

# Literary allusion in sociological analysis: Mass Observation mantelpiece reports as epic and drama

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## Abstract

This paper experiments with the use of literary analysis for the interpretation of participants' writing. The dataset comprises 56 'Reports' in response to a 2019 Mass Observation Directive. Mass Observation is a British archive. Its aim is to record everyday life through correspondents' responses to thrice-yearly Directives. The paper contributes to lyrical sociology with its development of 'textural' analysis. The 2019 Directive asked volunteers to submit reports on what was on their mantelpieces and also about their treasured objects. I found this writing highly allusive of two literary works: Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*, and the 'Catalogue of Ships' in Homer's ancient Greek epic poem, the *Iliad*. This led me not only to review the earlier reports but also to consider how literature can enrich the interpretation of participants' writing. In conclusion, I argue that following up allusive 'hunches' can result in fruitful literary analysis, as a 'textural' approach to sociological method.

## Keywords

mass observation, allusiveness, literary analysis, qualitative methods, methodology, lyrical sociology, textural sociology

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore literary allusiveness in research participants' writing. With reference to specific literary genres and texts, I argue for the value of literary analysis as a research method. It contributes to the growing literature on 'lyrical sociology' (Abbott, 2007), with a particular focus on the ways 'literary fiction has the capacity to unravel deeper meanings from the textures of human subjectivity' (Vána, 2020: 194). The paper does not treat novels as a 'vehicle for social analysis' in the teaching of sociology (Carlin, 2010: 219). While Carlin, with extensive reference to the literature in this

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field, argues that the ‘perspicacity of novels is a found perspicacity ... the sociologist, on reading a novel, recognizes a sociological theme (2010: 224), I take a different path. The method does not put the literary work at the centre of sociological teaching nor treat it as, essentially, a sociological text. Rather, it relies on the researcher’s ‘hunch’ in following up a *felt* connection between a literary text and participants’ writing, to enrich analysis. Through following this process in the paper, I will conclude by linking the method with De la Fuente’s concept of textuality, which ‘... captures important ‘temporal’ and ‘spatial’, as well as ‘material’ and ‘symbolic’ dimensions, of how the world is shaped and sensed (2019: 553). This is, as De la Fuente comments, not simply a methodological strategy but also ‘... offers a view of sociology that is thoroughly qualitative at the theoretical and ontological ... levels’ (ibid. 565). By contributing to this cultural turn, literary allusiveness explores ‘the sociological imagination’, which ‘... enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society’ (Mills 1959: 5–6). Through pursuing the affective resonances between personal writing, itself a cultural form, and two historically-distinct forms of writing – ancient classical epic and modern drama – the method demonstrates that link between the individual and the cultural/historical. As De la Fuente argues, this attentiveness to texture denies the difference between ‘surface’ and ‘depth’. Culture is not some superficial addition to the social; cultural expressions are articulations of the social.

The participants’ writing is drawn from a collection of 56 ‘Mantelpiece Reports’, in response to a Mass Observation Directive sent to volunteer correspondents in late 2019 (Mass Observation, 2019). The Reports are available on application to The Keep in Brighton and are part of the Sussex University Library Special Collections. Previous Mantelpiece Reports were submitted by volunteers in 1937 and 1983, so the latest collection can be understood as part of a series of writings by successive generations of correspondents. Having done extensive and detailed research into the two earlier Report files (Hurdley, 2013; 2014), I initially approached the 2019 collection with a clear strategy. However, successive readings of and analytic approaches towards these writings led to the emergence of this different strategy. The principal questions I address are: how well does this method of following allusive ‘hunches’ work sociologically when followed up by literary analysis? Is it transferable to different datasets comprising participants’ writing or other forms of data? Secondly, I explore how literary allusiveness can be contextualised within the cultural and textual turns in sociology.

The paper will focus primarily on Homer’s *Iliad* and Stoppard’s *Arcadia* to explicate the interpretive process. There were no direct parallels between the Mantelpiece Reports and the literary works and phrases described; rather, it was a tonal relationship. This is an affective connection, and subjective, in the sense that it relies on the researcher’s stock of literary knowledge. The task then is to expand this tonal relationship in a way that is sociologically analytic. Allusiveness is a common literary technique, where a work deliberately evokes other poems, plays and novels to deepen meaning, add an ironic subtext and increase the authority of the text. It was used to great effect by Homer, with intertextuality and imitation being much admired as poetic craft (Dyser, 1990). *Arcadia* is also full of allusions to classical and modern texts, enriching its meanings. I do not suggest that MO correspondents are purposely using literary techniques in their writing. Although I refer here to two specific pieces of literature, the principle is to encourage

listening or feeling for literary allusiveness during the analytic process. This is a particular case of the possible. My aim is to demonstrate how researchers might follow a literary hunch or trace an allusive echo to see where it leads them, as an alternative to conventional methods for sociological textual analysis. The literary texts are sensitising devices, as are the participants' writings; the researcher crafts an analysis from the felt relationship between the two forms. As such, the analysis is an explication of subjective intertextuality which the researcher must undertake, to make this personal interpretation sociologically salient.

Volunteer correspondents have been submitting day diaries and also reports, in response to thrice-yearly Directives, to the Mass Observation Project since 1981, and, in its earlier incarnation, between 1937 and the 1950s. Founded by anthropologist/ornithologist Tom Harrisson, poet/journalist Charles Madge and painter/film-maker Humphrey Jennings, Mass Observation's '... history is entwined in complex and fascinating ways with the history of the disciplines of anthropology, economics and particularly with sociology' (Stanley, 1990). Its use by social historians, sociologists and other disciplines examining 'ordinary lives' in what its founders called 'an anthropology of ourselves' is extensive (e.g., Casey, 2008; Hubble, 2010; Robinson, 2016). As a secondary data resource, its methodological potential has been of interest to sociologists (Savage, 2005; Moore, 2007). There has been a multitude of debates on theoretical and methodological issues raised by using the Archive since its resurgence in the 1980s as the Mass Observation Project (Sheridan, 2000; Bloome et al., 1993; Savage, 2005; Pollen, 2013; Casey et al., 2014). However, focusing on it for interesting quotations or historical snapshots, taken out of context, risks using it merely as a 'treasure trove' (Sheridan, 1996: 1). As well as a wide variety of forms of writing, Mass Observation materials include photographs, paintings, drawings and sketches, and its visuality was an aim from the outset (Madge and Jennings, 1937: 90), leading to ongoing interest in the Archive's aesthetics and forms of representation (Curzon, 2017; Pollen, 2022).

Therefore, with an acute awareness of the importance of form, my approach to the Mantelpiece Reports of 1937 (Mass Observation, 1937) and 1983 (Mass Observation, 1983) not only took a thematic approach to content but also to the diverse types of submission, which included lists, short narratives, drawings and some photographs, confessionals and, in the 1983 collection, a direct letter to then Director David Pocock and a polemic on housework. These were influenced by the form of the Directives, which asked for lists and photographs where possible, but Mass Observation correspondents frequently took Directives as a starting point for their own approaches, a freedom which has been encouraged by the less prescriptive prompts on recent Directives.

In the next section, I summarise this analytic background. The third section presents two Reports submitted to the 2019 Directive, followed by a section presenting and discussing 'The Catalogue of Ships' and 'The Shield of Achilles', taken from the *Iliad*. After this, I consider *Arcadia*, with reference to its staging and two extracts of dialogue. The passages presented are necessarily lengthy, to unpack the analytical process.

## Background

The 1937 Mass Observation Mantelpiece Reports principally comprised lists, as requested by the Directive, in order from left to right and naming what was at the

centre. The 1983 Reports were similar, although by then, there were fewer mantelpieces due to the advent of central heating, and more ‘mantelpiece spaces’, such as windowsills, bookcases and the tops of gas fires or desks. Reading and rereading each collection separately and together not only revealed the many similarities and the changes in ‘mantelpiece objects’ but also produced cultural collages and an almost acoustic sense, a rhythm in the background of everyday life.

Referring back to MO founder Charles Madge’s intention that the endeavour would produce a ‘popular poetry’, I found a bare poetry in the lists of candlesticks, ashtrays, rent books and clocks of 1937, and the takeaway menus, photos, pot plants and Buddhas of 1983 (Hurdley, 2013). These resonated with the Simon Armitage poem, ‘About his Person’, listing the things found on a dead body, a possible suicide, thus emphasising not only the poetics of the Mantelpiece writings but also the stillness of these displays, *memento mori*. Conversely, the very bareness of the lists also led me to flesh out these scant bones with biographical details: political leaflets on a student’s mantel suggested involvement in fiery meetings; the souvenirs told of travels to British seaside towns, and a careful halving of mantel space spoke of the negotiations of living in a shared room.

Reading the 1983 Reports led to another literary echo, of Alan Bennett’s (1980) play *Enjoy*, written as the ‘heritage turn’ began to dominate British public culture. My memory of his description of the mantelpiece at the end of Act One, as ‘Altar, noticeboard, medicine chest, cemetery’ prompted this further exploration of cultural parallels between accounts of what people were putting on their mantel spaces, and their everyday lives. Perhaps the character of Mass Observation – its curious alchemy of poetry, documentary, art, surrealism and realism to produce knowledge about society and social inequalities – encouraged the awakening of sociological imagination. In particular, its deliberate use of juxtaposition to ‘shock’ the consciousness opened up a space where suggestion, allusion and unusual connections could wander in. However, this was how they remained: allusive and thus elusive sources, which I had not fully examined. Thus, when literary allusions started to drift into my analysis of the 2019 Mantelpiece Reports, I determined to interrogate these in more detail.

## Mass observation 2019 reports

In this section, I reproduce the Directive and two full Mantelpiece Reports from 2019. This is necessary to allow the reader to appreciate the direction of the paper’s argument, through observation of the correspondents’ forms of writing. To avoid treating MO like a ‘treasure trove’, as in Sheridan’s criticism (1996: 1), these were selected at random from the 56 submissions. To offer only extracts would take the paper in the direction of thematic analysis (which is another possible method). Representing just two submissions is itself problematic, like the original MO publications (e.g., Madge and Jennings, 1937), for ‘... its vision is always postponed by the process of editing, which cannot but reduce the multiplicity of the reports to certain individuals’ work’. However, ‘Madge/Jennings recognize the difficulty of achieving such a truly democratic basis, and it is in this very fact that we can detect the movement’s utopian impulse’ (Hoshino, 2020, 138). It is impossible to provide all the Reports in a short paper, but all are available at The Keep or online (see <http://www.massobs.org.uk> for access).

Questions that correspondents were asked:

*Winter 2019 Directive Part 1: Mantelpieces and treasured objects*

*Part 1 of this Directive is inspired by the very first task that volunteers for Mass Observation were given in 1937. They were asked to write down 'in order of left to right' what was on their mantelpiece.*

*Since the 1930s with changes in architecture and central heating we now live in places that may not have a mantelpiece. However, there could be an equivalent surface where you place items of importance such as clocks, ornaments, books, photographs, cards and bills etc.*

*Task*

*We would like you to choose a room in your home (this could be more than one) that has a surface where you place items of importance. Please:*

- *Describe this surface*
- *Write down from left to right what there is on display*
- *Is there a particular order to how the items are arranged?*
- *Are any of the items hidden? For example, bills or receipts*
- *Who placed these items on there?*
- *Is there more than one person who utilises this space and arranges the items?*
- *How often do the items and the arrangement change?*

*As this is a Winter Directive you may have festive decorations on display, so please note if some items are temporary for the season.*

*We welcome any photographs and drawings.*

*Treasured objects*

*Are any of the items of personal significance to you or another family/person in your home? If so, could you tell us what it means to have this item on display? What is its story? Has it always been in this position?*

The two submissions:

Report 1

A6936 [MO assigned number] Female

69 Widowed Bristol Retired civil servant

I live in a 1960s semi and still have a mantelpiece. Moving from left to right, the first object is a small china sea chest. There is a picture of a sailing ship above an inscription that states that it is a souvenir from Cherry Tree Park. This immediately takes me back to the holiday that I had with my husband at Great Yarmouth in 1983. We hired a static caravan for a fortnight, were blessed with beautiful weather, and made full use of the facilities on the site, particularly the evening entertainment, as well as exploring the county of Norfolk. The chest now contains some address labels and receipts.

Next along is the first of the photographs. I am so glad that I took this one and placed it into a curved frame. It was taken on 1 September 2005, our Silver Wedding Anniversary, and shows the cards and flowers that we received on that beautiful day. We were staying at a hotel in Surrey and the whole day was perfect.

There are now several china mementoes – a London bus and the Eiffel Tower, both given to us by my Mum and Dad. China ducks, two lucky pixies, one with a coin, a shaggy dog wearing glasses, and a donkey from Clovelly in Devon. Then comes an oast house from the Garden of England. My husband came from Kent and was fiercely proud of his county. I loved it as well, and we went there at least once a year throughout our married life. Then we have something different – three sea shells. Two came from a beach near Cwmddu, the last holiday that I had with my husband in 2007, and we picked up these shells on a walk along with the beach on his birthday. The other one is from a beach in North Wales that I visited with my cousins this year, during a holiday in Snowdonia. There are two miniature brass clocks of conventional shape, a third in the shape of a vintage car, while the fourth is modelled on a VW Beetle, my first car. A small thatched cottage, from Wimborne Model Town, completes the china souvenirs. In the middle of the mantelpiece is a photograph of the happy couple on our wedding day, then I have two more framed photographs of my husband. The latter is especially treasured as it was a studio photo taken on his 21st birthday, long before I knew him, when he was on RAF service in Germany. Then there are 2 lipsticks placed inside miniature clogs, and two tins of lip balm – I use copious amounts of this stuff since spending half my life playing the clarinet and trombone. At the far end is a rack of thimbles, added to five others which are fixed above the mantelpiece. Endless memories here of course, as there are way over a hundred thimbles from places visited, commemorative events and gifts from relatives.

So that's it, treasured items indeed, and I have not changed them for many years. A real trip down memory lane and I see no reason to change them.

## Report 2

E5551 [MO assigned number], sex – Male, age – 44, marital status – Married, the town where you live – Bristol and your occupation – Operational Management Consultant for an Insurance Company.

### Part 1: Mantelpieces and treasured objects

I struggled with this a bit as we don't really have a traditional mantelpiece in our house and we don't have a fireplace. There is, however, a window sill in our smallest ground-floor front room, which we call The Snug but is really just a really messy playroom for our kids. The room contains a sofa, a piano, a TV and loads of stuff for the kids. It's a small room with a corner window that faces out onto the pavement/road outside the front of our house. This is where we keep flowers and cards and photos. The combination tends to change as flowers die and anniversaries fade away but now – on December 29<sup>th</sup> it holds, from left to right, the following items; Two window keys

- A photo of our eldest daughter stood in the bath
- A bottle of 'Method' Kitchen cleaner spray – what's that doing there?!
- A black and white football team photo with me in it from approximately 1985.
- An orange alien our eldest daughter made out of a toilet roll tube and pipe cleaners.
- A small good luck card from my in-laws to our eldest daughter for her nativity play (she was a sheep and an angel).
- A purple alien made out of a toilet roll tube and pipe cleaners.
- A small plastic horse.

- The DVD of Gnomeo and Juliet (not in the case).
  - An elaborate Lego princess carriage.
  - A black and white framed photo of me and our eldest daughter on a beach.
  - A very elaborate, very religious Christmas card from my wife's Godmother to us.
  - A candle, possibly scented, in a patterned holder.
  - A clock (wrong time)
  - A reed diffuser
  - A tea light/candle scent burner thing.
  - A wooden nativity scene including a light. I forgot this was there. I haven't touched it since my wife got the decorations out. I quite like it.
  - A sepia-framed photo of my wife and eldest daughter. We clearly stopped framing photos after our second daughter was born. Poor thing.
- There is no sense or order in this collection. The photos are permanent fixtures and were placed there years ago to cover the whole family but now needs a new addition! The toys come and go as we either take treasured or delicate toys (the princess carriage) out of reach of our youngest daughter or 'tidy up' by picking stuff up off the floor and dabbing them down on any available surface. The cards come and go with time. The kitchen cleaner is clearly misplaced, and the clock isn't used to tell the time. It's mostly just clutter. There aren't even any flowers!
- My wife tends to organise most of these areas and I shall work with her to refresh them!
  - I just realised that I was the last person to use the kitchen spray ...

Both correspondents follow the Directive loosely. Initially, I did content analyses of all the submissions, in terms of Things, Materials and Provenance/Reason. The aim of this was to create 'meta-lists' to enable written collaging of the results, as in my previous representation (Hurdley, 2013). The collage was a miniaturised, poetic form of socio-logical fiction (see Watson, 2021 for full discussion). I also considered the form of writing, with a focus on narrative and biographic elements, which remain popular qualitative analytic methods (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019; Brotman et al., 2020). This was particularly apt in the case of the 2019 Reports, in contrast to the less discursive 1937 and 1983 Reports. The focus on 'treasured objects' elicited stories, expressly entwined with the moral economy of the gift (Hurdley, 2007). Life course, family history and current situation were articulated in many of the Reports. However, I wanted to experiment with methods of analysis, rather than examining socio-cultural, historical and biographic accomplishments through these accounts, as I had in the past. Something else was tapping on the margins of memory, echoing quietly in the forms and sentences of the Reports. Whilst making the meta-lists and scribbling notes on the surreality of everyday displays (a stuffed pet mouse, a poker without a fire), I kept returning to the same literary memories: Arcadia and the Catalogue of Ships, the shield of Achilles and Septimus's tortoise; *lacrimae rerum* and *in medias res* ['tears of things' and 'into the middle of things']. Since these allusions may be unfamiliar to some readers, a brief explanation follows.

Arcadia is a region in Greece and the title of a play by Tom Stoppard, in which time, order and chaos, and the nature of reality are dominant themes. The tortoise is a key figure in Stoppard's drama, symbolising the interconnection of past and present and frequently to be found on the table which remains centre stage throughout the play. Arcadia has also

come to mean a Utopian place of pastoral calm and a time of innocence, based on the legendary character of the Greek place and people. The ‘Catalogue of Ships’ is a section of Homer’s ancient Greek epic poem, the *Iliad*, which tells the story of the Trojan war, in which the Greeks battled the Trojans to destroy their city, in revenge for the capture of Helen, the beautiful queen of Sparta. The Catalogue lists all the ships coming from different regions of Greece, bringing armies to fight the Trojans. Achilles is the central hero of the poem, whose shield is described in a detailed ekphrasis in Book 18, which illustrates contemporary cosmology, from the heavens to the various practices of human society.

It is also useful here to include a brief summary of Homer’s epic poem, the *Odyssey*. While the setting for the *Iliad* is principally the battle ground at the city walls of Troy, the *Odyssey* depicts the ten-year journey home of Odysseus, one of the Greek warriors. The poem goes back and forth between his wanderings and events in his palace, where his son and wife are desperately holding off a large group of hostile suitors, all wanting to marry Penelope and take over the lands and wealth of Odysseus, believed to be dead. One of Penelope’s strategies is to weave a shroud for her father-in-law during the day, promising to choose a suitor once it is finished. By night, she undoes what she has crafted, thus delaying the decision for two years, until a servant betrays her.

The phrase *lacrimae rerum* is taken from a much later Latin epic, written by Virgil. Its direct translation – tears of things – does not do it justice, since it is poetry, open to multiple interpretations: about the human condition, entwining human suffering with compassion, a knowledge of sorrow and death, yet also an understanding that tears are central to all things. Finally, *in medias res* – into the middle of things – is a rhetorical technique used in all three epics and many other creative works. Coming ‘into the middle of things’ means there is no lengthy introduction, but an immediate immersion into a critical situation. The context unfolds gradually, through flashbacks, dialogue and other techniques.

## The catalogue of ships and the shield of achilles

The *Iliad* begins *in medias res*, in the last year of the Trojan War. Similarly, its ‘sequel’, the *Odyssey* starts during Odysseus’s last year of wandering. Taken together, the epics portray war and domesticity as contrasting but complementary tropes. Both are thought by some scholars to be oral epics originally. The *Iliad* can be seen as a tragedy, with Achilles as the hero whom we know will die, although his death is not covered in the timeline of the poem. His closest friend dies, as does the Trojan hero, Hector. The *Odyssey* is a comedy, its hero successfully returning home, reuniting with his family, killing the suitors and taking control of his palace.

The ‘Catalogue of Ships’ is a section of *Iliad* Book 2, which describes the provenance of all the Greek armies sailing to fight the Trojans. In all probability, this was adapted from an earlier epic or epics (Hope Simpson, 1968: 39; Kelder, 2017) and thus has its own literary history. The whole section cannot be repeated here, so a passage follows, about the ships coming from Arcadia:

And they that held Arcadia beneath the steep mountain of Cyllene, beside the tomb of Aepytus, where are warriors that fight in close combat; and they that dwell in Pheneos and Orchomenus,



rich in flocks, and Rhipe and Stratia and wind-swept Enispe; and that held Tegea and lovely Mantinea; and that held Stymphalus and dwelt in Parrhasia, —all these were led by the son of Ancaeus, Lord Agapenor, with sixty ships; and on each ship embarked full many Arcadian warriors well-skilled in fight. For of himself had the king of men, Agamemnon, given them benched ships wherewith to cross over the wine-dark sea, even the son of Atreus, for with matters of seafaring had they naught to do.

(Homer, Book 2: 605–614)

As we can see, the Catalogue is not simply a list but details the geography of the place, the type of warriors, their leader and the fact that, being entirely land-bound, they were given the ships by Agamemnon. Such ‘story additions’ (Hope Simpson, 1968: 40) incorporate the Catalogue within the narrative of the *Iliad*, as a form of ‘... the war in miniature’ (Crossett, 1969: 244). The Catalogue is geopolitical, in that, for example in another section, Athens ‘claims’ Salamis. It has also been called a ‘spatial mnemonic’, mapping Greece through several forms of spatial organisation: syntactical, contingent and circling a central point (Clay et al., 2011). The temporality of the section is heterogeneous, not only drawing on earlier epic but also possibly post-Homeric poetry, meaning ‘It becomes increasingly difficult to restrict Homeric poetry to any one time and any one set of places’ (Nagy, 2010: 312). It is notable too that the list is considered to be a memory device of literate societies (Kelder, 2017), suggesting that this section at least was written, unlike the predominantly oral character of much of the epic.

Turning to Achilles’ shield, we can read this too as a ‘microcosm’, albeit not ‘a utopia’, since it pictures peace and war (Taplin, 1980:12). The passage below is from the beginning of the ekphrasis, as the god Hephaestus starts to make the shield. Not only is the world of humans pictured but also the cosmos as it was understood at the time. City and country, life and death and the gendered character of society are visualised on the finely wrought artefact. Music, movement, voices and bright flames spring from the description:

Therein he wrought the earth, therein the heavens therein the sea, and the unwearied sun, and the moon at the full, and therein all the constellations wherewith heaven is crowned [ ... ] Therein fashioned he also two cities of mortal men exceeding fair. In the one there were marriages and feastings, and by the light of the blazing torches they were leading the brides from their bowers through the city, and loud rose the bridal song. And young men were whirling in the dance, and in their midst [495] flutes and lyres sounded continually; and there the women stood each before her door and marvelled. But the folk were gathered in the place of assembly; for there a strife had arisen, and two men were striving about the blood-price of a man slain ...

(Homer, Book 18: 483–498)

The technique of ekphrasis in a literary work presents a ‘word picture’, to interrupt the busyness of the plot- and/or character-driven narrative. As classicist Oliver Taplin commented, it allows the reader/listener to, ‘stand back temporarily from the poem and see it in its place – like a ‘detail’ from the reproduction of a painting – within a larger landscape, a landscape that is usually blotted from sight by the all-consuming narrative in the

foreground' (1980:12). Both the 'Catalogue of Ships' and the 'Shield of Achilles' accomplish this, as complex, composite works of art in themselves and as miniatures of the war, and of social life.

Although it remains uncertain whether 'Homer' was an individual or a group, whether the poems were composed as units or at different times by different people, and whether they were oral or written epics, it is nevertheless certain that both works were designed to be performed. The goddess of Memory, Mnemosyne, is invoked in both Homeric poems, to help the speaker perform them accurately for the audience. The many repetitions in the compositions, of words, phrases and passages would have aided the performer's memory. Nevertheless, it is likely that particular parts of the poems would have been changed by the speaker for the audience; the Catalogue of Ships may have been an ideal opportunity to bring local colour to the epic. Therefore, these epics are social, cultural performances, which were contingent upon audiences. This was no one-way production/consumption relationship, but social interaction. Much has been written about Homeric epic over the centuries, but of sociological interest here is the invocation of memory in social interaction. It was perhaps this that resonated with the Mass Observation writings, which in themselves are memorialisations of the artefacts of memory, as parts of a greater collective, social memory – the Mass Observation archive. As such, they too interact with the greater archival text, an ever-growing process, contingent on concerns and issues of the day.

## Arcadia

This play's themes and plot are too complex to describe here, exploring the relationship between past, present and future, order and disorder, certainty and uncertainty, classical and quantum physics. It is '... no imitation of real-world space and time, but a self-consciously artistic creation – an aesthetic object' (Melbourne, 1998: 57). Its effect, however, is to prompt the reader/audience to reflect on the unfamiliarity of the taken-for-granted: this 'period drama' is no *Downton Abbey*. The title is significant, alluding to the pastoral idyll this country house, in its garden setting, seems to embody. It is a domestic play, taking place in one room, with a large table at centre stage. The scenes move between two periods (1809 and the present) with different protagonists, who come together in the concluding scene, dancing around the stage, with the table now piled high with things that have been added during the play, inhabiting the past and present.

An extract from the stage directions for the first scene (from 1809) is below:

... the room looks bare despite the large table which occupies the centre of it. ... There are two people, each busy with books and paper and pen and ink, separately occupied. The pupil is Thomasina Coverley, aged 13. The tutor is Septimus Hodge, aged 22. Each has an open book. Hers is a slim mathematics primer. His is a handsome thick quarto, brand new, a vanity production, with little tapes to tie when the book is closed. His loose papers, etc, are kept in a stiff-backed portfolio which also ties up with tapes. Septimus has a tortoise which is sleepy enough to serve as a paperweight. Elsewhere on the table there is an old-fashioned theodolite and also some other books stacked up.

(Stoppard, 1993: 3)

Later on, the stage directions state:

In the case of props – books, paper, flowers, etc. – there is no absolute need to remove the evidence of one period to make way for another.

[ ... ] During the course of the play, the table collects this and that, and where an object from one scene would be an anachronism in another (say a coffee mug) it is simply deemed to have become invisible. By the end of the play the table has collected an inventory of objects.

(Stoppard, 1993: 22)

In the last scene, the stage directions now say:

The table contains the geometrical solids, the computer, decanter, glasses, teamug, Hannah's research books, Septimus's books, the two portfolios, Thomasina's candlestick, the dahlia, the Sunday papers ... [ellipsis in the original]

(Stoppard, 1993: 131)

The stage directions are critical to the action of the play, and its meanings. As Paul Edwards comments, 'At the end of the play, the table has accumulated a variety of objects that, if one saw them without having seen the play, would seem completely random and disordered. ... But if one has seen the play, one has full information about the objects and the hidden "order" of their arrangement, brought about by the performance itself.' (2001: 173). The table itself is a performer, like the human actors. The accretion of things, from 1809 and the present, and the meanings they represent, referring to nature, culture, space, time, physics and so on, can be understood as encompassing the whole of human experience, however contradictory they might at first appear. As the nineteenth century tutor, Septimus says:

We shed as we pick up, like travellers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. We die on the march. But there is nothing outside the march so nothing can be lost to it. The missing plays of Sophocles will turn up piece by piece, or be written again in another language.

(Stoppard, 1993: 53)

The table is a microcosm of this philosophy of 'the march', of the impossibility of things ever really disappearing in the universe. The ordinariness of the crowded table is terribly strange, as familiar objects such as flowers, books and mugs, the visible and invisible coalesce in a spatio-temporal chaos/order. Valentine, a character from the 'present' voices the miraculous strangeness of the everyday:

... The ordinary-sized stuff which is our lives, the things people write poetry about— clouds— daffodils—waterfalls—what happens in a cup of coffee when the cream goes in — these things are full of mystery, as mysterious to us as the heavens were to the Greeks.

(Stoppard, 1993: 65)

The things themselves would simply be mundane objects, but they become animated, as it were, by the parts they play in the drama. They expand the meanings of the play, beyond the words spoken by human actors. ‘Ultimately they make time visible: in the theatrical present, future and past coexist and interact’ (Blattès, 2012: 119). The tortoise is always present, but changes names according to whose tortoise he is in each period; the same apple is present in both periods; a pot of nineteenth-century dahlias do not look like modern-day flowers. Some things stay the same, but are possessed by different people; other things seem to remain constant; others look almost the same, but somehow out of time.

## Interpretation

In this section, I test the hunch. Having laid out my materials, I will explore how the two Mantelpiece Reports resonate with the literary passages above.

### Epic

Seen as a whole, each Report comprises lives - domestic and beyond - in miniature. In the descriptions of mantelpieces and ‘mantelpiece spaces’, the writers begin *in medias res*, in the middle of things, the life of a person, household, family and social network. In the first Report, here is marriage and widowhood, family of origin, biography of self and husband, communication with others and precious purchases, music, celebrations and journeys. In the second, there is school and play, housework and Christmas, births, childhood and early adulthood, wider family networks, religion and football. We may be reading only short passages from the greater histories of lives, but these extracts portray the whole of complex human social lives. They are types of ekphrasis: written description of lived experience, imbued in things and images. The first Report, written in later life, conveys the tragedy of the human condition, *lacrimae rerum*, for even when lived joyfully, death comes – in this case, to the writer’s parents and husband. Perhaps neither writer nor husband knew that the holiday to Cwmddu was the ‘last holiday’ at the time, but in flashback to the time the shells were collected, the Report can recount it as a death foretold, as past becomes present and present becomes future. In the second Report, the aliens, nativity scene and Christmas card are a microcosm of current cosmological knowledge, of religious/scientific understanding.

Temporally, these apparently static tableaux span more than single lifetime, with inherited objects, Christ’s nativity, a family’s history in Kent, and the second World War. Flowers die and anniversaries ‘fade away’ in the second, while ornaments stay for years and former anniversaries are commemorated daily in the first. Eternity and ephemera are contingent, as are the mundane and the universal: toilet roll aliens from outer space; the coast and mountains of Snowdonia in a shell. Clocks are decorative, as time passes and is noted in other ways and other places.

Both Reports are spatial mnemonics in that they recount the landscape of the display spaces, and the provenance of each artefact. One is orderly, with a central photograph of the marriage, whilst the other is an unordered gathering of objects, nevertheless temporally situated around Christmas and geographically organised according to the needs of everyday life. Further, the first Report is a memory account of the geographic origins of ornaments and photographs, travelling from the East and the West of the UK. A

hundred places are remembered in thimbles. In the second, geopolitics are played out in the microcosm of the domestic sphere; children dominate, a woman organises the space and a man neglects to tidy up after himself.

Treated as lists, the Reports are literate forms and techniques of memory, recording a few moments of looking at a mantelpiece. They are close-ups on a place in the wider landscape of the house and the great narratives of lives and memories of lives, an opportunity to stop and look upon, and to look back. More than this, they are passages from the long narrative of social, cultural life in 21st century Britain. Two artefacts from a collection of literary artefacts, the 2019 Mass Observation Mantelpiece Reports, that together comprise multiple observations of domestic life, family hierarchies and relations, journeys, social rituals, knowledge, superstition and belief. These in turn are part of a longer history, spanning 1937, 1983 and future Reports. And these materials are filed in the Mass Observation Archive, a vast assemblage of individuals' texts, drawings, photographs, paintings, press cuttings and pamphlets that together are an epic of mass observations. These two reports are the Archive in miniature.

### Drama

First, I will consider the Reports as stage directions for a drama in which the things listed are part of the performance. Both convey a conscious aesthetic; after all, the second writer need not have mentioned the kitchen cleaner – it too has its part to play. Like a play, the setting and the human performances are interdependent: a child has built the Lego Cinderella coach, which then became part of the stage set; a couple got married and the photograph was put on the mantelpiece. In the present, the Cinderella coach is too high up now for the child to play with, so she must do something else; the photograph is now of a past time, so looking at it, the bride-turned-widow is prompted to take 'a trip down memory lane'. The second Report makes visible what is not there, such as the flowers and the second child, vivifying them as presences that are somewhere off-stage, waiting for their moment. The dramas of weddings, Christmases, anniversaries, war, birth, death and baths are all immanent in these miniature stage sets. Pixies, aliens, baby Jesus, cousins, a Godmother, parents and children are all on-stage, performances past and present occurring simultaneously. At the same time, a small child might be having a tantrum because she cannot play with that Lego, and a woman may be crying quietly, or laughing at the memory of a walk on the beach. The stage sets are surreal, with tiny houses, too many clocks or a clock telling the wrong time, garish aliens and pixies, and whole towns, held in a thimble. The past is wrought in sepia and monochrome, and a fairy tale in pink plastic.

Three hundred years ago, a mantelpiece would have been an elegant symmetry, but it is now transformed into a tableau of personal memory and family history or is not even a mantel at all, but a corner window. A Georgian carriage clock is replaced by a car clock, and the candlesticks by a scent burner and a reed diffuser: smell rather than light matters now. Sailing ships, once so vital to international trade, are transformed into an aesthetic miniature, and religious ritual to a little nativity scene. There is not only bathos here but also the grandeur of everyday life: battles between parent and child, commemoration rites, the ritual economy of the gift and the eternal march. Each mantel is a little drama waiting to be observed, or brought to life in dialogue, but it is also magnificent. The second child's photo might be mounted there one day; the London bus will be

passed on, perhaps to a relative or sold on Etsy; things are picked up and let go, but never disappear completely. Another child will play with Lego, *Gnomeo and Juliet* is ever-present on Netflix, and schoolchildren will always make things out of toilet rolls and pipe cleaners. Even when Lego, Netflix and pipe cleaners are let go, fairy tales, plays and creatures from outer space will remain, to be remade in other forms. In another Report, a cracker trinket sits on the mantel, 'too good' to throw away. Will it stay there, an irritating intruder, a slight friction in the life of the living room, or will someone finally throw it out, feeling faintly guilty? Decisions like these may seem trivial, but they are the micro-processes that produce moods, quibbles and negotiations in daily dramas of domesticity.

Although these two Reports may be unique dramas, viewed as a whole, all the 2019 Reports produce a collective drama of life, interrupted. There are accounts of chronic or critical illnesses, divorce, many marriages, births and deaths, life abroad and life in a small student room, all told through ekphrasis. These descriptions of mantelpieces portray some of the players – the still and silent ones – which participate in the theatre of everyday life. In these complex accounts, some writers are performing memory, others the busyness of daily family life. One person portrays their activities with friends through the diverse papers on their noticeboard, and another focuses on a particular lunch with his son. A man evokes sound and mood as a fan of Leonard Cohen, whose CDs adorn the mantel, and one woman's role as an Etsy seller is connected to her ever-changing display of artefacts. Thus, the Reports are not only dramas of things but also dramatised aspects of the writers' lives. They are interruptions, in that they insert themselves into daily human dialogue and action to perform other roles from other times: rites of passage, commemoration and celebration; holidays and sport; collections and gifts. Therefore, things and people are all performing in this social theatre.

Since this is an exploratory discussion on method, the paper will not expand this analysis further into the substantive materials. Its aim is simply to test the 'hunch' by exploring how a more in-depth look at allusions and resonances plays out. A full discussion of substantive themes such as family, memory, materiality and culture can be found in Author (anonimised for peer review).

## Discussion

This method took many years to process, and I knew the 1937 and 1983 Mass Observation Mantelpiece Reports very well. I also had a thorough knowledge of the origins, aims and methodological peculiarities of Mass Observation. Having analysed and written about the earlier Reports as social documents, I found some poetic and dramatic echoes of a Simon Armitage poem, and an Alan Bennett play, which were marginal in sociologically focused publications. However, literary allusions continued to arise on reading the most recent Reports, and since it makes sense to fit the method to the research materials, it also seemed sensible to pursue this connection further. The method, as it were, emerged from the materials. But how well did it work as a method in sociological analysis?

Through following the 'hunch' into literary analysis, I found first that the textual and the substantive were hard to separate. These Reports were accounts that could be treated as literary texts, but they also worked as a form of ekphrasis, as writing that was

powerfully pictorial and, therefore, conjured the material up for the imagination, sociological and literary. Therefore, my analysis moves between focusing on the text and the mantelpieces described. However, this is not problematic, since literary analysis commonly adopts this plural vision, on literary form, style and content. Treating the reports in this way emphasised the dialogic character of everyday interactions between people and things, background and foreground. The stasis of artefactual assemblages was mobilised through analysing the writing as epic and drama, in a way that content or thematic analysis might not accomplish. Rather than looking *through* the text, this method looks *at* the text.

The analysis in the last section is brief and partial but is enough to demonstrate how following the ‘hunch’ through to a more detailed examination produces sociological findings. The Reports are allusive of the literary texts, rather than directly comparative. First, it is important to undertake an analysis of the literary passages within the context of the work as a whole. As well as their form, the content can then be analysed, to open up the allusions that have arisen in the research materials. Finally, research texts can be interpreted within the context of these earlier analytic processes. These are ‘interpretations’, in the sense that they are highly subjective, perhaps emphasising the subjective character of all sociological analyses: following a hunch, pursuing emergent methods, settling on meanings.

To keep this to the length of a journal article, I chose only two literary passages and two Reports. However, as shown in the last section, the literary analytic method leads to further connections being made to other Reports and to the collection as a whole, which can clearly open up into more detailed writing on both dramatic/epic aspects of these texts, and the ways in which mantelpiece displays are part of everyday drama and poetic epic. In addition, further literary passages which resonated with the Reports can be analysed, such as those from the *Odyssey* and other parts of the *Iliad*, as well as the wider themes and meanings of these epic poems. Clearly, the method relies on the individual researcher listening to, feeling, and following up on such hunches.

## Contexts

Before moving onto discuss cultural and textual turns, one concept clearly connects with an analysis of everyday drama: Goffman’s dramaturgy, looking specifically at his theorisation of the performance of self in everyday life (1959/1990). He comments that the ‘decorations and fixtures in a place where a particular performance is usually given, as well as the performers and performance usually found there, tend to fix a kind of spell over it ...’, setting the ‘tone’ for a setting even when the performers and performance are absent (126). The mantelpiece and other display spaces can be viewed as front-stage settings within the wider stage of the living room, itself a front-stage in the management of self-presentation, and the house itself. In a way, the mantel is what is left – the relic – when the performances have passed and the curtain comes down on what becomes a ‘back-stage’ area when visitors have left. However, this temporal division omits the theatre of everyday life, which happens everywhere, all the time. Goffman argues that when there is no audience, backstage ‘reciprocal familiarity determine[s] the tone of social intercourse’ (129). Yet, it is this ‘reciprocal familiarity’ which gives rise to everyday dramas. Mantelpiece displays are material artefacts of this unboundaried everyday relics of what has been performed, on display in a continual performance.

It is too easy to consider such relics as mere surfaces, with little connection to depth ontologies (De la Fuente 2019). For example, in Rojek and Turner's (2000) critique, they argue that, 'Instead of engaging with state politics, ornamentalism concentrates on the level of micro-politics, thereby exacerbating the problem of its own relevance to politics or policy' (639). They specifically criticise 'decorative sociology' 'as a trend in contemporary sociology where "culture" has eclipsed the "social" and where literary interpretation has marginalized sociological methods' (629). However, this paper has shown that literary interpretation of researcher- and participant-produced texts enriches sociological methods. This is different from treating social life *as* text (Geertz, 1973), yet the proposed method contributes to the textual turn in bringing text and material together, in what De la Fuente (2019) calls 'textuality'. Although texts may be conceptualised as purely cultural artefacts, they are also social things, inextricably linked with the material conditions of their production. Surface and depth in both social life and social texts are not divided by '... an unbridgeable chasm ...' (557). For the sake of analysis, texts and other things can be separated but reintegrated for further interpretation. Mantelpieces are prime exemplars of this interconnection since people can 'tell' these linear surfaces *as* text and also use produce text as textured ekphrasis. Thus 'textural sociology offers a view of sociology that is thoroughly qualitative at the theoretical and ontological as well as methodological and epistemological levels' (De la Fuente, 2019: 564).

## Conclusion

This 'hunch' began with tentative links between a poem and a play when analysing Mass Observation Mantelpiece Reports from 1937 and 1983. Following the concept of 'popular poetry' that Mass Observation's founders hoped for led me to pursue allusiveness in the 2019 Reports. Through the close reading of passages from Homer's *Iliad* and Stoppard's *Arcadia*, together with two randomly selected MO submissions, I found that this method was valid as sociological interpretation. It is both transferable to other qualitative projects and valuable in more extensive use of literary texts and researcher- or participant-produced writings. Mantelpieces themselves may be seen as merely decorative, yet these miniature surfaces are textured, material and animated presences in domestic lives. Textual accounts of these places can be analysed as 'stage directions', setting the scene for domestic theatre, and also as epics in microcosm. Cultural and social worlds are not separate nor is the macro distinct from the micro in everyday life. Mundane poetics – of mantelpieces and texts – can be analysed through allusiveness to other texts. Such fictions are socially immersed, and detailed examination of form – epic and drama in this case – themes and content, leads to fruitful sociological analysis of data.

This method can be situated within Goffman's (1959/1990) dramaturgical analysis of everyday life, with a nuanced turn towards the settings of performances, and an acknowledgement that 'back-stage' performances matter. It also contributes to 'textural sociology' (De la Fuente, 2019), in arguing that there is no distinction to be made between surface and depth, cultural and sociological. Further, it extends 'sociological fiction' as a method (Watson, 2021; see also Abbott, 2007), in that such analysis evokes social life through fictional allusiveness. This is the sociological imagination in action, at the nexus of biography and history (Mills 1959). Aesthetics do not float over the world of people and things; threads, allusions and mantels make this world.




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