

Chapter 1

Knocking-off Time in the North: Images of the Working Class and History in L.S. Lowry and Mitchell and Kenyon

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‘As a crowd they lie there; as a crowd they rise again.’ Elias Canetti.

This chapter is concerned with the meanings of northernness in English culture. I understand northernness to represent a complex set of interrelated ideas about the working class and history which I intend to explore in two key recent manifestations: the Mitchell and Kenyon ‘factory gate’ films and the rehabilitation of the work of L.S. Lowry in the 2013 Tate Britain Lowry exhibition curated by T.J. Clark and Anne M. Wagner (*Lowry and the Painting of the Modern Life*) (Clark and Wagner 2013). As Tom Gunning has argued in his essay on the Mitchell and Kenyon factory gate genre, ‘Pictures of Crowd Splendor’, these films represented the emergence of the working class ‘onto a new stage of visibility’ (Gunning 2004: 49). However, counterbalancing the excitement of this appearance (then and now), there is a qualified nostalgia in Gunning’s account for a working class as it was once conceptualized in historical materialism. For instance, he talks of the working class as being ‘putatively the driving force of any age’ (ibid.: 49). It is the combination of *emergence* and *promise*, followed by *disappearance* and *defeat*, a combination summed up by Gunning in the idea of the once ‘imaged and promised’ but now ‘forgotten futures’ of early cinema, that has become such an established part of representation of the industrial ‘North’ (ibid.: 58). Nevertheless, I will argue that at the same time the Mitchell and Kenyon films help to re-introduce ‘the openness of the future into the past’ and thereby interrupt the solidity of that ‘North’ (Zizek 2013: xviii). Stored unseen and forgotten in a Blackburn cellar for most of the twentieth century, evidence of an ‘early’ cinema which disappeared before World War I, the fate of the films, their belonging to a chancy, hopeful ‘lost and found narrative’ allows us to review the utopian energies released by what was perhaps *the* encounter of cultural modernity: the working masses with the cinematograph. In their miraculous *rendezvous* with our present the films allow us to reflect on some of the continuing pressures of class ideology which their original public manifestation broke through. Something was going on here – I

will refer to it as the ‘crowd-effect’ – which retains its importance in theoretical discussions of the political potential and the metamorphoses of the working class in the present.

L.S. Lowry painted his famous pictures – which by the mid-twentieth century had become synonymous with northerness - in the same part of the industrial North West featured in the Mitchell and Kenyon films. These canvases form an important inter-text with the latter, particularly the factory gate films. (For a long time, Lowry’s most frequently reproduced picture has been *Coming from the Mill* (1930)).

Figure 1.1

Lowry's most popular print: *Coming from the Mill* (1930)

In what follows I will attempt to show how Lowry’s work, particularly as it emerges in Clark’s critical analysis, helps us to refine the discussion of working class northerness. Although Clark’s account of Lowry does not directly mention Mitchell and Kenyon, the points of contact are clearly discernible in the Tate exhibition, which included Mitchell and Kenyon’s *Miners Leaving Pendlebury Colliery* (1901). Pendlebury was one of the locations known intimately to Lowry. I hope to show that Clark’s account of the spectacle of the industrial working class in Lowry, although sensitive to inter-class dynamics, tends to reproduce certain enduring (and recognizably ‘northern’) representations of the working class which are problematised in what I am claiming is a forgotten early cinematic inter-text. Furthermore, by using the work of Elias Canetti on crowds I intend to argue that the northerness of the working class in the Mitchell and Kenyon films is different from the northerness largely mythologised by Lowry, a mythology at times reproduced by Clark (Canetti 1987). Is it possible that Lowry’s canvases reconfigure the scene of the early cinema and a specific working class culture of northerness which we are in danger of failing to recognize? Although Lowry remains largely trapped within the ideological force-field of a specifically northern ‘caste’ culture of class, or what Clark refers to as the ‘apartheid’ model of class and which he misrecognises as a sign of Lowry’s authenticity and aesthetic power, is it possible that the endurance of the latter’s work lies in its still living but concealed attachment to an earlier northerness (Clark 2013: 43)?

Crucially Clark’s Lowry seems premised on his current rejection of left-utopianism and any classical Marxist politics of the proletariat. Indeed, a contemporary sense of political defeat

and dramatic socio-economic obsolescence has attached itself to the emblematic image of disorganized, disbanded industrial workers to mark the end of any plausible historical narrative dependent on the progressive agency of the proletariat as argued for in classical Marxism. The ‘factory gate’ films can help to problematise this ‘end of history’ thesis, and thereby capture a more dialectical and energized sense of northernness, one not restricted to an emotional tone of nostalgia and melancholy, but one which radiates an afterimage of the late nineteenth century ‘solidarity project’ with its associations of radical egalitarian promise and possibility (Garland 2001: 199). There is then a utopian or redemptive aspect behind the critical intention of the essay’s exploration of northernness. As Tom Nairn has argued in the context of his work on British nationalism, it was through the tradition of the ‘popular sovereignty of North’ that ‘equality’, the destruction of ‘class’ [ideologies of the English class system], and ‘a nationalist democracy’ have historically resonated (Nairn 1994: 244).

Lowry: Sealing the North

Northernness has had a long association with failure. The North’s socio-economic failure (its declining industrial power and its un-regenerated post-industrial moment) has been seen as subtending the political failure of the nineteenth and twentieth century socialist/Marxist hopes for the working class. These failures were then sealed in late twentieth century memory by an associated debacle of left-inspired post-war planning whose scars have often been linked to the North. A sense of failure and defeat have in turn produced a discourse of dysfunctionality which has attached itself to the social problems of post-industrial working class communities. Failure, defeat, dysfunctionality have haunted the north during the twentieth century, however, these durable aspects of northernness and their recognisable narrativisations of class, capitalism and history are themselves naturally open to historical shifts. For instance, the idea of the North as the truth of neoliberal capitalism was an important part of the 2013 dusting off and renovation of the reputation of Lowry at Tate Britain. That is to say, the North re-emerges, post the 2008 financial crash, as that which marks the hollowness of the neoliberal ideology of contemporary classlessness and the breakdown of contemporary narratives of capitalism and progress. Indeed, in their co-authored essay on the Lowry collection, Clark and Wagner see the painter’s early twentieth century vision of the industrial North prophetic of the ‘planet of slums’ to which contemporary capitalism has led us (Clark and Wagner 2013). As they say, Lowry’s Wigan

of 1925, and the contemporary edges of Shenzhen or Sao Paulo bear a striking resemblance to one another (ibid.: 19). Here the North is prophetic of a disastrous capitalist present rather than a residue of its past.

However, if the Lowry exhibition was critically conscious of the myths of neoliberal capitalism it also reproduced some well-established, core associations of northernness concerning the working class. We can explore these through the history of the concept of a *northern pastoralism*. Emerging in the inter-war period, as a response to the fear of class struggle in an era of economic dislocation, northern pastoralism helped to place the industrial north and its denizens within an English dominated class system. If the essence of Englishness was its Arcadian, pastoral peace and timelessness, then the industrial North traditionally struggled to locate itself within this national framework. To be northern was to be un-English, especially given the suggestion that northernness was an expression of an emergent, historically disruptive working class political presence. A northern urban pastoral could be identified and celebrated, however, if working class culture could be depoliticised and aestheticized. As Chris Waters puts it: ‘The pastoralisation of the industrial North in the 1930s was widespread and one of its effects was to render the region devoid of threatening political agency’ (Waters 1999: 131). What Waters calls the ‘English Lowry’ was celebrated precisely on these terms (ibid.: 132). His mass reproduced images became viewed as expressions of a beauty in sordidness; of a northern poetic fairyland (as we shall see, his manipulation of scale was crucial to this effect) and as a testament to a stoic, enduring, ‘richly textured’ inward turned culture of working class community (ibid.: 131).

By the 1960s this Lowryesque view of the North had become problematic. For instance, Tom Nairn, writing in the *New Left Review* in the early 1960s, constructed a narrative of the development of the working class from the early nineteenth century which emphasised, from a perspective sympathetic to Marxism, a historical blockage (Nairn 1964). As he put it: ‘The English working class is one of the enigmas of modern history’ (ibid.: 43). The enigma resided in the fact that ‘this titanic social force which seemed to be unchained by the rapid development of English capitalism [1800-1850] did not...emerge to dominate and remake English society’ (ibid.: 44). Instead, after the high tide of Chartism ebbed from the 1840s, this same ‘Colossus’ (55) / ‘Leviathan’ (ibid.: 53) / ‘Hercules’ (ibid.: 46), with its mighty mythic presence and its ‘giant’s task’ (ibid.: 48) lapsed into a ‘corporative mode existence’ (ibid.: 52), tragically captured and subordinated within the coils of an unmodernised bourgeois

hegemony, stuck fast in a peculiarly English social world ‘of the inexplicably concrete, the bizarre...[and] eccentric (ibid.: 54-5). There are two things to note about this account of the working class as a kind of *feudalised Frankenstein’s monster*. Firstly, Nairn’s lively prose is figuratively exploring Marx’s historical materialist schema: here is a proletarian Prometheus riding the forces of production, propelled into the future in such a way as to burst asunder the flimsy fetters of existing social relations of production. Except, in the English case, Prometheus has become a sleeping giant, an anti-Miltonic Samson buried beneath the ‘carapace of dead matter’ that represents the English class system, meekly accepting and imitating traditional norms of intra and inter class deference and hierarchy (ibid.: 56). I am not concerned here with the detail of Nairn’s historical explanation of this enigmatic reversal, all we need to note is that he presupposes some missed encounter between revolutionary Marxism and the English proletariat. In the 1960s this perceived suffocation of the English class system spurred on an interest in Nairn and the New Left generally with continental ‘theory’ which was seen as offering the ideological means to attack an unmodernised bourgeoisie and thereby lift into revolutionary class consciousness the slumbering working class giant. Subsequently, the missed encounter with Marxism became an important motif in British historiography. Clark’s catalogue essay for the Lowry exhibition cites the historical authority of Ross McKibbin whose research on British ideologies of class has sought to answer questions such as ‘Why there was no Marxism in Great Britain?’ (McKibbin 1994). Clark also cites Robert Roberts’ *The Classic Slum* as the work of a ‘great native informant’ (Clark 2013: 57) – noting his comment that ‘Marxists’ and ‘hotheads’ got ‘short shrift’ in Lowry’s Salford (ibid.: 62). Clark himself is adamant: Lowry’s world has no place for ‘Jesus or Marx’ (ibid.: 53). The North then, particularly Lowry’s vision of it, becomes the locus for this historical disconnection between the working class and its destiny.

If in the 1940s Marxist art historians of the industrial revolution such as Francis Klingender had viewed Lowry as a significant figure resisting romantic class picturesque for social realism, by the 1960s his canvases appeared to provide ample evidence to support Nairn’s reading of a corporatized working class – of class worlds separated from one another by clear boundaries and by the apparent impossibility as well as un-English undesirability of the logic of class struggle as opposed to the entirely acceptable logic of contained, endemic, grating, but never explosive, class antagonism and conflict (Waters 1999: 28). The tragic system of English class or caste culture - the ‘quiet madness of England’, its ‘endearing, exasperating Dickensian lunacy’ - is certainly present in Lowry’s North, and to that extent Clark’s

observations on it in his catalogue essay seem to carry weight (Nairn 1964: 55). However, this is the same Clark who shares the New Left origins of Nairn. Whilst one cannot imagine Nairn appreciating Lowry in the early 1960s, Clark, someone who has described himself as a Marxist, is an enthusiast in 2013. The clearest explanation of these developments lie in changing perceptions of the continued failure of any juncture between Marxism and the proletariat. Indeed, Clark wrote a bold essay in the *New Left Review* shortly before the Lowry exhibition entitled 'For a Left with No Future' in which he peremptorily rejected the political tradition of utopian, revolutionary Marxism and espoused instead a tragic, very un-1960s 'reformism' (Clark 2012: 73). This is a conclusion he has come to in the context of the political catastrophes of the twentieth century, and in response to the fact that neoliberal capitalism, despite its polarising, immiserating effects, and the financial crash of 2008, has so far stubbornly refused to be politicised in the mode of the left revolutionary tradition. The political qualities that Clark currently admires are those that recognise and respect the limitations imposed on us by our tragic, bloody human nature. He therefore advocates an ironic, modest, cautious, detached, stoic politics, geared to improving what one can through small steps, and avoiding the dangerousness of 'revolutionary stylistics' and the utopian, future directed discourse of infinite potential and perfectibility common within formations of modernity (ibid.: 57). Many of these values can be aligned with the ideology of northernness as an expression of working class culture, reversing their negative assessment in the sixties when they were viewed as signs of the backwardness, and historical obsolescence of Englishness. Half a century later, the same culture of class becomes not an enigmatic residue of historical failure for a frustrated political left, but a point of guidance for a chastened one. We might say that Clark uses Lowry to open up Nairn's 'carapace'. But what the latter had shudderingly described as a parochial, 'static, vegetative culture of working class apartheid' burying the English proletariat giant and keeping it distant from Marxism is now, in Clark's account, subject to a more understanding, less dismissive view (Nairn 1964: 56).

This persistence of certain core class meanings of northernness – regardless of how these meanings are valued – is also in evidence on the other side of the political divide. Take conservative philosopher Roger Scruton's celebration of his own family's northern background which he mediates through references to Lowry (Scruton 2001). Scruton's father was born in a key Lowry locale, Ancoats. As Scruton describes three generations of family history he builds up a picture in which his aestheticisation of the working class social via pastoral tropes helps to establish the value of a working class culture relying on distinctively

English qualities. This proud, penniless, hardy, respectable, honest, gentle working class retained its moral integrity despite, or perhaps because of the privations and miseries of industrial labour, and was grounded in a culture that knew the ‘joys of a community which lived for small increases and knew how to bear far greater loss’ (ibid.:143). Its thoroughly and inalienably English social instincts were ones of practical ‘clubbability’ not Marxist ‘class solidarity’ which for Scruton is a sentimental illusion of post-war Marxist historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson (ibid.:144-5). Scruton refers to this social instinct as ‘spontaneous’, an irrepressible English ‘joining-in’ and formation of ‘autonomous societies’ – citing the proliferation of those mitigating institutions of church, chapel, school, institute and friendly society which offered shelter to the northern working class during the Industrial Revolution (ibid.: 144-6). This English historical class narrative is pastoral in the sense that it depends on removing any suggestion of dangerous working class political agency of the kind that might be supposed to result from that class’s passage through the ‘inchoate world of the first industrial revolution’ (Nairn 1964: 43). Instead English pastoral emphasises the many cultural and social threads weaving together a hierarchical society that emerged from that traumatic transition to produce a harmonious, beautiful whole. Additionally, in Scruton’s version the class soothing of the pastoral does not represent a desire to ‘*equalise* the English [the left project], but to reconnect them to their history’ (my emphasis, Scruton 2001:148). In other words, the pastoral is a key form through which the mythification of the trauma of class history takes place.

Comically perhaps, it is hard to tell, Scruton’s family history reads like a Dickens novel. Serving girl and squire produce a bastard child; the girl ends up in the gutters of Manchester, but two generations later, Scruton’s father finds the ‘exit’ to the slum ‘maze’ in the rural heart of England, in the bosom of the middle class (ibid.:142). There is in Scruton a northern aestheticized ethics of austerity which fits with contemporary neoliberalism’s moralised landscapes of poverty and individual responsibility (he has little interest in those parts of his family who ended up in the gutter). His northern urban pastoral allows him to attack not just Marxist historians, but also ‘post-war planners and ideologues’ who destroyed the ‘enchanted’ maze of slums like Ancoats (Lowry is described as capturing some of this enchantment), causing his returning father, himself a socialist, to weep in despair (ibid.:143).

Clark may have no interest in the transparent ideologies of capitalism and nation that entrance Scruton, however, he does stress how Lowry avoided ‘left Leninist fantasies of

untroubled solidarity plus seething resentment at the factory gates', along with sentimental, epic romantic metanarratives of the Industrial Revolution in its sublime 'satanic' register, focusing instead on a complex reality through which the material conditions of the industrial working class emerged, including its 'real energy, obduracy and confinement' (Clark 61-2). In this way he characterises Lowry's achievement in terms of the latter's efforts to combine the realism of Frederick Engels and music hall comedy of George Formby Senior. Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class* (1845) has as its subject the same streets walked by Lowry who likewise attempted to take the measure of the 'immense' 'world historical' 'social fact' of the industrial North (ibid.: 21). At the same time Lowry found a form for this content which was modest, not overdramatised or melodramatic but 'little', scaled to manageable, everyday dimensions and tones, as in the music hall performances of Formby (ibid.:30). In other words, Lowry emphasises that ironic/humorous realist survivalism of the working class in preference to any heroic Marxist vision of a battling proletariat.

My argument is not that Clark is wrong about Lowry, although as we will see, I believe there is more to say about Lowry's engagement with the working class, but that there is a problematic confirmation, in the image of working class northernness he finds in Lowry, of his current vision of left politics (anti-utopian and anti-Marxist, or perhaps post-Marxist). We can further illustrate the complexity of Clark's Lowry if we consider his description of the latter's rejection of the 'grand view' of the modern, industrial scene (ibid.:33). Clark finds in Lowry an ethics of scale which aligns formal and stylistic choices with a particular view on the world. Early critical reception of Lowry assumed that the relationship between figure and landscape, one of littleness to monumentality, confirmed traditional class stereotypes in which the exaggerated tininess and therefore relative *imperceptibility* of the differences amongst the depicted human figures could be understood as an *absence* of difference. Clark and Wagner rightly dismiss these class prejudices which only see homogeneity in the working class – a class blindness which shades easily into de-humanising contempt expressed by critics in comments on Lowry's depiction of 'anthropomorphic vermin' and 'pea-brained homunculi' (Berger 2009:95). By contrast, Clark detects a different relationship between figure and landscape. For him, littleness in Lowry does not deny but registers the world historical. Thus, however inward turned the social world depicted, this vision of the working class is calibrated to register, in subtle ways, the immense historical forces stored up in the landscape. The little, or miniaturised world is neither patronisingly dismissed as insignificant, or sentimentalised, just as the larger world is not aggrandised as epic or sublime. To

overemphasise either pole would effectively falsify the relationship between class and history.

However much we might agree with Clark's reading of Lowry's careful attempt to capture both the specific reality of industrial scene and the detail of the working class's engagement with those constraining historical pressures, the problem remains - to what extent does his account refute those, like Waters', who have argued that Lowry is an urban pastoralist, dealing with an essentially 'inert and nostalgic' world of class and capitalism? (Clark 2013: 61). As Waters observes, the positing of an *English Lowry* against a *political Lowry* is a key moment in the formation of his wider post-war cultural significance. Critics like John Rothenstein argued that this English Lowry's value lay in the realism with which he engaged with 'squalid disorder' of the inter-war period, and how this offset the 'drab uniformity' of planned post-war social reconstruction (Rothenstein in Waters 1999: 132). This reactionary nostalgia and anti-utopianism was presented as a form of aesthetic honesty – there was not 'an iota of idealisation' in his pictures (Rothenstein in Rhode, S, 1979: xxii). There is an echo of Clark here, just as there is a similarity between Scruton and Clark's arguments about the necessary detachment of Lowry from any Left political 'fantasies'. But Scruton's account also demonstrates how the attachment to the anti-political Lowry, in its endorsement of the superior (northern) truth of an English working class, with its associated caste rather than class consciousness, accommodates itself easily to pastoral nostalgia and idealisation. For Waters, Lowry was a pastoralist who distanced himself both spatially from his class subject matter (through his characteristic view from above and use of the horizontal line demarcating the boundary between spectator and scene) and temporally (through an arrested allegiance to and repetitive imaging of the working class of the inter-war period, resonating with a political ambivalence about the post-war welfare state). The representational effect created was precisely that of a reassuring, sentimentalising and nostalgic 'beauty in the smoke' central to the urban pastoral (Waters 1999:125).

Clark maintains a different position. On one level he reproduces the standard pastoralist line, quoting Maurice Collis on the typical Lowryesque creation of 'beauty out of the ugliness of mean streets', however, he rejects the argument that this is the signature of sentimentalisation (Clark: 26). He appears then to endorse an inversion of the opposition between the English Lowry (urban pastoralist in Waters sense) and the political Lowry (a social realist), by granting the urban pastoral a superior kind of truth-telling which bypasses the putative

contradiction between ‘aestheticism’ and ‘social awareness’ (ibid.: 26). The urban pastoral is more truthful because it does not flinch from the inaesthetic ugliness of working class reality and at the same time draws out of this raw subject matter redemptive – aesthetic – qualities. By implication, social realism does flinch from this reality, prompted as it is by its political fantasies about the working class to produce a paradoxically sentimental realism.

Regardless of whether Lowry’s version of northern pastoralism engages more directly with the troubling social material it subjects to aesthetic transformation, it is important to remain mindful that what is central to the pastoral effect is the fixing of the class based subject matter in a mode where its political essence is absolutely known to be one thing rather than another. This is not something given emphasis by Clark, but it is readily visible in the tradition of the English Lowry: here the emphasis is on his work’s essential Englishness (Waters 1999:130), or its ability to ‘put the truth about the Lancashire scene and Lancashire people’ on the canvas (ibid.:126). Hence the significance of the critical emphasis on neutrality, affectlessness, a kind of nerveless steady gaze in this English Lowry – features which are also referred to by Clark. Such postures help to authenticate the belief that the class subject is truly known by Lowry in a way which precludes other kinds of knowing. As Berger argues, the effect achieved is the impression of an ‘essential changelessness’ (Berger 2009: 98). Incident in Lowry, ‘the bustle of the crowds...the fight, the accident’, ‘changes nothing’ (ibid.: 98). ‘In certain canvases this sense of unchanging time becomes an almost metaphysical sense of eternity’ (ibid.: 98-9).

But what if class reality is not so easily captured? In this instance, Clark’s assessment conforms to historical accounts which, as we have seen, are dependent on a notion of a frozen class landscape (corporatist, caste based, socially segregated and politically immovable). And these accounts of class history have been challenged, notably by Richard Johnson and Ellen Meiksins Wood, precisely because of their emphasis on social immobilism, cultural fixity and political petrification to the exclusion of any sense of the constantly animating pressure of capitalist relations of exploitation, antagonism and resistance working within class relations (Wood 1991, Johnson 1980). For instance, Johnson argues that Nairn’s history of class neglects a ‘pattern of challenge and response, action and reaction, problem and solution, threat and containment’ and instead creates a sense of class history in which ‘nothing much happens’ except ‘unending corporateness’ (Johnson: 88). Such apparent motionlessness conceals a seething, tense interlocking of class forces caught in the vice of

capitalist social relations. Thus, whilst I agree with Clark that Lowry can be seen to resist Tory clichés about the working class from the inter-war period, it needs to be emphasised that this is not because he is any less anxious about a society which is constantly de-stabilising class boundaries (inter/intra). After all, the threat of *déclassement* is perhaps the most recognisable theme/event in Lowry's biography, as well as an explicit topic in his work (see *The Removal* 1928).

Lowry may well give us a representation of the world of class as a 'system of separation', nevertheless he is equally fascinated with containing the threat of dynamic working class collectives and crowds. A *world apart* necessarily creates some sense of a *world unknown* – even for a *petit bourgeois*, boundary crossing, voyeuristic topographer and rent collector who has a free pass to navigate the slum. So whilst he might, as Clark argues, avoid sentimental illusions about working class unities and solidarities, it is also apparent that he wants to pin down or securely place this working class world, defusing its possible class threat. Clark has some interesting things to say about Lowry's vision of the working class collective. For instance, he discusses the difference between two versions of a single scene painted years apart - *A Town Square* (1928) and *Our Town* (1941). In the later canvas the relative cohesion and agglomeration of the foregrounded crowd is diminished by Lowry's opening up of the city vista in the background. This captures a tendency in Lowry to subtly undermine any collectivising logic of the working class crowd depicted. Likewise, Clark also notes that whilst Lowry seeds his pictures with suggestions of the emergence of small crowds in a characteristic motif which involves a 'thickening' of the tiny figures around solitary speakers in public spaces, these same crowds are always undermined by the 'cold concrete fact of the world up here' (Clark 2013: 51). It might well be possible to view this tension – between the world from 'down here', at the foot of the soapbox, at the centre of the forming crowd, to the 'world up there' - as precisely the tension described by historical materialism, according to which we make history, but not in circumstances of our own choosing. Indeed, Clark's argument is directed in this way – thus he attributes this tension to Lowry's 'materialism' (ibid.:51). But this is to ignore the fact that this view of the working class – undermined by the isolating dimensions of an alien world – also suits a particular political perspective, one uneasily watchful, always eager to emphasise the impossibility of working class collectives other than those occurring through random and unsustainable processes. As Clark says, over time, Lowry's work gave more prominence to the de-substantialising of those little 'congregations' which, we might argue, tended to figure his awareness of the possible

stirrings of working class political agency (ibid.:51). In the large scale canvases on the industrial scene from the 1950s, as Clark points out, all that is left of these dispersed, isolated crowds are ‘wisps, wraiths...transparencies’ abandoned in enormous decaying industrial panoramic vistas. As he then adds, these are landscapes which ‘hardly belong to Jesus or Marx’ (ibid.:53). But we need to be careful not to assume that the narrative of the end of industry depicted for example in *Industrial Landscape* (1955) reinforces a ‘materialist’ perspective on working class existence with the logic of history itself – an illusion perhaps conjured in Lowry’s late canvases as working class collective energies leak away into the panoramic, entropic and emptying spaces of the post-war North. This ‘materialism’ then, is decidedly not *historical materialism*.

It has often been noted that Lowry’s working masses seem oddly isolated – we might call this Lowry’s paradoxical *crowd without the crowd* project. Wagner refers to his depiction of ‘populous desolation’ and his anticipation of David Riesman’s sociology of the ‘lonely crowd’ (Wagner 2013: 95). She also notes how there is little sense of belonging offered in Lowry – the spectator is kept at a distance by frontal compositions and a theatrical style (ibid.: 108). Even when the titles seem to announce some ‘social inclusiveness’ (*VE Day* (1945) or *Our Town*), the resulting pictures carry no sense of ‘festive union’ (ibid.:108). Berger refers to Lowry’s crowds as being ‘especially English’, ‘*civic and deprived*’, and in a reference which clearly indicates the puzzlement or enigma of working class political passivity also fascinating Nairn, he adds: ‘They appear to have little to lose as a mob; and yet they are not a mob’ (Berger 2009: 97). Is this the Lowry comfort-effect: a vision of the inertness of that which has such feared potential for agency?

The reading proposed here then of Lowry’s work follows closely Clark’s perceptive formal analysis, with its complex interpretation of the figures of scale and composition. However, the conclusions drawn remain distinct and opposed. For Clark, Lowry is a realist, bravely out on his own in the artistic community, attempting to capture the scene of the modern in the English context. But this view depends upon finding in Lowry confirmation of a problematic, but well entrenched view of the English working class. One moment in Clark’s text where this difference can be brought out most clearly is to be found in a quotation from Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*.

It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had... vast piles of building... where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. (Dickens in Clark 2013: 51-3)

The quote follows Clark's comments on the sense of the oppressive weight of Lowry's world, perceptible in the depiction of built form, that constricts any freedom of 'human action' or any association of individuals hesitantly forming in his foregrounds, whether in pursuit of salvation through socialism or Empire (ibid.:69). After noting Lowry's professed attachment to Dickens, he argues that the former's work, especially in the landscapes of the 1950s, approached a similar kind of Dickensian 'horror and disbelief' to that found in the passage from *Hard Times* (ibid.:53). However, when considered more closely, the Dickens passage suggests other reasons for its appropriateness as a gloss on Lowry's work. The 'high-Victorian rhetoric' (anaphora, analepsis) is linked not just to social despair but also to reassurance. In other words, such rhetoric creates the impression that homogeneity of environment equals homogeneity of (classed) humanity. Note that the figure of gigantism (elephant for factory) indicates a perpetual motion which goes nowhere, as does that other image of hopeless infinity, the uncoilable serpent of smoke. This sense of repetition as entrapment, when linked with the class thesis of human homogeneity, suggests that the industrial population constitutes a social body with no resources to produce change or self-emancipation. And in this respect it is important to remember that despite all the qualities of detailed social observation which enliven the pictures, Lowry possessed a typical petit bourgeois insensitivity to the simplest but at the same time, most profound distinctions of working class life. For instance, Clark himself rightly notes that there is no sense of the difference between leaving and entering the factory in the paintings. As we will see later, and with all due allowance for the rhetorical overdrive, Dickens' assertion that the industrial North represented a world '...inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow...' is both a fondly

held, enduring middle class view of working class existence, and at the same time utterly unsustainable. The Mitchell and Kenyon factory gate films vividly remind us of this.

Opening the Gates

Clark recognises the distinctiveness of what he calls the ‘primitive’ or early cinema within the working class culture contemporary to Lowry, however, he neglects to consider in any detail early cinema’s relationship to his central theme: ‘the painting of the modern life’ (Clark 2013: 43). This is a shame because the cinema was centrally engaged in this project of representing the condition of modernity. Rather than confirming what we thought we knew about northernness and class, the early cinema genre of the factory gate administers a shock to such assumptions. (An effect captured by BFI’s titling of their first Mitchell and Kenyon compilation: *Electric Edwardians*, (2005)). Indeed, it might be argued that there is evidence of what Jacques Rancière refers to as a process of ‘dissensus’, or a ‘re-distribution of the sensible’ to be found in the factory gate films (Rancière 2010). In other words, the latter makes ‘visible what had no business being seen’ (Rancière 1999: 29). Intriguingly, there are echoes of this same challenge in Clark’s account of the ‘ambition of modern painting’ which he describes in terms of ‘the idea of a new kind of evenness and openness to sensation, keeping the entire picture rectangle alive’, tactics which he claims Lowry shares with the nineteenth century continental ‘painters of the modern life’ whose efforts recognized that ‘openness would only be found or constantly renewed, in the face of emergent, unorchestrated, still unknown forms of life’ (Clark 2013: 38). The mistake Clark makes is to assimilate early cinema, in its entirety, to the moment at which the ‘modern’ became a ‘system of separateness’ and ‘class apartheid became the new reality’ - in the case of the North, this is the world ‘of cloth caps, the football league, the co-op, George Formby, the ‘steamie’, *primitive cinema*, the pub, the pools, pigeon fanciers’ (ibid.: 43, my emphasis). Certainly, the Mitchell and Kenyon archive provides plenty of evidence of a distinctive working class culture that fits Clark’s description (the many football films for instance), however, this emphasis on a corporative culture leads him to miss another staging of the idea of modernity.

With the help of the factory gate films, we encounter then a lost northernness – one which was emergent in the late nineteenth century, early twentieth century, unsure of itself,

‘unorchestrated’, not easily named, and necessarily pre-occupied with the possibility of its future, receptive to the unknown and the yet-to-come, *an enigma in the making*. And maybe the traces of this forgotten northernness can be detected even in Lowry, the most celebrated practitioner of a more familiar North. This would be a northern landscape haunted not by ruins (industrialism), and pastoral nostalgia (lost communities) but by a disappearance or forgetting (of a particular, working class encounter with the modern). Its occasion is not, however, the class mixing or the ‘experiment’ of modern mass consumption/recreation (of the variety studied by Clark in his seminal *The Painting of Modern Life* which featured the work of the French impressionists from 1870 onwards), instead it emerges, as the factory gate films show, on the boundary marking the precise place and time at which the working day ended: a place and time in which capitalist production and the reproduction of labour were held in suspension.

Figure 1.2

Crowds, child, camera: a memory of the early cinema? Still from John Read’s BBC documentary on L.S. Lowry (1957)

There are one hundred and twenty-four factory gate films in the archive, the majority featuring locations in the industrial east and centre of Lancashire, particularly around Manchester and Salford (Toulmin 2006:202). Classified as ‘actuality’, their value as ‘documents of social and filmic history’ has been emphasized whilst their aesthetic or cinematics qualities have been seen as lacking in innovation (Sargeant 2005). The majority were filmed to coincide with wakes weeks – the annual unpaid holiday which travelling fairground and northern coastal resorts catered to. Some of the weeks preceding the wakes were ‘bull’ or ‘calf’ weeks in which double time was worked before the holiday so ‘productivity would not drop’ and the workers did not lose pay (Toulmin 2006: 231). Intense excitement, anticipation, and exhaustion: the moments captured in these films presupposed the contradictory dynamics of modern capitalist industrialism, especially the struggle over the time of labour and its reproduction.

Gunning’s work on the films’ has been the most substantial to date, and he does pay attention to their formal characteristics, relating them to what he calls the ‘cinema of attractions’ (Gunning 2004: 53). This is his general term for the early cinema (1895-1906) which he

maintains was intimately related to the mediation of the experience of modernity. Gunning's work is indebted to the tradition of German film scholarship associated with Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Theodor Adorno. He argues that early films channeled and re-presented the typically dis-orienting, shocking impact of the modern urban experience, developing in the process a complex spectacular anti-narrative aesthetic of surprise supported by an exhibitionist, direct address confrontation with the spectator. Urban crowds and city streets often featured prominently and it was through the shaping of such spectacle that the thrill and threat of the modern posed itself. For Kracauer the cinema, in its 'affinity' for the experience of the modern, witnessed in its ability to 'record and reveal' the kaleidoscopic, fragmentary, transient intensities of the modern scene, conveyed some of the 'radical and popular political promise' of modernity (Kracauer 1960, and Gilloch 2015). And for Gunning too, the cinema was making promises, magnetizing its early audiences with an intense demonstration of the future-oriented experience of the modern (Gunning 2004:58).

But what specifically was the aesthetic form of that promise? Its difference from other aesthetic experiences of the modern can be characterized by attention to the figure of the crowd. And here Lowry remains useful. As Clark points out, in painting, and particularly in the French tradition, the crowd experience was mediated through a form of detachment (Baudelaire's sensation of the isolated self adrift in the crowd) in which the proximity to the stranger, a necessary and challenging aspect of the experience of modernity, was managed. The French tradition was preoccupied with the challenge of class mixing imposed by the socially heterogeneous metropolitan 'mass'. By contrast, what makes Lowry fascinating for Clark is that his rent-collector *flaneurie* was sustained at a time when the classes had separated out again. Uniquely, he tracked the way this inter-class separation passed into intra-class isolation too (through status discriminations and the public anxieties of 'respectability'). The factory gate films, however, circulating in the period of Lowry's childhood, represent a working class experience of modernity which Lowry's anxious petit bourgeois sensibility could not only never hope to penetrate, but was also designed to aesthetically deflect and dissipate. In these films then the working class experience of modernity crystallises in a crowd effect which I will argue evokes an image of *absolute equality*.

I am drawing here on the work of Elias Canetti and his anthropological typology of crowds and crowd formation (Canetti 1987). Canetti argues that the crowd has four unconscious attributes: a desire to grow; a state of absolute equality (he calls this 'discharge'); a love of

density and a need for a direction (ibid.:32) He associates the formation of crowds with the primal fear of the unknown, of being touched, especially by the stranger. The crowd relieves us of that fear. As all crowds seek to be more, their increasing density frees us of our differences, preparing us for the moment of discharge, or absolute equality in an intense affect of belonging. As Jodi Dean puts it: 'Equality in the crowd is de-differentiation, de-individuation, the momentary release from hierarchy, closure and separation' (Dean 2016: 215). The crowd enacts Rancière's principle of 'dissensus' in as much as it violates established visible and valid differences between groups.

Canetti goes on to distinguish different types of crowd. 'Open' and 'closed' crowds are established in terms of growth – the crowd is open if its growth is not impeded, closed if it is (Canetti 1987:16). A 'stagnating' crowd has density but delays discharge – it waits in a somewhat passive state, whilst the desire for action accumulates and strengthens within it over time (ibid.:38). In a 'rhythmic' crowd density and equality coincide and can be explored in dance (ibid.:35). In their density and equivalence of parts, such crowds become like a single creature: 'A dancing creature with fifty heads and a hundred legs and arms, all performing in exactly the same way and with the same purpose' - in traditional political thought this is the feared many-headed monster (ibid.:35). 'Slowness' characterizes the crowd which is remote from its goal; discharge is denied it (ibid.:44). The 'fast' crowd has a more immediate relation to its goal. A political or sporting crowd forms quickly and dissolves rapidly. Crowds can also be characterized according to their 'prevailing emotion' (ibid.:54). 'Prohibition crowds' are created by a refusal, such as a crowd of striking workers where the synchronized cessation of work creates an immense relief and pride in which all those participating feel equality in their determination (ibid.:63). The 'reversal crowd' is analogous to a revolutionary situation in which a previously stratified society produces a group whose discharge involves a collective deliverance from the 'stings of command' (ibid.:67). 'Long submission to some kind of domination' is thus overcome through the reversal crowd's dynamic (ibid.:71).

I will attempt to show shortly how these distinctions can help us analyse the peculiar effects of the factory gate films, but first the attention to the experience of *absolute equality* allows us to clarify, by contrast, the nature of the effects achieved through Lowry's perspective on the northern working class. Scruton's commentary on Lowry is particularly interesting in this respect. Scruton makes the following observation on the culture of respectability common to

the Ancoats area: ‘When times were hard, people helped each other, though nobody liked to be “beholden”, since this tended to destroy the distance between neighbours without which neighbours were intolerable’ (Scruton, 2001: 142). ‘Beholden’, in the sense of being indebted, etymologically also carries connotations of *being held by*. Scruton’s account tallies with Clark’s reconstruction of the moral economy sketched by Lowry (and Robert Roberts) in which intra-class competition concerning domestic finances was an important publicly marked criteria of respectability (Clark 2013: 57). What interests me is the link to Canetti here. We could say that to be beholden was a failure to resist the temptation to ‘touch’ the other (in a felicitous overlap, *touching*, in the sense of seeking help or money from the other, associates the moral economy of working class respectability with the issue of bodily contact) and to be held by the other in consequence of that touching. These metaphors are suggestive of a negative valuation of the very absolute equality offered by the crowd effect, and more than that, an activation of the very primal fear of being touched that the crowd is designed to squeeze out of us. And this negative valuation – this sense of the intolerable breaching of the social distance between people – helps us to clarify much about the conservative outlook towards a key aspect of working class culture. This is the political repulsion felt on the right for what Scruton refers to as the left project to ‘equalise the English’ and for what is considered to be the ‘myth’ of working class ‘solidarity’ (Scruton: 145-148). On the one hand *equality*, on the other, *equalising*. The latter translates the former into the reduction of difference rather than seeing it as the precondition of difference. The post war pastorally nostalgic narrative of a decline of community is dependent on this move – portraying the political project of the left (modernisation) as synonymous with a ‘levelling’ soulless *equalising* of individuals and communities or ‘autonomous societies’ through coercive, planned homogenisation. Of course it is easy to turn this around. The denial of working class differences (their *equalisation*) lies deep within the political perspective of the right, and this is clear in the form of its phobic fascination with the image of the crowd. Indeed, despite Clark and Wagner’s rescue attempts, it needs to be remembered that this was a very strong critical frame of reception for Lowry’s work: Berger quotes Edwin Mullins in the mid 1960s describing Lowry’s depiction of the ‘battle for life’: ‘It is a battle engaged between the undignified pea-brained homunculi who pour out of a mill after a day’s work... (Berger, 95).

If we were to try and reconstruct the social philosophy behind Scruton’s observations on *beholdenness* we are presented with a paradox: if people of the same class are to help each other – the problem of solidarity - they necessarily render one another *beholden*, placing

their very social exchange (with its required distances) in jeopardy. I say ‘of the same class’ because evidently things change when one views this problem, as Scruton does ultimately, from the perspective of class hierarchies. *Touching* across the class hierarchy does not close the distance between people. To be *beholden* to one’s superiors in the full sense is impossible, unless one presumes equality with them. One accepts the charity of the rich and powerful because it is their duty to be touched by the poor, and such acts are not intended to be repaid. Any such attempt of the socially inferior to acquit themselves is in itself a challenge to naturalised inequalities. The rich may cringe at the touch of the poor, but they do not fear it. Lowry himself clearly adhered to this ideology. As a painter he refused to be beholden to his audience (hence the day job as rent collector); as a retired rent collector he refused to be beholden to his employers (refusing the pension). Lowry was man who kept his distance.

For those like Scruton, working class culture and society, when it departs from enchanted, isolated, virtuous poverty, cannot be imagined as anything other than a contradiction in terms. But this overcoming of social distance in pursuit of equality is at the heart of the working class crowd effect where the norms of accepted proximity dissolve. The crowd, as we have seen, is where intervallic space is abolished in the discharge of equality. This sense of people belonging to one another is precisely what Lowry’s work is incapable of countenancing. For Canetti, discharge provides the energy for the longing for justice. It is also an energy which seeks to transgress boundaries/technologies of disciplinary control – the crowd spills out, everywhere, all at once, crossing thresholds, taking advantage of space in-between. (Which of course is not to argue that such disruption is necessarily politically progressive or even political).

Let us at this point briefly detail ways in which the films’ common textual system can be made to intersect with Canetti’s account of the crowd. The factory is the site of the closed crowd – its movement and growth carefully controlled according to capitalist priorities (indeed one might ascribe not just the characteristics of the closed crowd but also the open crowd to capitalism, as it is historically unique as a social form that ‘remains hungry as long as there is one human being it has not reached’) (Canetti 1987: 24). This Taylorised factory crowd is evidenced in processional exits. Here showmen, in conjunction with Mitchell and Kenyon cameramen, operated according to their own capitalist priorities of maximising the mass before the camera. With the subjects encouraged to return and pay to see themselves

later these workers were the original *prosumers*! Showmen and factory owners often appear to control the gate, its opening and the order of the appearance of the processing workers. However, at the same time the films can also be related to prohibition and reversal crowds. Certainly, as we will see discharge is often achieved, in a brief flurry, as the crowd exits the gates and enters the public space of the street.

More generally, the crowd's spirit of equality also informs the very basic scenario held within the generic form. This can be seen if we think about the 'exit' film in relation to the strike as an instance of the prohibition crowd. As Canetti argues, the strike produces a crowd through an act of refusal. All stop work, and the prohibition on work unites all who previously were only fictively equal (in the light of differences of status and wage in the factory). Stoppage seeks to spread this equality beyond the factory, to all of society. The more general the idleness, the greater the victory. However, everyone must continue to abide by the collective decision to stop work. Pickets guard the gates – lifting them out of 'everyday triviality' and giving them a 'special dignity' (ibid.: 65). The emptiness and stillness of the strike bound factory indicates its new status of common possession of the workers. Pride is felt by the strikers in their ability to distribute, equally, the meagre resources left to them to survive on.

There is an unbroken relationship between this crowd of strikers and the same workers in their everyday working lives. 'Knocking-off' time is related to the cessation of working time and its exhilarating equality. True, this is merely the equality of a momentary daily synchrony and therefore it is part of that fictive equality that belongs to any factory workforce that is not self-consciously politically engaged. However, one must remember that the timing of the working day, the number of hours worked, is the result of a long history of struggle unconsciously persisting and recapitulated at the moment of exit which, in turn, is not associated with the collective surveillance and discipline of the prohibition crowd. Instead, it is attached to the happiness of those past victories. When one watches these films, one cannot but help notice the joy of so many in their release from alienated labour. At the very least, everyone is spontaneously united in leaving the factory – without the heaviness of heart that such departure means to those striking. No watchmen or pickets are required to ensure that all workers go home! And given that workers feel in their very bones that capitalism's energies are demonically unbounded and unsleeping, whilst their own are finite, and that capitalism never gives up its struggle to appropriate more of the surplus labour of its workforce, knocking-off time not only recalls the happiness of equals in the strike crowd, it is

itself an ‘overlooked’ diurnal strike. And finally, as we have seen, this unceasing struggle is itself reduplicated in the evidence provided by the special ‘wakes’ weeks exits – moments poised between a redoubled exploitation and unpaid holiday when the factories lay reluctantly idle.

This account of the films’ generic form and its relation to crowd dynamics is not meant to suggest that the films are not contradictory products of the modern capitalist mass entertainment industry. Equally, it is not meant to suggest some unproblematic class consciousness at work in the films. Indeed, there are distinctive and often clashing aesthetic effects achieved across the films. Some give emphasis to what Rancière would call the existing socio-political ‘*partage du sensible*’ (Rancière 2006). In *Workers leaving Nuttalls Brewery, Blackburn* (1901), the bosses, who have been preceded by the loaded drays – transporting the company’s proud commodity – are followed by the workers. This interest in social orderliness sometimes produces films which rely on processional compositions. The processional film, an early genre in its own right, does not convey the same sense of the crowd evoked by Canetti precisely because it relies on hierarchical principles of social and spatial representation. The structured ‘file past’ projects the Taylorised bio-mechanics of the factory itself, inhibiting the crowd form whose aesthetic, as we will see, shares many of the features of Gunning’s ‘cinema of attractions’. For the processional exit, see *Workers Leaving Bamford’s Works, Moseley* (1900). Sometimes the exiting is superintended by authority figures (often in middle class dress) who seem concerned with keeping the procession moving, not just according to a capitalist logic of maximising the exposure of bodies/faces before the camera, but according to a principle of orderly social flow whose rectitude they embody. Thus, *Workers Leaving Barrow Steelworks* (1902) concludes with a uniformed doorman and *Employees Leaving Yates, Hawyood and Co. Foundry, Rotherham* (1901), includes a watching policeman at the door. Significantly, in the latter the closeness of the camera to the door reduces the public space within which free encounters with the camera might be possible. Everyone is ‘going about their business’. A man in a top hat enters the doorway from the street; a notice on the pillar that Marx would have loved says: ‘No Admittance Except on Business’. This tight individualising and authoritarian control of egress/ingress kills the crowd effect.

Often then the films demonstrate what one might call an ‘aesthetic of capture’ which creates very different effects to those explored by Gunning under the rubric of the ‘cinema of

attractions' where the 'democracy of composition' of a polycentric image matches the content - the emergence into visibility of those with no recognised or established claim to public visibility, especially in a tabooed collective, crowd form (Gunning 2004: 50). The aesthetic of capture is motivated by the desire on the showman's part to simply multiply and monetise the films' subjects and audience (who of course were often the same). See for instance *Ropner and Co, Shipbuilders, Stockton-on-Tees*, (1900) and its boast "Magnificent animated pictures of 10,000". In this film, even the children appear constrained presences. The more it works as an efficient processing of numbers, the greater the magnificence of that quantity, the less the engagement with the camera, and the more marked the absence of the crowd effect.

Most of the films seek to control the movement of the workers so that there is an element of surprise or heightened attention evident in their reaction. Many create a sense of anticipation, massing the workforce behind a gate or door which they have to wait to be opened – see *Workers leaving Craven Ironworks, Ordsall Lane Salford* (1901) and *Workforce Leaving Cartwright and Warner Hosiery Works, Loughborough* (1900). Some use aspects of the *mise en scène* or cinematography to capture and contain the workers visually. Thus, sometimes exits are narrow, forcing filing and facilitating the framing of identifiable individuals – see *Workpeople Leaving Fish's Waterfall Mill, Blackburn* (1900) and the funnelling effect in *'Hands' Leaving Work at North-Street Mills, Chorley* (1900). Sometimes light effects are used to establish a trap of visibility (Foucault 1976). In *Workers at India Mill, Stockport* (1900), for instance, the underexposed darkness beneath the arch helps to give emphasis to those emerging into the light. In *Workmen Leaving Peacock's Works at Meal Time, Gorton, Manchester* (1900), the sun's position behind the camera floods the scene around the gates with such bright light that those exiting and attempting to scrutinise the camera have to use their hands as vizors. In *Workpeople from Mayall's Mills, Mossley* (1900), the route from the gate is on an incline, thus taking advantage of the effort of exiting to control the motion of the figures before the camera. Occasionally, a corner hides the camera, and the workers encounter it without the advantage of preparatory scrutiny – see *Workers Leaving Butterley Ironworks, Ripley* (1900). The operation of the aesthetic of capture through co-ordination of architecture and camera position is well displayed in *Workers Leaving Haslam Ltd Colne* (1900). Here the elevated camera position allows the workers to approach and then pass beneath its gaze, whilst the constraining wall controls the direction of movement. Sometimes, an architectural feature of the composition dominates the perspective on the unfolding action

– thus, in *Great Northern Railway Works at Doncaster* (1900), the use of the bridge guarantees a constant stream of workers. Here the camera operates almost as a census machine, entirely in control of the documented exit. The relative narrowness of the bridge means that not just direction but speed is constrained. No branching-off of individuals or groups of workers is possible. Social interaction is reduced to a minimum. This is less a ‘crowd’ (where the fear of being touched is overcome), than it is an aggregation of workers whose distances remain palpable, recapitulating outside the factory the Taylorised division of labour to be found inside. Its processional ‘marching’ or regimentation helps to distinguish by contrast those films that do achieve crowd effects. The processional exit film, we might say, is not seeking to explore the space of equality. Note too how in this film women employees are given a separate section, and that the male workers are represented in terms of ‘shifts’ or ‘shops’, helping to underscore established social/occupational and gender differences.

Finally, in terms of those films failing to create crowd effects, it is useful to consider the problem of the timing of the exit. In *Workforce of Parkgate Iron and Steel Co, Rotherham*, (1901) the moment of the exit is not the central focus of the film, thus even when groups form before the camera – often caught in stationary poses or queuing – it is individuals rather than any crowd that remain the point of interest. Without the mutually enlivening, momentary encounter of the camera/showman and workers suddenly free to leave work, the sense of the cinematograph’s convergence with other disciplinary, isolating modern technologies predominates. This is apparent in the way the camera marks itself out as a suspect, class-intrusive presence in this film – as testified to by some workers’ hostile responses. Similarly, in *Darwen Factory Gate* (1901) the sense of the moment of the exit itself is dissipated. A tableau composition before the closed gate is followed by several agitated pans after it has been opened, leading to a cumulative loss of attention on the moment of exiting. Instead it is the residential context around the factory that emerges, along with a sense of detached social activities in the adjoining public spaces, including the spectacle of a knife grinder at work. Here, suddenly, is Lowry’s North. Once the workers have been absorbed back into the world after their shift, and that reciprocally magnetising gaze of camera and workers that is common to many of the films is disrupted, the crowd effect disappears and is replaced by the kind of social atomisation in which vivid, Lowryesque vignettes predominate.

In *Employees Leaving Williamson's Factory, Lancaster* (1901), on the other hand, it is the distance to the gate and the time elapsed since the moment of exit that is crucial. Generally, the gate's presence or proximity is important as it concentrates the very brief, intense crowd affect - after all, knocking-off time represents both the formation of the crowd and its almost simultaneous dispersal. The liminal gate, standing between work and the world, spatializes this transience. But in this film the workers have trudged a distance from the visually absent gate before encountering the camera. The deeper the worker penetrates the space of the world, the more the sense of a collective occasion is lost. The camera here is unable to enter that carefully staged meeting with workers briefly re-energised by the happiness of the exit-crowd, and piqued by the novel technology of moving pictures.

The gate itself then is not just a disciplinary technology exploited by an aesthetic of control (like a turn-stile). Rather it is analogous to the dark point described by Canetti which is the goal of the crowd – the 'blackest spot where most people are gathered' (Canetti:16). This goal is the lure of density and discharge made manifest in the equality of the *daily strike*. For instance, in *Workers at Kynoch Ltd Lion Works, Birmingham* (1901) at times the dense press of bodies passing through the arch means that the mass undulates in an apparently single movement - an effect emphasised by the framing which excludes legs when the numbers of those exiting fills the foreground and background. In sum, frequently in these films the dynamic image of the crowd forms within a careful calibration of the camera location in relation to the exit and of the time of exit in relation to the act of filming. Taking this further, we might say that the image of the crowd depends on something we might call the emergence of a *playing space*. This key aesthetic innovation of the factory gate genre represents a specific cinematic space whose construction is frequently overdetermined by the showman's invocation of the fairground as he seeks to stir the workers at the gate, rather like a bubbling pot, with the enticement of the camera, provoking a sense of anticipatory participation in the popular culture of entertaining spectacle. The fairground was often advertised at the moment of filming as the place where the finished film could be viewed. In *Sedgwick's Bioscope Showfront at Pendlebury Wakes*, (1901) we are fortunate to have a filmed example of the cinematograph show on the fairground. Here the festively licenced playing space around the tent's show front re-invokes the playing space before the factory gate that presumably graced the screen within.

Let us now consider some examples of films which emerge out of this contradictory mixture of ideological, economic and aesthetic influence and motive, and help to give us a clearer impression of the factory gate crowd effect. In *Operatives of the Acme Spinning Company, Pendlebury* (1901), the *mise en scène* of orderliness breaks down quickly, and the role of the showman – James Kenyon in this instance – is crucial. An internal audience of children are permitted to watch the camera crew whilst the adults exit.

Figure 1.3

Larking about around the gate. Still from *Operatives of the Acme Spinning Company, Pendlebury* (1901)

The high position of the camera also allows the children to mob it without interfering with its view. The set up then is permissive and encouraging. The gate is relatively close and the street's unsupervised freedoms are available. Kenyon abandons his role as showman director of traffic, and becomes a participant, a thermal exciter in the emerging crowd, joining in with his manic hand waving and horseplay, secreting himself within the crowd, understanding its tactile nature. Here the showman is not the man with the top hat and cane waving the workers on like a policeman. Kenyon is intent on creating turbulence – he himself passes up to the camera and then drops beneath the bottom of the frame, only to reappear later, creating a rhythmic sense of a re-circulating crowd. The image becomes highly complex – not just polycentric but polymobile, full of seething points of energy. Kenyon can be seen playing a game with a woman – holding her as a shield from the camera, ducking down so that only his floating head is glimpsed bobbing behind her shoulder. Such actions enact the disappearing game that these films reveal as part of the pleasure of the crowd. Here is a form of imagistic dis-embodiment as collective re-embodiment. Swaying and staggering within the current of the larger flow, those who are interlinked and seeking to linger in the embrace of one another make small movements of adjustment. The tottering steps of the densely compressed crowd verge on the rhythmic. Towards the end there is a stationary coming together moment, marked by jumping up, waving, and pressing back and forwards. This is an often repeated shot in the films – a kind of tableau vivant snapshot of the crowd, frequently featuring children, all at the last moment waving hands and throwing hats into the air. This film offers a good example of the aesthetic construction of the *playing space*. This space enables the

solicitation and capturing of the tactile excitements of a crowd before the camera, and is in turn created out of the potential cinematic crafting provided by the camera. It is a space conjured within the shadow of the gate (sometimes literally so), in which gestures of friendship and familiarity become infectious. This is important to emphasise - what the experience of the camera galvanises is always social, shared response, and even if occasionally figures stand stock still, rapt by the presence of the camera, they invariably turn to others as confirmatory witnesses (see *Employees at White Cross Co Ltd Wire Works, Warrington*, (1900) and *Workers at Pilkington Glass Works, St Helens* (1900). Children in collaboration with showmen often seed the playing space. Repeatedly we see arms around necks (young boys) and arms interlinked around waists (young women and girls who sometimes form a line of four or five figures, in a processing dance) – for example, *Workers at Jesse Crossley and Sons Ironworks, Ripley*, (1900).

The playing space clearly requires the proximity of public/social space – usually of the street – to private factory space. Between the two spaces, sits the gate. If the composition chosen emphasises the mighty factory façade (see *Employees Leaving Vickers, Sons and Maxim Works, Sheffield*, (1901)), or focuses on one space over another (factory interior or a wasteland of intervening public space which dissipates the moment of excited congregation), then the crowd's infectious binding together cannot occur. The playing space lies just beyond the gate – it is the place where decisions have to be made (to tarry with the crowd or to be off). The gate itself is not just a point of convergence for the crowd, but also the space which detaches and frames individuals, preparatory to their striking out alone, back home. It is a space where in spreading out the workers start to form momentary and dense superimpositions and complex interconnections which receive emphasis in cinematographic decisions (angle and height of the camera; lens choice and its compression of depth of field) and *mise en scène* (the general pre-determined direction of the space). As the tempo of exiting increases, so the playing space become vertiginous in terms of the complex, non-linear overlaps of movement. In *Workers Leaving a Factory in Leyland* (1900), one boy reverses his own walk back across the field of vision (without looking behind himself – as if he had reversed his own film/self, or incorporated the potential of the camera within himself). In *Workers Leaving Gossage's Soap Works, Widnes* (1901), we see the collapsing multi-planar effect. That is to say, at relatively greater distances to the gate the camera compresses the image's planes, thereby appearing to squeeze the space between the workers. Typically, in this way, several lateral vectors of movement are superimposed on one another, building

up the crowd effect through a layering of space and bodies. Sometimes, this also creates an effect of motion distortion in the image – for instance, vehicles and figures passing in the street close to the camera rush by in a phantom blur. Such complexity in the image – its overlaying of trajectories, speeds and discrete spaces – helps to concentrate the accumulating sense of crowd discharge, as a singular collective entity forms before the gates. On this level, although the films are still functioning to capture the maximum number of bodies, identifiable individual identities (the commercial selling point) start to blur, despite the camera’s power to pick out such differences and details. The mobile scattering of the workers before the gate, in other words, is also, within the cinematic image, the kaleidoscopic unification of a crowd which offers a glimpse of the precondition and potential of the workers as a self-conscious class in the image of the experience of discharge/equality. The logic of individual appearance and disappearance within the playing space is important in conveying this increasing density and the promise of equality. That is to say, movement in the compressed planes of the image creates a dance of concealment and revelation, and at times, it appears as if the crowd takes advantage of this cinematic effect through its own self-conscious contribution.

Despite the undoubted heterogeneity of crowds within which individuals have clearly separable trajectories, based on different objectives, tasks, and relationships to the camera, street and surrounding others, nevertheless in these films all are caught up, momentarily, in a great swirl of collective presence. Often children are the precipitating factors, adopting circular, returning, re-binding movements which cut across the usually more purposeful, linear directed adults. (This circularity is put to good effect by James Kenyon on the fairground show front in *Sedgwick’s Bioscope Showfront at Pendlebury Wakes*). The children’s actions often suggest the possibility of a reversal crowd. In their cheeky, insubordinate, high-spirited disorderliness one senses what Canetti refers to as a shrugging off of the accumulated ‘stings’ of authority, and one needs to remember that many of them were (half-time) workers themselves, subject to the oppression of the capitalist factory like any other adult. Kracauer’s work on cinema and clowning seems useful here (Kracauer, 1960). Kracauer saw the cinema as capable not just of ‘recording’/documenting but of ‘revealing’ worlds within worlds (ibid.: 28). From one perspective, the power of the Mitchell and Kenyon films lies predominantly in this recording power, in their detailed testimony to the massive social ‘presence’ of the northern industrial working class, a class whose tragic historical significance is often interpreted, for instance in Clark’s take on Lowry, as an

implicit rebuke to utopian modern political fantasies - the 'fiction of a full existence to come' (Clark 2012:19). As we have seen, this North is viewed as the intimidating, incontrovertible graveyard of that modernity. Such a framing of the Mitchell and Kenyon films, whilst important, has its dangers. For instance, on a national level, it tends to re-stabilise a north/south hierarchical binary. Thus, in conventional film history, the southern gentlemen pioneers of the early cinema are credited with 'discovering' the cinematic essence of the medium (the Hove and Brighton School for instance and the development of editing). In this way, whilst the status of the Mitchell and Kenyon films as outstandingly valuable 'documents' of the past might be universally recognised, they still fail to touch the cinematic essence or soul. Rather they offer a receptacle (an 'archive') full of inessential content, or 'actuality'. A northern body for the early cinema's southern soul. And the body is largely that of the worker whilst the soul still belongs to the gentleman. Bodies of a defeated working class, exposed in detail by the shocking clarity of the cinematograph, unable to prevent themselves from being swallowed up in the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century. This makes the films belong to a very traditional, tragic working class northernness.

However, there is another way of seeing the films, one associated with their revelatory power which goes beyond the simple mimetic recording impulse, joining that power to what Kracauer referred to as the 'formative tendency' of cinema or its ability to shape the world it records (Kracauer, 1960: 35). I have detailed that collaborative shaping by their subjects, audiences, showmen and the Mitchell and Kenyon cameramen – it is productive of the excitements and illuminations of the playing space. We can add some more detail to this if we consider Kracauer's interlinked ideas about childhood, improvisation, clowning and utopia (Gilloch, 2015). He argues that the cinematic medium, like the improvising child, can suspend the oppressive laws of the 'real' world, and in the context of modernity in particular, the comic film suspends the chronologic of capitalism (ibid.: 183). Thus, children and clowns are able to sustain their distracted susceptibility to find delight and wonder in the world at inopportune moments. Childish clowning opens up a time which is outside the pressure of clock-time (we might call this other time *knocking-off time*). In the factory gate film, time hangs heavy, its effects stored in the often transparently weary body. But this pressure of the time of labour and its subsequent reproduction is resisted by the dilatory, hanging-around of the children before the gate. Living *extempore* for Kracauer signalled the ability to live in and for the moment, or to live out of clock time. It resists the task-oriented time of scarcity – the modern busyness/business of punctuality and predictability and the consequent feeling that

there is never enough time. For the child and the clown, as Gilloch paraphrases Kracauer, ‘there is enough time, there will be time’ (ibid.: 183). The childish cheek and the dallying, the acceptance of the challenge of cinema, and the perception of its affinity with the energies of the fairground would have been recognised by Kracauer as consonant with his account of that key comic genre of silent cinema, slapstick. Charlie Chaplin, born in 1889, was of the same age as the northern children in the Mitchell and Kenyon films. Around the gate then, a crowd forms, one which senses not just an immediate delight in the coming of the fair and the screening of the film, or the imminent week, but of a different future, an alternative reality. And in such responses to capitalist modernity lies an invocation of ‘a reality not identical with our own; a reality as at odds with the quotidian as that of fairy tales and ...dreams (Kracauer in Gilloch: 184). The fairy tale was a key form for Ernst Bloch, Benjamin and Kracauer. It distilled their sense of the persistence of the powers by which the weak could continue to struggle, with hope, against the powerful, a transposing of pre-modern into modern forms of resistance. The sense of ‘liberation, happiness and convivial complicity’ at the heart of the form are related to the energies that power the crowd (Gilloch: 184).

Perhaps it is Bloch, however, who is most useful in drawing out the challenge Mitchell and Kenyon deliver to our present with its fixed ideas about northernness. For Bloch, reality itself is in a state of ontological incompleteness, as expressed in his principle of ‘the not yet become’ (Bloch:1995). As Slavoj Žižek comments, such an open ontology seems paradoxical – how can the real be incomplete? (Žižek: 2013). In his appreciative account of Bloch’s ideas, Žižek cites quantum physics – with its ‘uncertainty principle’ sitting at the heart of subatomic matter - in defence of such an ontology. And how doubly paradoxical this idea of an incomplete real seems when we are contemplating northern realities – of the present and the past – with their oppressive sense of finality. (It has been considered all over with the North for some time now). For Bloch, utopianism is energised by this proposition that reality does not coincide with itself and is ‘striving towards potentiality’ (ibid.: xviii). As Žižek puts it, radical emancipatory potentials continue to ‘insist’ ‘as a kind of historical spectre and to haunt the revolutionary memory, demanding their enactment, so that the later proletarian revolution should also redeem (put to rest) these past ghosts’ (ibid.: xix). The encounter of the working class and the cinema in the Mitchell and Kenyon archive, re-opened to its own once lost future, generates a strong sense of Bloch’s open universe which is ‘sustained by the

hope of redemption, joy and justice to come' (ibid.:xix). This is most clear in the glimpses of the cinematic crowd we get in the factory gate films.

In conclusion, as it has been often pointed out, in conventional cultural history, the 'south' is changeless, outside time, Arcadian, millennial and English, whilst the North is 'on the brink of leaving history', its hopes lost, its future apocalyptic (Kohl, 2007:102). Both are beyond history or have a peculiar relationship to history. But the Mitchell and Kenyon films suggest a North that is not leaving history but located at the heart of a modern, dialectical conception of history. This is a time that remains undeveloped but not exhausted. It offers a narrative of the North that is no longer chained to the elegiac (a narrative about what has been done to the north and its despoliation) but is open, lacking closure. And in this respect Kracauer's preference for the comic over the tragic seems important (Kracauer, 1960: 269). Comedy for Kracauer insists that endings are not the end and suits the cinema's affinity for the endless flow of life, the indefinite and fortuitous as opposed to that sense of the closed cosmos of the tragic (ibid.:269). Dialectics and comedy. A very *un-southern* combination. But perhaps not such an *un-northern* one.

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