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Two Part PhD submission;

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**Volume 2 – A Birmingham psychogeography: continuity and
closure**

Volume 2

Christopher Alan Prendergast

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Keele University

Abstract

There has been some sociological interest in MG Rover's decline and widespread de-industrialisation in Birmingham. However, little research has considered the proximity of Rover's closure in 2005 to another seminal event for the city – the opening of the Bullring shopping centre in 2003. These events appear indicative of Daniel Bell's conception of 'post-industrialism'. This thesis uses the tradition of 'psychogeography' to critique post-industrialism in Birmingham, examining the city's collective psyche from a dynamic literary perspective. In Chapter 1, Daniel Bell's predictions (made in 1973) of the likely characteristics of a post-industrial society are outlined and measured against recent economic and social events in Birmingham. In Chapter 2, the tradition of psychogeography is critically analysed, from Situationism and Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* in the 1960s to the contemporary works of Iain Sinclair and Rebecca Solnit. I explore the argument that the key tenet of psychogeography missing from the work of contemporary practitioners is a utopian element with which writers theorize alternative forms of the city. This chapter provides a theoretical basis for both the use of literary montage and Stirchley's inclusion in the psychogeography. Consequently, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 constitute the psychogeography itself, moving through three key geographical areas. These chapters offer a creative-critical representation of Birmingham in montage form, weaving fragments of narration with literary, theoretical and sociological works and considering the impacts of technology, industry and post-industrial urbanism on the city's landscape and psyche. The discussion of Raymond Williams's 'mobile privatisation' in Longbridge provides a catalyst for the consideration, in the final chapter, of a porous but socially divisive architecture in the Bullring. As the psychogeography progresses, the suburb of Stirchley and the Bullring market-area both emerge as contested spaces and, simultaneously, blueprints for an alternative form of the city. This thesis celebrates the variety, incoherence and inclusiveness of both spaces.

Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

Introduction	6
1 Post-Industrialism	9
2 Psychogeography	24
3 Longbridge	54
4 Stirchley	77
5 The Bullring	100
Conclusion	125
Bibliography	135

List of Figures

Figure	Page
1. Longbridge Island	54
2. St. Modwen's Advertisement Hoarding	67
3. Rotated Junk Content	87
4. Another Rotation	91
5. An Indoor Streetscape	107
6. Controlled Exposure	120

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Introduction

In Birmingham, two significant events occurred in proximity to each other at the turn of the millennium. In 2003 the new Bullring Shopping Centre was opened in the city centre. In 2005 MG Rover went into administration and parts of the Longbridge plant were subsequently closed or demolished. Newspaper articles and brief considerations of both events are numerous but rarely comprehensive. Perhaps only a 2011 Runnymede Report into intergenerational race relations, prompted by Birmingham's 2005 rioting, has adequately considered the local impact of de-industrialisation.¹ Aside from this, there has been little consideration and representation of the effects of these events on the city's inhabitants, its landscape and its collective *psyche*. The primary aim of this thesis is to contribute to a literary discussion of these events and to conduct a psychogeographical analysis of post-industrial Birmingham.

Kevin Lynch describes the city as a temporal image, something which can be 'perceived only in the course of long spans of time'.² Accordingly, this thesis is not concerned with the Bullring's 2003 opening or the closure of Longbridge in isolation but rather their resonances with the city's wider history. I focus in particular on a decade encompassing the two events (2003–2013) but I have tried to contextualise the events within the city's wider history, stretching back to its beginnings as a medieval market town. The immediate economic, cultural and spatial implications of these events can be seen in the context of the transition to a 'post-industrial society'. My argument accordingly explores Daniel Bell's prediction of a 'post-industrial society'. From this basis, I look for key characteristics of the 'post-industrial' in Birmingham. However, I also problematize these characteristics, finding

¹ Kamaljeet Gill and Kjartan Sveinsson, *Passing the Baton: Inter-Generational Conceptions of Race and Racism in Birmingham* (London: Runnymede, 2011).

² Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1979), 1.

them disparate and uneven. To account for this, I consider Fredric Jameson's critique of the severance or discontinuity implied by the term 'post-industrial' in *Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992). Jameson's critique and Bell's own reflections on the term's development provide impetus for my own re-evaluation of the 'post-industrial' in Birmingham.

To achieve its objectives this thesis has to utilise theory and practice across a number of disciplines, including sociology and cultural studies. However I find a central fulcrum in the examination and juxtaposition of literary works, particularly literary fiction and its representation of urban space. As such this thesis situates itself within the field of 'psychogeography'. The thesis is a site of psychogeographic struggle in a number of respects. Firstly, it resists linear and totalising urban narratives of Birmingham. Secondly, it resists the homogenising influence of planning and 'regeneration'. Crucially, as well as attending to these elements of struggle or resistance, the thesis is a *re-imagining* of the city in the form of literary montage. Through re-imagining Birmingham, the thesis attempts to realize the original, utopian tenets of psychogeography. To contextualise this latter point I will examine the history of the term 'psychogeography'. The term is generally associated with the work of Guy Debord in Paris in the 1950s but it is also a part of the wider urban theories and interventions of two avant-garde groups – the Lettrist International and the Situationist International. Recently, Denis Wood has argued that psychogeography emerged simultaneously and separately in Paris and in the United States (principally at Clark University).³ The thesis will explore the meanings and methods of psychogeography in light of this dual, yet independent, emergence.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 explore definitions of the 'post-industrial' and 'psychogeography'. This establishes the dimensions of the subject

³ Denis Wood, 'Lynch Debord: About Two Psychogeographies', *Cartographica*, 45/3 (2010), 185–199.

matter, post-industrial Birmingham, and then outlines the tool I will use to analyse it, psychogeographic montage. In Chapter 2 I also outline a methodology for the montage form of the essays that follow. The remaining chapters consist of the psychogeographical montage essays. Each of these essays is devoted to one area of the city. These areas are: Longbridge, Stirchley and the Bullring Shopping Centre (and surrounding area). The chapters on Longbridge and the Bullring reflect my desire to open up continuities between the city's industrial past and its present, 'post-industrial' status. However, during my research, the suburb of Stirchley has come to the fore as an 'alternative' to Birmingham's post-industrial trajectory and our understanding of the post-industrial itself. Stirchley emerged as a 'node' or 'unity of ambience' during the course of the study. It was a site of resistance against conventional city planning and also an area on the cusp of immense change that demonstrates shortcomings in many conceptions of the post-industrial. Therefore, a chapter on Stirchley sits between the chapters on Longbridge and the Bullring. Stirchley thematically bridges Chapters 3 and 5 and this location also reflects Birmingham's geography (Stirchley lies between the southern edge of Birmingham and the city centre). These three montage chapters constitute a psychogeographic reading of post-industrial Birmingham. The events concerned (Longbridge and the Bullring) are mapped spatially in the city and sequentially in this thesis. The order of these chapters also reflects Birmingham's transition into post-industrialism. Therefore, we travel from a significant brownfield site in Chapter 3, through Stirchley in Chapter 4, to an iconic shopping centre in Chapter 5.

Chapter 1

Post-Industrial Society

Daniel Bell argues that his 1973 book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* is ‘a logical construction of what *could* be’.⁴ He produced it as a measure ‘against which the future social reality can be compared’ (1999: 14). Bell forecast that the following thirty to fifty years would see the arrival of a ‘post-industrial society’ (1999: cii). He saw evidence of this emerging society in the U.S.A. in the sixties and seventies and wrote that ‘processes of change are more advanced and visible’ there (1999: cii). However, it is of interest to this thesis that seminal events affecting the principal subject matter (Longbridge and the Bullring shopping centre) fall directly within the greater span of time offered by Daniel Bell for the *arrival* of a ‘post-industrial society’. From within fifty years of the book’s release we can measure the current social reality against Bell’s ‘logical construction’. It will serve the thesis as a whole to outline Daniel Bell’s original definition in 1973 and his reflections on the term in 1999. I will also look at Fredric Jameson’s critique of Bell’s notion of ‘post-industrialism’ and draw subsequent conclusions about the ‘post-industrial’ status of Birmingham.

Bell identified five dimensions of a ‘post-industrial’ society. He argues that the ‘simplest characteristic’ of post-industrial society is the engagement of ‘the majority of the labour force’ in the service sector rather than manufacturing and agriculture (1999: 15). Bell categorized services as ‘trade, finance, transport, health, recreation, research, education and government’ (1999: 14–15). Amongst these, health, research, education and government would see the most ‘decisive’ growth (1999: 15). Bell highlights these public services as he is wary of the term ‘services’ being ‘used generically’, citing examples of agrarian societies

⁴ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting, Anniversary Ed.* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 14. Further references will appear in the text.

with a ‘high proportion of persons engaged in services, but of a personal sort (e.g. household servants)’ (1999: 15). The divisions within service sector growth outlined in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* – health, research, education and government – notably separates public from private services. It also, most importantly, distinguishes post-industrial society from its agrarian and industrial predecessors.

A growth in the service sector would, Bell argued, accompany a change in the ‘*kind of work*’ people do (1999: 15). A distribution of employment skewed towards health, research, education and government would ensure ‘the pre-eminence of the professional and technical class’ (1999: 14). Bell here notes that white collar workers had begun to outnumber their blue collar counterparts. He also saw the lessening of the semi-skilled worker’s significance as partially indicative of the ‘growth of professional and technical employment’ (1999: 17). This latter type of employment, he remarks, ‘usually’ requires ‘some college education’ (1999: 17). Given the growth Bell predicted in the education and research sector, the increasing requirement of college education for many jobs assumes added significance. To clarify the professions under discussion Bell includes a table that displays the ‘[m]ake-up of Professional and Technical Occupations’ (1999: 19). It includes the job categories: ‘[s]cientific and engineering’, ‘[t]echnicians’, ‘[m]edical and health’ and ‘[t]eachers’ as well as specialists like ‘[s]ocial workers’ or ‘[l]awyers’ (the latter listed under the sub-heading ‘General’) (1999: 19). Again, we can see in these professions the likely growth of public sector services that Bell foresaw. Of these categories, he argued that the growth in employment of ‘scientists and engineers’ was most palpable at the time of writing (1999: 17).

For Bell, post-industrial society has an ‘[a]xial principle’, a ‘specifically defining characteristic’ which provides a ‘schema’ for that society (1999: 14, 19–20). Bell argues that it is the ‘centrality of *theoretical* knowledge’ which is unique to post-industrialism (1999: 20). This is evidenced, Bell writes, by the rise of chemistry as a modern industry, intricately

‘linking [...] science and technology’, as well as the ‘joining of theory and policy’ that is often used to establish areas for ‘government intervention’ (1999: 21–23). Having identified the growth of education as pivotal to the service sector’s overall growth, *theoretical* knowledge would be another extension of knowledge’s overall pervasiveness in such a society. Bell argues that the ‘primacy of theoretical work, which codifies what is known and points the way to empirical confirmation’, is most clearly evidenced in technology and economics (1999: 26). However, it is also the ‘strategic resource’ of wider post-industrial society (1999: 26). Increasing links between ‘science, technology and economics’ are ‘symbolized’ by the growth of “research and development” (1999: 25).

Bell describes his fourth dimension as both ‘[f]uture orientation’ and ‘[t]he *planning of technology*’ (1999: 14, 26). He argues that ‘new forecasting and “mapping techniques”’ allow for an unprecedented ‘planned advanced of technological change, and therefore the reduction of indeterminacy about the economic future’ (1999: 26). Further, given the right ‘political mechanism’ and ‘[t]echnological assessment’, post-industrial society has the potential to anticipate the ‘often overlooked and certainly unintended’ consequences of technological development (1999: 27). Bell emphasises post-industrial society’s potential to safeguard its economic future against ‘indeterminacy’ (1999: 26). Key here is Bell’s reading of Marx’s assertion that a ‘capitalist economy had to expand or die’ (1999: 26). He argues that rather than geographical expansion, this expansion is best expressed through ‘capital-intensive or technological expansion’ (1999: 26). Essentially, the reduction of indeterminacy, through the planning of technology, indicates how economic growth or expansion can be maintained.

The final dimension of Bell’s post-industrial society is ‘[t]he rise of a new intellectual technology’ and the influence of this intellectual technology on ‘[d]ecision-making’ (1999: 27, 14). Bell describes ‘intellectual technology’ as ‘the substitution of algorithms (problem-

solving rules) for intuitive judgements' (1999: 29). Such a substitution, Bell argues, becomes increasingly necessary in the 'management of large scale systems', the 'organized complexity' of post-industrial society (1999: 29). Bell refers to Jay Forrester's computer simulation model of 'how a central city first grows' which ultimately illustrates that, with innumerable variables, 'the nature of complex systems is "counterintuitive"' (1999: 32). Intellectual technology weighs 'certainty, risk or uncertainty', strategizes the 'optimal or "best" solution' to problems (including counterintuitive solutions) and has the ultimate goal of "ordering" the mass society' at its heart (1999: 30, 31, 33).

Further to the five criteria which Bell gives for an emerging 'post-industrial society', there are important caveats that contribute to our understanding of Bell's definition. Certainly, in terms of definition, Bell argues that 'post-industrial society' is not a 'social system' in itself (1999: 114). Rather he argues it is, as a concept, 'an effort to identify a change in the *social structure*' (1999: 114). He defines the social structure as 'the economy, the technology and the stratification system' of a society, as opposed to its 'politics and culture' (1999: 119, 115). The interaction between a changing social structure and politics is especially marked in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. Bell often refers to the interactions between politics and science, or politics and technology, as defining this society. For instance, he suggests we will see the 'inherent confrontation of science with any arbitrary power' (1999: 406). Elsewhere, he asserts that '[i]t is not the technocrat who ultimately holds power, but the politician' (1999: 360). In these arguments we can see tension and reciprocity between traditional institutions of decision-making and emerging technocratic institutions. However, Bell does not suggest that post-industrial society will be exclusively technocratic. There is confrontation – the prominence of a professional and technical class, the rise of theoretical knowledge and intellectual technology offer challenges to the status quo and suggest an emerging technocracy. However, as Bell argues, power remains with the politician in post-industrial

society. These dimensions instead characterise a change in the social structure against which political institutions will react, or alongside which decision-making institutions will themselves change.

In *Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992) Fredric Jameson offers a postmodern critique of Bell's 'post-industrial society'. This critique raises crucial questions about post-industrialism's interaction with, even continuity with, preceding social systems. I will now turn to address Jameson's concern and further elaborate on the nature of Bell's 'post-industrial society'. While Jameson's critique is famed and has had a significant influence on the arguments put forward in this thesis, I will suggest that his analysis of Bell's 'post-industrial' society is misleading on points of detail. Having addressed this problem I will be able to outline the features of post-industrialism perceptible in Birmingham, the subject of this study.

Fredric Jameson discusses his own use of both the terms 'postmodernism' and 'late capitalism' (the latter taken from Ernest Mandel's designation of the third stage of capitalism as 'late capitalism') to describe contemporary society. According to Jameson, postmodernism is 'to be understood as an attempt to theorize the specific logic of the cultural production of that third stage, and not as yet another disembodied culture critique or diagnosis of the spirit of the age'.⁵ The 'spirit of the age' diagnoses he refers to include Daniel Bell's 'post-industrial society' and the 1950s arguments for the 'end of ideologies' (1992: xviii, 159). Jameson has several reservations about both these schools of thought. While he does entertain them as part of postmodernist discourse itself he rejects them as somewhat illusory formulations originating from the political right (1992: 400).

Jameson's contention is primarily that the phrase 'post-industrial society' misleadingly underscores a 'break, rupture, and mutation' from a preceding era of

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), 400. Further references will appear in the text.

industrialism and monopoly capitalism (1992: xix). His preference for the term 'late capitalism' is largely because it emphasizes a sense of 'continuity' with what has come before (1992: xix). Elsewhere he lists 'post-industrialism' as one of a 'range of competing formulations [...] unsatisfactory insofar as they were too rigidly specified and marked by their area of provenance' (1992: xiii–xiv). In the case of post-industrial society that area of provenance is 'economics' (1992: xiv). For Jameson, Bell's 'post-industrial society' is a misleading and rigid gesture of new economic relations that, in actuality, obscures the fact that postmodern capitalism is the 'purest form of capitalism yet to have emerged.' (1992: 36).

Jameson's critique of the notion of the 'post-industrial' is closely connected to his rejection of 'the end of ideology' (1992: 400). Jameson suggests that both formulations belonged to the 'conservative ideologues of the fifties' (1992: 159). Jameson is eager to designate Bell as a right-wing critic. He attributes the rise of the post-industrial and end of ideology paradigms to the Right's colonizing of 'mediatic and informational social phenomena' during the Cold War (1992: 400). Jameson allows for the 'end' of ideology insofar as ideology 'has ceased to be functional in perpetuating and reproducing the system' (1992: 398). This suggestion that ideology has diminished in significance and (political) impact has proved sustainable, unlike Bell's cruder 'end of ideology'. However, it is also apparent that Jameson and Bell are often discussing the same large-scale changes to society. Indeed, like Bell, Jameson argued that major scientific developments such as the atomic bomb and the computer signalled a historical break. For Jameson, this represented the break between modernism and postmodernism rather than industrial society and post-industrial society.

Jameson is right to draw attention to the term 'post-industrial' in Bell's work. He raises relevant issues over the legitimacy of a rupture between industrialism and post-industrialism. However, there are several problems with Jameson's reading. Firstly, Jameson

overlooks Bell's presentation of *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* as a 'logical construction' of what may happen. It is essentially a social forecast for future comparison. However, despite this, Jameson does not debate or critique any of Bell's dimensions, seemingly stopping at the level of terminology itself.

There is a theoretical disparity between Jameson and Bell about where the rupture lies. Bell was concerned with charting a change in the *social* structure (economy, technology and the stratification system). For Jameson, as evidenced by the full title of his acclaimed work *Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, there was a comprehensive change happening in the cultural superstructure. This change reflected a *purifying* of capitalism throughout society, continuity with the past rather than a break from it. Yet, even here, these positions are not mutually exclusive. Bell diagnosed a change in U.S. society in the 1970s, and one might argue that Jameson was looking at the same process of change, some years later, from a more defined perspective that incorporated cultural change. Hence Jameson emphasized *postmodernism* over post-industrialism.

The key difference between Jameson and Bell is their different attitudes to Marxist thought. We have seen that Jameson is eager to dismiss Bell as a right-wing critic. This is problematic because Bell would see himself, and has been seen by others, as a liberal and a social democrat. Bell is vulnerable to this kind of critique because he does not identify himself clearly with any left-wing ideology through his work. Further, much of *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* expresses wariness towards essentializing tendencies, whether they are technocratic or Marxist.

In his 1999 foreword to the anniversary edition of *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* Bell emphasises the continuity of 'post-industrial society' with its precedents. For example, after considering an *Economist* article on "Post-Industrial Glasgow", Bell expresses concern that many have conflated his designation with 'the decline of industry and

manufacturing and the supplanting by services'.⁶ Instead, Bell argues there is an 'extraordinary range of changes' in a post-industrial society 'that does not wholly displace the agrarian and industrial worlds' (1999: xi). This argument for continuity counters Jameson's suggestion that the term 'post-industrial society' emphasises rupture. Further Bell argued that industrial society cuts across the world's various social systems and 'industry is managed in different ways in the capitalist and communist systems' (1999: xi). These statements suggest that the 'post-industrial' also cuts across such divisions and does not equate to 'post-capitalist' for Bell. Rather, it leaves the possibility of adaptation or change in capitalism in order to move from the management of industrial society to the management of post-industrial society.

Bell had reservations about conventional Marxist readings of these changes. He writes that 'Marx thought that the mode of production was *constitutive* of society, that is, intrinsic to the structure of all societies' (1999: xviii). Further 'Marxists see society as organized by the mode of production, which unites the sub-structure and super-structure – the economic as the foundation and politics and culture as epiphenomena' (1999: xix). Against this 'holistic' theory, Bell offers his own assertion that the mode of production is a '*conceptual*' scheme, albeit the 'most useful conceptual scheme to understand Western capitalist society from ca. 1750 to 1950' (1999: xviii). Rather than a totality comprised of sub-structure and superstructure, Bell felt that contemporary society was best characterised as 'a set of disjunctive realms [...] the techno-economic, the political, and the cultural' (1999: xix). For 'techno-economic', we can read 'social structure', as he had termed it originally in 1973.

Bell argues that the chief failing of Marx's conceptual scheme is the 'decline of the industrial working class' (1999: xviii). Bell also observes that Marx overlooked *family* capitalism and the notion of inheritance (1999: lxiv). Bell argues that capitalism brought more

⁶ Bell, *Post-Industrial Society*, xi.

fluid economic relations but as a social system was quite rigidly built around the family unit (1999: lxiv). These qualifications bring us to Bell's reading of capitalism in a post-industrial society. He argues that 'post-industrial society makes higher education – human capital – the foundation for position and privilege in the society' (1999: lxv). Family wealth remains, albeit solely as a 'cultural advantage', inheritance in family firms 'gives way [...] to a managerial class' and 'ownership of companies becomes disbursed through mutual funds and pension plans' (1999: lxv). What does this mean for Bell? With a movement to a 'post-industrial' society and an increasingly meritocratic system we are presented with the 'anomaly of a capitalist system without capitalists' (1999: lxiv). Bell predicts this loss of capitalist actors because capitalism itself remains as an economic system 'but is less of a social system' (1999: lxiv).⁷

The central questions among these issues appear to be: has there been a rupture between a 'post-industrial' and 'industrial' society? If so, is 'post-industrial' the most appropriate term for characterising this rupture? If we take it to be the case that there has indeed been a rupture, there are plenty of terms that *can* account for one. We can take Postmodernism, for instance. Michael J. Dear notes that the prefix 'post' in postmodern signifies both a 'rupture' and 'continuity' with past trends'.⁸ This is a point that Jameson would not necessarily draw our attention to. Jameson himself lists terms as he considers alternatives to 'late capitalism'. These are less explicitly suggestive of rupture and include, notably, 'spectacle or image society'.⁹ This latter term is of interest, particularly if we were to take a Debordian reading of these issues, under which we might want to consider 'The

⁷ The exact implication of Bell's ideas on social class requires a thorough analysis which cannot be incorporated into this study without taking a definitively sociological approach. Bell makes some problematic arguments about the 'death of class', largely because his definition of social class is decidedly rigid. One potential starting point for a critique would be to consider class and post-industrialism in light of Guy Standing's work on an emerging, insecure globalised class, *The Precariat*.

⁸ Michael J. Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 32.

⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xviii.

Society of the Spectacle’ as the basis of our rupture with given precedents. Another possibility is the ‘Information Age’ and Bell discusses this directly in his 1999 preface to the 20-year anniversary edition of *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*.

Bell addresses the question that ‘[i]f information is so central to the new forms of socio-economic organization, why did I not call my work *The Information Society*?’¹⁰ Here we see once again that Bell is wary of using essentializing terminology, thus he avoids the term ‘The Information Society’. He argues that his interest is in ‘the role of technology and the ways that technology has become the strategic resource and lever of social change in society’ (1999: xviii). However, he is keen to stress that ‘I am not a technological determinist’ (1999: xviii). Rather, while acknowledging technology as ‘the major instrument of change’ he stresses that ‘technology operates in a context not always of its own making (such as politics and culture)’ (1999: xviii). While Jameson attacks Bell’s use of the term ‘post-industrial’, Bell expresses justifiable concerns about the technologically determinist connotations of a newer designation, ‘The Information Society’.

It is because of its resistance to a technologically determinist schema that Daniel Bell’s ‘post-industrial society’ is still relevant today. While Jameson’s critique rightly draws our attention to the problematic nature of end or rupture narratives that have circulated in intellectual circles from the ‘end of ideology’ in the 1950s to Francis Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’, Jameson does not fully engage with the substance of Bell’s arguments. If he did, he would find extremely useful accounts of the growth of the service sector, the growth of college (or university) education, the centrality of theoretical knowledge to society, the assessment of technology and the need for ‘intellectual technology’ to order mass society. This thesis will use Bell as a reference point for its exploration of Birmingham. It will also

¹⁰ Daniel Bell, ‘The Axial Age of Technology: Foreword: 1999’, in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society, Anniversary Ed.* (Basic Books: New York, 1999), xviii.

capture the spirit of Bell's warning over the '*hubris*' of 'post-industrial society'.¹¹ That is, that although the 'human quest has been for a common tongue and a unity of knowledge' and the technological advances of society seem to have satiated this quest, we have to maintain a 'necessary humility' in our endeavours (1999: 265). This will be clear when we examine the fallout of post-industrial change in Birmingham. I now want to produce an overview of the post-industrial characteristics of Birmingham.

A Runnymede Report¹² conducted in 2011 puts the closure of Longbridge in the context of a wider shift in employment across the city: 'At one point heavy industry accounted for 50 per cent of all employment in the city. Between 1998 and 2007 manufacturing declined dramatically, 30,000 jobs were lost and the sector came to account for only 11 per cent of the total employment in the city. Over the same period the public sector expanded rapidly creating 40,000 jobs'.¹³ The sheer scale of the employment shift is notable here. This large shift has also taken place over a relatively short period of time (9 years). We should remember here that this kind of industrial decline, alongside a shift to service sector employment, represents only the most superficial characteristics of a post-industrial society. However, the scale here is indicative of a seismic social change. It is therefore a suitable opening to a discussion of the city. There is a post-war precedent for large-scale change in Birmingham – although it is related to infrastructure and housing rather than employment. Following the Luftwaffe's 'extensive' but 'widely scattered' bombing of Birmingham during World War II, the city embarked on a significant rebuild and development programme, on which David Adams has commented that 'the scale of development, public and private, municipally funded and developer-led, was far more extensive in Birmingham than in other

¹¹ Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society, Anniversary Ed.*, 265.

¹² Runnymede is a UK-based independent race equality thinktank who engage with policy makers, practitioners and citizens.

¹³ K. Gill and K. Sveinsson, *Passing the Baton: Inter-generational Conceptions of Race and Racism in Birmingham* (London: Runnymede, 2011), 8.

British cities'.¹⁴ In this respect, the shift from manufacturing to public sector employment between 1998 and 2007 was the second large-scale change to post-war Birmingham. However, it has been a change indicative of Daniel Bell's 'simplest characteristic' of post-industrial society – the growth of service sector employment.

What is taking place on the Longbridge site now? The redevelopment of the land formerly occupied by the Rover manufactory has been ongoing for a decade. Alex Burfitt and Ed Ferrari have examined the likely residential impact of proposals for a science park as a component of the redevelopment programme.¹⁵ They characterise the science park as part of the wider 'economic diversification' efforts in Birmingham as a response to the local 'over-reliance on the automotive sector' (2008: 293, 296). This diversification includes a long-running ambition to establish a Central Technology Belt or 'high-technology corridor' running from the centre of Birmingham to the south of the adjoining county of Worcestershire' (2008: 293–294). The objective of the C.T.B. would be to work in conjunction with public sector bodies, to 'exploit knowledge assets in local firms, universities and hospitals' and 'foster the development of high-technology and knowledge-intensive industries' (2008: 294). With echoes of Bell's emphasis on social-economic changes in 'post-industrial society', Burfitt and Ferrari describe the CTB as representing the 'greatest *break* from the economic traditions of the local economy' (2008: 294 – my emphasis).

These changes are the direct impacts of the Rover factory's closure in 2005. They also reveal various levels of response to the closure. Miles further north, in Birmingham's city centre, there has been another event inextricably linked with forces of capital that have governed the decline of local manufacturing. A redeveloped Bullring Shopping Centre opened in 2003, its opening coming between BMW's sale of Rover in 2000 and its final closure five

¹⁴ David Adams, 'Everyday Experiences of the Modern City: Remembering the Post-war Reconstruction of Birmingham', *Planning Perspectives*, 26/2 (April 2011), 242, 238.

¹⁵ 'The Housing and Neighbourhood Impacts of Knowledge-based Economic Development Following Industrial Closure', *Policy Studies*, 29/3 (September 2008), 293–304. Further references will appear in the text.

years later. The new Bullring replaced a faltering and somewhat misjudged 1960s retail development. It did retain some features of the previous incarnation (the emphasis on porosity of access, a multi-level layout and its enclosed, indoor nature). However it has avoided the 1960s tendency for visibly uncompromising modernist architecture and subjugation of the pedestrian to surrounding road networks.

It is important to think of the Bullring in a wider context than local redevelopment. For instance, Michelle Lowe has written of Southampton's West Quay Shopping Centre as 'one of the most prominent examples of the shift in orientation in UK retail planning in the late 1990s towards a stronger urban regeneration-led focus' and this intertwining of retail planning and regeneration, Lowe points out, was at the heart of 'New Labour's urban policy agenda'.¹⁶ Opening in the year 2000 West Quay slightly pre-dates the new Bullring but both shopping centres epitomise the retail focus of the recent 'urban renaissance'. Indeed, the Bullring construction team was largely made up of the 'same individuals, and supply chain' that built West Quay.¹⁷ What is clear in both cases is that the iconic retail developments indicate a strategy that is 'consumptionist, making the city a place of exchange rather than production of the social surplus'.¹⁸

The Bullring's contribution to Birmingham's status as a 'place of exchange' was part of a wider reorientation of the city's economy towards leisure, tourism and business. Prior to the 2003 opening of the Bullring the city's 'limited retail was not on a par with the international standard of its business and cultural facilities' (including the NEC, the NIA and

¹⁶ 'The Regional Shopping Centre in the Inner City: A Study of Retail-led Urban Regeneration', *Urban Studies*, 42/3 (March 2005), 449–470, 450.

¹⁷ Anon., *Bullring Birmingham: Information Pack* [PDF accessed through website] (n.d.), 9. <<http://eu-static.bullring.co.uk.s3.amazonaws.com/Live/Documents/INFORMATION%20PACK%202012.pdf>>, accessed 1 July 2014.

¹⁸ Gill Bentley, 'Fitting the Piece in the Jigsaw Puzzle? The Governance of Local Economic Development Policy and Regeneration in Birmingham', *Local Economy*, 20/2 (May 2005), 238–243, 239.

the Symphony Hall).¹⁹ The Bullring was part of an overall strategy to improve the city's international standing. As well as the 'significant benefits' seen by the city's tourism industry there has been collateral job creation (Emery, 2006: 131). John Emery explains that '[o]ver 8,000 jobs were created during the project's lifetime and, since opening, Bullring has generated thousands more employment opportunities' (2006: 131). With the recent expansion of the public sector (as referenced in the Runnymede Report above) there has also been a parallel expansion of the service sector and this is typified by the Bullring. Whether these employment shifts (from manufacturing to services) have been direct appears doubtful. Burfitt and Ferrari draw attention to an emerging trend of 'Rover employees [...] finding jobs in traditional manufacturing sectors rather than significantly penetrating new, knowledge-intensive sectors'.²⁰

As I have outlined, these problematic issues are central concerns of this thesis. Between the closure of the Rover plant, the overall decline in the city's manufacturing, regional investment in high technology industries and the redevelopment of inner city retail Birmingham shows many of the characteristics which are symptomatic of Bell's 'post-industrial society'. It is therefore a fertile environment to scrutinise and re-evaluate our conception of post-industrialism. The landscape of Birmingham itself demonstrates the potentialities for rupture with preceding industrial capitalism (the Central Technology Belt) as well as entertaining opposing arguments for continuity (the redevelopment of the 1960s Bullring site).

Bell's notion of 'post-industrialism' was undoubtedly prescient and remains useful in scrutinizing changes in Birmingham. As we have seen, there are numerous ways in which the

¹⁹ John Emery, 'Bullring: A Case Study of Retail-Led Urban Renewal and its Contribution to City Centre Regeneration', *Journal of Retail & Leisure Property*, 5/2 (2006), 121–133, 121. Further references will appear in the text.

²⁰ 'The Housing and Neighbourhood Impacts of Knowledge-based Economic Development Following Industrial Closure', *Policy Studies*, 29/3 (September 2008), 297.

recent history of Longbridge and the Bullring can be explained using Bell's notion of a post-industrial society. However, part of the objective of this thesis is to re-capture the nuances of this term. We have discussed here the debate over the term's problematic sense of 'rupture'. Such a rupture could be justified if Bell integrated 'post-industrialism' into changing global structures. Without this context, 'post-industrialism' loses its relativity. Furthermore, Bell's arguments for the death of class in 'post-industrial society' justify the scepticism of Jameson. In light of this, Bell's prediction of society beyond 'class' distinctions actually looks more like a reassertion of class structure (just as any refutation of ideology is an ideological statement itself). However, Bell's emphasis on the change of society's social structure (as distinct from politics and culture) needs to be remembered. His awareness of the danger of the technocrat's hubris and his resistance to technological determinism are also integral to our conception of society.

This chapter has established the central issues of rupture and continuity in regard to post-industrialism and considered their manifestation in Birmingham's development over recent years. The next chapter will consider the tool of criticism, psychogeography, and, in doing so, outline a methodology for following chapters.

Chapter 2

Psychogeography

The practice of psychogeography has taken many forms and been expressed through a variety of mediums including newspaper columns, empirical studies, urban explorer groups, literary traditions, and, to its detriment, literary fads. Detailed examination of the origins of the term will determine the central concerns of this study. In this chapter I trace the term to Guy Debord's initial usage in 1955. I also consider the term's parallel emergence in U.S. academia following the work of Kevin Lynch. These separate 'schools' of psychogeography have their commonalities: both see 'psychogeography' as a means to theorize alternative forms of the city. However, Debord's and the Situationists' political project, of which psychogeography is a part, does not share the commitment to institutional reform. This commitment defined U.S. psychogeography following the emergence of Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960) and evolved further at Clark University. I draw insights from both emergent psychogeography and contemporary forms in this thesis. This chapter also considers the criticisms made of contemporary psychogeography by Sukhdev Sandhu and Owen Hatherley. Contemporary psychogeography has been dismissed as nostalgic by critics who argue it has deviated from its utopian origins. I will look at evidence of these traits in Iain Sinclair's work and diagnose the source of this nostalgia. I will then argue that Sinclair's work is more notable for the *separation* it seeks from daily urban life. This is where contemporary psychogeography exhibits predominantly privileged and male perspectives. Negotiating these, I will outline my own multi-faceted approach to this psychogeography of Birmingham including both the theoretical basis of the montage form and the discussion of Stirchley as an 'alternative'.

From this analysis of psychogeography I will explain my use of literary montage as the form for Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of this thesis. To do so, I will discuss the use of montage by

Walter Benjamin, the production of maps by the Situationists and the fragmented way they each depict the spatiality of the city. I draw much from Rebecca Solnit's arguments about the continuities and discontinuities of urban experience and how these are affected by the walking act. I will distance this thesis from the contemporary work of Iain Sinclair in two ways. I will not be replicating his nostalgia for avant-garde politics and the 'false opposition' this creates between insiders and outsiders in contemporary urban life. I will also not be replicating his use of the recorded 'excursion' which is particularly vulnerable to the nostalgic tendencies I have already mentioned. Rather through montage and the predominantly present tense form, this thesis mimics movement and is itself the 'event' or 'site' of struggle. This is a quality closely linked to the utopian and creative tenets of Situationist psychogeography.

Guy Debord's original definition of psychogeography can be traced to his 1955 text 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography'.²¹ Debord does not claim to have invented the term himself. He attributes the initial use of the term 'psychogeography' to an 'illiterate Kabyle' (Debord, 2006: 8). The suggestion made by the 'Kabyle', a member of a Berber ethnic group from Northern Algeria, is welcomed by Debord as a 'general term for the phenomena a few of us were investigating around the summer of 1953' (Debord, 2006: 8). Debord later outlined elements of a psychogeographic lifestyle, which had the investigation of urban phenomena at its heart, in his 'Theory of the Dérive'.²² He described such acts as: 'slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition, hitchhiking non-stop and without destination through Paris during a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion' and also 'wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public' (Debord, 2006: 65). The idea of moving by various means, often covert or unofficial, through parts of the city generally considered out of bounds is commonly found in contemporary

²¹ Guy Debord, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 8–12. Further references will appear in the text.

²² Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 62–66. Further references will appear in the text.

psychogeography and such activities might be seen as ‘expressions of a more general sensibility’ (Debord, 2006: 65). However, it is important for us to view them in terms of the initial definition Debord outlined before moving on to contemporary manifestations.

Debord defines psychogeography as ‘the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals’ (Debord, 2006: 8). The impact of the environment on the individual is key here, as is their interaction. We should also take note of the sense of precision. Debord uses empirical terms (‘precise laws’, ‘specific effects’) to heighten the reader’s sense of psychogeography as an objective pursuit. While many may feel that the experience of the city is wholly subjective Debord made a surprising but resilient claim to report objective ‘findings’ (Debord, 2006: 8). He wanted psychogeography to produce objective conclusions about the influence of the environment on the individual. This scientific standpoint was one he found consistent with a ‘materialist perspective,’ with life and thought ‘conditioned by objective nature’ (Debord, 2006: 8).

If Debord was keen to stress the objectivity of psychogeography as a practice and pursuit, he was less precise in its exact application. He celebrated the term ‘psychogeographical’ as a ‘charmingly vague adjective’ (Debord, 2006: 8). He gave the term some elasticity with regard to its application, applying it to both the ‘findings’ of the investigation, the ‘influence’ of these findings on ‘human feelings’ and then, opening up the term somewhat, to ‘any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery’ (Debord, 2006: 8). Thus psychogeography can seem like an urban practice, an urban ritual and further, a level of perception, or consciousness, that seeks out a new terrain of ‘discovery’. In ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography’ there are some examples of psychogeographic practice, including a reference to a friend of his having navigated the Harz region of Germany with a map of London (Debord, 2006: 11). However, Debord doesn’t

share his friend's findings. We don't know whether he discovered more about the Harz region or London through this intervention. Therefore we need to look elsewhere for a clearer definition of psychogeographic practice and writing.

In particular, we can look to Debord's list of psychogeographic 'phenomena' in 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography'. These include 'sudden changes of ambience in a street [...] zones of distinct psychic atmospheres [...] the path of least resistance [...] automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain)' and finally 'the appealing or repelling character of certain places' (Debord, 2006: 10). If these psychogeographic phenomena appear to be subjective despite the initial definition, if some elements sound uncomfortably like pseudo-science ('psychic atmospheres') then Debord had intended them to be employed towards compiling multiple psychogeographical readings of the city, for the most part through the act of simultaneous 'dérives'. We must remember that Debord emphasised the 'materialist perspective' of psychogeography. Lefebvre has revealed some of the practices used by Constant and the Situationists. He describes members of the group conducting walks or 'dérives' through different areas of the city, communicating to each other via walkie talkies to connect 'neighbourhoods that were separated spatially'.²³ Here we can see one instance in which the group embraced technology and used communication devices to augment their psychogeographic work. Debord saw psychogeography as a means of tracing the material causes of all these phenomena. Knowledge of these phenomena could be accessed through a heightened consciousness of, and heightened immersion in, architecture and the city.

We can use the work of Denis Wood to further define the materialism of psychogeography. He has also contributed to an expansion of the movement's origins. Wood

²³ Henri Lefebvre interviewed by Kristin Ross, 'Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 2004), 272.

has a useful way of categorizing psychogeography as a science. The former doctoral student of geography at Clark University describes psychogeography during its emergence as a science that ‘used humans as instruments for learning about the environment’.²⁴ He takes this, the use of systematic observations and standardised experiments as the key components of psychogeography as a science (Wood, 2010: 186). Wood’s views are useful because he makes an argument for the dual, and mutually independent, emergence of two psychogeographical practices during the 1950s and 1960s. We have discussed the emergence of psychogeography amongst the Lettrist and then Situationist Internationals (under the guidance of Guy Debord) in 1950s Paris. However, Wood argues that psychogeography was also emerging parallel to this in the U.S., principally in its academic institutions and with more emphasis on urban planning reform.

Wood traces the emergence of psychogeographic study in the U.S. to the work of Kevin Lynch, in particular *The Image of the City*. Lynch’s book was first published in 1960 and makes no mention of psychogeography. However, Wood argues that *The Image of the City* was a precursor to psychogeographical study at Clark University and that in writing and researching the book, Lynch would have been practicing his own form of psychogeography ‘at the very same time the Situationists were engaged in their experiments’ (Wood, 2010: 188). As the Situationist International was formed in 1957 and Lynch’s research prior to the book was ‘supported over several years’ by funds from the Rockefeller Foundation, Wood’s summary appears accurate (if Lynch had researched the book for longer than three years he would have been researching parallel to the Lettrist, not the Situationist International).²⁵ Having considered this mutual emergence, I turn to the substance of Lynch’s work and the academic study it inspired, particularly at Clark University.

²⁴ Denis Wood, ‘Lynch Debord: About Two Psychogeographies’, *Cartographica*, 45/3 (2010), 186. Further references will appear in the text.

²⁵ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1979), v. Further references will appear in the text.

The Image of the City explores the ‘imageability’ of a city, by which Lynch means ‘that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any observer’ (Lynch, 1979: 9). The primary or original function of imageability, Lynch argued, was ‘orientation’ and ‘permitting purposeful mobility’ (Lynch, 1979: 9, 124). Lynch identified the formation of an ‘environmental image’ in its wider application as ‘a fundamental part of our equipment for living’ (Lynch, 1979: 124). These concerns are particularly of interest to this study when considered in the light of Lynch’s motivation for working on *The Image of the City*. Amongst other reasons outlined, Denis Wood notes that Lynch had ‘an interest in the connection between psychology and the urban environment’ as well as a commitment to ‘the actual human experience of a city’ (Wood, 2010: 189–190). The former almost directly mirrors Debord’s definition of psychogeography (as detailed above) while the latter mirrors the Situationists’ street-level concerns.

Perhaps the most important shared interest between the psychogeographic projects of Debord and Lynch is an interest in re-imagining the city’s form. This also, simultaneously, brings us to one of their more significant differences. ‘Psychogeography’ under the guidance of Guy Debord and the Situationists is a tool of change, part of a wider revolution the group openly pursued and frequently invoked. A Situationist editorial opens with the line, ‘First, we believe that the world must be changed’.²⁶ Their work has repeatedly stressed that their ‘unitary urbanism’ was not a ‘doctrine’ of urbanism but rather a critique of urbanism (Anon., 2004: 103). Equal to their revolutionary concern was their wariness of a ‘more progressive urbanism’, a ‘corrective’ to existing forms of city planning, which they deemed ‘false’ (Anon., 2004: 103). Ultimately, their ‘unitary urbanism’ requires ‘the creation of quite different conditions of life’ (Anon., 2004, 103). Psychogeography, in its European form is an

²⁶ Anon., ‘Editorial Notes: Critique of Urbanism’, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, tr. John Shepley, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 2004), 103. Further references will appear in the text.

objective means of studying current conditions of life in order to change them, and create new ones.

Kevin Lynch's notion of 'imageability' is also an analytic tool of interest here. However as a tool it is a model of exactly what the Situationists were wary of – improving current forms of urbanism and reforming planning. Lynch often refers to the 'designer', for whom we might read planner and/or architect, and their responsibility 'to strengthen the public image' of the city (Lynch, 1979: 116). Lynch's work, written while he worked at the M.I.T. and subsequently embraced at Clark University, imagines a liberated design aesthetic for city planners. Lynch was confident of securing financial assistance to implement his ideas (once they were further realised), claiming that: '[i]t will probably be more difficult to gain an understanding of the problem and to develop the necessary design skill than it will be to obtain the necessary powers, once the objective is clear' (Lynch, 1979: 117). This is not to say that Lynch's involvement in institutional or planning policy dilutes the utopianism of his project: his work's goal remains to 'raise the experience of a city to a new level' (Lynch, 1979: 117).

The shared utopianism of the European and American psychogeographic traditions is matched by their fundamentally different programmes. Lynch sought reform within institutions of planning and research. On the other hand the Situationists were decidedly outside such institutions, affiliations and obligations. Those who were designated as potential agents of 'psychogeography' and 'imageability' are of crucial interest given these different vantage points. Lynch draws *The Image of the City* to a close by envisaging the creation of 'a critical and attentive audience' for the 'highly developed art of city design' (Lynch, 1979: 120). He repeatedly refers to educative terms – 'training' and 'teaching' urban residents to enhance their perceptions of their environment (Lynch, 1979: 117). Similarly, the Situationists referred to the necessity of 'freeing an instinct for construction presently

repressed in everyone' in order to replace increasingly totalitarian living conditions.²⁷ Universal access is a key concept here, with these intellectual ideas being offered as ideals for everyday life. Notice, though, that Lynch's incorporation of democratic access prioritises education. Conversely, the Situationists talk more in terms of liberation, of 'freeing' latent instincts. Here we can see the distinction between Lynch's reformatory urbanism, vulnerable to charges of academic elitism and managerial dilution and the Situationists' uncompromising drive for a revolution of daily life.

These dynamics are useful in mapping the subsequent evolution of psychogeography, especially given the central, re-imaginative and utopian urban concerns expressed in its early forms. Denis Wood stresses that in the wake of the success of *The Image of the City*, Lynch 'focused his research on aspects of the city that could be shaped by city government' (Wood, 2010: 194). In contrast, the Situationists aimed at 'provoking' crisis and a 'collective takeover of the world' (Wood, 2010: 195). Of the former strand, Wood has a personal perspective. He recalls that the psychologist David Stea offered the first course in psychogeography at Clark University in 1967 (Wood, 2010: 186). He notes that for 'five years the field flourished' (Wood, 2010: 186). Then, however, he explains that the field mutated 'rapidly into [...] splinters' (Wood, 2010: 186). On the one hand, U.S. psychogeography, institutionalised in universities, petered out. Meanwhile, European psychogeography saw various splits in the Situationist International as Debord 'became increasingly pre-occupied with a Marxist revisionism'.²⁸ Psychogeography, in some ways a methodology for a wider revolutionary project, gives way to Debord's focus on the 'spectacle' and eventually this revolutionary doctrine becomes a sole focus of Situationist thought, particularly in the wake of the Paris uprising of 1968.

²⁷ Anon., 'Editorial Notes: Critique of Urbanism', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, tr. John Shepley, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 2004), 111.

²⁸ Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpenden, Hertfordshire: Pocket Essentials, 2006), 101.

Both these initial sources provide a generalised understanding of the term ‘psychogeography’ as the interaction between a subject’s psyche and their environment. More specifically psychogeography concerns the effect of the environment on the subject. We have also seen that psychogeography in its earliest forms had a utopian project which aimed either to provide ordinary citizens with a critical eye for urban spatiality (Kevin Lynch) or to unlock latent forms of urban activism (Situationism). How did these principles manifest in subsequent psychogeographic work? The answer in Kevin Lynch’s case is self-evident. *The Image of the City* contributed to the beginnings of an academic discipline, to the beginnings of the merging of geography with psychological responses to the city and to the development of urban planning. However, in the case of the Situationists, who resisted such institutionalisation, the question is more problematic. The Situationist legacy is now in the hands of contemporary writers who emphasise ‘practice’ over academic or scientific research.²⁹ To fully evaluate the legacy of Situationist psychogeography we need to consider the criticisms of contemporary psychogeography made by Sukhdev Sandhu and Owen Hatherley. Both identify similar negative traits in contemporary psychogeographic writing that are worthy of consideration here.

Sandhu’s criticism is informed by a wide array of psychogeographical writing and he rightfully takes time to bring our attention to its more neglected practitioners across different mediums. He argues that contemporary psychogeographers are limited by their masculine and London-orientated perspectives and the work of such practitioners takes the form of solitary engagements characterized by a ‘mourning, perhaps a nostalgia’ for the disappearing elements of the industrial-age city.³⁰ I will return to the limitations of these perspectives later. For now, we need to consider Sandhu’s most damaging point. This is to highlight the aesthetic

²⁹ Will Self, ‘Decontaminating the Union: Post-Industrial Landscapes and the British Psyche’, *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 129/2 (2013), 60.

³⁰ Sukhdev Sandhu, ‘Discovering the Secrets of the City’, *New Statesman*, 135/4804 (7 August 2006), 46–47. Further references will appear in the text.

‘umbrage’ much current psychogeographic writing takes at economic structures of ‘deregulation, turnover and a healthy irreverence for the past’ (Sandhu, 2006: 46–47). This stance is at odds with nostalgia for the industrial-age city (an urbanism which was founded on exactly the same laissez faire economic principles). There is some evidence, then, of an ideological approach to the city’s development, particularly economically, that is self-contradictory. It is here that Sandhu’s criticism chimes with Owen Hatherley’s critique of psychogeography.

In *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* Hatherley calls the individualism of punk music a ‘counter-cultural equivalent to Thatcherism’.³¹ He similarly describes Victorian Manchester and its associated liberalism as ‘a laissez faire doctrine with distinct similarities to Thatcherism’ (Hatherley, 2011: 121). This strand of argument leads the reader to his attack on contemporary psychogeography. He argues that this psychogeography is similar to punk through a mutual element ‘that laments the destruction of Victoriana’ (Hatherley, 2011: 122). Hatherley counterpoints this regressive stance against the U.K.’s socially democratic approach to urbanism in the post-war years. For him, psychogeographers like Iain Sinclair glorify the ‘unplanned’ and ‘autonomously’ formed Victorian cities (Hatherley, 2011: 122). Their affection for Victorian cities produces an unexpected endorsement of laissez faire economics. It is not clear whether this is tacit support as Hatherley suggests or whether, in fact, this kind of economics is the cause rather than the effect of aesthetic preferences. The crucial point here is that Hatherley argues that this kind of nostalgia turns away from the utopian and future-orientated schemes of psychogeography present in Situationist writings. Hatherley is insistent in his reading of Situationist doctrine and emphasises the tendency for the original, European branches of psychogeography to imagine a ‘new urbanism’ whilst

³¹ Owen Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* (London: Verso, 2011), 118. Further references will appear in the text.

resisting previous regenerations of city form (Hatherley, 2011: 122). It is clear that Hatherley prioritises the utopian elements of early psychogeography.

Considering Sandhu and Hatherley's critiques we can see some of the critical vulnerabilities of contemporary psychogeography. On the one hand there appears to be a reflexive trait in the writing that attacks the impact of contemporary laissez faire economics on the city. On the other there is an inherent nostalgia for what has passed in urban settings and this usually appears as a preference for Victorian-era urbanity, itself created by laissez faire economics. The problem can be addressed with a direct consideration of one of psychogeography's more successful and noted practitioners, Iain Sinclair, who, as we have seen above, is directly mentioned in Hatherley's critique. We will turn now to Sinclair and his principal psychogeographic books: *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997), *London Orbital* (2002) and latterly *Ghost Milk* (2011).

These books are particularly relevant because they all take as their starting point a recorded narration of either an extended walk (*London Orbital*) or a series of walks (*Lights Out for the Territory*, *Ghost Milk*). They are perhaps best termed as books of excursion. The excursion has become a form with which Sinclair is now somewhat synonymous. Will Self has produced similarly structured work, including 'Walking to New York', a pilgrimage between his home in London and his mother's childhood house in New York. This recorded walk opens the book *Psychogeography* (2007) which collects his psychogeography columns, produced alongside the artist Ralph Steadman, from the *Independent* newspaper. Self's columns popularised a form of experiential urban narrative that Sinclair developed through the books he released on either side of the millenium (*Lights Out for the Territory* and *London Orbital*). These two writers, then, are the contemporary face of psychogeography; both of them adopt the same structure or medium – the excursion.

In *Lights Out for the Territory* Sinclair's express intention at the outset is to cut a 'v' shape across London by walking. He discusses the method of walking as the 'best way to explore and exploit the city' and a means of 'noticing *everything*'.³² Evoking ideas of both flâneury and dérive, Sinclair describes his preferred mode as '[d]rift[ing] purposefully' (Sinclair, 2003: 4). He wants to allow 'the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself' (Sinclair, 2003: 4). Although he describes this pattern as a fiction, Sinclair argues that the act of walking 'stitches it all together' (Sinclair, 2003: 4). Rebecca Solnit uses the same metaphor of stitching or threading to describe the act of walking. She explains that 'each walk moves through space like a thread through fabric, sewing it together into a continuous experience'.³³ Walking is certainly a means of rediscovering a *continuity* of urban experience. This is crucial to the revival of the urban walk and its expression in literature. Sinclair may define the continuity, the 'underlying pattern', as a 'fiction', but he finds it nevertheless seductive, an 'illicit cocktail' to which he returns for much of his work (Sinclair, 2003: 4).

In *Lights Out for the Territory* there is some evidence of a nostalgic approach. When writing on the Hackney Society's 'local-history buffs' Sinclair notes that these historians are keen to prove that Hackney 'has a pedigree, something more than the mess of the present' (Sinclair, 2003: 32). Crossing through the area to keep to the walk's v-shape, he confirms that 'Victorian Hackney, patched and restored, had lost its voice' (Sinclair, 2003: 36). Elsewhere, he snatches a 'sentimental glance at the canal' (Sinclair, 2003:39). These moments are counterbalanced by an openly critical attitude towards the modern 'republics of glass' (Sinclair, 2003: 50). On discovering that a previously 'exhilarating walk' down the overgrown remains of an old elevated line is 'no longer a possibility', Sinclair places the blame on a 'future development', a 'car-park or privatized railway' (Sinclair, 2003: 10). Sinclair veers

³² Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 4. Further references will appear in the text.

³³ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Verso, 2002), xv. Further references will appear in the text.

between wryness and resignation at these moments. It is notable that even when he is parodying the nostalgia of Hackney's 'local-history buffs' he echoes their arguments. The emphasis on the possibility of *privatized* rail demonstrates his anger towards laissez faire economics (the very laissez faire economics that have constructed the canal on which he gazes fondly). Here, we can see some evidence of why Hatherley interprets Sinclair's 'mess of the present' as nostalgic, with the contemporary city a source of consternation and one often making for a poor comparison with the – *perceived* – freedoms of its Victorian predecessor. Yet, despite these moments Sinclair's nostalgia is not paramount in the text, neither is his deference for occultism. Rather *Lights Out for the Territory* is Sinclair's tour through the aftermath of missed opportunities, political and cultural, of the twentieth century. Further, it is an excursion through urban areas which catalogues the implications of these missed opportunities.

Brian Baker has described *Lights Out for the Territory* as a 'breakthrough' text for Sinclair, reflecting the book's success as a record of psychogeographical excursions (in this case nine excursions).³⁴ However we can also contextualise the book's breakthrough as part of a wider trend identified by Baker, a movement from the failure of late 1960s counterculture to the 'spatial turn' in critical and social theory' (Baker, 2007: 2–3, 11). Baker discusses Sinclair's personal involvement in the counterculture movement (in particular his attendance at both a demonstration against the Vietnam war and also the 'Dialectics of Liberation' Congress in London in 1968). However he stresses the 'position of the disinterested observer' or 'documenter' that Sinclair adopts towards the movement (Baker, 2007: 3, 5, 4). Sinclair admonishes violence, distrusts revolutionary energies and prophesies the re-appropriation of outsider or revolutionary figures into the 'circulation of mediated images and consumption' (Baker, 2007: 3, 5, 4). Sinclair would follow a wider trend in turning towards the spatial after

³⁴ Brian Baker, 'Introduction: maps of the London Underground', in *Iain Sinclair* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 8. Further references will appear in the text.

the sixties. Despite his scepticism, his personal involvement in this movement is still evident decades on in the remaining traces of a ‘tension between apocalyptic imagining and utopian/revolutionary desire’ in his work (Baker, 2007: 4). Given this tension, it is arguable that any nostalgia in Sinclair’s work is a complex one, a product of the events and fallout of the 1960s and not necessarily of any ideological sympathy for the Victorian city.

We can find evidence of this in Sinclair’s handling of the avant-garde in his work. For example, the initial excursion in *Lights Out for the Territory* takes Sinclair past the London Psychogeographical Association headquarters. Here, Sinclair gives an insight into the contemporary nature of psychogeography in London. His ruminations are revealing of his own attitudes towards London’s history. Sinclair accentuates the ludic qualities of the society’s newsletter, suggesting that: ‘it invents the rumours that it purports to discover’ (Sinclair, 2003: 25). Sinclair includes an extract from the newsletter which alleges that British politics is dominated by occult forces. Sinclair sympathises with these psychogeographical ‘fantasies’ (Sinclair, 2003: 25). He describes them as ‘[i]mprovisations on history that are capable of making adjustments in present time’ (Sinclair, 2003: 26). Indeed, prompted by the work of the psychogeographical society he gives the reader some historiographical guidance: ‘[t]he past is fluid, a black swamp; dip for whatever you need’ (Sinclair, 2003: 26). When Sinclair subsequently ‘dips’ into the past in *Lights Out For the Territory* he notably goes back to the sixties, to the writers and activists of Amhurst Road, the Matrix Press and the Angry Brigade. If Sinclair is ‘dipping’ into the past he is pointedly looking back to the *sixties*. Sinclair’s aesthetic, a gaze obsessively taking in the mess of the present, is not primarily motivated by nostalgia for the disappearing Victorian city. Rather it is the recent past – and recent failings – of sixties counterculture that Sinclair sees as significant. This preoccupation – the past as significant, occasionally useful although ultimately disappointing – motivates

Sinclair's distanced approach. Perhaps the most important thing which Sinclair gained from his experiences during the 1960s was the sense of himself as an 'outsider'.

I have argued that Hatherley's critique of Sinclair raises some crucial issues but treats them in a misleading way. Baker's characterisation of Sinclair gives us a more useful insight into the problematic nature of the contemporary psychogeographer. He identifies Sinclair as occupying a 'paradoxical critical position, half inside, implicated in the processes of production and consumption (walker, writer, bookseller) and half-outside, critical of them (poet, shaman, 'mad walker') (Baker, 2007, 22). For Baker, psychogeography in Sinclair is not driven by self-contradiction as Hatherley has argued. Nevertheless it remains a paradoxical enterprise. The paradox of Sinclair is his insistence on the writer or psychogeographer operating as an 'outsider' figure. The idea of the outsider and separation runs throughout Sinclair's work. At one point in *Lights Out for the Territory*, Sinclair, discussing the trade stalls of London booksellers, says: '[i]t's very unlikely that *Lights Out* will put itself around enough to claim a perch on the stall' (Sinclair, 2003: 18). At that time, Sinclair may have made the statement earnestly. Since then he has become a bestseller and it is hard not to imagine his works passing through these bookdealers. This idea of separation recurs in *Ghost Milk* when Sinclair recalls his life in the seventies. He talks about his manual labour at Chobham Farm, a job that initiates him into 'the mystery of how a city works'.³⁵ But he quickly follows up this implied immersion with reference to his first published works. He explains that he also produced a collection of prose and poetry and views this milestone as the 'first shift towards separating myself from the substance that contained me, a living, working London' (Sinclair, 2012: 6). The emphasis on separation is an important one in Sinclair's work. My concern here is not whether or not this separation is a reality, or whether it can be

³⁵ Iain Sinclair, *Ghost Milk* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 6. Further references will appear in the text.

achieved. Rather, I feel the importance lies in Sinclair's admission that separation is actively *sought* through writing.

Since the 1960s Sinclair has become a successful poet, novelist and psychogeographer. With such success in the literary world of contemporary London, the separation sought in his work often seems to be made in denial of his own 'implication' in the processes of production and consumption. His work has increasingly focussed on psychogeographic reportage, and the recorded excursion has been central to this. The recorded excursion is the form used for all of his recently successful work including *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997), *London Orbital* (2003), *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire* (2009) and *Ghost Milk* (2011). The principal problem, which Sandhu has discussed (see above), is that the recorded excursion of contemporary psychogeography has come to enshrine a particular and privileged perspective.

The recorded excursion is the clearest example of the dominant privileged and male perspectives that saturate contemporary psychogeography, particularly in the U.K. In seeking neutrality or separation, an intellectual island from which to comment on urban life, writers like Iain Sinclair have in fact lapsed into the problems of the walker's gaze that Griselda Pollock has situated within a modernist framework.³⁶ In particular Pollock describes the modernist figure of the flâneur as an embodiment of the 'gaze of modernity which is both covetous and erotic' (Pollock, 1993: 67). She contextualises the flâneur's 'privilege or freedom' to walk the 'public arenas' of the city within a 'matrix of bourgeois ideology' that has enacted a 'gendered division' of the public and private spheres (Pollock, 1993: 67). Effectively, there 'is not and could not be a female flâneuse' as women could not walk 'incognito in the crowd' – they only act as recipients of the male gaze in public and their realm of influence is intended to be the private sphere (Pollock, 1993: 71).

³⁶ Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity', in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1993), 66–67. Further references will appear in the text.

Building on Pollock's arguments, Tom McDonough has made a convincing case that, in this regard, Situationist *dérive* is distinct from *flâneury*. He argues that 'the participant of the *dérive*' is not exclusively male (McDonough, 2004: 257). He makes several arguments for how the *dérive* participant is critical towards the 'hegemonic scopic regime of modernity' which underlies the *flâneur* figure (McDonough, 2004: 257). Of principal interest to us here, in terms of the male gaze and privileged perspective, is the argument that the *dérive* enacts a kind of 'blindness' as 'tactical practice' (McDonough, 2004: 259). This 'blindness' is specifically an immersive trait of walking as opposed to an alienating (or separating) trait. It involves the walker's adoption of the 'characteristic of the everyday user of the city who confronts the environment as opaque [...] in order to subvert the rational city of pure visionality' (McDonough, 2004: 259). What is clear is that this 'blindness' and immersion is consciously employed. It is done so in opposition to the 'disentanglement' or 'alienation' which has motivated other hegemonic attitudes to the city in the twentieth century (McDonough, 2004: 255).

Sinclair references both *flâneury* and *dérive* in his psychogeographic or excursion work. However, he doesn't methodically subscribe to either. It would be inaccurate to characterize him, or contemporary psychogeographers, as either. However it is evident from Sinclair's seeking of 'separation' that his work is gaze-orientated. Indeed, the title of *Lights Out for the Territory*, taken from the finale of *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), might itself be interpreted as a flight from female-influence, just as Finn takes flight from his Aunt Sally. It might therefore be argued that it lapses into the privilege or maleness of the modernist framework, owing more to *flâneury* than *dérive*. That is not to say such a perspective is exclusive to modernism. In *Wanderlust* Rebecca Solnit discusses the walking essays of the Romantics, ranging from William Hazlitt to Henry David Thoreau, and criticises them as overly 'sermonizing' (Solnit, 2002: 122). She laments the male, 'privileged' writers, ones 'of

a vaguely clerical bent' who have undertaken years of moralizing by writing about walking in such a way that is 'domesticating' the walking revolution and describing the 'allowable scope' of its freedoms (Solnit, 2002: 122). Not only does the writing exclude women from walking, giving them the most cursory of glances: it also excludes problems, conflict, 'assailants' and 'avalanches', excluding all these things as a means of preserving the 'wholesome' nature of a walk (Solnit, 2002: 123). For Solnit, these exclusions and this prescriptiveness severely limit any wholesomeness in the act of walking, drawing a tight and exclusive boundary around its freedoms. It is clear that exclusivity, privilege and the male gaze are recurring themes of walking literature.

Solnit's characterisation of Romantic walking carries some implications for any discussion of current psychogeographical writing. With writers like Iain Sinclair it does occasionally seem that the form of the excursion has slipped into a 'sermonizing' tone. Rather than preaching about the virtues of Nature (as the Romantics did) current psychogeography tends to preach about the evils of urban economics and privatization while, in its weaker moments, valorising the past. In Sinclair, Ackroyd and Will Self we see a generation who are dominating this discourse. Psychogeography needs not just a greater variety of voices but a variety of forms and terrains. There are reasons to be cautious, critical and also reflective when it comes to this domination. Solnit gives three prerequisites for walking for pleasure. They are: 'free time, a place to go, and a body unhindered by illness or social restraints' (Solnit, 2002: 168). This set of criteria applies equally to the act of walking for psychogeographical purposes. All aspects of privilege, maleness, whiteness and (in my case) involvement in academia can give contemporary psychogeographers time and space to walk the city but, more importantly than this, these characteristics also shape the walks taken and perceptions made.

These contemporary writers publish with a frequency that has begun to dominate psychogeographical perspectives. This is certainly so in Sinclair's case. Sinclair has walked regularly with the aim of producing books. Through his insistence on his own 'outsider' status and his sensitivity to current economics, he in fact diverts attention from the commodity status of his own walks. In light of these 'commodified excursions' Sinclair's insistence on a personal 'separation' from London seems a compensatory gesture. The Romantic writers proselytized on the 'wholesomeness' of walking in their essays. Similarly, Sinclair tries to achieve purity in the walking act. In fact, however, Sinclair's act of walking is, through his writing and publishing, implicated in the economic life of the city. This, of course, is a problem for any writer or artist who doesn't share mainstream values. However, it is exacerbated in the field of psychogeography. Sinclair's work neither looks to planning reform nor imagines an alternative future. It does not seek to educate and empower readers nor liberate their latent skills. It is neither Lynchian nor Situationist. Without these utopian outlets Sinclair is stunted by his own implication in regeneration processes that he preaches against and yet which fuel his writing. There are two problems here. Firstly, there is Sinclair's decontextualized lamenting for avant-garde movements of the sixties and seventies that Hatherley and Sandhu have detected (and misdiagnosed). Secondly, Sinclair insists on what can only be described as a false separation between himself and the city – this separation is neither a contradiction or a paradox but is rather a false opposition, of *insider* and *outsider*, that not only seems regressive but also, given the site of struggle is within popular culture itself, seems complacent.

My own work has been significantly influenced by contemporary psychogeography. However, psychogeographic writing is clearly problematic in a number of respects, whether or not one concludes that such work is marked by 'paradox' or 'contradiction'. While being sensitive to the privatisation of space and the urban impact of laissez faire economics, I do not

call for a retreat to the past (Victorian or otherwise) or an abandonment of the future in this work. Neither does this thesis attempt an act of ‘separation.’ It is not separate from the economic principles governing urban life nor from the material of concern, Birmingham. Rather it is immersive in its approach to the city and the other materials used for consideration or comparison. What I do take from Sinclair is a poetic and literary approach grounded in the ‘spatial turn’ that has governed academic traditions and the avant-garde movements beyond the 1960s. However, where Sinclair’s depoliticised approach sees him often turn to mystical or occultist readings of power in the city, I instead turn to constellations of landscape, literary and cultural works.

The concerns of contemporary psychogeography are understandably different to its original articulations, which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. The earliest psychogeographers sought essentially utopian ends using empirical or materialist means. There has been a seismic shift in social processes and a hardening, or purifying, of economic processes in the West that has been especially influential upon the Western city. It is both difficult and somewhat conceited to attempt a psychogeographic project that prioritises fidelity to the original psychogeographical approach, particularly as this was developed in response to post-war debates on urban development. The specifically empirical nature of psychogeography can now be augmented with increasing technological approaches (GPS, Satnav and Algorithmic programmes). The problem here is that monopolistic ownership of these technologies will inevitably narrow their remit at the point of use, resulting (at best) in a Lynchian refinement of existing urban planning (rather than a comprehensive challenge to this). As for the revolutionary aspects of Situationist, or European, psychogeography – when this spirit is shorn of its utopian element, a conception of *alternatives*, it loses any political dynamism and becomes regressive – even conservative – in its attempts to preserve city form. This is the

problem of psychogeography today, caught between these two origins and dissatisfied with its field of practice, the contemporary city. Therefore, this thesis attempts to re-orientate contemporary psychogeographical writing in a manner appropriate to the urban forms of today but one which does not lose sight of its original utopian vision.

In order to do this, I have taken a number of approaches that differ from much contemporary psychogeography – particularly from Sinclair and Self. Firstly, my approach avoids the typical ‘excursion’ form of the psychogeographic tract. I instead approach my psychogeography of Birmingham through the construction of a literary montage assembled from fragments of many walks.³⁷ My work in the montage form is influenced by Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, Rebecca Solnit’s conception of urban life’s disrupted continuities and the mapworks produced by the Situationist International (principally Guy Debord). Secondly, I have included a chapter on Stirchley which proposes that the area is an ‘alternative’ – both to Birmingham’s own trajectory and to our understanding of the ‘post-industrial’ itself. The first approach allows me to represent urban experience without lapsing into the form of a privileged or exclusive gaze. The second approach exercises a fidelity to the utopian principles of both European and U.S. psychogeography. I will now discuss these approaches in more theoretical detail.

As I have already noted, Solnit argues for the importance of contemporary walking as a means of opening up continuities in an increasingly fractured urban environment. For Solnit, walking counteracts ‘the way air travel chops up time and space and even cars and trains do’.³⁸ However, she is sensitive to the privileging of the literary walk and its enshrining of particular perspectives. This privileging emerges when the act of walking is aggrandized in literary essays by the Romantics. We can also see the hallmarks of this privileging in the

³⁷ I will discuss the interaction between multiple walks and the thesis structure below.

³⁸ Solnit, *Wanderlust*, xv.

recorded excursions of Iain Sinclair, so typical of contemporary psychogeography. The literary montage, which disrupts any continuity established by walking, is one useful way of resolving this problem.

Numerous walks around Birmingham have informed the following literary montage. These include walks directly from Longbridge to the Bullring (or indeed, in the reverse direction) and numerous walks around each constituent area. In doing so, I have not walked exclusively as a 'flâneur' or solely engaged in 'dérive'. At various times, I have slipped into either form of walking. However, it is important to stress that I have often walked with a direct route and destination in mind, which certainly does not correspond with *dérive*. Still, *within* these areas, I have often engaged in a drifting walk characteristic of *dérive* or a transcendentalist mindset characteristic of *flâneury* (particularly in Stirchley and the Bullring). I have walked as a conscious way of collating material, memories and experiences. However, I have also, just as importantly, walked recreationally or spontaneously in these areas during other personal navigations of the city. I am not claiming any particular adherence to the walking forms outlined above. Rather, I am accentuating that the walking I have engaged in has been an immersive practice, with no clear start or endpoint and beyond any sense of 'pertinence'.

The way I have collated my notes from these walks and edited them into the montage also raises the issue of the temporal nature of this psychogeography. I have amassed materials on these areas of Birmingham over the course of four years (2011 – 2014). At crucial moments, the content of the thesis reflects the *changes* that I have observed over the course of my walking (and writing). Therefore, I have developed a way to include, and reflect on, some of these changes.

For the most part the thesis is written in present tense. I've used this tense to heighten the immediacy and immersive qualities of the psychogeography, working in tandem with the

included photographs. This has proved most successful in terms of rendering the areas and subjects clearly to readers. At times, the tense shifts from present-tense to past-tense. This is to allow a discussion of certain changes in the area, giving the thesis enough temporal elasticity to process these. This is certainly part of the discussion of Longbridge and is reflected in the presentation of Chapter 3. These temporal changes are integral to the thesis content and my aim to present the work as an ‘event’ in itself. However, where possible and for the sake of continuity, I have kept these stylistic shifts to a minimum.

All of these walks have opened numerous continuities between spaces or areas of Birmingham. The continuities I have established are of course privileged in their own manner. I have walked as a white male, as a student and as a writer. While these continuities have been useful to my understanding of the Longbridge, Stirchley and the Bullring, and of Birmingham’s character or psyche itself, I believe these continuities lose their essential cohesion, and gain much in privilege (or ‘sermonizing’), through the act of literal written interpretation. In fact, I propose that any notion that it is possible to record the totality of a walk is necessarily flawed, particularly as such a task involves editing the countless ruptures of urban experience into one continuous narrative.

Instead, I propose a different approach to the recording of excursions. Our daily experience of urban life, through cars, rail and airplanes, is fragmentary and the act of walking is the predominant means to opening up a continuity between these fragments. Therefore, I argue that the act of *re-fragmenting* the walking experience into montage produces a literary effect that is closest to our daily experience of the urban. The literary montages of this thesis are fragments of the continuities opened up by successive walks. They are read in the same way we experience the urban on a daily basis. However, the crucial difference is that these fragments have been consciously arranged. They are not arbitrary or a result of walking alone.

There are numerous precedents for a literary montage with urban concerns. There have been works which have incorporated features of montage, albeit as a ‘compilation’ or ‘appendix’ form, and these have had some considerable influence on my work. These include works like *Edgelands* (2011) by Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley which effectively compiles an appendix of ‘edgeland’ features (I draw material directly from their work in Chapter 3). I have also been influenced somewhat by John Hersey’s *The Algiers Motel Incident* (1968). Hersey’s book is known for relaying the story of several deaths that took place during Detroit’s 1967 riots. However, for me, it is remarkable for its juxtaposition of crucial incidences and witness accounts with seemingly non-pertinent biographical information about the victims and officers involved. The accumulation of these accounts in various fragments creates a compelling effect for the reader, illuminating the lives of those involved as it makes its case for Police brutality. However, these influences are secondary to the primary theoretical influence of Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* and Guy Debord’s psychogeographic maps, which utilise fragmentation, constellation and montage to capture the spirit of urban experience. I will now explore this theoretical approach to the montage in depth. At the outset, I’d like to stress that the montage of this thesis is less concerned with the fluidity (and indeed malleability) of history as Iain Sinclair describes his own historiography in relation to the London Psychogeographical Association. Instead, I prefer to echo Benjamin’s concern with historical constellations. Benjamin’s constellations foreground the idea of historical arrangement and affinity.

Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin have argued that Walter Benjamin’s experiments with montage form became a ‘favourite device’ in his later work.³⁹ Eiland and McLaughlin lament that *The Arcades Project* cannot be considered a ‘realized work’ (Eiland

³⁹ Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ‘Translators’ Foreword’, in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), xi. Further references will appear in the text.

& McLaughlin, 2002: xi). Yet, despite this, they identify a crucial ‘compositional principle’ at work in the advanced research (Eiland & McLaughlin, 2002: xi). Benjamin was constantly revising his notes for the ‘convolutes’, the thematically divided sheaves of quotations and commentaries that make up the unfinished manuscript (Eiland & McLaughlin, 2002: xi). Such extensive revision was not conducted with a view to publication as a conventional book. It seemed that Benjamin was looking to surpass his previous use of montage form in works such as *A Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1950) and *On the Concept of History* (1940). Thus, from the meticulous arrangement and revision of *The Arcades Project* manuscript, Eiland and McLaughlin conclude that ‘the research project had become an end in itself’ (Eiland & McLaughlin, 2002: xi).

Benjamin’s discussion of the aims of *The Arcades Project* reinforces the argument that a ‘compositional principle’ is at work. Benjamin wrote that the theory of the work was ‘intimately related to that of montage’ (Benjamin, 2002: 458). This form reflected his belief that ‘knowledge comes only in lightning flashes’, elsewhere suggesting that such flashes of insight are the result of ‘what has been’ conjoining with the present ‘to form a constellation’ (Benjamin, 2002: 462). The montage, a constellation of images or ideas, was a ‘large-scale’ construction that nevertheless allowed for a discovery ‘in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event’ (Benjamin, 2002: 461). Thus the micro reflects the structural insight of the macro. One of the fundamental underpinnings of this methodology was Benjamin’s assertion that ‘I needn’t say anything. Merely show’ (Benjamin, 2002: 460). This statement, which tallies with the principles of creative prose-writing in post-Hemingway literature, emphasises that Benjamin was constructing a form of criticism that is read almost

like fiction, where a ‘convincing interpretation’ of his materials could be offered an illumination in ‘decisive contexts’.⁴⁰

Benjamin wanted to develop ‘the art of citing without quotation marks’ (Benjamin, 2002: 458). However, *The Arcades Projects* still features much of his commentary as well as assembled materials. So, it is not just the abundance of citations that defines *The Arcades Project*’s ‘compositional structure’: it is also the physical manifestation of ‘gaps’ and segments. Frequent gaps between successive quotations and the (often diminished) commentaries of Benjamin himself are, in *The Arcades Project*, a constant feature of the ‘overall construction’. Of these gaps he wrote of trying to ‘characterize and preserve the intervals of reflection, the distances lying between...which are turned most intensively to the outside’ (Benjamin, 2002: 456). The ‘gaps’ produced by literary montage are more prominent than their equivalents in film montage.⁴¹ They are the spaces between quotations, allusions or ideas which are evident on first glance of a page. They isolate blocks of material from each other and draw attention to their own assembly and arrangement. Where Benjamin wrote of incorporating ‘intervals of reflection’ into his work the gaps in my literary montage do this with specific reference to Rebecca Solnit’s discussion of continuity. For me, the disrupted continuities of urban experience often prompt distraction or reflection. As for the ‘distances lying between’, I take a spatial reading of this statement. Indeed, this is where the Benjaminian approach brings us back to psychogeography, more specifically to Guy Debord’s *The Naked City* map. Fittingly, Debord inherited Benjamin’s concern with the intermittent destruction and rebirth of Paris.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘Reply’ [Letter to Theodor Adorno], in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1998), 135.

⁴¹ At this junction, it may be useful to note that while Benjamin writes of the dialectical ‘image’ as a vital part of his constellations he states that these images ‘are encountered in language’ (Benjamin, 2002: 462). Distinguishing literary montage from film montage via the notion of the ‘gap’ is crucial here.

Tom McDonough's describes *The Naked City* (1957) as a composition 'of nineteen cut-out sections of a map of Paris, printed in black ink, which are linked by directional arrows printed in red'.⁴² Debord's *The Naked City* is a place of subjectivity and fragmentation. Paris is exposed as a fragmented city which cannot be captured as a totality without compromising the city's experiential qualities or entertaining a fallacy of omniscience (McDonough, 2004: 241-265). Thus, McDonough argues, Debord's map is more of a subjective narrative than a universal description (McDonough, 2004: 243). Still, McDonough acknowledges that 'the narrative mode does not fully account for the appearance of Debord's map' (McDonough, 2004: 248). We are urged, then, to consider the meaning of the red arrows which join each fragment in a seemingly arbitrary way.

The subtitle of *The Naked City* is 'Illustration de L'Hypothèse des Plaques Tournantes en Psychogéographique.' McDonough argues that the term *plaque tournante* usually refers to a railway turntable ('a circular revolving platform with a track running along its diameter, used for turning locomotives') (McDonough, 2004: 243). McDonough suggests that '[a]ppropriated by Debord the term describes the function of the arrows linking sections of the psychogeographical map' (McDonough, 2004: 243). McDonough goes on to argue that for Debord, like a propulsive railway turntable, there are forces in a city which drive 'spontaneous turns of direction taken by a subject moving through these surroundings in disregard of the useful connections that ordinarily govern his conduct'.⁴³ McDonough suggests that Debord's ambivalence about these forces is a result of the restriction of individual freedom in a city 'under the reign of capital' (McDonough, 2004: 243). Attempts to record or evaluate these tensions and ambiguities of movement are the project of the Situationist *dérive* and this form of walking intervention heightens the individual's ability to

⁴² Tom McDonough (ed.), 'Situationist Space', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 2004), 243. Further references will appear in the text.

⁴³ Tom McDonough (ed.), 'Situationist Space' [Quoting Debord/Jorn's *The Naked City*], in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 243.

do away with those ‘useful connections’ which ordinarily influence their movement. From this analysis we can see that the red arrows represent a force acting upon the individual’s movement that is neither topographically rational nor entirely predictable but which is, however, ambiguously linked to the reign of capital. Indeed the various shapes and sizes of the arrows between each fragment suggest an attempt to objectively quantify the impact of the propulsive forces of capital.

If these arrows signify a complex and ambiguous sense of movement between areas, they also draw attention to the omitted areas of the city they replace. The omitted status of these areas suggests they can be treated as transitory space that individuals will pass through as a means to reaching what Debord and the Situationists tended to call the ‘unities of ambience’, the cut-up and separated fragments of the city. With an emphasis on arrangement, these theories of movement and spatiality clearly have a structural basis in the assembling of the map. They also have a theoretical output in the immediate visual evidence of knowing where ‘important’ space in Paris lies and how one usually navigates it.⁴⁴

Asger Jorn and Guy Debord produced a book of poetry called *Mémoires* in 1957. Scattered with Debord’s ‘literary and visual fragments’ as well as Jorn’s ‘dripping and splashes of colour’, the book is a collage of pronouncements and aphorisms that gives way to ‘fragments of city plans’ in its second half.⁴⁵ Libero Andreotti rates *Mémoires* amongst Debord’s ‘best-known and widely reproduced psychogeographies of Paris’. He identifies the book’s ‘fluctuation between spatial and temporal registers’ with fragments as ‘self-enclosed

⁴⁴ This can be differentiated from Fredric Jameson’s ‘cognitive mapping’. Jameson suggests that the ‘imageability’ of Kevin Lynch does not exercise its full potential when applied to the ‘limits’ of city form. Rather Jameson combines imageability with an Althusserian definition of ideology and suggests a contemporary need to ‘cognitively map’ ourselves as part of global structures. We need to map our social relationships to ‘local, national and international class realities’. He suggests this kind of cognitive mapping would be a precursor to genuine struggle and that, for the moment, we are left with limited understandings – of which he includes the argument for a ‘post-industrial society’ and the argument that traditional social classes no longer exist (Jameson, 1992: 51–54).

⁴⁵ Libero Andreotti, ‘Architecture and Play’, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 2004), 217. Further references will appear in the text.

entities' and colour drippings as forces of 'movement' (Andreotti, 2004, 222). It becomes clear from these visual descriptions of the pages of *Memoires* that Andreotti is comparing the text to the maps that Debord created (*The Naked City*, as described above, and *Discours sur le passions de l'amour*) rather than any narrative accounts of *dérive*.

Both *Naked City* and *The Arcades Project* provide a theoretical basis for the use of montage in this thesis. While Debord and Benjamin were employing their montage techniques to different ends (the former as a site of political struggle, the latter to facilitate historiographical insight into the present) the use of elision in both their montage works is testament to the effectiveness of montage in representing spatial experience, particularly in an urban context. It is notable that Merlin Coverley, in his dismissal of *actual* psychogeographical research under the Situationists, does not consider the production of these maps nor the production of *Mémoires* as the credible, yet complex, contribution to a discussion of psyche and place, the spatial and the temporal, that Andreotti suggests they are.

Merlin Coverley has written of the Situationist psychogeography that 'while the theoretical and instructive elements of psychogeography are manifest, the actual results of all these experiments are strangely absent'.⁴⁶ He describes one of the Situationists' 'few extant examples of actual psychogeographical research', a piece on Les Halles written by Abdelhafid Khatib, as a 'particularly unreadable form of travel guide' (Coverley, 2006: 99). We know from Henri Lefebvre's accounts of his interactions with Constant and the Situationists that the group were repeatedly engaged in *dérives* through Amsterdam, Paris and Strasbourg.⁴⁷ Rather than providing narrative accounts of these psychogeographical excursions (and thus privileging their recorded form) there was more emphasis on creating fragmented city

⁴⁶ Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpenden, Hertfordshire: Pocket Essentials, 2006), 99. Further references will appear in the text.

⁴⁷ Henri Lefebvre interviewed by Kristin Ross, 'Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 2004), 267–283. Further references will appear in the text.

experiences simultaneously by communicating via walkie talkies during the event (Ross, 2004: 272, 280). So when Merlin Coverley, frustrated by a lack of written accounts of Situationist psychogeography, dismisses the research and its 'hapless nature' it is unfairly reductive. However, there is an implication here, more widely credible in the Situationist canon, that the more successful 'recorded forms' of psychogeography are not those which attempt linear, narrative accounts of the practice of walking.

Indeed, in their depictions of city form, both Situationist works, the collage of *Mémoires* and the arrangement of *Naked City* or *Discours sur le passions de l'amour* 'refuse a regulative ideal' and instead 'form a site of struggle' themselves (McDonough, 2004: 253). Tom McDonough characterises *Naked City* in this way, seeing the map as a site of resistance against a 'dominant construction of urban space as homogenous' (McDonough, 2004: 253). This is a crucial potential of psychogeographic works. It is a characteristic which is less prevalent in contemporary psychogeography. Writers like Sinclair take the act of the excursion (or walk) to be a site of resistance. Their writing, their books, subsequently act as a retrospective report on this resistance. This thesis, a literary montage that is also a re-fragmentation of experience, avoids acting in this way. The montage form is more closely linked to our experience of the urban – that process of opening and closing continuities through our urban movements. It does not act as a preamble, nor a report after the fact. It is the site, indeed the event, of a psychogeographical Birmingham itself.

Chapter 3

Longbridge



Fig. 1: Longbridge Island – photographed in 2012. Behind the signs are large parts of the 468-acre building site. Bournville College is visible to the left, rising towards the sky.

I

The central reservations in Longbridge are a good measure of the space and breadth of Birmingham's southern periphery. The central reservation of the Lickey Road, near the roundabout, doubles up as a car park. Often you will find a man there, sitting in a high-visibility jacket, slumped a little in a camping chair and under a white gazebo. The banner hanging from the tent advertises his windscreen repair business. He sits there so drivers can pull in to the reservation itself and he can do the repair job on the spot, with minimum fuss. I don't know whether he gets much business. He seems to live in a constant state of falling asleep, continually awoken by the thrum of car engines as they turn off the roundabout.

And the circling cars aren't alone in waking him. A building site also brushes up against the roundabout. According to St. Modwen's figures, 468 acres of land is currently being redeveloped.⁴⁸ The sounds of demolition, purring cranes, large engines running, the clash of metals, the calls of site managers could all potentially wake the windscreen repair man. If he sleeps through the next year or so, the blue perimeter fence will have been dismantled, a new town centre will have been built behind it and the landscape will have altered dramatically, resembling a brand-savvy commercial outpost more than a dispersed edgeland.⁴⁹ The man in the hi-vis waits for windscreens to be chipped and dozily watches this edge of the city change.

II

When I look at the area on Google maps, I realise I've received a false impression. I always thought Longbridge centred on the factory site. This isn't quite accurate: the bulk of Longbridge lies in housing estates to the south-east. I can see why I got this impression. I've constructed an urban node from the alignment of Longbridge railway station, the vast factory sites and their intersections with the Bristol Road. But this area is actually where Longbridge turns into Rednal, Northfield or the Lickey Hills, depending on the direction you take at the island. Google Maps itself highlights the train station, Bournville College and Longbridge Technology Park as the principal sites of note, supporting my own impression. A closer zoom reveals a new Premier Inn. These symbols are surrounded by two massive grey spaces on each side of the Bristol Road. I know these grey swathes are building sites, the site of the former factory, but they aren't given this context on the map.

⁴⁸ Anon., 'History', *LongbridgeBirmingham* [Longbridge website], (n.d.), <<http://www.longbridgebirmingham.co.uk/vision/history/>>, accessed 1 July 2014.

⁴⁹ This term is taken from Farley and Roberts work *Edgelands* (2012). I draw further material from this book later in the chapter.

When I see Longbridge on a map like this I think of it as a phantom limb extending towards the South-West. The toes (and the roads) point towards Worcester. It's a phantom right leg if Birmingham is lying on its back. A phantom left leg if Birmingham is face-down. Either way there was an amputation of this southern appendage in 2005, for our own good. Now, Longbridge is being redeveloped and the focus has been shifted. A new appendage is being added, piece by piece. Now the area is a testing ground, and Longbridge a sandbox for balanced regeneration in the suburbs. The problem has been faced before but the scale and locale hasn't quite been the same.

III

Two music videos have been shot in the area. Sequences from the video for the Chemical Brothers' single 'Believe' (2004) were shot inside the Longbridge factory. All the outdoor shots for that video were done in London. On a similar note of discontinuity, parts of the video for Swim Deep's 'King City' (2012) were shot in the Lickey Hills. The 'Lickeys' are a verdant backdrop to Longbridge. 'King City' used footage of the band looking across the hills as part of a sweep through Birmingham's hotspots. Swim Deep are born Brummies but their sound is sun bleached, post-Nirvana, guitar pop. 'King City' was re-released in 2013. This time there was more money behind it. Swim Deep subsequently re-shot the video out in the U.S. desert. In both the Chemical Brothers' and Swim Deep's videos, this part of south Birmingham offered locations that weren't *quite enough*. Longbridge had to be spliced with, or substituted by, elsewhere. But it must have promised something in the first place.

IV

The principal cultural export of Longbridge is Jonathan Coe's 2001 novel *The Rotters' Club*, followed by a three-part B.B.C. T.V. adaptation (2005). The novel looks back from the early noughties to the early seventies, book-ending the decades we have come to know as 'post-industrial'. If the area promises a 'spirit of place' then *The Rotters' Club* captures it best as a dual essence. The adventures and ordeals of Benjamin Trotter and his friends in the seventies are set to a backdrop of union antagonism. The novel has some tongue-in-cheek references to the end of class warfare, nonchalantly delivered by a senior manager, 'It's over. Truce. Armistice'.⁵⁰ The novel also alludes to the design flaws that increase with each new takeover. A less senior manager allows himself some 'mild swear words as he wrestled with the lock of his brown Austin 1800, struggling to free the obstinate catch he had personally designed, a few years ago, with such confidence' (Coe, 2001: 21).

The novel uses industrial unrest as a backdrop for the emotional turmoil of adolescence. Coe seems to be accentuating the importance of Longbridge as a place to grow up *and* work. As such, there are two versions of the area. The first is Longbridge as the home of the factory plagued by industrial disputes, manufacturing decline and famed for Communist or 'militant' shop stewards like 'Red Robbo'.⁵¹ The second is a leafy, spacious, residential suburb, on the arterial bus routes used by the novel's young protagonists attending school. In this sense, Longbridge connects up the greenery of Cofton Park and the Lickey Hills. The greenery co-exists with lurching A-roads. This area is a periphery, an exit from the city and a precursor to the universe existing beyond 'the confines of Longbridge' (and the confines of adolescence) (Coe, 2001: 11). Coe suggests this second Longbridge when a

⁵⁰ Jonathan Coe, *The Rotters' Club* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 16. Further references will appear in the text.

⁵¹ Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970–1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 99.

worker's wife walks to a local shop during a strike and notices the absence of the assembly track noise. She notes that living there 'you got used to it; didn't notice, until it stopped' (Coe, 2001: 33). Re-reading the novel, this moment appears wistful, resonant. After all, large-scale manufacturing has now stopped for good in Longbridge. I've stopped registering all the absences, even the bridge that used to cross the Bristol Road (it carried each car chassis between different parts of the site but was pulled down after the factory closed). Instead, it feels to me as if the dual Longbridge of Coe's novel has morphed into a single, peripheral one. Now we get to see Longbridge for the suburb it is.

V

Out here the city's grip, its undeniable gravity, is weakened. A 'Central Technology Belt', stretching from the centre of Birmingham, through the University Campus and new state-of-the-art hospital site and out towards Worcester, hasn't materialised.⁵² Software companies and insurance brokers aren't a natural fit among working men's social clubs (there's about four within walking distance of the train station) and council housing that makes up most of the area. Though some high-tech industries have moved in, they don't have much of a presence. Approaching the Longbridge roundabout, the 'tech-belt' narrows and almost snaps. The problem here is underuse. College students trail the long straight roads between isolated pockets of Subways and McDonalds outlets, waiting for the new town centre promised by St. Modwen. The hope is that this centre will re-align all the axes and join up the dots, consolidating Longbridge's internal focus (on the technology park, the train station and the college) but also consolidating the area in relation to wider regional change.

⁵² This regional ambition, referenced in previous chapters, is outlined in Alex Burfitt and Ed Ferrari's article: 'The Housing and Neighbourhood Impacts of Knowledge-based Economic Development Following Industrial Closure' (2008).

VI

In Book Four of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* the protagonist is introduced to the 'mohome'. Mohomes are a form of housing manufactured by, and largely inhabited by, the working classes of 'Unthank'. Lanark finds them by 'stepping through a gap between two posters onto a great area of gravel'.⁵³ From a distance they appear as 'rows of parked cars' (Gray, 2007: 446). As mohomes 'don't have lavatories' and 'aren't connected to the sewage system' they are unaffected by the 'very lethal and corrosive gas' rising through the drains following the tanker and Algolagnics transporter crash at an Unthank intersection (Gray, 2007: 450). The mohome has no 'clutch or steering column' (Gray, 2007: 446). Glass panel dividers and sliding seats 'form a bed' from the backseat (Gray, 2007: 446). The room created by the lack of driving equipment allows space for a 'set of drawers, shelves and compartments' beneath the windscreen, including an electric plate, a sink and a tiny refrigerator (Gray, 2007: 447). Mohomes have the appearance of cars but they are in fact immobile. Instead, the car is used for large-scale housing.

In the mohome, the windscreen acts as a television screen and simulator for the inhabitants. When the occupant has 'twisted a switch' they can be transported anywhere from 'a shrubbery of rosebushes' to a lake 'of great depth' to a 'multi-lane freeway under a dazzling sun' (Gray, 2007: 446–447). Further, the experience is interactive, and the occupant can find themselves immersed in a square-off with swastika wielding bikers, firing a 'glittering barbed dart' from under their car into a competitor's armpit, creating a scene of

⁵³ Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), 446. Further references will appear in the text.

‘[s]lowly crashing and screaming cyclists’ who cling ‘in agony to the car bonnet’ (Gray, 2007: 447). This is how it appears.

In fact, the mohome is a claustrophobic space that brings its residents into direct conflict with each other. The mohome is made by the working classes. It is also made predominantly *for* the working classes. The mohome is the result of an industrial process that consolidates class differentiation. Notably, workers are reluctant to complain about their accommodation because this type of housing brings them employment. Perhaps then, it is not just a physical immobility but a *social* immobility that the mohome symbolises. The confines of physical space combined with the interactions of the windscreen indicate the growing passivity of Unthank’s working classes as the city is immersed in technological change.

VII

A signboard on the Lickey Road appeals for public input on the ‘Birmingham Development Plan’, explaining that at the current rate of population growth 80,000 new houses will be needed by 2031.⁵⁴ The city council wants residents to be involved in the discussion, to join the ideas-shower planned by executives. The appeal for input is difficult to interpret. Between a suggestion that the public won’t engage and a confession that the council doesn’t know what to do, there is an appeal for complicity in whatever is ultimately decided. Further on there is new housing built by St. Modwen on the former site of part of the car factory. Park View is billed as an idyllic location to live in. Its website talks of the Lickey Road as a ‘tree-lined boulevard’ and reminds us that nearby Cofton Park ‘dates back to the Georgian era’.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Variations on this figure can be found in the published version of the *Birmingham Plan 2031* [PDF from Birmingham *Big City Plan* Website] (n.d.), <<http://bigcityplan.birmingham.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Birmingham-Development-Plan1.pdf>>, accessed 1 July 2014.

⁵⁵ These quotations are taken from the *Park View Brochure* [PDF from St. Modwen’s *Longbridge Development* Website] (n.d.), <<http://www.longbridgebirmingham.co.uk/downloads/park-view-brochure.pdf>>, accessed 1 July 2014.

Of course the online brochure omits the bleak tenement blocks opposite Park View, the edge of a Rednal council estate. It also neglects to mention the last vestiges of the Longbridge plant – the M.G. Motor U.K. building, just up Lowhill Lane, bordering the estate (there's still some manufacturing work going on here). A few cars are sparingly parked outside these three- or four-bedroom houses, some of which are sold, some of which are still waiting for owners. Whether it's the kitsch of IKEA-era minimalism or not, most of the new housing doesn't actually look lived in at all. A few choice residents and builders emerge and are almost indistinguishable from each other. I find a dead rat on the pavement not far from the fence in front of the homes. The rat's corpse undermines the artifice of St. Modwen. It somehow shows how carefully they've handled everything else, the rejuvenation, the *Modwenisation* process which, day by day, is eliding the bleaker narratives of social and class trauma from the area.

At one end of the Park View estate are the partly demolished ruins of the factory offices. Two diggers turn over the rubble in the centre of the fenced off brownfield. There's a set of steps that now take you up to a fenced off promontory, where the car factory's brick walls used to curve along the roadside. Soon it will be filled again and that memory loop closed off. The bulk of the development is being carried out by St. Modwen and Morgan Sindall. Down by the main building site a blue fence seals off the view, interrupted only by company logos. Longbridge's open wound, its open ground, is sterilised by an anti-bacterial memory wipe of diggers, fences and billboards.

The first death knell of M.G. Rover was sounded in 2000. B.M.W. decided to 'break up the company, selling Land Rover to Ford [...] and selling the remaining Rover division with its Longbridge factory'.⁵⁶ In response to B.M.W.'s announcement to sell Rover to a group called 'Alchemy', Labour's Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Stephen Byers,

⁵⁶ David Bailey, Seiji Kobayashi and Stewart MacNeill, 'Rover and Out? Globalisation, the West Midlands Auto Cluster, and the End of MG Rover', *Policy Studies*, 29/3 (September 2008), 275.

attended a meeting at the Longbridge site on Friday 17 March 2000.⁵⁷ During the meeting Byers was introduced to John Towers, who ‘accompanied Mr Byers to the train station’ afterwards (MacGregor & Newey, 2009: 20). John Towers, a former M.G. Rover executive and local businessman, had a significant ‘public profile and prior involvement in the motor industry’ (MacGregor & Newey, 2009: 51). An article in the *Financial Times* claims the pivotal conversation took place ‘in the back of a taxi’.⁵⁸ According to newspaper reports, on 17 March Stephen Byers suggested there may be a way of saving Rover, urging Towers to come up with alternatives, perhaps even an alternative bid. Given the proximity of the local train station to the Longbridge site, their taxi ride could not have lasted long. But a seed was planted.

Numerous meetings followed, attended by, amongst others: MP John Hemming, former Board Directors like John Towers and Nick Stephenson and the local historian Carl Chinn. With B.M.W.’s deal with Alchemy on the point of collapse, the task force pursued an ‘alternative bid’ (MacGregor & Newey, 2009: 23). Objectives listed amongst early meeting notes included ‘avoiding a perception that “There is No Alternative” to factory closure (MacGregor & Newey, 2009: 23). Four men, spearheaded by Towers, emerged as the ‘Phoenix Consortium’ and bought M.G. Rover for ten pounds on 9 May 2000 (MacGregor & Newey, 2009: 42). The Phoenix Consortium pleased everyone. Rover workers felt confident jobs could be saved. A concerned but non-committal Labour Government were reassured about saving the last domestically owned mass-production car manufacturer. B.M.W. were grateful to have a financial liability taken off their hands. But while the city trumpeted this intervention to save Rover, no-one was willing to voice the reality *too* loudly. Rover needed a

⁵⁷ Gervase MacGregor FCA and Guy Newey QC, *Report on the Affairs of Phoenix Venture Holdings Limited, MG Rover Group Limited and 33 Other Companies, Volume 1* (Norwich: The Stationery Office, 2009), 20. Further references will appear in the text.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Guthrie, ‘Heroes Fell Far Short of Their Billing’, *Financial Times* [Newspaper Website] (12 September 2009) <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/99d8c6aa-9efc-11de-8013-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3NZBpRDGL>>, accessed 1 July 2014.

partner, a joint venture arrangement. If they didn't get this the consortium's failure was inevitable (MacGregor & Newey, 2009: 47–48).

As it turned out, the factory's closure was only delayed by the Phoenix Group for a few years. Those intervening years of the 'Phoenix Four' left a bitter taste. A Government Report found their decision-making and business acumen questionable, even if their actions were legal (MacGregor & Newey, 2009: 749–766). Numerous commentaries point to their feckless attempts to revive the Rover brand through Motorsport.⁵⁹ Interviewees make loaded observations on public relation stunts involving girl groups; style at the expense of content.⁶⁰ The Phoenix Four now symbolise the false hopes of industrial rebirth and the conflicting interests of regeneration.

VIII

J.G. Ballard takes the seductive technological imagery of the car as a muse for his fiction in both *Crash* and *Concrete Island*, arguing that the 'twentieth century reaches almost its purest expression on the highway'.⁶¹ Ballard wrote a review of the television series *Automania* in the *Guardian* in 1984. 'Autopia or Autogeddon' describes *Automania* as a sign that in the 1980s the car had been 'restored to our affections' (Ballard, 2002: 232). This followed a public backlash against the motor car in the 1970s when it was largely characterised as an 'ecological disaster', a 'chrome-hungry destroyer of cities' (Ballard, 2002: 232). Ballard reminds us of the car's idyllic and coveted beginnings. He observes that back at the turn of the

⁵⁹ Jonathan Guthrie, 'Heroes Fell Far Short of Their Billing', *Financial Times* (September 12, 2009) and the ITV Documentary *Why Rover Crashed* (broadcast on 13 June 2005) both reference this.

⁶⁰ Quentin Wilson, *Why Rover Crashed* [ITV Documentary uploaded to Youtube] (originally broadcast 13 June 2005), < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBI0iClF0E4>>, accessed 1 July 2014.

⁶¹ J.G. Ballard, *A User's Guide to the Millennium* (New York: Picador USA, 1997), 262. Further references will appear in the text.

twentieth century the car was a ‘rich man’s plaything’ and that ‘the first European limousines featured fully equipped kitchens, silk brocade armchairs that could be converted into beds, and [...] a built-in flush toilet’ (Ballard, 2002: 232 – 233). This charting of the rise and fall of the car’s fortunes across the twentieth century is indicative of Ballard’s own ambivalent attitude to the technology.

For instance, Ballard sees the car’s significance in wider society. In ‘The Consumer Consumed’, Ballard observes that the ‘technological landscape’ has ‘enfranchised its own electorates [...] who vote with money at the cash counter rather than with the ballot paper in the polling booth’ (Ballard, 2002: 259). He attributes this view to the rising popularity of ‘consumer crusader’ Ralph Nader following his safety campaigns against General Motors in the seventies. Ballard views Nader as the kind of ‘maverick’ outsider who realised he could not penetrate a shrinking core of ‘professional politicians’ and sees the site of ideological struggle outside of politics. Instead, Nader’s ‘headful of obsessions’ come from an ‘unexpected quarter of the horizon’ – the field of consumption.

Ballard therefore describes us as ‘huge and passive electorates’ (Ballard, 2002: 259). This insight is all the more powerful because Ballard also identifies with consumption’s immediate appeal. He admits that ‘[f]or most of us the styling and efficiency of a soup-mix or an automobile are far more real, and far more reassuring, than the issues of traditional politics’ (Ballard, 2002: 259). This is the root of Ballard’s ambivalence. On the one hand we have become passive through consumption. On the other, the objects we consume are more real to us than traditional politics or ideology. In fact, Ballard locates ideology, our ability to choose, within the car’s interior.

Ballard’s 1973 novel *Crash* is full of references to the car’s control systems. The opening of the novel violently eroticises these individualized control systems. The narrator lists a rhapsody of car-death fantasies, shared by his late friend Vaughan, which include the

‘perverse logic of blood-soaked instrument panels’ and reveries of ‘the chests of young women impaled by steering columns’.⁶² These fantasies are best understood in light of Ballard’s 1971 article, ‘The Car, The Future’, published in *Drive* magazine. The article is underpinned by Ballard’s fear that the autonomy of car drivers will eventually be taken away.

He predicts a legislative assault on the freedoms of the car. He attributes this loss to the associated risks and dangers these freedoms produce. Ballard laments that ‘[t]he private car will remain, but one by one its brake pedal, accelerator and control systems, like the atrophying organs of our own bodies, will be removed’.⁶³ Driving a car with a steering wheel will ‘become illegal’ (Ballard, 2002: 265). Instead, the act of steering will be replaced by the transmission of electronic signals guided by ‘invisible eyes’ (Ballard, 2002: 266). Here we see that one set of freedoms created by the car will be displaced by the further development of car technology. Ballard’s fears over the loss of autonomy here seem libertarian, even anarchist. However, the central point of concern returns to his comments on electoral passivity and consumption, that is, the impact of technology on *choice*. Ballard does not see the new tech of electronic piloting, guidance systems and traffic monitoring as creating new opportunities. Rather, he fears they will restrict our freedoms and limit our access to meaningful choice.

IX

Thirty-three other companies were set up by the board of the Phoenix Consortium in the five years they ran Rover. The money drained out, leaked down fiscal holes. It escaped the workers – the ‘M.G. Rover Trust Fund’ amounted to a paltry £23,352 (which was eventually donated to the children’s hospice Acorns). For their part the Phoenix Four felt abandoned by a

⁶² J.G Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995), 12–13.

⁶³ J.G Ballard, *A User’s Guide to the Millennium* (New York: Picador USA, 1997), 265.

Labour Government who had welcomed their deal with B.M.W. but reneged on promised support. All involved parties (The Phoenix Four, the Labour Government, the workers, Alchemy) have regularly traded accusations of blame as Longbridge becomes an earth-scarred landscape. A union jack is draped down the back of the remaining factory building on Lowhill Lane. It presides over the churned earth, the toiling diggers and the scattered workers shouting across long distances to each other. Unless you walk to the apex of the bridge, you are unable to see any of this over a perimeter fence.

The fence on this old railway bridge both conceals and projects. Hoardings are mounted here and they show St. Modwen's projections for the area's development. The pictures depict a new town centre, transparent trees, computer-rendered figures in the background and cropped real-life photographs in the foreground. The hoardings appear to show familiar high street franchises amongst the town centre. At least, at first glance they do. The logos are almost identical by brand colours and typography. However the brand names themselves are corrupted, misspelt. We have 'M&H' and 'Top Fashion' (echoing 'H&M', 'Topman'). These strange names are most likely an issue of copyright. They also seem like a caveat, allowing for the possibility that the new town centre will *not* deliver these high street chains to Longbridge. Combined with the ghost trees, the rendered and cropped figures, they contribute to a glassy alternate world, marked only by the slightest variations from our own.

The hoardings back up against the Bournville College which has provided the most notable change to the Longbridge skyline. The new college is a centre piece to the town centre that will eventually materialise. With its distinctive panelling and emphatic presence the college looks like a sky blue ocean liner, or an ostentatious escalator rising up towards the sky. There is the sense that this boat may have been washed inland on the last tidal wave of New Labour spending. The building's effect close-up is just as beguiling as from afar. On the concealed entrance side there are large wooden columns and glass frontages that draw in the

walker. The college combines with ‘The Factory’, a youth centre opposite, to reassure you that, if one generation’s fate may have been sealed with the closure of Rover, there are some contingencies for generations to come.



Fig. 2: St. Modwen’s advertisement hoarding – a close-up of one of the adverts on a fence surrounding Bournville College in 2013.

X

Lewis Mumford begins *The City in History* with anthropological concerns, looking particularly at early settlement. He presents characteristics of early settlement as ‘[f]oreshadowings’ of urban development, those which may, ‘like language and ritual [...] have left few material traces’.⁶⁴ Crucial among these pre-urban ‘components’ is the use or disuse of mobility. Mumford states: ‘Human life swings between two poles: movement and

⁶⁴ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1975), 12. Further references will appear in the text.

settlement’ (Mumford, 1975: 13). Later he states that ‘[a]t every level of life one trades mobility for security, or in reverse, immobility for adventure’ (Mumford, 1975: 13). The implication here is that these two conditions are mutually exclusive – one is exchanged for the other. To illustrate the ‘[a]nimal promptings’ of this reality, he points to the possibility of tracing this tendency to an ‘original break between the mainly free-moving protozoa that formed the animal kingdom and the relatively sessile organisms that belong to the vegetable kingdom’ (Mumford, 1975: 13). These aren’t fixed states. Though protozoa are largely free-moving and vegetables sessile, he gives examples of organisms (oysters, plant seeds) that trade one characteristic for the other (Mumford, 1975: 13).

XI

We have seen how the polarity between movement and security has been problematized. In *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* Raymond Williams captures this difference with his description of the process of *mobile privatization*. In the first place, mobile privatisation is characterised by the ‘apparently paradoxical’ but in fact ‘deeply connected tendencies’ of ‘mobility’ and the ‘apparently self-sufficient family home’.⁶⁵ The self-sufficient family home has come to epitomise our ideas of security and settlement. This tendency towards mobile privatisation is a technological one, typified by the 1920s manufacturing of ‘consumer durables’ including ‘the motorcycle and motorcar, the box camera and its successors, home electrical appliances, and radio sets’ (Williams, 1974: 26). These products are linked to the change of scale and demand in industrial society including ‘increasing distance’ between residences and places of work (Williams, 1974: 26). With broadcasting technology like radio, the ‘privatised home’ could be fed ‘news from “outside”’ (Williams, 1974: 27). Williams also

⁶⁵ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1974), 26. Further references will appear in the text.

describes new transport technologies like the car facilitating ‘*expeditions* from the home’ (Williams, 1974: 27). Mobile privatisation, in these technological forms, brings the outside world into the home and also allows the enclosed nature of the home to be taken outside. Thus it appears that mobility and security are no longer incompatible states as Mumford describes them. They no longer have to be exchanged for each other. We can move with security (through the car) and travel the world (through broadcast media) without leaving the home.

XII

Yet this re-evaluation is itself problematic. Through the process of mobile privatisation it becomes easy to equate enclosure (or ‘settlement’ as Mumford described it) with security. This is especially true when we look at mobile privatisation in the form of the car. The enclosing chassis of a car, its separation from strangers, our augmentation of movement through technology, the use of a safety belt, the availability of traffic news on the radio and guidance from a satnav are all attributes that heighten our sense of secure travel within cars. In fact we are looking at an increasingly privatised and mediated sphere of experience, one which appeals to a latent desire for both mobility *and* security but does not necessarily fulfil the latter category. Rather, mobile privatisation acts as a precursor to what Rebecca Solnit describes as the ‘disembodiment of daily life’, a disembodiment she attributes widely to the processes of ‘automobilization and suburbanization’.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 267.

XIII

Coming away from the Longbridge Junction you pass down the side of the Longbridge Technology Park. Like nearby Bournville College, the Technology Park took form early on in the Longbridge redevelopment process. This is where the 'Central Technology Belt' sought by council and developers currently has its clearest manifestation. The grass is sculpted into mounds and dotted sparingly with trees. The building has been raised on stilts made of brick. Early on in the redevelopment process this building stood alone and it has retained the air of an architect's model rather than a completed structure. The even placement of the trees speaks more of planning meetings than it does of landscape, Powerpoint presentations rather than scenery.

Along the Bristol Road, running from Longbridge to Northfield, wide pavements give a longer approach to the small shops and businesses that face the main road. Even the much larger Kalamazoo building seems small. It is set far back from the road, fenced off and behind an expanse of grass the size of a football pitch. The grassland would make a nice public park but Kalamazoo seem to be holding onto it for now. I've heard that they are notorious for asking interviewees whether they smoke or not.

Behind the Kalamazoo building is a new housing estate along the same lines as Park View, near Cofton Park. There's no dead rat, no brownfield and no bleak tenements. The houses have enough variation to be inviting, comforting, homely. But paradoxically the housing estate itself has an insular alignment, shutting out the surrounding area and hindering access. If you try to cut through you find yourself turning in circles of uninterrupted housing and miniature parking sites. It's tempting to shimmy up the side of someone's beautiful new semi and jump a fence to get back to the main road. Fortunately there's an escape hatch,

found almost too late, in a low fence at the other end of a playground, which takes you to the relative safety of the River Rea's stripped parkland.

Back on the Bristol Road I hover between shops, looking out onto a grassy central reservation, divided up and sectioned off by metal fencing but still home to a colonnade of oak trees. I approach an inflatable witch, a Halloween display for a fancy dress shop. She spasms in the autumnal wind. Her body is tied, with rigging, to the floor and the front of the shop but her neck is held at an impossible angle, helplessly broken, by the renewing wind. A little further up, two female employees of a mobility shop are taking their fag breaks. They are sitting in two mobility scooters which are backed up against the shopfront glass. In every sense they're left to their own devices.

The liveliest setting by far on the endless Bristol Road is always an old petrol station that has been converted into a car wash and valeting service. It doesn't have the petrol pumps but has kept the square roof, with two stilts holding up its midriff, and a garage nestled beside it. The workers tan themselves in the summer and dodge each other's spray in the colder months, racing up from their plastic chairs to get the next job coming in. The spray forms little streams and eddies, foaming over and flowing down the gravel and paving. The options for what kind of wash drivers can get are set out on yellow hoardings, bunched together like specials on a food menu.

XIV

In *Edgelands: Journeys Into England's True Wilderness*, the poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts discuss the near ubiquity of the satnav among drivers. They apportion the satnav's often undue influence over drivers to the guidance system's position on 'a fault line

between our mistrust of technology and a desire for magic and unsullied instinct'.⁶⁷ Further, they think this problematic relationship with automation and technology runs throughout modern culture with 'satnav' often used 'as a pejorative term, way beyond the context of road travel' for those who are 'incapable of thinking for themselves' (Farley & Roberts, 2012: 15). As ubiquitous as the machines themselves are the horror stories of crashes or marooned drivers who followed automated guidance over 'what they could see with their own eyes' (Farley & Roberts, 2012: 15).

XV

In the concluding pages of *Television* Williams looks at the future of television technology as a tool in a democratic society. On the one hand Williams argues that an 'educated and participatory democracy' should benefit from this technology (Williams, 1974: 151). The participation which its distribution can potentially bring could lead to the 'recovery of effective communication in complex urban and industrial societies' (Williams, 1974: 151). However, Williams also foresees a 'successful counter-revolution', a centralised incursion 'further into our lives' which could eventually limit 'individual and collective response to many different kinds of experience or problems' to a simple choice 'between their programmed possibilities' (Williams, 1974: 151).

⁶⁷ Paul Farley & Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness* (London: Vintage, 2012), 15. Further references will appear in the text.

XVI

Joe Moran considers the newspaper stories that vilify users of satnavs who were guided to ‘the edges of cliffs or deposited in village ponds’ in his book *On Roads*.⁶⁸ He observes that these stories are ‘brimming with *schadenfreude*’ (Moran, 2010: 86). While some of these stories may be true, Moran feels that they ‘have more to do with subconscious fears about technology’ than anything else (Moran, 2010: 86). Rather Moran is concerned with celebrating and demystifying the technology of the satnav. To do the latter, he suggests that the type of female voice used by British satnavs is the ‘rather clipped, bell-like, head-girlish voices’ that are ‘easier to distinguish from engine noise and road rumble’ (Moran, 2010: 84). Going beyond the practical necessity here, Moran gives us the names of these satnav voice-actresses (Susan Skipper and Eve Karpf). These details are intended to reinforce his suggestion that we shouldn’t read too much into (indeed, mystify) the satnav as it is ‘just a dumb computer, obeying its algorithms’ (Moran, 2010: 85).

Crucially though, Moran also discusses the two companies which provide us with all satnav data, ‘America’s Navteq and Belgium’s Tele Atlas’ (Moran, 2010: 85). This is the most useful element of his de-mystification as it reveals the monopoly these two companies have over the collection and distribution of satnav data. He explains how these companies depend on their ‘field data capture team’ who are responsible for regularly ‘ground-truthing’ the digital maps (Moran, 2010: 85). We are told that ground-truthers ‘work in pairs [...] corroborate street names, count the numbers of roundabout exits, mark out dead ends and one-way streets, and decide which bits of the road count as ‘points of interest’ (Moran, 2010: 85). As Moran allows us to permeate the process by which satnav data is gathered, we see the human agency behind the technology. It is the Ground Truthers who make decisions on our

⁶⁸ Joe Moran, *On Roads* (London: Profile Books, 2010), 86. Further references will appear in the text.

behalf (i.e. – what will be of interest to us). The name of these teams (*Ground Truthers*) suggests that they corroborate data already held with the physical reality of the landscape and road system, coming up with a halfway solution, a digital reality. Moran, so determined to demystify the satnav as a technology, overlooks the crucial issue: the prescriptive role in a global driving culture is held by just two companies in the world.

XVII

Slavoj Žižek has made similar observations on the use of cloud computing technology. Cloud computing is ‘the organization of cyberspace’ so we can ‘access information from wherever we are in the world’ on any computer or smartphone.⁶⁹ However, Žižek points out that the abstraction process that makes cloud computing possible requires a ‘monitoring system’ or ‘some work being done elsewhere’ (Žižek, 2010: 406). In effect, to ensure an easier interface for the individual user, regulation and control is handed over to private companies who provide the technology. Žižek identifies these primarily as ‘Apple’ and ‘Microsoft’ (Žižek, 2010: 406). Going against popular and utopian rhetoric usually associated with Silicon Valley, Žižek describes these companies as operating a ‘monopolistic privatization of the cloud’ and describes cyberspace as increasingly privatized even with increases in access (Žižek, 2010: 406–407). The implications are numerous, including the setting of prices, the filtering of software and variations of use owing to ‘commercial and ideological interests’ (Žižek, 2010: 407). Daniel Bell said that ‘[d]ecisions are a matter of power’ and the crucial questions of society relate to ‘[w]ho holds power?’⁷⁰ For us, it is increasingly in the hands of tech companies. From satnav data to cloud computing, these technologies ‘offer individual

⁶⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (UK: Verso, 2011), 405.

⁷⁰ Bell, *Post-Industrial Society*, 358.

users an unprecedented wealth of choice’ but, as Žižek rightly asks, ‘is this freedom of choice not sustained by the initial choice of a provider, in respect to which we have less and less freedom?’ (Žižek, 2010: 407).

XVIII

I returned to Longbridge in early 2014, three years after my initial visits, and following much change. A lot of the site around the college has been developed. The projections of the St. Modwens advertising hoards have now been realised, less as a bristling high street than as a curious half-built town centre. A grey monolithic Sainsburys store now lowers the architectural tone that the college building had raised. However there are other retailers on a neighbouring strip, including a new chippie and a charity shop for autism research and awareness. Wide steps, with inset lights, approach these from the roadside. A new street separates Sainsburys from the College. This untouched, unspoiled, detached space has a comforting anonymity. You feel like you may be the first person to take off the wrapping or cut the ribbon. I had the feeling I was ground-truthing the advertisement hoarding. There’s a Costa Coffee, a Premier Inn, a Hungry Horse pub and you can pursue the street around to the beginning of the Austin public park. ‘H&M’ hasn’t arrived yet, neither did ‘M&H’ come across from the mirror world. However, M&S have bought a lease for land and will be moving in (in 2015).

I find articles from the *Birmingham Mail* discussing the Longbridge site. The stories, mostly printed in 2013, comprise a strange addendum to the site’s manufacturing heritage. One announced new retailers and discuss being at the halfway point of St. Modwen’s regeneration project. An article on the Hungry Horse pub’s opening declares that 69 acres of the site are owned by Chinese Automotive Manufacturer S.A.I.C. There is some very small-

scale manufacturing going on in one corner. A research article published in 2008 discusses the wavering prospect of Longbridge becoming a centre of Research and Development for car manufacturing. A Chinese Government-backed buyout appears to have strengthened ‘the likelihood of genuine R&D coming back to Longbridge’.⁷¹ Therefore, there is the prospect of R&D developing in accordance with the long lauded tech-belt stretching towards Worcester. Only, this R&D would have the novelty of being ‘under Chinese state ownership’ (Bailey, Kobayashi & MacNeill, 2008: 277).

⁷¹ David Bailey, Seiji Kobayashi and Stewart MacNeill, ‘Rover and Out? Globalisation, the West Midlands Auto Cluster, and the End of MG Rover’, *Policy Studies*, 29/3 (September 2008), 277. Further references will appear in the text.

Chapter 4

Stirchley

I

I walk down compact residential streets. They merge and blend into each other. There are interruptions to this: river culverts, stations and grassland. When I spot a converted brick farmhouse, now a repair garage behind housing, I pause and listen. It's a source of bass-heavy accents and rattling machinery on an otherwise quiet street. Behind this a Co-op supermarket opened in 2013. Within the first week the shop found itself under attack from furious locals. Front windows were smashed again and again. It's not that the supermarket was foisted upon them. Rather, as I heard from a friend, that the Co-op's security guards were overly vigilant and kept ejecting young people. Whether the actions of those kids warranted these measures is up for debate. Apparently they took little provocation. Either way, this is no Stokes Croft, there's no leftist indignation about the Tesco invasion.⁷² If community resistance is co-ordinated they don't quote Che Guevara or Banksy. They make a brutal claim to space with hurled stones and bricks. I take these thoughts of a skirmish with me up to the Rea Valley route.

The Rea Valley is a corridor of grassland and shrubbery which, like the canals or railway lines, cuts a swathe through the city's melee of suburbs. The path here keeps swapping from one side of the river to the other. At many points along this walk the river appears in entirely different guises: frothed and gurgling, littered and dragging down hanging

⁷² Stokes Croft is a popular area of Bristol. In April 2011 there was a riot in Stokes Croft following a police raid on a squat. Tensions arose in the area because Tesco wanted to open a store there. Many felt this threatened the character of the area. This episode has been largely overshadowed by the national riots that followed in the summer of 2011.

bushes or weeds, rushing clearer over parkland. I follow its tight curve around the back of some local shops. On one side, there is thick overgrowth. Partially trampled bushes and reeds are the only space amid some untamed land dividing the shops from surrounding housing. I approach another road and can hear the sounds of a playground. Shoes scuttle on the tarmac. Voices are raised on the periphery, insults maybe, laughter.

The River Rea goes on much like this, edging behind housing and dissecting parks until it starts running parallel to the canal in Kings Norton. At this point, the unofficial art exhibition begins. An improvised gallery of graffiti runs along red brick walls backing onto the canal. The standards are high, with careful attention to colour blends and shading. Names recur with a warm familiarity: *AMRIT*. The buildings on the other side of this wall are low-rise warehouses. It's hard to get a good look at them. One piece of graffiti snapshots the city's abiding mood along some corrugated steel: *Moan Moan Moan Moan Moan*.

I exit the canal before it ducks under the Pershore Road, taking a route through a relatively new housing estate of winding streets and detached houses. The river reappears on the right-hand side behind a fence. It rushes through a concrete tunnel. When we round the corner to the back of a tenement block, heading towards the heart of Stirchley, there is one last sign off from the graffiti strip. On the back of some garages there are more hints at a dramatic rescue to come: *Guess who it is bitches...SOUTHSIDE SAVIOURS!*

II

Kevin Lynch has introduced the idea of the urban 'node' to us. He argues that the 'node' is one of five elements (paths, edges, districts and landmarks being the others) that constitute our collective 'city-image'.⁷³ He refers to these nodes both as 'strategic spots' and 'intensive

⁷³ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 46. Further references will appear in the text.

foci', suggesting with his language that there are long-term gains to be made in these types of places (Lynch, 1979: 47). Nodes are places that draw us in or propel us out. This sense of forces acting inwards and outwards recalls Ebenezer Howard's definition of the city as a 'magnet' which allows for 'action at a distance'.⁷⁴ The difference here is that the node is a subsidiary magnet of the larger, more forceful city. In many ways Stirchley is a node, certainly of south Birmingham and arguably of the entire city.

Lynch argues that nodes are usually either a place of convergence or of concentration, sometimes of both (Lynch, 1979: 47–48). In Stirchley there are a number of notable convergences. The Worcester and Birmingham canal, the River Rea, the Cross-City train line and the Pershore Road (the A441) all converge or overlap within Stirchley. Of those, the Cross-City line and the Pershore Road serve masses of commuters moving in and out of the city centre. The river and canal play host to leisurely commuters and occasional loiterers. Certainly, on weekday evenings in the summer, many bike or walk down the canal. Stirchley high street is usually a bottle-neck for traffic. And, where Stirchley on the whole is a place of convergence, the high street in particular is an area of 'concentration'.

Lynch argues that a node may 'stand as a symbol' for the uses or character of an entire district (Lynch, 1979: 47–48). Elsewhere he argues that while nodes are 'unique' in some way, successful nodes also seem to 'intensify some surrounding characteristic' (Lynch, 1979: 77). In this case, Stirchley high street symbolises, and intensifies, the characteristics of the surrounding city. Here is an area with a much less established identity than Longbridge. It has a famous neighbour – an older sibling even – in nearby Bournville. Stirchley arguably plays second fiddle to Bournville in the same way Birmingham does to London, even Manchester. The range of businesses and activities available in untamed pockets of Stirchley is symbolic

⁷⁴ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1975), 101.

of Birmingham's own cultural eclecticism, one that often borders on incoherence.⁷⁵ Indeed, Stirchley has slipped through the net of development and regeneration seen elsewhere in the city. In this way it reflects the planning issue noted by David Adams – while post-war Birmingham saw reconstruction on an unprecedented scale, there was no overall plan for the city.⁷⁶ Stirchley is dominated by a busy High Street that bottlenecks at rush hour and Birmingham itself, synonymous with the Spaghetti Junction (also a confluence of roads, rivers, canals and rail routes), can often be reduced to an unspectacular set of roads in the national psyche.⁷⁷ The prominence of Stirchley isn't just as a symbol of Birmingham's problematic character in these respects. It is very likely that it will acquire historical importance. Over recent years this urban node has become a battleground of sorts.

Kevin Lynch deliberately avoids a discussion of the nodal that incorporates the 'social meaning of an area' (Lynch, 1979: 46). Rather than considering the daily interactions between people in the city, for example – meeting-points, spontaneous interactions, institutions – his method utilises topography and landscape. Lynch focuses on uncovering 'the role of form' in the city-image (Lynch, 1979: 46). In doing so, he is concerned with physical features over social ones. He does, however, allow for *temporal* features to figure in his initial definition of the node. When discussing the node's interaction with paths he refers to characteristic '*moments* of shift from one structure to another' (Lynch, 1979: 47, my emphasis). He also writes that nodes could be framed as '*events* on the journey' (Lynch, 1979: 48, my emphasis). The temporality here begs the question: what *kind* of event is Lynch referring to? The answer is found later, and is fundamentally related to navigation and decision-making. A node is a

⁷⁵ I discuss this quality in the ebook *Birmingham: Build and Destroy* (Influx Press: 2014) which was co-authored with the poet Steve Camden.

⁷⁶ David Adams, 'Everyday Experiences of the Modern City: Remembering the Post-war Reconstruction of Birmingham', *Planning Perspectives*, 26/2 (April 2011), 238.

⁷⁷ For more on this, see Jonathan Meades' excellent documentary on Birmingham, *Heart By-Pass* (broadcast on BBC Two on 31 May 1998).

convergence of paths where ‘decisions must be made’ and ‘people heighten their attention’ (Lynch, 1979: 72). Lynch suggests that pieces of infrastructure like a road junction best meet this criteria. Thus, pulling into a junction could be a major event on a drive, especially if, as the driver weighs up his options, that junction offers the potential for a dramatic shift, a structural change of topography.

With Stirchley, we must widen the scope of the nodal ‘event’. It is not just a convergence of physical routes but a convergence of routes that mark socio-economic decisions in time, indeed in post-industrialism.⁷⁸ Stirchley has undergone de-industrialisation, its independent retailers have diversified, we have not seen common conglomerate buyouts and franchise growth in the area, it has offered rental accommodation to the city’s student population (in part this is an overspill from another neighbour – Selly Oak). Yet these routes now converge on a series of major events that will bring the area in line with more conventional urban redevelopment. The potential for irredeemable change comes with the possible construction and opening of two supermarkets, Asda and Tesco. That Stirchley has resisted this kind of development much longer than most Birmingham or U.K. suburbs makes these nodal events even more significant. Stirchley is the closest thing Birmingham has to its own alternative. There has been a decade-long delay in decisions made about the area’s future and this has opened up a space for wider reflection on the recent past.

III

Stirchley High Street begins with a misstep. Magnet and Wickes, two low-rise warehouses set back from the Pershore Road, give the wrong impression of what’s to follow. Move past this southern extremity and the High Street has many small, independent retailers. There’s a fruit

⁷⁸ This is an example of using ‘cognitive mapping’ more expansively in relation to global structures, as suggested by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

and veg store with varieties of potatoes laid out on stalls outside. A 'Local Hire Shop' offers low-tech hardware: cement mixers, mowers, wallpaper strippers and carpet cleaners. There's a place for tool repairs. 'Global Autoparts' offers turbos and cylinder heads, all supplied and fitted. 'ATS Euromaster' peddles tyres. There's 'Andrew Yule & Co', a chartered solicitors. After some vestiges of the manufacturing past, both sides of the high street are illuminated into the night by the pale glow of UV fly traps in takeaway windows and the neon-fringed signage of 'Balti Hut Tandoori Restaurant'. More curry houses follow. These are places with different sleeping rhythms. Further variety is thrown into the mix with a bicycle hire place ('Foundry'), two junk shops ('Pandora's Box' and 'Bits and Pieces'), Hydroponics, TV repairs and, bizarrely, the Belgian and Netherlands Consulate.

Apart from the latter though, these types of stores aren't especially unusual for a suburban high street. That's until we consider the street's unlikeliness as a whole. There are no common franchises – not even a Subway. A local activist tells me that this is because the buildings on the High Street are too small to house a standard outlet. Also, specialisation is a key characteristic here, particularly with the hardware shops. Many people come from across the city to track down specific parts for replacement or repair. They save themselves a small fortune doing so. The High Street has survived admirably as a whole. It generally weathers economic threats. Businesses do indeed go under but new businesses often come in to take their place.

Large rolls of carpet rest partly on roof rafters. From between these slanted pillars the owner of a shop emerges and looks around. I move under the awnings and canopies, stepping around the wares left on the street. Some of the business hoardings refer to an alley or a drive-in. Residents leave passive-aggressive notes for each other on their letterboxes. I pretend that I live here, that they are for me. Looking out into the rain there are a number of options. I can grab spare parts for a vacuum cleaner, get a Turkish haircut or go for a Garra rufa fish

pedicure. That last option is only available for a few months, before the beauty business folds, but it stays with me when I revisit. The thought of toothless fish taking dead skin off a pair of calloused feet – is there an urban planning equivalent?

IV

In Debordian psychogeographic terms Stirchley is a ‘unity of ambience’. Perhaps not the entire area as it blends unremarkably with suburban housing in parts. Rather an internal area can be determined: it is bordered by the canal and road bridge to the south, the Co-op and traffic island to the north, the climb of Mary Vale Road to Bournville Station to the west and the ruins of Hazelwell Lane stretching out to the River Rea in the east. These streets are all bound together by the anarchic high street of independent shops and amount to one of the city’s ‘distinct psychic atmospheres’.⁷⁹ This is a place that resists egress. Debord talks of trying to explain the ‘path of least resistance’ that ‘has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain’ (Debord, 2004: 10). Well here, I leave those paths of least resistance that *do* follow physical contours – the canals, the river – to circle the above streets, drawn in, until I am projected out.

Debord mirrors some of Lynch’s strategic or ‘long-game’ terminology in his ‘Theory of the Dérive’. He talks of the unities of ambience having passages, exits and most notably, ‘defenses’.⁸⁰ The question is: why would an area need a defence? This takes us from the realm of economic strategy to military strategy. Perhaps Debord, more so than Lynch, is sensitive to the idea that a ‘node’ of interest, or a ‘unity of ambience’, is usually most under threat from the forces of capital. The Situationists themselves were absorbed in Les Halles before it was

⁷⁹ Guy Debord, ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography’, in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 10. Further references will appear in the text.

⁸⁰ Guy Debord, ‘Theory of the Dérive’, in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 66. Further references will appear in the text.

demolished in post-war reconstruction, anticipating this threat. Perhaps this is what makes these areas zones of psychic influence – their vulnerability to capital, their teetering on the brink of change. And this returns us to Lynch’s notion that attention is sparked in a place because ‘decisions have to be made’.

V

In his 1967 work ‘The Ghost in the Machine’, Arthur Koestler speculated on the hierarchical and abstracting qualities of memory formation. He argued that through abstraction the memory process reversed that of human or artistic creativity, stripping down an original input to a necessary skeleton of itself. Though this arguably meant an ‘impoverishment of lived experience’, the memory process was not limited to one single hierarchy but multiple, interlocking hierarchies.⁸¹ Our memories are reconstructed from a stimulation of these various hierarchies. As a result, each hierarchy offers its own elements to restore much of the flesh to the skeleton. Thus we *rebuild* the input, although it will have necessarily changed or lost particulars in the memory process (Koestler, 1971: 105–116).

Opposed to what Koestler termed ‘abstractive’ memory was a memory concept he called the ‘vivid fragment’ (Koestler, 1971: 105). These were ‘picture-strip’ memories, extraordinarily vivid in nature and usually ‘emotionally coloured’ (Koestler, 1971: 111). ‘Abstractive memory generalizes and schematizes, while the picture strip particularizes and concretizes – which is a much more primitive method of storing information’ (Koestler, 1971: 111). Koestler suggests that the ‘picture-strip’ memory is connected to older structures of the brain, the type we associate with fight or flight response. As we develop our sense of rationality and reason our memory will become more and more abstractive. Koestler takes a

⁸¹ Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine* (London: Pan Books, 1971), 107. Further references will appear in the text.

moment to consider the alternative to this development and its generalizing qualities. The result is a type of sensitised memory we might otherwise associate with schizophrenia. He writes that '[I]f, instead of abstracting universals like 'R' or 'tree' or 'dog', memory were a collection of all our particular experiences of 'R's' and 'trees' and 'dogs' – a store of lantern-slides and tape recordings – it would be completely useless: since no sensory input can be identical in all respects with any stored slide or recording, we would never be able to identify an R or recognise a dog or understand a spoken sentence. We could not even find our way through that immense store of particularized items (Koestler, 1971: 107).

VI

Jorge Luis Borges captured the nightmarish dilemma of perfect recollection in 'Funes the Memorious'. The story's narrator meets Funes as a precocious young boy in Fray Bentos. Later we hear that Funes has been paralysed after being thrown from a 'half-tame horse'.⁸² Following this accident he is confined to a cot but left with a supernatural memory. He can remember every moment of his life with an uncanny 'richness and sharpness' (Borges, 2000: 91). This changes his world-view completely. He begins several endeavours, including reconstructing entire days of his life, ascribing an 'infinite vocabulary' to a 'series of numbers' and meticulously cataloguing the countless 'images of his memory' (Borges, 2000: 92 – 93). Each endeavour is soon abandoned.

Funes is soon lost in apathy. He cannot see beyond the futility of his own actions, particularly in the face of his infallible memory. He is too aware that the attempts to map, categorise or delineate his own consciousness of time would prove 'useless,' that they will always be eclipsed by his own mind (Borges, 2000: 93). On the other hand, the narrator

⁸² Jorge Luis Borges, 'Funes the Memorious', in *Labyrinths* (London: Penguin, 2000), 89. Further references will appear in the text.

perceives Funes' problem somewhat differently. He sees that Funes' memory, its attention to diversity and difference, makes Funes 'almost incapable of ideas of a general, Platonic sort' (Borges, 2000: 93). The inability to abstract or generalize is presented by the narrator as a debilitating trait – we begin to feel sorry for Funes despite his immense abilities. Funes' confinement to a 'cot' is therefore understandable. To remember too much is debilitating. It numbs us to the consideration of other possibilities. Rather '[t]o think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions.' (Borges, 2000: 94).

VII

Every time I am on the High Street I go into a junk shop called Bits and Pieces. I first noticed the shop because its insides had been spilled on the pavement. It sells the wares of house clearances, or, as the lettering says in the window; 'household furniture', 'ornaments', 'collectables', 'bric-a-brac', 'gold' and 'curios'. For three years I've consistently taken pictures of the shop's stock. I return to exactly the same standing position to take my pictures and they always yield different results. The junk content is regularly rotated. The action is an unlikely meeting of base-neophilia and retromania.

The content changes. The lighting conditions differ. The camera settings differ. Yet these are all shots of the same space. The photos feature a table with the polished sheen of a lake, a CD player/soundsystem without its flanking speakers, a portable record player (once open on the table, once closed on the shelf), a lampshade, a wall lantern, a toy wolf, a chest, some bronze scales, a chair in various guises, a plant pot with an inexplicable power cord hanging from it and dinosaur toys, robot toys and penguin toys. Each object plucked from a house clearance, the profit of a death, or a fire, or a move.



Fig. 3: Rotated junk content – in the shop ‘Bits and Pieces’.

I find an unlikely domestic scene. It involves Yoda and a tribal figurine. Yoda is without his usual white cloak and walking stick. His hands are open to suggestion. There is a thin layer of dust on the thin grey hair at the back of his head. Next to him is a faux-African wooden carving of a woman, seated, with a child on her lap. I assume the plastic Yoda and the carved figurine have been placed next to each other because of their similar size. Yoda looks like he is whispering into her ear.

VIII

Hazelwell Lane notably contributes to Stirchley’s ambience. The lane comes off the Stirchley gyratory, a split in the high street where a one-way system for traffic precedes a bend by the Co-op. Hazelwell Lane’s opening sits between a small car park and a vacant outlet (formerly

an aquatics supplier). At this opening you can see Hazelwell Lane from top to bottom, right down till it meets a road parallel to the River Rea. For the past few years, the street has been home to only one resident. While Hazelwell Lane has fourteen terraced houses, thirteen are abandoned. As you walk away from the gyratory, and traffic, the bustle abruptly ends. The houses sit vacant on your left. They are barricaded with metal sheets (all except one). On your right are the beginnings of an overgrown brownfield site, with purple buddleia proliferating through cracks in the concrete. Eventually the left matches up with the right, and industrial wasteland takes hold.

Hazelwell Lane has unlikely signs of life. There are a number of dents in the barricades, folds in the sheet metal where people have tried to gain access. At the back of the houses the street is more porous. Fences have come down. Loot has been dragged out into the car park of the TASCOS social club behind it. Once I found a framed picture of the Jamaican World Cup team for France '98. There's a graffiti image of a school-age boy, with glasses, a naïve smile. Stencilled around the image are the words 'Golden Boy'. The charred remains of steel drum fires can be found in one garden outhouse. There's a video online of squatters, bailiffs and Police, fronting up and arguing around these houses, before the squatters were thrown out in 2012.⁸³

Hazelwell Lane is on the proposed site of the new Tesco supermarket. Much of the land was secured by a Compulsory Purchase Order but the development has stalled for over a decade. Though one resident has remained living in one of the properties, this doesn't appear to have delayed things. Rather there has been some community opposition and some wrangling with the council over Section 106 investment. There's also been opposition from the nearby Co-op supermarket, who can't compete on prices. Tesco have put propositions for redeveloping the local baths and community centre into their development plan.

⁸³ This can be found on a rarely updated tumblr website on the area at <<http://fuckyeahstirchley.tumblr.com>>, accessed on 1 July 2014.

Anna Minton has described ‘compulsory purchase’ as a ‘crucial piece of legislation’ that was ‘slipped through the back door’ by the Labour Party in 2004.⁸⁴ Compulsory purchase has for the most part enabled private landlords to buy up land and property, forcing smaller businesses to sell, by proving that any ‘development will be of public benefit’. However, the crucial problem with this is that, as Minton describes, ‘public benefit’ has undergone a significant re-definition and greater importance has been placed on the ‘economic impact of a big new scheme’ over and above ‘the effect on the community’.⁸⁵

As for Section 106 legislation, Minton traces this back to the Tory introduction of ‘the market into housing’. Following ‘disastrous system building of tower blocks which had to be knocked down’ in the ‘post-war period’ the Tories decided that ‘social housing’ would be built by housing associations working with private-sector developers’. Therefore, from 1990, ‘Section 106’ required house builders to ‘work with local authorities to negotiate a percentage of public housing in all new developments’. Minton suggests the legislation has been criminally underused (Minton, 2009: 117).

IX

For his chapter on ‘Video’ in *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson analyses the 29-minute collage film ‘AlienNATION’. Amongst the various contents of this video gathered in a kind of bricolage (contents which Jameson methodically lists over two pages) he notes its ‘formal markers’, including some footage of a lakeshore that signals the film’s closing sequence (Jameson, 1992: 83). Jameson observes that our reading of

⁸⁴ Minton is slightly misleading here as she glosses over the full history of Compulsory Purchase, dating back to the ‘Compulsory Purchase Act 1965’. However, the 2004 legislation strengthened Compulsory Purchase and removed certain loopholes, which is why Minton stresses its significance.

⁸⁵ Anna Minton, *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First Century City* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 22. Further references will appear in the text.

a text like this has been altered under postmodern conditions of cultural production. While the lakeshore image may once have held implicit meaning, ‘the sea as some primordial element, as the place at which the human and the social confront the otherness of nature’ this content is now emptied from the image. In place of content, the image of waves on a sea or lakeshore offers only a ‘syntactical function as closure’ (Jameson, 1992: 84). So an image that once had content and meaning has had that content displaced by our familiarity with its formal use in art or culture. Instead of thinking about the connotations of the sea it is now second nature for us to think, simply, that waves are rolling and the film must be ending.

This same phenomenon has surely influenced how we now read the city under the conditions of ‘post-industrialism’. I refer here to an argument made in Chapter 1, that Bell was concerned his designation was being reduced to de-industrialisation and the replacement of industry with services. Between Hazelwell Lane’s vacant housing, the nearby brownfield and the second-hand Yoda figure in Bits and Pieces – the ruined, the defunct and the abandoned – we sense closure. Yet at the core of our idea of the ‘ruin’ is the same tendency towards ‘syntactical function’ Jameson identified in the waves of ‘AlienNATION’ (Jameson, 1992: 84). As Brian Dillon puts it, the figure of the ruin has a ‘capacity to place us at the end of a historical continuum’.⁸⁶ Further, there is a sense of ‘having lived on too late, of having survived the collapse of past dreams of the future’ (Dillon, 2011: 12).

X

There used to be a beauty salon called Beauty Glam Treatment. It was a much more substantial retailer than Bits and Pieces, stretching across three small outlet spaces, and

⁸⁶ Brian Dillon (ed.), ‘Introduction//A Short History of Decay’, in *Ruins: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery & The M.I.T. Press, 2011), 13. Further references will appear in the text.

featured a garish pink hoarding as well as promos offering various treatments including ‘High powered sunbeds’ and the unfortunate enjambment of a ‘Garra Rufa Fish/Vajazzle’. It couldn’t have been more of a contrast. Entering Bits and Pieces feels like boarding an evacuation pod launched from a dying civilisation. It seems to have been stocked, in a panic, with whatever came to hand. The Beauty Salon, on the other hand, was elegant, sleek and spacious. Amongst its assembly of angles and reflections, however, it seemed to have carefully handpicked items that might have come from its neighbour, such as vintage lamps and gramophones. It’s more likely that these vintage objects were selected in a catalogue and ordered, delivered by van and unpacked. Then hours may have been set aside to get the right feng-shui. Meanwhile, next door, the objects layered like sediment in a slow stretch of river. The shop-owner placed his stock wherever there was space, wherever it would balance. Junk shops have always prompted me to think of the end of things, yet, this ‘evacuation pod’ survives and outlives many of its neighbours, including Beauty Glam Treatment.



Fig. 4: Another rotation – a change of content in the junk shop which survives many of its neighbouring businesses.

XI

drif field is an enigma, an oddity, a caustic bookdealer known for wearing a kilt and cycling around the junk shops of London.⁸⁷ In ‘Driffield: Missing, Presumed Missing’ Iain Sinclair tells us field was thrown out of the U.S. in disgrace. Of that unpleasantness, Sinclair says, field was unabashed, ‘I’d like to go round the world collecting documents saying “You’ve been asked to leave the country.”’⁸⁸ All in all, drif field has the manner and sense of a man collecting objects instead of himself.

It is of little surprise then, that in *London: City of Disappearances* (2006) Iain Sinclair is concerned with drif’s disappearance from the known circles of bookdealers in London. Rumours surround the disappearance: incarceration and suicide being mooted by interested parties. Later in the collection drif turns up himself, with three prose pieces charting his navigation of train stations, backstreets and junk shops. The collection, concerned with the fluctuations of London’s existence, posits a disappearance only to retract it. Yet sandwiched between two of drif’s pieces is an account by Marc Vaulbert de Chantilly of a visit to drif’s flat. Evidently something has changed: as a result of a cycling accident drif is ‘sounding punchdrunk now: so blunted I wonder whether he’s braindamaged’.⁸⁹

drif field himself has some important things to relay. As he sits on the train opposite a ‘faux Teddy boy’ he recalls being unsettled by something about the youngster’s dress (Sinclair, 2007: 527).⁹⁰ He lists all the boy’s items of clothing and acknowledges that each

⁸⁷ The lower-case treatment of drif field’s name here is consistent with its appearance in the book *London: City of Disappearances* (2006).

⁸⁸ Iain Sinclair (ed.), ‘Driffield: Missing Presumed Missing’, in *London: City of Disappearances* (London: Penguin Group, 2006), 115–116. Further references will appear in the text.

⁸⁹ Marc Vaulbert de Chantilly, ‘Strange Meeting’, in *London: City of Disappearances*, ed. Iain Sinclair (London: Penguin Group, 2006), 517–522. Further references will appear in the text.

⁹⁰ Driffield, ‘Marine Stores’, in *London: City of Disappearances*, ed. Iain Sinclair (London: Penguin Group, 2006), 527. Further references will appear in the text.

one in itself ticks the box of authenticity for Teddy boy wares, but still cannot shake his unease. He realises this is because the clean cut youngster has it all and ‘there was never a Ted who had it all’ (Driffield, 2007: 527). Further he argues that ‘this is exactly where those period dramas on TV get it wrong: the crazy idea that everything from a period belongs to that period’ (Driffield, 2007: 527). The inclusion of Driffield in the anthology raises two intimately connected points. The first is that something thought widely to have disappeared may well resurface, albeit changed (a play on the book’s epigram, attributed to Ed Dorn, ‘You don’t disappear, you reappear, dead’). The second is that the cohesion of eras, or periods, or ages is fragile, and that the key component of their fragility is the notion of authenticity, which, when sought, undermines the whole endeavour.

XII

Another street coming off the high street shares Hazelwell Lane’s aesthetic. This one, Ivy Road, had some associations with the Occupy Movement from 2011–2012. An abandoned building on Ivy Road, the Whitmarley building, was occupied and re-appropriated as a ‘social space’ by students, activists and community members. The building was a former shop fittings site and since the occupation it has been demolished. In August 2011 a community group called SuperStirchley held meetings in the Whitmarley. They discussed the plans to build an Asda in the area. The building seemed to pre-date most of those around it. Chalky outlines showed where parts of the walls had been rebuilt. The building’s name was painted nobly in red lettering, on a white undercoat stretched in a strip across the front façade. A perversely long light cord trailed down from a second-floor window, swinging gently against the front door. A notice told you to refrain from knocking. Once, I had to pull the cord and wait for access. A while later I heard someone heaving back a bulky garage door to the side.

Attendees at one meeting consisted of concerned locals, students from the University of Birmingham and others who had drifted in from Handsworth or the city centre. They talked up the possibilities of Section 106 legislation. Their hope was that Asda would be forced to invest in the area and not simply parachute their franchise in. Activists made plans for a football match and community gardening on Asda's proposed site. They reviewed their traffic interventions; a platoon of bikes had formed a 'Go Slow' initiative down the high street to demonstrate congestion levels. The meeting room was a wide warehouse, chairs were make-do, wild spray-painted murals beamed down on the room's occupants. Someone, a patient Afro-Caribbean lady, raised one last issue as a few began to leave: threats have been made to the Bullring markets. We needed a show of support from all of Birmingham's communities. If there is a battle, then it seems to be on multiple fronts.

XIII

After the meeting, I was invited to go and see the proposed Asda site. An activist led me down the road, moving a fence to slip inside. He stooped over the plants that had been bedded between low walls of loosely-placed bricks. This was a portion of their guerrilla garden. One he wanted to expand on, not just in the adjacent yard but across part of the brownfield. They were growing cabbages, cauliflower and winter salad. A sheet metal enclosure covered two piles of plastic brown crates. Moving into the brownfield site itself, there was a micro-hill, a patch of grass. He explained that this was one of the strips they were hoping to get some decent plants growing in. Of course, all that had taken root were the buddleia bushes.

We discussed the cost of living in the area (it is lower than gentrified parts of Birmingham like Moseley). We also discussed Stirchley's location as an intersection of three small rivers (an ancient convergence I wasn't aware of). The whole site is a former

manufacturer of car parts so the shop floor is mapped out beneath in peeling paint, blue gangways extending out across the concourse. A security guard, who had been tossing bricks aside at the far end of the site, approached the two of us from a council building. He was worried that people were trying to break into the electricity substation. He told us that Asda had been in to test the ground for chemicals from the site's former use. The guard picked a piece of vinyl up off the ground and dusted it off with his sleeve.

XIV

Kevin Lynch wrote of the city-image as we have seen Koestler write of memory, in terms of abstraction and generalising. For Lynch, images had to relate to each other, to have continuity despite the differences of 'viewpoint, time of day, or season' (Lynch, 1979: 86). To establish this continuity between our varying images of the city – to better map it – he argues that 'many observers drained their images of visual content, using abstractions such as "restaurant" or "second street"' (Lynch, 1979: 86). The abstractive approach to a city-image was required for a *continuity* of use and experience 'day and night, driving or walking, rain or shine' (Lynch, 1979: 86).

While Stirchley fits Lynch's criteria of the urban 'node' much of what we have seen here departs from Lynch's emphasis on a *continuity* of image. Most of the area's characteristics pertain to difference, variety, idiosyncrasy, specialisation and concretisation. This departure from continuity would seem to make Stirchley unnavigable, isolated and disordered to the majority. In fact, treated as a thoroughfare alone, this is often the case. However, this is a limited view. It in fact highlights where Lynch's 'imageability' (and Lynchian psychogeography) is a refinement of hegemonic urban planning, without positing alternatives to this. Nothing would aid the formation of a generalized and more effective

‘city-image’ within Stirchley than the opening of recognisable supermarkets and franchises. Further, when Lynch talks of a ‘node’ being a place where ‘decisions must be made’ and where ‘people heighten their attention’ he is thinking in terms of ‘junctions’ or ‘break-points of transportation’ (Lynch, 1979: 72–73). Yet the prospect of supermarket development has been resisted by many in the area. As for road junctions – we have considered Stirchley as a more significant kind of ‘junction’ or ‘event’, where crucial decisions could either bring the area in line with conventional urbanism or provide a unique post-industrial existence. Therefore, the qualities Stirchley has cannot be understood or enhanced by Lynch’s approach alone, which must be transcended. This is where the work of Guy Debord and the Situationists has much more potential for a thorough criticism. While it is not as accessible and directly applicable as Lynch’s work often appears, this is largely because Lynch’s approach operates comfortably within the parameters of known urbanism. For the Situationists, ‘psychogeography’, as a part of ‘Unitary Urbanism’, is a critique of urbanism (albeit a critique from within).

Lynch notes that the process of ‘imageability’ will be achieved ‘with some effort and loss’ (Lynch, 1979: 86). The loss he alludes to does not appear to be a concern. Yet it would certainly have been the Situationist concern. As I outlined in Chapter 2, European and U.S. psychogeography differs in implementation and the Situationists were just as concerned with areas threatened by development (for example Les Halles) as their utopian plans for cities of the future. However, this concern was not conservative in nature. It has been characterized in this way (as I discussed in Chapter 2 when I explored criticisms of Iain Sinclair). It is in fact a loss of alternatives. The Situationist project of ‘Unitary Urbanism’, a doctrine which was intended as a critique of urbanism itself, is vindicated here. Lynch’s imageability could only ever be a refinement or purifying of economic urbanism. It does not leave space for an alternative to this urbanism.

XV

Refining hegemonic urbanism is not the only danger here. Also running counter to the production of urban alternatives are narratives of ‘authenticity’. In 1998 Disney had plans to build a ‘store and theatre’ in New York’s Times Square.⁹¹ Andreas Huyssen writes that Disney’s proposals led to some critics waxing ‘apocalyptic about the effects of Disney’s invasion into the inner sanctum of New York city’s popular culture’ (Huyssen, 2003: 85). It’s unsurprising to hear the word ‘invasion’ in this context. The store was part of a redevelopment that included other ‘conglomerates’ like Bertelsmann and Viacom (Huyssen, 2003: 87). Indeed, the store was set to take the place of the New Victory Theatre, presenting New Yorkers with the prospect that Times Square was being popularized at the expense of high culture. Three years later Huyssen reports that although the theatre had been renovated and the ‘much maligned Disney store’ erected on its site, the Disney store had in fact already ‘disappeared’ (Huyssen, 2003: 91). Despite the fear and hyperbole, the Disney ‘invasion’ had been shortlived and was followed by a quick retreat. While Huyssen allows that Disney’s proposals and corporate presence may have been an ‘indication of urban developments that are not altogether salutary’ he is equally opposed to lamentations about Disney’s ‘relentless commercialization of culture’ (Huyssen, 2003: 87).

Huyssen’s concern is that, so often, ‘a mythic image of a better past is conjured up [...] to fend off change (Huyssen, 2003: 86–87). This is where the ‘attractive’ and ‘elusive’ issue of authenticity comes into play (Huyssen, 2003: 87). Huyssen argues that ‘[a]uthenticity [...] always comes after, and then primarily as loss’ (Huyssen, 2003: 87). Here is the crucial problem. If we direct our energies into diagnosing or pre-empting ‘loss’ alone we risk

⁹¹ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 87. Further references will appear in the text.

propping up debates about an area's authenticity which, as Huyssen rightly argues, is one of the most artificial arguments against change. Rather, a consideration of loss must be balanced with a consideration of alternative futures.

By extension, Stirchley's existence as an urban 'node', as a 'unity of ambience' and as an alternative to Birmingham has nothing to do with authenticity. Stirchley is not any more legitimate or credible than a regenerated Longbridge. Neither is the area more sincere than the consumer-orientated Bullring. It is the unanticipated residue of the same processes, one which has lacked top-down urban planning. A decade-long hiatus, during which decision-making has been deferred, has allowed other voices to contribute and define themselves. Perhaps most indicative of this latter point is the argument that the mobilisation of Stirchley's community groups, which have re-written the area's identity, has come in *response* to the potentiality of vast changes. In particular, the potential Tesco supermarket, which has been on the horizon for a decade, and latterly the plans for an Asda, have energised activists, students, film groups, art groups and councillors to invest time or money in the area.

Benjamin wrote that, while a film adaptation of 'Faust' might prompt critical disdain, there is a 'world of difference between a bad film of *Faust* and a good one' (Benjamin, 2002: 459). Echoing this sentiment, Huyssen warned against being drawn into an opposition between high and low, or 'elite and commercial' culture in response to developments like the Disney store. Rather, he suggests that the 'fissures' of debate (of which there are many) should 'crack open in the very realm of the "popular" itself' (Huyssen, 2003: 87). This is why the work of activists to push for Section 106 legislation in Stirchley, for the redevelopment of the local swimming baths and town hall in tandem with any supermarket construction, has to be welcomed. In the meantime, we can actively consider Stirchley as an alternative. For instance, when Richard Rogers describes the polycentric nature of his plans for '[t]he Compact City' he suggests revising proximity within a city around the 'concentration of

diverse activities, rather than the grouping of similar activities'.⁹² In this respect, with its parade of diverse activities, Stirchley could provide a model for change. I will return to this idea directly in the conclusion. To further this argument, we must first consider the character of one of Birmingham's most crucial icons – the Bullring. Therefore, we will now head towards the centre of the city and explore the spatial impact of this notorious shopping centre development.

⁹² Richard Rogers, *Cities for a Small Planet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 40.

Chapter 5

The Bullring

I

The journey from Stirchley to the Bullring is the longest stretch of the walk.⁹³ It involves re-joining the Rea Valley route for some time, where the path is occasionally dotted with solar-powered cats' eyes, then departing from it on the periphery of the city centre, outside Cannon Hill Park. The journey here encounters an unforeseen problem. A number of my walks have shown little of immediate psychogeographic interest. Certainly, despite Cannon Hill Park, Tally Ho (a Police training centre) and Edgbaston Cricket Ground, there is no sense of crossing through an area with a distinct atmosphere. My notes are often blank. Next time I try walking in the opposite direction, from the Bullring out to Longbridge, approaching this transitional area at the outset. I notice the same absences.

I'll recover a few details of this space here: the runner flanked by her personal trainer in Cannon Hill Park, a dropped stopwatch, a roadside synagogue, the insult ('Pussy!') I receive from a stranger near Edgbaston Cricket Ground and finally the 'LeisureBox', an old eighties ice rink that's still open, just. Amongst these bits of debris, the LeisureBox has the most resonance. It sits within the city centre, albeit peripheral, beside a monolithic concrete car park. In name alone LeisureBox is reminiscent of Berlin's 'INFOBOX', which Huyssen has described unforgivingly as '[m]ore image box than info box' (Huyssen, 2003: 64).

⁹³ At the outset of this chapter a clarification of terms is necessary. 'The Bullring' is a common term for the current shopping centre. The name 'Bullring Birmingham' is often used commercially. In the past, however, the term 'Bullring' was often two separate words, as in the Bull Ring Shopping Centre (1960s development) and the Bull Ring area (commercial area dating back to the medieval period). I vary my use of these terms according to the above distinctions.

However, Huyssen was responding to the idea that Berlin's overall 'image and design' were at the service of 'power and profit' (Huyssen, 2003: 63). Birmingham's LeisureBox, which contains little else but the ice rink, is rather a decrepit reminder of the Situationist Constant Nieuwenhuys's prediction that 'extensive automation will create a need for leisure'.⁹⁴ Well, no one *needs* the LeisureBox. It's an option amongst many better ones. And leisure hasn't expanded threefold to replace labour, as Constant Nieuwenhuys implied. It's rarely even called 'leisure' anymore. The Bullring dwarfs the LeisureBox in size as well as presence. However, the LeisureBox serves as a fitting introduction for what follows. Changes to the conception of leisure, and its implied partner – tourism – come to the fore as we approach the Bullring centre. It's already getting busy. On any given weekday the city centre used to be empty, fifteen or so years ago. Max Ferber, in W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1993), makes the same distinction with regard to another U.K. city. Recalling entering Manchester city centre in the 1960s he comments that 'no one was out and about in English cities so early in the morning'. He contrasts this with 'today', where 'a continental zeal has infected the British'.⁹⁵

II

Gwendoline Riley's second novel, *Sick Notes*, is narrated by Esther, a returnee, a twenty-something young woman, who, in the opening pages, describes a bus journey back into Manchester. Esther invests much of her spare time navigating the spaces of Manchester city centre. She swings between the isolation of unemployment, waiting in the flat for her friend to return, and a more active isolation as she walks the city centre. She presents her walking as a

⁹⁴ Constant Nieuwenhuys, 'A Different City for a Different Life', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 2004), 99. Further references will appear in the text.

⁹⁵ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (London: Vintage Books, 2002), 151.

ritual, partly pseudo-spiritual – ‘Well, I’m sure I can feel something sometimes’ – but predominantly meditative and virtuous: ‘like saying alms’.⁹⁶ It is clear that she is drawn to public, civic spaces like the library or the music school as well as to the commercial bustle of the markets or multiplex. At the same time, she seems physically passive: her legs ‘switch along, taking me here and there that I don’t even choose’ (Riley, 2004: 57). Interspersed between these drifting moments of solitude are occasional visits to see her friends in a bar. But these visits appear as a hiatus, a break from something more comprehensive. Esther is a perennial city-stroller.

III

A great deal of work has been put into restyling Birmingham’s architecture and skyline over the last ten years. It’s difficult to appreciate this though, even when walking. The Bullring in its entirety is so amorphous and super-accessible that it’s far too easy to slip into one of its many entrances before getting a good look at the exterior. I’m in through a glass door, on the ground floor. Only the ground floor itself is an entirely relative concept here. Entrances and exits come on all levels, both quiet and announced, bustling and abandoned. It has three main levels and two underground car parks. Multiple entrances and exits across every floor, subterranean links between the two main malls and a gallery spanning the road as a bridge, all of these factors emphasise a ‘permeability’ that has been lifted from the Bullring’s sixties predecessor (Emery, 2006: 129).

Nikolaus Pevsner would welcome this. For the most part the architect was critical of the Bull Ring Shopping Centre of the 1960s. In particular he lamented the prioritisation of ‘traffic requirements’ in the city centre, noting that in the case of Birmingham ‘the roads came

⁹⁶ Gwendoline Riley, *Sick Notes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 59. Further references will appear in the text.

first and the buildings had to be fitted in'.⁹⁷ He dismissed the Bull Ring Centre's 'conventional commercial character' and 'typical gimmicky detail of the 1960s' (Pevsner: 1966, 123). However, despite these criticisms, Pevsner stressed that the 1960s Bull Ring Centre had 'unique' qualities which were 'probably of more far-reaching importance than its architecture' (Pevsner: 1966, 122). These include: the Bull Ring Centre's inner-city placement, 'multi-level shopping [...] circulation of considerable complexity [...] direct access to the building on five different levels' and 'entirely covered shopping' (Pevsner: 1966, 123). As I enter the new Bullring, it is evident that these qualities have been seized upon in abundance. Rather than cars circulating with ease, the Bullring is now dedicated to the circulation of people.

IV

In *Sick Notes* Esther is engaged in various kinds of activities during her walks. She often mediates her experience. She filters her environment through writing in her notebook and listening to music in her headphones. When she sneaks into the cinema she mediates the films that are shown, continuing to listen to her headphones and using the light from the screen to write. Such actions re-interpret the city centre's functionality. Sometimes this seems to have a therapeutic intent, for example when she matches her breathing to the 'hissing' escalators or the 'deep unremitting whoosh of the a/c' (Riley, 2004: 57). This therapeutic cross-functionality is pursued to the point of staying in a local hotel for two nights, despite money troubles. Esther attests to the apparent neutrality of the Manchester hotel environment, revealing that 'it calms me down' (Riley, 2004:58). Esther's walk echoes the flow of the *dérive* through psychogeographic ambiances. Her use of the environment has the playfulness

⁹⁷ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Buildings of Warwickshire by Nikolaus Pevsner', in *The Buildings of England: Warwickshire* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1966), 121.

of early Situationist tactics. However, Esther has no political aspirations – she’s no activist. She has discovered this walking as a simple means of self-preservation. The novel’s title *Sick Notes* implies an illness; the novel itself reveals a deep unhappiness. What this passage reveals is that Esther effectively treats her unhappiness through restlessly walking the city centre.

V

The circulation of people is fed by a vast public transport network. The Bullring is located between New Street train station, the Rotunda building, Moor Street Station and Edgbaston Street. Bus routes from the south have been redirected from Corporation Street to pass directly under the belly of the shopping centre. Outside access to Birmingham has been largely defined by the prominence of New Street train station. While undergoing years of redevelopment, the station has always maintained enclosed access to the Bullring for its many passengers. This enclosed access, beginning at a subterranean level, then via escalators and hallways increasingly becomes part of the indoors of the shopping centre. This sheltered access also, notably, draws pedestrian flow away from the west of the city, undermining movement from New Street Station to Victoria Square, the Town Hall and the Art Gallery as well as other public squares or buildings. This seems to be all in the service of making Birmingham more tourist-friendly but also more shopping-orientated. For many from outside Birmingham, or those natives who use the trains themselves, access to Birmingham is now equivalent to access to the Bullring itself.

VI

‘Trude’ is one of the cities described by Marco Polo to Kubla Khan in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972). This vignette is listed under the ‘Continuous Cities’ subheading. In a novel purportedly set during the 13th Century, ‘Trude’ is one of the few cities to mention contemporary technology. Polo describes arriving at the city’s ‘airport’.⁹⁸ Further, on landing, Polo states, ‘I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off’. This is the first indication of the endless sameness in ‘Trude’. Calvino’s narrator goes on to stress that Trude’s ‘suburbs [...] housing [...] signs [...] flowerbeds [...] squares [...] hotels [...] dialogue [...] goblets’ and ‘swaying navels’ are the same as those of city he flew in from. In fact, the narrator tells us that in Trude ‘[o]nly the name of the airport changes’. Polo questions his own intentions: ‘Why come to Trude?’ But he is also warned that on leaving, he will find little difference elsewhere. It turns out that ‘[t]he world is covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end’ (Calvino, 1997: 116).

VII

Neutrality. A home away from home. What better place to feel these comforts than the department store? A security man walks into Debenhams, one of two department stores to anchor each wing of the shopping centre. Debenhams also marks the end of the hinterland between the Bullring and New Street. The corridor bends around Debenhams at right angles, then joins a corridor which leads towards the West Mall. Alternatively, you can cross through Debenhams itself and emerge at a similar point. I have two options with similar outcomes. I take the second.

⁹⁸ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (London: Vintage Books, 1997), 116. Further references will appear in the text.

The department store seems to go on without end. White columns interrupt the islands of retailers that are spread out before you. Merchandise laid on tables and stands with ready attendants is the preferred method, alongside racks or shelves. The walkways guide shoppers along pre-determined routes, with pre-determined perspectives hoping to elicit pre-determined responses. There's more suitable terrain to drift across here than on the corridors. The pace is slower. The products are clustered by type or brand. Everything is well lit. Debenhams is homely. It's a cushioned entrance to the atrium of the Bullring's West Mall.

VIII

I stand outside a third floor entrance to Debenhams, in the Bullring's West Mall. Here is the fullest view of the Bullring's interior. The view from a balcony straight ahead reveals all three levels from top to bottom as well as the spread of escalators and the tilted glass roof. From here it is clear that the centre's design incorporates physical features of the outdoors. The roof is composed of square panels of glass held up by steel trusses. It allows natural light to fall to the ground floor concourse. More than this, the 'Skyplane' roof appears to overshoot the shop facades it encloses. It gives the sense of covering a much vaster space, a miniature world perhaps. The idea here is that opposing shop frontages express themselves differently, feel only loosely connected, like buildings facing across a street. All the airy novelty of the outdoors without the bad weather, all the protections of the indoors without the monotony.

This effect is clear in the Goldsmiths branch that forms the corner of two corridors. Each retail frontage has the projections and angles of a building façade. This is an indoor streetscape that reveals itself slowly, subliminally. The crowds filter through, down escalators, past tilted TV screens, air vents and electronic billboards. They walk between the indoor trees. Every floor is crowded. They bottleneck at the foot of escalators. Some have

stopped to sit down on the marble effect cuboids that serve as seating across the store. They check their phones or people-watch.



Fig. 5: An indoor streetscape – Goldsmiths and crowds of shoppers in the West Mall.

IX

Sick Notes offers a wry portrayal of interchangeable towns and cities. In the novel's opening chapter the protagonist comes back to the U.K. from the U.S.A. Her friend James says she may as well have escaped to nearby Davyhulme; 'Why go to New York. Go to Davyhulme' (Riley, 2004: 55). As ironic as his comments may be, Esther seems blithely aware of a real interchangeability of place. Commenting on the Gardens Hotel in Manchester, she remarks

that ‘you could be anywhere, nowhere’ (Riley, 2004: 58). She often seeks out places of apparent ‘neutrality’. This interchangeability, the neutral disposition of being ‘anywhere, nowhere’, is echoed in Farley and Robert’s *Edgelands* in their discussion of the hotel in general: ‘According to the script, the hotel lobby is one more familiar, undifferentiated space in a chain of spaces that transported you there: airport, transfer bus, taxi. You could be anywhere: the piped-muzak, carefully appointed sofas, six-foot yucca plants, the multiple clocks telling you what time it is in distant cities’.⁹⁹ However, the two writers do suggest that the interchangeability of the hotel and similar spaces heightens the experience of crossing a threshold, when these thresholds eventually come. For instance, ‘[t]he real thrill of a lobby is the stepping outside from it’ which in an ‘unfamiliar city [...] can supply a little jolt of strangeness and difference’ (Farley and Roberts, 2012: 206).

X

At an architectural level, the Bullring screens visitors, certainly rail passengers, from the city’s reality. For what’s omitted, they are compensated with light, streets and air, the best of both worlds. What of the natives? One stands out. There was a tall man walking in circles around the Pallasades, near New Street, every day for years. He was known for going into shops with either a basketball, an acoustic guitar or a notepad and talking to the staff. A rumour went around that he used to play for the Birmingham Bullets basketball team before a career-ending injury. His story is ‘Mighty Ducks’ or ‘Coach Carter’ meets ‘Jerusalem Syndrome’, removed to Birmingham, where redemption comes, if not through shopping itself, then through bearing witness to these consumer temples.

⁹⁹ Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), 206.

On the present visit, the basketballer has disappeared, and his usual haunts have been overhauled as part of the New Street Station redevelopment. I can see why he was attracted to this place. It has always been possible to wander continuously indoors, without breaking cover, for hours on end. Walking the sheltered mini-city of the Bullring I am reminded of the mutant humans living in the New York tube stations in *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*. And, not forgetting Constant Nieuwenhuys, who suggested, in the adrenaline rush of the space-race, that ‘bases established on other planets will immediately raise the problem of sheltered cities’ (Constant: 2004, 99). In *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, the humans are sheltering from nuclear fallout. The sheltered cities Constant Nieuwenhuys envisaged were inspired by inhospitable atmospheres. I have to wonder what the great indoors of the Bullring is sheltering visitors from – bad weather, the insecurity of public space, perhaps even from Birmingham itself.

XI

In ‘[t]he Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics or Art’ Debord described tourism as ‘a miserable spectacle that conceals the real countries through which one is travelling’.¹⁰⁰ His point seems to be that the tourist industry does not solely facilitate travel to other places. Rather it provides a marketable, limited experience of place, folding non-congruent elements away, enacting a concealment. Later, in *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord stressed that tourism or ‘the economic organisation of travel’ to places ‘guarantees their *equivalence*’ (Debord: 94). The development here is subtle but worth noting. Debord now seems to be arguing that tourism, through concealment, makes these places increasingly

¹⁰⁰ Guy Debord, ‘The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics or Art’, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004), 162.

similar. He may have meant this in the sense we do now – that contemporary city centres are producing interchangeable spaces and commerce. We go from one Trude to another.

Debord was certainly talking of economic equivalence. An important aspect of this is that *travel in both directions* has become increasingly financially lucrative. Tourist destinations are no longer sun-traps. The emphasis has shifted from international tourism in the middle of the twentieth century to an often regional inter-city tourism in the early twenty-first century. As a result, no matter which city in the U.K. you may inhabit, tourism dominates urban life. If this is the case, and we follow Debord's logic, concealment is present in virtually every city centre. Concealment of space, and economic equivalence, amounts to spaces which are wholly interchangeable. It seems we really are going from one Trude to another.

XII

Or are we? The city of Trude is accessed by the narrator via an airport. This means of access is notable in a novel which often beautifully communicates the experience of approaching cities on foot, as a traveller. Yet there is an emphasis in Trude on flight and airport access. Plane flight, the quickest and most enclosed form of transportation, signals the fulfilment of what Benjamin described as the Modernist desire to 'bring things 'closer' both spatially and humanly'.¹⁰¹ In fact we are seeing here another manifestation of the latent desires for both 'mobility' and 'security' which we've previously explored through Raymond William's principle of 'mobile privatisation'. In the Bullring environment 'mobile privatisation' manifests less in the form of private cars and personal hardware (as discussed in Chapter 3) and more in terms of the pseudo-public realms of inter-city travel. So, where cars have

¹⁰¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 216–217.

successfully tapped into our desire for mobility and security, now airports, train stations and shopping centres seek to do so too. They funnel us through space with certain guarantees: lighting, shelter, air-conditioning, food sources and, most importantly, a security presence. Under these conditions hospitality is orientated towards outsiders rather than residents, to shoppers rather than walkers. It is the experience of reacquainting ourselves with mobile privatisation – albeit in a more diffuse form, integrated into the space around us – which triggers the sense of familiarity, of sameness. So a flight from one city to another will indeed take us from Trude to Trude. As will a train from one central metropolitan station to another. I'm reassured that, by walking to the Bullring from within Birmingham, I appear to have entered the city through the backdoor.

XIII

In the introduction I described this thesis as a mapping of two principal events in Birmingham's recent history, the closure of the Longbridge factory (2005) and the opening of the Bullring shopping centre (2003). This transition from the remains of the industrial era, a factory, to evidence of post-industrialism, in inner-city retail, assumes that the Bullring represents service sector growth in Birmingham. However, as we saw in Chapter 1, Bell described the growth of services as one of the most 'superficial' characteristics of 'post-industrialism'. I have nevertheless maintained the symbolic importance of the movement from Longbridge to the Bullring because, in a post-industrial context, the Bullring represents more than service sector growth alone. In fact, the Bullring's contribution to the growth of services and employment in services, while significant, is secondary to its contribution to Birmingham's reinvention as a shopping *destination*, as a beneficiary of tourism. The Bullring signals the nature of Birmingham's social reinvention. The extent of this reinvention, and how

it has manifested spatially, in the city centre, indeed, how it interacts with Birmingham's identity, is under scrutiny in this chapter.

XIV

One thing a sustained walk indoors will deny you is a glimpse of the Bullring markets. Open air and indoor markets sit at the foot of the Bullring development by St Martins Church. For the most part, they sell fruit and vegetables from plastic bowls and wooden crates. Dotted amongst these are mobile phone stalls offering to 'unlock' smartphones, sell carry-cases or exchange goods. Wooden pallets are piled all around. The stall holders are weathered Brummies, offering up snippets of song to grab your attention and cat-calling to each other. Tarpaulin, hauled over the tables, rises and falls in the wind. Most of the crowd are less clean-cut than the Bullring's typical customer base. To me they seem to look cynical and yet more open to interaction. They scrutinise everything they're picking up to buy. I have to consciously walk down to this space, as the crowd-currents, the desire-lines of shoppers, don't often draw you out here. However, a visit is always enlivening.

In 2009 the City Council's plans to relocate the nearby wholesale market to outer-city Witton were revealed.¹⁰² In 2011, once these plans had advanced, the move was interpreted by the Bull Ring Traders Association as an attack on the market traders in the Bullring, who are supplied by the wholesale markets. The market's supply line is more visible than the Bullring's. Even if, in both cases, most goods arrive on shipping containers from abroad, in the markets this is more visible and easily traced. Thus their businesses might not survive without this vital link in the chain. Bernice Ellis, the co-chairwoman, said quite strikingly that

¹⁰² Lisa Pilkington, 'Hammerson Pitches in with Hines', *Estates Gazette*, 923 (June 2009), 17.

‘[t]his is the first phase of the social cleansing of the city centre’.¹⁰³ The expansion of high-end restaurants at the foot of the Bullring’s slope, closer and closer to the edge of the markets, suggests that localised, low-end market retail is increasingly unwelcome and vulnerable. For now, it remains the most socially porous space of the entire development, where you can move swiftly from Jamie’s Italian or Gourmet Burger to a roadside burger van and market stalls. The Bullring’s physical permeability is clearly evident – you can access it via many different entrances and exits, on many different levels. However, the issue of social access to the shopping centre is being fiercely debated. Increasingly, the outdoor markets symbolise the kind of low-income, financially insecure and bargain-hunting public the Bullring doesn’t quite accommodate.

XV

Constructing the Bullring was a central part of Birmingham’s ‘place building’ strategies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Michelle Lowe has described ‘place building’ as being at the ‘heart of New Labour’s urban policy agenda’.¹⁰⁴ ‘Place building’ has in fact emerged from a consensus of power-brokers: government policy and local council needs are given form by commercial interests. Lowe writes that ‘a strategy focused on the development and promotion of ‘successful places’ has often comprised ‘a link between retail development and urban regeneration’ (Lowe, 2005: 450). This link means emphasis has moved from the de-regulated and ‘ubiquitous’ satellite-town retail parks of the 1990s to new policies which have ‘prioritised the vitality and viability of town centres’ (Lowe, 2005: 450). ‘Place building’, an

¹⁰³ Neil Elkes, ‘Birmingham Bullring Market Traders Vow to Fight Closure Threat’, *Birmingham Mail* [Local Newspaper Website] (3 August 2011), < <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/birmingham-bullring-market-traders-vow-158816>>, accessed 1 July 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Michelle Lowe, ‘The Regional Shopping Centre in the Inner City: A Study of Retail-led Urban Regeneration’, in *Urban Studies*, 42/3 (March 2005), 450.

urban policy initiated by the Labour Government, one strongly linking retail with regeneration and focusing on the identities of *city centres*, doesn't solely manifest in terms of physical development but also with the 'development of a new and different image' for the city (Lowe, 2005: 450).

XVI

It is important to stress that the city council have made some efforts to preserve the market culture that existed alongside the previous shopping centre. This is largely because the market-area looks back to the city's medieval past. In the founding medieval town, the Bull Ring itself was a 'village green' overlooking the workshops of Digbeth and Deritend to the south-east (Pevsner: 1966, 98). The seventeenth century saw the 'industrial character of the town' grow, with Digbeth, Deritend and the area around St Martin's becoming 'increasingly congested' (Pevsner: 1966, 103). Jenny Uglow writes of '[f]orges and workshops clustered in low-lying areas around the alleys of Digbeth and Deritend, Well Street and Corn Cheaping'.¹⁰⁵ Clearly this area produced the initial unprecedented growth of the city. It was smithies and workshops rather than vast manufactories that powered Birmingham's industrial growth. Therefore, the markets symbolise the heritage of the Bullring site, particularly their variety and personable scale. In fact, the markets play the same role here as the variety of specialised businesses play in Stirchley, an expression of Birmingham's eclecticism. In the Bullring there are historical precedents for this. It should be of no surprise then, that those activists engaged in the development of Stirchley should raise the spectre of the Bullring markets also. The ringing of hammers echoes through both these spaces.

¹⁰⁵ Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 17.

XVII

Steve Bloomfield rightly argues that Birmingham is ‘a city that outsiders mock and insiders struggle to defend’ and one ‘that fails to define itself’.¹⁰⁶ He also makes the point that the city has failed to have an impact on popular culture in the way, for instance, Manchester has influenced music. Rather predictably, Bloomfield laments the city’s lapse from its industrial success of the nineteenth century, which reached its apogee with Joseph Chamberlain’s three-year spell as mayor (1873 – 1876). Bloomfield’s propositions for a remedy begin on the level of image. He argues that ‘rebuilding the brand is vital’ in order to avoid mockery: ‘Image, the environment, transport and graduates: that’s where to start’ (Bloomfield, 2013: 112). He proposes that Birmingham would benefit from an elected Mayor, and makes a democratic argument for this (Bloomfield, 2013: 112). Bloomfield makes some pertinent observations. However, the emphasis on rebranding, on image as a *starting* point, speaks more of current commercial obsessions than it does of long-term success. Would this be the right context in which to introduce an elected Mayor? Whatever would come of some of Bloomfield’s proposals, he is right that Birmingham consistently ‘fails to define itself’.

XVIII

The Bullring’s most memorable and iconic feature is Future System’s Selfridge’s building. The flank of this iconic building most exposed to shoppers and passers-by looks down on the Bullring markets. This overlooks St Martin’s church, nestled next to the markets further down a slope. The cladding on Future Systems’ building, spun aluminium discs attached to a royal blue undercoat, and the amoebic bulge of the outer layer, is offset nicely by the stonework of

¹⁰⁶ Steve Bloomfield, ‘Take the Lead’, *Monocle: A Briefing on Global Affairs, Business, Culture and Design*, 7/65 (July/August 2013), 112. Further references will appear in the text.

St Martin's church. I like the proximity of these differing buildings. It is a welcome overturning of U.S. 'contextualism' in architecture and urban planning, reflecting the power of anachronism in European cities. The slope itself divides the two wings of the Bullring (The West and East Malls). This division has reopened a vista that used to be part of the old Victorian street.

I still feel confused by elements of this space. There are features usually indicative of a public square: each wing of the Bullring wraps around St Martin's, wide steps, an area of stone seating, public art, a waterwall and a bronze statue of Horatio Nelson.¹⁰⁷ For a brief time a small Starbucks, designed as a large seashell, was placed on one of the steps. For a brand now synonymous with tax avoidance it was an unlikely architectural risk. However, a more recent facelift removed the seashell, narrowed the steps and built more restaurants. And that's what doesn't add up. The encroachment of high-end restaurants into a space which was used effectively as a public square, and closer to the market's edge, shows renewed commercial interest. Fittingly, my first glance of Selfridges means turning my back on the markets. I've had to make a conscious effort to leave the Bullring's interior for this sighting. In doing so, I've learnt that St Martins and the markets do a good job of presenting not-quite-a-public-square. This is a place where commercial and social interests are being invisibly contested.

XIX

Every year the magazine *Monocle* (Billed as 'A Briefing on Global Affairs, Business, Culture and Design') publishes an index of its 'Top 25 Liveable Cities'.¹⁰⁸ Categories for this index

¹⁰⁷ Nelson visited Birmingham in 1802. He met the industrialist Matthew Boulton and drew crowds of locals. The visit endeared him to Brummies and led to the public funding of this bronze statue.

¹⁰⁸ Andrew Tuck (ed.), *Monocle*, 8/75 (July/August 2014). Further references will appear in the text.

have fluctuated year to year, city by city. More recently, these have expanded to incorporate not just the traditional stats on ‘Crime Rates’, ‘Sunshine’ and ‘Drinking and Shopping’, but also increasingly largely subjective, cultural aspects such as ‘Architecture’ and ‘Tolerance’. Indeed, in 2014, a rather polarising political category has been introduced: ‘Libertarian paradise or stickler for the rules’. Cities compete for the recognition offered by this kind of index and these are the hot topics for current city leaders. It is now possible to talk of increasing a city’s social tolerance in the same way we would talk of driving down its crime-figures.

Meanwhile, directly altering sunshine and general weather patterns is the stuff of science fiction. In China Mieville’s novel *Embassytown* the city’s weather is generated by design. The novel’s narrator explains that, ‘[t]he microclimates over the city and those over Embassytown were rigged according to a complex algorithm I’d never bothered to decode [...] I noticed particular weathers, of course, but didn’t ever expect them.’¹⁰⁹ The description of ‘microclimates’ here demonstrates that control of the weather is localised, perhaps even tailored to local needs. This reflects and perhaps extends the principle of the ‘sheltered city’ explored earlier in this chapter. The relative predictability of seasons has gone, replaced by a ‘complex algorithm’. Indeed, Daniel Bell believed the algorithm would be a definitive, decision-making feature of large-scale post-industrial society (previously explored in Chapter 1). Bell foresaw this in terms of the ‘substitution’ of algorithms for ‘intuitive judgements’ (Bell, 1999: 29). However, Mieville’s novel points to the potential for algorithms to create new variables and increasing levels of environmental control. It seems the algorithm’s capabilities are still vastly underimagined in our urban environment, if not our novels. Sidelineing these, *Monocle’s* city index is reflective of current commercial aspirations. The index promotes a city’s ‘liveability’. We are seeing these kind of assessments now more than

¹⁰⁹ China Mieville, *Embassytown* (London: Macmillan, 2011), 177.

ever. Somewhat contradictorily, measuring the ‘liveability’ of a contemporary city means measuring its appeal to those who *don’t* live there. It means promoting tolerance outwardly, even if that notion becomes more and more problematic internally.

XX

Physically the Bullring is complex. Apart from the Selfridges building, which is a relatively small part of the development, the Bullring’s external architecture presents only a few noticeable features. Four steel trusses, painted white and looking like giant fish spines, reach over from the centre to the boxed concrete base of the Rotunda and other buildings. This creative engineering work is necessary to support the overall structure as New Street’s Victorian tunnels run underneath this space.¹¹⁰ Some of the buildings are a sterile mix of off-white or pale lemon brickwork, some wooden rafters extend out in parts – on the slope down to St Martin’s for example. Elsewhere, square cuts of glass are used to maximise retail visibility and internal light. The ‘skyplane’ glass roof, which is of interest, is also more of an internal feature. But, accessed on so many different levels, from so many different sides, the Bullring doesn’t have a memorable physical form.

Selfridges itself is endlessly stylish. I walk back indoors to try and draw a conclusion. The department store’s curvaceous entrances, spread wide across each floor, all have a different allure – from food and clothing to jewellery and perfume. The signage is set against a concave border of glass. The lettering is made out in thin neon rods. The mannequins furthest forward, facing in different directions, each have identical hair. The male ones have a set of bright white headphones.

¹¹⁰ Anon., *Bullring Birmingham: Information Pack* [PDF accessed through website] (n.d.), 7.

The Selfridges building has the scale and shape of a warehouse. But this is decorated by hanging bars of light, the controlled exposure of pipes and venting in the ceiling as well as the richness of variety in the product stands. The lower level entrance is a food market in miniature. At Yo Sushi, customers sit with their backs to the rest of the shoppers and press buzzers to get a waiter's attention. They ask for cokes and/or refills on their Miso soup. Across the way, there's a Krispy Kreme that allows its customers to view their donuts being made by conveyer belt, with chocolate toppings syringed from above. Another apparent 'exposure'. Past other luxury cake stands and Bombay Bicycle Club you find a trademark bull made from a rainbow-coloured medley of confectionery.

I look to the walls and ceiling, where possible. It's hard to gauge the structure I'm in. None of the Selfridges interior even reflects the amoeba-like bulge or aluminium discs of the building's exterior. There are a select few entrances and exits within the department store that bring you out next to the cladding but they aren't the conventional routes in. There is a disjuncture here between the interior and the exterior appearance. I'm aware I could have made my way into the department store without seeing the 'iconic' architecture at all, had I not explicitly set out to do so. For the most part, all this architecture is geared towards tourists. Why, then, is the building itself relatively small and relatively hidden?



Fig. 6: Controlled exposure – from a mannequin’s exposed stomach on the far left to exposed pipes and venting in the ceiling.

XXI

In, *Art, Space and the City* Malcolm Miles examines the complicity of art in the worst excesses of urban corporatism. His book includes a highly relevant study of Birmingham’s public art programme in the 1990s. This focuses on a sequence of squares including Chamberlain Square, Centenary Square and Victoria Square with the International Convention Centre presented as an ‘organising principle’ for various public art schemes.¹¹¹ It is important to note that these public art schemes belong to the city’s north-westerly municipal centre, an area which operates separately to the Bull Ring area. Looking back on these schemes in the wake of the Bullring’s redevelopment it appears easy to characterize these two sides of the city centre as on the one hand, corporatist (the Bullring) and on the other municipal (the numerous squares and public buildings). Indeed the Bullring’s thinly

¹¹¹ Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City* (London: Routledge, 2000), 115. Further references will appear in the text.

veiled neo-liberalism appears definitively separate from the socially democratic sequencing of Victoria and Chamberlain Square found elsewhere.

Yet Miles's study reveals the falsity of this separation and in fact allows us to establish a trajectory leading from one to the other. Firstly, Miles argues that '[p]ublic art in Birmingham has a key role in the manufacture of "place"' (Miles, 2000: 117). I have already referred to Michelle Lowe's work on 'place-building' and New Labour's urban policy, which was strongly linked to retail.¹¹² Miles's language ('manufacture of place') shows evidence of this approach prior to 1998, albeit in a less comprehensive form and without direct retail links. In regard to the public spaces of Victoria and Chamberlain Square, he argues that "'place-making" has been interpreted as urban design allied with public art'. This is a tentative alliance though, with public art giving a 'public face to development designed in a framework of corporate values'. A combination of statues, sculpture and artfully designed paving and street furniture creates 'an approach that privileges the visual in constituting the city'. The result of this is an emphasis on 'the creation of grand vistas' (Miles, 2000: 117).

In the wake of the Bullring's opening in 2003, "place-building" in Birmingham has entirely capitulated to the goal of visually constituting the city. This no longer means the creation of 'grand vistas', as least not within the city. The Selfridges building has a relatively underwhelming physical presence because its purpose is to be 'iconic' and 'controversial' alone. A 'grand vista' can be sought, from the Moor Street trainlines (notably coming from London) or depicted on postcards and advertising. However, here is the clear evidence of the development's external orientation. The Selfridges building is in fact looking out of the city, to tourists, shoppers and potential inhabitants.

The public art schemes of the early nineties have given way to privately-funded tokenistic architecture. As a result the 'public' realm element of these redevelopments has

¹¹² Lowe, 'The Regional Shopping Centre in the Inner City: A Study of Retail-led Urban Regeneration', *Urban Studies*, 450.

quietly disappeared. In its place a series of pseudo-public spaces have been introduced. We have seen that these spaces integrate features of the outdoors, offering new ways of resolving the latent desire for ‘mobility’ and ‘security’. The ‘public’ element of ‘public art’ has been vastly reduced too. Despite the features of a public square, a fountain, a statue and a piece of waterfall art, the square itself has been eroded through the expansion of restaurants. How does the Selfridge’s building contribute to this effect – as an architectural distraction. It is the perfect storm of ‘controversial’ architecture in an era where controversy is entirely arbitrary. As Miles asserts in *Art, Space and the City* ‘a little controversy over art is sometimes not unwelcome if it distracts attention from social issues’ (Miles, 2000: 106).

XXII

Miles’ point is that an undertow of exclusion comes with centralisation and commercialisation. Miles believes that the spaces created in the public squares are ‘remote from many publics and parts of the city’ (Miles, 2000: 118). He questions whether such schemes can be directly linked to public wellbeing, whether jobs created are sustainable (and not insecure) and whether ‘appealing to corporate interests’ does not lead to the ‘exclusion of disadvantaged groups and those living in peripheral urban areas’ (Miles, 2000: 118). His assessment is that ultimately these spaces cannot support ‘mixed uses by mixed publics’ because of their ultimate ‘appeal to corporate utopianism’ (Miles, 2000: 118).

We have seen evidence of similar exclusions in the Bullring. The Bullring markets, situated next to St Martins at the foot of the Bullring and overlooked by the Selfridges building, offer a social porosity that accompanies the architectural permeability of the numerous entrances and exits to the Bullring. So it is right that any threat to their existence should be interpreted as an act of ‘social cleansing’. It betrays a fundamental part of the

Bullring's problem with its own public, socially diverse inhabitants of the city itself. Where Miles saw an exclusion of mixed publics remote to the city centre in the early 90s, we now see a concealment, indeed a 'controlled exposure' of areas and publics *within* the city centre. The result of this is the same: exclusion. Only, in this case the exclusion effect is far more divisive, unapologetic and, ultimately, alluring.

XXIII

Guy Debord has warned that in the Society of the Spectacle the elimination of geographical distance 'produces a new internal distance in the form of spectacular separation' (Debord: 94). We have traded the ease of travel, of secure mobility, for a comfortable level of alienation from each other. Along the gallery that links New Street station with the Bullring there are for the most part small novelty stores. There's a shop of wall-to-wall boxed gadgets for the kid in everyone. There's also a New Age shop, its shelves filled with the musk of unlit incense. The nail salon further along is lit to a blinding white. One of the girls working there is waiting idly. She looks up from her booth while her co-worker leans carefully over a splayed hand. Even when the girls aren't working on anyone, they keep their white fume masks on.

A Sky Television stand has arced tubes connecting different pods. The tubes are see-through but catch the daylight coming through the plate-glass windows. Numerous screens are spread across the stand. Each is in sync with the other, showing scrolling adverts for a number of Sky Television series. The T.V.s are muted. The only sound from the stand comes from its solitary attendant. In a regulation black polo shirt with the Sky logo on his chest and a lanyard hanging by his stomach he fixes his hair, arranges his papers, strolls back and forth

and greets shoppers confidently. He checks his reflection in the stand's flank. He looks confident and brittle.

There aren't many groups of people on this corridor. Most are in pairs or walking alone. Some go head down, exercising tunnel vision and carrying their bags. Some couples are walking aimlessly and causing miniature pile-ups of people-traffic. Younger couples start kissing. One young man appears in headphones and gloves, a scarf wrapped around his neck. He perfectly maintains a self-enclosure, a mediated bubble, applying his own soundtrack to the sheen and glide on marble floors. He is followed by a Rastafarian with a walking stick, looking painfully into the café, taking more notice than most. A security man passes with his hands rigid at his side. His earpiece wire spirals out from his hair.

Conclusion

Birmingham has been the subject matter of this study. Psychogeography has been the tool of inquiry into this subject. Specifically, this thesis has concerned itself with Birmingham's southern half, represented by the areas of Longbridge, Stirchley and the Bullring. However, the subject matter has also been the nature of so-called 'post-industrialism' in this city and in drawing a conclusion to the study it may serve us to evaluate this concept first. Thereafter, this conclusion will provide a summary of the appearance of Birmingham's environment, the impact of this on its inhabitants and the city's general psyche. I have not sought to ascertain whether the 'post-Industrial society' Daniel Bell predicted in 1973 has definitively arrived. Rather, I have used it as a 'measure' against which the 'social reality' of Birmingham can be compared. Bell intended his work to be read in this spirit. However, this thesis has also considered criticisms of Daniel Bell, primarily from Fredric Jameson. This has served to refine the ideas Bell presents of what a 'post-industrial society' could look like.

Firstly, it should be stressed that while implying a rupture with capitalist precedents, Bell himself is careful to argue that 'post-industrialism' *does not* equate to 'post-capitalism'. Rather, Bell sees capitalism remaining as the principal organisational system of economics. He merely sees capitalism, socialism and communism as different ways of organising industrial, and therefore, post-industrial society. Despite this, Bell anticipates capitalism's diminution as a social system. This view is an extension of the fact he views post-industrialism as a change in the social structure, rather than a social system in itself. However, he has not anticipated the evolution, or as Jameson might term it, the *purifying* of capitalism as a social system. Even with this shortcoming, Jameson's dismissal of the term has proven limited, with political overtones. Increasingly Bell and Jameson have appeared to be evaluating the same systematic changes. For Bell, this change has taken place in one of a set of disjunctive realms, rather than in a substructure or superstructure.

It is right that we should emphasise the ‘disjunctive’ nature of these realms, comprised of the techno-economic, the political, and the cultural. ‘Post-industrialism’ itself has appeared disparately across Birmingham. We have seen this in the Central Technology Belt’s sparse manifestation at Longbridge, in the possibility of Research and Development under Chinese state ownership, in the prominence of Bournville College and of College education itself. However, the problem of the growth of services, post-industrialism’s most ‘superficial’ characteristic, has loomed large in the thesis. This is evident with the movement from intellectual technology and theoretical knowledge industries in Longbridge to Stirchley’s specialised businesses and finally to the Bullring, which has contributed symbolically to service sector growth. This psychogeography’s symbolic exchange of factory sites for shopping centres, if interpreted incorrectly, could give undue emphasis to the growth of services, and potentially risk wrongly characterising Bell’s definition. However, in Chapter 5, this thesis recorded the visibility of services in the Bullring while also exploring the shopping centre as an indication of the growth of inter-city, regional tourism. It is on this last point that we can resolve how the Bullring interacts with Bell’s post-industrialism on a fundamental level, and not solely in relation to services.

In his conclusion to *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* Daniel Bell adds his final and most ‘intangible’ characteristic of post-industrial change. To do so, he turns to ‘existentialist terminology’. Considering how man is ‘thrown’ into the world, he suggests that post-industrial society is neither a ‘game against nature’, as society was originally established, nor the substitution of a ‘technical order for the natural order’ (a ‘game against fabricated nature’) as industrial society subsequently became. Rather, post-industrial society ‘turns its back on both’. It is ‘essentially a game between persons’. This argument reinforces Bell’s assertion that ‘post-industrial society’ is ‘primarily a change in the character of the social structure’. Whilst Bell feels the ‘problem of group life’ is one of the oldest difficulties of

human civilization' the context for this problem has now 'changed'. Group life in relation to nature and group life in relation to things have been 'routinized' and have 'almost disappeared'. Furthermore reality is no longer considered to be 'nature' or 'technics' but rather '*reality is primarily the social world*'. What this means, in simple terms, is that '[i]n the salient experience of work, men live more and more outside nature, and less and less with machinery and things; they live with and encounter one another' (Bell, 1999: 487–488).

Bell does not offer this characteristic of 'encounter', of the 'game between persons' as the undercurrent of service sector growth. Had he examined the material we have seen above, he might have. In the guise of the Bullring, Bell's existential postscript gains unforeseen importance. The Bullring has been represented in this thesis as a place of encounters between men and women, encounters with strangers, security workers, salesmen and women, beauticians, stall-holders, diners and restaurateurs. These encounters are all tied closely to transaction, commerce. This is what Debord meant when he described the Spectacle not as 'a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images' (Debord: 7). Our social interactions have gained economic importance; they are also increasingly mediated. This is evident in the average shopping environment and it is writ large in the iconic Bullring. After all, the Bullring is a shopping centre which maximises the potential for encounters, for the 'game between persons'. It does so through its engagement with inter-city, regional tourism and through its attempts to attract new inhabitants. This will only further the circulation of people through the city, further the potential for encounters and further the economic potential of those encounters.

If Bell's description of the 'game between persons' gives some existential context to Birmingham's post-industrialism then it also gives a sobering assessment of the frustrations many have with the current state of affairs, evident here in the work of activists and community groups in Stirchley and the accusations of 'social cleansing' made against those

seeking to relocate the Birmingham markets. Bell writes that when the ‘relation among men [...] becomes the primary mode of interaction [...] the clash of individual interests, each following its own whim, leads necessarily to a greater need for collective regulation and a greater degree of coercion (with a reduction in a personal freedom) in order to have effective communal action’ (Bell, 1999: 475). So the increasing encounters between people leads to an increasing clash of interests. Not only this, but, in order to achieve ‘effective communal action’, individual choices are made on our behalf, often without our input. There are opportunities to oppose this or actively contribute to these decisions but Bell warns that ‘full participation’ in decision-making results in ‘an increase in information costs’ and increasing time needed to ‘reach agreement on action’ (Bell, 1999: 475). Therefore, we are caught between passively accepting the choices of others or slowly, and often painfully, influencing these decisions ourselves, often at a financial cost. We can recall the public consultation, advertised on a billboard in Longbridge, on the building of housing in Birmingham. Perhaps Bell’s description of the increasing complexity of ‘effective communal action’ explains the underlying apathy of this consultation.

The closure of the Longbridge factory has had a significant impact on Birmingham’s inhabitants, directly and indirectly. It has also contributed to the city’s overall psyche, its collective mindset. We have seen in Longbridge that part of the former factory site has been directly replaced by Bournville College, signalling the importance of education and qualifications. We have also seen that some minimal car manufacturing remains and there is potential for research and development, under Chinese ownership. The Longbridge Technology Park has also replaced parts of the site and each of these features contributes to a real sense that the intellectual technology and theoretical knowledge Daniel Bell put at the centre of post-industrial society is well-represented in south Birmingham. However, the Central Technology Belt does not exist as envisaged. Perhaps the most important point to

make here is that the employment shifts between manufacturing and these high-tech industries has been far from direct. As a result, there is a generation of workers who have been sacrificed in the shift from one economy to another. For them, there is some comfort in the idea their children can reap the benefits of the local college and youth centre. The resultant mismatch between the skills sets of many Longbridge residents and local employers means that many of these high-tech companies will be served by employees commuting into the area. These are the jolts of transition and there are no doubt those who get left behind, who fall between the cracks.

What should not be lost in any analysis, certainly not here, is the nature of Longbridge's closure. The ordeal of the Phoenix Four's attempted takeover, and the second collapse of the Rover Group, have surely sharpened the jolts. Public recriminations between businessmen and politicians don't reflect well on the parties involved. A bitter air has come out of the hopes of the Phoenix Consortium. Even the name of this group reflects the wild swings between emotive, unchecked optimism and irony-heavy, self-deprecating apathy towards the city's ability to protect its industries and its inhabitants. Breasts were beaten before heads were hung. Most disheartening has been the MG Rover Workers Fund which, so vastly diminished as a result of mis-management, was eventually donated to charity with all-round approval. Yet, little would have stopped the overtures made by Stephen Byers to John Towers in the back of a taxi in 2000, one minister protecting his credibility, one businessman seeing the potential to perform a P.R. coup. It's easy to cast these aspersions in hindsight. It's much harder for the city to come to terms with the steady erosion of Rover's credibility. The mismanagement goes back decades, the cars were badly designed and the on-running problems of the industry, unaddressed at the time, remain a raw nerve.

The corruption of four businessmen provides an alibi for neglecting the long view. Birmingham had an unhealthy reliance on a below-par car industry. The knowledge that

Rover rotted from the inside is surely now part of the collective psyche, a collective denial. Amongst all the anger at politicians, executives and investors, there is an almost crippling lack of self-confidence, a paralysing lack of conviction. It can be disguised, indeed it is well dispersed. This is a major source of political ambivalence. We are happy to have the complex choices taken off our hands, to have our own choices displaced by technology. We decide to arrive at the point in decision-making where major, ideological choices have already been made. This way, it will be someone else's decision to blame. Or there will have been no alternatives available. As this mentality sets in, monopolies are re-asserted on newer and newer technologies. This part of the city's psyche, its passivity, is most apparent in Longbridge.

However, this is not the full story of Longbridge. The car industry itself was part of a latent, pervasive desire for both mobility and security, those two poles of human endeavour that Lewis Mumford recognised at the extreme ends of the history of the city itself. Of all the technologies that fit the criteria for Raymond William's 'Mobile Privatisation', and thus have appealed to this latent desire, it is the car which has had the most impact on the construction of our environment. Post-war infrastructure, as Pevsner identified in the 1960s Bull Ring development, subjugated pedestrians to the actions of drivers. This was true of most major U.K. cities. In Birmingham it has been more acute, with a greater fetishism, through engineering elements such as the Spaghetti Junction. However, and perhaps more importantly, the concomitant reliance upon the automotive industry for employment adds another dimension to Birmingham's car-dependence. For the most part the city relied economically upon an industry which, by virtue of being large, cumbersome and needy, didn't share continuity with its industrial heritage – small and diverse manufacturing, the toy industry and specialised businesses. For all the talk of Marks and Spencer opening a store in Longbridge,

the real M&S desired by its inhabitants, once offered by the car itself, is Mobility and Security.

The principle of mobile privatisation has evolved in the last few decades. This is not evolution in the sense that modern day technocrats might argue. For them, mobile technologies such as the mobile phone or the tablet represent a utopia of developing communications. Rather, mobile privatisation has evolved the physical environment itself. In the modern cosmopolitan city it is the pseudo-public space of train stations, airports, hotels, shopping centres and restaurant squares that represents the evolution of mobile privatisation. Rather than the full enclosure of a car these spaces funnel us through urban space. They allow commuters and tourists to feel they can make *safe expeditions* in familiar environments, with shelter, familiar franchises, C.C.T.V. and security workers. If we looked at this phenomenon in terms of Lynch's *The Image of the City* then these spaces provide the 'continuity' of 'city-image' which 'imageability' ultimately aspires to. Tourists are likely to cognitively map a new space quickly and more effectively if it has these familiar characteristics, these spatial resonances, a shared ambience. However, in developments Lynch could not have foreseen, these continuous spaces appear to be public while operating under private ownership. Thus citizens have become more confidently mobile, and unconsciously isolated, along certain, pre-disposed currents of circulation; with the faint possibility their usual rights may be waived, suspended.

Of course this wouldn't be widely accepted or tolerated if it wasn't done so well. And the Bullring does it well. As long as you surrender yourself to its currents, to exiting only to re-enter somewhere else in the labyrinthine centre, to losing yourself in the throngs, you can gladly lose an afternoon in close proximity to people you have probably never seen before and never will again. This is the 'continental zeal' that Max Ferber refers to in *The Emigrants*. It is also often the 'Birmingham Syndrome' in action, an often therapeutic 'bearing witness'

to the cult of endless shopping. When the circulation of people is done so efficiently, even elegantly, it is easy to avoid the city's other spaces. Indeed, the Bullring signals a shift of spatial emphasis within the city centre, from the municipal decision-making and public squares of the North-West (which Malcolm Miles has critically assessed, as above) to Ballard's consumer votes, the fluid ideologies of shopping tourism. The city's economy has been re-orientated towards leisure, tourism and business, all with an emphasis on building Birmingham's regional and international standing. These changes are tailored primarily towards outsiders, not natives, but of course *some* natives benefit. The Bullring has re-focused the city and signalled a change in what people do for work, not just in the sense of service sector growth but also in terms of working increasingly with other people, encountering them more and more in the realm of work. It is hard to deny that some of these changes have invigorated parts of the city, and some of its more adaptable inhabitants.

However, it has also sharply divided the city centre, bringing it into competition with itself. This thesis has demonstrated how such division arises, how the 'shelter' of mobile privatisation spills into a 'concealment' of non-congruous elements and how this in turn excludes different publics. Indeed, through its continued sheltered access via New Street station, the Bullring has monopolised access to Birmingham. The Bullring is Birmingham's primary interchangeable space. Its Trude-like familiarity, rather than sameness per-se, gives a sense of 'neutrality'. Yet this sense of neutrality, and the privatised nature of its space, needs to be continually scrutinised. Steve Bloomfield's insistence that a reimagining of Birmingham needs to take place at the level of image is misleading on two counts. Not only would it be the wrong place to start such a reinvention, that reinvention may have already begun. In 2012 the Bullring launched a comprehensive advertising campaign 'We Are So City' which has gone from strength to strength. The name alone indicates the re-orientation around commercial

interests that it seeks to reinforce.¹¹³ It will become increasingly hard to untangle the issues I have discussed above from these kinds of marketing strategies as they often pre-dispose people to an externally mediated experience of space. However, having counteracted this with repeated walks around the Bullring and intense focus on my surroundings, I'd now like to draw the most pressing issues from this psychogeography.

Two spaces have assumed unforeseen importance in the course of this psychogeography. The Bullring's markets and the suburb of Stirchley are the most socially contested spaces described. As such, they are the most luminous examples of the ongoing social restructuring of Birmingham under Daniel Bell's conditions of post-industrialism. On a ten-year hiatus, Stirchley has faced the possibility of seismic change through the introduction of either a Tesco or Asda store into the area, which threatens to change its unique character completely. Equally, the Bullring market now faces the threat of losing its place in the city centre through the relocation of the Wholesale Markets on which it depends. Stirchley has benefitted somewhat from hiatus. The uncertainty over supermarket development has given impetus to community groups, activists, businesses and students to fill a void of debate, to make their own uses of the area's space. The Bullring markets have also benefitted, in their own way, from their incorporation into the Bullring's overall development. They have evolved with the changes in the city centre. To celebrate these areas is not to bestow the label of the 'authentic' on them. The pursuit of authenticity is, as has been argued, a contributory factor to the loss of alternatives. As 'Funes the Memorious' demonstrates, the absolute preservation of the past allows no idea to be held about the present, and no alternative to be planned for the future.

¹¹³ A comprehensive study of the 'We Are So City' advertisements alongside other images of the Bullring is an option for further work. This thesis has tried to focus on the spatial experiences of the walk, so has omitted such a study here. However, for some initial analysis, please see 'The Bullring Effect' in *Build and Destroy: Birmingham* (Influx Press, 2014).

My concluding proposal for an alternative Birmingham is this: the Bullring markets and Stirchley's array of specialised businesses and community groups offer the potential for an alternative future for Birmingham. Firstly, they both show continuity with the *successes* of Birmingham, not heritage for its own sake. They don't aspire to become anything like the inflexible behemoth that Longbridge and Rover have been. They demonstrate specialisation, variety, eclecticism and deliver all these things on a personable scale. They also demonstrate the flip-side of Birmingham's 'inability to define itself'. Birmingham in fact has the potential to do many things in miniature, to do so fluidly, with no fixed, hegemonic identity to try and fulfil and no easy, marketable traits to lapse back into. We have seen above, particularly in the guise of the Bullring, that attempts to gain coherence in urban form will necessarily conceal and exclude. For a mixture of reasons, planned and unforeseen, Birmingham, via Stirchley and the markets, has presented a mirror-world of what-ifs. This Birmingham is inclusive from the inside-out, rather than from the outside-in. This is what concerns me when I think of the basketballer who walked the Pallasades shopping centre every day. I remember thinking that he must have been an antagonist for the older shopping centre's security and shopkeepers. That was until I once saw him joking and chatting to the security guards themselves. Birmingham shows that any kind of remarkable life is possible, given the right incubation. For all the business acumen behind the Bullring, I doubt they would have actively pursued the exclusion of this man. Yet these decisions are not made in a vacuum. Birmingham would do better to think about its own inhabitants, and what sort of city it wants to invite people into – one that is partial, glossy and deeply divided, or an incoherent, inclusive and dynamic one.

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