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This collection of six individually authored essays offers an exploration of social realism in various media through a range of lenses. In his essay, Stephen Lacey defines social realism as an exploration of social and political issues motivated by a belief that the world not only is knowable but could be transformed by art. This broad definition would probably be embraced by all authors, as the stated objective of the volume is to open up the term to as many understandings of social realism as possible. Indeed, the collection makes no claims to being the final word on the topic. The editor David Tucker promises that broadening the scope for investigation would “reveal many divergent, surprising and significant trajectories of influence, of genealogy, and of legacy” (9). This approach is shaped by the collaborators’ wish to consolidate a wider reappraisal of realism and invigorate a nonnostalgic study of social realism. Tucker points to a lack of scholarly interest in the subject in the last decades, which he links to the rise of postmodernist critique and the difficulty in defining social realism. Tucker maintains that postmodernist critics have viewed realism, the concept social realism is frequently defined in relation to, as naive, dull, and embarrassingly transparent and therefore unworthy of further study. The contributors beg to differ.

As a whole, the volume argues that the commitment of social realism to the social and the political illuminates the values and preoccupations of a large group of artists and thinkers. Thus, an analysis of their oeuvre will shed light on the society they inhabited. In addition, social realism is not merely a relic of the past but a relevant tradition in Britain today. Lacey argues in his excellent exploration of social realist theater that “engagement with the contemporary world is now part of the DNA of theatre” (79). He traces this engagement back to social realist tradition, which reinforces, in his view, the need for a lively academic exploration of it. Paul Dave finds traces of influence of 1950s and 1960s social realist film in the context of neoliberalism and the crisis of the social in the films of contemporary directors Shane Meadows and Andrea Arnold. His genealogy leads to the unexpected emergence of the ethics of solidarity and its potential to revive the impoverished social sphere. Dave uncovers political intentions not only in the work of the artists he explores but also in the motives of its academic discussants. He argues that social realist films draw viewers’ attention to the relationship between capitalism and the evils of contemporary culture. This focus, he hopes, might inspire political mobilization and facilitate an envisioning of a noncapitalist society.

The collection is organized around medium rather than theme, with chapters exploring social realism in cinema, fiction, theater, poetry, visual art, and television. It aims to document their appearances and significance in Britain, but the geographic focus is mostly on England. The exceptions include Keston Southerland’s reading of Glaswegian poet Tom Leonard and Gillian Whiteley’s argument about the internationalism of 1950s social realist visual art. Most of the analysis is focused on the immediate postwar decades, although Whiteley begins her survey in the 1930s, and most contributors bring their chapters up to the present.

The collection as a whole makes a convincing case for the importance of examining social realism through a historical perspective. Lacey’s aforementioned article is successful in grounding the movement in various historical moments. So are Rod Mengham’s essay on British social realistic fiction, Whiteley’s essay, and Dave Rolinson’s piece about televisual social realism. Mengham’s fascinating close reading of key novels written in “a culture of scarcity” (86) during the late 1950s to the early 1960s demonstrates how the entrenchment of the language of economy in Britain determined fictional protagonists’ use of economic terms (notably “debt” and “credit”) even when confronted with ethical and emotional issues. Whiteley’s survey of the development of social realist visual art in Britain traces the changes in artists’ and critics’ understanding of the social role of the artist and the function of art
in society. Rolinson provides a useful account of tight links between social realist aesthetics and values and the ways in which program makers understood the new medium of television.

Interestingly, while the collection aims to expand the scope of discussion on social realism, these essays establish a canon of social realist works, artists, and influences. Novels such as *Room at the Top* (1957) or *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), theater pieces such as *Look Back in Anger* (1956), and directors and writers of the ilk of Ken Loach and John Osborne appear in a number of chapters as important examples of social realism. The figures of cultural critics Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, in particular, dominate the volume. This is expected, as Hoggart’s seminal work, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), had defined the values, the agendas, and the tone of social realism in Britain. Rolinson points to Hoggart’s decisive role in the 1962 Pilkington report assessing the future of broadcasting in Britain. He argues not only that *Uses of Literacy* influenced program makers but that the broadcasting policy in Britain in the post-Pilkington era was actually shaped by Hoggart. While Hoggart is the embodiment of social realism in Britain, Raymond Williams’s understanding of culture and society infuse the analytic work of the contributors to this volume. This is a powerful testament to Williams’s significant contribution to the field of cultural studies.

Taken together, the essays provide exciting research on an intellectual, artistic, and political movement. They add to our understanding of postwar Britain and consolidate a welcome addition to the growing body of work on postwar culture and society.

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The second half of the twentieth century saw a surge in the number of public bodies that took on an obligation to encourage the cultural life of the people through the arts. Among them there was the BBC, the Arts Council, commercial television (and the promises it had to make under the 1954 Television Act), local government, and various public moralists who offered their services as makers and breakers of public taste. Some of them were committed to the people and looked for ways of working their own art into a living tradition. Others wanted to promote a cause or a career or their particular conception of the grand project. The Victorians built libraries and schools. The Edwardians enjoyed ritual and ceremonial. Interwar progressives taught in settlements for the unemployed or the Workers’ Education Association. From 1945, however, a new kind of cultural activist appeared, and everyone had to learn the faux language of regeneration through culture—nowhere more so than in the far forgotten corner of northeast England.

The people, however, already had a culture, and news of its degeneration was premature. Indeed, apart from the creative artists (who for the most part deal in what they have to deal in whatever the culture), the idea of the *cultural region* was always the work of a fourth estate that lived by its own initiatives. As Natasha Vall puts it, “The north east is a fruitful site to explore this continuing debate. With its historic contribution of cultural infrastructural deficit and tenacious vernacular traditions the region is a significant ‘ideal type’ for assessing the efficacy of cultural policy initiatives since 1945” (3).

We can better understand what Vall means by “cultural policy” if we understand that she is not interested in the popular and commercial. In other words, if she was out in Newcastle on a cold Wednesday evening in 1966 (like I was) and saw three poets and a dog coming one way from the Morden Tower and 40,000 people coming the other way from St. James Park, Vall would be more interested in the three poets and the dog. (I thank Gordon Burn for this image.) She is, however, especially interested in those who engaged with the “ver-