

British Social Realism in the Arts since 1940



Edited by David Tucker



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David Tucker

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macmillan

For Tatiana

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Introduction – ‘an anthropology of ourselves’ Vs ‘the incomprehensibility of the real’: Making the Case for British Social Realism

David Tucker

In 1930, at the age of twenty-four and unsure where his literary prospects lay, Samuel Beckett, the future Nobel Prize winner and leading figure of the twentieth-century literary avant-garde, gave a term's worth of lectures on modern French literature at his old university, Trinity College Dublin. Notes to these lectures survive as fragmentary transcriptions taken by a small number of the students then present. One of these students, Rachel Burrows, recalls Beckett's thoughts on the realism of Balzac:

He hated what he called the snowball act, which means that you do something that has causes, causes, causes, causes so that it's all perfectly consistent.

(Burrows 1989, p. 5)

For Beckett, such a ‘snowball act’ of cause and effect in Balzac's realism fails because it falls too far short of recognizing what Beckett described to his students as ‘the incomprehensibility of the real’ (ibid.). According to Beckett, an author's focus on the surface details of causal connections between one thing and another emphatically does not get anywhere near the heart of the matter. Beckett would later refer to fictional characters in works subjected to what he called this ‘*enchaînement mécanique, fatal, de circonstances* [mechanical, fatal, enchainment of circumstances]’ (Le Juez 2008, p. 28) as merely ‘clockwork cabbages’, unreal life-forms stuttering along, half-suffocating in a ‘chloroformed world’ (Beckett 1992, p. 119).

However, Beckett also rejected wholeheartedly the option of refuge in extreme alternatives to naturalistic realism. One of these alternatives – a

formalized conceptual abstraction – came in for particularly sharp criticism. Beckett wrote derisively in 1948 of what he called the ‘estimables abstracteurs de quintessence [estimable abstractors of quintessence] Mondrian, Lissitzky, Malevitch, Moholy-Nagy’ (Beckett 1983, p. 135). Yet, as Erik Tønning has argued, Beckett’s dislike of the abstract in these painters’ works does not necessarily exclude his admiration for more complex formulations of abstraction. Transposing the term ‘abstract’ into his own preferred vocabulary of the ‘metaphysical concrete’, Beckett commented in his diary, while visiting Germany in 1936, on Karl Ballmer’s painting *Kopf in Rot* (c.1930). According to Beckett’s note, *Kopf in Rot* instances ‘fully a posteriori painting. Object not exploited to illustrate an idea, as in say [Fernand] Léger or [Willi] Baumeister, but primary’ (cited in Tønning 2007, p. 22). What appears to be the case with Beckett’s critique of the ‘estimables abstracteurs’, as with that of Balzac’s realism, is that his arguments are at least partly directed against one-sided and simplistically inadequate genre conventions.

Beckett’s arguments against Balzac’s realism might also benefit from their being thought of in relation to a broader literary–historical context; as was the case with a number of Modernist innovators, Beckett’s criticisms were in part a reaction against his more immediate forebears. In a famous letter to his friend Axel Kaun of July 1937, for example, Beckett imagines the formal literary stylistics he was so opposed to via images of nineteenth-century social gentilities:

Grammar and style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused.

(Beckett 1983, pp. 171–2)

This might all seem a world away from British social realism. Yet what it helps to foreground is the possibility of realism, and critiques of realism, as historically determined, malleable and mutable. Moving towards historicizing Beckett’s arguments as a microcosm of broader Modernist aesthetics does, admittedly, rob this most individual of authors of some of his individuality. However, it also serves to bring into focus Beckett’s complex and ambitious polemic as one that is in part determined by its historical context, and it thereby warns us against certain dangers of rushing too fast to dismiss outright and for all time something that might openly call itself, perhaps even without shame, ‘realism’.

Let us take a further refracted approach to an aspect of realism, namely that of the visible, verifiable details of a reality, via the Polish-born filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski. Kieślowski argues that the goal of art is 'to capture what lies within us' (Kieślowski 1993, p. 194). This is something beyond or behind the surfaces of objects, something underlying the 'fabric of things' that we can physically sense, as Virginia Woolf dismissively described the 'Edwardian' novelist's world in *Character in Fiction* (Woolf 2008, p. 49). According to Kieślowski, '[g]reat literature doesn't only get nearer to it, it's in a position to describe it' (Kieślowski 1993, p. 194). That might be good news for literature, but literature's poorer cousin – cinema – cannot, according to Kieślowski, match literature's access to such a 'within' 'because it [cinema] doesn't have the means. It's not intelligent enough. Consequently, it's not equivocal enough' (ibid., p. 195). Cinema's natural habitat, Kieślowski goes on to claim, is a world of prosaic reality and concomitant surface detail, a 'fabric of things' that blocks access to anything beyond itself:

For me, a bottle of milk is simply a bottle of milk; when it spills, it means milk's been spilt. Nothing more. It doesn't mean the world's fallen apart or that the milk symbolizes a mother's milk which her child couldn't drink because the mother died early, for example. It doesn't mean that to me. A bottle of spilt milk is simply a bottle of spilt milk. And that's cinema. Unfortunately, it doesn't mean anything else.

(Kieślowski 1993, p. 195)

Even with such a sure sense of cinema's grounding in the detail of visible reality, however, Kieślowski describes his own continual, aspirational drive against these essential realist strictures. The filmmaker admits that he himself has never managed to escape cinema's formal literalism. Yet he does claim that such an urge against the boundaries of cinematic form has come to succeed on a few occasions, and his list of filmmakers who have managed to somehow make cinema 'intelligent enough' in this regard might surprise:

Welles achieved that miracle once. Only one director in the world has managed to achieve that miracle in the last few years, and that's Tarkovsky. Bergman achieved this miracle a few times. Fellini achieved it a few times. A few people achieved it. Ken Loach, too, in *Kes*.

(Ibid.)

Loach is the only director in Kieślowski's list who is given with a Christian name, an indication perhaps that few British filmmakers are normally considered alongside such estimable company. However, Kieślowski's comments are not quoted here as an invocation of authority for a British filmmaker by association with the giants of world cinema. More importantly, what they point to is the notion of an escape from literalism operating in one of the films most frequently cited as typifying genre conventions of British social realism, a film that itself tells a story about flights of freedom and struggles against constraint, Loach's adaptation of Barry Hines's 1968 *A Kestrel for a Knave*, *Kes* (1969). Kieślowski's conception of realist detail is one where no access is granted to anything beyond the surface displayed. It is realism without a capacity for metonymy or metaphor. In order to attain something approaching the full-blooded capabilities of literature, Kieślowski implies, film must somehow move, or be pushed, beyond its own lack of intelligence. However, as is revealed with the reference to *Kes*, it is not necessary to simply turn one's back on realism *per se* in order to achieve this. Kieślowski's comments, along with Beckett's, pose challenges to simplistic categorizations of realism.

These challenges point to the possibility of revealing what might be strange and different in the otherwise seemingly ordinary and usual, and of a need to seek precision in discussions of realism. They can be further focused with a comparison that places them in the context of an appreciation of social realism in its specifically British, twentieth-century, manifestations. It is a comparison that reveals a strangeness and ineffability indelibly tied into an otherwise realist, and avowedly social, project, and that places us at the start of the historical period traversed in this volume.

In 1937, Tom Harrisson, an anthropologist who had spent a number of years living with tribal groups in Borneo and claimed to have partaken in cannibalism, along with Humphrey Jennings, co-curator of London's major *International Surrealist Exhibition* of June 1936 and a documentary filmmaker whom Lindsay Anderson famously described as 'the only real poet the British cinema has yet produced' (cited in Jennings 1982, p. 53), and Charles Madge, a poet whose editor was T.S. Eliot at Faber & Faber, together founded the organization they called Mass-Observation. Mass-Observation turned just such a transcription of surface detail, the surface detail that was rejected by the Modernist aesthetics of Beckett and Woolf, and was cited by Kieślowski as evidence of cinema's innate lack of intelligence, to incredible lengths into a proposal for a social science. What Harrisson called Mass-Observation's

‘anthropology of ourselves’ intended to reveal was nothing less grand than the ‘Mass’ of Britain to itself (Mass-Observation 1943, p. 7).

The three founders had become disillusioned with what they saw as an entrenched political and media bias, and their frustration came to a head following media coverage of Edward VIII’s abdication crisis of 1936. They sought, in opposition to the dominant mainstream, to give voice to ‘the ordinary and non-vocal masses of Britain’ (Harrison 1961, p. 14). To this professed end they followed a twofold route. In London, Jennings and Madge concentrated on recruiting a nationwide panel of what they referred to as ‘observers’. These recruits were invited to record their personal impressions of large-scale political and cultural events, beginning with the abdication crisis, in the form of answers to a questionnaire derived from Jennings’ and Madge’s ideas for ‘Popular Poetry’. As Nick Hubble describes it, ‘Popular Poetry’ was ‘a surrealist-inspired social movement that would map the collective mass consciousness of the nation through the establishment of factory- and college-based ‘Coincidence Clubs’ (Hubble 2006, p. 4). Observers also answered questions about day-to-day minutiae going on around them, and their personal beliefs about topics such as superstition. Mass-Observation considered the minutiae of personal, individual response to be the important and neglected context in which larger-scale events took place, and those early questionnaires became templates for what are now known as ‘directives’; sets of themed questions still sent out to volunteers in 2010. Recent examples have been concerned with such diverse topics as ‘Your Home’, ‘Quoting and Quotations’, ‘Public Library Buildings’, and ‘Genes, Genetics and Cloning’.

A second approach to data collection was founded in the group’s northern outpost of the pen-named ‘Worktown’, so-called after Helen Lynd’s American study *Middletown*, and otherwise known as Bolton, where Harrison was the group’s convenor. Harrison was later to explain his choice of Bolton as having been determined by concerns of a global, as well as of a local nature. He wrote in a later reappraisal of Mass-Observation entitled *Britain Revisited* about his anthropological expedition to Malekula in the New Hebrides and how this had influenced his choice of and research in Bolton. It had struck Harrison that a very specific and important ‘trail led from the Western Pacific to the south of Lancashire’ (Harrison 1961, p. 26):

What was there of Western civilisation which impacted into the tremendously independent and self-contained culture of those

cannibal people on their Melanesian mountain? Only one thing, significantly, in the mid-thirties: the Unilever Combine.

(*Ibid.*, p. 25)

Having noted that '[e]ven the cannibals in the mountains of Melanesia were touched by the tentacles of this colossus, buying copra, selling soap', Harrison traced this supply back to Unilever's beginnings in Bolton (Harrison 1959, p. 159). Harrison had seemingly located, in the birthplace of William Lever in Park Street, Bolton, nothing less than the nascent heart of global capitalism's Victorian birth. Setting up headquarters only half a mile away at 85 Davenport Street, Harrison proceeded to spy on, and to encourage others to spy on, or 'observe', those in most immediate physical proximity to this almost mythical centre – the working class of Bolton.¹

Research in Worktown involved some even more curious approaches to data collection than the questionnaires being compiled under the auspices of Jennings and Madge in London. Harrison's group insisted that the information collected on members of the public must be gathered, at least for the most part, surreptitiously, and various covert observational and interventionist ruses were therefore contrived. According to these procedures few details were considered too insignificant to escape the prying eyes of the organization's observers. For example, in some of their studies the observers would count the taps a person in a pub made on a cigarette to dispel their ash. They noted where exactly on a female partner's body men placed their hands during public dances. Taking their apparent fascination with forms of intimacy beyond observation, members of the group would intervene on what they appraised as intimate moments, physically tripping into courting couples on Blackpool promenade and recording the results. All of this real detail was intended by the group to form the vital material needed in the new 'anthropology of ourselves'. This was an anthropology that placed a particular emphasis on the importance of single images, of single instances of actual things happening, and being seen to happen. Accordingly, the photographer Humphrey Spender joined the Bolton group. Though Spender was only with the group for a short time, many of his images have come to encapsulate the experiences of Mass-Observation in Bolton. Spender would conceal a camera in what he describes as a 'very shabby raincoat', and take pictures of people who were unaware they were being photographed (Spender 1982, p. 18).

Mass-Observation was in one sense a very realist project, a living archival collation where the details recorded were interpreted, if without



Figure I.1 Humphrey Spender. *Street Scene, Bolton* (1937). Spender spies a man who might be waiting for the traffic light to change colour. © Bolton Council

strictly planned methodology, as a kind of cultural metonymic, the otherwise overlooked physical and psychological minutiae of Britain used to reveal the identity of a country to itself.

In another sense, the early days of the project discussed here realized a much stranger aesthetic. Driven by Harrison's subjective associative procedures as they combined with the threesome's broader remit for the organization, the Bolton group's focus on teaspoons, hands, hats, cigarettes, walking, dancing, drinking, manual labour and socializing as images to be described, sketched or photographed, produced a kind of archive of the imaginary, a sometimes whimsical and playfully associative archive that tells us at least as much about the observers themselves and their own social-historical contexts as it does of the streets and people of Bolton. While it would be too simplistic to invoke Jennings' credentials in the movement and call this imaginative impetus 'surrealist', nevertheless there is a collision of multiple worlds and world-views in the early days of Mass-Observation. Spender notes, for instance, how Harrison imported his anthropological background into the Bolton work:

I think Tom, having worked a lot in remote parts of the world, was perhaps anxious to find parallels in the life of this country. And so,

having observed ritualistic dancing, and the masks, the costumes and other art connected with it, he would constantly be on the lookout for the same sort of thing in Bolton. For example, at every possible opportunity the children used to put on paper hats and dance about: these were quite innocent, childish affairs, but Tom was inclined to put rather mysterious interpretations on them. He had a tendency to wish things on to events in that way.

(Ibid., p. 16)

In contrast to the way the realist cinema of Kieślowski would view these dancing children, as straightforwardly just children, dancing, Spender reveals how Harrison's realist anthropology was sometimes compelled by an associative, logical yet strange and individual frame of reference. If the soap in Bolton and Melanesia is the same, the analysis appears to run, might the children of the two places not also be somehow the same?

Mass-Observation has been criticized along these lines and many others ever since the project was founded. Harrison himself notes one such line of detraction, for example, when he points out that the numbers of volunteers recruited to observe the working class in Bolton expanded greatly 'during Oxford and Cambridge University vacations' (Harrison 1961, p. 26). Yet it is in its very contradictions, in its multiple concerns, contexts and aspirations, that the Mass-Observation project mirrors a number of the issues that are important to any critical reappraisal of British social realism. To take just one such issue, let us look a little further into this matter of the relative social positions of the observer and the observed.

Such relative and relativizing positions are explored, for example, in Alan Bennett's early and rarely performed play *Enjoy* (1980). In this play a typically Bennett-like working class elderly couple are to be rehoused to the suburbs by the local council from their Leeds back-to-back terraced house. The couple receive a silent visitor, ostensibly from the local council, who brings a letter. This letter claims that the council are concerned about the potential loss resulting from the rehousing of 'many valuable elements in the social structure of traditional communities such as this' (Bennett 1991, p. 271). These 'valuable elements' turn out to be clichés of working class life such as 'self reliance, neighbourliness, and self-help' (ibid). The council requests that the visitor is to be allowed to enter the couple's home, and to silently observe their domesticity for the purposes of research, in order that their new housing can accommodate the rehoused residents with as little change as possible. The couple

are instructed to ignore the visitor, whom they decide to let in, and this visitor will record secret observations of the couple and report back to the council in a manner not entirely unlike that of Mass-Observation, though here granted rare access to domesticity.² At the end of the play the couple are moved to a zone on the outskirts of town where the entire neighbourhood will be rebuilt brick-by-brick, reproducing exactly the proportions and look of the original area. This zone, however, will be made economically viable by the council's opening it, within designated hours, as a kind of working class theme park, where paying tourists will look around the relics of the terraced past. These relics, however, are only a nostalgic façade. The new suburban houses will have under-floor heating, but use of this is strictly limited to outside the park's opening-hours. During opening-hours residents are requested to use the more quaint, *original*, coal fire.

There are a number of intriguing characters' perspectives in *Enjoy*. First, there is that of the silent, observing visitor who arrives heralding change from a legitimating authority. Secondly, there are the imagined paying tourists trundling around the culture-park, around the suburban masquerading as urban. These tourists might be aware they are witnessing a façade, or they might labour under an illusion of authenticity. Thirdly, there is the elderly couple who are subject to these other multiple gazes, and whose own marginalized positions as observers of their own being observed drive much of the play's dialogue, anchoring its ironies and pathos. The multiple perspectives of *Enjoy*, as of Mass-Observation, play out complex and shifting dynamics of social, political, economic and familial power, dynamics that are pertinent to the study of social realism in Britain more broadly.

This volume avoids offering up for preservation nostalgic displays of dilapidation in an academic equivalent of Bennett's culture-park. The histories that are on display in the following chapters are primarily *historicizing* rather than nostalgic, whilst they also have their eyes set keenly on the contemporary. *British Social Realism in the Arts since 1940* seeks to open out, rather than close down and tightly define, social realism. As Stephen Lacey argues of social realist theatre, 'the question is not "is this play social realist?" but rather "what is there in this play that is social realist?"' This is a question that emphasizes the specificity and individuality of a given work. In a study of genre such emphasis is a complex but vital matter. The different approaches the following chapters take to the matter of definition reveal many divergent, surprising and significant trajectories of influence, of genealogy, and of legacy.

There are, nevertheless, certain things that should be noted here of the term ‘social realism’ (and of what happens when we put ‘British’ alongside it). For one thing, ‘social realism’ denotes different things across a number of disciplines. In sociology, for example, the term derives primarily from criticism of Émile Durkheim’s views as expressed in *Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique* (1895). As Robert Alun Jones explains in a study of how Durkheim derived and developed this aspect of his sociology, ‘social realism’ brings together ‘a constellation of ideas’ (Jones 1999, p. 1); primarily, for Durkheim, these ideas coalesce around claims about social phenomena being subject to scientifically discoverable and verifiable laws. They also, interestingly in the context of a study on realist aesthetics, seek to preserve complexity from reductive core theses. For Durkheim this is specifically from Cartesian notions of the ‘clear and simple’, from foundational knowledge that cannot cope with the complexities of modern society.

Most recently, in the sociology of education the term ‘social realism’ has come to refer to a pragmatic and contextually determined paradigm of learning. As one recent study puts it, referring back to the title of a previous work, the contemporary usefulness of the term

signals a shift from viewing knowledge in terms of *construction* – especially when this implies we can construct the world as we see fit, free of the consequences of how the world will react back on that construction – towards a focus on its *production* within relatively autonomous fields of practice according to socially developed and applied procedures that may have both arbitrary and non-arbitrary bases. It thus highlights a concern with the *sociality* of knowledge in terms of how knowledge is created (‘social’) and emphasizes that knowledge is more than simply produced – its modalities help shape the world (‘realism’).

(Maton and Moore 2009, p. 6)³

The emphasis here too is on the possibility for mutable complexity, and the determining factors of context.

Perhaps the complexity attendant upon a multiplicity of definitions for the contested term is one reason so few studies have been devoted to the social realism(s) discussed in this volume. Returning to the opening section of this introduction, however, it is more tempting to postulate that the major barrier for social realism is that it is a subset of the predominantly unfashionable, poor old problematic (but not problematic enough) realism. Yet as a number of recent studies have

shown, realism itself is well overdue important reappraisals. Notable among these studies is Matthew Beaumont's *Adventures in Realism* (2007, reprinted and expanded with a chapter by Terry Eagleton in 2010 as *A Concise Companion to Realism*).⁴ Beaumont's volume makes a convincing case for its primary aim of putting realism 'back into the critical picture, center-stage' (Bowlby 2007, p. xvii). Part of the problem for realism, as for social realism, is one of definition. But whereas a lack of clear boundaries for social realism presents opportunities at the same time as it poses difficulties, the issue for realism is often one of too-simple definitions. Descriptions of realism, Beaumont argues, have been all too often subjected to a postmodernist caricature that tended to define realism as the naïve and somewhat embarrassing aspirant to transparency and meaning, against which subtler and more up to date isms might measure their own excellence. Realism is also not helped by its being historically stuck in a no man's land between the more intoxicating highs of Romanticism and Modernism, and Beaumont points out the unfortunate consequence for realism according to which realism's critical importance derives solely from a supporting role played in a literary-historical narrative that concentrates on its more extroverted relations. All this, Beaumont claims, 'has made an impatient or apathetic attitude to realism seem acceptable' (Beaumont 2007, p. 2), and it is surely time such attitudes were rethought. Beaumont quotes Fredric Jameson to make the case for newly invigorated approaches:

It might be more productive, as Fredric Jameson has argued, "if we can manage to think of realism as a form of demiurgic practice; if we can restore some active and even playful/experimental impulses to the inertia of its appearance as a copy or representation of things" [...].

(Beaumont 2007, p. 7)

In *Signatures of the Visible* Jameson describes the 'excitement' of Modernism as 'demiurgic', whereas realism 'is conventionally evoked in terms of passive reflection and copying, subordinate to some external reality, and fully as much a grim duty as a pleasure of any kind' (Jameson 1992, p. 162). It may be that learning how to reveal and revel anew in 'pleasure' is the most viable route by which realism will find its way back into the academy, and onto the bookshelves crammed, as Beaumont describes, with the myriad introductory critical theory books that marginalize realism, and that are so 'assiduously marketed at students' (Beaumont 2007, p. 3). Beaumont reveals such playful