

Jane Rendell, *May Mourn*

May Mourn is a site-writing which takes a selection of images from a collection of abandoned black and white photographs of modernist architectural icons, part of London's post war social housing project, found in spring in a derelict arts and crafts house called *May Morn* in the capital's green belt and pairs them with texts taken from primelocation.com advertising flats for sale in these same buildings. The image-text pairs prompt a re-consideration of the modernist project and its socialist ideals. The images are dialectical images¹ in their own right – fossils of the modernist utopian dream – but paired with the aspirational desire expressed in language of the contemporary estate agent, is it possible to turn them forward, and align with hope, public as well as private?

Morn and mourn are homonyms, one suggests a beginning, the other an ending. Morning begins the day, while mourning, in grieving the loss of something or someone, marks an ending. Due to their deteriorating material states, the *May Morn* house and the paper of the photographs point towards their own disintegration or endings, yet the buildings contained within the photographs are shown at the beginning of their lives. May and may are homographs, one is a spring month, the other a modal verb, one which is used to express a wish or hope.

What does it mean to photograph these icons of modernism at an early moment – a spring time – when hope for a better future was not viewed as a naïvely misjudged optimism; what does it mean to turn back and re-examine them today, when the very buildings which stood as ideal realities are being sold off as property investments, and when post the 2010 May election and post New Labour's

¹ Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image is far from straightforward, yet it is distinct in its attempt to capture dialectical contradiction in an instant as a visual image or object, rather than as an unfolding of an argument over time: 'The dialectic, in standing still, makes an image.' See Walter Benjamin, 'Materials for the exposé of 1935', in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project (1927–39)* translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 911, see also p. 462.

ambivalence towards the public sphere, the advent of the new (Liberal) Conservative agenda suggests there will be no longer be any kind of question mark concerning the public sector – drastic cuts are to be made.

Is this site-writing a work of mourning? Can it offer a reflection on London's post war social housing projects not simply as lost objects², as derelict utopian dreams, but also as wish images, future ideals for which we may yet strive. *May Mourn* juxtaposes emergence and decay, and situates a fascination with the backwards gaze of nostalgia³ in relation to anticipation as a yearning which moves forward.

² The psychoanalytic concept of the lost object is introduced in the work of Sigmund Freud in relation to the loss of the mother's breast and then her whole person. See Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', [1905d] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VII (1901-1905): A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955) pp. 123-243 and Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' [1920] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955) pp. 1-64. See also Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', [1917] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955) pp. 237-258.

³ Writing positively of nostalgia, as a longing for something better, cultural critic Frederic Jameson has pointed out, with reference to the earlier work of Walter Benjamin on allegory and ruin, that looking back to a past because it appears to be better than the problems of the present is not necessarily regressive, especially if it can be used to change the future. He writes: 'But if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with Fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other ...' See Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) p. 82.