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Dr Richard Hornsey

Dept of Culture, Media and Drama

University of the West of England, Bristol

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"City of Any Dream": Colin MacInnes

and the Expanded Urban Environment of late-1950s London

NB This paper is a condensed version of material in my book: The Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London *(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Any readers interested in these ideas are strongly recommended to pursue them there.*

In 1961, the painter Francis Bacon moved his studio into Reece Mews in Kensington, cluttering the floor with great piles of books, press cuttings, photographs, torn magazine pages and a significant number of male physique magazines. Key images from this detritus famously found its way into many of his canvases, as he selected and reworked them to create original and often harrowing composites. Writing in the catalogue for the recent Tate retrospective, the art historian Simon Ofield has described this studio as a kind of scrapbook, its debris providing a disordered lexicon which Bacon could use to articulate his own distinctly metropolitan form of post-war queer sense.[1]

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[1] Simon Ofield, 'Comparative Strangers', in eds. Gale and Stephens, *Francis Bacon*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), pp.64-73.

In 1959, Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton moved into their bedsit in Noel Road in Islington, and spent the next three years covering the walls with images of classical nudes and Renaissance paintings sliced out of the art books that they periodically stole from public libraries around Islington and Hampstead. The historian Matt Cook has written of this collage as a type of *bricolage*, which allowed the pair to fashion their own form of provisional queer domesticity against the heteronormative prescriptions of post-war British culture.[2] Like Bacon's studio, the content of the imagery thus becomes less interesting than its mode of accumulation; an assortment of essentially public images wrested from the city's municipal sites of learning to make a seamless environment for a distinctly queer home.

In 1956, publicity posters appeared across London to advertise the collective art show *This is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Gallery in the East End. Dominating the poster was an image by the artist Richard Hamilton, probably in collaboration with John McHale, which has since become canonised as a foundational work of British pop art. Like both Bacon's studio and Orton's bedsit, Hamilton's interior was a collage fashioned from an assortment of appropriated public images, which he cleverly combined to create a coherent and seamless composite. In the forefront of the image stood the physique model Zabo Koszewski, pretty much naked except for a tiny pair of white shorts, in a photograph cut out from a copy of *Tomorrow's Man*.

These three collaged interiors are united, I want to suggest, by an emergent and defiantly queer sensibility that was beginning to take shape amidst the relative consumer affluence and expanded popular media of late-1950s London. Indeed, whilst the popular narrative of 50s queer Britain tends to present it as a decade of repression, appeasement and assimilationist manoeuvres, it is these hesitant rumblings

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[2] Matt Cook, 'Homes Fit for Homos: Joe Orton and the Domesticated Queer', in eds. Sean Brady and John Arnold, *What is Masculinity? Historical Perspectives and Arguments*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming [2010]).

of a more disruptive alternative that I wish to consider in this paper. Marked early on by a wave of tabloid vitriol against so-called 'male vice', the 1950s are remembered as the decade of the Wolfenden Report and the apologist Peter Wildeblood, of the deferential politics of the Homosexual Law Reform Society and the ascendancy of a psychiatry that cast homosexuals as damaged unfortunates who deserved society's noble pity so long as they restrained themselves in public. It would take at least another decade for a more radical and counter-cultural critique to develop and coalesce in the form of Gay Liberation. Yet such an account risks undervaluing what may have already been going on in the 1950s, for particularly towards the end of the decade the pink shoots of that more radical moment may have already appeared, poking up as a dispersed but highly creative set of engagements with the contemporary urban terrain and its proliferation of mediated popular cultures. The problem for the queer historian, however, is that these embryonic stirrings were not particularly articulated through the prism of sexuality. Instead, they presented a diffuse and decentred form of social opposition in which alternative sexualities remained marginal or uncodified. Hence the apparent paradox that one of the most challengingly queer images of the mid-1950s was produced by a heterosexual man.

To excavate these disruptive urban engagements, it is important to recognise how central the very idea of urban sensibility had become to strategies of social governance in Britain at the end of the Second World War. By 1949, the sociologist TH Marshall had already identified it as the essential foundation of the brand new Welfare State, which, he argued, proffered a form of social equality based not on income or material wealth, but on inclusion within a universal form of civic

citizenship.[3] Marshall's suggestion was that any post-war agenda for material redistribution was secondary to that of relegitimating class inequality, reinforcing existing hierarchies whilst simultaneously dampening down the kind of interclass tensions that had dominated British society before the war. Post-war reconstruction thus focussed on fostering an inclusive form of civic belonging, via a set of quotidian rituals carefully woven into the fabric of ordinary life. By queuing for one's weekly allowances at the post-office or visiting the local municipal branch library – things Marshall termed the 'details in a design for community living' – individuals from all social classes would become newly instilled with a common civic unity, a universal sense of national community that made economic inequalities less important and contentious.

In the immediate post-war period, officials worked hard to reform ordinary people's engagement with everyday urban space, as a means to encourage this sanctioned and proper mode of consensual civic performance. Plans to rebuild Britain's bomb-scarred cities placed local participation at the heart of their new neighbourhoods, which centred both spatially and symbolically on a municipal cluster of schools, community centres and pedestrianised shopping precincts. Whilst major exhibitions worked in tandem to inculcate individuals into a more refined responsiveness to the virtuous built environment. At the Festival of Britain's *South Bank Exhibition*, for instance, visitors were marshalled around a series of carefully-managed pathways and encouraged to wonder at both the utility of its modern architecture and the ordered collective sociality in evidence on its plazas. By thus teaching citizens how to inhabit civic space properly, to visually appreciate its functional values and social utility, reformers hoped to instil within the citizen a

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[3] TH Marshall, 'Citizenship and Social Class' (1950), in TH Marshall and Tom Bottomore, *Citizenship and Social Class*, (London: Pluto, 1992), pp. 3-51.

purposive interiority, an ideological sensibility that would sustain good public behaviour in accordance with post-war structures of hierarchical conformity.

Of course, this prescriptive sensibility was one entirely untainted by erotic intentions. As reformers made plain, public space as a crucible of practised civic order was separate and distinct from the sanctioned realm of sexual expression – the private familial home. Thus at the state-organised *Britain Can Make It* exhibition at the V&A in 1946, visitors were ushered past a succession of model interiors, each of which supposedly belonged to a contented family of picturesque characters. Together they not only provided an image of an ordered and conspicuously cross-class urban community, but taught visitors to appreciate the value and importance of a well-designed living space, whose functional decorative order was vital to the maintenance of a stable family life.

This reinforced divide between civic public space and the private home made any residual elements of public sexuality a renewed source of demonic disorder. By the late-1940s, this had already found popular expression within the character of the spiv, an ineffectual and self-aggrandising minor criminal who sought self-affirmation and others' respect via a street-corner life of black-marketeering and petty crime. A staple feature of satirical cartoons, radio comedies and post-war crime films, the significance of the spiv lay in the overdetermined nature of his criminality, which expressed a whole range of dominant anxieties about class, sexuality and the unruly urban environment. Putting individualistic self-gain over collective civic duty and refusing to be contented with his working-class status, the spiv's real deviance lay in how his street-corner presence depended on eliciting selfish desire in others. This cast him as an active agent of disorder who served to tempt unwary citizens away from

their purposive civic behaviour and regress towards a dangerous vulnerability to the distractions of the commercial metropolis.

Yet most significant in the present context was the spiv's underlying queerness. His sartorial ostentation and ineffectual criminality already marked him out as insufficiently masculine, whilst more sinister representations persistently cast him as impotent and sadistic in his relationships with women. Indeed, certain psychiatric criminologists argued that spivvery was intimately connected with male homosexuality; both conditions resulted from a damaged homelife in which an overbearing mother or negligent father had prevented their son from reaching psychosexual maturity.[4] According to this diagnosis, spivs were really latent homosexuals who had thankfully summoned a last drop of courage to fight against their condition, and achieve a fragile, but volatile, heterosexuality.

When, in the early-1950s, the British tabloids escalated their attention to queer metropolitan activity, the spiv provided a basic template through which its dangers could be expressed. Like the spiv, the queer's criminality lay in the malignant way he responded to the city, illicitly attuned to its solicitous surfaces and their inherent corrosion of quotidian civic performance. Also like its spivs, London's queers were agents of urban instability, tempting others away from their purposive participations and into a set of transitory, selfish and commercial transactions that connected deviant sexuality with disruptive class mobility. According to this model, those most vulnerable were that same generation of immature working-class lads, who were foolish enough to succumb to the advances of older, richer perverts. Like his discursive predecessor - the spiv - the street-corner queer undermined both the static

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[4] See, for instance, Peter Scott, 'A Clinical Contribution', in ed. Norwood East, *The Roots of Crime*, (London: Butterworth and Co., 1954), pp. 55-89.

stability of post-war class hierarchies and the type of benign civic sensibilities through which such structures were being legitimated.

As Matt Houlbrook and others have shown, debates about male homosexuality in Britain in the 1950s can productively be read as a battle between two competing paradigms that both proposed a truth about how queer men inhabited and operated within the city.[5] Whilst the tabloids demonised queer perverts for their corrosive public behaviours, a bourgeois coalition of medical experts, policymakers and queer professionals worked hard to promulgate a more conducive account of metropolitan homosexuality that accorded with the hegemonic spatial imperatives of post-war social citizenship. Most famously captured within Peter Wildeblood's testimony to the Wolfenden Committee in 1955, this new model of respectable homosexuality sought to pave the way to queer assimilation and legislative reform. According to this account, 'proper' homosexuals were careful, in fact, to renounce London's unstable criminal street life with its commercial solicitations and transient encounters. Instead, they yearned for a more orthodox life of public restraint, domestic fulfilment and the love of a life-long companion. This account, then, restored the firm division between non-sexualised public space and the sanctity of the properly-private home, in accordance with the structures of post-war reconstruction. And it was this model that was eventually endorsed by the Wolfenden Committee in its 1957 recommendations and which came to dominate the campaign programme of the Homosexual Law Reform Society when it was founded the following year.

Yet, I want to trace an alternative and less complicit urban sensibility that seems to have emerged alongside these developments and whose often latent

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[5] See, for instance: Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Matt Houlbrook and Chris Waters, '*The Heart in Exile*: Detachment and Desire in 1950s London', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 62, 2006, pp. 142-65; Frank Mort, 'Mapping Sexual London: The Wolfenden Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution 1954-7', *New Formations*, no. 37, Spring 1999, pp. 92-113.

radicalism might still need to be recovered. Within a new climate of consumerist possibilities, this came to celebrate those same unstable facets of the contemporary urban landscape that post-war reformers had actively tried to suppress – commercial solicitation and ephemeral distraction. By engaging anew with the flickering surfaces of the dynamic city, this troubling sensibility not only challenged the static hierarchies of post-war community but enabled more autonomous forms of everyday life to develop, whilst occasionally promoting tentative alliances across boundaries not only of sexuality, but of gender, class and race.

In a sense, this challenge had already been articulated within Hamilton's poster for *This is Tomorrow*. This collage is often misread as either a satire on consumerism or as a simple wish-list from the depths of post-war austerity. Yet Hamilton's image was a sincere attempt to explore the developing impact of urban consumerism and its attendant visual economies on private domestic space. Thus this living-room has been invaded, both by numerous commodities and by a cacophony of sounds and images transmitted via a plethora of different audio and visual media. Most succinctly expressed by the cinema lights insistently shining through the curtainless window, the image calls into question the very possibility of properly private space - the kind of sober ordered homelife on show at *Britain Can Make It* or as valorised within the pages of the Wolfenden Report. This home is no longer a discreet a space of sentimental training and companionate fulfilment. Now profoundly porous, it has been fully saturated by that solicitous urban terrain that it was supposed to keep at bay, to become suddenly the site for a more sexualised and much queerer mode of everyday domestic performance.

Hamilton's ambition in creating this image was to guide the viewer towards a more advanced set of visual skills, more adept at navigating their way through this

expanded metropolitan environment. By gathering together a profusion of ordinary imagery and forcing into a disjointed unity, he sought to initiate a more evolved perceptual apparatus that could meaningfully engage with and make sense of the fragmented image systems of the late-1950s. Indeed, this concern ran through the work of most of Hamilton's colleagues in the Independent Group, a loose gathering of young artists, designers, architects and critics who hung around the ICA on Dover Street in the mid-1950s. Including the artists Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson, the architects Alison and Peter Smithson, and the critics Lawrence Alloway and Reynor Banham, this band of associates consciously set out to explore the impact of new consumer practices and forms of popular culture on everyday urban experience; and found in them not an unruly challenge to the ordered stability of post-war life but exciting opportunities for autonomy and difference.

At the ICA in 1953, for example, Paolozzi, Henderson and the Smithsons mounted an exhibition called *Parallel of Life and Art*, comprising of over 100 black-and-white images of such things as scientific diagrams, newspaper photographs, microscopic images, anthropological artefacts and contemporary abstract paintings. These had all been rephotographed in the same deliberately grainy style, the resultant prints mounted on bits of cardboard and hung from the walls and ceilings in a deliberately overwhelming and disjointed manner. Like the *South Bank Exhibition* only two years earlier, here was a tightly-controlled environment that was actively interested in reconfiguring the visitor's perceptual apparatus and reformulating their environmental responsiveness in preparation for a return to the city outside. Yet unlike the South Bank's carefully managed vistas of good civic behaviour, *Parallel of Life and Art*'s bombardment of disconnected imagery was deliberately disorientating,

forcing the viewer to navigate their own way through it via a succession of partial and provisional viewpoints.

In an essay of 1959, the group's leading art critic, Lawrence Alloway, would articulate this further in a staunch critique of post-war urban planning.[6] For Alloway, London's architects should not attempt to restrict the city's transitory commercial addresses, but should work to develop the individual's ability to fashion them into some sort of creative and autonomous mode of ordinary urban living. Thus, whilst reconstruction planners had routinely damned the neon flickers of Piccadilly Circus for its squalid appeals and disordered distractions, Alloway argued that they opened the way to a more fecund form of lived democracy in which a diverse range of social actors might find the resources they needed to forge more meaningful encounters with the city.

Dating from this same period, Orton's bedsit collage and Bacon's studio floor might reveal a particularly queer endorsement of this same proposal. In fact, Alloway explicitly celebrated Francis Bacon as the founding father of what he discerned as a British pop sensibility, whose influence ran through the work of his own peers and onto the crop of self-proclaimed 'pop artists' who emerged in the early-1960s.[7] McHale's son has even claimed that the tin of ham in the collage for *This is Tomorrow* was a direct nod to the painter's unique importance for the group.[8] Elsewhere across London, it is tempting to point to the boutique culture emerging around Carnaby Street as another important crucible of this queer sensibility, the developing turn to casual separates suggesting a form of queer *bricolage* that allowed

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[6] Lawrence Alloway, 'City Notes' (1959), in ed. Richard Kalina, *Lawrence Alloway: Imagining the Present; Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 66.
[7] Lawrence Alloway, '"Pop Art" since 1949', *The Listener*, (December 27, 1962), pp. 1085-7.
[8] See John-Paul Stonard, 'Pop in the Age of Boom: Richard Hamilton's *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*', *Burlington Magazine*, 149/1254, 2007, pp. 607-20.

younger male customers to experiment with a form of self-creation that opposed the coherent orderings of the more conventional suit.

Yet, it is perhaps the work of Colin MacInnes, the queer novelist and journalist, that provided the most thorough queer articulation of this metropolitan orientation. His essays from the period, as well as his 1959 novel *Absolute Beginners*, are enthusiastic about the various forms of commercial popular culture taking root within London, finding evidence therein of an expansive and internationalist outlook that challenged the restrictions of nationalist cohesion, and which dissolved barriers of class and ethnicity, whilst loosening the strictures of outmoded sexual mores.

But above all, it is his essay 'City of Any Dream', a text written in 1962 to accompany a book of images by the Czech photographer Erwin Fieger, which provided his most coherent celebration of the multifarious environment of the mass-mediated city. Fieger made pioneering usage of both colour art photography and the telephoto lens, two methods which, he claimed, enabled him to "isolate the significant details from the midst of a bewildering profusion."[9] Fieger's book on London is thus a composite of momentary fragments; grainy, incomplete and usually obscured by some object in the foreground that renders only a section of the image properly intelligible. For MacInnes, it was this disjointed partiality within Fieger's collection that made it such an acute articulation of the modern metropolis and of the ungovernable experiences of its mobile individuals. Here, London's elusive dynamism, its confusion of scales and its unpredictable configurations were perpetually pointing outwards to alternative experiences and pluralist perspectives. As MacInnes wrote about the experience of standing in Trafalgar Square: "we find ourselves in a higgledy-piggledy out of which each spectator must try to create his

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[9] Erwin Fieger, in Erwin Fieger and Colin MacInnes, *London – City of Any Dream*, (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1962), p. vii.

<u>own</u> visual image".[10] Clearly consonant with Alloway and his associates, the only suitable response to such an incoherent, fragmented and ephemeral environment was to come to terms with it in one's own way, to develop the kind of responsive apparatus needed to forge one's own set of urban relationships. Fieger's London was thus less valuable in itself that for its celebration of its own partiality, announcing a more disparate and autonomous mode of engaging with the deregulated surfaces and seductions of the city.

MacInnes's essay is far from being explicitly queer. Indeed, his marked antipathy to the apologetic rhetoric of figures like Peter Wildeblood, with its more assimilationist imperatives towards domestic propriety and public restraint, ensured that he was less interested in London's homosexual subcultures than in the activities of its teenagers and Afro-caribbean immigrants. Yet this marginalisation of queer themes within his work may very well be the point. For his determination to look elsewhere in London and his refusal to withdraw from its supposedly-trivial popular trends allowed him to explore this terrain for novel possibilities of self-fashioning and communality that might eventually transgress more dominant social hierarchies of class, ethnicity and age.

If, then, the later-1950s witnessed the tentative emergence of a disruptive urban sensibility, then it may well have initiated something of value. It is certainly tempting to find continuities between these fragmented activities and the later activism of the Gay Liberation Front, who both exploited the opportunities of the ephemeral mass media and ordinary urban space, and which embraced an internationalist outlook that actively sought alliances with both feminism and Black Power. The problem for the historian, I think, is that this earlier queerly-disruptive

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[10] Colin MacInnes, 'City of Any Dream', in ibid., p. xviii; my emphasis.

mode of navigating the city was only intermittently recognisable as actually 'queer'. Tentatively collating ephemeral images and commodities, it had yet to coalesce within identifiable forms of subcultural identities or political resistance. Yet, in our own contemporary moment, when metropolitan homosexual consumption practices often seem all too sedimented and insular in their outlook, returning to a more creative and collagic approach to the city might perhaps still open up new and unforeseen forms of engagement and alliance.