INTRODUCTION: 'THE WORLD OF THINGS': AN INTRODUCTION TO MID-CENTURY GOTHIC

The new human type cannot be properly understood without awareness of what he is continuously exposed to from the world of things about him, even in his most secret innervations.

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*[1]

Monsters and dreams stalked London's South Bank in 1951. The Festival of Britain site was a gothic space for a gothic time, visited by the sighing spectres of the Blitz, and the chain-rattling ghosts of modernism's promise of a brand new world. Carved out of a derelict warehouse district by the River Thames, it showcased new ways of living over 26 acres and 31 buildings, arranged around the Dome of Discovery's interplanetary statement of aluminium-clad futurism, and watched over by the towering Skylon, aimed like a missile to infinity. Inside each building was a throng of jostling and contradictory objects, ranging in size and gravitas from an entire aeroplane to a novelty violin made of matchsticks, and all broadcasting cacophonous messages about what Britain was or could be. The whole confabulation of architecture and exhibits had been conceived as an integrated, rhetorical declaration that would insist upon a frictionless continuity between the nation's glorious past and its confident future. Yet when this imaginary city sprang to life out of the post-war rubble, the exhibition's war-weary visitors – incomers from a grittier reality – became the ghosts who haunted its pavilions and precincts.

Like the mid-century decade that spawned it, the South Bank Exhibition proved to be a chaotic playground for unruly ideas. Its future-facing designs made an awkward frame for jingoistic celebrations of past heroic endeavour; modern art and technological utopianism bumped uneasily against whimsical displays of moth-eaten eccentricity and colourful kitsch. This midsummer dream-park was supposed to consolidate British post-war identity and potential, but its jumble of ambiguity and contradiction instead opened up uncomfortable dialogues with the grimy and battered infrastructure of real-life London. The idea of a clean articulation of the past and the future only served to highlight the disorderly and disarticulated reality of the present. And yet,

against all odds and in the teeth of political and media hostility, the Festival was a roaring popular success. Its off-message dissonance was the perfect expression of a mid-century moment when the forward momentum of culture and progress was temporarily disrupted. Before the inrush of the briskly instrumental new structures of post-war consumer capitalism, old demons – war trauma, imperial over-reach, class antagonism – would need to be brought out into the open, examined and placated.

An anecdote recalled by the exhibition's Director of Design, Misha Black, summed up the way a spirit of resistance and liberation was invested in and expressed through the thing-world framed within this semantically supersaturated zone. Black describes a dinner laid on in the Dome of Discovery just before it opened to the public, organised as a morale-booster for the disgruntled workers who – like the post-war population at large – were labouring in difficult conditions to complete a project of regeneration that was essentially opaque in its intentions and outcomes:

> A few naked bulbs gave illumination, the dark areas were greater than the lit, braziers glowed with minimal warmth. The speeches of exhortation to greater effort and fewer trade-union disputes were dreary and misconceived. The atmosphere became as frigid as the night, when suddenly one man sent his paper plate (food eaten) whizzing across the void. In a moment a thousand plates were spinning, until the whole volume of the Dome was alive with white discs, as though invaded by flying fish. This was a magical moment.[2]

These abstract white discs were harbingers of a different kind of future – bracingly modern space invaders that hailed a new and unruly agency in the people who threw them. Repurposed as messengers of dissent and sent across the dark void, they also became uncanny in their moment of flight: animated by repressed emotions and impulses, they were an image of liberated potential, and spoke more eloquently than any of the carefully placed and exhaustively explained exhibits which would later fill the Dome. Answering the antinomian longings of the disgruntled diners, the plates staked a physical claim on the cultural space that the workers had laboured to bring into existence but from which they felt excluded. They subverted the gesture of disposal that mobilised them: instead of settling into place as abject rubbish, they took flight and performed an act of transformative magic.

The same spirit of recalcitrance also infused the South Bank site when it was opened to the public and began to operate as a dynamic system in continuous motion. Each idiosyncratic pathway chosen by each individual visitor through the maze of clamorous objects disrupted the integrity of the exhibition's sanctioned story – a story that was already teetering under its heavy discursive burden. In his reminiscences, Misha Black remembered 'screams of righteous indignation' from the pavilion architects as designers 'tried to cram their gallon of exhibits into the pint pot of the buildings'.[3] While the guide-catalogue

claimed that the exhibition 'develop[ed] its themes by means of things you can see and believe', it proved impossible to codify the haphazardly curated displays in order to align them with a pre-planned message.[4] An approved 'way to go round' for visitors was illustrated in the guidebook by means of dotted lines, and accompanied by a neurotic emphasis on mapping and signposting on the site – but was generally ignored. Detailed captions and information boards were carefully composed, but, as Black put it, 'it is doubtful whether more than a single sentence lingered in the mind'.[5] Dylan Thomas, speaking in a BBC Radio broadcast, described how the chaotic subjectivity of the individuals passing through made the South Bank a playful and liberating space. 'Perhaps you will go on a cool, dull day, sane as a biscuit', he wrote, 'and find that the exhibition does, indeed, tell the story of "British contributions to world civil-isation in the arts of peace"; that, and nothing else. But I'm pleased to doubt it.' In practice, he observed, 'you see people go along briskly down the wide white avenues towards the pavilion of their fancy … and suddenly stop: another fancy swings and bubbles in front of their eyes'.[6]

Unintended meanings and harbingers of enchantment were conjured out of this swirl of competing fancies. Consumer goods, prominently displayed but impossible to buy, took on the character of fetishes. Open-sided buildings displaying the latest ideas in furniture recalled blitzed houses broken open by bombs. Bronze door handles in the showpiece Regatta restaurant were shaped like disembodied hands, so that the sculptor Barbara Hepworth 'refused to touch [them] as she associated them with amputation'.[7] This car-nival of submerged affect erupted from a threshold moment. The lingering warscapes of the Blitz were still scarred by the bombers' radical acts of spatial defamiliarisation, while social upheaval threatened a culture untethered from its old assumptions and needing to define itself anew.

This is not a book about the Festival of Britain, but it seeks to examine and explain the gothic atmosphere that produced it, and other mid-century cul-tural artefacts. In particular, it seeks out uncanny objects which, like the paper plates in the Dome or the fractious domestic and industrial exhibits in the other pavilions, provided a focal point for human recalcitrance. As Adorno puts it in the quotation that opens this introduction, such objects offer secret insights into what was new about the people of the mid-century, and the ways in which the things around them demonstrated the powerful agency, and the suffocating intimacy, of a different kind of materiality. Such objects found their voice in mid-century novels, films and exhibitions, where they functioned as reservoirs of alterity and dissonance, and brought into focus the uncanny animations that acted on, or in concert with, human consciousness.

The literature and culture of the post-war decade have not received the same critical attention as the more easily classifiable eras of pre-war modernism or later post-modernism. Its in-between-ness has led some critics to the notion

that the late 1940s and early 1950s marked the dying fall of a richer cultural milieu, or a regrettable retreat into aesthetic conservativism among chinking teacups which would be skittled away by Angry Young Men and 1960s counterculture.[8] Yet the years between 1945 and 1955 tackled distinctive and equally lively questions of their own, inspiring political and aesthetic experimentation in a generation moulded by dislocation, deprivation and aspiration towards a better life. In *The Four-Gated City* (written in 1969), Doris Lessing pointedly refutes the idea that 'everyone knows' 1956 was 'a watershed, a turning-point, a cross-roads' because it was the year of the Suez crisis and the Hungarian Uprising:

> It has become the year that everyone refers to: oh yes, that year of course! ... So that now, looking back, the people who lived through it say, for the sake of speed and easy understanding: 1956, and what is conveyed is the idea of change, breaking up, clearing away, movement.
> Yet the air had cleared well before 1956.[9]

Considering the period from 1945 to 1955 simply in terms of a dialogue with declining modernism, or with later avant-garde experimentation, is to ignore – among other things – the mid-century's gothicised experience of history. Salvaging modernity from the debris of modernism was not simply a case of shaking off the past, but of understanding its tendency to haunt the new material and popular cultures which were to become reservoirs of historiographical unease.

A schema of cultural hierarchies that had been powerful in wartime crystallised with a brittle sharpness at the moment when post-war socialism and the new materiality seemed to threaten age-old privileges. This moment also marks the point at which British modernism became anti-modern, as can be seen in T.S. Eliot's shrill and embattled appeal to cultural conservatism, 1948's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, which sought explicitly to preserve the elitism of high modernism in the teeth of its post-war superannuation, insisting that firm delineations and stratifications must be the basis of any cultural salvation for Britain. Eliot asserts 'with some confidence' that 'our own period is one of decline' and that 'the evidences of this decline are visible in every department of human activity'.[10] His thesis is that connoisseurship is the essential arbitrator of cultural value, and is instinctively propagated by intimate networks of taste and knowledge. The process should be anything but commercial; the elite should be 'something much more organically composed', he writes, 'than a panel of bonzes, caciques and tycoons'.[11] His claim that civilisation springs 'from the soil' amounts to a theory of cultural *terroir*, with art cultivated like a wine which reflects the unique particularities of the vineyard.[12] Even the attempt to materialise this secret knowledge in the form of books is somewhat vulgar ('we read many

books because we cannot know enough people').[13] He leaves it disdainfully to America to pursue the dissemination of culture via material goods, with Hollywood cited as major culprit:

> America has tended to impose its way of life chiefly in the course of doing business, and creating a taste for its commodities. Even the humblest material artefact, which is the product and the symbol of a particular civilisation, is an emissary of the culture out of which it comes: to particularise only by mentioning that influential and inflammable article the celluloid film; and thus American economic expansion may be also, in its way, the cause of disintegration of cultures which it touches.[14]

The interdisciplinary approach taken by this book is in part a refutation of Eliot's hierarchy of culture, which was already coming under sustained and intellectually serious attack by 1948, not only from the world of literature, but from the cinema, design and architecture. Scholars such as Ben Highmore and Richard Hornsey have suggested that these new cultural directions began to form a pattern of emergent dissidence in the 1940s; this book argues more particularly that narratives about upstart objects and disorderly commodities engaged with urgent questions about autonomy, self-determination and identity, and opened up a minatory, if fleeting, perspective on the workings of the new consumerist ideology which was to take hold in the economic aftermath of global conflagration.[15] By reappraising neglected post-war texts, including domestic, middlebrow and other non-canonical novels, and setting them within the wider contexts of visual art, film, and material and technological cultures, it will show how they reflected the sense of crisis and liminality which made the century's mid-point a gothicised, interstitial zone.

Post-war objects began to display a militancy which highlighted and problematised the onrush of a new type of consumerism far more assertive than its interwar iterations. In 1923, Georg Lukács had described the process of reification which the proletariat underwent when they were inculcated into the social relations required by industry, which treated them as functioning (or malfunctioning) units in a machine and robbed them even of the power to perceive their own reification.[16] After the Second World War, the rise of mass culture and advertising extended this process of reification to consumers, and not just workers; an ideal of *self*-commodification was promoted via an endless cycle of desire and imperfect fulfilment. In 1954, J.B. Priestley coined the term 'Admass' to describe the 'swindle' that had prevailed in the US for decades but had only come to Europe since the war:

> This is my name for the whole system of an increasing productivity, plus inflation, plus a rising standard of material living, plus high-pressure advertising and salesmanship, plus mass communications, plus cultural democracy and the creation of the mass mind, the mass man.[17]

For Priestley, this massification was a disaster for the individual: 'You think everything is opening out when in fact it is narrowing and closing in on you,' he wrote. 'You have to be half-witted or half-drunk all the time to endure it.'[18] The detrimental effect of mass consumption on individuality and personal agency coincided with the increasing sophistication of the new psychological techniques being used in marketing. In his 1957 book *The Hidden Persuaders*, Vance Packard identified the 'startling beginnings' that had been made since the war in an ongoing quest to mould consumers into the custom-built products of the advertising industry.[19] What he termed 'the depth approach' aimed to overcome 'the apparent perversity and unpredictability of the pro- spective customers' by making them identify with products on a psychical level, rather than offering them a logical rationale for purchase.[20] In one example, for instance, he described how a Chicago grocery chain decided to 'take on the traits "we like in our friends". Those were spelled out as generosity, courtesy, cleanliness, patience, sincerity, honesty, sympathy and good-naturedness.'[21] By identifying with the brand, consumers ratify and reinforce the norms it stands for, creating more and more pressure to conform and eliding the distinction between consumer and product. But if such theories aimed to enforce 'desir- able' behaviour by flattening the distinction between subjects and objects, and ascribing personality, morality, autonomy and agency to the inanimate realm, then narratives about the recalcitrance of the thing-world offered a submerged revolutionary subtext: if uncannily subject-like objects could demonstrate the 'perversity and unpredictability' that consumer capitalism was designed to eradicate, then people, too – as uncannily object-like subjects – might also stubbornly refuse to conform to the programme.

Such cultures of economic unease and political insurrection have a natural affinity with the gothic – a form that arose in the eighteenth century as an expression of provocative intransigence towards Enlightenment rationality. In the early twentieth century, the imbrication of gothicism, modernism and materialism was central to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, which found currents of revolution in the ruins and discarded rubbish of Paris's consumer dreamworlds. As Margaret Cohen points out in *Profane Illumination*, his project amounted to a work of 'gothic Marxism' which was 'fascinated with the irrational aspects of social processes'. The Enlightenment, she points out, was 'always already haunted by its gothic ghosts, and the same can be said of Marxism from its inception'.[22] This revolutionary uncanny rediscovers a suggestive world of enigmatic, overdetermined symbols and psychological tensions in order to pathologise social relations and precipitate their rupture. But the hazy surrealism of Benjamin's interwar Paris had hardened, in post- 1945 Britain, into something more prickly. Materialism was a battleground; socialism and the welfare state were pitted against a resurgent capitalism, and the things people needed or wanted were the weapons with which the war

was fought. In this context, narratives about gothic objects not only expressed the psychological residues which attached to mid-century things, but carried a hefty cargo of political freight.

The terms 'gothic' and 'uncanny' connect this emergent critique of consumerism with a tradition of literary insubordination which goes back to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*.[23] Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny' ('Das Unheimliche') was itself a critique of a gothic text, E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', and made explicit for the first time the way gothic literature had foreshadowed the psychoanalyst's attempts to make the mysteries of the psyche legible. After Freud, the culture of the gothic necessarily operates in dialogue with psychoanalysis, even if that dialogue is antagonistic. In *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher called for a new critical vocabulary to illuminate the way twentieth-century culture responded to the gothic themes of fragmentation, doubling, hauntings, uninhibited sexuality and psychic spaces which produced the troubled, dislocated subject.[24] He proposed the term 'weirdness' to describe 'the presence of that which does not belong', which is often 'a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete'.[25] The related quality of 'eeriness' is recognisable, according to Fisher, by 'a *failure of absence* or a *failure of presence*', the sensation that 'there is something present where there should be nothing, or is there is nothing present when there should be something'.[26] These categories differ from Freud's *Unheimlich*, he argues, because they do not stand in any kind of relationship with the homely: 'A sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human.'[27] In my opinion, however, Freud's *Unheimlich* always survives as the Ur-category into which such terms as 'weird' and 'eerie' are folded. I have been content to characterise the objects under discussion in this book as 'uncanny', even though my definition, like Fisher's, diverges somewhat from Freud. His conception of the *Unheimlich* depends on an analogical glitch in which something is both familiar and strange; close to, but not quite the same as, another object which has previously been smoothly assimilated into the cognitive homescape. In the mid-century, I argue, it is not the analogy between things and things, but between things and selves, that causes this cognitive glitch. All gothic objects combine semantic overdetermination with the disruption of authoritative narratives about the linearity of space and time. In mid-century gothic, however, the distinct personhood of the human self succumbs to fluid interactions with the thing-world; gothic objects are invested with economic and cultural power, but then exceed their allotted meaning and come to define, control or replace the people that make, own or use them. In this way, they challenge the integrity of the subject in one of two ways. First, they may exhibit an unwarranted *agency* and begin to pursue a thingly agenda that promotes their own survival and is indifferent to the historicity of the

human; alternatively, the objects may achieve an uncanny *intimacy* by infil-
trating the human and problematising his or her autonomy and individuality.

The six categories of uncanny objects collected together in this book
express an insidious kind of otherness which resists commodification – a dia-
lectic of objecthood and subjecthood which unseats fundamental categorical
assumptions. Part I traces the enchanted agency of the mid-century object,
which emerges first in the uncanny animation of the rubble and insubor-
dinate detritus of wartime bomb sites; next, it appears in the aestheticisation
of power, class and identity within the semiotic spaces of exhibition and spec-
tacle; finally, it enables media hardware to command and undermine the
subject's autonomous physical existence. In Part II, the intimate inhabitation of
the human by the inhuman is exemplified, first, by the haunted junk of gentri-
fication; next, by costumes and equipment which enable access to heterotopic
forms of experience; and lastly by atomic bombs which disgorge vast zones of
radioactive emptiness from their compact and inscrutable interiors. In post-
war literature and culture, such disorderly objects not only provoke or sustain
an impression of dislocation and refer to the eternal postponement of post-
traumatic rehabituation, they also evade or complicate the smooth workings of
economic and libidinal exchange. Whether they have been wrecked, salvaged
and repurposed, or have become ritualised, intangible and unobtainable, their
value and meaning remains disturbingly uncertain.

Such things differ from the modernist understanding of gothic objects typi-
fied in Benjamin's fragment-fetishising *Project*, or, for that matter, Virginia
Woolf's short story 'Solid Objects', which describes how a man's obsessive
attention to the thingliness of physical materiality leads to the breakdown of
his human identity. When Elizabeth Bowen set out to define the qualities of
post-war literature, she concluded that trauma must be the mid-century's pri-
mary subject, and that the interwar novel of the psychic interior 'did not finally
diagnose the modern uneasiness – dislocation'.[28] Bowen was interested in the
gothicisation of things and people who appear as uncanny apparitions in a
post-traumatic world, out of place or out of time. The stream-of-consciousness
approach was not sufficient to convey this new disruption of public/private
priority:

> The salutary value of the exterior, the comfortable sanity of the concrete, came
> to be realised only when the approach of the Second World War forced one to
> envisage wholesale destruction. The obliteration of man's surroundings, streets
> and houses, tables and chairs, sent up, for him, their psychological worth. Up to
> now, consciousness had been a sheltered product: its interest as consciousness
> diminished now that, at any moment, the physical shelter could be gone.[29]

A lack of material safety had unpicked the modernist subject and – which
perhaps amounts to the same thing – the modernist subject-matter. Tim
Armstrong's *Modernism, Technology and the Body* has shown how modernism

incorporated new technologies and objects into its aesthetic of proto-post-humanism; in the mid-century the tables were turned, and it was the human that had to be incorporated into an alien, and suddenly dominant, thing-world.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critique of mid-century mass culture identified the gothic undertow of the commodity economy in the 1940s. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) they contrasted the instrumentality and rationalisation of capitalism with older cultural forms which could never be completely repressed.[30] They argued that independent thought and the idea of the unitary 'self' had been subsumed into a purist ideal of the Enlightenment 'subject', which could be understood and quantified by logic and economics: a subject cleansed of meaning, all the better to conform to the machinic regime of productivity and acquisition. Since, for Adorno and Horkheimer, ambiguity – which disrupts the sterile purity of reason – is the essential condition for meaning, then mass culture in the modern world poses an even greater threat than first-wave industrialisation, because it promotes the repression of the ambiguous self just as it strives to replace unruly things with objectively quantifiable products.[31]

During his wartime exile in California from 1938 to 1953, Adorno was profoundly affected by the strangeness of his American surroundings, which reflected his own strangeness as a displaced person in an alien culture. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* held up a broken mirror to his own damage and his sense that a hostile materiality was stripping people of the cultural structures which had previously sustained them. For Adorno, modern design disrupted the proper balance between subjects and objects by indulging 'the implacable, as it were ahistorical demands of objects' that make 'gestures precise and brutal, and with them men'.[32] Thus, he observes that self-closing doors rob people of good manners by removing the responsibility of looking behind them as they pass through; sliding windows normalise the practice of shoving; and cars suggest, by their very existence, the possibility of mowing down innocent pedestrians. Adorno follows this observation to its savage conclusion: simple interactions with the thing-world, he warns, will become so coarsened by the 'unresting jerkiness' demanded by modern objects, that human subjects will be brought steadily closer to the baked-in brutality of the fascistic mindset.

As mid-century literature and culture attempted to resituate the self in relation to this totalising thing-world, the gothic return of repressed enchantment offered a dialectical remedy. By highlighting the auratic autonomy of newly re-mythologised objects, gothic narratives suggest ways of reintroducing the autonomous self at the expense of the reified subject, so that consumerism is problematised. The whole project of reification is endangered by objects which themselves stake a claim to selfhood and irrationality. Such objects offer – to borrow Isobel Armstrong's resonant

phrase – a 'moment of difficulty', an impediment to the frictionless transit of the subject through the machine of economics.[33] If we accept Adorno's distinction between independent self and chained subject, and borrow the distinction that Bill Brown drew in his 'Thing Theory' between intransigent things and obedient objects, we can see that, whereas the economic arbitrage of *subject* and *object* is an attempt by each to gain decisive mastery over the other, the fluidly ambiguous relationship between *self* and *thing* is liberatingly dialectical, and offers a way out of the self's imprisonment in rational subjecthood.[34] Thus, human disobedience and resistance can be modelled and expressed by the unruliness of uncanny things.

Marghanita Laski's 1949 novel *Little Boy Lost* directly addresses the super-annuation of pre-war modernism and the post-war mood of dislocation, and invests simple objects with the power to disrupt old habits of mind.[35] It recounts the anguished wanderings of a modernist poet, Hilary Wainwright, who goes looking for the baby son he lost during the Nazi occupation of Paris. Secretly, Hilary dreads being reunited with his lost son because he believes that he will then have to settle into a new life of humdrum responsibility with his dull fiancée, and be subsumed into the kind of sclerotic domesticity he himself grew up in, and which he escaped by adopting the urbane attitudes of modernism. Navigating the affectively supercharged bombscapes of post-war France – a gothic 'wilderness of desolation' – he is forced to confront his own neurotic intellectualism as well as questioning his self-identification as a member of an international modernist clique supposedly immune to parochial, bourgeois concerns.[36] In contrast to Hilary's spasms of aesthetic superannuation, the boy he tracks down, Little Jean, is the model citizen of the new modernity: full of hope and optimism despite his abject state, he is not oppressed but grounded by the battered objects he has gathered around him – 'a pinecone, a stone marble with nearly all its colour rubbed away, a used American stamp, and a tiny little celluloid swan with its head broken off and a dirty piece of rag tied round its neck for a bandage' – and his teacher remarks, rather curiously, that his intellect is distinguished by a superior 'sense of causation', which seems to give him a foothold in history.[37] Jean sees the proper value in solid things, which has nothing to do with the post-war discourse of consumerism, but everything to do with what Bill Brown calls 'the dialectic by which human subjects and inanimate objects may be said to constitute one another'.[38] Most importantly, Jean demonstrates an effortless hybrid identity, entirely fluid and contingent on context: right up until the end of the novel, he might be Hilary's son, or he might not be. Finally, it is a modern, mass-produced object – a cheap toy dog which Jean remembers from his infancy and correctly names – that holds the key to the true relationship between the man and the boy. But by then, it is clear that Hilary will only survive by holding tightly on to this child – whatever his identity – and heading towards the future that he represents.

While Jean is a mid-century native, Hilary has to be awakened from his modernist stupor before he can cross over into the new post-war reality, and this means he must experience the full emotional impact of the trauma that has befallen Europe. It is possible to hear in the novel an echo of all the lost and broken families of the Holocaust, the emotional wreckage of loss, anger, guilt and denial and the physical wrench of dislocation and homelessness. Like the toy dog, Jean is also a kind of uncanny object, capable of cathecting the terrible cataclysm that Hilary wishes to pretend never happened. History's thresholds must be crossed, and the moment of difficulty at the point of transition represents an opportunity for recuperation. As we will see in a later chapter, Laski repeatedly places her characters in such contested spaces; stuck on the wrong side of the war, on the hingepoint of the century, the supposedly modernist Hilary is simply not modern enough to realise that the ambiguity *is* the meaning.

The mid-century was a time of inversion: inside became outside; old became new; modernity became historical; junk became treasure. But while this sense of topsy-turvy possibility conferred a freshness and novelty not otherwise available to an essentially conservative and cash-strapped nation, it brought with it a nagging anxiety. Would the norms of society survive? Would value and authenticity lose their meaning? Would codes become illegible? Would objects break free of the meaning ascribed to them and begin to bleed history?

In a *Vogue* article on the Festival of Britain, Laski described the ubiquitous tapered shape that appeared in furniture, souvenirs, typography and the buildings themselves, and became its defining design emblem. She asked:

> What are we to deduce from the ubiquitous shape in the Exhibition, the top-heavy pillar, the triangle on its apex, the inverted cone? ... Since we have lately been told that its converse shape, the obelisk, is a phallic symbol, have we here its antithesis, an unconscious symbolism of the decline of the west? Or does it symbolise an airy indulgence in fancy, an aspiring imagination no longer earthbound?[39]

Her speculation ends on a warning note that the optimism of novelty might suffer its own reverse:

> Over everything hangs the shadow of the most important question of all – shall we remember the Festival as the beginning of the future it promises, or as the last pleasant dream before the nightmare?[40]

This book attempts to explore both the dream and the nightmare – and to answer the question of what happens after the dreamer wakes up.

NOTES

1 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 40.

2   Misha Black, 'Architecture, Art and Design in Unison', in Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier, eds., *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), pp. 82–85 (p. 85).

3   Black, 'Architecture, Art and Design in Unison', p. 84.

4   *South Bank Exhibition London: Festival of Britain* (London: HMSO, 1951), p. 9.

5   Black, 'Architecture, Art and Design in Unison', p. 84.

6   Bevis Hillier, 'Introduction', in Banham and Hillier, *Tonic*, p17. Quoting Dylan Thomas, *Quite Early One Morning* (New York: New Directions, 1954), p. 220.

7   Black, 'Architecture, Art and Design in Unison', p. 83.

8   See for instance Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) and Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

9   Doris Lessing, *The Four-Gated City* (London: Paladin, 1990), pp. 307–08.

10 T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), p. 19.

11 Eliot, *Culture*, p. 85.

12 Eliot, *Culture*, p. 19.

13 Eliot, *Culture*, p. 86.

14 Eliot, *Culture*, p. 92.

15 See Richard Hornsey, *The Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

16 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/ [accessed 28 January 2018].

17 J.B. Priestley and Jacquetta Hawkes, *Journey Down a Rainbow* (London: Heinemann-Cresset, 1957), pp. 44–45.

18 Priestley and Hawkes, *Journey*, p. 45.

19 Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (London: Penguin, 1960), p. 16.

20 Packard, Hidden Persuaders, p. 17.

21 Packard, *Hidden Persuaders*, p. 47.

22 Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), p. 2.

23 Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

24 Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2016).

25 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 61; p. 13.

26 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 61. Emphasis in original.

27 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 11.

28 Elizabeth Bowen, 'English Fiction at Mid-Century', in *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 322.

29 Bowen, 'English Fiction', pp. 322–23.

30 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997).

31 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 31.

32 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 40.

33 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 12. See Chapter 3 for a discussion of Armstrong's theory of glass.

34 Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory' *Critical Inquiry*, 28:1 (Autumn 2001), 1–22.

35 Marghanita Laski, *Little Boy Lost* (London: Persephone, 2001).

36 Laski, *Little Boy Lost*, p. 80.

37 Laski, *Little Boy Lost*, p. 94; p. 154.

38 Bill Brown, 'The Tyranny of Things (Trivia in Karl Marx and Mark Twain)', *Critical Inquiry*, 28:2 (Winter 2002), 442–69 (p. 446).

39 Marghanita Laski, 'The visionary gleam: thoughts on the South Bank Exhibition', *Vogue*, June 1951, pp. 73–78 (p. 78).

40 Laski, 'The visionary gleam', p. 78.