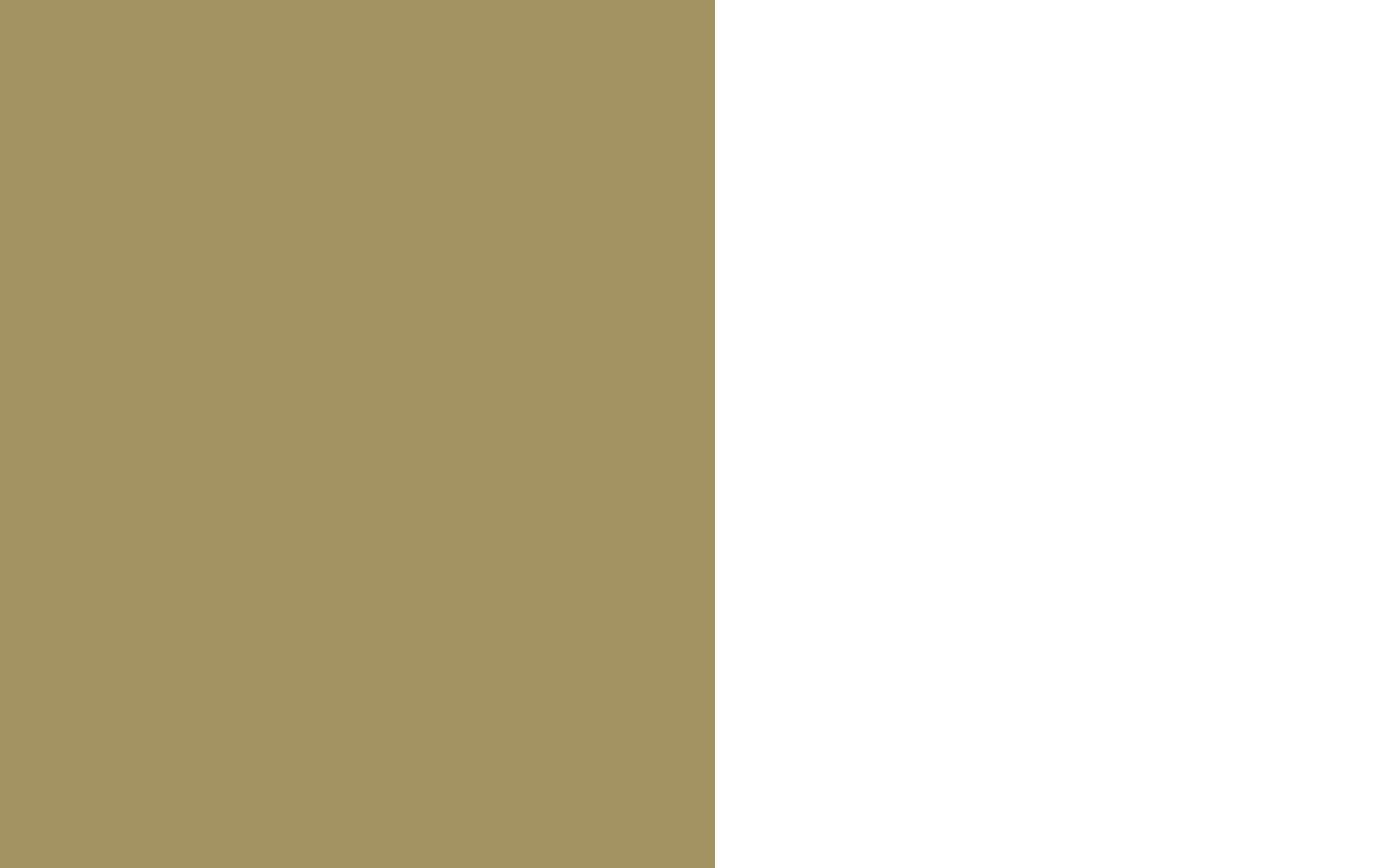


WILLIAM MORRIS

David Mabb

with essays by Caroline Arscott and Steve Edwards





THE COLONISATION OF UTOPIA

Steve Edwards

WILLIAM MORRIS 'MINISTERING TO THE SWINISH LUXURY OF THE RICH'

David Mabb

FOUR WALLS: MORRIS AND ORNAMENT

Caroline Arscott



FOREWORD

About three years ago David Mabb approached the Whitworth Art Gallery with the idea that he might curate an exhibition/installation, based primarily on the gallery's own substantial holdings of textiles and wallpapers by the designer, with the aim of problematising visually the apparent contradictions in Morris's work and thinking. Morris was a romantic and a revolutionary, a medievalist and a modernist, a utopian socialist whose clients were drawn largely from the upper echelons of Victorian society. As his commitment to socialism grew Morris himself became aware of the dilemma in which he had placed himself by aiming to satisfy 'the luxury of taste rather than the luxury of costliness' (as Morris & Co.'s first prospectus pronounced optimistically in 1861) while effectively being obliged to '**minister (...)** to the **swinish luxury of the rich**' (lambasting one of his best clients, the Yorkshire industrialist Sir Isaac Lowthian Bell, towards the end of his life).

The relationship between the Whitworth and William Morris goes back to Morris's own lifetime, so David's proposal struck an immediate chord. The two large-scale figurative tapestries which he has included in the exhibition, *Flora* and *Pomona*, were shown by the Morris firm at the Manchester Royal Jubilee Exhibition in 1887, having been woven between 1884 and 1885. They were subsequently purchased for the Whitworth's opening exhibition in 1890 (the gallery was inaugurated by Royal Charter in 1889) and are, therefore, among the first examples of contemporary art acquired for the gallery's collections. Nearly a century later and to mark the 150th anniversary of Morris's birth in 1834 I and a colleague, Joanna Banham, the then Curator of Wallpapers at the Whitworth, organised a major loan exhibition entitled *William Morris and the Middle Ages*, which examined the ways in which Morris drew on the medieval period consistently in both his design work and in shaping his artistic and political theories; he was, interestingly, the only leading nineteenth-century medievalist to try and reconcile admiration for the Middle Ages with a belief in utopian socialism. Twelve years later, in 1996, the anniversary of Morris's death, I was invited by the Crafts Council to curate a touring exhibition, opening at the Whitworth (*William Morris Revisited : Questioning the Legacy*), which attempted to explain the nature and role of the crafts at the end of the twentieth century by examining their roots in the work and ideas of Morris and his contemporaries in the Arts and Crafts Movement. One of the six thematic sections in the exhibition looked at the economics of producing work by hand in an industrial society and examined specifically the incompatibility of Morris's ambitions for democratising good design with his insistence on labour-intensive methods and the finest materials. It took little persuasion, therefore, to see that David Mabb's project would be of interest in extending the gallery's periodic re-presentations of William Morris and his work.

Other factors also played a role in our enthusiasm for working with David as curator. The Whitworth has a tradition of continually rethinking the ways in which the permanent collections are reconfigured and re-presented, and a track record in innovative

exhibition making. The collection curators, who are all actively involved in the exhibition-making process, recognise in particular the value of artists' perspectives in extending and illuminating our understanding of the collections. And last but not least, Manchester itself could not be a more appropriate setting for an artistic project which takes as its subject-matter the tensions between art and industry. It was the birthplace of the industrial revolution (which Morris held responsible for most of society's ills) and, for a time, the home of Frederick Engels, Marx's collaborator; the nexus is relevant and important as a key difference between the socialism espoused by Morris and that of orthodox Marxism is the emphasis in the latter on the liberating potential of the industrial proletariat, as a result of the growth of industry. Morris also lectured in Manchester on numerous occasions in the 1880s and 1890s in Ancoats, at that time one of the worst slums in the city and dubbed by him 'the vestibule of Hell'. The lectures were part of a programme aimed at improving the lives of local inhabitants by bringing them culture and other forms of edifying entertainment.

For around six months David worked closely with curators of textiles, wallpapers and fine art at the Whitworth, becoming acquainted with museum classification and documentation systems, and with the preparation and display methods used by conservators. He also made contact with other institutions in the city holding Morris material, who generously lent objects to augment the work from the Whitworth; these organisations and individuals are acknowledged directly by David and in the captions to the photographs of the installation. The resulting project is a hybrid creature which 'wobbles' the boundaries between an exhibition of historical artefacts and a contemporary art installation, a display without a clear narrative voice which leaves the visitor uncertain about the status of the spectacle on offer.

My own thanks go primarily to David himself for bringing the idea of the project to the Whitworth and for the pleasure and stimulation we have all had in working with him. I must also acknowledge the generous financial and other support which we have received from The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Arts and Humanities Research Board, The Oliver Ford Charitable Trust, Arts Council England, Arthur Sanderson & Sons Ltd, and The Little Greene Paint Company, without which it would not have been possible to mount the exhibition.

Jennifer Harris
Deputy Director, The Whitworth Art Gallery

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Things

They would go in to department stores and stay for hours on end, (...) marvelling at and almost drowning under the scale of their own needs, of the riches laid out before them, of the abundance on offer.¹

Perec's *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, from which this passage is taken, tells, in a disparaging tone, the story of an aspirant young couple who find work in the new field of market research and who define themselves through their discernment as consumers. Perec's characters - Sylvie and Jérôme - play a significant role in Kristin Ross's important account of French post-war culture *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, where they condense several features of the new France.² Sylvie and Jérôme - who, Ross notes, never appear singularly - encapsulate modern subjectivities produced through commodity choices; one key to this is their status as middle-class couple capable of unifying the central objects of gendered desire: the automobile and the consumer goods identified with the modern home. Their mental world is shaped by the things they covet, and the novel proceeds by means of lists: They discovered knitwear, silk blouses, shirts by Doucet, cotton voile ties, silk scarves, tweed, lambswool, cashmere, vicuna, leather and jerseywool, flax and, finally, the great staircase of footwear leading from Churches to Westons, from Westons to Buntins and from Buntins to Lobbs.³

The terms in the list may have changed, and the modern 'consumer' may not be quite so enthralled with English sartorial style as Sylvie and Jérôme, but the idea of 'lifestyle' shaped by commodity choices ought to be familiar enough. Perec's tone, though, announces the recent nature of the phenomenon he describes. Sylvie and Jérôme are marked as both petit bourgeois social climbers and as snobs, as individualists and conformists: it is significant that their occupations put them as insiders, intelligence agents, of capitalist consumption. They are, thus, part of the significant new layer of capitalist functionaries that Ross calls the 'jeune cadre'.⁴ Perec's novel may be subtitled *A Story of the Sixties* but it seems to reflect on the changes of this period from the perspective of a previous age, and the reader is left with little doubt that the men and women shaped by the long post-war boom are rootless and shallow.

As *Things* progresses the characters follow the route of many of their friends and leave Paris, first for North Africa and finally for the French countryside. The first trip confronts them with alien things that they do not know how to fetishise; the second expedition from Paris sees the lists become dominated by food: 'Eldorados of hams, cheeses and spirits'; 'Millions of loaves would emerge from a thousand ovens'. The patterns of consumption outlined in this book suggest a petit bourgeois dream world of plenty and idleness; as the author puts it: 'They would drown in plenty.' In the passage I began with Perec calls this plenty 'abundance' (he also uses this term elsewhere in the novel). Abundance is, though, an odd, archaic sounding word that seems to belong to the allegorical paintings or texts of previous centuries. Perhaps we are now so inside the world described by Perec that we no longer give much thought to abundance. But the pattern of



Things, its particular 'Eldorados', which combine idleness and abundance, follows some established utopian plot lines. It is worth reflecting on this point since a consideration of abundance takes us to the heart of utopian thought, to William Morris and beyond.

Abundance in the Pastoral mode

Abundance is one of three central themes that structure utopian thought. Along with sexual freedom and a life of ease, or idleness, abundance defines the parameters of the utopian imagination.⁵ These themes recur in the various utopian projects from Thomas More's *Utopia* to the present; they may be configured differently but abundance is usually an important ingredient in the mix. A.L. Morton has done more than anyone to trace the lineaments of this strain of utopian thought.⁶ Morton takes as the founding text for this tradition of utopian abundance the fourteenth-century poem *The Land of Cokaygne*. One passage from this text reads:

That geese fly roasted on the spit,
As God's my witness, to that spot,
Crying out, 'Geese, all hot, all hot!'
Every goose in garlic drest,
Of all food the seemliest.
And the larks that are so couth
Fly right down into man's mouth,
Smothered in stew, and thereupon
Piles of powdered cinnamon.
Every man may drink his fill
And needn't sweat to pay the bill.⁷

1 Georges Perec, *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (1965), trans. Andrew Leak, The Harvill Press, 1990, p.42.

2 Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, MIT, 1995.

3 Perec, op. cit., p.39.

4 Ross, op. cit., p.7; *passim*.

5 Perry Anderson has recently identified four 'commanding themes' for utopia, only one of which - sexuality - intersects with those I mention here. His other themes are 'property', 'work-play-art', and 'nature as conquest and companion'. Anderson describes the neutralisation of these themes; the dystopian image of modern science; and the possibilities for utopian thought now. See Perry Anderson, 'The River of Time', *New Left Review*, No. 26, March/April 2004, pp.67-77.

6 A.L.Morton, *The English Utopia* (1952), Lawrence and Wishart, 1978.

7 Anon., *The Land of Cokaygne*, in Morton, ibid., p.282.



In this short extract the objects of desire - geese and larks - arrive as if by magic already cooked and dressed, and the alcohol runs freely. The good life in Cokaygne is defined by this abundance of the necessities of life. It is enough to reach out a hand, or open your mouth, for all needs to be satisfied. Morton details the British morphological variants of this poem and its reincarnation in the Norwegian fishermen's song *Oleana* of 1853, as well as in two American folk songs: *The Big Rock Candy Mountains* and *Poor Man's Heaven*. The same basic figures are present in these latter versions: rivers of wine and whisky, lakes of stew, fruit falling from the trees, piles of strawberry pie and wagon loads of cream; food that needs no preparation: hens that lay 'soft boiled eggs' and roasted pigs that 'leap about merrily asking if anyone would like ham'. In all these variations on a theme, utopia is concerned with the pleasures of the body, particularly feasting and revelry.⁸

In a recent essay Fredric Jameson has characterised utopian themes of this type as representing 'old peasant dreams'.⁹ It is easy to see why he might do so. The dreams of plenty and idleness must seem particularly appealing to those whose lives are marked by the combination of toil and scarcity. Nevertheless, I think Jameson is mistaken in this assessment. In any case, given that peasants continue to make up the majority of the world's population, his tone seems inappropriate. Millions of people continue to find themselves gripped by laborious work and inadequate nutrition; for them the dreams of plenty, surely, retain a utopian dimension. I want to argue here that abundance - particularly when it is cojoined to a release from toil (figured in the tradition of Cokaygne as idleness) - cannot be confined to the peasant imagination. Rather, abundance constitutes one of the deep figures of the utopian wish-image. Jameson's alternative utopian proposal revolves around the claim for 'full employment'.¹⁰ But, because he makes no larger claims for the transformation of society, this claim for the utopia of full employment would leave us all in thrall to the capitalist labour process: to toil and alienation, and to vast inequalities of wealth on a local and global scale. It is what Morris would have called a 'Cockney Paradise'. This argument represents a narrowing down of ambitions for social transformation typical of a period marked by political defeat, but the problem, I think, also stems from Jameson's conception of utopia. He has argued on several occasions that the strength of the utopian tradition does not lie, as is commonly assumed, in speculating about the future, but in demonstrating the limits of the present.¹¹ Utopian thinking, for Jameson, demonstrates the extent to which we remain trapped within our historical present and are unable to imagine a radically transformed world. We need only glance at TV sci-fi to get the point. The argument for full employment is significant in this account because it folds back on to the present, exposing its economic priorities, which put profits, whether of individuals, corporations, nations or geographic zones, before the right of all to an adequate livelihood.

One problem with this argument is that it reinforces some strongly established injunctions on thinking about the future. The champions of capitalism tend to represent anyone who claims that society can be transformed as an impractical dreamer whose plans would require a world populated exclusively by angels. At best the opponents of



capitalism are depicted as unnatural and slightly deranged, but ineffectual fantasists; at worst they are represented as busy drawing up plans for gulags. The political Right has a clear vested interest in propagating such views. The case on the political Left is more complex. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were extremely critical of the Utopian Socialists of the nineteenth century, and tended to view utopianism as 'the construction of blueprints of a future society that are incapable of realisation'.¹² Comments on the future society are to be found scattered throughout the writings of Marx and Engels, but they became wary of utopian projects for constructing what they called 'castles in the air', believing that the future socialist society would emerge through the process of struggle, rather than follow some pre-established plan.¹³ In much of the subsequent Marxist tradition this critique of utopian socialism was mistakenly taken to debar socialists from speculating about the future.¹⁴ The term 'utopianism' came to be used in the socialist tradition as a pejorative label; consider, for example, that frequently heard phrase: 'hopeless utopians'. But as Ernst Bloch has taught us, the last thing utopians can be blamed for is a lack of hope.¹⁵ While this original socialist critique of utopianism contains an important political lesson, it risks cementing the dominant culture's injunction against thinking about social change. The various negative assessments of utopian thought come together in a blockage of the utopian imagination and deprive radical critique of a significant resource. Jameson's argument, despite his intention, contributes to this

8 Cokaygne is a literary tradition, but we should be able to imagine its visual equivalents; Morton mentions Breughel in this context; still life painting with fruit bursting, and seed scattering presents another obvious image of fecundity, while the genre of the market scene with its butchers' stalls depicts a particularly visceral version of plenty. It might even be possible to think of modern advertising in the light of these traditions of utopian wish-imagery.

9 Fredric Jameson, 'The Politics of Utopia', *New Left Review*, No. 25, January/February, 2004, p.40; Peter Smith in an excellent essay that covers many of the key themes of my argument describes utopias of this kind as 'escapist'. It will become apparent that I think this is a mistaken idea. See Peter Smith, 'Never Work! The Situationists and the Politics of Negation', unpublished paper.

10 Strictly speaking - and Jameson recognises this - this example is not utopian at all but a 'transitional demand': that is to say, the claim for full employment is a political demand that exceeds the system's ability to deliver it and therefore works as a critique of existing economic priorities.

11 See, for example, Fredric Jameson, 'Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?', Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art/Godine, 1984, pp.239-52.

12 Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, Philip Allan, 1990, p.35.

13 Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), trans. Samuel Moore, Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1968, p.60.

14 For a good exploration of Marx's and Engels's responses to the Utopian socialists see Levitas, op. cit.

15 See his monumental *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols. (1959), trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice & Paul Knight, MIT, 1986. Morton, in trying to claim Morris for the British communist movement, found it necessary to claim that he was not a utopian thinker, or if he was he was a scientific one. See A.L. Morton, 'Introduction', *Three Works by William Morris*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1968, p.29; *The English Utopia*, op. cit., p. 221; 'Introduction to the Anniversary Edition', A.L. Morton ed., *Political Writings of William Morris*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1984, p.8. E.P. Thompson followed Morton in this assessment in his great political biography of Morris: *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Pantheon Books, 1976. But see the 'Postscript: 1976' to this volume where, following Miguel Abensour, Thompson re-evaluates the place of utopianism in the thought of Morris and its role in the socialist tradition. These issues are also discussed in Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, Verso, 1980.



Morris, writing from within the early English socialist movement, addressed this problem of speculating about the future head on. He criticised the earlier Utopian Socialists and positioned himself on the side of Marx. In 'The Society of the Future' he argued that socialists were opposed to 'putting forward elaborate utopian schemes' and argued that what was needed was not prophecy but action. Even so, he could not resist adding a 'nevertheless...' In this essay Morris distinguished between those he called 'analytical' socialists (abstract theoreticians) and others whom he variously described as 'constructive' socialists, 'visionaries' or 'practical people'. Morris felt he slotted into the latter camp. The problem, he believed, with those who possessed an analytic turn of mind (he was probably thinking of H.M. Hyndman and Ernest Belfort Bax) was that their dry theoreticism could not appeal to the workers they wanted to reach. It was 'dreams for the future', he suggested, that could inspire such people to become socialists, in a way that 'sober reason' alone would not. Morris felt that this work of futurity would create a 'fit frame of mind' for the study of 'science and political economy'. To this end he offered his essay as 'a chapter of confessions', presenting 'what it is I desire of the Society of the Future'.¹⁶ Morris's 'conversion' to revolutionary socialism in 1883 involved a transformation in many aspects of his thought, but here he carried over the distinction between utilitarianism and 'the laws of the heart' which had been central to the 'Romantic anti-capitalism' of Carlyle, Dickens and Ruskin. It does not much matter if we call Morris's speculations 'utopian', or describe them as a form of the 'communist imaginary'. The point is the same: his achievement was to accept the Marxist critique of Utopian Socialism while refusing the injunction on thinking about the future: in the process he cast utopianism in an activist mode. Utopian thought offers a gap rather than a feasible strategy and tactics, but at those historical moments when possibility seems to have withered to the promise of more and more stuff, a gap at least provides an openness to the future. The utopian imagination holds open the possibility of fundamental change, and suggests the chance of living otherwise.

There is one last point from Jameson's important essay that has a direct bearing on the theme of utopian abundance. He recognises a counter-claim to his argument for full employment in the demand for the right to be idle, which he associates with Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue.¹⁷ In his book *The Right to be Lazy*, written in 1880, Lafargue suggested, in a truly subversive argument, that the working class should aspire to the idleness enjoyed by the bourgeoisie. As we have seen, the tradition of Cokayne and its derivatives places a significant emphasis on idleness. It is notable that, with minor exceptions, no one works in the various Cokayne fables. In this tradition, the things needed to satisfy our needs are deemed to be self-generating; they do not even require the kind of work which usually remains hidden in the kitchen. If abundance is central to this conception of utopia its immediate counterpart is idleness. Nothing marks these texts as belonging to communities of labour as much as this dream of a world without work. The ready availability of life's necessities plays such a substantial role in this utopian imaginary because, for the working communities of the pre-industrial world, this was the only way (short of being discovered as a lost Princess or Prince) that abundance could



be conceived without sentencing oneself to toil. Utopia meant abundance that you did not have to produce for someone else, but there was no way to imagine this plenty without some form of *deus ex machina*, things would need to produce themselves magically if all our demands were to be satisfied. This aporia suggests that the utopian tradition has been written in the pastoral mode. The tradition of pastoral poetry, which was developed in ancient Sicily and passed via Virgil to the eighteenth century, is preoccupied with the lives and, particularly, loves of herdsmen and shepherds. But, as John Barrell has argued, these Arcadian shepherds represent mythological figures rather than agricultural workers.¹⁸ The pastoral figure is defined not by his or her labour in the landscape but by leisure and idleness; pastoral figures do not work, instead they pass their time reading poetry, dozing under the sun, or engaging in the games of sexual seduction. If work is required in the pastoral landscape to milk the cows or sow and reap the corn, it always takes place somewhere else and is performed by unseen figures. This is because, as Barrell suggests, pastoral verse and pastoral painting are aristocratic forms whose characters (shepherds, milkmaids, etc.) inhabit the landscape of the gentleman's estate and stand in for the 'idleness and insouciance' of the aristocratic patron.¹⁹ All those milkmaids and shepherds are mirrors for the aristocratic viewer. The Cokayne tradition of abundance can be seen as a reworking of this pastoral tradition from below. Cokayne represents a pastoral landscape from which the traces of aristocratic privilege have been expunged. When this happens plenty turns rough-and-ready. No one works and yet the wheat grows, the wine flows and meat turns on the spit.

16 Morris, 'The Society of the Future', Morton ed., Political Writings, op. cit. pp.188-90. His most famous 'dream for the future' was, of course, *News from Nowhere*.

17 Paul Lafargue (*La Droit à la Paresse*, 1880) translated as *The Right to be Lazy and Other Studies*, Gordon Press, New York, 1973. For an account of the tension between anarcho-syndicalism and a tendency advocating the refusal of work in the anarchist tradition see Richard Porton, *Film and the Anarchist Imagination*, Verso, 1999. Porton does a good job of assembling the ideas of more recent anti-work thinkers, but I find his account of the revolutionary tradition confused.

18 John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840*, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

19 Ibid., p.11.

Morris frequently employed the word abundance: 'abundance of life'; 'abundance of beauty'; 'abundant meaning'; 'superabundance of art'; 'abundant easements and holidays'; 'abundant leisure'; 'abundant discussion'; 'abundant corruption'; the 'abundant' spread of Socialism among English-speaking people; and so on.²⁰ In each of these examples Morris uses the word abundance as a synonym for 'a great deal of...', or 'lots of...'. It appears so frequently in his writing that many of his commentators, it would seem, unwittingly carry over this strange word into their own prose. But he also used the concept of abundance in two much more specific ways. The primary form of abundance, for Morris, was to be found in the workings of nature. Fields, fruit trees and hedgerows all generate natural plenty. Rejecting the conflation of wealth with articles of luxury, Morris wrote:

Wealth is what Nature gives us and what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use. The sunlight, the fresh air, the unspoiled face of the earth, food, raiment and housing necessary and decent...²¹

Capitalism, however, wastes this 'superabundant beauty and pleasure'.²² The drive for profit dissipated the abundance of summer, generalising winter scarcity for the majority, and it blighted the landscape: 'It has covered the merry green fields with the hovels of slaves, and blighted the flowers and trees with poisonous gases, and turned the rivers into sewers....'²³ With the generalised slumdom and urban sprawl generated by the capitalist transformation of rural economies around the world, this critique becomes ever more relevant.²⁴ The second form abundance took for Morris concerned the economics of the future socialist society. Capitalism was, he argued, a society of waste, squandering its resources in supporting a class of rich idlers and producing useless articles of luxury (and their counterpart in shoddy or makeshift wares).

Socialism, he believed, would free labour from these fetters of waste: 'so as to produce the greatest possible amount of wealth for the community and every member of it'.²⁵ This transformation of society - dispensing with the idlers and the useless commodities - would result in 'such an abundance of all ordinary necessaries that between private persons there will be no obvious and immediate exchange necessary'.²⁶ In *News from Nowhere* these two forms of abundance fuse, so that nature itself seems to have become an agent of communist plenty; roses are said to have increased in size and quality; the hay and wheat harvest reaches record proportions; and the whole novel is pervaded by the sensations of summer. In 'Under an Elm-Tree' Morris had contrasted the natural beauty of the countryside with the agricultural labourers, broken and deformed by grinding work, who inhabited it.²⁷ In the communist society depicted in *News from Nowhere* these workers gave way to 'men and women worthy of the sweet abundance of midsummer, of its endless wealth of beautiful sights, and delicious sounds and scents'.²⁸

The topos of abundance was not just confined to Morris's political writings and utopian fiction; it also plays an important and obvious role in his design work. In the textiles and wallpapers, even in the

borders of the books printed at the Kelmscott Press, the fecundity of nature is everywhere apparent. The tendrils of plants weave and pulsate, fruits and berries abound, while birds and animals replicate across the surfaces. In *Fruit*, his version of an oriental garden, Morris thematised utopian abundance; the open, ripe flesh of the pomegranates is presented to us still attached to the tree, all we have to do is stretch out a hand to satisfy our bodily needs. This hardness is often figured in Morris's textiles, not through the direct presentational mode of *Fruit*, but by substituting birds pecking at the fruit for the viewer; *Strawberry Thief* of 1883 is one example of this substitution; the *Bullerswood* carpet of 1889 is another. In these designs strawberries and grapes grow so plentifully without human assistance that there is enough for the birds to take their share.²⁹ Even when the plants depicted are not fruits or vines but acanthus or briars it is the vitality and fecundity of nature that comes through. Abundance is an overarching principle governing Morris's work: it runs throughout his writing and designs and it stretches across the divide between his pre-socialist and socialist works. The health and abundance of nature was one thing that Morris took from his romantic heritage and reworked after he joined the Social Democratic Federation.

20 For these, by no means exhaustive, examples see: *News From Nowhere*, A.L. Morton ed., Three Works by William Morris, Lawrence and Wishart, 1968, p.203, p.369; 'The Lesser Arts', p.46; 'Art Under Plutocracy', p.63; 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', p.89; 'How We Live and How We Might Live', p.150; 'The Society of the Future', p.192; 'Communism', p.227; 'Looking Backward', p.247. Citations to these essays refer to Morton ed., Political Writings, op. cit.

21 Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', op. cit., p.91.

22 Morris, 'Under an Elm-Tree: Or Thoughts In the English Country-Side', Morton ed., Political Writings, op. cit., p.218.

23 Morris, 'The Society of the Future', op. cit., p.193.

24 See Mike Davis's important essay 'Planet of Slums' on these trends. Davis figures this ever-expanding slum living through Dickens, but he could have used Morris as a counter-point. Mike Davis, 'Planet of Slums', New Left Review, No.26, March/April 2004, pp.5-34.

25 Morris, 'The Hopes of Civilization', Morton ed., Political Writings, op. cit., p.181.

26 Morris, 'The Society of the Future', Morton ed., Political Writings, p.195.

27 Morris, 'Under an Elm-Tree: Or Thoughts In the Country-Side', op. cit., pp.215-9.

28 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, op. cit., p.330.

29 In many ways, Morris's designs continue, or reinvent, the tradition of Roman wall painting. See Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still life Painting*, Reaktion, 1990.

In one of the most powerful interpretations of the iconography of Morris's designs, Stephen F. Eisenman has argued that the works of the 1870s and 1880s reveal Morris's split response to nature.³⁰ On the one hand, these designs depict nature as 'fertile, enveloping and consoling' and, on the other, they figure it as 'overwrought, confining and oppressive'.³¹ For Eisenman Morris's textiles and wallpapers, particularly during the 1880s, embody a contradictory, or dialectical, relation to nature that involves simultaneously 'a critical distance as well as closeness, an ironic reserve as much as intimacy.' Eisenman also describes this as an 'ornamental contradiction between naturalism and nightmare'.³² According to him, the tension in Morris's decorative work arose from his encounter with capitalist modernisation in Essex and from the 'shame' which was the result of his personal involvement in capitalist mining development in Cornwall. This is a strong reading that rejects the comfy Morris purveyed by the contemporary heritage industry; the Morris of carrier bags, ring-binders and chintz taste; the Morris of middle England. This Morris industry has the effect of transforming his legacy into 'waste'. *Evenlode*, *Wandle*, *Medway* and so on, are seen by Eisenman as both critical responses and compensations for capitalist development; these designs substitute for loss by transforming disfigured nature into works of formal beauty, but they are also marked by anxiety.

Eisenman's account, however, is not without its problems; for one thing, 'shame' seems to me to be the wrong adjective to apply to Morris. It personalises his response to the degradations of capitalist civilisation and diminishes his political understanding of exploitation and oppression. Shame is essentially a liberal concept that tends to isolate Morris from the romantic and socialist critiques of capitalism; as he put it, 'my special leading motive as a Socialist is hatred of civilization; my ideal of the new Society would not be satisfied unless that Society destroyed civilization'.³³ Hatred is a very different category to shame. The real problem with Eisenman's interpretation, however, is that it does not accord with Morris's conception of art and beauty. Eisenman is compelled, in his attempt to read Morris through the twentieth-century modernist aesthetic of Theodor Adorno, to suggest that the designs contradict Morris's explicit statements on their function, which he described as 'an innocent love of animals, or of man passing his days between work and rest as he does'.³⁴ For Morris any art that 'did not minister to the body' and 'soothe, or elevate the mind' was 'useless'.³⁵ The decorative arts, he argued, 'must be either beautiful or ugly, either elevating or degrading to us, either a torment and burden to the maker of it, or a pleasure and a solace to him'.³⁶ There does not seem to be much room for manoeuvre with this passage; it is not easy to see Morris opting for ugliness, degradation or torment. But to take in Morris's conception of art and beauty, I think we require a different, and probably more traditional, interpretation of these designs.

Morris worked with an organic aesthetic: it underpinned his political views, generating strengths and weaknesses in his account of art and society. For him art was beautiful only when it was in accordance with nature; it was ugly when it was discordant with it.³⁷ If Eisenman's description is correct, we would have to concede that, by



Morris's criteria, these works are abject failures. This organic imagery is palpable in Morris's design work, but his writing is also riddled with organic metaphors. In 'The Lesser Arts' of 1877 he argued that the arts, and the decorative arts in particular, were 'sick' as a consequence of the split between intellectual and mechanical work that occurred during the Renaissance. There was a time, he argued, when all handicraftsmen had been artists producing beautiful and useful artefacts, but with the division of labour which had made architecture, painting and sculpture arts 'of the intellect' the handicraft worker had been reduced to a mere labourer. Both high art and decorative art were scarred by this process, but the lesser arts had particularly suffered and were now 'trivial, mechanical, unintelligent, incapable of resisting the changes pressed upon them by fashion or dishonesty (...) nothing but adjuncts to unmeaning pomp, or ingenious toys for a few rich and idle men'.³⁸ Morris speaks of art as 'fruit' growing from the conditions of society. He felt that the sick art of his time needed clearing: 'a burning up of the gathered weeds, so that the field may bear more abundantly'.³⁹ A 'blank emptiness' without art would result:

...and amidst its darkness the new seed must sprout. So it has been before: first comes birth, and hope scarcely conscious of itself: then the flower and fruit of mastery, with hope more conscious enough, passing into insolence, as decay follows ripeness; and then new birth again.⁴⁰

Art would 'grow again', but it would take time before things would 'straighten'.⁴¹ In this analysis, art is a pullulation of society, it develops organically from it; a sick society can only produce an unhealthy art. Society here is figured as an integral whole; it is a kind of organism - elsewhere it appears as a body - whose different parts, art, politics, economics, etc., necessarily reflect one another. In this pre-socialist essay the recovery of art from the sickness of the age is put down to the natural rhythms of development, decay, and growth. At this point Morris saw art as a 'campaign' against the corrupt values of the age.

³⁰ Stephen F. Eisenman, 'Class Consciousness in the Design of William Morris', *The Journal of William Morris Studies*, Vol. XV, No.1, Winter 2002, pp.17-

³⁷ For an equally powerful and inventive reading see Caroline Arscott's essay in this volume.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.18.

³² *Ibid.*, p.24.

³³ Morris, 'The Society of the Future', op. cit., p.192.

³⁴ Eisenman calls this conception 'soothing, even anodyne'. Eisenman, op. cit., p.32.

³⁵ Morris, 'The Lesser Arts', op. cit., p.52.

³⁶ Morris, 'Art Under Plutocracy', op. cit., p.58.

³⁷ Morris, 'The Lesser Arts', op. cit., p.33.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.32.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.40.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.43.

In his subsequent socialist essays these same themes are present. What changed in his analysis was that Morris now saw socialism as necessary to overcome the degradation of the worker and restore the lost balance between art and work:

In the times when art was abundant and healthy, all men were more or less artists; that is to say, the instinct for beauty which is inborn in every complete man had such force that the whole body of craftsmen habitually and without conscious effort made beautiful things...⁴²

If art was a 'fruit' the tree on which it grew was human labour power. Morris now looked to social revolution for the remedy that would restore its health. At this point his analysis tended to become cataclysmic and millenarian. As long as the commercial capitalist system survived, he saw no hope for either nature or its corollary, beauty. As he put it in 'How I Became a Socialist', for art to develop 'roots' it 'must have a soil of a thriving and unanxious life.'⁴³ On one occasion Morris declined the offer to give a lecture on art, stating that he was tired of discussing things which could not be resolved under the 'Present state of things'. For those who would have made up the audience for this event his only response was: 'let 'em turn Socialists!'⁴⁴

One problem with this all-or-nothing analysis is that Morris came to see little hope for art in his time. As a consequence, his own design output declined, even if it did not cease entirely; he sustained his practice at this time for his own amusement. After the disintegration of the Socialist League he turned to writing prose romances, but again this was done as a more-or-less private entertainment. We may regret the works that were lost during this period of socialist agitation due to his shift in attention and energy, but this decline in artistic output is at least offset by the gain: the essays he penned during this period made a lasting contribution to socialist theory; arguably, they are his greatest achievement. Under his editorship, *Commonweal* became an outstanding organ of nascent English socialism, and *News from Nowhere*, which he published in it, continues to haunt the present. Morris thought that he had discovered the cure to the civilisation he hated so much in socialist organisation and so he lost interest in an artistic campaign against the age. In the process he transformed, virtually single-handedly, the tradition of romantic anti-capitalism in England from a more-or-less Tory formation into a mainspring of the left. The real problem here is not the effect that this analysis had on his artistic output but the constraints it placed on his political thought and practice. The 'infantile disorder' of ultra-leftism that Morris was guilty of seriously disabled the early Marxist movement in Britain and contributed to its isolation from the mass of the working-class; it also meant that Morris found it difficult to counteract the growing influence of the Fabians and anarchists. E.P. Thompson has given a compelling account of these political failings.⁴⁵ The problem, I think, is that the organicism of Morris's intellectual formation presented a substantial barrier to pressing issues of how to combine political intransigence with the interventions necessary to build a mass movement. Resolving this problem meant looking to contradiction and not to continuity or integrated wholes. Morris was left in an abstentionist bind, confined to producing abstract propaganda.

42 Morris, 'Art Under Plutocracy', op. cit., pp.61-2.

43 Morris, 'How I became a Socialist', Morton ed., Political Writings, op. cit., p.245.

44 Morris, Letter to John Bruce Glasier, Oct. 11th, 1892, cited E.P. Thompson, William Morris, op. cit., p.559.

45 E.P. Thompson, William Morris, op. cit. Eisenman follows Thompson in suggesting that Morris's dreams of apocalypse - his preference for 'barbarism' over 'civilization' - runs dangerously close to irrationalism, and may have contributed to the real forces of barbarism that overtook twentieth-century civilization.

See: Eisenman, op. cit., pp.32-3. Following up this argument would take us too far from the question to hand.

The other problem with the organic aesthetic in Morris is this aesthetic itself. The first thing to note here is the sheer beauty and power of the works he produced. Besides the works of the French avant-garde, no other work of visual art in nineteenth-century Europe can match these designs. For aesthetic vitality, energy and inventiveness they dwarf the productions of the Pre-Raphaelites. The model of organic totality allowed Morris to position these works as implicit criticisms of capitalist civilisation. Morris's aesthetic stands as a powerful homology for the recovered wholeness of men and women, of their relations to their fellows, and to nature. These works appear – out of time – as placeholders for the unalienated men and women of the future, who contrast starkly to the nineteenth-century worker fragmented and scarred by the division of labour and social division. The organic tradition is very good at grasping connections and drawing into conjunction links that have been masked; its emphasis on growth and change also make it a good mode in which to represent dynamic patterns of thought and social transformation. The section in *News from Nowhere* on 'How the Change Came' presents an exceptional understanding of the revolutionary process in the century after his death.⁴⁶ But this emphasis on transformation comes into contradiction with Morris's stable and fixed conception of beauty rooted in nature and the pre-capitalist handicrafts. The idea of 'truth to materials' developed by Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement made a significant contribution to modernism, but it did so as a 'vanishing mediator', that is, it achieved a considerable influence at the cost of its own disappearance. As the twentieth century unfolded, Morris's organic conception of beauty was less and less suited to capture the fragmentation, isolation and splitting produced by commodity culture on human subjectivity. Morris's aesthetic cut off his legacy from the critical traditions of modernism focused on contradiction, juxtaposition, montage, and simultaneity. His deep investment in ornament and carving did not sit well with the new cult of the machine-made and the unadorned surface. Where his aesthetic did persist was in the British Communist and labour movement but, paradoxically, the effect was to cast British socialism as anti-modern. Morris's conception of the society of the future tends towards a kind of pretty stasis. This frozen beauty comes through forcefully in his account of the malcontents in *News from Nowhere* who prefer the dynamic hell of the nineteenth century to their own utopian condition.⁴⁷ In important ways, *News from Nowhere* is more concerned with the look of the socialist society than with its social arrangements: with stone walls and stone buildings; with pretty mills dotted along the Thames; with how workers look in the fields and so on. At its worst it is too cute for words. The heritage version of Morris as a prophet of beautiful and happy, rural England may be incredibly partial, but it is not entirely a fiction. It is always easier to represent hell than heaven, be it in the sky or on earth.

One thing remains to be said concerning Morris's utopian vision, and it is one of his key achievements. By combining the pastoral utopia with an emphasis on labour he transformed utopian thought. As we have seen, Morris's model of abundance bears close relation to the family of Cokayne fables. What Morris did with the utopian imagery of abundance was to shift it from a pastoral to a georgic mode.



The *Georgics* were a series of agricultural poems in four books written by Virgil between 37 and 29 BCE.⁴⁸ Georgic verse departs from the tradition of pastoral because it places more emphasis on labour, love of the land, and the virtues of simple living. In an attempt to characterise John Constable's attempt at resurrecting the georgic tradition in the early nineteenth century, John Barrell defines it as 'a vision of England, as a rich and peaceful land where labour is valued and rewarded'.⁴⁹ Barrell argues that the enormous cultural authority of Virgil in the eighteenth century allowed landscape painters and poets to employ the themes of georgic verse to escape the permitted representations of the pastoral mode. The georgic tradition enabled artists to depict work that was otherwise impermissible in the dominant pastoral mode; this move enabled representations to be produced which could negotiate the condition of the poor in capitalist agriculture. In particular, Barrell suggests, the georgic mode allowed artists and poets to depict the labouring poor within a framework of capitalist improvement of agriculture in a way that emphasised their secure and harmonious place in the natural order of things.⁵⁰ Barrell is not suggesting that the georgic mode was a radical form: on the contrary, his account attempts to describe the way this aesthetic was employed to fit the existing images of rural labour to changing patterns of capitalist agriculture without generating too much of a disturbance in representation.

Morris thought in the georgic mode, but he had very little in common with the moralising tradition which, by the middle of the nineteenth century, required the poor to be represented as diligently working. The 'greatest offence against property', as E.P. Thompson once noted, 'was to have none'.⁵¹ Morris, in contrast, combines a coruscating critique of labour under capitalism with a serious consideration of work as a humanising project of self-making. 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil' is the title of one of his most significant essays of the socialist period.⁵² The ability to develop work as an aesthetic programme is, for Morris, what makes life worth living, and work freed from capitalist control and returned to the moral keeping of the worker, would, he argued, eradicate waste and produce abundance for all. In the era of nascent socialism Morris could envisage abundance and labour; he did not need to rely on magic. This was a decisive move and a towering achievement. I will return to Morris's vision of the georgic utopia of work in the conclusion to this essay.

⁴⁶ Alongside Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* it is probably the best account of the revolutionary process we have. Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), trans. Max Eastman, Sphere Books, 1967.

⁴⁷ See, for example: Morris, *News From Nowhere*, op. cit., p.336.

⁴⁸ Virgil, *Georgics*, (29 BCE), trans. L.P. Wilkinson, Penguin, 1982.

⁴⁹ Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, op. cit., p.137.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp.12; passim.

⁵¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, 1968, p.66.

⁵² Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', op. cit.

At this point I intend to fast forward and consider the fate of utopian conceptions of abundance after World War II. In the wake of the war the European economies were substantially reconstructed: one the one hand, the Stalinist USSR drew the Eastern part of the continent into its orbit, creating a series of satellite states that mirrored its own hideously bureaucratic form; on the other hand, the Western European states, in the main, witnessed a long and sustained boom founded on US investment and mass-produced commodities. Italy, France and Spain and, to a lesser extent, Britain underwent a period of rapid economic modernisation at this time. In France this period of rapid change is usually referred to as the 'Thirty Glorious Years', in Italy as the 'Economic Miracle' and in Britain the 'long boom'. As Ernst Bloch, the Marxist philosopher of utopia, put it in 1962 (a time when the success of the West still appeared remarkable), the modern West can be characterised by 'surprising prosperity and extensive boredom, and the modern East by equally surprising non-prosperity and monolithic boredom'.⁵³ In these Western states large sections of the working class and the peasantry saw new levels of prosperity and gained access to commodities of which they had previously only dreamed: cars, washing machines and the like. As Kristin Ross argued:

In the space of just ten years a rural woman might live the acquisition of electricity, running water, a stove, a refrigerator, a washing machine, a sense of interior space as distinct from exterior space, a car, a television, and the various liberations and oppressions associated with each.⁵⁴

On the eve of WWII, there were 500,000 cars in, and around, Paris; by 1965 this figure had quadrupled.⁵⁵ And as Paul Ginzborg notes, in 1951 18,500 fridges were produced in Italy; by 1967 the figure had leapt to 3,200,000, while the production of plastic goods increased fifteenfold in the ten years after 1951.⁵⁶ During this period European capitalism began to proclaim the mass democracy and freedom of consumption previously associated with the USA. In due course, these claims would be generalised to incorporate all the world's inhabitants. But in the period of the long boom - from the late 1940s until the 'oil crisis' in the early 1970s - the ideologues of Western capitalism claimed that the road to happiness lay in the creation of a mass consumer paradise. In the process, capitalism captured much of the ground of utopian thought. Perec's novel is a sort of document of that seizure. With it came the 'jeune cadre': technocrats and managers of consumption; promoters and speculators; media commentators, researchers and all their kind.

None of this is meant to suggest that this process of modernisation ushered in prosperity for all. Today 1.3 billion of the world's population live on less than one dollar a day, while in the former Soviet Union the richest 20% of the population have an income share eleven times that of the poorest 20%.⁵⁷ The number of those living in slum conditions is multiplying at an incredible rate across the world.⁵⁸ In the USA itself, the average income of the wealthiest 20% is \$132,390, while that of the poorest 20% is a mere \$6,787.⁵⁹ According

to official British statistics, which define poverty as characterised by a household income of less than 50% of the national average, in 1996-7 nearly 25% of the British population should be seen as living in poverty: an increase of 10 million since 1979.⁶⁰ Plenty more examples of this kind could be cited. Capitalist abundance is incredibly uneven (and that applies to both differences between geographic zones and distinctions across social classes). In any case, for Morris's social division was much more important than mere distinctions of wealth and poverty. What capitalism was able to do during the long boom, however, was to offer a significant proportion of the working class relative prosperity, and on the basis of this change to represent itself as a society of affluence. This linkage of 'social utopia, historical progress, and material plenty for all' has an obvious bearing on the issues under consideration here.⁶¹ I want to look at the fate of Morris's utopia in this period of capitalist mass consumption. To illuminate this problem I could have focused on the thought of Henri Lefebvre, or Italian Neo-realist cinema, the artworks produced under the titles of *Nouveau Réalisme* or *Arte Povera*, or French New Wave directors of the 60s. Instead, I want to consider some ideas from Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle*, because of their explicit connections to the themes I have been considering.⁶² In particular I want to examine what Debord calls 'augmented survival' as a blockage of utopian vision.

Guy Debord was the key figure in the Situationist International (S.I.), a group of revolutionary artists and intellectuals who, during the 1950s and 1960s, developed a critique of the new consumer paradise and a series of strategies for opposing it. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord analysed the new phase of capitalist society. He argued that society had become spectacularised by the predominance of mass commodity culture. This spectacular society developed, he said, when capital was 'accumulated to the point where it becomes image'.⁶³ The point of Debord's analysis was to reveal two characteristics of capitalist society - certainly in its post-war incarnation: firstly, lived experience was increasingly mediated by representation; secondly, opposition was largely incorporated and managed, producing the spectacle of opposition, or the spectacle of participation. *The Society of the Spectacle* is a rich and problematic book; I intend only to tease out some themes that bear directly on the consideration of Morris's vision.

⁵³ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 'Postscript', 1962, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice, Polity Press, 1991, p.6.

⁵⁴ Ross, op. cit., p.5.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.53.

⁵⁶ Paul Ginzborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988*, Penguin, 1990, p.215.

⁵⁷ Alex Callinicos, *Equality*, Polity Press, 2000, pp.1-2.

⁵⁸ Davis, 'Planet of Slums' op. cit.

⁵⁹ Cited in Callinicos, op. cit., p.4.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp.8-9.

⁶¹ See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, MIT, 2000, p.68.

⁶² Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, 1994.

⁶³ Ibid., p.24.

The theme of commercial culture plays a central role in Morris's thought, and, in significant ways, it is not a million miles from Debord's account. For Morris, commercialism produced the very antithesis of utopian abundance, generating instead a 'famine' of art. He was also opposed to those 'useless things' that he described as waste, and which Debord would characterise as generating 'pseudo needs'. Morris hated luxury which he described as 'sham wealth', or as mere 'toys' for the rich; he especially detested what he saw as the new fraud of advertising, or 'puffing'. The things seen in shop windows, Morris argued, were 'embarrassing or superfluous to the daily life of a serious man'.⁶⁴ In a wonderful passage he wrote of the 'idle public' that buys these things, which it does not really want: 'but buys them to be bored by them and sick to death of them'.⁶⁵ These useless wares were, according to him:

...stirring up a strange feverish desire for petty excitement, the outward token of which is known by the conventional name of fashion - a strange monster born of the vacancy of the lives of rich people.⁶⁶ By 1967, when Debord came to publish *The Society of the Spectacle*, these feverish desires were no longer confined to the rich; capital had been busy weaving its spells throughout all levels of society.

Like Morris, Debord was fond of the word abundance: he first introduced it in *The Society of the Spectacle* in thesis 31, suggesting that what the working class produces is the 'abundance of dispossession'; in thesis 39 he argues that the spectacle must 'eventually break the bounds of its own abundance'; and, in thesis 50, he described what happens when society attains 'a purely economic abundance'.⁶⁷ The idea of abundance appears throughout this book, in some ways it is what it - certainly in the key Section II 'The Commodity as Spectacle' - puzzles over. If abundance was a strange word in Morris's time, by the point Debord wrote this passage it was positively dust-laden. We must assume that he did not select it casually; it is the kind of term he may have encountered while reading his favoured seventeenth-century authors and, no doubt, he was attracted to it because this provenance allowed him to keep a proper distance from feeble ideas about the 'affluent society' that were doing the rounds in the '60s. But Debord's readers do not seem to have picked up on the resonances of 'abundance'. It has now been frequently observed that Debord was among the first to recognise that 'social life' or 'everyday life' was being absorbed - colonised is the telling term used by both the S.I. and Henri Lefebvre - by capitalism. I want to suggest that it is one of the real strengths of *The Society of the Spectacle* that Debord also seriously confronted the capitalist colonisation of utopia. As he put it:

The absolute denial of life, in the shape of a fallacious paradise, is no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself.⁶⁸

It may be heretical, but I want to suggest that, despite this ostensible distance from utopianism, two of the key themes of utopian thought - idleness and abundance - play a fundamental role in *The Society of the Spectacle* (the S.I. tended to leave the third term to practice).

It is thesis 40 - the magnificent, mad thesis 40 - that introduces the substantial question of a capitalist abundance of commodities. Debord tells us that the 'development of the forces of production' has been central to building and developing 'the conditions of survival and their extension'. According to him, however, modern commodity production does more than cater for survival. 'The realm of commodities', he writes, 'has meant the constitution, within a natural economy, of a surplus survival...'.⁶⁹ I take him to mean here that, in advanced capitalism, the forces of production have developed to the point where they meet not only the basic survival needs of all (most) of society's members, but are also able to provide all (most) with more than they need to satisfy what Morris would have called their 'animal needs'. What is at stake in his account is the entry of significant sections of the working class into 'permitted consumption'. Thesis 40 attempts to address the issue of working-class consumption while keeping a distance from the kind of embourgeoisement argument that was then fashionable with then fashionable sociologists. The immiseration of the working class, Debord realised, has given way to 'abundance' and 'the basic problem of survival' has been solved.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Morris, 'Art and Socialism', Morton ed., Political Writings, op. cit., p.112.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp.113-4.

⁶⁷ Debord, op. cit., pp.23, 27, 33.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.18.

⁶⁹ Debord, op. cit., p.33.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.28.

If Western capitalist societies were now liberated from the 'struggle for survival', there remained, Debord believed, the fight to liberate them 'from their liberators'.⁷¹ Biological needs might have been met, but this had been achieved under conditions that perpetuated and further entrenched the alienation of the worker. 'In these circumstances', Debord wrote, 'an abundance of commodities, which is to say an abundance of commodity relations, can be no more than an "augmented survival".'⁷² Two points need to be made about this important passage. Firstly, this discussion of abundance and 'augmented survival' shows that Debord, like Marx and Morris, did not think human needs could be reduced to simple biological needs. Human needs are not the same as bare physical subsistence or mere 'animal needs'. In Capital, Marx frequently writes about the expansion of individual human needs, central amongst them, as *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* makes clear, being the need for self-realisation.⁷³ 'From each according to his abilities to each according to his needs', as the slogan emblazoned on the banners has it. Capitalism responds to these real human needs, but it does so by inflecting them and channelling them through what are conventionally called 'false needs'. Capitalism fulfils human needs and desires with commodity solutions. Or, since, as Debord realised, the gratification is always deferred, it offers the promise of a commodity solution. The next purchase - always the next one - will finally bring us satisfaction and happiness. But the needs and the desires are no less real for all that. Morris put this very well when he said that capitalist society 'bred desires which it forbids us to satisfy'.⁷⁴ The second related point, the point about the capitalist colonisation of utopia, is that the good life has been corralled into patterns of consumption. The proliferation of commodities allowed capital, as Debord put it, to 'enroll all socially permissible efforts and projects under its banner'.⁷⁵ It is with the consumption of commodities, rather than their production, that the worker can become human in the eyes of an inhuman society. As a consumer the subject has needs, as a worker she has none, or none that do not rapidly reduce to the biological reproduction of her labour power. This is a central point that will, eventually, return us to Morris.

To find freedom in consumption - and cultural studies now generates such accounts by the metre - is, to take a line from one of Debord's favoured artists, 'just like a thief being enraptured by his legs in irons'.⁷⁶ Consumption is permitted freedom and a freedom that fuels capitalist reproduction. Consumption is, to coin a phrase, the 'spectacle of participation'. The freedom offered by consumption is the slavery of alienation. In contrast, the idea of abundance and augmented survival - abundance as augmented survival - is one of the things that give Debord his enormous power. To recognise a fundamental shift in the nature of capitalism, to see that new issues that arose once immiserisation was staved off, was important. To simultaneously refuse to believe that all this translated into a surfeit of signs, or that capitalism had solved its contradictions, as so many ex-Marxists, sociologists, and other adjunct cultural managers came to believe, put Debord among a handful of really revolutionary thinkers. In this argument it is the conjunctures that are most significant: the spectacle and the working class; the fetishism of commodities and the workers' councils.

If the spectacle emerges, as Debord argues, at the point at which the commodity completes its colonisation of social life,⁷⁷ it might also be said that the colonisation of utopia is no less a significant factor in this emergence. At the point at which people can no longer imagine another organisation of life, the future and (with it) the past disappears. The loss of utopia is also the loss of history. This loss of an historical imagination is at the heart of 'the spectacular society'. As the theme of abundance is appropriated by capital as one of its own key characteristics, it comes to inhabit (and inhibit) the utopian imagination: capitalism, we are told, delivers plenty in the here and now. A material abundance of commodities - the ability to deliver fridges and motor cars, washing machines, jeans and pop records - has been one of the central claims of capitalist ideology since the long post-war boom. It is worth emphasising this date. Capitalism has only really claimed to deliver the good life for its working population for about fifty years. On a global scale the lustre of capitalism has received much of its sparkle from the fact that a few Western states have been able to provide a surplus of consumption (junk food and junk commodities) for its members. If the claim to a capitalist utopia of abundance has been globalised, the reality has been very different. It is strikingly apparent that in large sweeps of the world capitalist abundance is no more than a broken promise. All the same, the yellow brick road of the market has had a considerable allure.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Karl Marx, *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (1867) trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, Lawrence & Wishart, 1954; *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume*, op. cit., pp.287-317.

74 Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', op. cit., p.93. Wolfgang Haug has recently put this well suggesting: 'manipulation could only be effective if it "somehow" latched on to the "objective needs" of those being manipulated.'

Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p.6.

75 Debord, op. cit., p.28.

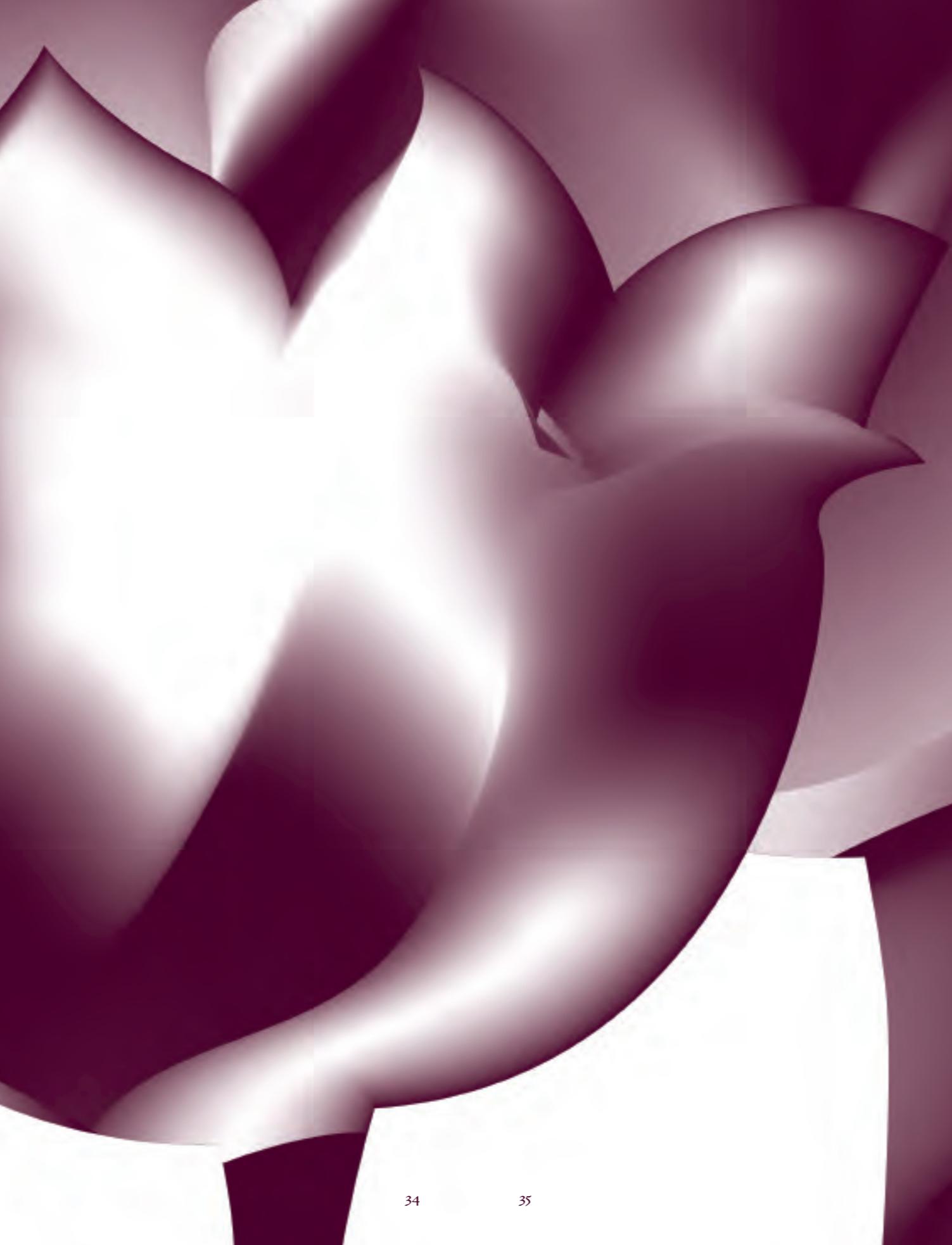
76 Kazimir Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting' (1916), trans. T. Anderson, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood eds, *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell, 2003, p.173.

77 Debord, op. cit., pp.28-9.



The abundance of commodities meant that standard economic demands could not be seen as revolutionary, and this is one central reason why Debord and the S.I. took up the critique of alienation. ‘Behind the glitter of the spectacle’s distractions, modern society lies in thrall to the global domination of a banalizing trend....’⁷⁸ The ‘leisure and humanity’ of the worker was finally attended to by capitalism because they were brought under the ‘sway’ of the commodity. Thus, ‘the totality of human existence falls under the régime of the ‘perfected denial of man’.⁷⁹ According to Debord, ‘consumable survival must increase, in fact, because it continues to enshrine deprivation.’⁸⁰ This ‘consumable survival’ was, according to Debord, the gilding of poverty. Commodity abundance then provides the backdrop to the S.I.’s programme for a radicalism of everyday life. The S.I. was not unique in this, it is not coincidental that the theory of alienation gripped the intellectuals of the left at the same point that the working-class standard of living rose significantly. In addition to the Lukács revival, and the well-known work of Marcuse, Debord and Lefebvre, this period saw the publication of István Mészáros’s *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* in 1970; Bertell Ollman’s *Alienation: Marx’s Theory of Man in Capitalist Society* appeared the year after.⁸¹ The critique of alienation allowed these thinkers, or most of them, to continue to see the working class as an agent of socialist revolution in the face of a reconciled economism. It was the critique of alienation that allowed Debord to suggest that ‘we are now witness to the failure of capitalist abundance’ and to predict the rising of a new General Ludd who would smash the ‘machinery of permitted consumption’.⁸²

We have much to learn from Debord’s argument here. This is a radical politics that recognises that, at least for the time being, the capitalism of the advanced West has been able to offer a ‘surplus survival’ to a section of its working population. But it is significant that this abundance is figured as a continuation of poverty; survival is met, but needs or passions go unaddressed. Debord is capable of paying attention to the political effects of a raised standard of living amongst the Western working class, while refusing to write off that class. Debord would not make his peace with capital. The result was a reactivated humanist Marxism that was capable of making demands beyond immediate concerns for survival. Perhaps it is worth observing, in the light of many of the criticisms of the traditional workers’ movement that one finds in the literature on the S.I., that it was possible to raise the questions and issues it did because the needs of survival were being met for the majority. Then, as now, Debord and the S.I. contributed a great deal to a revolutionary socialism that was attentive to much more than ‘bread and butter issues’. Questions of needs, passions and desires must be at the heart of any critique of capitalism. Along with a revolutionary intransigence, this is what the utopian imagination brought to socialism. It is one reason that it makes sense to say that the S.I. was utopian, and to contrast its utopian desire to capitalism’s corralling of abundance. Economic demands remain necessary, but alone these will not be enough to reactivate utopian desire; a critique of everyday life and the dominance of stuff must accompany them. Marx is one place to find such a critique; William Morris is another; the artistic avant-garde a third; Debord a fourth....



Useful Work versus Useless Toil (Still)

In the West, then, capital has claimed abundance as its own; heaven knows, sexual license has been thoroughly fenced in by the commodity. Capitalist enclosure now includes some of our most important ways of being. But however much it has captured these two utopian themes, the third – work – remains too rough a terrain for its manoeuvres. Capitalism cannot imagine a utopia of work for the worker, it can only perceive of one without her in its various robot fantasies. It can abolish the need for the worker, or believes it can, but unlike its utopia of consumption, it has nothing to offer the working class *qua* workers. Debord’s own solution to the hijacking of utopia by capitalism was to move from the problem of abundance to the question of work, or, more precisely, his utopia of the escape from work. A politics of the S.I. involved a rejection of work: a famous slogan of theirs sprayed on walls in Paris in 1968 simply read ‘*Ne travaillez jamais*’ (‘Never Work’). This position connects them to a line of anarchist thinkers stretching back to Rimbaud and Lafargue. In a significant essay on the S.I., Morris and the politics of work, Peter Smith has argued that this position was a response to what the S.I.’s Roal Vaneigem called a ‘Front of Forced Labour’. Smith notes that, in contrast, the S.I. engaged in ‘an endless pursuit of play as an antidote to the régime of work’.⁸³ For Debord and his associates opposition to capital operated as a form of revolutionary self-making; a refusal of forced labour and forced consumption was an important part of this strategy. The problem, as Smith notes, is that as a consequence the S.I. tended to withdraw into the ‘dives and bars of Paris’. Debord, whose vision of refusing to work could (and still can) satisfy ‘boho’ idlers, could have little to say to those who must sell their labour power to live. This meant that the S.I. made no serious attempt to analyse changes in contemporary work or to propose a serious industrial strategy for combating these changes.⁸⁴ The S.I., despite its claims to have relinquished art for revolution, was always too much of an avant-garde organisation to transform itself into a mass tendency.

78 Ibid., p.38.

79 Ibid., p.30.

80 Ibid.

81 István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, Merlin, 1970; Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx’s Theory of Man in Capitalist Society*, Cambridge University Press, 1971.

82 Debord, op. cit., pp.85–6.

83 Smith, op. cit., unpaginated.

84 Smith discusses the S.I. on work and Jappe’s attempt to justify their position.

At this point we need to return to Morris whose account of work is infinitely more productive as a response to 'commercialism' and capitalist abundance than this advocacy of slacking. As we have seen, Morris believed that the rise of capitalism sundered mental from manual labour and turned the worker into a mere cog in the machine of production.⁸⁵ Workers had no control over their work and were driven by the need to produce cheaply, to work rapidly and without craft or care. The capitalist labour process turned the worker into a machine for turning out worthless goods. Work was central to Morris's idea of the future: his georgic utopia turns on transforming work. At the same time he resolutely refused the moralising ideology of 'dignity in labour'. There was no dignity, he felt, in work done under these conditions, only 'slavery' and work that was not worth doing.⁸⁶ He described this work as 'mere toiling to live, that we may live to toil.'⁸⁷ Morris continually cited J.S. Mill's argument that machinery had not saved one iota of labour or effort, only reassigned the worker new tasks that required less skill.⁸⁸ He also believed that even a reduction in the hours worked would not compensate for 'repulsive' labour.⁸⁹

Morris saw no hope for changing the conditions of work within the framework of the existing society. A fundamental change was necessary that would, among other things, eliminate the waste that was a condition of the class structure. The revolution would transform this, he claimed, because there would be no need to produce things which were not needed. With this elimination of waste, luxury and idleness wealth would increase substantially. It may not be as simple as this suggests, but Morris was attempting to think about the allocation of resources in a transformed society, and that is certainly tenable. His conclusion about what to do with this increase in wealth is very significant: 'Now, for my part', he said, 'I think the first use we ought to make of that wealth, of that freedom, should be to make all our labour, even the commonest and most necessary, pleasant to everybody....'⁹⁰ This transformation in labour was fundamental because all the wounds, psychic as well as physical, of a society divided along the lines of mental and manual labour were predicated on it. In *News from Nowhere* he suggested that it was the change in labour that made all the other changes possible.⁹¹

What Morris was proposing was to remake work, and thus society, under the sign of art. All work, in the socialist future, he claimed, would be a form of 'sensuous pleasure' modelled on the work of artists. The strategy for transforming work in *News from Nowhere* entailed 'the production of what used to be called art, but which has no name amongst us now, because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces.'⁹² This argument has been a persistent theme in Marxism and Morris was one of its key exponents. Briefly summarised, the point here is that while art does not escape unscathed from capitalism (the market shapes all aspects of our lives), it remains one of the few practices in bourgeois society where mental and manual labour have not been entirely sundered: the artist - unlike the worker in capitalist society - retains a large degree of control over her production from beginning to end. If artists do not control the distribution and marketing of their work, they are able to conceive

their work and execute it (or in some cases, have it executed by a specialist), controlling the labour process. In this way, the artist can develop her own work as a coherent intellectual project. And, in the process of developing this artistic project - changing it over time, responding to what they have done, pursuing lines of thought which come up, experimenting with possibilities, etc., - the artist makes herself as a self-reflective subject. The cognitive value of art under capitalism is primarily lodged in the form of labour it embodies. The corollary of this argument is that, in a society not deformed by capitalism, work itself would take on this creative form and art might well wither away as a discrete activity. As Morris puts it, then we would have 'work which is pleasure and pleasure which is work'.⁹³ As a component of this argument, Morris refigured the utopia of abundance. When work had been transformed and waste eliminated, he suggested, instead of trying to avoid work, as in his time, everyone would seek it. In fact, in *News from Nowhere* he presents the spectre of the 'work famine' in the socialist society of the future.⁹⁴ The real risk, in a society without waste production and where work was a joy, was that there might not be enough for everyone. This is important because here Morris links plenty and labour, and reverses the usual conceptions of scarcity and abundance. In the capitalist society of the nineteenth century the necessities of life were scarce but there was only too much work. In his georgic utopia, in contrast, work is scarce and things people need and want are plentiful.

⁸⁵ For a study of Morris's attitudes to work see Ray Watkinson, 'The Obstinate Refusers: Work in *News From Nowhere*', Stephen Coleman & Paddy O'Sullivan eds, William Morris & *News From Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, Green Books, 1990, pp.91-106.

⁸⁶ Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', op. cit., pp.86-7.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.88.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Morris, 'Art and Socialism', op. cit., p.124. This argument has found an important echo in feminist histories of housework, which argue that the introduction of modern domestic appliances has not resulted in any lessening of female toil in the home. See, for example, Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society 1750-1980*, Thames & Hudson, 1986; Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work For Mother: the Ironies of Household Technologies from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, Basic Books, 1983.

⁸⁹ Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', op. cit., p.95. Unfortunately this assessment led him to largely ignore the Trade Union struggle of the time for shorter hours. See, for example, the section of Thompson's book on the 'New Unionism'; Thompson, William Morris, op. cit., pp.523-33.

⁹⁰ Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', op. cit., p.96.

⁹¹ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, op. cit., p.275.

⁹² Ibid., p.319.

⁹³ Ibid., p.394.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp.279-80.



In this sense, Morris's definition of transformed, truly human labour is the same as his definition of art. It has two components. Firstly, work must overcome the distinction between mental and manual labour - between those who think, or direct, and those who graft. Truly human work, like art, entails working with the body under the direction of the mind: it calls for what would later be called a 'whole man', rather than the partial figures of capitalist labour process. Secondly, for Morris, it was a sign of this healthy condition of labour that work was decorated with carvings or pattern. All true work, for him, is ornamental, and it is a sign of capitalism's sickness that there was precious little possibility for the ornamental figuration of labour. Serious decoration was too costly; there was not enough time for expression of skill or wonder at nature. Ornament, for Morris, works like a medical sign or symptom - a kind of inverse of measles - that demonstrates the health of the social body. As one wag put it, Morris 'would disturb the foundation of our Society in order that a higher artistic value may be given to our carpets....'⁹⁵ But for Morris this made absolute sense because there was an intimate connection between these things: carpets that were worthy of living with could only be produced by a truly human society and, in turn, suitable carpets were a sign of such a society or lack of it. His design work is an example of this tendency, and I think its most important characteristic is the model of labour it represents. This is one reason why Eisenman's argument does not hold. Morris could not allow his designs to take a dirempt, or split, form because to do so would disfigure their central feature: their incarnation of creative labour and its organic link to nature through ornament. It ought to be apparent that Morris was drawing his model of both art and labour from the handicraft work of the fourteenth century. Morris was not simply nostalgic for the past, it was a condition for him of the reinvention of work that all arduous or repetitive work would be done by machines, so that the worker could be freed for creative labour. Machines would play less of a role in a socialist society, he believed, because there would be no compulsion to produce cheap wares; as such the worker could take time and care over the products of her labour. He also understood that medieval society was a profoundly unequal society, but he believed that craft-workers in the period prior to the capitalist division of labour still controlled both the pace of their work and to a large extent its form. The craft-worker conceived the artefact and manufactured it. But this adherence to craft work remains a problem in Morris's work.

Like Debord, Morris was an avant-gardist who wanted to re-unite art and society. And, like all true avant-gardists, both figures were prepared to do away with art to achieve their goal. The difference, however, is that Debord had the tradition of twentieth-century artistic experimentation behind him. One strength of the S.I. was that it was able to combine the revolutionary tradition with the innovations of avant-garde art; it is a real pity that they did not rethink work on this basis. The problem for Morris was that the model he inherited for rethinking work was the organic aesthetic of nature and handicraft. It served him well at times, but it also drew him back to the model of craft labour, with its conception of individually produced artefacts. It is difficult to imagine a complex society of the future subsisting on the model of the stonemason. To do so would undoubtedly return the

relation of scarcity and abundance to their more familiar ordering. The model of twentieth-century art provides a different conception on which to re-engage work - one that still combines the mental and manual, and which sees work as a project of self making - in that it also allows us to image such a vision combined with technology and technical specialism, capable of grasping contradiction and the energies of metropolitan life: film, video art or photography, not the handicrafts, provide our models. It remains to be seen what would be left of Morris, if we could re-engage his work without the organic aesthetic, without the ornament, and without the folksy bits.

COMMON TO ALL ALL WHEAT AND WINE
OVER THE SEAS AND UP THE RHINE.
NO MANSLAYER THEN THE WORLD O'ER
WHEN MINE AND THINE ARE KNOWN NO MORE.

William Morris





David Mabb



William Morris wallpapers from the Whitworth Art Gallery's collection, produced early to mid-twentieth century, hung on William Morris wallpapers produced by Arthur Sanderson&Sons Ltd 2003-4

Rodchenko Production Suit made from William Morris Fruit fabric in 2002 (left), Hammersmith Socialist League banner (middle), borrowed from The Working Class Movement Library, Salford, and framed wallpaper samples produced before 1917 (right), borrowed from Manchester Metropolitan University, all hung against William Morris paint colours manufactured for Arthur Sanderson & Sons Ltd by The Little Greene Paint Company



Gallery 1
Galleries 8-10 ↗
Way Out ↘



Pomona (left) and Flora (right), wool and silk tapestries made c. 1885, hung against William Morris paint colours manufactured for Arthur Sanderson & Sons Ltd by The Little Greene Paint Company



William Morris wallpapers from the Whitworth Art Gallery's collection, produced early to mid-twentieth century, hung on William Morris wallpapers produced by Arthur Sanderson&Sons Ltd 2003-4

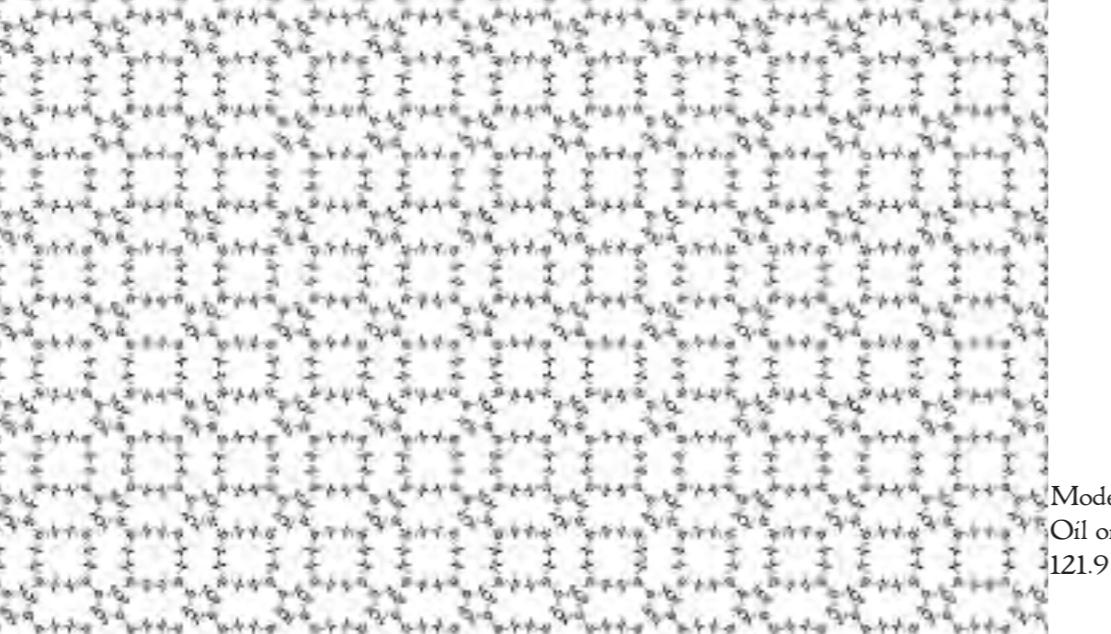


William Morris textiles from the Whitworth Art Gallery's collection, produced 1875-c.1920, hung against William Morris wallpapers produced by Arthur Sanderson & Sons Ltd 2003-4





Head of a Peasant 2002
Oil on *Garden Tulip* fabric
190.5 x 160.0 cm (75 x 63 inches)



Modern Men's Shop 2001
Oil on *Bird & Anemone* fabric
121.9 x 160.0 cm (48 x 63 inches)



Books printed at the Kelmscott Press in the 1890s, borrowed from the collections of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester



Political pamphlets by William Morris written in the 1880s and 1890s, borrowed from The Working Class Movement Library, Salford and The Labour History Archive at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester



Trade and exhibition catalogues dating from the 1880s to the early 2000s



Wallpaper samples from a pre-1917 pattern book borrowed from Manchester Metropolitan University

A selection of contemporary 'heritage' products from the 1990s and early 2000s using designs by William Morris







Unlike Walter Crane William Morris rarely included figures in his repeating designs for decorative textiles, wallpapers or tiles. In my view, however, the designs must be understood in terms of the experience of inhabiting the human body. In William Morris's early Daisy embroidered hangings (c. 1860) simple clumps of daisies and three other kinds of flowers, including perhaps campions, are stitched in outline on blue indigo-dyed serge.¹ Morris had been looking at the wall-hangings depicted in a fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript of Froissart's *Chronicles*, as A.R. Dufty and others have pointed out.² One of the scenes in the illuminated Froissart shows the room glorious with at least six different kinds of hangings with red, blue and green backgrounds, forming large colour blocks dividing the wall into contrasting square areas, or fields, the height of the room. The courtiers are assembled to enjoy music and dancing, the ladies seated on a sofa covered in a Daisy-like design of red and white flowers on green. The dance of the wodehouses, or wild men, takes place on the floor. The dancers (courtiers in disguise, who were led by the King, as Froissart recounts) leap, bend and gesticulate, and wear green, shaggy costumes which cover them from head to foot, complemented by wild green hair and beards. Disastrously their costumes have caught fire: out of the green come tongues of orange flame. The dancers have laid their rough cudgels on the ground and a figure to the left of the group pulls at his costume, drawing it apart at the chest to reveal his naked skin beneath the green body-suit.³ A little dog, shaggy as the dancers, jumps up and barks frenziedly amid the group.

The placement of figures in the scenes from the Froissart manuscript is relevant to an understanding of the degree to which the designs of William Morris reference the human body and the manner in which they make that reference. The personnel of the court are shown, here and in other scenes, in lines against the floral backgrounds, their heads and bodies punctuating the diapered design, as regularly positioned as the flowery tufts, the garlanded trees or the ornamental birds. The ladies of the court sink a little into the sumptuous, meadow-like, patterned fabric on the seat. A bearded man seems to have sunk right into this cradling zone of delight, as we only see his head. We learn from the text that he is the King who has been rescued from burning up, the flames extinguished by the skirt of the lady. The bodies of the wild men make no regular pattern and so they do not participate in ornament in the same way that the orderly spectators do; on the contrary, their dance conveys an untrammeled abandon, suggestive of fury, ferocity and pain. Nonetheless they are, in their own way, effecting a conjunction of the human figure and the ornamental surround. At certain junction points the bodies coincide with the patterns: the fingers of a hand coincide with the spray of flowers on the red wall-hanging behind; the mossy forearm of a figure is positioned in front of the trunk of a tree on the blue wall-hanging so that branches and leaves seem to grow from the arm. Most significantly, the bodies of the dancers have been colonised by the vegetation of the decorative scheme, as they are encased by the furry verdure, and those orange flames shoot out as ordered motifs on the green. It is just a disguise that could, under normal circumstances, be pulled aside to reveal uncolonised flesh, or is it? It seems that vegetation roots into the flesh, just as fire sears the bodies. There is a tugging at

the accretions of curly green hair, to no effect, in the figure third from the left. He and the figure to his right appear to have hair that is growing right over their feet rather than leaving them naked. Behind them on the far right is an undifferentiated tub of this green matter, big enough to be another green man but limbless, balled up. This represents a man who has had to immerse himself in a tub of water to douse the fire. The invasion of ornament might be described as a progressive feature moving from the most orderly, civilised area of the spectator group on the left, where it is experienced as pleasure and as superficial or detachable, through the figures of the dancing men, intensifying from left to right where it is increasingly invasive and non-detachable and has to be interpreted in terms of ecstatic frenzy or agony.

The way in which I am reading this scene takes no heed of fifteenth-century interpretative categories, but when Morris came to look at these manuscript pages in the nineteenth century he too connected with them in a spirit of anachronistic dizziness.⁴ For all his awesome knowledge of the literary texts and the stylistic and historical specifics of the medieval material he collected and surveyed, he was involved in an artistic project that relied on an eclectic mixing of sources. Motifs and devices were unfixed from their historical context and brought together in a dense weave in which the exigencies of the composite determined the positioning of component elements. The designs themselves offer us a metaphor for his method of combining diverse historical references. The dynamic interplay within any Morris design meant that components were liable to be overlaid at one point and to surface at another. Differences were not eliminated in an amalgamative process of pastiche. An allegorical relationship of present to past, of here to there, was set up, one in which every branch of an interlocking design maintained its own power to convey meaning: nothing is ever cancelled. The past is not obliterated by the present but can be brought to the surface and take on colour in a new dawn, just as Pater saw the excavated remains of the classical world taking on fleshly form in the Renaissance, or as he said of Morris's take on the past, achieve a 'strange second flowering after date'.⁵

1 Daisy was also used for a wallpaper design (with some alteration to the specific plants indicated), 1864, William Morris, 1834-1896, exhibition catalogue, London, Victoria & Albert Museum, 1996, pp. 206, 236.

2 A. R. Dufty, *Morris Embroideries: The Prototypes*, London, Society of Antiquaries, 1985, citing W. R. Lethaby, *Philip Webb and His Work*, 1936. The Froissart manuscripts, in the British Library, are BL Harleian MSS. 4379-80.

3 For the carnival or dance presentation of woodhouses (wild men or *wudewásá*, the Anglo Saxon term) see Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men In the Middle Ages*, Harvard University Press, 1952. A PhD thesis is in preparation by Rebecca Dixon, University of Durham, 'Representations of the Alien in Fifteenth-Century Burgundian Literature'. The event came to be known as the *Bal des Ardents*. The best account of this depiction is Margaret Backus, 'Froissart's *Chroniques* and its Illustrators: Historicity and Ficticity in the Verbal and Visual Imaging of Charles VI's "Bal des Ardents"', *Studies in Iconography*, vol. 21, 2000, pp. 123-80.

4 Morris was engaged in preparing a printed edition of Froissart for the Kelmscott Press between 1892 and his death in 1896.

5 Pater 'Aesthetic Poetry', 1868, Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1989, see especially pp. 57-68.

To read the Froissart manuscript illuminations in terms of pleasure and pain, dainty arrangement and barbarous profusion, flat surface covering and the sharing of substance between surface and flesh into the depth of the living body, is to read them in terms that are central to Morris's own project. It may be a partly anachronistic reading of the fifteenth-century material but it is in accord with the preoccupations of the nineteenth-century designer. These opposite terms are maintained as paradoxical alternatives in Morris's work. He does not allow us to choose pleasure over pain, nor demand that we choose between civility and wildness. From complaisant costumed decorum to a kind of primal energised aesthetic, from surface to depth - Morris measured the gains and losses in each and refused to choose. The class determinants of these terms and the implications in terms of historical development are implicit in his design work from the early 1860s and would be articulated most distinctly when Marxist categories and historical frameworks were taken up by him after 1880. Rude, energetic dancing brings the strength of peasant culture as a positive term into the environment of the aristocracy. The mythology of ogres and satyrs, or the deep human past wherein may be found the source of such myths, a past characterised by communal tribal living, can be seen as positive terms in relation to the modern forms of privilege and private property.⁶ But comfort and daintiness are on the other side of the picture, as it were, away from the wild men. Violence and pain are the necessary accompaniments of depth. It is crucial for an understanding of Morris's work to understand how the two sides of the paradox, in each case, were held in play. I will go on to explore these aspects of Morris's design work and aesthetic project.

This argument, which sees the designs of 1860-80 as structured around issues which could eventually be articulated in terms of class politics when Morris came to revolutionary politics in the 1880s, offers a different reading from that to be found in the immense and magnificent work of E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955). For Thompson the exploration of ornament was a retreat from the politicised exploration of life that characterised romantic poetry in the early years of the nineteenth century, a retreat that was ended by the rediscovery of political purpose in Morris's socialism after 1880. His early *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858) and the unfinished *Scenes From the Fall Of Troy* are seen as vivid, engaged with life, full of naturalistic observation, somewhat rough at the edges in formal terms but, crucially, alive to conflict. These are contrasted with the verse of *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70) which Thompson sees as mannered, smooth and facile in its form and averse to conflict. 'Mechanical oscillation of mood' is said to replace true conflict.⁷ The underlying seriousness of the verse, the dark tone, which is most certainly there, is seen in terms of personal and political despair; no hope can be fixed upon to hold back the drift towards death. The felicities of the ornamental are seen as a palliative or compensation.

Are we to see the ornamental aspects of Morris's designs in the terms set up by Thompson? The extreme productivity, in terms of design, of the years that span the poems from *The Earthly Paradise* to *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876) threw up a large body of work that we could

consider in this framework. To pick out highlights, he produced repeating designs for printed textiles such as *Jasmine Trellis* (1868-70), *Tulip and Willow* (1873) and *Honeysuckle* (1876), wallpaper designs such as *Larkspur and Jasmine* (c. 1872), *Vine* (1873), *Acanthus* (1874), and *Pimpernel* (1876), the *Honeysuckle* embroidered hanging (1876), the *Tulip and Rose* woven fabric of 1876, the calligraphy and ornamental illumination of the works which culminated in his manuscript *The Aeneid of Virgil* of 1874-5, and tile designs such as *Tulip and Trellis* (1870) and the elaborate tile panel for Membrand Hall in 1876. Morris's designs stylise natural forms and yet always retain a naturalistic reference. In these years the plant forms make more and more intricate patterns as they cross over and under each other, sometimes creating a weave that goes beyond the graspable geometry and mathematics of symmetry, alternation, looping, turning, crossing, plaiting or interlace.⁸ The thrust or droop of sappy stems and fragile petals brings springiness or gravitational pendulousness into the pattern: a sort of fictional physics with mutant specimens. How can geometry survive in a chock-full visual zone where the mutual clasp of tendrils offers both a pull down and a climbing up?

6 On Morris's understanding of the gens and primitive communism at the stage of barbarism see Stephen F. Eisenman, forthcoming article in *Art Bulletin*.

7 E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955), Pantheon Books, New York, 1976, p. 123. At one point in the argument the 'oscillation between sensuous desire and the emptiness of horror' is linked to the thwarting of his love for Jane Morris, p. 159. This deficiency in his poetry is tracked from *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70) through *Love Is Enough* (1872), while some infusion of optimism and naturalism is seen in *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876) under the impact of his experiences in Iceland.

8 My thanks to Fred Orton for his helpful advice on the categorisation of pattern elements and drawing my attention to the categorisation set out in the Anglo Saxon Corpus.



The radial form of a flower head is contradicted by the bunched tips of leaf fronds behind it which fills the gap point-to-point, by pliant compression rather than spreading or unfurling from a conjoined centre. The spoke shape is much more than a pattern on the surface of the design, and more than a demonstration of the intrinsic geometry of the specimen. Form is a contingent aspect of a dynamic system. Within the order of the design various elements find their place: one serrated petal edge of tulip or poppy interlocks coincidentally with the little tips of conifer foliage. The colour of one bloom is garlanded all around by the blossoms of another that opportunistically flower in the intervals. Insinuation and insistent nudging takes a side shoot through a chink, passing back into depth or pushing through and round. To answer the question about the survival of geometry: yes, geometry does survive in the design despite the evocation of living systems. The pattern units repeat. The underlying structures do register in the viewer's mind even if they are hard to grasp as we observe the detail. We are able to appreciate the rhythmic disposition of forms in two dimensions. The naturalistic observation does not for a moment make the viewer think that a real scene is being depicted; we know that things do not grow quite like this in any garden or hedgerow.⁹ And yet there is a response in the viewer to the subject of these co-dependent living elements, a familiarity when taken close up to the pulsing weave. My contention is that Morris's designs use the ornamental interlock, interlace, plaiting and pattern repeat to suggest a unity of living substance which references the human body, and which can be understood to reference the community, and eventually the commonwealth or the class united in struggle.

It is Thompson who draws attention to a series of metaphors in Morris concerning the walled-in nature of the heart. In *The Earthly Paradise* he picks out the comments about the narrowing of the world, first in the case of the English King whose world has narrowed to 'the four walls of a fighting place', besieged as it were in his castle, unlike the Wanderers who can roam. Secondly the protagonist of 'The Man Who Never Laughed Again' finds that he becomes numbed, alienated and detached from the actual world: 'The world was narrowed to his heart at last'. Thirdly the question is raised in the verses for November:

Art thou so weary that no world there seems
Beyond these four walls, hung with pain and dreams.

Thompson, following his thesis concerning the isolation of the individual in this late phase of exhausted romanticism, sees a line of development in the poem involving a contraction of experience and a retreat from the realm of political engagement: as he puts it, 'the four walls of the "fighting-place" have contracted to the four walls of the solitary individual's heart'.¹⁰ In his view this is what has happened to Morris's art as it turns to ornament. Thompson sees the trajectory through the scheme of *The Earthly Paradise* as mirroring that of Morris himself, moving from the outward-looking orientation of romanticism to a state of despair at being trapped or immured within the suffering, mortal self. For Thompson this is where the over-refined intricacies of ornament languish. The identification of this



sequence of passages is compelling. There is something intensely poignant about the repeated image of four walls, and it is hard to deny the sadness of isolation and thwarted effort that is one aspect of the work. Yet there is an expansiveness in the metaphor too that Thompson does not acknowledge. As the world closes in to the four walls of the heart, the heart expands to the dimensions of a dwelling. The human subject has the experience of seeing the self from within, not in the sense of introspective self-evaluation, but in a topological or even physiologically literal way. If the chambers of the heart are hung all about with tapestries then the fleshy walls of this organ can be experienced aesthetically. We have to imagine a space within the embodied self where Morris's designs are installed and the paradoxical aspects of these surfaces are apparent. As I have already indicated, his system of decoration conjoins expansive swelling life with curbed or deflected life. The orderly alignment, the symmetries and blithe sprigging of surface coexist with an intimation of a probing and sprouting tangle in depth which is scarcely comprehensible.

This envisaging of the tapestried heart has its consequences. As we take in the surface pattern and complexification in depth we feel the force of the analogy between floral or vegetal design and the organic substance of the human body.¹¹ If the habitation of the heart has William Morris decor then the self, regarding these walls, is taken beyond inner surface to a knowledge of pulsing flesh. In this way aesthetic response, which is marshalled in relation to pleasing surface pattern, is extended and maintained in the imaginative foray into, and conscious apprehension of, living fibres of the self's own body. Beauty is not lost, despite the horrific implications of plunging, eyes-open, into one's own flesh. The encounter with fleshy substance is de-abjectified due to the fact that a continuation of the pattern's principles is understood to lie in the depth, even where it cannot be readily understood in terms of geometry or discipline. In Morris's visual system more fundamental than geometry or discipline is the push and pull and interdependence of living, organic elements; this is what drives and sustains pattern.

⁹ Stephen Eisenman writes interestingly and vividly about the gap between mimetic observation and geometry in Morris's designs. Stephen Eisenman, 'Class Consciousness in the Design of William Morris', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, Winter 2002, pp. 22-4. He goes on to talk about an intensification of drama, and a restless rushing quality, verging on nightmare, in the work of the 1880s. This is discussed in relation to Morris's his own conflicted sense of identity and allegiance prior to the 1880s, his awareness of class conflict throughout his life and his eventual adoption of the notion of phases of annihilation in the process of rebuilding society. My argument about the designs prior to the 1880s also identifies a potentially nightmarish aspect but my sense of the aesthetic experience is that the potentially fearful or the deathly is embraced and repositioned as joyous and vital, and that an undoing of oppositional difference is constantly achieved.

¹⁰ Thompson, p. 124.

¹¹ The theme of the fleshy and the dermal quality of Morris's work is discussed by me in relation to tattoos, body ornament and nineteenth-century anthropological positions concerning aesthetics and body ornament in my forthcoming book about temporality and technology in Victorian art from the 1860s.

The experience of being shut up in the self might be understood, as Thompson understands it, as an abdication of effort, and a loss of confidence in the effectiveness of effort, as a resigned acceptance of sweet surface order. However, in my view, sweet surface order, in Morris's oeuvre, never speaks only of surface. Shut up in the self, an aesthetic experience is available that takes the subject into the depth of the four walls, into the substance of living matter which is knit together self with self and potentially self with homologous elements and extensive systems beyond the body - human being with plant, the salon with the forest, the self with the fellowship of comrades. Morris's comment about the garden at Kelmscott Manor, when, in 1896, he wrote about the house (itself conceived of as having 'grown up out of the soil and the lives of those that lived on it') comes to mind:

The garden, divided by old clipped yew hedges, is quite unaffected and very pleasant, and looks in fact as if it were, if not a part of the house, yet at least the clothes of it: which I think ought to be the aim of the layer out of a garden.¹²

When the young Morris was poring over the illuminated pages of the Froissart manuscript I think the dainty motifs of the wall hangings fascinated him but, at the same time, the idea of the penetration of flesh by ornamental vegetation in those dancing green men must have had an impact. The tame and refined courtly ambience was set alongside the rough and untamed natural world, and the possibility was envisaged that these different orders of being were perhaps not to be understood as true opposites: pleasure versus pain, modern versus primal, the blest or Edenic versus the cursed or lapsarian. If life forms could be bound together then an aesthetic effect would be achieved that encompassed those binaries. In the logic of Morris's design work which is marked by a materialism and a commitment to the transformative energies of nature, the traditional religious motifs of the tree of life and the tree of knowledge (and that third tree, the tree of Calvary, Christ's cross) were drawn upon and deployed to different ends.¹³ It is important to realise that in the process of passing through the wall of the chamber to the encompassing weave of flesh or vegetation, and yet maintaining or enhancing aesthetic delight, the perimeter of the garden of Eden has effectively been breached and the joy of paradise is being explored, subversively, in the realm of toil.¹⁴

Thompson finds a telling strain in the dulcet arrangements of polished verse of the period starting with *The Earthly Paradise*, which urges him to characterise the mood as one of despair rather than just self-indulgence. He discerns, in Morris's verse, a dark, hidden current of death. Looking at William Morris's designs I would re-describe the depth that impinges on the surface sweetness as the hidden current of life. Certainly life is understood in terms of life from death as the generations succeed one another and the vital elements grow into the gaps left by death, to maintain the overall fabric, but when death and loss are seen in these terms they are not absolute.¹⁵ When he was writing in 1876 to a friend who was, indeed, in a state of despair, Morris's words showed the intense empathy that he felt but also indicated the way that he sees the principles of pattern as the one thing



that take the individual beyond despair:

I wish I could say something that would serve you, beyond what you know very well, that I love you and long to help you: and indeed I entreat you (however trite the words may be) to think that life is not empty nor made for nothing, and that the parts of it fit one into another in some way; and that the world goes on, beautiful and strange and dreadful and worshipful.¹⁶

These words describe life as made up of interlocking or interlaced elements, as having an ornamental aspect. 'Beautiful, strange, dreadful and worshipful', these words can be used to identify the aesthetic parameters of Morris's designs, and the way in which, for him, ornament was always a means to access the world at large.

12 J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (1899), Dover, New York, 1995, vol. 1, pp.229-30, 231.

13 My thanks to Rose Marie San Juan and Joanna Woodall for their insights into these theological and iconographic frameworks. The tree of life mosaic, dating from the twelfth century in the apse of S. Clemente in Rome was not known to Morris, as far as I am aware, but it offers a great example of this traditional imagery.

14 This I see as an effect of the designs of the period I have been discussing (1868-76), and not a feature that only emerges with Morris's commitment to revolutionary politics in the 1880s.

15 This is explored in political and aesthetic terms in Morris's *A Dream of John Ball* (1888) and discussed by me in my forthcoming book. It is perhaps significant (in view of my emphasis, in this essay, on the ways in which Morris may have viewed the illustrations to Froissart) that Froissart was the source he went to for information about the Peasants' Revolt when devising *A Dream of John Ball*. See J. Banham and J. Harris (eds), *William Morris and the Middle Ages*, Manchester University Press, 1984, pp. 222-4.

16 Mackail, vol. 1, p. 328.

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