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City Lights

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**‘And the life
of the city became
spectacle,
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or artwork’**

City Lights Noted

Suburbia constitutes a new sublime: mere existence – endlessly replicated and resistant to meaning. The City, on the other hand, is finite and spectacular, and seems like a problem which might be solved: the problem of the inner city, for example, inscribed on the pavements, dozing in cardboard in the underpasses. The City reeks and acts like a threat, but the suburbs merely extend, occupy space, deny Life in favour of vicarious experience.

Life, in the 1950s at least, meant that tear-stained face over there; it meant the burden and pleasure of individual existence. But in the 1980s ‘life’ and ‘death’, no longer as confident as they once were, slipped into more comfortable inverted commas, presented themselves as mere words among words. And the ‘life’ of the city became spectacle, a huge entertainment or artwork.

The polychrome city flourishes, occupies consciousness if not the mind. Black-and-white made its appeal; to mind and to conscience rather than to consciousness. In the New York of Walker though, I am dazzled therefore I am. “Look at all those colours, where do you get colours like that!’ Colour, vertiginously, breaks hold of conventional sense, leaves a way free for Robert Walker, for instance, to envisage the ruin of New York as a toy town under threat from the carrier-borne jets on the USS Intrepid. Humanity plays a walk-on part in the great spectacle, there by virtue of a cerulean scarf or alizarin shoes which might pick up or compliment neighbouring publicity. Walker insists on a vivid here-and-now, at odds with ‘idea’s’ as marginal, insignificant, decorative, risible, worrying.

Ian Jeffrey

