Everyday Life and the Birth of Mass Observation
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We saw [...] that the discovery of new material forces had reached a suicidal point in the form of poison gas; and that a new technique for making use of the superstition of a literate but suggestible majority was being brought to final perfection. This, then, is the point at which Mass Observation was founded…[1]

EVERYDAY, EXTRAORDINARY
The blurb on the back cover of the first published book by Mass Observation (1937) read as follows: This pamphlet is the first issued by MASS OBSERVATION; it describes the aims, methods and work of this new organisation, which sets out to accomplish sociological research of the first importance, and which has hitherto never been attempted: namely, to collect a mass of data based upon practical observation, on the everyday life of all types of people: and to use the data for scientific study of Twentieth-Century Man in all his different environments.[2]

But if the object of Mass Observation's research is primarily 'everyday life' then it might come as something of a surprise to open this small book and read the title of the first chapter: "THE KING WANTS TO MARRY MRS. SIMPSON: CABINET ADVISES "NO". [3] The words are from a newspaper headline alerting readers to the Abdication Crisis as it was emerging in the winter of 1936. If the back cover directs the reader to thinking of Mass Observation as primarily interested in what might be called ordinary or mundane behaviour, the Inside redirects attention towards public, political, and extra-ordinary life – towards social elites and momentous occasions.

The very first public announcements of the Mass Observation project are framed by this dual perspective, as well as by the modernist ambitions that the above quotation articulates ('data for scientific study of Twentieth-Century Man'). In a small clutch of letters published in New Statesman and Nation, through December 1936 and January 1937, Mass Observation begins to take shape in public. The sequence goes like this. The first letter (December 12, 1936) is not by anyone associated with Mass Observation but seems to work as an incentive for the Mass Observation project to go live (so to speak). It is written by Geoffrey Pyke (an eccentric thinker, military innovator, and school director) and is in direct connection to the recent Abdication of King Edward VIII, and the furore caused by his intention of marrying Wallis Simpson, an American woman who had been married twice before. Pyke's letter suggests that the various responses and opinions generated by the 'crisis' would provide a limited, but very useful, resource for the 'anthropological study of our own civilisation of which we stand in such desperate need'.[4] Not only would this anthropological study make evident the sexual situation of modern western society, it would also start to unravel the connections between sexual mores and national identity (particularly the sense of national identity circulating in America and Britain).

The second letter, titled 'Anthropology at Home', responds to Pyke's suggestion by claiming that just such an anthropological movement was already in existence. The letter, signed by Charles Madge, but alluding to a group of similarly intentioned minds, describes a project of 'mass observations' that had started 'some days before the precipitation of the crisis [the Abdication Crisis].[5] Indeed the discussions that gave rise to Mass Observation, conducted in the Blackheath home of Charles Madge and the poet Kathleen Raine, had been imagining a form of mass poetry that would be responsive to a range of 'upheavals' (like the Abdication Crisis, but as we will see, including events like the burning of Crystal Palace), as well as providing a form of communication-from-below. Madge suggests that the importance of events like the Abdication Crisis is that they bring 'repressed elements' 'to the surface'. Implicitly invoking psychoanalysis as a relevant intellectual resource Madge writes of the crisis as a 'mass wish situation' and of the 'Crystal Palace-Abdication symbolic situation'. Importantly Madge's letter is also an invitation to enlist as a volunteer for the purpose of a 'mass science': 'only mass observations can create mass science'.[6]

The third letter is signed by Tom Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings, and Charles Madge and is also titled 'Anthropology at Home'. Between the second letter and the third letter a coincidence occurs: Tom Harrisson, an ornithologist and amateur anthropologist, has a poem published in New
Statesman and Nation and this is placed directly after Madge’s letter. When Harrisson reads the letter he immediately contacts Madge. Harrisson has been conducting his own ‘anthropology at home’, by applying the anthropological techniques he had learnt on the island of Malekula, in Vanuatu (then called the New Hebrides) to the Lancashire town of Bolton. The third letter then is partly a product of this meeting, but mostly a fulsome continuation of what the Blackheath group had already established. This letter, written by the triumvirate that in writing the letter appear to ‘officially’ found Mass Observation, sees the initial impetus of Mass Observation extended and given a degree of professional legitimation (Harrisson had just written an anthropological book, one that would be very successful, describing the culture of Malekula and his time on the island[7]). In this third letter (or the second one authored by Mass Observation) the intellectual resources that Mass Observation will draw on are outlined in more detail. Alongside psychoanalysis (Freud and Breuer’s work on hysteria is mentioned), the work of Darwin, Marx and Tylor are mentioned. Thus we begin to see an interdisciplinary project that will combine political economy, psychoanalysis, natural history, and cultural and social anthropology.

The third letter also gives an indication of where such interdisciplinarity will be directed. A list is offered for possible areas of exploration. Items include: ‘shouts and gestures of motorists; the aspidistra cult; anthropology of football pools; bathroom behaviour; beards, armpits, eyebrows; Anti-Semitism’, and so on. That the project will have a political agenda is made explicit towards the end of the letter: the aim is that the ‘environment may be understood, and thus constantly transformed’. This is something that Madge makes clear in an essay that is published a couple of months later:

The ancient taboos that govern the king still seem to exert an unconscious influence on a part of the popular mind. To lay bare the sources of this influence would have the effect of lessening the magical power of the symbol of monarchy. To interpret the symbol is the first step towards changing the institution. Interpretation must have this active revolutionary aim always in mind[8].

For Madge (and for Jennings, and perhaps also for Harrisson) the ‘symbolic economy’ of culture was deeply embedded with myth. Rationalism on its own could not equal to the power of myth; the point of marshalling the various critical forces of Freud, Marx, Darwin and Tylor, is to bring myth to the surface, to make it conscious.

If this third letter vividly argues for the combined efforts of various modernist social sciences it also, importantly, includes art within that orbit. Mass Observation conjoins art and science in a general modernist social science that will always enlist a variety of forms of attention:

Equally, all human types can and must assist in this work. The artist and the scientist, each compelled by historical necessity out of their artificial exclusiveness, are at last joining forces and turning back towards the mass from which they had detached themselves. [9]

Harrisson, it should be remembered was an ethnographer who wrote poems; Madge was a poet who worked for the Daily Mirror (and would later become a sociology professor); Jennings was a filmmaker, poet, painter, and critic.

There is, I want to argue, a dynamic tension in all this that is worth highlighting and worth seeing as constitutive of the Mass Observation project. This tension, between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between elites and ordinary ‘folk’, between talk in front parlours and reports in the newspaper, is a central ingredient that flavours all of Mass Observation’s various concoctions. But this tension between social life ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ (to frame it in terms of social hierarchies) is connected to other tensions – for instance, the tension between ‘science’ and ‘poetry’, between analysis and description, which are also central to the work of Mass Observation. In this essay I want to explore these tensions and to see them in their social and cultural context. I want to explore the run up to the public announcement of Mass Observation in January 1937. By concentrating on the year 1936 I want to see Mass Observation’s emergence as an event that happens at a particular moment. Mass Observation, as the epigram that heads this essay insists, is born at a moment of extreme danger. That those people involved in establishing Mass Observation chose (at least initially) to face this danger by studying ‘bathroom behaviour’ rather than by working within more conventional political arenas is the central and inescapable
actuality of the project. Without recognising that actuality we risk miss-recognising the fundamental character of the project – its force, its possibilities, its problems.

**A MOMENT OF EXTREME DANGER**

One of the first indications of the form that Mass Observation would take is provided by a questionnaire circulated in December 1936 (before the two January 1937 letters to the New Statesman and Nation, before, that is, Tom Harrisson joins the group).[10] With twenty-two questions it moves from the straightforward (age, marriage status), to questions about fear, freedom, hatred, superstition, religion, and death. The directive asks the questioners to expand the questionnaire by inventing their own questions spontaneously. The examples that are given are: 'Do you approve of gambling? Do you avoid looking at street accidents? What is the ugliest thing that you can think of?' The directive also suggests that questions should be asked rapidly and answered immediately, and that after this the person questioned can then write answers at leisure but without seeing their first set of responses.

In the list of questions it is question 13 and 14 that are most evidently connected to the contemporary moment (winter 1936). Question 13 asks: 'Did you want the King to marry Mrs. Simpson, and if so, why?' Question 14 asks: 'Were you glad or sorry when the Crystal Palace was burnt down and if so, why?' In the supplementary notes for the questionnaire it states: Alternative questions should be substituted for Questions 13 and 14 when those are no longer topical. If possible, they should refer to symbolic events, such as the burning of the Crystal Palace, rather than to the real crises of which those events are symbols. The association method should also be used to obtain a series of words associated by the person questioned with key-words such as King, Crystal Palace, etc.

The burning down of the Crystal Palace is recognised of being of a similar order of upheaval as the Abdication Crisis, and similarly worthy of attention. Interestingly, though, the Crystal Palace seems to be favoured over the Abdication Crisis because (potentially) it seems so evidently symbolic of other crises, and not simply the crisis itself. The Abdication, of course, did look like an actual crises (and it provoked a constitutional crisis) but its real import is the way that it can be made to register a series of subterranean forces that bubble below this minor ripple on the surface of social life. It is because the King's abdication and choice of spouse resonated so profoundly with a deeper crisis that entangled changing ideas and feelings about religion, sex, marriage, and the monarchy that it was such a productive event for Mass Observational work. And it seems clear from the start that one of the leading components of a Mass Observational approach is going to be psychoanalytic – but through analogy rather than through the systematic use of a psychoanalytic interpretation.[11] To reveal the repressed elements that a symbolic understanding of the Abdication can point to (around marriage and monarchy, for instance) 'free association' is taken as the underlying method of the questionnaire.

So if the Abdication crisis had provided the final impetus for Mass Observation to go public and to bring 'anthropology home', it was because it was situated at the end of a train of events leading up the emergence of the public face of Mass Observation. As Charles Madge suggests in his letter, the Mass Observation group had already formed prior to the Abdication. In a number of ways it was the burning down of the Crystal Palace that played a more significant role in forming Mass Observation as a movement interested in the way that both unusual events and day-to-day life could offer the circumstances for conducting a new anthropology of contemporary modernity. We need to look more closely at the Crystal Palace fire, and work backwards to show how and why it might be a significant event for a project aimed so insistently at the everyday.

Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, when it was built in 1851, had been the home to the Great Exhibition (or the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, as it was formally called).[12] It was, at the time, a symbol of both industry and empire. In 1854 the building (which had originally stood in Hyde Park) was re-erected in Sydenham, then a small rural town in Kent, only recently connected to the metropolis by rail. By 1936, however, Sydenham was firmly established as a London suburb, and the Crystal Palace had slowly transformed itself from the high altar of industrial and imperial culture into 'a people's palace', a place for dancing, fireworks,
dog-shows, circuses, and so on. As The Times commented: ‘there it stood, becoming steadily more historical and symbolic as the years passed, and as living memories faded of its original purpose and pristine splendour’.[13]

The Crystal Palace was destroyed by fire on the night of November 30th, 1936. With flames as high as 150 feet, the blaze, could be seen from every hill in London and from as far away as Brighton. ‘From afar off’ wrote The Times ‘the great red glow in the sky seemed like an exaggerated sunset wreathed in huge billowing clouds. Thousands of people hurried to the scene from miles around by car, on foot and by bicycle.’[14] It seemed as if a vast industrial behemoth was dying: ‘masses of glass dropped continually, and section by section the huge skeleton of ironwork visibly bent and twisted and fell with heavy crashes and in immense showers of sparks’. [15] Those who were present at the fire remember the night:

Il was thirteen years of age and was asleep in a little room at the top of the house when I was awakened by lots of noise – people shouting and bells ringing. We lived in a road that was quite close to the main entrance of the park and I wrapped up warm and went outside with my parents. Hot molten glass and metal were flowing down the road and the adults formed a human chain and passed buckets of water from hand to hand in an effort to stem the flow of hot glass. [16] Others felt that an aspect of their life was being devoured: ‘I saw a good part of my own life burning up under my eyes’. [17]

When the Crystal Palace burnt to the ground its ‘symbolism’ was particularly complicated. If, as The Times claimed, it had been steadily becoming ‘more symbolic’, then what was it symbolic of? On the one hand it seems likely that it represented a certain moment of British achievement that had now passed. On the other a symbol of a new, more democratic culture: one characterised by the availability and legitimacy of mass, popular culture. But in 1936 this symbolism was over-etched with another more cataclysmic symbolism. One member of the Mass Observation inner circle remembered immediately connecting the fire to much wider political forces:

For most of us, - we Mass Observationists that is to say, - it represented in a sort of symbolic way an image of the world-conflagration which we were already beginning to think of as about to break out, and we felt that it meant this, unconsciously, to the general public, hence the unusual fascination it seemed to have for everyone at the time. [18]

When Gascoyne saw the fire he was on his way back from a meeting at Charles Madge’s Blackheath house (from where the glow of the fire could also be seen) where he had been involved ‘in the discussions which led to the foundation of Mass Observation’. [19] For both Madge and Gascoyne part of the interest that the fire seemed to stir up was due to the way that it symbolically presaged what would become the Second World War.

Mass Observation then, in its initial phase at least, was established to test out the way that the threat of war – or the ‘image of world-conflagration’ (and other cultural and social cataclysms) – had got under people's skin, bypassed conscious consideration, entered their dream-world, and affected their responses to events like the burning of the Crystal Palace. This would be an important aspect of their work, and Mass Observation would consistently ask observers to make records of their dreams and nightmares. [20] The symbolism that emerged in the extraordinary event (Crystal Palace fire, Abdication Crisis), then, could be used to register something of the way that world events, political anxieties and changing social experiences, are threaded into the day-to-day world, and, importantly, the night-to-night world. Extraordinary events allowed these anxieties to come to the surface, to be tested, in a way that was not available by studying the ordinary everyday as a transparent and empirical reality. One reason for this is because the everyday often emphatically shows, at least on one level, the successful management of such anxiety, the failure of world events to completely disrupt daily life. In this sense everyday life is the veiling of the very context Mass Observation was interested in.

1936 was a momentous year for the production of anxiety. For those in Britain (especially those on the Left) with a sense of what was happening in Continental Europe, 1936 was a catalogue of
catastrophes. In March Hitler's armies, in contravention of the Treaty of Versailles, entered the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland claiming that it was needed for national security. For those who had been relatively unperturbed by the rise of Fascism in Germany, the military occupation of the Rhineland should have been a clear signal not only of Nazi Germany's expansionist ambitions, but also of the extent to which its military rearmament was steamrolling in an unprecedented fashion. In July the fascists, under General Francisco Franco, mobilized the Spanish national army against the democratic republic, heralding the tragedy of the Spanish civil war and offering Nazi Germany its first opportunity for testing a variety of military strategies (such as aerial bombardment).

For those in London (especially), even those uninterested in international politics the general rise of Fascism would have been hard to avoid. The British Union of Fascists led by Oswald Mosley consistently organised demonstrations in the East End of London, especially in areas where there were large numbers of British Jews (Whitechapel, Stepney, etc.). Those involved in Mass Observation, who listed as their areas of inquiry 'anti-Semitism', had had first hand experience of the insidiousness and ubiquity of anti-Semitic racism when demonstrating against Fascism in London. Thus in mid October when Gascoyne takes part in an anti-Fascist procession he recounts:

All was well until we approached Green Street, where the blackshirts have their headquarters. A small crowd of dupes shouted menacingly at us: 'Where's yer Union Jack?' 'Why don't you go back to Palestine?' 'Down with the dirty Yids'.[21]

Yet reading the broadsheets of the time you get a sense, especially from the letters pages, of a general indifference to Mosley, and an irritation in the way that the Communist Party sought to demonstrate against the Fascists. On the ground, so to speak, things looked very different. On Sunday October 4th 1936 Mosley attempted to lead the British Union of Fascists (3,000 'blackshirts') into the East End of London, into Bethnal Green, through Stepney (an area with the largest Jewish population in Britain).[22] Mosley had been organising Fascist marches throughout 1936, but on October 4th a vast number of people decided to stop the march from entering the East End:

An estimated half a million people turned out on that day – a mixture of Jewish residents, workers and activists in the Communist, Labour and anarchist parties, joined by hundreds of dockers, Irish immigrants, trade unions and other working-class Londoners who came to lend support to what was one of the most spectacular mass mobilisations of modern British political history.[23]

The anti-fascists blockaded most of the roads into the East End, and quickly set up barricades on Cable Street:

The police repeatedly charged the blockades in an attempt to clear the way for Mosley, but in the ensuing battle they were pelted with fruit, bottles and even chamber pots as they launched repeated baton charges. Injuries and arrests mounted until the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Philip Game ordered Mosley to abandon the march.[24]

This example of popular protest, especially the evident carnivalesque attitudes of the anti-Fascists (throwing fruit and chamber pots, the rowdy celebrations that lasted into the morning, the way that Fascists were chased away by dancing protesters) will be an important example for Mass Observation of the optimism to be found in the actions of 'the people'.

MASS MEDIA
It seems clear to me that exceptional events, like the destruction of the Crystal Palace, could be used as a vehicle for bringing repressed material to the surface of life. In this, such events are not so much 'symbolic' as ciphers that can carry the weight of 'ordinary' fears and desires (that is; fears and desires that percolate into everyday life, however distant and terrible they may be). Thus the exceptional can take us back to the ordinary, the everyday. But it seems less clear why the everyday in its very ordinariness (the life of pubs, the daily meal, etc.) should be seen as the
primary arena for scrutiny at a moment of such danger. Why would 'ordinary life' provide the tools for resisting the massive force of European-wide Fascism?

The answer to this lies partly in such events as the Battle of Cable Street: if the press where often indifferent to the rise of Fascism in Britain, and if the radio broadcasts told of life only from a limited perspective (the Mass Observation broadcasts in 1939 are often claimed to be the first time working class accents are heard on British radio[25]), then events like Cable Street offered another image of collective life. Indeed the question of the 'people' and what they (we) thought, how they (we) lived, was not only a counterbalance to the media, it would have to be a crucial weapon in the fight against Fascism. It was absolutely indispensable for fighting a form of life that worked on the everyday, filling it with attitudes of hate, duping its inhabitants with mythologies of race superiority. The popular resistance, that erupted as an absolute refusal of the anti-Semitism being peddled by Mosley, flew in the face of an indifferent media.

Thus one crucial aspect of Mass Observation was a desire to produce an alternative media, which would include radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, but also a more general 'counter-newspaper' practice: 'an indispensable aid to development will be a monthly bulletin, designed for wide circulation. It will be an experiment in co-operative newspaper-making, since those who read it will also help write it'.[26] So if the epigram at the start of this essay talks about the physical dangers of the contemporary situation ('poison gas') it goes on to talk about the dangerous possibilities of media: 'that a new technique for making use of the superstitiousness of a literate but suggestible majority was being brought to final perfection'.[27] The idea of techniques aimed at a 'suggestible majority', honed to 'final perfection' undoubtedly conjures up images of groups of National Socialists and idealised Aryan families sitting round the 'people's radio' listening to the latest declamations of the Führer, yet for Mass Observation it would also include the general hypnotising products of British and American media. A co-operative newspaper would be the antithesis of the hypnotic quality of much mass-entertainment (easy-listening music, endless horoscope columns, and so on). It would be antithetical, not because it would be coldly rational, but because it would come from 'below'.

Thus the establishing of a 'mass' of observers isn't simply a new way of doing anthropology (anthropology from below, so to speak) but a way of establishing a potentially different media space. Here it is crucial to remember that the 'mass' of observers aren't merely conveyors of information (informants, in the language of anthropology and sociology) but producers (writers, analysts, 'journalist' for the co-operative newspaper):

The first practical measure to be aimed at would seem to be the mobilisation of observers on a mass basis to carry out according to an agreed programme the observation of the habits of different classes, and their concealed wishes as they reveal them in their superstitions, fantasies and fears, and as they are exploited by advertisements, by newspapers and films. By such means it might be possible to make conscious that 'unconscious understanding of all customs, ceremonies and laws' which Freud claims as typical of mass-psychology.[28]

So here the establishment of a mass of observers is at once a critical opportunity for gauging the extent of superstition at work in a culture, a way of measuring the intoxicating effects of the culture industries, but also (because they will be involved in co-operative newspaper-making) a way of recruiting a new, everyday cadre of journalists who won't be professionally dependent on the structures of the industry and its codes of practice, but will instead 'write for themselves'. Thus: Mass Observation intends to work with a new method. It intends to make use not only of the trained scientific observer, but of the untrained observer, the man in the street. Ideally, it is the observation by everyone of everyone, including themselves. [29]

Not only will this alter the notion of poetry, anthropology and sociology, but could potentially have radical effects on how media is produced and circulated.

In 1936 the mediascape of Britain was dominated by radio and newspapers. One aspect of the burning of the Crystal Palace that didn't seem to excite much interest at the time was the fact that
at one end of the Crystal Palace (the South Tower) John Logie Baird, the founder of Baird Television Limited, had established four fully equipped television studios and had started to transmit the first television broadcasts in 1935. The South Tower (built by Brunel) both housed the studios and operated as the aerial for the transmissions. While the main body of the Palace was burnt to the ground, the television tower and aerial survived and much of the equipment was saved. The Crystal Palace, then, was the site of the first experimental 'high definition' (as it was called then) Television transmissions. On November 2nd 1936 the BBC Television service was officially opened. The Crystal Palace symbolised (along with all the other things it symbolised) new media forms; it held within it an image of media possibilities, of different forms that might become available. It also, however, held the promise of the further extension of the state and the entertainment industries into the everyday domestic realm. If the home was becoming saturated by voices transmitted from central institutions, TV seemed likely to increase this 'intrusion' in ways that might hold little promise for a democratic communicative media. Media, its potential and its very real dangers, were a central preoccupation for those involved in Mass Observation.

1936 could be seen as a moment of 'media crisis' for various members within Mass Observation. While Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge were to a large extent involved in mass-media forms (film and newspapers) they were also heavily involved in more individualised art forms that circulated in relatively small circles, often involving socially elite milieux. The idea of moving from the production of poetry, to the production of 'co-operative newspapers' is not simply a swapping of an elite form for a more popular form. The work of Mass Observation both maintains the singularity of more individualised art forms as well as pursuing the vernacular force and dissemination possibilities of the mass media. Such media practices suggest a particular solution to the debates around ‘popular culture’ versus ‘high art’: as opposed to mainstream media (the BBC most particularly) the co-operative newspaper is not in the business of ‘representing the people’, or the interests of a particular social group: it offers not the voice of the people but people’s voices, in all their un-sectarian heterogeneity. It democratises mass culture, by radically extending the number of people involved in producing it, and maintains the singular perspective (and affective register) that often characterises so-called ‘high culture’.

If Mass Observation can be seen to emerge out of a media crisis, then this crisis would most likely have come to a head in the wake of the International Surrealist Exhibition that was at the New Burlington Galleries in London in the summer of 1936. Organised by, and with contributions from various members of what would become the Mass Observation group it is hard not to see this, the first Surrealist Exhibition in London, as a crucial moment for the emergence of Mass Observation. But it also seems clear that Mass Observation is neither simply a continuation of Surrealism (by other means) nor an outright rejection of it. Mass Observation hold on to a number of elements of Surrealism (the high esteem accorded to psychoanalysis, the belief in the productivity of coincidence, the use of various montage techniques, etc.) while critiquing others. Mass Observation’s critical relationship to Surrealism was aimed most directly at Surrealism’s failure to go beyond the production of mystification: Surrealism took myth and mystery seriously (which, for a Mass- Observationist, was good) but did nothing with it, and ended up adding to the production of mystification. But Surrealism, as a form of fine art, might also be critiqued as a form of media: it didn’t alter the means of production, it never really left the studio or the art gallery to become a popular form. Mass Observation should be seen to emerge out of a critical dialogue with surrealism that is developed on a number of levels; ideological, practical and in terms of media dissemination. The Mass Observation project brings together a critical investigation of media (which includes their possible democratic transformation), a passionate but equally critical interest in the ‘surreal’ in everyday life, and an absolute abhorrence and fear of the political situation (the rise of Fascism) in Europe. What emerges as ‘Mass Observation’ is, I think, entirely unique. But this constellation of interests and forces isn’t. The German critic Walter Benjamin, for instance, in a number of essays written in 1935 and 1936 similarly combines a sympathetic critique of Surrealism, a resolutely anti-Fascist cultural and political position, an investigation of new media forms (including strikingly similar suggests about co-operative newspaper production), and an insistence on the importance of everyday life. While Benjamin can’t be seen as an influence on Mass Observation (or vice versa) a very brief look at his position might allow us to further reflect on why Mass Observation chose to immerse itself in ordinary everyday life as a way of fighting Fascism.
In essays such as ‘The Author as Producer’ and ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin sees the task of the cultural producer as recognising the dangers of Fascism and of finding cultural forms that are inoculated against Fascism from the start. An anti-Fascist stance begins with a critical engagement with the present and the recent past as a way of assessing both current dangers and democratic potential. For Benjamin it meant recognising that the mass media had altered (both potentially and actually) the condition of communication and had done so in ways that helped the spread of Fascism while at the same time providing some of the conditions (often unrealised) of fighting it. Needless to say the ultimate aim is to help realise those media conditions that could fight Fascism. This is not the place for a full investigation of Benjamin’s subtle and provocative thinking, but we should note the following. First that for such conditions to be realised the democratic potential of media communication needs to be grasped both at the point of production (turning media consumers into media producers) and at the point of reception (encouraging a critical reception of the dream-like products of the entertainment and information industries, and encouraging a participatory reception of what might be considered counter-media). Second, it meant using a critical understanding of recent social and cultural changes to defeat the ideologies that might fuel a Fascist culture. Third it meant focusing on the everyday as the primary source for a truly democratic culture.

On this second point, for instance, Benjamin’s analysis of modern media forms suggest that historically a whole range of cultural values are no longer applicable – which is not to say that they aren’t continually being invoked and acted upon. Benjamin’s theses, though, isn’t simply aimed at the most accurate understanding of the present, but of mobilising these historical and critical points against Fascism:

It would be wrong to underestimate the value of such theses as a weapon. They brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery – concepts whose uncontrolled (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense. The concepts which are introduced in the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism.[30]

In fighting Fascism the task of marshalling any and everything that is ‘useless for the purposes of Fascism’ is of the utmost importance and urgency. And this is where the interest in everyday life has to be located. On the one hand it is clear that Fascism corrals aspects of everyday life in its own interests: it acts on everyday life, filling it with deluded myths, militarising daily routines, marshalling everything from childbirth to hunger into an image of supplication to the Führer. A radically democratic culture would operate in reverse to Fascism: it wouldn’t act on everyday life but emerge from the unknown possibilities of everyday life – from the material actuality of everyday life, and its non-sectarian cacophony. Thus Benjamin can move from a denunciation of Fascism to the seemingly banal world of everyday life:

Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person’s posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods.[31]

Film and photography, for instance, could be used to bring this unconscious (and invisible) world of the everyday to the visible surface of conscious life. Whatever we think of this as an effective tactic for fighting Fascism in the short term (and I don’t think Mass Observation or Benjamin were deluded enough to think that such interests would protect them from Stormtroopers and Gestapo) it was clearly intended to be an enquiry that was inoculated against Fascism. To study the actuality of the everyday, its idiosyncrasies, its waywardness, was to refuse to start out with an idea of ‘shaping’ everyday life from above. If the investigation of everyday life (by Mass Observation, and in a very different way by Walter Benjamin) sought to transform everyday life, such transformations would be radically democratic and (hopefully) impossible to recruit for Fascist ends.
There is in all this an optimism that the subterranean field of everyday life is somehow essentially anti-Fascist. More pertinently, though, is the idea that the radical heterogeneity of the everyday (filled with petty hatreds as it undoubtedly is) will always be the sticking point that a Fascist culture has to overcome. If Fascism, then, sets out to overcome the everyday, organise its heterogeneity into a cohesive unity, erase its differences (literally), then anti-Fascism must always insist on, not simply from starting from the unmanageable heterogeneity of the everyday, but of staying there too.

AN ARCHIVE
We shall collaborate in building up museums of sound, smell, foods, clothes, domestic objects, advertisements, newspapers, etc.

The promise of a great museum of the senses, built out of the valuable detritus of the daily, never finally came about, but while Mass Observation continues as an ongoing project, soliciting information from volunteers about their everyday life, it also, and perhaps primarily, exists as an archive. Archives can be used in any number of ways: they can be indiscriminately mined for anything relating to a particular topic; systematically examined to show principles of exclusion and inclusion; sympathetically explored for the traces that are left of lives once lived; and so on. Archives are always unfinished statements: they are the foundations that always exceed whatever account is given on their behalf.

The art historian Erwin Panofsky, who intimately knew the ‘extreme danger’ of Fascism (he was forced out of his academic post by the Nazi regime), wrote in the 1950s about the dialectic between empirical history and theory:

It is rightly said that theory, if not received at the door of an empirical discipline, comes in through the chimney like a ghost and upsets the furniture. But it is no less true that history, if not received at the door of a theoretical discipline dealing with the same kind of phenomena, creeps into the cellar like a horde of mice and undermines the groundwork.

Panofsky’s point allows us to see the critical potential of an archive like Mass Observation. Its materials can disturb and undermine our most cherished beliefs. And this is indeed how the work of Mass Observation was often mobilized: to burst the bubble of official reports, governmental understanding, and received opinion. The Mass Observation archive can still do that: scuppering ideas about ‘Englishness’, or about class, or about the placidity of citizens to official dictates. But we also need to heed Panofsky’s first point: namely that if all we take from Mass Observation is a mass of empirical data we can end up smuggling the spectre of ‘theory’ in down the chimney. This is simply (and damagingly) the theory that such documents are simply transparent, unmediated shards of reality; the more you collect the more you will know about a particular time. But the truth they tell is not a simple one: each document was itself an opaque ‘poem’, an item of symbolic matter.

Mass Observation wasn’t primarily a theoretical project of course (not in any explicit way) but within it is a set of theoretical precautions, propositions, and methodologies. But these implicit theorizations can’t be stated as ‘a theory’: they are experimental, heuristic and contradictory. What I have been struggling to do in this essay is bring some of the co-ordinates of Mass Observation’s approach to the surface by returning to the scene of the emergence of Mass Observation. As importantly, though, I have been trying to suggest what was at stake in the theoretical positions adopted as Mass Observation emerges. In 1936 the stakes were very high indeed.

An archive is open. Dip in to it at will. Discover the dreams and nightmares of generations living through momentous historical circumstances. Find the way that necessity and aspiration are threaded through the activities of social life. But take care too. Pay heed to the fabric of memory, to the moment of memorial. These documents were not collected, primarily, to furnish material for the social and cultural historians of the future. These are explosive documents, or at least they are meant to be. Treat them with the respect they deserve. They are meant to be detonated.
[3] Ibid, p. 9
[6] Ibid.
[10] My intention is not to down-play Tom Harrisson's role in Mass Observation, merely to look at the emergence of Mass Observation prior to Tom Harrisson.
[11] Crucially they had little truck with the sort of symbolic cultural psychoanalysis that was the forte of Jung and his followers.
[14] The Times, 1 December, 1936, p. 16
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] See 'They Speak for Themselves', produced by Olive Shapley, BBC Radio Manchester, June 1, 1939
[27] Ibid, p. 28.
[28] Charles Madge, 'Magic and Materialism', p. 33
[31] Ibid, p. 239.