façade, trees in a forest, and a naked female torso. Since *Ways of Seeing* takes aim at class supremacy based on property and wealth, this image functions as an obvious political revolutionary metaphor. The book's final words: "To be continued by the reader. . ." make this exhortation even more emphatic.<sup>12</sup>

As an aside, *Ways of Seeing's* revolutionary message can also be seen in the way that this television series opposes all that *Civilization* stands for. Clark came from a wealthy background and was a member of the establishment: he was an Oxford-educated aesthete, art collector and scholar. By contrast, Berger is an anti-establishment Marxist, and an autodidact, who worked as a painter, art critic, journalist and writer, and who has remained outside institutions. Clark and Berger's manners of presentation are diametrically opposed, since the elderly Clark is a model of decorum and restraint, whereas the youthful Berger displays the kind of "passionate intensity" that Clark considers dangerous. While *Civilization* was abundantly resourced, *Ways of Seeing* was made on a meagre budget. Whereas Clark is photographed on location beside original works of art, Berger often has a blue screen backdrop and he comments on reproduced images. The series was partly filmed in Paris during May '68, and, from the opening credits onwards, Clark addresses the dangers of this revolutionary uprising: the triumphal procession of "great works of genius" includes a palace with a tank in front of it. Clark emphasizes the threat posed by barbarians from the Roman Empire onwards and he draws pointed comparisons between barbarians and rioting students, particularly in the episode entitled "The Fallacies of Hope," which takes revolution as its subject. In his conclusion to the series, he examines the "moral and

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<sup>11</sup> Berger pays direct tribute to Benjamin in John Berger and others, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 34.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

intellectual failure of Marxism.”<sup>13</sup> By contrast, Berger does not regret, but celebrates, the revolutionary spirit of May '68 in both *Ways of Seeing* and in his novel *G*.

With respect to the relationship between *G*. and Berger's theories about the revolutionary nature of Cubist painting, *G*. is extensively concerned with Cubist art. The book has a collage-like structure and it exhibits all the canonical generic features of a Literary Cubist novel.<sup>14</sup> However, it also draws on Berger's writings about Cubism on a conceptual and a verbal level. *G*. is set during the Cubist historical moment and the eponymous character *G*. is based on Berger's notion of Picasso, whom he considered a “Don Juan in relation to art,”<sup>15</sup> and whom he thought of in revolutionary terms.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, *G*. is a latent revolutionary, who eschews politics, but who attempts to destroy society in his own mind through his subversive sexual activity.<sup>17</sup>

Like the Cubists, Berger's protagonist is not involved in politics, but he does have a revolutionary consciousness.<sup>18</sup> The reader is never told what *G*.’s initial stands for, and, while he is most closely identified with Don Juan—or Don Giovanni—he is also linked with a number of political revolutionaries in the novel, who stand for some of the “possible selves” that *G*. might have become. The devastating looks *G*. bestows upon women that provide the clearest indication of his revolutionary significance. Yet, *G*.’s looks are only able to convey this meaning, because Berger locates his novel during the Cubist moment and *G*.’s span of maximum sexual activity coincides almost exactly with the Cubist years. Therefore, *G*.’s vision reflects the promise offered by his age.

In Berger's novel, too, *G*.’s revolutionary import rests upon “the relation between the seer and the seen.” Berger introduces the significance of *G*.’s looks by providing some information on the split subjectivity of women. This discussion is almost identical to a sequence in “Ways of Seeing,” which had a formative influence on theories of the male gaze.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940* (London: Methuen, 1995), 153–4.

<sup>14</sup> See Simmons, *John Berger's G.*, 93–130.

<sup>15</sup> Berger, cited in Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (London: Writers and Readers, 1980), 129–30.

<sup>17</sup> Berger, cited in Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 91.

<sup>18</sup> R. Selden, “Commitment and Dialectic in Novels by David Caute and John Berger,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 11 (1975): 116.

<sup>19</sup> *Ways of Seeing* predated Laura Mulvey's influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which was written in 1973 and published in 1975 in *Screen*.

We are told that nineteenth century middle-class women lived in a socially conditioned, subjunctive world where each woman was divided within herself "between surveyor and surveyed".<sup>20</sup> G.'s looks enable the woman to gain a sense of her own singularity and they therefore provide her with a unified sense of self. It must be said, however, that for those with feminist sympathies, the revolutionary transformation that G. offers is heavily compromised by his being identified with Don Juan, whose seductions can be seen as the very embodiment of patriarchal oppression.

Berger provides us with a clue to G.'s Cubist consciousness, when, in a resonant gesture, G. dethrones an ornamental swan. This action is thematically depicted as a revolutionary transformation; it also occurs during a conversation that explores the transformative effects of looking, dancing, reciting, and swinging on a merry-go-round. This gesture follows on from Camille's recitation of some lines by the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, from a sonnet commonly referred to as "The Swan." If G. is identified with Cubism, and, in this episode, Camille with Symbolism, when G. dethrones the ornamental swan, his action represents the Cubist displacement of Symbolism. We are told that: "On a low table near which they sat was a large glass statue of a swan, rose-coloured, and mounted on a silver turntable which revolved. It was neither art nor toy, but an ornament denoting wealth".<sup>21</sup>

G. leant forward and pushed the glass swan quite forcefully so that its silver turntable began to revolve. It ceased to look like a swan and resembled a tall-necked, many-sided carafe of rosé wine.

The swan is drunk, said a young man.<sup>22</sup>

Although the comment that "The swan is drunk" recalls Mallarmé's opening line of "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd' hui / Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d'aile ivre",<sup>23</sup> the description of the revolving swan is as suggestive of Cubism as it is of Symbolism. A carafe is often depicted in Braque's and Picasso's still-lives from 1912-13 as a "many-

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<sup>20</sup> John Berger, *G.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 167.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>23</sup> MacIntyre translates these lines as: "The lively, lovely and virginal today / will its drunken wings tear for us with a blow...". See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Poems*, trans. C.F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 83.