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The Missing and the Lost: Celebrity and Politics in Gordon Burn's *Born Yesterday*

If representation is marked by its limitations, then the paradox of contemporary realist fiction lies in its struggle to capture the heart of the moment through something as prosaic as prose. Whether the present can even be conceptualised or must always remain eclipsed by the genealogical repulsions of past and future lies at the heart of Gordon Burn's 2008 non-fiction novel, *Born Yesterday*, which seeks to capture a moment of contemporary British life through revisiting the events of summer 2007. Among other things, that summer witnessed Tony Blair passing the baton to Gordon Brown, Madeleine McCann's abduction, attempted terrorist attacks in London and Glasgow, and homes throughout Britain being flooded in the seemingly constant rain. For Terry Eagleton, contemporaneity is a promise deferred:

If modernism lives its history as peculiarly present, it also experiences a sense that this present moment is somehow of the future, to which the present is nothing more than an orientation; so that the idea of the Now, of the present as full presence eclipsing the past, is itself intermittently eclipsed by an awareness of the present as deferment, as an empty excited openness to a future which is in one sense already here, in another a sense yet to come.¹

The present by this token is simultaneously replete and vacant, a presence and an absence that cannot be reconciled but sustains its own symbolic logic. Thomas Docherty agrees that the quality that defines the present moment is its resistance to formal structure:

A presentation of the present must always involve a representing, which has the effect of marking the present moment with the passage of time. 'The contemporary' ... thus has the effect of introducing an element of heterogeneity and difference into what is or should be homogenous, self-identical, the self-present as such.²

If the present is to be understood, or at the very least conveyed, it is only through the frustrating deferment of representation, an act which places time and space between the experiencing consciousness and the mediating consciousness. The novel which can, by definition be new, cannot equally by definition, be now. The paradox of the impossible contemporary has not hindered twentieth and twenty-first-century novelists from seeking to isolate and examine it; indeed the modernist portrayal of the individual's sense of being-in-

the-world was predicated upon a consciousness of the present as eternal moment. For postmodernism, to engage with the present was to acknowledge the multiple layers of mediation and remediation that separates us from experience. This essay will argue that to understand the now in the twenty-first century requires not only a sophisticated awareness of technologised subjectivity, but also an appreciation of the dynamics and social force of celebrity culture.

Born Yesterday is a slice of life in the modernist sense, its open-endedness and loose associative structure reflecting the amorphous qualities of any given moment. Burn has described it as a 'found object' in the tradition of Duchamp's ready-mades, and there is a sense in which he is presenting his reader with a necessarily undigested mass of information and inviting, rather than offering interpretation.³ Structurally the text gestures towards traditional narrative in that it initially positions a narratorial figure (who we later discover to be an avatar of Burn himself) as an indirect observer and confused interpreter of events, but this figure frequently drops out of sight to be replaced by free associative jump cuts between memorable news stories with the occasional random note thrown in as if transcribed directly from a journalist's notebook. The book, with its passages of investigative reportage, its echolalia of public and private events and its ruminative reflections on the interconnectedness of things, sits somewhere between the psychological and empathic realism of the novel and the disjointed immediacy of the rolling news channels that are the target of its satirical bite. Understandably, the book was written to a very tight schedule over the winter of 2007, much of the work being done over an eight-week period though Burn claims for a six-month period of research beforehand.⁴ This is certainly a book with unsmoothed edges, but such is the price of immediacy. The motivating impulse to record very recent history, when events are still information rather than commonly understood, is in part to observe the process of accretion and in part to critique the simplification, decontextualisation and extermination of the real by which the news becomes newsworthy.

Burn's primary literary vocation was journalism and he remained a journalist throughout a career that produced four novels, of which *Born Yesterday* was the last, four works of non-fiction that took him into the worlds of professional sport and true crime, and two volumes relating to the contemporary art scene and in particular the work of the Young British Artists. Burn is unusual among contemporary writers (with Tom McCarthy and Stewart Home as notable exceptions) in being heavily influenced by the visual arts and in particular the installations of Damien Hirst, for whom Burn has contributed introductory remarks to the publications following from two exhibitions. Hirst's fascination with the

processes of death and decay, what Burn has described as the ‘hurtability’ of the human body, is clear to be seen in Burn’s second novel, *Fullalove* (1995) which contains a press photographer notorious for snapping images of bereaved or traumatised individuals, a practice that grants him a dubious fame in a gutter press untroubled by the baggage of ethics. Remorselessly demoralising, *Fullalove* (1995) depicts a Britain of deracinated, affectless entertainment junkies who can only connect with their emotional lives by being shocked by the most gruesome details of real-life crimes. The novel’s commodification of pain stems from Burn’s own experience working in the True Crime genre: *Somebody’s Husband*, *Somebody’s Son* (1984), his first book, deals with the case of Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, and took Burn to Yorkshire for three years where he exhaustively interviewed Sutcliffe’s family. He followed this in 1998 with *Happy Like Murderers*, an in-depth historical and psychological cartography of the Fred and Rosemary West murders. It was a task that left him deeply disturbed at the empathic proximity that was necessary to know his subjects.

The forensic detailing of psychotic pathologies is done without prurience or the salaciousness often associated with the True Crime genre and sits instead somewhere between the objectivity of the external observer and the commitment to the untangling of life that is the territory of the novelist. Burn cites Truman Capote and Norman Mailer as primary influences on his writing, and it is evident that there is a stylistic debt to the American non-fiction novel that flowered between the 1960s and 1980s with Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966), Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* (1979) and Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) as prime examples. Where journalism and reportage in particular have always been dominated by the deadline and the conveying of immediacy, the ‘New Journalism’ of Capote, Mailer, Wolfe and Gay Talese ‘enjoyed the luxury of time: they could hang around until people had forgotten they were there, then creep up on reality with its pants around its ankles’.⁵ Burn’s crime writing shows the extent to which he has inherited and internalised the lessons of the New Journalism to produce a form of non-fictional prose that employs fictional techniques, that is explicitly subjective rather than objective and that attempts to get under the skin of a story to examine its internal architecture of causality and consequence. In turn, Burn has influenced a new generation of writers (David Peace, Andrew O’Hagan, Richard T. Kelly, Rupert Thomson) whose work explores the potential for a stylistic symbiosis between fiction and non-fiction.

Whether fictional or non-fictional, Burn’s writing gravitates around the issue of celebrity. Frequently, as in the books on the Yorkshire Ripper and the Wests, the celebrity

depicted is macabre in tone and fetishistic in quality, a prurience on the part of a ghoulish public, but for Burn, the lustre of the tawdry is central to the appeal of celebrity culture. The vicarious satisfaction of a dark subconscious fantasy connects the unacceptable individual act to a broader framework of acceptable, indeed valorised, cultural productivity. The serial killer's actions and their subsequent mediation through publishing, television, film and the internet recuperates the murderer from the moral margin and into a position of symbolic resonance in late twentieth and twenty-first century culture. Burn's own early fiction addresses the status of violent crime as a form of cultural output, consumed alongside more legitimate entertainment. In *Alma Cogan* (1991), the singer's career performing light, whimsical hits such as 'Never Do a Tango with an Eskimo' and 'I Can't Tell a Waltz from a Tango', is narratively paralleled by the series of child killings by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, known as the Moors Murders. Both constitute the stuff of popular culture, Burn implies, inhabiting the same space of 1960's mass public consciousness, equal in their contribution to the contemporary structure of feeling, but unequal in their seriousness or social reverberation. In the novel's grim denouement, the two worlds are brought together when the killing of Lesley Ann Downey is conducted to the backdrop of Cogan singing 'The Little Drummer Boy' on the radio.⁶

The darker side of celebrity has been the focus of a number of recent novels (Andrew O'Hagan's *Personality* [2003], Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde* [2000], Colum McCann, *Dancer* [2003]) and Burn addresses it as one of the compelling social discourses of the present. *Born Yesterday* iterates the extent to which contemporary culture depends upon what John Corner calls the 'celebrity frame' to make sense of the intricately and extensively mediated worlds of TV rolling news, gossip magazines, blogging, texting, tweeting and email.⁷ The profusion of communicational platforms and the multiplicity of technological sources have generated such an excess of informational exchange that a crisis of demand and supply has ensued. When supply outstrips demand, not just marginally but exponentially, the necessity of frames for categorisation and interpretation become apparent. We are all, Burns suggests, immersed in the continuous production and consumption of information and yet are apparently less and less able to distinguish the genuinely important and world-historical from the incessant white noise of ephemeral traffic. The 'commercial media logic' of the twenty-first century dictates that the diversification of media channels and information outlets brings with it a culture of competitive info-gathering that necessarily exceeds the boundaries of the conventionally newsworthy.⁸ The greater the competitive market, the wider the net must be thrown, but

ironically, narrower and more homogenous must be the agenda focus, as Pierre Bourdieu points out:

People are ready to do almost anything to be the first to see and present something. The result is that everyone copies each other in the attempt to get ahead; everyone ends up doing the same thing. The search for exclusivity, which elsewhere leads to originality and singularity, here yields uniformity and banality.⁹

An expanded supply base, with each medium striving for predominance and competitive edge, results in events and figures that previously may have briefly flared in the popular limelight being thrust remorselessly into the public eye and maintained there by little more than speculation, gossip and a market-driven thirst for instantaneous and continuous entertainment. The inverse relationship between a soap-star, reality-star, Katie Price-style newsworthiness and the publicity it receives is the new reality of the news celebrity according to Burn, who in a 2009 article for the *Guardian*, wrote:

In these days of junk news, junk food, junk money and the junk self, authenticity in the realm of reality TV means adhering to Saul Bellow's dictum of following a character not just into the bedroom but also the bathroom (and into rehab, the penis-enlargement clinic, the assisted-suicide facility, the dungeonus punishment pit).¹⁰

In this instance, Burn's distaste for this access-all-areas journalism is prompted by the on-camera relaying of the news that she had been diagnosed with cervical cancer to reality-star Jade Goody, whilst she was participating in a variant of the *Big Brother* television programme that had made her famous. The curious media sense of this decision – the quest for an authentic reaction to disastrous life-events from a caricature created by television for a television audience – exemplifies the cold, affectless logic of a postmodernity in which the ethical constantly subtends the dramatic.

Born Yesterday recognises celebrity as a thinning of the symbolic membranes, a disambiguating process by which the message of any socially communicative act is simplified and endlessly repeated in a parody of significance and complexity. It understands that the primacy of the single iconographic image and the elision of any moral or subtextual ambiguity are fundamental to the operation of the mediated economy and deconstructs the

process of commodification through an event of summer 2007 that was genuinely newsworthy: the abduction of Madeleine McCann.

Madeleine's disappearance constitutes a central strand of the novel, a compelling touchstone to which the narrator returns throughout a narrative structure that is associative rather than expository. Hers is the principal loss that throws all the other absences, gaps and holes of 2007 into relief, a human tragedy at the heart of an otherwise largely stage-managed drama. Yet, though the space left by Madeleine is a painful and unresolved hiatus in the narrative, the novel focuses its primary attention on her parents and the intensity of media interest that they not only tolerated but also generated. As he has done elsewhere (with Alma Cogan, Peter Sutcliffe, George Best and Duncan Edwards), Burn draws Gerry and Kate McCann as though they were fictional characters, describing a narrative arc from their solidly working-class roots in Glasgow and Liverpool, through the years in which they settled themselves into the comfort afforded them by their jobs as doctors, to the events in Praia de Luz in Portugal that brought them into the public gaze. In the process, Burn interrogates them less as grieving parents, but as the two-dimensional, and increasingly commoditised media representations that they became:

Something interesting occurred as the weeks and months of Madeleine's disappearance lengthened: Kate McCann's Scouser accent, not much more than an inflection at first, thickened and became what it must have been when she was still being shaped by Liverpool ... The coarseness of her accent at times seemed at odds with the smoothness of her skin and purity of her complexion; the still unblotched colour – the mask-like, magazine-model good looks which had been widely commented on and were credited with the blanket coverage the case was being given compared to other previous and already forgotten snatched-child stories.¹¹

The McCanns are notable for their untypical (that is journalistically untypical) response to the loss of their child: their refusal to break down in front of television cameras; their sober neutrality and emotional control and their unstinting mobilisation of all publicity channels in the search for Madeleine. For Burn, this rejection of the public expression of grief was transgressive in that it forestalled easy narrativisation by a media accustomed to sensationalising personal tragedy. That the McCanns refused to play the game resulted in an empathic disconnect in a TV and tabloid audience who were denied the opportunity for emotionally correct sympathising with the family before moving on to less real realities. That

the McCanns took the game to the press and the media, managing the campaign for Madeleine's recovery with a business-like determination and focus, was truly transgressive for it revealed an awareness of the penetration of media coverage that could only arise from culturally mediated individuals.

The McCanns' willingness to market their own celebrity in the interests of their campaign, speaks to Burn's unease with celebrity culture as a whole: when the genuinely newsworthy is required to sell itself as sensation, rather than command the attention of the public because of its inherent human interest, it indicates both a moral and an interpretive incapacity in the consuming audience to respond flexibly to stories at differing levels of seriousness. Burn's disquiet is focused less on the urgency of the campaign than on its networked, media-savvy operation that granted the McCanns access to prominent public figures from the Pope, through Gordon Brown and J.K. Rowling to the ex-England rugby player, Martin Johnson. Meanwhile its high-profile financial backers and seemingly relentless grip on the attention of the popular press suggested an efficient marshalling of the technological and publicity matrices of the twenty-first century, one dissonant with the emotional catastrophe that had beset the family. In such circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that the questioning of Madeleine's parents as suspects in her disappearance should bring forth general murmurs of self-congratulation amongst those sceptical elements of the press and public, but that cynicism grows from the disaffection brought about by the disruption of the popular narrative and is not in any way indicative of the guilt of parents, nor of the inefficiency of the judicial process. Indeed, the McCanns had every right to respond to the devastating loss of their daughter in whichever way was most appropriate to them, but once they had been thrust into the public sphere the narrative of grief and the narrative of celebrity are equally problematic in their tendency towards simplification, trivialisation and sensation. By trying to co-opt the media and, in turn, being co-opted by it, the McCanns were projected into a quasi-celebrity that feasted on their, albeit macabre, glamour and photogeneity as a consumable product – grotesque admittedly, but gripping nevertheless. Once projected into the information economy, the family are products of the market and are appealing to an audience insufficiently literate (in Burn's view) in the nuances of media narratives to appreciate fully the severity of their plight. To illustrate their confused symbolic status, Burn produces a fascinating collocation of coincidences that tie the McCanns to other concurrent celebrity stories: Praia de Luz, the location of Madeleine's abduction, was a holiday bolthole of Paul and Linda McCartney during the 1970s, whilst Heather Mills, the estranged second Mrs McCartney, complained bitterly about her press coverage on morning

television, comparing her pain to that of Kate McCann. She was followed on the show by Gordon Brown, one of the McCann's most public supporters, but was subsequently dropped by her PR adviser, a man who had previously been in discussion with the McCanns over the role as their spokesperson. Burn's point here is two-fold: to reveal the incestuous interconnectedness of the celebrity network and to put back into the McCann story some of that which he believes has been stripped away by the incessant reductionism of the media frame: ambiguity.

The celebrity frame, or the narrative of celebrity as I have been casting it here, depends for its impact on the immediacy and accessibility lent it by a high turnover technologised media where analytical depth is forfeited in the interests of broad-brush retelling. What results is an engagement characterised by fleeting attention and endless channel/platform-hopping, what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have called the 'aesthetic of the glance'.¹² For Burn such promiscuous glancing enables an attitude of self-reflexive confirmation, an egotistical belief that the only stories of value are those that intersect directly with our individual interests. Thomas de Zengotita has called this the 'flattery of representation', the conviction that in a mediated world, we are the centre of attention and, given an ever-expanding range of entertainment options, we will always choose the one that excites us most and, potentially, challenges us least.¹³ Were this culture of self-referentiality confined to the sphere of light entertainment it could perhaps be dismissed as frivolous but insignificant; in fact, Burn argues, it has made its presence felt in all aspects of culture at large and in the processes of political democracy. That politics can now only be understood by many through the celebrity frame demands both a significant realignment of public discourse and the elision of the worlds of politics and showbusiness. In effect, the kinds of transformation that characterised the era of Tony Blair and New Labour.

For all *Born Yesterday*'s concern with the trivialisation of public engagement in the life of the nation, its chief satirical target is the Blair government, an administration crippled by vanity and egomania and more concerned with its own international image than with running the country efficiently and cost-effectively. The summer of 2007 saw the longwinded abdication of Tony Blair and the succession to premiership of Gordon Brown, a man noted more for his political professionalism than his personal glitz. The novel is premised on an understanding of Blair's New Labour administration as intellectually bankrupt, having run together ideology and presentation to the point that they were indistinguishable. The routine spinning of news stories by teams of highly media-literate press and Public Relations advisors; the faux-friendships with the press and the extreme sensitivity to public opinion

created a government that was adaptable but principled only in the broadest sense. In many ways the superficiality of Blair's government reflects the depthless culture that gave rise and sustained it, a symbiosis that seems irrefutable after the catastrophic failures of the Brown regime. Brown's plea for a greater seriousness and gravitas in political life, allied to his supposedly spin-free presentational style, was, whether due to misconception or circumstances, grossly misjudged; far from underwriting a return to statesmanship, his sombre mien was suggestive only of an anachronistic and out-of-touch political system. Burn sets the men up as polar opposites: Blair, the suave communicator, Brown the awkward accountant, but behind that presentation is a sense of the emptiness of those descriptions, a symbolic aporia that cannot be resolved through the rationalisation of them to the sum of their mediated selves. Such clichés are clearly no more than frames for understanding which distance us from the men themselves, but what choice do we have in a culture dependent on speed, unambiguous intent and constant refreshing not only for its meaning but for its survival? As with the McCanns, contemporary politicians are subject to a brutally functionalist media logic to convey themselves and their message and are forced to abide by the same commercial imperatives of performance and entertainment. They are effectively celebrities.

The erosion of the politician's public esteem and their installation as figures of popular entertainment has been analysed by a number of critics.¹⁴ Since the early 1990s there has been a recognition that the distance between the political business of government and the public presentation of that business has narrowed dramatically. For John Street, contemporary politics has more in common with showbusiness than commercial business because it has come to privilege aesthetics over ethics: 'it celebrates and depends on the gap between representative and represented, and it is about the imagined bridging of this gap.'¹⁵ The imaginative leap necessary to associate an individual with a particular ideological system or social policy has increasingly called not only for the commodification of the message, but also for the commodification of the politician selling that message. The politician is no longer the advocate of an idea of societal organisation, but the very embodiment of the idea itself, and in seeking to convey a party doctrine s/he incarnates the personal value of that world-view. Politicians' 'value lies in their meaning as texts, rather than their use as commodities'¹⁶ and in that they come very close to the narratives and frames that we associate with the entertainment business; as P David Marshall has suggested:

In politics, a leader must somehow embody the sentiments of the party, the people and the state. In the realm of entertainment, a celebrity must somehow embody the sentiments of an audience. These arguments construct celebrities and political leaders that identify a general system for the construction of public subjectivity and conceptions of subjectivity.¹⁷

‘Politics is, by definition, a public sphere. Yet perhaps never quite as public as it is today’, and with the advent of 24-hour rolling news broadcasting, online commentary and easy access to breaking news through handheld devices, politicians face intense pressure to be on-message at all times.¹⁸ The result has been serious investment at a party level in cohorts of image advisers and media consultants to manage the PR interactions of the candidate/politician bringing about a buffed and evanescent quality to public figures, what de Zengotita describes as a ‘thinness to things, a smoothness, a muffled quality – it’s all insulational, as if the deities of Dreamworks were labouring invisibly around us, touching up the canvas of reality with digital airbrushes’.¹⁹ As politicians have learned to stage-manage their public performances, so a uniform method of communication has taken over leading to a creeping homogenisation amongst a class of state servants whose political differences are increasingly discerned by nuance and inflection rather than broad ideological opposition:

The effort to produce aesthetically acceptable candidates whose ideas are subordinated to other, cosmetic considerations has brought what W. Russell Neuman calls ‘excessive sameness’ in all politicians served up by television. As we are only ‘partially attentive’ when viewing and listening to them, eye-catching characteristics or memorable catchphrases linger in the mind of an audience that has become accustomed to passivity.²⁰

Dependent on the support of a ‘glancing’ public unable to tell even senior party figures apart, the politician falls back upon an ever-more condensed and easily understandable message that can be conveyed with minimal ideological outlay and maximum press impact. The soundbite is a response to a commercial media logic that thrives upon simplicity and penetrability and speaks to a market desensitised to serious debate about ideas, increasingly politically inactive and impatiently pressing the default news refresh key. In such an environment only those politicians sufficiently fleet of foot in presentational style and display and implausibly

photogenic will profit; for Burn, Tony Blair was all those things whilst Gordon Brown was none of them.

Whilst Tony Blair and New Labour were not the instigators of this culture of celebrity politics (Cashmore cites Ronald Reagan as the symbolic tipping point in a process that had begun with John F. Kennedy), they quickly became adept at, and reliant upon, image and story management as a daily part of the functioning of government. Burn regards this privileging of the medium over the message as representative of a movement away from the purpose of government being the pursuit of the betterment of the life of the nation and towards an idea of government as a manager of, often irrational expectations. If the role of the Prime Minister is somehow to embody the sentimental life of the nation, then there is a danger that s/he is little more than a figurehead, a cipher automatically placed before television cameras to transmit a soothing sense of business as usual, while the real stuff of national administration is conducted ob-scene. Moreover if the Prime Minister is to be read through the celebrity frame, then managing access to her/him is crucial for, as Burn has written in connection to Damien Hirst's popular notoriety, 'celebrity is about control and distance; it is about adding space to the space that inevitably exists between human beings and remaining apart from the flock. It is about degrees of separation and personal insulation and choosing ... to place the flesh cell of your person inside a second, more unbreachable container tank.'²¹ Much has been written of the celebrity aura and the necessity of restricting access to the individual at the heart of the cultural fantasy in order to maintain that allure, but for the celebrity politician, the problem is less one of denying access than of sustaining the aura whilst appearing approachable by all. Blair achieved this consummately in Burn's estimation, whereas Brown possessed little of the style and none of the charisma necessary to a twenty-first century premiere. But what interests Burn is not the public face of either man but the person inside that second unbreachable container tank. How, he asks, can we ever know Blair or Brown? Is it possible to peer through the veil created by the culture of communicational immediacy to an authenticity, a 'this-ness', that guarantees a deeper, more human, being. Or are these public figures ultimately unknowable amidst the blizzard of 'rumour, gossip, spin, speculation'.²²

Troubled by the indeterminacy of these men as mediated individuals, *Born Yesterday's* narrator visits their constituency homes when neither is in residence, as if the solidity of brick and stone will guarantee a presence that is lacking in the high-velocity turnover of rolling news. In visiting Blair's Sedgefield home, Myrobella, he discovers that:

...the closer you get to it, coming down the hill past the miners' welfare cottages with their barbered lawns and recently constructed cubistic architecturally adventurous hard-edged glass porches, past the terraces with their uniform vertical swivel-blinds and elderly men gardening in their vests, hard muscle turned soft, the harder the Blair house is to see.²³

In the context of something rooted and concrete, Blair seems to disappear. The reticent quality of Myrobella is in stark contrast to the sturdy there-ness of the miners' houses; they speak of historicity, of domesticity and of class order, a continuity that is tied to a locale and not to the convenience of a constituency seat. As the narrator approaches closer to the house he further notices that:

... none of the house's doors, certainly none of its windows, is visible. The process of concealment has been so well achieved that all Myrobella's particulars – homeliness, openness, availability of natural light, original features, true wear and tear, stability, renovations, orientation, everything about the house – is subject to speculation, and has to be guessed at rather than known.²⁴

Blair's home metonymically reflects his own media evasiveness, a blank surface from which nothing personal could be gleaned. When the narrator moves on to Gordon Brown's home Dramcarling in Inverkeithing, Fife, one might expect a dwelling of more robust heft, but as he discovers Brown's presence is equally absent, though for more practical reasons:

To the right, as he looked at it, were the first signs of the police beginning to dig in – some wire mesh screens, some temporary lightweight crowd control barriers – like a junior, starter version of the bomb-detection portals and robotic inspection systems, like defensive architecture then in the process of being stripped away from the Blairs' place in Sedgefield.²⁵

Swaddled in security equipment, Dramcarling is as ghostly as Myrobella, ironically given a presence only by the defensive operation designed to ensure its safety.

For Blair the silence and obliquity of the houses functions metaphorically to denote the insubstantiality of contemporary political life: its tough, compulsively controlled efficiency is not finally underpinned by any substantive engagement with the private worlds

of the populace. Instead the houses work as symbols as once empty and replete, of dislocation, dissociation and unknowability. Burn's writing has repeatedly addressed the inexpressible disconnect that distances one person from another and that can make another's actions incomprehensible, but in *Born Yesterday* there is an overriding sense that this model of severance has become a social default, acculturated through both postmodernism's identity politics and increasingly mediated representations of the world. In a world where communication across vast distances has never been easier, or quicker, there seems to remain a gulf in the human experience of the other, and, as *Born Yesterday* reveals, a failure of genuine empathy. The new information reality of twenty-first century life is that we have more ways of knowing about each other and less desire to do so; in the place of real connection is a cult of fetishised celebrity but the *ad nauseam* speculation, heresy and gossip about their lives is little more than compensation for our other losses. That this solipsistic mode of being-in-the-world has infiltrated our cultural lives is sobering enough according to Burn, that it has affected the way we understand the precepts of political democracy is infinitely more worrying.

Yet for all the absences in *Born Yesterday*, the one that generates the most pathos is actually more of a presence: in the first chapter, Burn's narrator encounters Baroness Thatcher on a walk in his local park in Chelsea. 'Mrs Thatcher', as she is always referred to in the novel – a name as iconographic as her image – is presented in all her octogenarian ordinariness; the deliquescence of age and the motivelessness of the disempowered weighing as heavily as the time she fills walking in the park. In *Alma Cogan*, Burn has previously addressed the sort of death in life that follows the removal of the public limelight, and Thatcher is placed alongside and symbolically against the jetsam of lived life: the dog-walkers, the bacon sandwiches her bored bodyguards consume and the effortless *How Clean Is Your House?* conversations between those for whom Thatcherism is nothing more than a fading memory. Divested of authority, Mrs Thatcher is merely part of the scenery and it is not without a certain irony that the narrator notices the lack of her trademark handbag:

And a muscle memory keeps sending Mrs Thatcher's pale, manicured right hand with its prominent wrist-bone and thin blue veins travelling along her arm in an attempt to push the slipping strap – which of course isn't there – back towards the clamp of her elbow.²⁶

The instinctual reflex of her movement is as pathetic as the narcissism of Blair's attenuated departure from power, or the desperation of Brown's craving for a statesmanship that would outreach him. Politics, like entertainment, is dependent on profile and exposure and once the camera is turned off with it goes a public subjectivity that has always been precariously positioned between platform and performance. Tony Blair may have been the inheritor of Thatcher's neo-liberal agenda, but he, like her, is subject to the pitiless commercial logic of the media frame.

Burn's experiment in *Born Yesterday* is an ambitious one that calls into question the distinction between reportage and narrative fiction and tries to bridge the chasm between the experience of events as facts and their transformation into the kinds of story that speak of a common human interest. Whether the experiment works is debatable: on the one hand, it effectively conveys how the media sustains itself through the appropriation of the transient stuff of life and its elevation to hyperbolic levels of significance: this, he argues, is the news reality of the twenty-first century, the impenetrable matrix of late capitalism's narcissism. On the other hand, *Born Yesterday* fails as a novel precisely because of its attempt at contemporaneity: the dislocating associativeness and the absence of comforting teleology risk sacrificing through incoherence what is gained through novelty. At what point, we may be moved to ask, does a random collocation of coterminous happenings coalesce into a novel? Burn's juggling of decontextualised facts and events will either work for readers or it won't; it will either suggest that any span of events are connected in some organic way, unconnected, or forcefully coerced into narrative connection by our desire for order and meaning. Burn's collection of coincidences, what he may we have called the creation of a texture of ambiguity, ultimately amounts to very little if one is looking for this novel to be able to illuminate the recent past, but I think Burn is both conscious of, and comfortable with the inconclusive nature of the text, its status as an open-ended literary ready-made.

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¹ Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', *New Left Review* 152 (1985): 60-73 (66-7).

² Thomas Docherty, 'Now, here, this', in *Literature and the Contemporary. Fictions and Theories of the Present*, eds. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (Harlow: Longman, 1999), 50-62 (50).

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- ³ Simon Willis, 'Interview. Gordon Burn', *Granta* www.granta.com/online-only/interview-Gordon-Burn, accessed 13 February 2011.
- ⁴ Brian Donaldson, 'Gordon Burn. Rewriting the Past', www.heraldscotland.com/gordon-burn-rewriting-the-past-1.886033, accessed 13 February 2011.
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- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.