PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE VISUALIZATION OF WORKING CLASS LIVES IN BRITAIN

DARREN NEWBURY

LOOKING AT WORKING CLASS LIVES

Working class lives have been of continual interest to middle and upper class audiences since at least the nineteenth century. Photographic representations of working class life have an equally long history, doing justice to which would take considerably more space than is available to me in this paper. It is important however to recognize that the images I intend to discuss can be situated in an historical context. Indeed, it is part of my argument that photographic representations can only really be understood in relation to other representations, both those that serve as historical points of reference and those that occupy the same contemporary cultural space. Photographic representations both draw from and contribute to a social and cultural imagery that is part of a broader public dialogue about society. Documentary photography becomes part of the way in which societies inform themselves about their own identities and values and those of other cultures and societies.

The practical focus of this paper is photographic representations of working-class life in Britain, primarily from the mid 1970s to the early 1990s, though some reference will be made to earlier work. Aside from its intrinsic interest, this focus is valuable for the opportunity it provides to explore a number of theoretical issues. Although there are significant variations across the different examples I will discuss, there are also a range of common concerns. First, social and cultural reference is fundamental to an understanding of the works discussed here. The photographers are quite consciously concerned with representing historically and culturally specific ways of life. For most of the examples, this places the images firmly within a national context and an explicit politics of representation. Some of the work discussed here shares a common aim with what Clifford refers to as “salvage ethnography” (cited in Stanley 1998: 16), to save both visually, and literally in some cases (through a belief that images will change the minds of politicians), communities that are about to disappear. Konttinen’s Byker for example, can be seen as one of a number of photographic studies of the impact of urban renewal in Britain in the wake of the 1954 Housing Act (Jobling 1993). Ironically, the threat to communities and traditional ways of life is no longer industrialization but its dissipation in a post-industrial era:

Any documentary project is, in the end, about memory. The creative drive of independent photography during the second half of this century has been sparked by a painful sense of the disappearance of communities. There has been a race to record them and their ways of life before and in the process of a destruction that can only be described as wilful. (Side 1995: 6)

Second, there are a number of methodological commitments made by the photographers that draw upon anthropological paradigms. Most straightforwardly, much of the work depends on the kind of long-term engagement that is typical of ethnographic fieldwork. The validity claims of documentary are often supported by a discussion of the makers’ sustained engagement and understanding of the subject. For example, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen’s documentary photographic study of the North East community at Byker (Konttinen 1988) is based on several years of living and photographing in the area.¹ There are of course some interesting counter examples. Despite the influence of anthropology,² Humphrey Spender’s photographic documentation of Bolton as part of the Mass Observation project in Britain in the 1930s was based on as little as five or six visits to the town, each lasting not much more than a week at the most.³ Spender himself has commented at length on his position as a stranger on such
These two images are from Spender's Mass Observation work in Bolton and are reproduced in Spender & Mulford 1982 under the category 'Work'. The categorization in the 1982 publication follows to some extent the categorization used in the 1975 publication, though it is much less journalistic both in the section titles and in the visual style: "It was a lovely funeral" becomes "Funeral", "The Local" becomes "Drinking". Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most recent major publication of Spender's images (Frizzell 1997) recontextualises the images again; in this case structuring them chronologically, and by implication placing Spender's development as an artist centrally.

The latter image is the only domestic interior in the Mass Observation work and was the result of a request from someone working for Mass Observation rather than being initiated by the photographer. Spender had previously photographed successfully in the home of a family in Stepney, to provide evidence of living conditions for a probation officer. He describes his approach then as one of spending many days with the family in order to make his presence as unobtrusive as possible (Spender & Mulford 1982:16). However, Tom Harrisson's preference for a methodology of covert observation precluded Spender producing many such images in the work for Mass Observation.
London, Stepney, 1934. Taken for probation services and magistrate Sir William Clarke-Hall (reproduced courtesy of the photographer).

Tyneside Slums, 1939 (reproduced courtesy of the Hulton Getty Picture Collection) This last image was taken on the second of Spender’s visits to Tyneside for Picture Post, when he was accompanied by the city architect (left) at the request of the mayor who had complained of the bias in the first Picture Post report. See ‘The Lord Mayor of Newcastle Show Us Tyneside,’ Picture Post March 1939.
photographic expeditions, and the recurrent social awkwardness of his photographic encounters. Furthermore, a number of the more recent photographers discussed are recording their own communities and lives. This reflects, more or less consciously depending on the particular example, a questioning of the legitimacy of the conventional approach to documentary fieldwork in which there is a clear demarcation between those being looked at and those doing the looking; though most of the examples discussed here retain a strong commitment to realism, to the notion that it is possible to represent other people’s lives and that there is some value in doing so. In some respects, then, the work can be considered as insider accounts or forms of indigenous ethnography.

The period is of particular interest for two reasons. First, it represents a period of political and social change and a restructuring of class relations in Britain. In the early seventies working-class institutions such as the trade unions represented a powerful political force, and, for working-class men at least, images of manual labor often had a powerful and celebratory appeal. This would not be the case for long. In the 1990s images of working class life have been predominantly seen as negative and often associated with the past. Successive British Prime Ministers (Conservative and Labor) have declared the end of class conflict, cementing its current unfashionability as a critical category in the discussion of contemporary life. What is interesting when one looks across the documentary photographic work of the period is a shift from an explicitly politicized representation of class that characterized some of the work in the early 1970s, for example work associated with the early Camerawork, towards a more cultural rendering of working class life. The vision embodied in the work of Paul Trevor, Nicholas Battye and Chris Steele-Perkins in Survival Programmes arguably has more of the desperate tone of nineteenth century social explorers to it, than any sense of class transformation, ending as it does in an apocalyptic series of images of street conflict across the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, it attempts to offer in visual form an analysis of working class poverty as the product of capitalist economic relations: “Documentary photographers have traditionally been concerned with ‘the human condition’. But to document a condition is not to explain it. The condition is a symptom, not a cause; more precisely, it is the outcome of a process. Therefore, in the way we present the material in this book we are as much concerned to indicate processes as to record conditions” (Exit 1982: 7). Later work, for example Tom Wood’s documentary account of bus travel in Liverpool, records in increasingly close detail the texture of working class life (Wood 1998). There has also been a notable shift during this period away from working class life as a subject for documentary practice. The notion of a consumer society became central to public debate in Britain during the 1980s, which has meant that what is seen as culturally salient subject matter for the documentary photographer has tended to move, with some notable exceptions, towards those who have the resources to participate most actively. Associated with the change in the focus of concern for documentary is the break in the link between photographic documentary and social democratic politics established in the postwar period, and evident most clearly on the pages of Picture Post, within which the display of poverty was viewed as a step towards building a consensus for social and welfare reform (cf. Hall 1972).

The period is interesting in terms of the development of a relatively autonomous photographic culture that both sustained and justified a documentary practice. This was a result of two main factors, the decision in the early 1970s of the Arts Council of Great Britain to begin supporting photography as an art form, and the establishment of a relatively secure base for photography in higher education. Up until that point documentary photography was either synonymous with photojournalism, Humphrey Spender for example does not distinguish between photojournalism and documentary, or was sustained as a semi-amateur activity, for example Margaret Monck’s work in the East End of London, Shirley Baker’s work in Salford or Jimmy Forsyth’s documentation of the area around Scotswood Road in Newcastle (Forsyth 1986). The work of Euan Duff is of some significance in this respect as he was a photographer who sought to work in a sustained documentary mode as opposed to the shorter term commitment involved in photojournalism, where he began his career. Duff published a book length study of life in 1960s Britain (Duff 1971), pointedly titled How we are, and also collaborated with sociologist Dennis Marsden on a study of unemployment (Marsden 1975). Although, Duff continued to photograph during the period in which he worked in photographic higher education, very little of this work has been published or exhibited.
The commitment over this period to publishing documentary photographs in book form, often supported financially by the British Arts Council, has contributed to the dissemination of this work and its value as a public resource of social and cultural memory. It is interesting that the institutional success of photography has also led to a greater emphasis on the individual practitioners. One of the problems, as Becker (1986) would recognize, of discussing these photographers within a sociological or anthropological context is that it is more often to the institutions of the photographic art world that they look for validation, than the academy of social science.

While I am writing from a British context it is also important to realize that many of the images discussed have also been circulated internationally. As a British understanding of what the 1930s depression in the United States looked like has been informed by the photographic work of the Farm Security Administration, so an international view of British working class life in the 1980s has, for those without any other experience to rely upon, been interpreted through the images of Nick Waplington, Chris Killip and others.8

In order to focus my discussion of photographic work in this period, I want to consider two particular moments. First, the emergence of a collaborative and sustained approach to documentary practice in the 1970s. In particular I want to consider the body of work that was developed around the Amber/Side group in Newcastle. Second, I want to consider how and why the visual concerns and the approach of photographers to the documentation of working class life appeared to shift away from this position during the 1980s.

A COLLABORATIVE DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE IN THE NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND

In 1968 a group of documentary filmmakers and photographers at the Central London Polytechnic came together to form the Amber Associates. The formation of a collective was motivated by the desire to carry on working collaboratively, and importantly to work outside of the mainstream film industry, once they finished studying. A central aim of the group was to develop a film and photographic practice amongst working class communities in the North East of England.9 For a number of the group the move to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, an industrial city in the North East, was a return home, for others the appeal was perhaps more symbolic. Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, a member of the group originally from Finland, makes the following observation: “The choice of a northern working class city was for most of our members a way of returning to their own roots - for the others the North East held a warm attraction, which led to a lasting commitment to the region” (Konttinen 1989:5).

Central to the photographic work of Amber was the Side Gallery opened in Newcastle in 1977. The gallery came out of the Amber group’s frustration with the lack of venues in which to exhibit the kind of work that they were producing, and as a way of bringing photography to the region which they otherwise would not have the opportunity to see.10 Chris Killip, although not formally part of the Amber collective, also became involved in the running of the gallery. Killip came into contact with the group during his time in the North East working on a fellowship funded by the Northern Arts and the Northern Gas Board, and developed a close working relationship with the group during this period. Killip had already published a documentary study of the Isle of Man, and been funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain to work on a project documenting British cities. The approach to the gallery, as articulated by Killip and Murray Martin (a founder member of Amber), was informed by a commitment to the communities of the region both as a subject and audience of visual work. The gallery also sought to place the regionally based documentary work in the context of a history of socially engaged photographic practice. This was signalled by the choice of the work of American social reform photographer Lewis Hine for the first exhibition, accompanied by a publication based on the layout of the popular national newspaper, the Daily Mirror.11 The vision was of a gallery that was both populist and interventionist, with a program that was of direct relevance to the area, at the same time as fostering international connections. As early as 1974 (‘The River Project’), and before Killip’s involvement, the Amber group had begun commissioning artists, writers and photographers to work on documentary projects. Once the gallery was established, the
raising of funding to commission photographers to document aspects of the region, and the development of a photographic archive, became an important part of the work. Unlike some community based photographic practices that were being developed at the time, such as those discussed by De Cuyper (1997), the work at Side was not primarily about putting cameras in the hands of ordinary community members, though it did promote the work of local photographers. The practice was one of professional image-makers developing work in dialogue with communities. At the time, and since, this has opened the work to criticism in the context of a politics of representation that questioned the voyeurism of documentary photography in general.

The aims of the group of photographers and filmmaker that constituted Amber/Side can be understood as involving both a methodological commitment to develop visual work out of a sustained local engagement—"Our initial ambition as filmmaker and photographers to work collectively and produce documents of working class life in the region, involving long-term relationships with local communities, has remained constant" (Side 1995)—and a political commitment to the representation of the everyday and ordinary in the lives working class communities.

Methodologically, the work depended on a long-term involvement with the people and communities represented. Tish Murtha, one of the photographers commissioned by Side Gallery, made a series of images of unemployed youth in the west end of Newcastle—"her angry photographs of young people in the west end of Newcastle—"her angry photographs of young people on early youth employment schemes involve some members of her own family (Side 1995). Konttinen had lived in Byker for two years before she began photographing there, and continued to live there until the street she lived in was demolished as part of the urban renewal process that she was documenting. The documentary film Seacoal produced by Amber Associates was the outcome of two years spent with the seacoaling community at Lynemouth, also photographed by Killip. This does not mean of course that access to those communities was unproblematic, or that the work produced was appreciated or even welcomed by members of those communities. Killip's access to the seacoaling community where he photographed in the early 1980s was the result of serendipity rather than any recognition of value in what he was doing by those who he wanted to photograph. As Killip recounts the story, he had tried several times to photograph on the beaches but had always been chased away by the men there. Understandably, Killip's presence was perceived as unwelcome surveillance and the fact that many of the men were claiming social security benefits meant that the circulation of photographic images was a genuine threat. It was only when one of the men recognized him from a previous meeting at a fair, and agreed to take responsibility for him on the beach that he was able to photograph in safety.

The commitment involved in the work extended beyond the use of images as an adjunct to political campaigns, say for better housing, such as those of photographers involved in projects in Merseyside (Bootle Art in Action) and London (Camerawork). Within individual photographic studies, as well as reading across the work as a whole, one is offered a vision of the integrity of working class communities and ways of life; the images are not simply about people as victims of poverty; "The irony of Chris Killip's seacoal photographs being used nationally, to illustrate poverty in the UK, shows metropolitan culture's inability to read some of this work. They are images of capitalism in the raw, of a kind of freedom at the edges of our civilization, but they are not about poverty" (Side 1995: 5). As a consequence of this kind of commitment there is in much of the work produced by this loose association of photographers an interest in an aesthetics of social and cultural life. This is expressed in different ways, for example the work of Chris Killip (1988) represents a significant attempt to produce a kind of monumental imagery of Northern working class life. Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen on the other hand explores a quieter aesthetic, exemplified in her study of a dancing school in North Shields, an aesthetic respite from everyday existence, published as Step by Step (Konttinen 1989). As in the earlier Byker there is a concern to document cultural aspects of the environment in which people lived.

Konttinen's Byker is a complex piece of work combining both images and text, and followed by a film produced by Konttinen in the same year as the book was first published. The 115 images that make up the main part of the book are accompanied by three kinds of text: an introduction that reflects on the photographer's entry into and relationship with the community; a postscript that reflects on the impact of the redevelopment; and interspersed with the photographs are quotations taken
from conversations that Konttinen had heard and recorded during the many years that she lived in the area.15

The two images that mark the entry into, and exit from, the main sequence are tightly framed photographs of the Byker rooftops, the former showing the old rows of terraces, and the latter the rooftops of the new developed Byker. The viewer is invited to reflect on the patterns of life that the book reveals existed in the old Byker, and by implication to speculate on the new patterns that are being established in the wake of redevelopment. The photographs are a mixture of formal portraits as well as more informal documentary images taken in the streets, homes, and community spaces in the area. Several of the images record interiors, drawing attention to the ways in which the occupants had humanized and personalized their rooms with photographs and other artifacts. A number of these images also make reference to imaginative worlds beyond the harsh realities of daily existence. Many of the images represent spaces of leisure: men racing pigeons, young people playing pool, the bookmakers, the bingo hall. There are very few images of men working, though a number show women working (cleaning the step, the wash-house, the hairdressers). The book seems to alternate between suggesting a way of life which is receding—the sequencing is punctuated by wider street images, which, as one moves through the book, show their gradual demolition—and bringing the viewer up close to the day to day life of the people who live in Byker, whose existence should not be ignored, and which is presented with a strong sense of its integrity. This is not to say that the image of working-class life presented is a uniform one, as Jobling notes the photographs can be read in a number of ways: “In attempting to decode these images, we become aware of the heterogeneity of working-class culture and of the plurality of life-styles embraced by it. Konttinen’s photographs teem not only with the signifiers of the popular tastes of the time and place, the clashing patterns of ornate carpets and wallpaper for instance, but are also revealing barometers of social class and status” (Jobling 1993: 257). However, the sense of the integrity and validity of a way of life is clearly important to Konttinen’s view of the work and its audiences; she quotes scathingly a Newcastle city planning officer, who describes the value of redevelopment as a means of breaking up communities of which he does not approve. Importantly, though Konttinen was not just presenting her view of the way of life of the people of Byker for future town planners and others who had no understanding of the area, but also for the people of Byker themselves: “people did believe what I was doing and that I was doing it, not as a service to the community as such but as a way of trying to understand how the community works and eventually trying to return that statement to them, which I promised to do in the form of a book” (Martin 1983: 1160). Photographs from the project are now on permanent exhibition in Byker.

The photographic work of Chris Killip, as opposed to his involvement in the Side Gallery, is interesting for the way in which it moves away from the kinds of methodological commitments of the Amber/Side group and towards a greater emphasis on developing an aesthetics of working class life in the North of England. Killip was not formally a part of the Amber collective, and in terms of his practice placed a greater emphasis on his own personal and artistic vision. Nevertheless, the work demands to be taken seriously as it provides some of the most powerful and widely disseminated visual records of working class life in this period. Although he worked on sustained documentary projects, Killip also brought to the work a particular kind of visual sensibility, which demands further interrogation. Killip was born and grew up on the Isle of Man and after working in London for a while returned to the Isle of Man to begin his first major documentary project. Between 1968 and 1972 he produced the photographic work which was eventually published in book form. It is in the connections between the Isle of Man work and his later documentation in England that one finds a key to Killip’s visual imagination. Killip’s photographic work in the Northern coastal communities of Askam and Skinningrove although at one level the documentation of particular lives can also be understood as an attempt to place those represented within a personal vision. In the communities of the North East Killip saw immigrant workers brought in to work in steel through industrialization, but with backgrounds in fishing and agriculture which they were able to sustain. Arguably they provided a link to a pre-industrial past, and also a link with his own background in the peasant culture of the Isle of Man - “my work in England is mixed up with those changes”. Killip understood his work as a way of trying to “open a dialogue with that history”.16

For Killip industrialization is perceived as negative
Kids with collected junk near Byker Bridge, 1971

Sirkka-Liisa Kontinen
All images from the Byker series (reproduced courtesy of the photographer)

Girl playing a piano in a derelict house, 1971
Raby Bingo, ('The Coffin'), Commercial Road – Oban Road, 1975

The living room of Harry and Bella Burness, Raby Street, 1975
Paul Trevor - Sunday afternoon, Mozart Street, Granby, Liverpool, 1975 (reproduced courtesy of the photographer). This is the opening image from Survival Programmes (Exit 1982). Trevor lived and photographed in the Everton district of Liverpool for six months whilst working on this documentary project; he also spent time photographing in Toxteth.

EXIT PHOTOGRAPHY GROUP
Exit consisted of three photographers, Chris Steele-Perkins, Chris Battye and Paul Trevor. In the publication that came out of the work made during the mid to late seventies, which included transcribed interviews as well as photographs (Exit 1982), individual photographs were not attributed. “our responsibility throughout has been for the work as a whole” (p.7). Trevor recalls that they looked at the model of shooting scripts used by the US Farm Security Administration when planning the work, though in actual fact the photographers worked more or less individually. The images reproduced here are by Paul Trevor.
In an interview Trevor discusses the importance of children as a first line of defense in the communities he has photographed in Britain and elsewhere. Acceptance by the children of the community was therefore seen as an important first step in building a sustained documentary practice.

One aim of the book was to make connections between the conditions in which working class people live and wider political and economic processes. The political analysis is conveyed by the building of a visual narrative that has its climax in the images of street conflict that dominate the final section.
force cutting people off from the past – "for me there is very little...difference between a coal mine, a steel mine and the Pirelli factory, they're all pretty awful...the rough end of industrial production" – whereas ironically for many of the documentary photographers in the North, and in fact in the working class political struggles of the class life up to that point, and still resonate in the popular symbolism of working class life, ceased to provide the main focus for photographic documentation. Instead, there is a greater emphasis on sites of cultural consumption and the home, including in some cases the detailed recording of the everyday lives of individual families.

1980s, it was the very communities and patterns of life created by industrialization that were under threat and in need of political support and cultural articulation.

FROM WORKERS TO CONSUMERS?

In comparison with the work that originated in the 1970s, the work that began to be produced in the 1980s and early 1990s represents a significant shift, both visually and methodologically, in the representation of working class lives. Representations of communal spaces such as the street, the pub and the workplace which had dominated many visual studies of working...
subject of technical determinants, I want to argue that it was also indicative of a shift in concerns, from an explicitly political to a cultural representation of working class life. Rather than presenting the development as a stylistic innovation led by particular practitioners, I would like to suggest the emergence of the color school in British social documentary photography can be traced back to the work in the 1970s that began to systematically record working class culture, and partly from the inside. Although there are clear differences in terms of political commitment to those represented, there is a continuity of visual and cultural concerns between the living room interiors in Konttinen's *Byker* and the collaboration between sociologist Nicholas Barker and photographer Martin Parr (1992) to record people in the domestic interiors they had fashioned.

The move into color arguably signalled a closer interest in the texture and aesthetic qualities of the living spaces of the subjects of the photographic work. Graham’s particular take on, what in photographic terms might be considered a traditional subject in the history of documentary photography, (largely male) unemployment was very much about the environment in which this was experienced – “lemon green walls, orange Formica benches and flickering fluorescent lights” (Graham 1986).

Similarly, it is interesting that interior decoration seems to be a consistent theme in the reception of the work of Nick Waplington and Richard Billingham. In both cases reviewers find the images simultaneously fascinating and repulsive, echoing responses to visual alterity common in cross-cultural encounters: “These suffocating interiors are not the accidental result of indifference or accumulation but, far more disturbingly, have been created on purpose, with some care even” (Williams 1996: 31); “the interiors bear all the grubby claustrophobic signs of bad British housekeeping. But Waplington isn’t appalled by the overflowing ashtrays, cheap furniture, kitsch-lined shelves, and low ceilings; indeed, it's complete lack of irony or distance from the subjects that makes these pictures so incredibly beautiful in their frightening way” (Spring 1992: 100). What is it that the reviewer finds frightening here? That they may be seduced by what they know by culture and education to be bad taste?

There are a number of reasons for such a shift in focus. First, as I have suggested the emergence of the notion of consumption rather than work as the locus of cultural identity became more prominent. Second, in relation to this, color photographic imagery in advertising and elsewhere was altering the visual culture, inevitably visual practitioners were responding to this context. Paul Trevor of the Exit group worked in parallel on a photographic project about television (‘A Love Story’) which he saw as the “flipside” to the world presented in *Survival Programmes.* In methodological terms photographic practice was also influenced by debates that questioned both the possibility and legitimacy of representing others. The corresponding lack of faith in narratives of political change suggested a more relativistic and increasingly circumscribed practice. I think it is also arguable that for the first time a significant number of photographers were emerging who themselves came from working class backgrounds, and therefore had a different relation to working class spaces than those who had gone before, though of course this was true of some of the earlier work discussed already.

The title of Nick Waplington's first publication—*Living Room*—which has subsequently been taken as the title for the body of work as a whole, draws attention to the significance of the representation of domestic space. A simple count of the photographs confirms the dominance of interior spaces. In the fifty eight photographs that make up Living Room, thirty seven are of interior spaces, another 12 depict the immediate exterior of the houses, with the rest being made up of various photographs which suggests some sense of community space, the school, the doctors, the news agent. This can be seen as a reversal of the balance in Konttinen’s *Byker*, where the interior is a secondary theme in relation to more public communal spaces. What Waplington offers in the series of images is a sense of communal, shared space centered on the domestic interior. Although in many ways this is a contemporary vision, and the specificity of the work to time and place is important to the photographer, there is in Waplington’s quotation of earlier photographic images of working class life (cf. *Picture Post*), a romantic reference to a disappearing sense of community. I’m thinking here particularly of the scenes in which the street is being used as an extension of the domestic space as a place for children to play, and adults to talk - these make up a very small, but I suggest, significant number of images. One might compare also the opening image in *Survival Programmes*, as a further example of this type of image used to evoke an entire view of working class life. Waplington makes
Waplington almost excluded this image from the publication on the basis of its traditional structure.

NICK WAPLINGTON
(Originals in color. All images reproduced courtesy of the photographer)
This image from the second publication in the 'Living Room' series shows one of the characters looking through a copy of the first publication.
this explicit in his introduction to the second book: “This is a large, close-knit community; everyone takes care of everyone else and nothing is too much trouble. At one time, there were a lot of communities like this one, but modern living no longer allows it. Nowadays, most people seem to love being in their own personal worlds. Thankfully that is not so everywhere”. The images, then, are positioned as representing a last bastion of communal values. It is interesting that in the context of a society that is increasingly placing an emphasis on mobility and the ownership of the means of transport, Waplington presents images of cars as things that do not work, or, in what I find one of the most intriguing images in the series, they suggest a sense of foreboding.

A number of other photographers share this concern to record in detail domestic spaces, including Anthony Haughey in his study – ‘Home’ – of Catholic families in Ireland and Richard Billingham in his study of his parents (1996). All but three of the images in Ray’s a Laugh are taken inside Billingham’s parents’ flat. The three that are taken outside – close-up images of birds – are intended no doubt to offer a kind of visual poetic counterpoint to the interiors and the condition of the main character Ray. Billingham offers a different view of domestic space, one that draws attention continually to the boundary between inside and out. Unlike Waplington this is not a communal space that has a web of links to local sites, but instead is one of confinement. Several images in the book draw our attention to the edge of the domestic space, but instead of offering a view of outside deliberately frustrate it. As Billingham says of his father: “If he went outside he became ill. He had a friend from a neighboring tower block – himself an alcoholic – who came around to make strong home-brew for him. This was much cheaper than normal beer and meant that Ray didn’t have to venture outside to the off-licence” (Billingham 1996).

One of the most striking things about the work of Waplington and Billingham is the representation of working class masculinity within a domestic space. Images of working class men have predominantly been either directly or indirectly about physical work, the aesthetic possibilities inherent in black and white photography have often been harnessed to good effect in giving expression to this view of working class life. It is significant that in a period in which traditional manual employment has been in rapid decline in Britain, these two bodies of work come to prominence representing working class men almost without reference to work.

At first glance the photographic approach adopted by these photographers seems to be one of extreme naturalism. Despite the intimacy of the scenes which the photographs record, the subjects rarely appear conscious of the photographer’s presence. Yet, this in itself is a kind of clue to the circumstances that surrounded the production of this work. The photographer’s presence is not that of a stranger, but instead it is clear that Waplington is as at home within this environment as his subjects are at home with him. As is true of ethnographic practice generally, so with photography, the resulting image is, in part at least, dependent on the particular quality of the interaction between photographer and subject. One image shows a girl crying approaching the camera, would she approach the camera in this way if the photographer was a stranger within this context? Indeed, access to many of the scenes in the work of both photographers is highly dependent on the particular relationship between photographer and subject.

Susan Sontag’s characterization of the photographer as a tourist in other people’s realities (Sontag 1979) does not apply in the context of the work of Waplington, Billingham or Haughey. Billingham chose to photograph the fraught domestic life of his parents, Haughey returned to where his uncle lived in Ireland to photograph family life, motivated in part by an desire to explore his own relationship to Catholicism, and Waplington’s subjects could be considered as an adopted extended family with whom he clearly has a close relationship. The long-term engagement on which the photographic work is based brings the work close to a form of ethnography. Harper refers to Waplington’s work as a “visual ethnography of daily life” (Harper 1998: 37), however there are two distinct issues. First, the biographical link with the subjects, and second, the structuring of an approach around visual rather than textual recording. Waplington’s work was the result of a methodology structured by the rhythm of his photographic practice, and in that sense is a distinct kind of ethnographic approach:

What basically used to happen was when I first started making the pictures, I used to shoot during the day. I’d go down to the college, the technician would give me the films from the day before and I’d go and contact sheet them in the evening, then I’d
go down to the Newcastle Arms have a few beers and then go home, and then in the morning I’d go back there and I’d take the contact sheets from the day before, and they’d look through them, and they actually became very good at looking at contact sheets, then the next day I’d maybe make some prints, and I used to give them prints, so by the time it came to put the book together in 1990 they were well aware of the pictures, they’d seen them at a couple of exhibitions, they had prints of all of them.

The relationship between photographer and subject raises important questions. Perhaps most importantly, can this work be considered as a form of cultural self-representation? If the work does not exactly fulfil what Don Slater argues is the promise of photography, to enable people to tell their own stories (Slater 1995), then it does come close to it in an interesting way.

A brief comparison with photographic documentary from Britain in the 1930’s is revealing. The seeming ease with which these photographers are able to make photographs at such close range contrasts strongly with the social awkwardness, such as that recounted by Humphrey Spender, which has accompanied many other photographic studies of working class life. The use of photographs to document working class life in the North of England in the 1930’s was predicated on a social and hence spatial separation between the photographer and the photographed. As Stanley points out in his study of the methods of Mass-Observation: “the only way to be sure that ‘natives’ were not acting up was to catch them about their ordinary life without then- knowledge. Consequently, in the M-O records, there are almost no photographs of interiors” (Stanley 1981: 128). This social divide has visual and aesthetic consequences.

Gillian Rose, also discussing photographs of working class life in the 1930’s, though in this case from East London, directs attention to images of the street, often taken showing the houses in linear perspective, imposing a sense of visual order (Rose 1997: 283). Similarly, Rose draws attention to the way in which women can be seen standing in doorways in formal poses for the camera physically and symbolically barring entry to the home: “Documentary photography’s perspective produced a viewing position that distanced the photographer (and, through him or her, their audience) from the photographed people and places” (Rose 1997: 284). As I have argued above, Waplington’s use of a similar visual construction in a small number of the Living Room series photographs, both situate the work in the broader context of representations of working class life, but also signal a break from this work.

The elision Rose makes here between the photographer and the viewer, is no doubt correct for the context about which she is writing. However, the work under discussion here evidences a more complex relationship between photographer and viewer. In these bodies of work it would be a mistake to assume that the viewer and photographer have similar relationships to the space represented. Indeed, part of the interest of the work is precisely this difference. The photographers make visually available spaces with which they have an intimate relationship, but which the viewer does not. These bodies of work are insider accounts, and not simply the result of a long term study, made available for wider consumption.

Waplington’s comment that, “For me the pictures are just a record of the great times we have together”, could be made by many people talking about the purpose of keeping a family album, and this is the frame of reference which is used by the families represented: “In 1991 Living Room was published. Suddenly Janet, family, and friends were in print, and we all looked at the book and laughed, and reminisced about the moments it contained. Then it was put away like any family album and saved for moments of quiet reflection”. This is reinforced visually by two images in the second of the two Living Room series books, one of which shows the earlier book being viewed by a family member, and the other showing the wedding photograph used on the cover adorning the living room wall. Billingham on the other hand describes his image making as an attempt to make sense of what was a difficult context: “I was just trying to make order out of chaos”, indicating an inner psychological motivation for the work. Nevertheless, despite these caveats, it is clear that the images have been taken up and circulated in public contexts. Despite any claims to the contrary on the part of the photographers this makes them part of a public discourse on contemporary working class life in Britain. Several commentators, including Irvine Welsh in an essay in Weddings, Parties, Anything, make reference to the photographs as images of poverty in post-industrial economies.

Despite the fact that Living Room is presented
with virtually no contextualization, the work can still be considered political in its intent, though the intervention is at a broader cultural level. Although he may be open to the charge of Romanticism, Waplington was attempting to articulate a positive version of life in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain for those who had been most denigrated by recent politics. The work was deliberately and consciously against both Thatcherite values and the kind of visual representations that viewed working-class people living in a kind of low-end consumer nightmare surrounded by cheap goods and rubbish (cf. Parr 1986). The images are then both a documentary recording but also part of a visual polemic or dialogue about contemporary society. One of the mistakes of anthropological photography is the belief that the meanings of images can be restricted to the former, thereby ignoring their cultural and political import.

**Towards a Theory of Photographic Visualization**

I want to conclude by drawing out a number of issues that I think are important to a theory of visualization, that is to the understanding of the making of photographic images of cultures and societies, whether by anthropologists or others. A theory of visualization, I suggest, will need to consider two principal elements: the methodological, and the aesthetic.

Methodologically the making of photographs of others can be understood as a particular kind of ethnographic engagement. It therefore requires to be understood in its own terms not merely as an adjunct to participant observation. The way in which the photographer relates to the photographed is of some considerable significance. Spender’s effort to become an unobserved observer through a process of building trust and familiarity while photographing a family in Stepney in 1934, is considerably different in practical and ethical terms from the kind of covert photography he engaged in for Mass-Observation, and which at times brought him into conflict with his subjects (Spender & Mulford 1982: 127). Neither is it simply a matter of being open with the camera. In relation to his images of the Jarrow Hunger Marches, some of which were published in The Left Review, Spender recounts the resentment of the marchers who saw an exploitative element and a lack of commitment in his joining the march ten miles outside of London. Similarly, there are important ethical and moral considerations that pertain to the construction of visual accounts of culture. These might parallel those involved in the construction of ethnographic texts, but they are not the same. Visual accounts for example cannot be anonymized in the way that texts can. It is interesting that Spender’s documentation of the northern industrial city of Bolton, went under the generalizing title of “Worktown”. However, it is only separation in time and place of the making of the work and its publication that makes this strategy genuinely effective. The publication of photographic work closer in time and place to its origination enters the photographs into a more local politics of representation, as Spender discovered in his photographing of Tyneside for Picture Post when the published images were challenged as misleading by local politicians. The initial reception of Waplington’s Living Room work in Nottingham is an example of how the representation working class life in inner cities continues to be strongly contested. The work, which documented a particular housing estate in the city, became known at the same time as the local council were involved in trying to improve the image of the estate, in particular the reputation that had built up through the local press of the estate as an area notorious for crime and drug use. The council saw Waplington’s work as reinforcing this view of the estate and commissioned a photographer to take more ‘positive’ images in order to stage a counter exhibition. Waplington is also acutely conscious of the fact that the publication of his photographs has made the subjects vulnerable to invasions of privacy by journalists and others who have seen the work.

One also has be aware that photographs have a particular cultural value as artifacts, independent of their place within a particular documentary study, in a way that is not equally true of ethnographic texts. Konttinen’s work at Byker, for example, began with her setting up a photographic studio and taking portraits for free, “which was a further attempt to establish a relationship with the people there. The giving away of photographs was always there from the beginning as a way of saying thank you for taking people’s time...The photographs were appreciated and they ended up on the mantelpieces” (Martin 1983: 1160). Chris Killip offers a particularly striking example. After the drowning of a young man who had been in a boat at Skinningrove where Killip was photographing, the photographer was asked by the person’s mother if he had any photographs of him. Killip replied that he did not—“I went home that
night and nearly hit myself over the head with a hammer, I’d answered her in the wrong way, in the sense that did I have any pictures I was thinking of my pictures, do I have my pictures of Simon, meaning the pictures that I think are good...I had a lot of pictures of Simon”. From his negatives Killip was able to create an album of sixty images which he gave to the mother. On two later occasions Killip also made up albums of people who died.\(^27\) Photographic images, then, are not simply the outcome of the relationship between photographer and photographed, but also an aspect of that relationship, as objects of collaborative reflection and exchange.

In contrast to issues of methodology and the ownership and display of images, anthropologists have given relatively little attention to the visual-aesthetic aspect. The question of visual style is one that is often perceived as problematic for visual anthropology. Although photography has had a significant, if marginal, presence in anthropology, and to a lesser extent sociology; with a few notable exceptions, the work of professional image makers has been much less discussed. One reason for this is the predominance of naturalistic modes of photographic interpretation. The photographic image is treated as unproblematic, and theoretically, if not always technically, transparent. For example, the camera is used simply as a visual notebook to record social phenomena such as gesture, dress and the organization of social space. Indeed, for the anthropologist or sociologist as photographer, professional training as an image-maker may be perceived to get in the way of, rather than assist the research process, as is indicated in the title of a book by Hagaman, *How I Learned not to be a Photojournalist* (Hagaman 1996). Michael Young’s discussion of Malinowski’s photographic practice equates the photographic image with a straight-on middle distance viewpoint. Having dismissed the character of Malinowski’s interaction with his subjects as the reason for his photographic style, Young argues that

> The only plausible explanation is that his marked preference for the middle distance was methodologically driven, albeit of an inarticulately nature. The implication is that Malinowski invariably felt obliged to capture a background, a setting, a situation, a social context. He sought to inscribe visual clues to what he was later to define in a theoretical contribution to linguistics as “context of situation” (Young 1998: 18).

Malinowski is reproached for the consideration of formal qualities in the images, which are seen as a distraction from the true concerns of the ethnographer: “[the] photograph of juxtaposed logs and sticks of varying bulk and texture is further testimony to Malinowski’s occasional surrender to an aesthetic impulse. It conveys little ethnographic information, though the inscription on the reverse dutifully appeals to realism” (Young 1998: 147). This is not a criticism of Young’s analysis of Malinowski’s images, but simply to wonder if in all cases the question of the visual can be dealt with so simply.

Documentary photographers are often seen to be giving greater weight to the visual at the expense of the subject. Becker argues that the conventional approach to photographic criticism is to distinguish between photographs that are informational and those that are expressive. In other words to mark the boundary between scientific and artistic photographic practices. This can be construed as an institutional problem, social scientific research demands valid representations, whereas the art world demands stylistic innovation.\(^28\) I concur with Becker when he argues that this distinction is unhelpful to an understanding of documentary photographs, which derive at least part of their significance from their social reference; and that in any case the distinction is a false one – “every photograph has some of both, and that has consequences for the way we look at, experience, think about, and judge photographs of all kinds” (Becker 1986). However, Becker’s point that the stylistic devices available to the photographer offer the means to emphasize some facts and de-emphasize others, is only the most obvious issue in relation to the visual and aesthetic.\(^29\)

> What I want to suggest here is the notion that visual representations have historical and cultural depth.\(^30\) Killip’s photograph of the Jarrow youth taken in 1976, for example, invokes through the reference to this symbolic location a whole history of working class struggle.\(^31\) As I hope I have demonstrated, photographs of working class life are not transparent windows on the world, but instead are competing versions, defining themselves and being defined in relation to other visual accounts. A selection of the photographic work produced since the formation of Amber/Side was exhibited in a series of eight exhibitions that toured regional venues in 1995 and 1996, as a means to explore the significance of images of the communities’ recent past in a period of
redefinition. The aim of the work was described as "reflect[ing] on a past which in many cases has disappeared, yet is still uppermost in our minds when we come to define particular communities around the region...The work does not lay claim to delivering some kind of definitive history of the region. Yet Side's consistent policy of documenting everyday life, the unremarkable, the non-newsworthy, does reveal a different interpretation of the history of the period to, say, that which has been generated by public relations and news organizations" (Side 1995: 2). What needs to be considered is the currency of visual representations in an increasingly professionalized image dominated society.

The historical depth of visual imagery is clearly not lost on Killip, who, when invited to return to Jarrow to photograph in 1996, deliberately worked in color in order to avoid the slippage into pastness that would arguably surround images produced in black and white. Over time the photographs and the ways of life they visualize become resources of social and cultural memory and imagination; the indexical becomes iconic. The reality of the North East in the photography of Chris Killip becomes a "place of memory" (Augé 1995), perhaps an "historical fantasy", at least for viewers who have no other knowledge of, or connection with, the region.

In his paper "In Search of a Social Aesthetic" MacDougall draws attention to the importance of the aesthetic dimension of everyday life. A social aesthetic, he argues, consists of a complex of interrelated elements, in the example he gives of the life of a particular school in Northern India, "such things as the design of buildings and grounds, the use of clothing and color, the rules of dormitory life, the organization of students' time, particular styles of speech and gesture, and all the rituals of everyday life" (MacDougall 1999). For my purposes here, while I want to retain something of the notion of a social aesthetic as MacDougall describes it – it is, I believe, central to the concerns of the photographic practices I have been discussing here – I also want to draw attention to the further visual aesthetic layer that inevitably mediates any attempt to represent the texture of social and cultural life in a medium such as photography. Visual anthropology should consider both aspects: the visual and aesthetic dimension in everyday life; and the ways in which everyday life has been visualized through photography.

What I want to argue is that those concerned with the visual representation of cultures must make two kinds of commitment. First, a methodological commitment to understand the cultures in which they work. This is a commitment from which no anthropologist is likely to dissent. Second, they must also seek to understand the complexity of the visual domain into which their work is entered. The complex mediascape of competing images of cultures and societies cannot be ignored. Although it would be an extreme position to argue that cultures exist only through their visualization, it is certainly true that the majority rely on visual images for their knowledge of other cultures, and that therefore those images have real effects in the world. The reproducibility and circulation of images of other people has profound moral and ethical implications, with which visual anthropologists have necessarily to engage.

Acknowledgments

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Note on Illustrations

The images reproduced here inevitably represent only a small fraction of the work that is discussed, and for that reason I would suggest that interested readers look to the published books cited in the paper. However,
two omissions warrant brief comment. Both Richard Billingham and Chris Killip declined permission to reproduce any of their photographs to accompany this article. Billingham felt that he did not want to be associated with the other photographers referenced in the article, and wanted to downplay the representational and documentary aspects of the work. In my view this is a naïve perspective on how the work can be understood, and the historical contexts and practices upon which it depends for its effectiveness. It is also perhaps, slightly disingenuous particularly given that his book was edited by Julian Germain, a photographer whose own work has been about the post-industrial North, and Michael Collins, formerly a picture editor with a national newspaper magazine. Killip’s reasons I think are similar, though he declined to articulate them. Although he worked closely with Amber/Side for a period during the late seventies and early eighties, he has since deliberately distanced himself from the Amber/Side group and their approach to photography, preferring to cultivate a more individualistic perception of his own artistic purpose.

Notes

1. “Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen lived in the old Byker area of Newcastle for six years and photographed it for twelve”, (back cover, Konttinen 1988).
2. Tom Harrisson who set up the Mass Observation project of which Spender became a part was an anthropologist, and Mass Observation had as an advisor Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski also contributed an essay to the M-O publication First Year’s Work. Spender recalls attending a course given by Raymond Firth in preparation for another of Harrisson’s planned projects, though this project was never actually carried out.
4. For a discussion of the nostalgic reinvestment in this type of image in the 1990s see Taylor & Jamieson 1997.
5. According to Paul Trevor it was the political nature of the work that led many national venues to decline the opportunity to show the Exit photographic work, though arguably it was as much if not more to do with the changing concerns of photographic galleries since the original production of the work. As Val Williams suggests in her interview with Trevor, and as has been pointed out by one of the reviewers of this paper, the work was probably seen as representing a period in British photography that had been left behind (Paul Trevor interviewed by Val Williams, 1991, Oral History of British Photography Collection). The Side Gallery in Newcastle was one of the few galleries willing to show the work and now holds the material as one of the collections in the Amber/Side archive.
6. This question was put to Spender directly in an interview by Grace Robertson. However, although Spender did not make this distinction he did make a different kind of distinction in respect of some of his photographic work. Spender talks about his three unpaid jobs – coverage of the Jarrow marches, the photographs in Stepney for the probation officer Clemence Paine, and the work for Mass-Observation – as linked to his left-wing political stance. The fact that they are unpaid is what marks them out, ironically as Spender was well aware it was his private income and class position that allowed him to do work unpaid. It is not unfair to say that he saw this as an indication of his commitment, though he is also aware of its role in appeasing his conscience. Humphrey Spender interviewed by Grace Robertson, 1992, Oral History of British Photography Collection.
7. The photographs were dropped from the revised edition published in 1982 by Croom Helm.
8. For a discussion of the American view of British social documentary from the 1980s see Kismaric 1990. (The exhibition brought together the work of Chris Killip, Graham Smith, John Davies, Martin Parr and Paul Graham).
9. The group is still based and working actively in Newcastle, with a number of its original members remaining, including photographer Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen. A current collaborative project looks at the impact of the demise of the mining industry on communities in the Durham Coalfield area.
10. “During the early seventies the photographers within Amber felt an acute need to create a gallery (Side) in order to exhibit their own work, and to be able to see and show the best of international work. This was at a time when there were no galleries in Newcastle showing photography” (personal communication, Murray Martin, March 2000).
11. Ron McCormick, was the initial choice of the group to run the gallery, and he played an important part in raising funding. However, partly perhaps because he did not share the same ideological and political commitments to the use of photography as Amber/Side, he only lasted six months. McCormick was followed by Murray Martin (one of the founder members of Amber Associates) for a period of two years and then by Killip for about the same length of time. The philosophy of the group was to have a practitioner-led exhibition space, hence the relatively short periods that individuals ran the gallery, and decisions were made collectively by the gallery team. This account is based on the Killip interview held at the National Sound Archive (Chris Killip interviewed by Mark Haworth-Booth, 1997, Oral History of British Photography Collection) and personal communication with Murray Martin, March 2000. Killip offers a more individualistic account of the work of the gallery, and in particular his role, whereas Martin argues that the gallery, like all the practical work at Amber, was never the responsibility of any one individual but instead was a collective enterprise. According to Martin, it was he, rather than Killip, who did most of the commissioning during this early period, though with Killip playing a strongly influential advisory role.

12. The current archive database lists 191 separate holdings with a varying number of prints in each. The majority of the holdings, though certainly not all, are bodies of work concerning the region. Personal communication, Richard Grassick, Side Gallery, November 1999.

13. Side 1995, wrongly attributes these images as being taken in Scotswood. Personal communication with the photographer, March 2000.


15. The latter texts emphasize the North East accent and vernacular, which I think reads very differently now than it would have done when the book was first produced.


18. Although Waplington noted that there was no deliberate intention to make visual reference in the way I suggest, he did make the following comment on the street image with the child in the bath: “I almost didn’t use that because I thought it was too traditional in its structure” (Nick Waplington interviewed by the author 2/6/98).

19. My comments here refer to the construction of the book which it has been suggested to me was as much the work of Michael Collins and Julian Germain (Billingham’s college tutor) as it was the work of Billingham himself.

20. Paul Graham’s book Beyond Caring (Graham 1986) which records the scenes inside numerous social security waiting rooms perhaps signals the endpoint of this type of photography in the context of contemporary Britain.


22. Waplington first began to photograph the two families soon after he came to Nottingham, where he already had family connections, to study photography at Trent Polytechnic: “what actually happened was that I was photographing my grandfather and Dawn, one of the ladies in the Living Room book, used to collect his pension for me, and I was photographing my grandfather in his house, and she came round. So she walked into the situation where I was photographing, I didn’t walk into her house with a camera. She came with her kids and I was photographing him and they wanted their pictures taken, and she just said why don’t you come round and take pictures at our house, take some pictures of the kids for me. I knew her husband anyway, and I’d been going round to their house to watch football on Sunday afternoons, I just hadn’t taken my camera. So I tried it one Sunday, I took my camera with me and I took a particular picture which ended up in the Living Room book, which at that particular stage was by far and away the most interesting and the best picture I’d ever taken” (Nick Waplington interviewed by the author 2/6/98). Although the Living Room work was begun while Waplington was at college, it now represents a body of work developed over more than ten years.

23. This could be referred to as “consent through habituation. Not only do the subjects know they are being photographed, they get to see how they are being photographed” (Nick Stanley 1998, personal communication).
24. Photography made a small but significant contribution to the methods of the Mass Observation movement in Britain (see Stanley 1981).
25. Humphrey Spender interviewed by Grace Robertson, 1992, Oral History of British Photography Collection. Jarrow, a former shipbuilding and coalmining town on Tyneside, lent its name to the hunger marches that took place during the economic depression of the 1930s when the unemployed from across Britain walked to London to demand the right to work.
28. Tagg (1988) discusses the institutional separation of these two dominant “photographies”.
29. There is in Becker’s argument an implicit structuralist theory of photography underlying his view that angle of view, focus, etc. can be combined by the photographer to create or emphasize meaning.
30. This notion is developed from Foster in his paper on the borrowings from anthropology in recent art practice (Foster 1995 & 1996).
31. See note 25.
32. One might consider as analogous developments, the emergence in recent years of an increasing number of working class heritage sites, for example around mining communities, which both visualize and perform the “nearly past” (Stanley 1998).
33. This interpretation of Killip’s In Flagrante was suggested to me in an interview with photographer Nick Waplington. Waplington made the following comments: “In Flagrante is a very strong book, but I just think that he was too tied up in Paul Strand and the historical references to Paul Strand, and I feel that because of that he made very quantifiable decisions to cut out things within the frame of the images that actually pin those images down to the time in which the pictures were taken, therefore he was producing a sort of historical fantasy book, and therefore even though some of those pictures are extremely strong and extremely powerful, as a work as a whole I think it’s a very poor interpretation of the eighties” (Nick Waplington interviewed by the author 2/6/98).

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