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‘Dirty Realism’: Documentary Photography in 1970s Britain—a Maquette

Steve Edwards

1. Introduction: two revolutions.

Let me begin with two different revolutions from the radical-documentary photography of the 1970s.¹

Victor Burgin’s multi-panel work *UK76 (Figure 1)* consists of black-and-white photographs with text and presents a panorama of mid-1970s Britain. *Today is the Tomorrow You Were Promised Yesterday* is one component; the image is a documentary-style photograph of a working-class housing estate (I suspect it is in the East Midlands). The point of view focuses attention on the dog crossing an empty space and draws the beholder up against foreground detritus; a low horizon-line boxes in the estate under a heavy sky, while the overhead cables lead the eye to a pylon, which also blocks off the space, imposing an industrial presence over the image. The text appears unrelated to this image: instead, it describes a Californian dreamscape. The mode of address suggests it come from a tourist brochure. Sea otters, whales and abalone contrast with the mongrel and the woman with her shopping; Pacific sunshine and ‘Turquoise waters’ are set against a prosaic, predominantly grey, image of everyday life. This work seems to emphasise the difference between the breathless rhetoric of the text (we instinctively know it is a sales pitch) and the very ordinariness seen in the photograph. The final line of text is distinguished from the rest (by spacing, size and capitalisation) and reads like the artist’s addition. This line offers a reflection on the operation of ideology: a promise is held out to ameliorate the conditions of the present, but it is endlessly deferred. Burgin’s scripto-visual work is built around a series of contradictions: image/text, everyday/exception, fantasy/reality, here/there,

today/tomorrow. Overall, the relation of these components might be characterised as ironic. A doubled address establishes a disjuncture in meaning; opposition of image and text foreground contradictory interests in society and unmask 'the mystifications of bourgeois culture by laying bare its codes, by exposing the devices through which it constructs its self-image.'² Burgin's practice can stand for the 70s revolution in representation.

The second revolution takes place behind the scenes.

Figure 2 shows Jo Spence and Terry Dennett at a Photography Workshop event in Covent Garden around 1975. The activities of Photography Workshop were diverse: running workshops for people from the East End of London; exhibitions; school and community education—at one point, they ran a darkroom from a van; *Camerawork* magazine; the attempt to re-found the worker-photographer movement; writing on the politics of photography; producing popular instruction manuals, articles and leaflets (including the excellent flyer for activists on how to avoid manipulation by the news media); *Photography-Politics: One*; Spence's involvement with the Hackney Flashers and much more.³ Their own photographs formed one part of an exemplary activist practice aimed at enabling ordinary people to generate their own histories. The central model for this activity was the earlier worker-photography of the 1930s. They were not alone in this. The workshop movement throughout the UK was engaged in providing resources and skills to community groups and activists (we need to distinguish this activity from Public Art, with which it crosses, but from which it remains distinct).⁴ Dennett/Spence worked to create critical institutions of photography—part of what Alan Sears has called an 'infrastructure of dissent'.⁵ This workshop practice points to a revolution in the production process.

These are two distinct models of cultural revolution and, while they sometimes coincide, their innovations are not synchronous. Burgin and Photography Workshop exemplify distinct elements of a Brechtian, or neo Brechtian, aesthetic relevant to the documentary work of the 1970s: on the one hand, a concern with form and subject position and, on the other, a commitment to transforming approaches to production. The latter is sometimes figured through Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Author as Producer', but is also central to Brecht's *Messingkauf Dialogues*.⁶ However, despite recent work on film and Siona Wilson's significant study of British feminist art of the period, many threads remain to be unravelled. One important entanglement has involved misconstruing the Benjamin-Brecht line; conflating a commitment to change production relations and build new institutions, with an avant-garde project of *écriture*.⁷ The first revolution has received much more critical attention than the second one. This essay makes a start at inserting the second tendency—a dirty realism—back into the debate.⁸ Realism has to include the second moment of transformation.

2. Then, now, and in between.

My argument assumes that significant political struggle in ideology takes place within the common forms. Documentary and class are closely entwined and that scepticism towards one of these terms often implies suspicion of the other.⁹ It is notable how often criticisms of documentary entail a criticism of class coded as 'of the past'.¹⁰ Subalterns are at the heart of documentary practice, as subjects and imagined producers, and periods when social class is prominent in public debate have produced strong documentary movements—the 1930s and 1970s provide the exemplary moments for this claim. The chronology is not clear cut, but the mood began to shift around 1980. The following period witnessed a rejection of

documentary by critical intellectuals. During these core years of neoliberalism, documentary was seen as a masquerade of power-knowledge, in which ‘truth claims’ provided a pretext for the authority of the individuals and institutions that made them; depiction of violence, suffering or atrocity were viewed as akin to pornography; and witnessing was seen as complicit with authority and domination. It was a strange time.

Reflecting on European and North American social thought of this period, Ellen Meiksins Wood argued that the 1980s structure of feeling centred on ‘the retreat from class’.¹¹ The different perspectives that came to dominate debate all entailed some displacement of a politics of class, for other constituencies – imagined or real. As Robert Hariman and John Louis Luciatas have suggested, documentary visibility is a condition for public debate.¹² Documentary is, first and foremost, ostensive, it points to the overlooked or occluded; it draws into view realities that powerful interests would prefer to remain hidden and unheard. For me, the core of documentary practice is not Azoulay’s ‘civil imagination’, but diremption or splitting.¹³ Documentary offers one significant site for the rupture of interests that produce politics. My point is that the abandonment of documentary was the form the retreat from class took in photography (and film); it amplified that flight, removing important conditions for dialogic struggle. And as Jacques Rancière rightly argues, when collective notions of ‘class’ or ‘people’ are abandoned, spurious collectivities such as ‘race’ occupy the void.¹⁴ It is now obvious that religious revivalism is another contender for the vacuum. We have been paying a very heavy price for the intellectual neglect of class that began during the 1980s. It might be asked whether the emptying of politics—real social divisions condensed into a stage-managed media circus of sound bites, spin and photo-opportunities—occurring alongside the intellectual opposition to documentary is a mere coincidence? Might we not see a deeper connection between anti-politics (‘post-truth’) and

the dismissal of documentary; is not this couplet rooted in the same fear of social reality or hatred of democracy? (*Figure 3.*)

Over the last decade there has been a revival of intellectual interest in the documentary tradition, primarily associated with the circuit of art galleries and biennials. Okwui Enwezor's *Documenta 11* in 2002 might be viewed as initiating this sequence.¹⁵ Some have noted that the shift into the institutions of art is directly linked to the neo-liberal transformation of public broadcasting: the replacement of sustained reporting by syndicated news—often little more than corporate press releases or advertising copy; picture capture from phone technology; and the 'embedding' of journalists with military units. If documentary, in its traditional institutions, has been undermined by this 'flat earth news', there is now an increased interest among intellectuals and artists in witnessing and truth telling. No one now seems interested in large digitally-manipulated photographs and only the foolhardy or the utterly callous would now subscribe to Baudrillard's argument that the first Gulf war was a media event.¹⁶ Today, epistemological scepticism is a luxury for the morally idle. We see a steady stream of publications recovering the hidden legacies of radical documentary and a significant outpouring of books that address bearing witness and speaking back to power. The impetus for this critical shift has obviously been economic crisis, the wars of intervention and violent regime change that are essential elements of the neoliberal polity. Documentary is back, while being confined in the prison house of art and restricted to one half of the Brechtian programme.

In a time of crisis when attention is again falling on global-labour practices, particularly those associated with precarious labour, I think we have a great deal to gain from returning to the debates and practices of the 1970s, which now look vital. In contrast, the staged practices and manipulated images of the intervening period feel like academic salon art.

3. *Photography/Politics*

Despite the elaborate criticisms of documentary realism made during the 1970s, many of the significant works of the period were produced in the documentary mode. These ranged from traditional studies of working lives to highly experimental works. What is more, the period saw the rise of a network of documentary institutions. In 1976 the first community post in photography was established and before long a network of community action groups and film, photography and poster workshops were operating from London to Saltley to Liverpool, all providing skills and equipment for acts of self-representation by the dispossessed and marginalised. As Jessica Evans has noted ‘community photography’ sometimes assumed that the community ‘has self-transparent access to its “real needs”’.¹⁷ This kind of Labourism was undoubtedly current and much left documentary was, as the critics have it, ‘arid’ or ‘boring’, but the criticisms miss the processual, productivist dimension of this work. As Jorge Ribalta has emphasised with regard to the 1930s, the practice of self-representation along with alternative modes of production and distribution were as pivotal to photographic modernism as the work on the image.¹⁸ Without the transformation of production relations the first revolution is a project for intellectuals. The workshop project of the 70s was, at heart, a project of radical pedagogy, teaching photography as a way of engaging in political discussion and learning about media and ideology.¹⁹ As the frequent invocation of Paolo Friere and Augusto Boal should indicate, the production of images are a part, but only a part, of the process involving ‘working class amateur photographers’.²⁰ As late as 1986, one publication listed several-hundred organisations operating in this fashion.²¹ Alongside this activity, a number of small presses, journals and galleries sprang up to support documentary practice.

We can get a flavour of the moment by looking at the 1979 publication

Photography/Politics: One, edited by Terry Dennett, Jo Spence with Sylvia Gohl and David

Evans of Photography Workshop.²² *Photography/Politics: One* is organised in three sections, with an afterword by John Tagg. The first—‘Against the Dominant Ideology’—contains historical and critical studies. The chapters appear somewhat random, but they perform a work of recovery. There are essays on base and superstructure in Marxist theory; photography in the Paris Commune; an extract from Stuart Hall’s important essay ‘The Social Eye of Picture Post’, Jo Spence on women in *Picture Post* in World War II; and an extract from Eckhard Siepmann’s book on Heartfield. The section ends with an analysis of contemporary advertising and the loss of historical imagination.

The essays in the central portion—‘Left Photography Between the Wars: The International Worker Photography Movement’—consider militant photography by, and for, workers made during the 1930s. This was not the first presentation of worker photography for the English-language public, but it was the most substantive engagement with this practice.²³ Beginning with a text by Willi Münzenberg, there were essays on the worker-photography movements in Germany, Holland, Belgium, the USA and three essays on aspects of the rather weak British incarnation. As noted, Dennett and Spence were attempting to revive this practice in the UK with their newsheet *The Worker Photographer*. In important respects, this dialectic of inter-subjective productivist transformation provides the over-arching model for a new politics of representation.

The third section, ‘Left Photography Today’, contains material on contemporary socialist photo work, including: an account of the work of the Hackney Flashers Collective and their important exhibitions ‘Women and Work in Hackney’ (1975) and ‘Who’s Holding the Baby’ (1978); an interview with the Film & Poster Collective, which made works to support political campaigns; examples of anti-fascist propaganda and the work of Robert Golden. There were statements by John Berger and Jean Mohr and an essay by Trisha Ziff on her experience working as a photographer for a Labour municipal council. The section

ends with Allan Sekula's pioneering essay 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)'. Interestingly, the early work of Mary Kelly is passed over, including her role in one of the most important projects of the time: *Women and Work: A Document of the Division of Labour in Industry*, (by Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt and Kelly of the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union). This documentation project, on a Metal Box factory in East London, analysed skill grades and wage differentials between men and women.

Photography/Politics: One is a manual for radical practice and is explicitly pedagogical. Its themes are work, particularly women's work, housing, poverty, and childcare. The editors are explicit about their commitments: 'Our starting point is the class struggle. We assume that it exists (now hidden, now in the open) and that it has economic, cultural and political sites (all overlapping, all continually shifting)'.²⁴ The focus falls on collective action, in politics and cultural politics and it is notable now many collectives feature: the Workers' Photography Groups of the 30s, The Hackney Flashers, The Film and Poster Collective; Berger/Mohr; Sekula's essay is an account of the San Diego group and, of course, there is the overall frame provided by Photography Workshop itself.

Heartfield is an obvious exception, but the focus of the book is on documentary. However, in *Photography/Politics: One*, documentary is not singular or cohesive; it ranges from the humanist emphasis of Berger & Mohr, to the campaign work of the Film and Poster Collective or Robert Golden and critiques of victim imagery (Hedges, Sekula). But none of the contributors, with the possible exception of Hall, doubt the capacity of documentary form for truth telling. Documentary, in some expanded or reinvented form, is conceived as a vehicle for Left-wing politics, capable of both exposing conditions of oppression and exploitation and a providing a tool for mass cultural production in a second wave of worker photography.

Photography/Politics: One was intended as the 'first of a series of publications planned by Photography Workshop'.²⁵ As it turned out, only *Photography/Politics: Two*—edited by Patricia Holland, Spence and Simon Watney—saw the light of day, appearing in 1986. It was a very different publication, focused as the introduction has it on 'The Politics and Sexual Politics of Photography'. Attention fell on advertising and fashion, on images of black homosexuality and the sexuality of children. There were considerations of photo-therapy and Eugenics in the nineteenth century. One-way to characterise this is to say that the body moves centre stage. I want to stress the difference from the earlier publication, but it is important to register how uneven this was. Spence contributed important reflections on Heartfield and gender, Sekula the preface from his commodity-form analysis 'Photography Between Capital and Labour'. There was an interview with Lorrain Leeson and Peter Dunn on their campaign work in the Docklands area of London and an analysis of the media coverage of the war in the north of Ireland. Spence and Rosie Martin remained committed to the consideration of class experience. But even in their work a shift in emphasis can be detected, this is no longer a collective politics of struggle, rather weight falls on the 'hidden injuries of class'.²⁶ In so far as class appears in *Photography/Politics: Two* it is the subjective experience of class—class as identity.

In many ways, all you need to know about *Photography/Politics: Two* (*Figure 4*) appears on the cover. Without denigrating the Polysnappers, symptomatically it suggests an intellectuals' war conducted against the image and carried out with toy guns. Documentary was in retreat. *Photography/Politics: Two* doesn't address photography in the organised and campaigning left. Throughout the book there is an evident shift in favour of staged images and media analysis; this tendency had been growing but, at first, was not viewed as an alternative to documentary.²⁷ Laura Mulvey's text 'Magnificent Obsession' is indicative. This was an exhibition text for students who had studied photography with Burgin at the

Polytechnic of Central London: Karen Knorr, Mark Lewis, Olivier Richon, Geoff Miles and Mitra Tabrizian. Mulvey notes: 'Both Mark Lewis and Mitra Tabrizian started off as documentary photographers with a strong commitment to realism. A shift in concern towards sexual politics, under the influence of feminism and psychoanalysis, has produced an equivalent shift in style and approach to the photographic image; the latter is now freed to convey an invisible reality, dream and fantasy.'²⁸ Mulvey's point is that staged images, engaging with media imagery, allowed photographers to explore the formation of gendered subjectivity in a way that realism did not. This does now, though, feel like a period 'structure of feeling'. From the perspective of the recent engagement with social reproduction, biopolitics, the re-emergence of socialist feminism and, indeed, the renewed prominence of documentary realism in theory and practice, there appears no necessary linkage between the terms Mulvey establishes. That is to say, there is no evident reason why sexual politics and feminism should be coupled to psychoanalysis or why these couplets involve severing any link to documentary, in favour of what she calls 'invisible reality, dream and fantasy'. Nor for that matter, is it apparent why so much attention should be given to media representation, particularly film noir. If documentary is a form, as the critics claimed, there is no reason why it should not be pursued as a form and one always more likely to have a public impact. What is clear is that the terms of the debate had changed. The story of this seven-year hiatus is yet to be recounted. Nevertheless, the drift is clear: from class to subjectivity; from activism to academic analysis. The criticism of photography had become detached from collective politics. Perhaps, it is more accurate to say that space had withered.

Photography/Politics: Two appeared on the other side of the watershed of the miners' strike of 1983-1984. The labour movement was in disarray and from that time until some point in the late 1990s Marxism stood at the lowest point of intellectual credibility of

anytime in the last 100 years. During the 1970s a network of documentary practices and institutions necessary to imagining class began to emerge and could have constituted a significant component of a strategy of hegemony. One central (fatal) problem was that that this activity relied on state and local authorities for funding rather than structures of autonomy, leaving itself open to shifting political agendas. However, this perspective—municipal socialism—was in retreat after Thatcher’s election in 1979.²⁹ To depend on the capitalist state for resources while pursuing a transformative perspective was never likely to be a winning strategy. Political confidence was already draining away, but when the Arts Council shifted gear in 1980 and the Greater London Council was shut down by the Conservative’s *Local Government Act* of 1985, this nascent structure of feeling was left homeless.³⁰ When combined with various strands of post-structuralism the effect was withdraw into the gallery and classroom. Too often this was presented as a matter of intellectual conviction rather than a structural transformation in institutions and funding regimes. While the new mood brought important developments, paths taken were undoubtedly over-determined by the ‘experience of defeat’; in that context a political perspective unravelled. The hard-left’s antipathy to cultural politics ensured the demise of this valuable project. The strategy of a dirty realism withered on the vine.

4. Four points by way of an argument.

I want to conclude by drawing out four themes from the documentary moment I’ve been considering.

First, women and work. (*Figure.6*) It has often been said that the radical documentary of the 1970s attended to class to the exclusion of gender. However, it is notable how much of documentary production of the time focussed on women’s labour: the *Women and Work* exhibition, the work of Spence, the Hackney Flashers, and The London Women’s Film

Group all spring to mind.³¹ ‘Women’s labour’ is a peculiarly doubled term and much of the new documentary looked at the role of women in both social reproduction and wage labour. Childcare and equal pay were the defining issues of the period. In an important sense, the new documentary emerged from the problem of how to depict women; how to avoid the voyeurism of the mass media and treat women, particularly working women, as active political subjects. Documentary in the 70s did not ignore gender; it reconstructed what we mean by class by visualising the gendered division of labour. Productivism was supplemented with reproductivism. The tension between feminist intellectuals and working-class women surface in these works as problems to be worked through and resolved in practice, rather than by high theory. Practitioners from working-class backgrounds (Spence and Hunt are exemplary figures) played a prominent role in this activity; but it was just as significant that middle-class women undertook their own voyage to the land of the people.³² These travellers immersed themselves in a two-way pedagogy; the teachers received instruction from the people.³³ In engaging with the experience and struggles of working-class women, socialist-feminist media activists redefined how class is understood. As Liz Heron noted, the Hackney Flashers were clear about ‘fighting class oppression as well as women’s oppression and showing the two as mutually reinforcing’.³⁴ With the retreat from class this concern dropped out of mainstream debates on feminist art and film, only recently resurfacing with renewed interest in social reproduction, intersectionality, sex work and precarious labour. The experience of neoliberalism and political defeat saw the poles of class and gender pull apart; the tensions slacken.

Second, Collective Production. Much of the debate in the 1970s was orientated towards form, but documentary makers and artists experimented with collaborative production and independent forms of distribution and exhibition. This ‘collectivism’ after modernism has been theorised in recent art, but while the practice was

discussed in other terms during the 70s, it was probably a stronger trend then than now.³⁵

The works I have pointed towards are the products of collaborative work, either made by collectives or co-authored. Hardly any of these works were made by individuals, the exception of Burgin is telling. Collective activity was a way of de-authoring production.

(*Figure. 6*) Many of the accounts of post-conceptual documentary have followed Jeff Wall and John Roberts and focussed on ‘deskilling’ and ‘amateurism’.³⁶ Critics argue that photographers abandoned the aesthetic of the fine print, drawing on vernacular photographic documents as ‘ready-mades’. However, this argument focuses attention on the form of presentation in the gallery to the exclusion of modes of production. A pervasive theoretical problem throughout the 1970s, and it has remained a feature of recent histories, involves recoding Benjamin’s ‘The Author as Producer’ as a matter of attentive viewing or reading, with the avant-garde ‘text’ at its heart. However, Benjamin was concerned with turning readers into worker correspondents, that is to say, producers. Similarly, interest in Rodchenko’s often cited argument for a photography centred on new points of view systematically ignores the most significant contribution to that debate, namely Sergei Tretyakov’s insistence that a radical project of photography had to be centred on use— ‘the whole range of utilitarian goals confronting photography’—and not either ‘raw facts’ or formal innovation.³⁷ Tretyakov’s argument proved fundamental to the developing aesthetics of Brecht and Benjamin.³⁸ Significant strands in the new documentary attempted to include their subjects in the production process; to draw the work out of dialogue with those represented. This directly parallels the Medvedkin Group in France in recapturing a critical impetus of the workers photo and film movements of the 30s. The workshop movement in the UK was engaged in a similar dynamic exchange of knowledge and subjectivity.

Collaboration and new patterns of distribution sought to transform the production apparatus, focusing not on representation or narrative, but on who controlled the labour

process. That is to say, there was a serious engagement with the division of labour and hierarchy of skills, collaboration with non-specialists, access to technology or distribution networks and new forms of exhibition. Novel forms of display might involve showing work outside of traditional venues, but also involve attempts to directly engage with the audience. In critical debate this dimension was given much less attention than the formal challenges and transformations. It is nevertheless crucial and an important dimension of 'Brechtian' practice. The textualist or formalist emphasis on the role of the critical viewer or reader, may just be another way of stressing the role of the 'literary critic'. As Brecht famously said 'they are enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable'.³⁹

The workshop movement was not engaged in deskilling, but with equipping new subjects with techniques and access to the apparatus. Workshop productivism involves a process of upskilling. In the context of the political documentary of the period, vernacular deskilling has been largely misunderstood. The appearance of the works by Photography Workshop, The Hackney Flashers and, perhaps, Women and Work emerge not from artistic intentions to parody or parallel low photographic modes, but as a result of the institutions in which they were to be viewed. They were cheaply-produced information boards, intended for display in community spaces, schools and trade-union meeting rooms, rather than art galleries. They needed to be duplicated at minimal cost; transported and installed without specialist handling. All that was required were cardboard panels and drawing pins, some black-and white photographs and hand-written or typed out comments. As Spence noted, she often sent an exhibition by train, 'for hanging at a meeting the next morning, so you had to have them laminated'.⁴⁰ These works are pedagogic in address, drawing on models familiar to their audience. They were shaped by trade union and municipal spaces much more than by the work of Ruscha or Smithson. In this sense, the critique that sees 'information' as homologous with bureaucratic culture seems misconceived, at least for these works.⁴¹

Third, Whose Radicalism? It should be evident from my discussion of *Photography/Politics: One* that the radical documentary of the 1970s was concerned with an ethics or politics of representation. Photographers attended to how they represented others, and they sought to enable working people to take responsibility for their own lives/representation. Self-representation was set alongside the self-activity of the working class; to paraphrase Marx, the representation of the working class must be the act of that class itself. In many regards, this concern is best drawn out in relation to a film. *Night cleaners Part 1* focuses on a campaign to unionise low-paid female office cleaners and the role of members of the Women's Liberation Movement in this action. It is another major project attending to women's work as social reproduction. *Night cleaners* was made by members of the Berwick Street Film Collective in 1975. Marc Karlin, James Scott, Mary Kelly and Humphrey Trevelyan worked on the film. Initially, it was intended as a contribution to the union campaign, but in the editing, as its makers struggled to represent relations between the women, the union, and the cleaner's action group, it became formally experimental. *Night cleaners* mixes documentary footage and interviews with various avant-garde techniques to distance or critically heighten the filmic construction. It combines montage, slow motion, silence, asynchronous sound and image and montage. Black leader—the absence of image—figures repeatedly and the filmmakers linger on the women's faces beyond any apparent or immediate need.

Griselda Pollock has argued that *Night cleaners* engaged 'the fundamental contradiction between the typical cinematic means of producing a "truth" about working class life... and the political aesthetics of a film that advertised its own manufacture.'⁴² Mary Kelly suggested that one of its strengths was 'the way it represents the input of the Women's Movement as well as the Trades Unions and the night cleaners themselves as three parallel, but interconnected discourses.'⁴³ Claire Johnson claimed it was the most successful

critical film of the period. I have always found it incredibly moving and disturbing to watch: the struggle of a group of women who work who, in their dual role as wage workers and labourers in social reproduction, manage only two-hours sleep per day. Their fight for better conditions and wages is a struggle for life. If biopolitics has any meaning it should apply here.

There is, though, no sidestepping the controversy. Those involved in the campaign—cleaners and activists (including Sheila Rowbotham and Sally Alexander)—found the modernist formal devices incomprehensible and felt that they had been used as the material for someone else's drama. In this sense, the criticism that Martha Rosler raised against the use of Allie May Burroughs by Walker Evans applies equally to the Berwick Street Collective's treatment of the cleaners' organiser May Hobbs.⁴⁴ The filmmakers' commitment to politicise all aspects of filmmaking from co-operative production to distribution and exhibition did not extend to an ethics of representation; it did not include the exploited workers as collaborators. It is a key instance in which the author as producer is transfigured into a reader: 'from work to text'. The prolonged periods of silence and lingering portraits of voiceless workers give the film a deeply melancholy cast. It is incredibly affecting, because we see destroyed lives and desperate struggle. But as an intervention into an activist campaign it is bizarre, since what comes through is a sense of voiceless defeat. It makes an important intervention into the politics of the time, putting the WLM centre stage (though, it occludes the role of activists from the IS and IMG). However, its effect is surely retrospective or retroactive; it is out of time, or out of synch. Its importance *now* is to remind us of a time when feminists were immersed in class politics and when radical form went hand-in-hand with workers struggles. But, as much as I have always found it compelling, I can't agree with Pollock, Kelly and Johnson. It is a film for those immersed in debates about a new cinema. It was not made by, or for, May Hobbs.

Fourth, Political Formalism. This brings me to my final point. Analyses of the radical and independent practice of the 70s has focussed on the combination of political subjects, particularly class and gender, with modernist formal techniques intended to disrupt the dominant conventions of the mass media. At its best this cross-pollination of political themes and modernist experimentation enriches both, opening new questions and indicating new directions for documentary. In this sense, the formation belongs to what Sylvia Harvey termed ‘political modernism’ or ‘neo-Brechtian’ practice.⁴⁵ Drawing on psychoanalysis, semiotics and Althusser’s theory of ideology it was argued that an emphasis on text as text unravelled realism’s transcendental fixity and identification, offering instead a space from which to reconfigure a self-conscious and active subject open to new political possibilities.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, this emphasis on *écriture* inclined some theorists and practitioners to reject realism and focus on desire and the imaginary in constructed or staged photography. In the process, Benjamin’s argument in ‘Author as Producer’ was transformed and Brecht’s legacy was reduced to the *Verfremdungseffekt* understood as critical labour on the text/subject. The latter’s presence in these debates provided a kind of leftist backfill for a ‘politics of form’. Brecht as the champion of popular entertainment and realism or the advocate of learning through practice barely figured in the argument.⁴⁷ Spence is the exception who retained a commitment to both popular pedagogy and vulgar hilarity; her library contains a *Book of Reactionary Jokes* (the cover is worthy of Trump) and a collection of smutty postcards. (Figure 7)

D.N. Rodowick has argued the key problem with the political modernist perspective resides in an analogy between, or conflation of, the human subject and text. If the unconscious is structured like a language, as Lacan suggests, many political modernists took this to mean that a radical *écriture*, or disruption of diegesis, could disturb, even reconstruct, the bourgeois subject. If Althusser argued the subject recognised itself in the act of

interpellation, this was thought to mean another mode of address could bring about a new politics of subjectification. This is an outright idealism, and for what it is worth, there is nothing in Althusser or Lacan to license such claims. ‘The male gaze’ or ‘the female viewer’, prominent in the debates, are collective entities, but the subject underpinning the argument was modelled on the individual self of psychoanalysis. The dialectic at work here is self/other rather than one/many. However, without this analogy—viewer/text—many of the central assertions of this work cannot be sustained; disruption at the level of narrative or form, might call attention to seamless ideology of the media, but they might just be alienating and not in the way Brecht intended. There is nothing inherently radical in breaking coherence and the production of active political subjects through such techniques is wishful thinking. Active attention is not secured by formal disruption. Some participants in the debate have acknowledged the problem.⁴⁸ At the time Sylvia Harvey also tried to moderate the avant-garde perspective, which she saw as a strategy for the academy, rather than a genuine political project.

The idea of retrograde traditional documentary has been overstated in polemical debates. Such criticism is often be blind to the diversity of practices, some of which I’ve highlighted, and the range of changes required to constitute radical hegemony. It is also overly fetishising of formal experimentation; under-estimating the importance for any serious Left politics of building new institutions of dissent and changing relations of production. Some of these photographic projects, were traditional in form, but with political content and militant address aimed at a distinct audience of activists and trades unionists.⁴⁹ However, co-operative production and innovative distribution and screening methods mean that many of these documentary works were seen in dialogic situations. They were frequently accompanied by the filmmakers and/or workers engaged in industrial disputes or campaigns. Even documentaries that did not question the protocols of realist-form generated

active discussion and reflexion, rather than passive consumption. After all, it is entirely possible to consume a film by Goddard passively, enjoying the iconoclasm and inventive play, and equally plausible to engage a more conventional realist film critically. Julia Lesage is particularly critical of such avant-garde attacks on feminist documentary arguing that it is important for women to employ traditional means of representation. She suggests ‘they saw making these films as an urgent public act and wished... to bring feminist analysis to many women it might otherwise never reach.’⁵⁰ In the same book, Charlotte Brunsden emphasises the importance of what she calls ‘women talking’. As I have indicated, the point applies to the representation of class. The visibility of working people is a necessary condition for the generation of consciousness of class.

Conclusion.

A genuine political practice, in contrast to avant-garde posturing, has to acknowledge the importance of different audiences and distinct institutional sites and therefore the need for different forms of address. Theorists at the time were fond of citing Althusser’s account of ideology, but they ignored its central Gramscian thrust: practices are embedded in institutions. A serious project for hegemony must transform the production apparatus and create autonomous institutions that turn ordinary people into media producers. There is no single recipe for the reinvention of documentary, but it must engage the dirty work of developing new structures of production and circulation. The dimension of the Brecht-Benjamin line that involves transforming production relations is ultimately central to any new politics. The labour of dirty realism is unglamorous work when compared with avant-garde formal experiment, but it is vital for realism.

¹ This essay emerged from a talk presented at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid in May 2015, as a response to the exhibition *Not Yet* curated by Jorge Ribalta. I would like to thank Jorge for his stimulating impetus and continued discussion. A number of friends and colleagues from the UK were present for the exhibition and my talk and I acknowledge their generous responses: Amy Charlesworth, Gail Day, Angela Dimitrakaki, Kirsten Lloyd, Gill Park, Stephanie Schwartz and Louise Shelley. Another version was presented at the conference ‘Photography and the Left’ in 2016 at Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea—Museu do Chiado, Lisbon. Many thanks to Margarida Medeiros and the organisers for their kind invitation.

² Victor Burgin, ‘Socialist Formalism’ (1976), Charles Harrison & Paul Wood eds, *Art in Theory: 1900-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) p.942

³ Terry Dennett & Jo Spence, ‘Ten Years of Photography Workshop’, Stevie Bezencenet & Philip Corrigan eds, *Photographic Practices: Towards a Different Image* (London: Comedia, 1986), pp.13-28

⁴ Su Braden, *Committing Photography* (London: Pluto, 1983).

⁵ Alan Sears, *The Next New Left: A History of the Future* (Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2014).

⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, 1927-1934* (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999) pp.768-82; Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (London: Methuen, 1965).

⁷ S.Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Feminist Art & Performance* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015).

⁸ Dirty realism is my adaptation from Enzensberger's criticism of the Left's recoil from 'dirty (mass) media'. See: 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media', *Raids and Reconstructions: Essays in Politics, Crime and Culture* (London: Pluto, 1976).

⁹ Allan Sekula, 'Allan Sekula: Réalisme Critique/The Critical Realism of Allan Sekula', interview with Pascal Beausse, *Art press* (Paris), (November 1998), p.20.

¹⁰ The mood rapidly switched. See three examples from *Camerawork*: Don Slater, 'The Object of Photography' (26,1983); Stuart Hall 'Left in Sight: An Interview with Stuart Hall' (29, 1983/84); and Kathy Myers, 'Loves Labour Lost' (29, 1983/84).

¹¹ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat From Class: A New True Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986).

¹² Robert Hariman and John Louis Luciates, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). They argue that documentary is essential to democratic polity as a source for disputation. Their liberal focus on 'informed debate' is open to question, but the larger point is important. Serious debate begins when there is evidence to contest.

¹³ Ariella Azouley, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone, 2008) and *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2012). I also disagree with the argument advanced by John Roberts on indexical truth claims of photography. The photo-index cannot substantiate a truth claim, but as evidentiary mode, is provide a nucleus for measuring dialogic dispute. See: Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Jacques Rancière, 'The Political Form of Democracy', *Documenta X Documents* (Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, 1997), p.80; and *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso), 2006.

¹⁵ Julian Stallabrass's Brighton photo-biennial of 2008: *Memory of Fire: Images of War and The War of Images*. See also: two exhibitions curated by Jorge Ribalta: *Not Yet* at the Reina Sofia in

2015, which excavated the radical photo-practices of the 70s, and its predecessor of 2011—*A Hard, Merciless Light*—dedicated to the worker-photography movement of the 1930s.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Reality Gulf’, *The Guardian* (11 January 1991); ‘La guerre du Golfe n’a pas en lieu’, *Liberation* (29 March 1991). For a stinging response see: Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1992), p.184.

¹⁷ Jessica Evans, ‘Introduction’, *The Camerawork Essays: Context and Meaning in Photography* (London: Rivers Oram, 1997), p.28.

¹⁸ Jorge Ribalta ed., *The Worker Photography Movement (1926-1939): Essays and Documents* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2015); Ribalta, ‘The Strand Symptom: A Modernist Disease?’, *Oxford Art Journal* (38.1, 2015), pp.55-7.

¹⁹ Compare with the History Workshop.

²⁰ Boal is repeatedly cited by Spence as one of her primary theoretical resources. For an account that recognised the potential of this practice, see: Don Slater, ‘Community Photography’, *Camerawork* (20, 1980), pp.8-9. The reference to working class amateurism is from ‘Editorial’, *The Worker Photographer* (1, 1979) in Ribalta ed., p.201.

²¹ See ‘Dictionary of Resources’, Bezencenet and Corrigan eds, *Photographic Practices: Towards a Different Image*, pp.166-77

²² In terms of the debate on the politics of representation it is clear that discussion in the UK was belated. The belatedness, in fact, demonstrates just how little was known of the history of radical practice in the English speaking world, but also how much was still imagined to be possible.

²³ David Mellor ed., *New German Photography 1927-33* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978).

²⁴ Editorial, *Photography/Politics: One*, Photography Workshop, 1979, p.I

²⁵ Dennett and Spence, 'A Statement from Photography, Workshop', *Photography/Politics: One*, Photography Workshop, 1979, p.II

²⁶ Richard Sennett & Jonathon Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Norton, 1993)

²⁷ There are considerations of documentary, notably Terry Morden's essay 'Documentary. Past, Future?' (Note the question mark).

²⁸ Laura Mulvey, 'Magnificent Obsession', *Photography/Politics: Two*, p.145. I pick on this essay, because I have great respect for Mulvey's work.

²⁹ Ziff's essay 'Working for the council' in *Photography/Politics: One* is revealing here.

³⁰ *Camerawork* registered the funding shift in 1980, but it did not lead to a major re-evaluation: 'Editorial', *Camerawork* (21, 1981), p.1. For this analysis see: Duncan Forbes's comments in Ribalta ed., *Not Yet*, pp.73-4.

³¹ Key examples from film include: *Women of the Rhondda*, *So that You Might Live* and *Riddles of the Sphinx*.

³² For a fascinating account of this intersubjective dynamic see: Jacques Rancière, *Short Voyages to the Land of the People* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

³³ Only Braden seems to have understood the role of Friere's idea of revolutionary pedagogy in this work: Paolo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1996 edition); Braden, *Committing Photography*.

³⁴ Liz Heron, 'Hackney Flashers Collective: Who's Still Holding the Camera', *Photography/Politics: One* (London: Photography Workshop, 1979), p.128.

³⁵ Blake Stimson & Greg Sholette eds, *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); also the issue of *Third Text* on Art & Collaboration edited by John Roberts & Stephen Wright: *Third Text* (18.6, 2004).

³⁶ Jeff Wall, “‘Marks of Indifference’”: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art’, Ann Goldstein & Anne Rorimer eds, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975* (Cambridge Mass: MIT, 1995), pp.246-67; John Roberts, *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976* (London: Camerawords, 1997) p.66.

³⁷ The Soviet photo debate appears in Christopher Phillips ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of art/Aperture, 1989). For Tretyakov’s contribution ‘From the Editor’, see pp.270-2.

³⁸ Hans Magnus Enzensberger reiterated the point in his ‘Constituents of a Theory of the Media’.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Conversations with Brecht’, *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1977), p.118.

⁴⁰ Jo Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture* (London: Camden Press, 1986), pp.204-5

⁴¹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, ‘Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions’, *October* (55, 1990), pp.105-143; Alex Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge Mass: MIT, 2004).

⁴² Griselda Pollock, ‘Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice—a Brechtian Perspective’, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.205.

⁴³ Mary Kelly, ‘The Body Politic’, *Frieze* (107, 2007).

⁴⁴ Martha Rosler, ‘In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)’, *Three Works* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art, 1981); May Hobbs, *Born to Struggle* (London: Quartet, 1974); London Socialist Women Group, *The Nightcleaners Campaign* (London: Prinkipo, 1971?).

⁴⁵ Sylvia Harvey, ‘Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties’, *Screen* (23, 1, 1982), pp. 45–59.

⁴⁶ See Jean-Louis Baudry, ‘Writing, Fiction, Ideology’, *Afterimage* (5, 1974), pp.22–39.

⁴⁷ See D.N.Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Film Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); and Colin MacCabe, 'Class of '68: elements of an intellectual autobiography 1967–81', *Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985) pp.1–32; 'Peter Osborne in Conversation with Paul Willeman', Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner eds, *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s* (Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery, 2013), pp.39-46. See also Dana B. Polan, 'Brecht and the Politics of Self-Reflexive Cinema' (1974), in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*, Vol.2 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp.661–72; and Harvey, 'Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties'.

⁴⁸ MacCabe, 'Class of '68: elements of an intellectual autobiography 1967–81'; 'Peter Osborne in Conversation with Paul Willeman'. Sylvia Harvey, *Independent Cinema?* (Stafford: West Midlands Arts, 1978); Important criticisms were voiced at the time, though, largely ignored. In addition to works by Sylvia Harvey, see: Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics and Pleasure* (London: BFI, 1980). A full account would also have to include the exchange between Clark and Wollen: T.J. Clark, 'Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Olympia', *Screen* (21.1, 1980), pp.18-41; Peter Wollen, 'Manet -Modernism and Avant-Garde', *Screen*, (21.2, 1980), pp15-25. My sympathy is with Clark, but it is now noticeable how much he too drew from the *Screen* toolbox.

⁴⁹ Claire Johnstone cites *Abortion* (1971) by the US Our Bodies Ourselves collective as one retrograde film; while approved of by many socialists and feminists due to its explicit arguments, she believed, it retained a conservative form. See: Johnston, 'Night cleaners (part one): Rethinking political cinema', *Spare Rib* (40, Oct. 1975).

⁵⁰ Julia Lesage, 'Political Aesthetics of Feminist Documentary Film', Charlotte Brunsten ed., *Films for Women* (London: BFI, 1986), p.15.