The Independent Group Looks at London's West End

Abstract:

In the early 1950s, British culture was dominated by welfare-state visions of urban reconstruction. These projections of a stable civic society were premised on a particular way of looking at and reading the metropolitan environment. At odds with this project, the Independent Group's discussions and collaborative work developed an alternative urban semiology, which found the city to be already rich in visual resources for fashioning a more profound form of social democracy. Soon, this critical engagement would develop in different directions, represented here by Lawrence Alloway's commentary on Piccadilly Circus in his essay 'City Notes' and the London footage inserted by John McHale into his film for the Smithsons' Berlin Hauptstadt project (both 1959). By the end of the 1950s, members of the erstwhile Independent Group had produced two contrasting critical accounts of how the metropolitan centre should be looked at, which challenged the strictures of post-war reconstruction in distinct and conflicting ways.

Keywords: Alison and Peter Smithson; Lawrence Alloway; post-war reconstruction; urban perception; Piccadilly Circus.

'A Design for Community Living': How to Look at the Reconstructed City

In 1949, the British sociologist TH Marshall gave a lecture exploring the critical significance of the country's nascent welfare state. This new social democracy, he argued, marked a shift in capitalism's on-going struggle to legitimate its own inequalities. The recent raft of welfare legislation and cultural provision was premised on a novel and enlarged understanding of citizenship, now interpreted as a common right to the nation's heritage regardless of one's place within the class system. According to this logic, if people of divergent wealth and income were all embraced as equal members of the same national community, this might diffuse the bitter class resentment that had characterised the interwar decades. This, Marshall noted, was a matter of culture more than brute economics. Material concessions to the least well-off were unlikely to be effective in themselves, for civic affiliation could only be sustained through the practice of ordinary rituals. The rich and the poor alike had to experience what it was to pick up one's Family Allowance from the local Post Office or change one's books at the municipal library. In short, in order to secure capitalism's founding economic disparities, post-war social democracy had to coalesce around a "new common experience" ([1950]/1992: 33) or "a design for community living" (p. 35).

Such new designs dominated the early years of post-war reconstruction. Patrick Abercrombie's influential plans to rebuild London – the *County of London Plan* (written with JH Forshaw, 1943) and the *Greater London Plan* (1944) – forecast a network of cross-class urban neighbourhoods whose economic hierarchies had been rendered benign by the everyday routines already programmed into them. With its main roads routed around its perimeter, each district's identity would be carefully

cultivated through an arrangement of space, and focussed on a cluster of municipal amenities - a community centre, a pedestrian shopping precinct, a library, perhaps – to which local residents might gravitate, regardless of class, to enjoy "physical culture, dancing, dramatics, handicrafts, discussion groups, lectures, etc." (p. 103). Soon Londoners were able to experience a taste of what this new urban living might feel like. At the *South Bank Exhibition*, the showcase arena of the 1951 Festival of Britain, dominant messages about the inclusive vibrancy of post-war social democracy were embedded within that mode of collective participation that Marshall had discerned as its basic foundation. Commentators enthused about how the site's network of pavilions, plazas and multi-level walkways emulated the latest ideas in urban planning. "As the visitor walks round it", the *Architectural Review* noted, "he [*sic*] might well be exploring a subtly designed town" (1951: 80).

The South Bank's layout also made concrete many of the spatial strategies on which Abercrombie had premised his vision of a stable future. Its sixteen pavilions were mostly themed by function, which mimicked the division of the plan's model neighbourhoods into a patchwork of use-prescribed zones. In addition, the South Bank's open plazas promoted the same kind of surveilled interaction as Abercrombie's pedestrian precincts, whilst the layouts of both environments were highly attentive to how individuals moved. As its Guide explained (Cox, 1951: 4), the *South Bank Exhibition* had been designed to tell a single unified story, which the visitors would only understand by following the pre-designated route. By invoking this narrative, a mass population might become channelled into a network of governable flows, much like the circulatory patterns that Abercrombie had built into his metropolitan districts.

Yet if such designed environments sought to inspire cultural affiliation to the wider civic body, then they had to do more than produce compliant spatial behaviour. They also had to create the right kind of emotional responses in the citizens who circulated around them. For this reason, Abercrombie's plans and the rebuilt South Bank both eschewed the spivvy excesses of Victorian civic architecture, preferring instead a vernacular modernism that expressed the values of a progressive welfare state. At the same time, the South Bank's trajectories revived the scripted theatricality of the English picturesque. Visitors were marshalled around a succession of dramatic viewpoints from which the site's pavilions, plazas and moving citizens suddenly formed a staging of social democracy in action (figure 1; Bullock, 2002; Gavin and Lowe, 1985).

Hegemonic drives to create a stable post-war society were thus inextricable from firm prescriptions about how to move through, look at, and make sense of the reformed urban environment. In concert with this, the newly-established Council of Industrial Design (COID) worked hard to teach Londoners how to look at their city properly and appraise the objects and images they saw there in a mature and responsible manner. At the popular *Britain Can Make It* exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1946, for instance, visitors discovered that all good designs shared three foundational qualities: functionality; a basic attractiveness; and semiotic fidelity. "Is it genuine or is it a sham?" was the question one had now to ask; "does it look like what it is, or is it pretending to be something else?" (COID, 1946). Only if a commodity, a building – or, indeed, a person – expressed its social value with earnest sincerity could it take its rightful place within the post-war urban landscape.

Very little of Abercrombie's plans was ever realised. Yet his reassuring vision of a stable civic order defined the contours of appropriate urban citizenship well into

the 1950s. Importantly, this image of a deferential, class-bound metropolis was partly a rejoinder to the aesthetic and social disruptions that appeared to characterise central London's West End. Once an exclusive zone of entertainment and commerce, this area had become democratised during the interwar years as working people's income and leisure-time increased (Nava, 2007; Walkowitz, 2012). To many middle-class observers, the intrusion there of chain stores, inexpensive restaurants, cinemas and dance halls signified a national culture in decline and a worrying submission to seductive American commercialism. Indiscreet investments in Hollywood, syncopation, cheap fashions and cosmetics seemed to be feeding an increasingly unruly and sexualised street culture, which looked visibly out of place against the imperial splendour of the district's monumental architecture. (Carey, 1992; Houlbook, 2007; Swanson, 2007).

According to the *County of London Plan*, the West End remained "one of the worst planned and architecturally designed areas of London" (p. 23); if this centre of nation and empire was to reclaim its stately dignity, it needed urgent sub-zoning and top-down redevelopment (Mort: 2010). Such prescriptions clearly sought to reinforce ailing hierarchies of class, gender and generational authority, by attacking the forceful solicitations that appeared to be corroding them. By the early-1950s, this moralistic gaze had become hegemonic within mainstream design establishments. In *ARK* (the student-run journal of the Royal College of Art), for instance, one young graphic designer could happily rile against "the lurid and tasteless film poster" for its "half truths and deliberate falsehoods". With its "appeal to the emotions rather than the intellect," such urban imagery was as socially destructive as the Fascist propaganda to which it was here compared (Hawkey, 1952: 8). Not only did it tempt spectators with ersatz promises, but it undermined any results already achieved by official

programmes of visual education. As all defenders of 'good design' agreed, the task now was to arm citizens with the perceptual weapons needed to fight such urban distractions and keep looking at their city with a sense of civic purpose.

"Indications of a new visual order": the Independent Group's urban semiology

Coming together within this cultural climate, the Independent Group shared personal and professional interests that set them at odds with the hierarchical investments of post-war reconstruction. Throughout the 1950s, their discussions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), their formal collaborations, and more casual dialogues challenged these hegemonic aesthetics, to explore instead the potential look of a more inclusive, empowered and transformative urban democracy. This was partly inspired by the "crisis of signification" that Toni del Renzio had discerned within New York action painting and Continental *art brut*, which shifted the work of art's importance "from the thing signified, to the act of signification itself" (cited in Massey, 1995: 140). This new focus on the semiotic event, aided by their casual appropriation of wartime communications theory, chimed with the group's affective investments in both the American mass media and British working-class street life. By asserting the primacy of the communicative act, they were able to radically expand what might constitute the field of significant culture. Yet in so doing, they were forced to address the difficult question of how and under what conditions to now ascribe aesthetic value.

In the first half of the decade, the group sought an answer within the notion of "materials 'as found'" - for Reyner Banham ([1955]/2011), the appropriate components of any New Brutalist art or architecture. Freely available within the

everyday landscape, such materials stood out not for their classical beauty, but for "all [their] overtones of human association" (p. 25). Both material and symbolic, the object or image 'as found' bore significant traces as a node of social interaction, situated within its own historic moment at a specific geographical place (Highmore: 2011). Above all, it expressed something important about those overlapping networks of production, technology and everyday social practice within which it had been discovered – a quality that the group could equally locate within a Jackson Pollock canvas, a child's chalk drawing on an East-End pavement, and a full-colour advertisement within the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

This criterion of aesthetic worth was a profound challenge to post-war visual pedagogy. The Independent Group were unconcerned about whether an object properly prescribed the function for which it had been designed. Instead, they found cultural value within the on-going negotiation between a thing's producer and its subequent users. Objects and images became significant because people chose to 'find' them and respond to them as active participants within located cultural networks. They provided vital channels of intercommunication, but expressed meanings that were far more evocative, ambiguous and open to contest than the normative instructions embedded within a piece of 'good design'. Differentiated experiences of class, gender, age, and location were all vital to these processes – the very things that reconstruction planners were seeking to marginalise and render benign in their rush to produce amenable urban citizens.

In 1956, Lawrence Alloway located this semiotic challenge firmly within the commercial metropolis in an essay celebrating the cover designs of American science fiction magazines. Opposing those "trigger-happy aesthetes and arm-chair educationalists" (1956: 19) who dismissed such covers as insidious and worthless,

Alloway recognised instead their profound social significance. The "symbolic" covers of the more pricey magazines, which typically inserted a scientific discovery into a familiar mythic drama, served to articulate important anxieties or aspirations about its likely social impact. Even the "exotic" covers of cheaper magazines, often featuring a scantily-clad woman in peril from a bug-eyed monster, allowed a rare form of erotic expression "in our half-censored urban culture" (p. 20). It was the basic industrial format of these magazines, Alloway claimed, that kept their covers so attuned to the desires and fears of their prospective customers. Their need to produce a quick sale from an overcrowded newsstand forced them to pursue a symbolic authenticity that less commercial or transient modes of cultural production – fine art, for example – struggled to achieve.

Alloway's article appeared only months after the COID opened its Design Centre, a pedagogical showroom of well-designed British commodities, on central London's Haymarket. His essay's implication was that those specimens of 'good design' now gathered on its shelves might be less culturally valuable than the unruly mass of commercial images freely available on the West-End streets outside. On the COID's terms, these gaudy magazine covers were everything to be denounced; they were ephemeral, sexualised, attention-grabbing shams. Yet Alloway defiantly celebrated the "principle of partial irrelevance" (p. 19) by which their illustrations bore little connection to the content of the articles inside. Since everything now hinged on that fleeting moment of urban solicitation, their designers were propelled to dispense with all fidelity and address instead the most pressing concerns of their casually-browsing audience.

As the 1950s progressed, the Independent Group focussed increasingly on the political dynamics of such seductive metropolitan imagery. In 1955, its second run of

seminars included sessions on fashion, pop music and advertising, and repeatedly found urban culture to be already expert at meeting its consumers' symbolic needs. For example, the pop music industry, as explored by Frank Cordell (1957), was found to monitor its fans' enthusiasms and respond by refining the stylistics of its songs and star personalities. Its teenage audience was thus an active force in determining the contours of the products it consumed. In a similar vein, del Renzio (1957) found the designed interiors of coffee bars and shoe shops to have courted the aspirations of their female clientele, whose tastes had helped to turn them into progressive spaces of light-hearted cosmopolitanism. Such cultural relays, which the group often couched in terms of cybernetic 'feedback', revealed how shameless commerce was helping to facilitate new urban identities and forms of social expression.

Within this mediated environment, the artist's role was to guide spectators through this communicative landscape by supplying them with the tools they needed to arrange its stimuli into a workable Gestalt. This quest for orientation fed the group's on-going inquiry into collage, from Eduardo Paolozzi's epidiascope lecture at their initial meeting in 1952, through exhibitions like *Collages and Objects* at the ICA in 1954, to the didactic 'tackboard' that Group 12 presented at *This is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956 (Robbins: 1992).[1] More significant, however, were the group's attempts to explode two-dimensional collage into three-dimensional space. In 1953, Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson, and Alison and Peter Smithson produced *Parallel of Life and Art* at the ICA on Dover Street. This exhibition featured 122 photographs, all reprinted in the same grainy monochrome and mounted on bits of cardboard, which were hung in a disjointed fashion from the walls and ceiling of the gallery (figure 2). Like the *South Bank Exhibition* two years before, *Parallel of Life and Art* inserted visitors into a designed, holistic environment in an attempt to

encourage a more developed mode of spatial perception (Walsh: 2008). Yet unlike the South Bank's managed trajectories and staged surprises, *Parallel of Life and Art* consciously set out to disorient and overwhelm. These hangings, the team forewarned the press, were meant as "indications of a new visual order" (Henderson et al, [1953/2011]: 7). Abandoned spectators would have to posit their own correlations between the images surrounding them, as they tentatively moved their way through a series of partial and provisional viewpoints.

Group 2's pavilion at *This Is Tomorrow* (created by McHale, Richard Hamilton and John Voelcker) updated these dialectics into a more explicit engagement with metropolitan media. Their constructed environment staged a collision between film-poster imagery, dynamic optical illusions, amplified pop music and strawberry-scented air freshener, delivering a multi-sensory overload that deliberately invoked the thrills of ephemeral popular culture. A number of feedback loops had been built into the exhibit – records to choose on the juke box, floor pads to press that emitted a smell – to create a malleable environment that visitors might learn to configure for their own satisfaction. As McHale advised in the catalogue, this was "a complex of sense experience which is so organised, or disorganised, as to provoke acute awareness of our sensory function in an environmental situation" (1956: unpaginated). Suddenly conscious of this, overstimulated visitors might achieve a more evolved Gestalt perception and be better equipped to return to the street outside (Moffat: 2006).

This critical interest in the dialectics of urban semiotic overload was finally theorised in 'City Notes', a short essay that Alloway published in *Architectural Design* in January 1959. Recently returned from the United States, Alloway's piece was a rejoinder to the rival *Architectural Review* which, in 1950, had attacked

American cities for their "haphazard and, all too often squalid, fantasies called streets" (p. 376). The aesthetic mess of urban America was, for the *Review*, symptomatic of both an excessive commercialism and a careless disengagement from planning and design. Alloway, too, found US cities to be a "complex, untidy, fantastic, quick-paced environment" (p. 35); but their brash competition of sounds and images produced only a pleasurable chaos that signalled the way towards a richer social democracy. The crime movies on show within their cinemas, the pop music piped into their restaurants, plus their massive swathes of eye-catching signage all coalesced to offer multiple conceptions of what a city was and how life there might be lived. American city-dwellers had already learned to utilise these semantic resources and collate them into more personal modes of urban habitation. Alloway particularly cited the young female office-worker, whose "bachelor-girl's eye-view of the city" (p. 34) was reflected in the gathered fashion tips, restaurant ideas and advertisements for equipment that made up her monthly magazine, *Charm*.

For Alloway, two technologies in particular were reshaping how Americans looked at their cities: the CinemaScope screen and the automobile windshield. These mutually-analogous media both framed the city through "the panoramic view" (p. 34), an enhanced mode of visual perception that suited the greater complexity and scale of urban America's streets. To illustrate this, 'City Notes' featured a letter-box photograph of Times Square at night, its rain-soaked highways reflecting back the glare of its car headlights and commercial illuminations (figure 3). "Created originally without 'architectural' pretensions," the caption ran, "Times Square is beginning to exert its lure on architects" (p. 35).

This famous Manhattan crossroads had been celebrated before within the pages of *Architectural Design*, by the typographer (and catalogue designer for *This Is*

Tomorrow) Edward Wright (1956).[2] Yet by connecting this vista to the "expanded visibility" of CinemaScope, Alloway borrowed an additional motif deployed by Roger Coleman - his protégé on the ICA's exhibition committee - in a recent article on the painter Richard Smith (Seago, 1995: 157). For Coleman, "the CinemaScope screen" was the key to understanding Smith's large abstract canvases, for both required the spectator to navigate an expanded pictorial field:

> On a wide screen or a wide canvas the area of action is too large to be contained within any single cone of vision, instead one's eye roams over the whole surface to envelop the senses in a majestic spatial movement (1957: 25).

Alloway's CinemaScopic presentation of Times Square sought to initiate the same peripatetic vision. Its converging highways might initially draw the eye to the brash exclamation of the Chevrolet sign, but the gaze soon wanders off to explore the competing fields of messages on either side of the frame. The initial point of focus is thus destabilised by a riot of intruding bits of information. As the viewer tries to arrange these fragments into a more coherent whole, the semantic challenge is similar to that posed earlier at *Parallel of Life and Art*. If, therefore, the social hegemony of post-war reconstruction was founded on a purposive, undistracted urban gaze, then Times Square announced a more mobile and autonomous mode of looking, tied to a new type of commercial landscape already well-stuffed with semiotic opportunities.

"The best night-sight in London": nice times at Piccadilly Circus

The notion of stabilising British society by redesigning its urban fabric was, for Alloway, both arrogant and misguided. In a densely-mediated city, architecture

could only be one source of information about urban life, exerting no great monopoly over how it was perceived or practiced. Architects would always now compete with filmmakers, journalists, ad-men, and pop producers, all delivering the semiotic fragments out of which Londoners might compile their particular metropolitan sense. To promote 'good design' as the moral core of a reformed urban society was unrealistic and reactionary, for this denied spectators' growing ability to insert themselves into its mediated feedback loops and fashion their own, more inhabitable city.

In 'City Notes', this critique was condensed into a few lines on Piccadilly Circus, which Alloway presented as a humble approximation to the glories of Times Square:

> It is absurd to print a photograph of Piccadilly Circus and caption it 'ARCHITECTURAL SQUALOR' as Ernö Goldfinger and EJ Carter did in an old Penguin book on the County of London Plan. In fact, the lights of the Circus are the best night-sight in London, through inferior to American displays (p. 34).

This pin-pointed attack - Alloway's only reference to his native context in this essay – was highly rhetorical. The British architectural establishment had long considered Piccadilly Circus to be a glowing beacon of malignant commercialism at what was popularly known as the Hub of the British Empire. Since the 1880s, when the driving through of Shaftesbury Avenue had destroyed the geometry of Nash's original, this world-famous (but now disfigured) landmark had repeatedly been framed as a source of national shame. Remedial actions had long been frustrated by the divided ownership of its component buildings between the Crown, the London County Council (LCC) and other private interests (Sheppard: 1963). Between 1923

and 1928, Reginald Blomfield had succeeded in remodelling the Quadrant (the arc of Regent Street that ran off Piccadilly Circus to the north-west), as well as its two adjacent buildings: Swan & Edgar's department store on the west side of the Circus; and the Country Fire Office, on the north. Yet the stone grandeur of these redevelopments only served to emphasise the visual chaos of the buildings opposite, which, by the mid-1920s, had become a lucrative source of advertising revenue (figure 4). Soon the brand names of tobacco, gin and daily newspapers dominated the Circus's entire eastern side, displayed on flashing signs of up to 25 feet high. "By day as well as by night", complained *The Times* in 1928, "they are a hideous eyesore which no civilized community ought to tolerate, especially in so prominent and important a position" (cited in Sheppherd, 1963: 96). Local byelaws, however, remained ineffective at removing them, whilst their savage effects seemed ever more obvious on the painted bodies and in the promiscuous practices of the increasing numbers who gathered underneath.

It was thus consistent that Abercrombie and Forshaw should propose the demolition of the east side of the Circus, to erase its "clutter of advertisements" and finally restore the "dignity that this important 'place' deserves" (1943: facing 139). When the advertisements were switched back on again in 1952, little had visibly changed and the site could once more become the portentous symbol of everything wrong about the commodified West End. 'The Scandal of Piccadilly Circus' ran one contemporary headline in the *Sunday Graphic*, its name serving as an easy metonymy for the brazen exhibitionism of local West End prostitutes (Mort, 2012: 45). Indeed, this mapping of the signs' solicitations onto 'immoral' participants in the area's illicit sex cultures would persist throughout the decade, especially under the authoritative gaze of the Wolfenden Committee from 1954 to 1957 (Hornsey, 2010; Mort 2012).

Alloway's defence not only countered such approaches to the city, but also confirmed a new generational interest in Piccadilly Circus and the social dynamics on display there.[3] In 1956, two young filmmakers, Claude Goretta and Alain Tanner, had set out to document the activities that took place there over the course of a typical Saturday night. Supported by the BFI's Experimental Film Production Fund, *Nice Time* shared Alloway's fascination with the channels of communication colliding within this semiotic playground. The film repeatedly returns to the famous illuminated signs, but it also dwells on movie posters, play billings, pornographic postcards, shop-window displays full of shoes, naturist magazines, pinball machines and the placards of evangelical preachers. Shot cheaply on a hand-wound Bolex, a camera that couldn't record sound and only managed twenty seconds of footage before needing to be re-wound, *Nice Time* is little more than a composite of clips. Over the top is heard a collage of captured sounds – snippets of film dialogue, sound-effect gunshots, the cries of hawkers, overheard gossip – plus folk and pop songs performed by the Chas McDevitt Skiffle Group.

The film was first screened in May 1957 at the National Film Theatre, ironically housed in the *South Bank Exhibition*'s old 'Telecinema' building. It was part of the third 'Free Cinema' programme, a movement spearheaded by Lindsay Anderson and Karol Reisz to promote young filmmakers who rejected the contrivances of the established British film industry. As their first manifesto proclaimed, Free Cinema asserted a "belief in freedom, in the importance of people and in the significance of the everyday," plus a deeply-held conviction that "the image speaks" (Anderson *et al*, [1956]/2001: 257). In effect, *Nice Time* was a montage of sounds and images 'as found', a filmic arrangement of significant communications that continued the Independent Group's principled inquiry into the aesthetics of the

urban scene. It clearly embraced its own materiality and didn't shy away from the fact of its own production. With much of the footage shot surreptitiously, the camera declared its own libidinal investments; it dwells voyeuristically on courting couples, and often jerks away mid-shot to capture something more exciting happening elsewhere. For all its through-the-night narrative, the film's succession of grainy, monochrome images posed the same semantic challenge as the photographs at the recent *Parallel of Life and Art*. Viewers were again left to posit what connections they could between, for example, a close-up of a movie poster and the face of a young woman picked-out from the crowd (figures 5a and 5b), whilst improvising these fragments into a tentative Gestalt.

Nice Time, then, posed Piccadilly Circus as a problem of interpretation: what aspirations are here being expressed?; what pleasures are emerging out of these flickers, cries and diverse solicitations?; what is the significance of these transient associations that are seen to coalesce within this environmental collage? As the camera's sovereign gaze roves around the space, it reveals a highly inclusive metropolitan society. Young people wander alone or connect up in small groups, but all are shown to be utterly at home here; one pair of women even removes their shoes whilst sitting on the steps of Eros. This is a fluid space of causal interactions and diverse enjoyments, gathering together the well-heeled and the poor, loitering youths and elderly street-traders, Afro-Caribbeans and their English sweethearts, servicemen, prostitutes and (potentially) queer men. Piccadilly Circus, the film ultimately suggests, has produced a more tolerant, vibrant and pluralist social democracy than the official versions once staged on the South Bank or projected within Abercrombie's neighbourhood plans.

All six Free Cinema programmes were de-rigor viewing for London's young intellectual arts crowd; on the first night in February 1956, Paolozzi had himself starred in *Together*, a short drama directed by his friend Lorenza Mazzetti. In his subsequent defence of Piccadilly Circus, Alloway turned *Nice Time*'s social investments into a theorised critique of reconstruction urbanism. To dismiss this highly evolved metropolitan scene as so much squalid architectural clutter was to deny its agency as an active force of social-democratic renewal. To comprehend this, however, one had to relinquish the imperial ambition that characterised so much West-End architecture and recognise instead the superiority of American city life. At one point in *Nice Time*, the screen is filled by the giant Coca-Cola advertisement that had been installed in the Circus in 1954. Over the top plays the British national anthem, the closing moment of the evening programme in some nearby cinema. Not long after the Suez crisis, this was a provocative juxtaposition. Yet, in anticipation of Alloway, it was also genuinely optimistic about how such transatlantic commerce might make new forms of empowerment more visible on London's streets.

"Cars as spectacle… people as spectacle": Hauptstadt London

Just as Alloway was writing his essay, others members of the erstwhile Independent Group were also wrestling with the social dynamics of West-End semiology. In 1958, McHale and Cordell collaborated on *Hauptstadt Berlin*, a film to promote the Smithsons' and Peter Sigmond's recent competition entry to design a new centre for the bomb-scarred German capital. The Hauptstadt plan was striking and ambitious, and served to articulate what Peter Smithson described in his voice-over as "the principle of organisation which is applicable to all motorised mechanism-

served communities". This basic pattern of urban mobility, which the architects had found to structure all major cities, would - if the plan was built - finally receive its proper architectural expression. In the meantime, and for the purposes of the film, *Hauptstadt Berlin* would demonstrate its more compromised existence on the streets of present-day London.

Anticipating an imminent state of universal car ownership, central Berlin's historic road layout was to be developed into a grid of highways, appropriately graded for different types of traffic. The entire ground level was thus prioritised to the needs of motor vehicles, whilst ten metres higher up, a network of paved walkways would grant unhindered mobility to those on foot. These raised platforms would likewise span the entire central area, being of irregular width to facilitate "the random patterns of pedestrian movement" (Smithsons, 1958: 387), and in a counterpoint arrangement to the highways underneath. Car drivers and pedestrians, then, were afforded equal freedom of movement and access, as each circulated around the city via their own dedicated conduits. At regular intervals, public escalators would enable individuals to transfer easily from highway to platform (and visa versa), or from one mode of mobility to the other.

Importantly, the Hauptstadt plan did more than just facilitate this essential pattern of movement; it also provided a legible image through which both drivers and walkers might comprehend their place within the dynamic social collective (Smithsons, 2005: 46). The basic organisation of motion was thus married to an ordering of vision that would reflect its pattern back in a symbolic and memorable form. As the Smithsons argued, walking and car driving (as well as ascending or descending on escalators) gave rise to their own specific modes of visual perception, which the plan now utilised and brought to full effect. Pedestrians would see - and

thereby comprehend - their significant place on the platform network, whilst also gazing down to register the unfettered mobility of the cars below. In a reciprocal action, drivers would glance up and grasp the symbolism of foot passengers milling about on the open deck above:

> Cars as spectacle: ↓ look down to roads. People as spectacle: ↑ look up to escalators and terraces (Smithsons, 1958, 387).

This, then, was a more complex reworking of the South Bank's attempt earlier in the decade to direct and order the meanings of the mobile gaze. Now updated to embrace the motor-age, the spectacular consumption of a modern social democracy was again to be built into the fabric of the city.

As Peter Smithson would later reveal, the plan's architects had handed over their source material for *Hauptstadt Berlin* to the Cordells and McHale, who then did "everything else, the filming, the cross-shooting, the music, everything" (cited in Colomina, 2000: 6). Unsurprisingly the final film remains rather incongruent, as the grainy realism of quotidian London alternates with the cool science fiction of Sigmond's drawings and Smithson's authoritative statements about how both cities work. McHale's camera is only static when documenting particular structures of metropolitan mobility. Otherwise, his London footage has all been shot on the move - from a car, on an escalator, walking along a pavement – to try and capture the visual experiences that the Smithsons found essential to these different types of motion.

In documenting these, however, the film runs into trouble, as evidenced by its opening sequence, shot on a car drive through the West End from Trafalgar Square to Regent Street. Here the camera pans across the passing streetscape, to take in shop signs and parked cars, the occasional monument and vehicles moving alongside and in front. Yet as it scans the pavement, pedestrians and passers-by quickly become

blurred. This accelerated vision lacks the humane curiosity that propelled Goretta and Tanner's *Nice Time* and it often struggles to locate something significant on which to focus its attention. Occasionally a person becomes singled out - notably one woman on the corner of Swan & Edgar's as the car turns left off Piccadilly Circus to drive up the Quadrant - but then the camera lowers its gaze and scans the sidewalk at just a height that pedestrians' heads are cut out of the frame. As people merge and become indistinct, this passenger's eye-view is revealed as distanced and estranged. The social identities of those on the pavement become obscured, leaving faceless citizens as blank and generic as those on Sigmond's architectural drawings.

Then, in a London department store, McHale tries to capture the "vantage points of an entirely new sort" that Smithson discerns aboard the automatic escalator. Here the camera revels in the sudden thrill of closely-passing bodies and the futurist reflections caught in the machine's metal balustrades. But it soon resorts to gratuitous arabesques, whose dazzling perspectives effectively preclude more naturalistic ways of looking. Here and elsewhere, *Hauptstadt Berlin* seems unsure of how to enliven the plans' austere rationality, or to make those visual experiences that it seeks to demonstrate as exciting as the already extant metropolis off-screen.

Throughout the film, Cordell's soundtrack neatly divides the two capitals: futuristic *musique concrete* accompanys Sigmond's Berlin drawings; whilst light, up-tempo jazz plays over the silent footage of London. The latter works well to invoke the frenetic modernity of the West End's clubs and dancehalls, but it also lends the film a telling ambiguity. When dubbed over close-up shots of a crowd's feet trudging up some steps or along the pavement, its syncopations both enliven and satirise the plodding movements on screen. "The centre of a capital city," announces Smithson, "is a place of leisure as well as a place of work: a place to be enjoyed." Yet the mobile

city here presented ends up relying on this extra-diagetic music to suggest a brand of local fun that it cannot properly admit. This sonic incongruity only highlights what has been side-lined to create this dynamic city: the visual, aural and kinaesthetic pleasures presently available to the casual West-End loiterer.

In many ways, this was symptomatic of the Smithsons' larger antagonism to the inherited state of the metropolis. The Hauptstadt plan was based on their notion of the 'Cluster city', which sought to supersede the centrifugal structure that now appeared to be strangling many historic European cities (Smithsons: 1957). Focussing on the family - the primary social unit now made mobile by the motorcar (Smithsons, 1956) - Cluster cities would have multiple centres conveniently linked by a network of speedy roads. Commercial amenities could then be more evenly distributed, to provide greater accessibility and personal choice. In the Berlin plan, this was pursued through a set of submerged 'enclosures', holes in the honeycombed pedestrian platform that would be typically arranged to serve a nominated need - one enclosure for fashion retail, for instance, and another for entertainment. This spatialisation of activities - mostly hidden from citizens' view by the open deck itself - would leave central Berlin "calm, urbane, even a little empty" (Smithsons, 2005: 52). In form and tone, then, this metropolis was closer to the ordered civility of the *South Bank Exhibition* than to any of the unruly West End spaces that might have been filmed to illustrate its principles.

Unsurprisingly, when McHale's camera passed through Piccadilly Circus it addressed only its western side, whilst averting its gaze from the commercial signage and the loitering bodies around Eros. As Alloway would soon recognise, such a visually-disordered terrain could only challenge professional notions of architectural expertise. According to the Smithsons, the architect's job was to "create the signs or

images which represent the functions, aspirations, and beliefs of the community and create them in such a way that they add up to a comprehensible whole" (1957: 336). Thus, the configured mobility of both the Cluster city and the Hauptstadt plan symbolically conveyed its own social progress. Yet by first assuming the existence of this singular "community" - all united by common functions, aspirations and beliefs - the semantic pluralism of the busy city centre had itself been rendered a problem. As *Hauptstadt Berlin* suggests, the Smithsons had regressed from the semiotic challenges they once posed at *Parallel of Life and Art*; Peter's omniscient voice-over removed all doubt about the single correct meaning of these images on screen. To save the authority of the architects' own image, more autonomous and partial modes of urban perception would have to be dispensed with, in a return to the social and visual imperatives of reconstruction planning. Social difference, subculture, pleasure and desire – all the preoccupations of the more Brutalist *Nice Time* – were now quietly hidden so that a rebuilt city centre could assume its proper form.

Conclusion: "a real smack in the eye"

By the end of the 1950s, members of the former Independent Group had evolved their earlier discussions into two contrasting understandings of the social politics of metropolitan vision. For Alloway, the city's explosion of communicative channels was a productive cacophony, which allowed different groups to forge new urban orientations that might coalesce to form a richer social democracy. As city-dwellers became progressively implicated in all its available sights and sounds, the metropolitan scene could only become more vibrant, diverse and socially mobile than the deferential sincerity pursued by civic planners. For the Smithsons, however,

architects had an important duty to provide semiotic guidance through this environment, by creating the memorable images in which the community might recognise itself anew. As *Hauptstadt Berlin* made clear, this project required an ordering of vision that battled against the city's distracting commercial stimuli. This was, in effect, a more nuanced return to the perceptual imperatives of reconstruction urbanism.

At the end of the decade, this fundamental conflict between visual order and soliciting display would be played out once more within Piccadilly Circus. In March 1959, the LCC approved plans by the developer Jack Cotton to demolish the Monico block on the east side of the Circus and replace it with an office building perched upon a podium of shops (figure 6). Two of its sides would be covered in illuminated advertisements - now more neatly ordered within several rectangular tackboards - whilst the pavement below would be narrowed to speed up the flow of traffic (Edwards and Gilbert, 2008). By June, Kenneth Browne in the *Architectural Review* was passionately defending the now-threatened site for its "full blooded, unfettered riot of signs":

> At present you get a real smack in the eye; a sign as big as a building, a bottle as big as a bus and the tracery of lights is continuous. It's vulgar but it's exciting. The proposed scheme is just rationed fun; controlled, co-ordinated, emasculated so that it can neither shock nor thrill (1959: 399).

For Browne, the sensational impact of the present display was the result of unbridled competition, as each sign tried to wrestle the viewer's attention from its neighbours. By contrast, the proposed building reflected "a guilt complex regarding posters which is quite misplaced here where the atmosphere depends on them" (p.

399). Yet if this seems to echo Alloway's discourse of five months previous, then Browne would only go so far. Piccadilly Circus, he maintained, was "a special case", a "symbol of London's gaiety" (p. 399) that needed an architect to enhance its form whilst preserving its crucial "'look no hands' effect" (p. 401).

By the end of the year, Cotton's proposal had attracted widespread public criticism. "[W]ithin a fairly short space of time", warned Bernard Levin in *The Spectator*, "there will be a monster in Piccadilly Circus beside which the most extravagant fancies of the horror-film industry will seem insipid and even charming" (1959: 861). Anti-Ugly Action, a group of students based at the RCA, lobbied MPs at Westminster, whilst critics noted that it contravened the LCC's own master-plan for the area drawn up by its architects only months before. At the subsequent Public Inquiry, concerns were expressed that its 172-foot tower would leak the illuminations out from the Circus to contaminate the greater London skyline. Its probable visibility from Buckingham Palace, meanwhile, was declared an assault on the royal family's privacy. As planner Thomas Sharpe advised, this display was unacceptable according to town planning's first principle since it promoted private profit at the expense of public amenity (*Architect's Journal*, 1960: 44).

After a condemnatory open letter signed by almost 60 leading architects - many of whom had contributed to the *South Bank Exhibition* - Cotton's application was duly rejected. In June 1960, Sir William Holford, then President Elect of RIBA, was asked to prepare a more considered comprehensive development plan for the area. The result was a revision of the LCC's earlier design, with Eros now surrounded by a pedestrian plaza adjoined to the old Criterion block to the south (figure 7). A network of raised walkways would afford pedestrians an elegant vista down onto the visitors below, whilst protecting them from fast-moving vehicles. The commercial

advertisements, meanwhile, had been further refined, now reduced to a neat screen in front of the rebuilt Monico site (*Architectural Review*, 1962: 379).

With its ordered circulations, surveilled open plaza, and controlled and tasteful illuminations, Piccadilly Circus had finally been reimagined according to the spatial and visual logics that had once served the South Bank's vision of civility. Yet this bold conception would never get further than the drawing board. The unruly dynamics of commercial enterprise, aided by complicated multiple ownerships and leaseholds, ensured that the Circus would experience only piecemeal redevelopment in the post-war era. Like London's wider West End, it would remain closer to Alloway's untidy commercial environment than to the ordered symbolism of the Smithsons' Cluster city.

Image captions

Figure 1. Elevated view of the *South Bank Exhibition*, 1951. John Maltby / RIBA Library Photographs Collection.

Figure 2. *Parallel of Life and Art*, ICA, 1953. Photograph by Nigel Henderson. © Tate, London 2013. © Nigel Henderson Estate.

Figure 3: Photograph of Times Square at night, taken from Lawrence Alloway, 'City Notes', *Architectural Design* 29(1), 1959, p. 35.

Figure 4: Postcard of Piccadilly Circus (c.1936) by Valentine & Sons Ltd. From left to right: Swan & Edgar's department store; entrance to the Quadrant of Regent Street; County Fire Office; Monico Café block, with advertisements.

Figures 5: Stills from *Nice Time* (Tanner and Goretta, 1957).

Figure 6: Model of Cotton, Ballard & Blow's proposed office block for the Monico site, 1959. © Alpha Press. © Daily Herald Archive/NMEM/SSPL.

Figure 7: Model of Sir William Holford's master-plan for Piccadilly Circus, 1962. © Daily Herald Archive/NMEM/SSPL.

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<u>Biography</u>

Richard Hornsey is Senior Lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of the West of England, Bristol and the author of *The Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2010). He is currently working on a project about the bureaucratisation of movement and attention in interwar London.

[1] *Collages and Objects* was a group show curated by Lawrence Alloway and John McHale at the ICA in 1954, which included work by McHale, Eduardo Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson and William Turnbull. Group 12's exhibit at *This Is Tomorrow* was a collaboration between Geoffrey Holroyd, Toni del Renzio and Alloway.

[2] Edward Wright was a typography tutor at the RCA and had celebrated Times Square in an article called 'Writing and Environment' (1956). For Wright, Times Square signalled a progressive developed in urban construction: an "environment built out of visual communications", in which electric writing and its architectural support had achieved "a surprising symbiosis". The Square at night, he wrote, "is heaven to those who can't read and at least a playground for those who can" (p. 391). He illustrated this point with two large photographs of the Square taken by his student Don Hunstein. Three years later, Alloway would use another photograph from the same suite to accompany his own 'City Notes' (Buckley, 2011).

[3] Students at the RCA also seem to have been particularly interested in Piccadilly Circus at this time. In autumn 1957, the cover of *ARK* 20 featured a photograph by AJ Bisley of its neon advertisements at night. The image was blurred, as if taken from a passing car or whilst the photographer was rotating. Only one detail stands out clearly: the giant Coca-Cola logo, placed dead centre of the image. Reproduced on its front cover, the urban solicitations of the original sign became high-jacked, used by the journal issue to advertise itself. Two years later, Richard Smith and fellow student Robyn Denny made their own contribution to *ARK* 24, a fold-out collage of ideas for an unmade film called 'Ev'ry-Which-Way' (1959). This had been assembled out of film stills, their own abstract paintings, and photographs of the city including a postcard of Piccadilly Circus. According to Denny, by this time he had collected over

200 postcards of the Circus, believing it "to be the symbol of an urban hub" (cited in

Seago, 1995: 103).