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**Kieran Curran \***

\* University of Edinburgh

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### **Introduction**

In his 2009 book *On Roads – A Hidden History*, Joe Moran included a chapter on the British people's often fractured relationship with mass car culture. It was fittingly entitled 'You Can Stuff Your Motorway', and it delineated a history of popular protest and dissent against (with a little cheerleading for) their development. Alongside concerns that they were destroying England's green and pleasant lands, there was also a sense that motorways represented degeneration in the nation's culture; they stood for modernity and excess, and were considered to be perhaps emblematic of what went wrong with post-WWII British society. Moran quotes the unreserved objections of a 1970s polytechnic lecturer and conservationist named John Tyme, who proclaimed that motorways were “the greatest threat to the interests of this nation in all its history” (206).

In the context of an economically depressed, anomie inflected mid '70s Britain, the choice of motorways and A roads as key settings in Stephen Poliakoff's play *Strawberry Fields* is thus a fitting one. The locations the play's characters inhabit – lay bys, roadside cafes, deserted public toilets – are relatively new inventions, but nonetheless are grime-filled, dilapidated, already in decline. They are portrayed as desolate and sparsely populated spots with (to varying degrees) alienated characters; you could almost term them non-places.

It is likely that the setting for most of the play is the A1 from London to Edinburgh, as the journey described is up the length of Britain, from just outside London to Scotland, and a pivotal scene at the close of Act One is set in Doncaster, the “middle of England” (22). Moran discusses some of the features of

this motorway in his book, including the Washington-Birtley service station (130) in County Durham. Apparently devised as a result of the Bartlett study into motor-side amenities, it suggested the tensions between the progress of technology, and a tatty cheapening of experience. The building had:

(a) robotised restaurant with a range of dishes including duckling á l'orange and coq au vin. Once customers had liberated their chosen meals from the rotating vending machines, they heated it up in a microwave, aided by female assistants in miniskirts. All food was served on disposable plates and cutlery, which could be tossed into a compacter along with the leftovers (130).

In this paper, I wish to explore how *Strawberry Fields* reflects the contemporary social reality of its time. It is a play which is not being polemical in its politics, shying away as it does from presenting more broadly drawn left or right wing ciphers – for instance, in its most seemingly “politicised” character, Charlotte. I will also look at how the play parodies and dissects 1960s hippy music culture, both in its ironic title (referencing one of the Beatles’ most iconic singles, ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’) and through its portrayal of Kevin, a perma-fried former bohemian, whose rambling reminiscences are a recurring device of Poliakoff’s. Other stories from the play’s central and peripheral characters also shine a light on the cultural ennui of the time. The play’s connection with the development of British punk rock music will also be explored, its sense of desolation and nihilism prefiguring similar themes in the work of The Sex Pistols and The Clash.

### **There Must Be Some Kind Of Way Out Of Here**

Historian of modern Britain Kenneth O. Morgan identifies, in the early 1970s, “growing disillusion with the Keynesian economists, the Fabian planners, the post-Beveridge social engineers, (and) the consensual liberal positivists who had governed the realm like so many conquistadors for a quarter of a century” (354). Related to this growing cultural disdain for centralised planning was scepticism

for two notable elements of the post-war reconstruction – social housing, particularly in its high rise format, and motorways. Despite some undoubted successes in both spheres, an overall sense of Brutalist progress was resisted for eroding physical landscapes, as well as being held to account for the destruction of a sense of working-class cohesion. Fred Inglis, in an essay collection entitled *The Black Rainbow – Notes On The Present Breakdown Of Culture*, categorised the damaged wrought by road building thusly:

...walk a little further along the perimeter of the construction site, and the costs of progress begin to look more sombre. There are the half-wrecked houses, the blind windows and nailed-up doors, the heaps of old mattresses, gas cookers, crumpled prams and fridges, and the vacant lots, the waste land behind the dull facades. A little further on, and the houses stand which were left as the dozers and the wreckers' ball-and-chain swept their long swathe through the district. No shops open, though. If you look harder, no doctor's surgery, no dentist, no police station. Nowhere for children to play except across the fascinating, dangerous rubbish of the demolition site, and along the road stodged with the unmoving cars, the giant sneezing lorries whose massive immobility has insisted on the necessity of the motorway. And if you pick your way across the bombed-out ruins to the dark, close streets beyond, you find all the symptoms of the dismal contagion which spreads out from any such upheaval (174).

Inglis' clear and impassioned invective – later in the same paragraph railing against peoples' limited prospects of a “twilit life for life” (174) – is echoed to an extent in the words and actions of the central characters of Poliakov's *Strawberry Fields*, written in 1976, and first performed in 1977.

### **I wish it was the Sixties, I wish it could be happy**

Referenced by the author as a sort of “summer nightmare” (xiv) in his introduction to *Plays: One, Strawberry Fields* is a bleak but visceral play which articulates a powerful sense of ennui about the period, as well as being somewhat

ambiguous and disengaged in its politics. Its two central characters are Charlotte and Kevin, the former in her early 20s, the latter in his early 30s, who are presented as meeting for the first time in a motorway café in the opening scene, about to embark on a mysterious trip, the point of which is initially kept from the audience. Both are frustrated idealists in different ways – Charlotte is seemingly a discontented, but very self-controlled middle Englander, originally from Kent, a “normal little rich girl” (51). Kevin, on the other hand, suffers from a terminal hangover after the unbridled optimism (and, seemingly, hedonism) of the 1960s – “when the Easy Rider bit goes badly sour” (26).

He seems an LSD casualty of sorts – his tangential monologues are a recurrent device of Poliakoff’s – and early on he bizarrely refers to himself as “going blind...maybe” (6). Where Charlotte initially appears reserved and in control, Kevin always appears duty bound to let loose with his emotions. In the same opening scene, he fantasises to her about “when the holocaust comes and these places are all deserted and there are thistles growing on the motorway...and there’s grass growing over the jukebox...and honeysuckle coming out of the expresso, yeah...and tadpoles swimming in the ladies” (8).

Kevin’s relish at the prospect of pastoral revenge on modernity seems to be shared, albeit in a more restrained way, by Charlotte. But in the following scene, at another road rest stop, they encounter Nick, a hitchhiker who seems to represent a sort of everyman-esque observer, as well as proof that Sartre’s dictum in *No Exit*<sup>[1]</sup> surely rings true. Nick, like any great observer of human theatre, seems unwilling to let Kevin and Charlotte continue their travelling up the motorways alone and unencumbered. They share boiled eggs and ice cream which “tastes a little of petrol” (10); soon after, he (and, indeed, the audience) discovers that they are carrying incendiary, “pretty heavy” (12) political pamphlets with them. He proceeds to read extracts aloud, incredulous: we discover that Kevin and Charlotte are members of a fringe extremist political group named the English People’s Party. Part of the manifesto points to “pollution...urban

wastelands...impersonal government...the mauling of the countryside” (12); here we see some of Inglis’ critique of a Britain in decline again.

Nick, however, as the voice of reason, can be relied upon to sound as patronising as possible towards their activism – he mocks their small scale, and considers them to be essentially harmless loonies. He seems intent on observing them, and always appears to enjoy the incongruous pairing of the refined Charlotte and the rather frazzled Kevin. He continues to tag along, and is present at the meeting between the English People’s Party and a paranoid, disenfranchised housewife in her late 30s named Mrs Roberts (more on her later). She provides the itinerant agitators with some money (“£83 and 40 pence”, precisely – 18) and, strangely, an electroset and a roll of wire. At this point, the overall tone of the play gets progressively more tense, and Nick’s amusement at Charlotte and Kevin’s actions turns into an uneasy suspicion.

### **Darkness At The Edge Of Town**

From the beginning of Act One, Scene Four, there is a palpable sense of eeriness – the setting, again, is a roadside this time in Doncaster. The scenery appears ever grimmer, consisting as it does of a derelict cinema with a hot dog van in the middle of the stage; Poliakoff’s stage directions interestingly specifying “the smell of onions” and “a pocket television flickering at the side of the van” (20). Kevin feels tense in this context of mechanical decay, and hears a police siren in the distance (any impending criminal act is not described here, so the sense of uneasiness permeates); here Charlotte relates an anecdote to allay his fears:

It’s all right. I saw a fire engine dash up a street in London not so long ago. It was two, three in the morning. All the streets were deserted, but it was roaring up them, screaming its head off, its siren was screaming. It came to this square and started going round and round in circles, making this extraordinary noise. I think they were just having a bit of fun, trying to wake people up. But nobody stirred. Nobody shouted. Nobody moved at all (20).

Whilst aiming to placate Kevin's anxieties, Charlotte's speech highlights the atmosphere of inner city disconnection. In the midst of a fire engine circling, producing such a cacophonous noise, one would expect some sort of shocked reaction, or surprise – even a simple noise to register recognition. Yet the response is inertia – no one stirring, no one moving. Nick's behaviour in this context becomes more erratic, more confrontational – his demeanour alters from a smug, somewhat detached amusement to crankily quizzing Charlotte as to the possibility of the absent hot dog man being an arms dealer. Pointedly, Kevin comments at this point that they are in “the middle of England” (22) – is this the median of contemporary experience<sup>21</sup>? Kevin proceeds to describe thereafter his voracious consumption of cinema, which, in his view, exposed “the sort of madness...the whole sickness” (23) of contemporary society.

The scene then explodes into violence when the local policeman Taylor appears. He confronts the group as Nick and Kevin are attempting to rumble a Fanta machine. In a self-conscious gesture of Poliakov's, Nick comments that Taylor is “very young isn't he?” (28), hinting at something about to go tragically wrong. In what Robin Nelson terms a “Poliakovian reversal, the most controlled character takes the most violent action without warning” (106), Charlotte shoots Taylor from a gun in her handbag, after which she empties the chamber into his prone body. The motive for the murder is apparently to save the anonymity of the names of other English People's Party members which are concealed on a list amongst her belongings; the end of Act One is book-ended by “on the soundtrack: a loud electric buzz lasting 50 seconds in the blackout” (28).

After this point, the play's dynamic changes further, where Nick effectively becomes a hostage of Charlotte and Kevin – his witnessing of murder has implicated him, and now as he consistently pleads to *leave* their company, his requests are denied. Here, at the beginning of Act Two, they seek solace in the context of another deserted nightclub by a motorway, served by a Cleaner-cum-dinner lady (again, more on her later). Charlotte's dress is dripping blood on the

cafeteria floor, which Nick points out, underscoring the macabre absurdity of the scene.

Kevin hints to Nick at the possibility of the murder signifying something greater – “it might just be the beginning of a bit of a legend” (36) – which seems to reflect his obsession with cinematic myth making, as opposed to the reality of the event as an unintended, grisly mistake.

Further on the road by another motorway café with “rubbish vats in the background” (37), they encounter an unnamed “Kid” who seems to exemplify all that is wrong with contemporary British youth to Charlotte. Though only slightly younger than Charlotte, he is described in stage directions as “obviously been through a lot of drugs” (38), addicted to heroin, and earns a living seemingly as a male prostitute. His story-telling and over-familiarity serves to ratchet up Charlotte’s temper and she, for the first time, seems to lose control over her emotions – “you’re filthy, you revolt me” (40) – and, after the interloper leaves, Poliakoff employs an odd device. Music starts playing from the juke-box, continuing throughout the scene – the records aren’t specified, but they underscore Charlotte’s vitriolic rants against “the Left” and a prophesy of impending civil war. Whilst Poliakoff certainly portrays Charlotte as far-right, and points to the obvious dangers of such an all-encompassing, quasi-apocalyptic ideology, she and Kevin do represent at least some degree of idealism, albeit on an extreme level of hoping for a year zero Britain. By contrast, Nick’s role is of a sensible, but not particularly idealistic youth – his ambition is to become a teacher, but he doesn’t seem to even countenance any of the English People’s Party’s critique, even as it is obvious that a strong sense of ennui and decline is palpable throughout *Strawberry Fields*.

Indeed, there is a sense of truth in the accusation that she levels at Nick, before going on to decry what, in her opinion, passes for modern life:

Everything’s been grey for so long, and the mess, everywhere, just totally grey. (*She looks at him, quieter.*) Like you... This sprawling mess, those



lights up there, that savage light, have you ever seen something so horrible, anything so inhuman, more disgusting, it's just degrading... Do you know what used to be here – where we are now. DO YOU? A valley and fields. It did. How can people live with a dread of the future all the time. How can you bring people up like that – just offer them that all the time. Tell me. Somebody's got to do something (43-44).

His rejoinder, effectively unable to argue with her on the basis of her undoubtedly extreme but deeply held views, Nick resorts to insulting her intelligence: “you're not even a very intelligent girl, are you? You aren't. Not deep inside there. Not even very bright. You've no ideas at all, nothing, except shabby, vicious, second-hand thoughts (45).” His reference to second-hand thoughts is especially odd, as he seems to exhibit himself only the received wisdom of what is considered to be common sense.

Following from this, Robin Nelson seems to be correct in asserting that “rather than foregrounding political structures and organised movements, Poliakov's *Strawberry Fields* picks up on the dangers which can arise from individuals' confusion when a progressive trajectory falters (108-109).” Thus, the English Peoples' Party's activism can be seen as a cry out amidst the cold stalemate of the aforementioned “summer nightmare” of 1976, in opposition to the silence of the greyness of contemporary England.

All the while, random records play on, sound-tracking the most impassioned politicised statements of the play, and surely the pop music score is also an ironic counterpoint to the scene's climax – a violent brawl between the returning “Kid”, Kevin and Nick.

### **Long Distance Runaround**

The play's climactic scene takes place on a Northumberland hillside, where Kevin begins to envisage a police showdown, leading to a potentially gruesome demise at the hands of cops who “shoot to kill”(47). Again, Nick assumes a mocking role, targeted particularly at Kevin's tendency to imagine a popular media “myth”

emerging from their deaths. Charlotte composes a note in the possible event of their capture, outlining their philosophy and motives, which isn't revealed to the audience. Kevin takes in the sites and embarks on a nostalgic speech about a previous communal existence he enjoyed "all us together, here, building things, making things, living under this sky. Peacefully (49)". He contrasts this rather emotive evocation with the scene now – "the pool where we used to swim...rusted up, and filled in, full of filth" (49). It seems that Kevin conceives of the revolution, if there is to be one, as reinvigorating the "shadows" (49) of his old hippy comrades, to wipe away "this appalling era", referring to modernism, the 1970s and market capitalism in one vague swoop. As police sirens are heard approaching, Nick consistently badgers Charlotte into admitting that she's "wrong" (51), hoping for her to recant her beliefs and for her to be saved, to become normal once more; again, Charlotte will not be moved. He turns to look at the road, and the play ends with cold, detailed stage directions, the noise of the radio underneath:

She shoots him – very close range. She picks up the bag and the thermos and leaves. On the soundtrack we hear the sound of traffic news on the wireless getting louder and louder, brash, jarring names of by-passes and road intersections blasting out fiercely. Then total silence. Fade (52).

### **Happy People Have No Stories**

After detailing the key scenes and plot progression of the play, I would like to look at two peripheral characters who come into the action of *Strawberry Fields* at different points. Each of these minor characters has a different story to tell, but, whereas Kevin, Charlotte and Nick are allowed fuller characterisation, Mrs Roberts and the Cleaner are notable for the melancholic, anecdotal and occasionally bizarre nature of their discourse. Each tangent allows the audience a strange, off-kilter snapshot of 1970s cultural ennui.

The first to appear is Mrs Roberts, a supporter of the English People's Party. She tangentially begins to tell the three a story about a teacher at the comprehensive

named “Mr Godfrey... he’s a very clever man, he feels thing strongly...it’s nice isn’t it to meet somebody that feels things strongly, instead of just muddle (16).” She arranges to meet him at the hyper-modern service station for a clandestine meeting (for what, she does not say, but it is fair to guess that she may be having an affair). After this, Mr Godfrey doesn’t turn up. In desperation, Mrs Roberts attempts to phone him, and but because the phones 15 out of the 18 phones are out of order protests by leaving them all off their receivers. They “made this really terrible whining noise, nearly blows your head off you know – like a scream almost” (17). The image of a respectable housewife cracking in this ways is humorous, but also pointed – facing the facts of mechanised detachment, and a lack of empathy from the service station staff, Mrs Roberts effectively screams out in frustration by ironically manipulating useless inventions against themselves. The desire for connection, phrased in such naïve terms for a person in their late 30s, is also quite touching – even though Mrs Roberts is a “crank”(Nick’s words) and incredibly paranoid (of bombs concealed in radiators, for one) she is, at the same time, portrayed as humanly pathetic.

Then there is the figure of the “bedraggled, overtired” Cleaner, double jobbing as a waitress in the dirty all-night Doncaster café the trio find themselves in after the murder of Taylor (29). She tells a bizarre anecdote whilst serving them about a lorry driver with his pants and trousers down who came in “few nights ago” (30).

He was so drunk, he couldn’t see a foot in front of him and he sat down, sort of singing quiet to himself, he had a high voice, and all the time he was doing it down his leg...you know. He was quite good looking you know, but he couldn’t really move (30).

In contrast to the sombre atmosphere amidst Kevin, Charlotte and Nick, her bawdy recollection is both absurd and slightly disturbing – also, her “doing it down his leg” remark foreshadows Nick’s pointing out that Charlotte has the blood of Taylor dripping down her legs. The observation itself is also odd – it

doesn't seem the most obvious thing to relate when describing a blind drunk lorry driver in an extremely undignified state.

The Cleaner goes on to describe her own sense of alienation in her employment; she is another disenfranchised character, albeit only encountered in passing. She's a local and can remember the road being built, so is aware of the town's previous culture at some level, and her comments on the detached nature of much of the café's visitors hits home: "it's funny you know, people look at you in here, they're amazed you can talk...yes, that there's something going on in your head after all..." (31). Clearly glad (she smiles as she speaks her mind) to have someone to talk to, even to those who are obviously preoccupied, she articulates the same poignant dislocation common to any menial workers within the context of a transient culture – she is thought to be merely a fixture, without consciousness or feeling. The conversation is ended after her down-to-earth observations begin to jar with the incredibly anxious and paranoid Kevin, who screams at her to leave their table.

### **Let Me Take You Down...**

Having focused up to this point on analysing the characters, settings and specific political and social undertones of *Strawberry Fields*, I would now like to look in some detail at the relationship between the work and popular music and culture. The most glaring aspect of this is the reference in the title. The John Lennon-penned 'Strawberry Fields Forever', released in 1967 as a double A-side single with 'Penny Lane', is widely considered one of the Beatles greatest and most iconic songs (and the combined release of both tracks, indeed, as one of their most significant musical achievements). As well as being immensely popular (although missing out on the number one spot in the charts on its release to Englebert Humperdink), 'Strawberry Fields Forever' is incredibly ambitious. In his seminal account of the Beatles' recorded output *Revolution In The Head*, Ian MacDonald considered that it "extended the range of studio techniques developed on *Revolver*, opening up possibilities for pop which, given sufficient invention, could result in unprecedented sound images... a sort of technologically evolved folk

music (175).” In this context, ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ could be considered to be a far-reaching example of pop music modernism.

Lyrically, the song is a nostalgic evocation of Lennon’s childhood in Liverpool, and also a partial reflection of his own immersion at the time in psychedelic drugs – retreating into a prelapsarian idyll with “nothing to get hung about, Strawberry Fields Forever.” Considering these two key aspects of the song, one can see how Poliakoff could use it to both ironic but also quite serious effect. Firstly, in terms of its music, the tune reflects Lennon and The Beatles’ ambition and adventurousness in its scope – using to the full the studio technology available at the time and underpinned by a sense of the possibilities of the popular song.

Also, MacDonald’s reference here to folk music is important, as it seems to reconcile the tension felt at the time between the residual folk movement and the rock/pop orthodoxy which succeeded it. In *The Black Rainbow* as part of a vituperative essay on the ills of late 1960s and early 1970s popular music, Charles Parker, in one of his few positive sentiments on the future potentiality of pop states that “the very electronic tools...made possible the creation of works springing from the people at their still vigorous linguistic and ethnic roots”(167). He is, in this context, referring to an ethnographic sort of folk-song collecting, but clearly MacDonald believes that The Beatles had already achieved this in 1966/1967.

This further underlines the almost utopian ideal of song exemplified in this song; Poliakoff would no doubt have been aware of the significance of this song in popular culture, and to render it ironic by using it to title a play in great part about “the hippy dream turning sour” (*Plays:1*, xiv). Additionally, the nostalgic nature lyrics of the tune add a more serious note to Poliakoff’s reference. Looking back to a pastoral English idyll along with a disturbing de-anchoring of the perception (“nothing is real”), the song’s juxtaposition of acid-tinged disturbance and nostalgic detachment seems reflected by the duality of Charlotte and Kevin’s dissension against the dominant culture of the mid 1970s as they see it.

### **I Get Around**

If ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ can be said to be slyly re-appropriated in this way, the Beach Boys reference in Act 1 could be a similar move by Poliakov. As Kevin and Charlotte wait in the motorway diner (unnamed, but most likely the Watford Gap) about to set off on their own, inverted Magical Mystery Tour, Kevin decides to put on “a nostalgic Beach Boys standard” to “get us travelling well” (*Strawberry Fields*, 9). Known even more for their ebullient positivity than The Beatles, in this setting the song seems oddly. Kevin quickly decides to leave, seemingly realising his error, whilst Charlotte’s nonplussed reaction to the tune is almost an intimation that she’s well aware that their trip should not be sound-tracked by the Beach Boys. (Add a reference here to the Beach Boys and their hymns to motorway culture – say ‘Fun Fun Fun’, ‘Little Deuce Coupe’)

### **Repetition, Repetition, Repetition**

Muzak (i.e piped in, repetitive, unobtrusive easy-listening music) appears again and again in the sound directions for *Strawberry Fields*. As Natasha Barrett notes, “*muzak* plays on passive reception to encourage us in some other activity (236)”, not calling attention to its self but thereby promoting engagement with whatever may be at hand. Yet if muzak is so pervasive in contexts where there is little else to do but wait, it functions to sedate and calm its listeners. Juxtaposed with the criminal conspiracies and activities of the play’s main characters, muzak is thus made into something hilarious – an ambient, passive soundtrack to a group (and those around them) devoted to destroying the existing condition of British society!

Minimalism could be said to be a less commercial relation of muzak. In his excellent history of 20<sup>th</sup> century music *The Rest Is Noise*, Alex Ross references Robert Fink in noting that:

Minimalism often mimics the sped-up, numbed-out repetitions of consumer culture, the incessant iteration of commercial jingles on TV. But...the minimalists deliver a kind of silent critique of the world as it is. They locate depth in surfaces, slowness in rapid motion (511).

Repetition in minimalism, following this critique, implicitly focuses attention on the functions of a world which is itself based on repetition. Thus, it challenges the listener to be more aware of the banal and even deleterious of their surrounding environment; if muzak has in any way a relationship with this musical form, then it could legitimately be viewed as amplifying the tensions existent in the world of the motorway rest-stops. Even more pertinent to this idea of amplifying awareness is the aforementioned use of a “loud electronic buzz” closing out Act One and ushering in Act Two. Not only is it a conventionally unpleasant sound, and, indeed, somewhat related to other incidental electronic noises such as the drone of a faulty electric light, but it also serves as a bold underlining of the violence which has just occurred.

### **Anarchy In The U.K**

Nick: Why is the whole fucking place deserted? The hot dog stand, the urinals, it's a fucking ghost town, the whole place has stopped breathing. Where is everybody?

Charlotte (*starting straight at him*): They're all indoors watching television probably. (*At him:*) Aren't they? (*Strawberry Fields, 25*)

The above epigraph immediately reminded me of ‘London’s Burning’ by The Clash, one of their most abrasive early songs. “London’s burning with boredom now” growls singer/guitarist Joe Strummer on The Clash’s first album, released in 1977, echoing Charlotte’s sentiments: “black or white, turn it on, face the new religion, Everybody's sitting 'round watching television!” Articulated within the boundaries of a distorted, noisy pop song and at just over two minutes long, there is more concision and forcefulness in Strummer’s variation on the theme. Yet both sentiments come from the same place. Poliakoff’s play coincides, more or less, with the emergence of The Clash; both Poliakoff and Strummer were born in 1952. Both seem to be articulating a sense of an emergent culture within a complex “structure of feeling” (Williams, 64-65), and thus key development in British musical and literary culture were born.

It is interesting to note also that Joe Strummer identified The Clash's music as "the sound of the Westway", a city motorway in London which "became a symbol for youthful alienation and inner-city grunge" (Moran, 215).

There is also a clear line to be drawn between the sentiments expressed by Kevin and that of perhaps the most iconic British punk act, The Sex Pistols. Jon Savage, in his cultural history of the emergence of punk rock in Britain *England's Dreaming*, identifies one of the key traits of the Pistols. "One definition of nihilism is that it is not the negative or cynical rejection of belief but the positive courage to live without it: the Sex Pistols and their supporters were an explosion of negatives (195)". Lyrics such as 'Wanna Be Me's "give me World War Three, we can live again" are in touch with Kevin's expressions of excitement at the impending apocalypse. Also, the stripping back of so-called "progressive" pop musical forms by punk also resonates with Savage's definition of nihilism – to remove unnecessary and extraneous elements to create a "year zero" environment, which, despite its fascist connotations, in artistic terms could feed an undeniably positive explosion of possibilities. There was also, on the one hand, the sense that Simon Reynolds identifies in *Rip It Up And Start Again* of punk's "sheer monstrous *evil* (xii - italics in original)" as a key element of its appeal, but on the other hand, of its paving the way for bands to approach music with more freedom to experiment. Reynolds, again, sees the "post-punk" period as far more musically interesting than punk, though its "astonishing experimentation with lyrical and vocal technique (xiii)" would have arguably not happened without the breaking down of barriers which punk achieved.

### **Conclusion**

Returning to Raymond Williams, he writes of his concept of the structure of feeling that it is a "practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity" (*Marxism And Literature*). As cultural and historical forces cannot be separated out from art-works, so cultural products in a given era are collectively imbued with this "practical consciousness", regardless of whether these works are from a conventionally "high" or "low" cultural background.



Drama critic Martin Priestman felt that the “aggression of punk”(289) was hinted at somewhat in Poliakoff’s 1975 plays *Hitting Town* and *City Sugar*, but neglected to reference *Strawberry Fields*. Yet it seems pretty distinctly felt in the play, which is frequently punctuated by verbal or physical violence. Robin Nelson, in his book-length critique of Poliakoff’s career, suggests that the play may have been prescient in identifying a definite lurch to the right in British politics – I’m not convinced by this, mainly because of the eco/environmental element to the English People’s Party.

More accurately, and perhaps a tad grandiosely, Howard Devoto, the pioneering Mancunian punk and post-punk musician and wit, in an interview with Michael Bracewell, retrospectively said that “punk rock was a new version of trouble-shooting modern forms of unhappiness” (25). Reflecting the common consciousness within differing art-forms, the same could be said of *Strawberry Fields*, with its decaying roadsides, alienated peoples, and the pervasive buzz of the post-industrial hangover.

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### **First Response**

These seems well-worth publishing as an account of an interesting play and its 1970s context. The cultural history is not all that theoretically informed but the

social-documentary type points being made are useful. As someone who has been active in the anti-roads (and anti-car) movement it struck me that more research on political cultures of that movement would deepen the account of Poliakoff's ambivalence (see, eg. Derek Wall, *Babylon and Beyond* .or "Earth First!" and the *Anti-roads Movement*, also by Wall). Is there also broader question of the connection between theatricality and protest? At Newbury in the mid 1990s two protestors were arrested in the guise of Daisy the pantomime cow. The reading brings out the social threads of the play very well, with some attention to stagecraft, though more scrutiny in this area would have been useful.