

“But ye de de art, divvint ye?” Authenticity, identity and the historicization of the Pitmen Painters.

In *Looking North: Northern England and the national imagination*, cultural historian Dave Russell discusses the role of culture in shaping the idea of ‘the North’ both for Northerners themselves, and for those beyond the region: ‘[...] most people outside the North and many within it have come to know the region not through personal experience but via versions they encounter in the field of culture. To explore the constructed ‘North’ then, is to engage not with some peripheral academic plaything but with a major factor in the definition of popular mentalities’ (Russell, p.4).

Contemporary cultural representations of ‘northern-ness’ are regularly presented and re-presented through screen, stage, literature, music and art, from the critically acclaimed Northumbrian folk music of The Unthanks to the reality TV horror show *Geordie Shore*.¹ Constructed, culturally mediated versions of the North – whether good or bad, true or false - continue to exert a powerful influence on the perception and understanding of the North of England.

In theatre, playwrights such as Andrea Dunbar, Shelagh Delaney, Alan Plater, John Godber, Peter Flannery, Alan Bennett and Alan Ayckbourn have offered compelling portraits of northern life and culture on stage, and have often done so ‘from the inside’, presenting the north from an intimately northern, regionalist perspective. The Newcastle-born playwright Lee Hall has likewise dealt with northern themes and settings in a number of works, including his recent revision of Alan Plater’s *Close the Coalhouse Door*. Perhaps best known for the 2000 screenplay of his original stage play *Billy Elliott*, which followed the story of an aspiring ballet dancer growing up in a Durham mining community during the 1984-5 Miner’s Strike, Hall returned to the north east of England - and its mining heritage – in his play *The Pitmen Painters* which premiered in 2007 at the Live Theatre in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

The *visual* representation of the North in *The Pitmen Painters* is at least two-fold. Not only is the performance itself intrinsically northern – the play is set in the North East of England, the central characters look and sound Northern in terms of dress and dialect – but the entire focus of the play deals with the relationship between visual representation and identity politics. It would not be overstating the case to say that the very meaning of the play is wholly dependent upon the layering of literal, visual images of northern-ness, from the actor’s cloth caps to the reproduction of paintings which in turn represent the north and northerners.

Based on the 1988 book by the art historian and critic William Feaver (1988), the play focusses on the factual story of the so-called ‘Pitmen Painters’, a group of (mostly) miners from Ashington, a colliery town in Northumberland, whose art works attracted art world and media interest in the 1940s and who continued to work and exhibit as a group until the mid-1980s. The men developed an interest in art in 1934 when they hired Robert Lyon, Master of Painting at Armstrong College Newcastle (then part of Durham University) to teach an Art Appreciation class as part of their continuing studies with the Workers Educational Association (WEA), an organisation founded in 1903 to provide education to working people who could not access or afford further or higher education.²

The main characters in the play, George Brown, Oliver Kilbourn, Jimmy Floyd and Harry Wilson, largely represent their historical namesakes, though in attempting to represent a group which at times numbered over thirty people, the characters bear aspects of other members. The unemployed 'Young Lad' character could be perhaps be regarded representing this composite role. With only one exception (*Bedlington Terrier*, 1937, by William Scott, is attributed to Jimmy Floyd in the play) all of the pictures the characters paint were originally painted by their namesakes. Lyon's first class with the group forms the opening scene (and provided me with the title of this paper) centring on the comedic 'odd couple' interplay between the miners and their tutor as they struggle to understand one another. The cultural gaps between the university lecturer and the Ashington men, together with Lyon's difficulty in grasping the Ashington dialect (and, in the play, vice versa), made even the initial introductions a challenge. As such, Hall's reliance on the specific dialect of South East Northumberland mining districts immediately foregrounds the sense of northern-ness which permeates the play. Indeed, clashing, class-based modes of speech are used throughout the dialogue for both comic effect and shorthand socio-political context.³

The first act depicts the unenthusiased, disinterested and sometimes baffled responses to Lyon's inaugural WEA class - a grainy, black-and-white slideshow of Renaissance art. The meta-message of the scene is abundantly clear - the men lack the necessary cultural capital required to either identify or interpret the paintings which their tutor assumed would be familiar to them and Lyon, for his part, has gravely misjudged the level of compliance and deference he might have expected from his students. In a case of mistaken identity, Lyon is called upon to prove his credentials. In doing so, he namedrops that he studied with Henry Moore at the Royal College and had accompanied Moore on a travelling scholarship to Rome. In response, George Brown, irritated, declares, 'Look, I divvint care where you've been gallivanting as a student. I'm just interested that yer qualified for the job. We set very high standards. We're pitmen (Hall, 2008a, 7-8). Following this, once his 'requisite qualifications' have been established, he begins the slideshow, causing further consternation. Jimmy Floyd says 'Bless you' when Lyon announces that the slide is a Titian (Hall, 2008, 9). Lyon's pronunciation of 'Renaissance' is similarly misunderstood, for several minutes, until Harry Wilson finally shouts, to a chorus of laughter, 'Ah! The Renaissance! The Renaissance! He means the Renaissance!' (Hall, 2008a, p.9-11).

In focussing on this exchange as the opening scene, Hall deftly questions some of the most commonly-held assumptions surrounding class identity and behaviour and the north-south divide. Far from being cowed or intimidated by their lack of knowledge, the men simply express frustration - aimed squarely at Lyon - that their expectations of the class are not being met. Unlike the stereotype of the uneducated, northern working class man resentful of outsiders or frightened by his own ignorance, the representation of the men in Hall's play emphasises the strain of self-determination, auto-didacticism and a politicised sense of entitlement to knowledge and culture that runs through working-class culture in the UK, eloquently documented in studies such as Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* and *The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class* by James D.Young. As Lyon noted in the 1935 issue of the WEA magazine *The Highway*, 'It was perfectly obvious that these men had decided views on what they did not want the class to be. They did not want to be told what was the correct thing to look for in a work of Art but to see for themselves why this should be correct; in other words, they wanted a way, if possible, of seeing for themselves' (Lyon, 1935 in: Feaver, 1988, 17-18).

Under pressure from his students, Lyon was forced to take immediate and radical action in terms of how the classes would be run. Against some of the guidelines of the WEA which emphasised theory over practice, Lyon quickly realised that in order for the miners and other members of the group to understand art, they had to be active rather than passive in their engagement. In line with much contemporary pedagogical theory, Lyon adopted a heuristic, experiential approach to the fostering of an appreciation of art in his Ashington WEA group, encouraging them to 'learn by doing', to actually learn and practice the techniques used by the artists they were studying (Lyon, 1935 in Feaver, 1988).⁴ Simultaneously, of course, through his 'experiment in art education' Lyon was simultaneously 'learning by doing' himself in relation to his role as an educationalist (his work with the WEA class would form the basis for his Masters thesis). This apparently inauspicious start, in an old Army hut in a small mining town, was the beginning of a body of work produced by the men at their weekly evening meetings for over five decades.

Unlike William Feaver's book, which considers the entire history of the group until its demise in the mid-1980s, Hall's play takes the beginning of the story as its focal point, concentrating on the thirteen year period between 1934 and 1947, the most prolific and energetic years of the group's activities. The narrative builds from the early days of the WEA classes to the period during which they became something of a *cause celebre* for the upper echelons of the art world, most notably the wealthy art patron and shipping heiress Helen Sutherland, a would be Peggy Guggenheim, and Northumbrian aristocrats such as the artist Julian Trevelyan and Lady Ridley.⁵ Shortly after they established themselves as a Group, their works were bought by collectors and shown in museums and galleries including the Hatton Gallery and the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the Lefevre Galleries, London and the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh. They were discussed by critics and art historians, appeared on radio and television and were featured in articles in publications such as *The Listener* and in books on English art.

The adoption of the Ashington Group by the 'cultural gatekeepers' of the 1930s and '40s and the contemporary visibility of the group garnered through Hall's play reignites problematic questions for art history and visual culture today. Art historians, critics and curators continue to attempt critically frame and categorise groups of artists, in spite of persistent attempts on the part of artists to represent themselves (by engaging directly in curating and critical writing, for example, seen in the rise of artist-run galleries and organisations and the increasing numbers of contemporary artists who work concurrently as critics). Likewise, regardless of the ideological issues involved in equating non-professional or self-taught art (not to mention non-Western art) with 'authenticity' there remains a troubling, lingering attachment to these notions in exhibitions and studies of 'outsider art'. Along with these concerns, further issues remain in the tendency for those in the 'creative industries' to speak on behalf of others, to represent without consent, or to render the agency of the individuals on which their works are based invisible.

Throughout their history, the Ashington Group repeatedly insisted that they were an independent, not-for-profit association (Feaver, 1988, 69). The works had never been intended for public exhibition. The entire project had been established to aid an understanding and appreciation of art history. As such, the works were often referred to as 'exercises' rather than being regarded as finished, stand-alone works of art (Feaver, 1988, 22). The public display of the works - and the way in which they were interpreted in the media - was engineered by figures such as Robert Lyon, Helen Sutherland and their artworld contacts. Even the moniker 'Pitmen Painters' was not their own

choosing but a label applied retrospectively by their historian William Feaver. Perhaps to avoid easy categorisation as ‘miners who paint’, or perhaps to acknowledge the non-miners amongst their members, the men themselves had chosen the term ‘Ashington Group’ to represent their collective identity. Despite the fact that the men regularly spoke publicly about their work, that they continued to produce work for decades after Lyon had left, and that they published essays and writings on art, they continued to be dogged by well-intentioned, yet sometimes fickle paternalists (Sutherland in particular) determined to ‘represent’ them or to champion their works.

In some respects, Lee Hall himself could be seen as yet another intermediary figure in this mould, fixing on the story as a vehicle through which to express his political sentiments. If this is the case, he would not be the first supporter of the group to have used the works to further a political or careerist agenda. Yet whilst in some ways the play perpetuates some of the issues surrounding the politics of representation, Hall’s account is sensitive to the need for the men themselves to regain agency over their story. Much of the dialogue is based on verbatim accounts by Oliver Kilbourn and Harry Wilson, recounted in William Feaver’s book. The play also offers a platform, albeit fictional in places, for the men to ‘speak back’ to their patrons, to correct and contradict the assumptions applied to them and their works. These exchanges make for some of the most compelling and politically nuanced scenes in the play.⁶

Above all, the play emphasises the motivation and desire of working class men for creativity and expression beyond their expected or assumed social or occupational role.⁷ As such, this is clearly not a play about ‘any’ group of amateur or Sunday painters, or even, really, about the works themselves. Rather, it is the specific socio-political context from which the artists and their works emerge that provides the narrative ‘hook’ for the play and the numerous other accounts of their work. In spite of Hall’s claims (Hall, 2012) that the themes of the play are universal (and the international interest in the play would support this) *The Pitmen Painters* is nevertheless resolutely rooted in the North East of England. It is, in fact, a portrait of Northern working class identity contingent upon at least a basic understanding of the North-South divide in England and on an awareness of the rise and fall of the British coal industry in the twentieth century. The notion of place, therefore, and the North of England in particular, is crucial to both the story of the Ashington Group itself and as the backdrop to Hall’s *Pitmen Painters*. Like *Close the Coalhouse Door* and *Billy Elliott*, coal mining is more than simply a setting - it is emblematic of the region. In *The Pitmen Painters*, social history, politics and art criticism are interwoven throughout the script, but it is coal itself which acts as the most compelling signifier for the north.

Before the advent of deep coal-pits, which were sunk mainly between the 1840s and 1860s, Ashington, situated around seventeen miles north of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, was essentially a single farm. In 1841 it had a population of just 58 people. It expanded rapidly due to the demand to house miners for the ‘Fell-em-Doon’ shaft, which was sunk in 1846, and the four further pits which followed it in quick succession – the Bothal Pit, the Carl Pit, Linton Colliery and Woodhorn Colliery. These five pits were only those immediately surrounding Ashington. The entire expanse of coastal south-east Northumberland, now littered with the scars of the open cast mining which replaced deep mining, was once covered with collieries and pit villages. In the 1930s and ‘40s, the mining members of the WEA Art Appreciation Group worked largely at Woodhorn and Ellington collieries.⁸

Along with shipbuilding, coal was and is intrinsic to the identity of the region. Even for those not directly involved in the industry, mining played, and continues to play, a central part of cultural and class consciousness. The visible signs of heavy industry are impossible to ignore though today it is often only the façades which remain. The buildings themselves, if left extant, are more likely to have been given over to the new post-industrial sector - culture and tourism.⁹

In Ashington, mining, on this scale at least, began in the mid-nineteenth century when a small group of local men, who would go on to found the Ashington Coal Company, were granted the right to mine coal by the Duke of Portland on a Rental and Royalty Payment Agreement. The Duke was the sole landowner and owner of nearby Bothal Castle and is referred to frequently by the mining characters in the play (the play concludes on the eve of the nationalisation of the coal industry in 1947). Over the course of just four decades, the Ashington Coal Company had transformed a rural hamlet into a town with a population of twenty-five thousand people. The workforce for the pits was comprised of local men who had struggled to find work with the introduction of farm machinery. Their numbers were swollen by farm workers from Norfolk, Cumberland lead miners and Cornish tin miners, together with Irish farmworkers escaping the Potato Famine.

In the play, Helen Sutherland, sweeping into the WEA hut on a visit from her stately home at Rock Hall, comments that 'all these little streets look the same' (Hall, 2008a, 42). It is very clear from its layout and architectural uniformity that Ashington was a planned development, a worker's town. The terraced rows of colliery workers houses, purpose-built for employees of the Company, led to Ashington becoming known as 'the biggest mining village in the world'. The long, parallel rows of 'brick boxes with slate lids' (Feaver, 1988, 14), as seen in George Brownrigg's 1937 painting *Shifting*, numbered eleven rows of six hundred and sixty-five houses by 1887. They were said to be some of the longest uninterrupted terraced rows in Europe. Just under fifty years later, in October 1934, the members of the Ashington WEA would meet at the YMCA hall, an old army hut, for their first Art Appreciation class. Over the next fifty years Ashington would feature heavily in their paintings, offering a picture of North East England which both complements and contradicts surveys of English life by 'professional' artists working in the same era.¹⁰

Both implicitly and explicitly, then, the play is intimately concerned with the visual representation of the North. It is dependent upon the use of northern imagery – in a literal, visual sense - in the form of reproductions of original paintings by the Ashington Group. Hall's stage directions dictate that the use of projected images and slides should be used to accompany and illustrate the dialogue (Hall, 2008a). These slides have been used throughout the play to provide social and historical context (dates, places, mining statistics, historical events and so on) and are used very conventionally to 'set the scene' before each act. But beyond the textual information contained on the large-scale projections, the script frequently calls for the large-scale reproduction (via overhead projection) of original paintings by the Ashington Group (Figure 1). These are occasionally interspersed with archival material, including photographs of the men on which the characters are based (such as at the start of the second scene in Act One and the opening of Act Two). In addition to the digitally projected images, the paintings also appear as props, as canvases on easels which again act as the centrepiece for dialogue. In Figure 1, for example, Harry Wilson's first linocut (made in 1934) on the theme of 'Work' acts as the focal point of discussion - what in art school jargon would be referred to as a 'crit'. In the play, Wilson, a dental mechanic, is at pains to emphasise the metaphorical, symbolic and critical aspects he has attempted to represent: 'What it's saying is: work is the creation of

surplus value expropriated by bourgeois class interests' (Hall, 2008a, 23). The other characters, such as George Brown, are at pains to remind him that he is one of the few amongst them who is not a miner: 'What would ye knaa? You've never done a day's work in yer life' (Hall, 2008a, 22).

Clearly, and as the title suggests, the central subject matter of the play is visual, dealing as it does with the paintings and prints of the Ashington Group. As theatre critic Adam Somerset has recently observed, 'theatre has a tradition of engagement with the visual arts', citing Alan Bennett's *A Question of Attribution*, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* and Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George* as examples of this relationship (Somerset, 2009). Critic Lyn Gardner has also noted a recent revival of interest in drawing and painting on stage and in characters who are artists (Gardner, 2011). In *The Pitmen Painters*, the paintings accentuate the characterisation presented through the actors' performances, and they offer glimpses into the aspects of the men's lives not seen on stage.

The works themselves – as reproductions in the play and as original artworks now on public display - depict the daily lives of the miners, above and below ground. The paintings, prints and a handful of small-scale sculptures show the men and their families tending to allotments, playing football, caring for racing pigeons and whippets and playing dominoes. There are scenes of the colliery and colliery houses, bars, clubs and shops. There are images of the miners themselves clocking in, collecting wages, and labouring at the coal face. And aside from their stated interest in specific artists there are indications in the paintings of a growing engagement with art history. See, for example, Kilbourn's interest in Sickert's music hall imagery, echoed in *Saturday Night at the Club* (1936) and referenced in the play (Hall, 2008a, 45) or the slag heap in the background of Harry Wilson's *Ashington Colliery* (1936) which recalls Cezanne's *Monte St. Victoire* series. (The Group had commented enthusiastically on their experience of seeing works by Cezanne, Blake, Turner, Van Gogh and Picasso, amongst others, during their trip to the Tate and the Royal Academy in London in February 1936).

Some of the paintings reflect popular perceptions of the 'grim' industrial north, and fit with the 1937 description of Ashington in the *Shell Guide* as a town of 40,000 people made up of 'dreary rows a mile long. Ashpits and mines down the middle of still unmade streets' (Colls and Lancaster, 2005, 11). Harry Wilson's *House Drain* (1938) shows this clearly. A dead pit pony, movingly depicted in Fred Laidler's *Dead Pony* of 1948, joins other images of toil, exhaustion, pit accidents and struggle. These difficulties characterise many of the mining scenes, yet many of the works show more positive images of mining communities - well-kept parks and pitches, coast and countryside, comfortable domestic scenes, children playing, people socialising. Even in some of the paintings which take mining as their subject-matter, a sense of camaraderie, solidarity and community is ever-present.¹¹ In many instances, therefore, the pictures are far from bleak, yet they are wholeheartedly northern. Even the titling of the works reflect the dialect of the men who painted them, using words which are specific to the area, such as Oliver Kilbourn's *Proggin' the Mat* (1938) or Jimmy Floyd's painting depicting a miner on his lunch break in his 1946 work *Bait Time*.

Along with the projected images of the artworks in the play, the actors playing the miners are also visually 'northern' (Figure 1). Beyond even their physical appearance - the smart shirts and ties of the off-duty miner, the occasional flat cap or work boots, the worsted suits - the gestures and mannerisms of the actors also echo and embellish the distinctive vernacular of the Northumbrian

'pitmatic' dialect (not, as has often been reported, Tyneside Geordie).¹² Along with these specific features and ciphers of Northern-ness, the play itself is, of course, a mediated, cultural representation of the North of England which sits within a tradition of works by Northern playwrights.

One of the most enjoyable and engaging aspects of Hall's play is its use of Northumbrian dialect but it is also one which is potentially unsettling. Much of the humour is contingent upon the apparent incongruity of the sight, and specifically the sound, of a group of uneducated miners as they reveal complex inner lives through their involvement with the Ashington WEA. The juxtaposition of 'that' accent and 'those' ideas are presented as paradoxical, almost oxymoronic and this allows the humour to function. There is no doubt that humour is frequently culturally embedded in accents and dialect but, dependent on the subject position (or, indeed, the accent) of the audience members, the representation of the north in this way is problematized. Who is laughing at whom here? Are working class audiences with parallel 'regional' dialects complicit with the director in poking fun at the characters on stage? Should audiences without distinctive regional accents question what they find so funny about the sound of this mode of speech?¹³ The implication seems to be that such achievements, from this quarter at least, are 'remarkable', and that form and content are at odds with one another. In short, the audience are led to feel that what we are seeing is a triumph of will in the face of adversity. This has certainly been the reading of the play in several theatre reviews. But what is the alternative? To flatten regional difference and call for standard English (it would be interesting to compare the play in translation in this respect)? Or to understate the fact that the working class men are every bit as articulate and expressive as their patrons, if not more so?

As such, it is ironic and contradictory, given Hall's intentions, that in some respects the play comes close to actually promoting the idea that the traditional working class (i.e. uneducated manual labourers) remain outside of access not only to culture, but to intellectual enquiry. This is enacted through the suggestion that those who transcend the apparent cultural barriers imposed upon them by their class and birthplace are noteworthy, special and 'apart' from the rest of their breed. More unsettling still is the suggestion that with intellectual ambition comes with an inevitable 'difficult choice', that at some point, gifted members of the working class must choose between loyalty or betrayal of one's roots and community if they are to pursue their passions.

In *The Pitmen Painters* Oliver Kilbourn is offered a stipend by Helen Sutherland to give up mining and work as an artist, (though it is unclear whether this was actually the case). Whether fictional or factual, the episode offers Hall an opportunity to present a dilemma already seen in *Billy Elliott*. Should you abandon the culture and lifestyle into which you are born, or seize the opportunities handed to you by those in positions of power? For both Billy Elliott and Oliver Kilbourn the choice seems stark. Unlike Elliott, Kilbourn decides to stay. For the Ashington Group, aspiration and ambition lay in the acquisition of knowledge and self-improvement for its own sake. The Group were not motivated by the pursuit of social or economic mobility but by intellectual stimulation and a desire to engage with 'high culture' on their own terms. This kind of narrative 'problem' seems to pervade representations of working class intellectual or cultural aspiration, from *Jude the Obscure* to *Billy Liar* but for the Ashington Group, self-interest in terms of careerist ambition was simply not part of the equation.¹⁴

The Ashington Group were *not* as unique as they are often taken to be. They were not the 'exceptions' amidst a community of philistines. In contrast to the 'poverty of ambition' which casts a pall over many of its residents today, many of the town's residents enthusiastically pursued cultural interests, particularly in music. The social stratification of leisure pursuits as analysed in Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* are problematized when applied to mid-20th century Ashington (Bourdieu, 1984). In fact, the cultural and intellectual lives of the almost wholly working-class residents of the town drew on a range of interests which traversed such distinctions. Whilst Ashington's most famous sons may have been footballers, two of her daughters – Janice Cairns and Sheila Armstrong – became internationally renowned opera singers. Likewise, when the Bach Choir from Newcastle played at the Central Hall in Ashington over 2000 people attended on a Sunday afternoon. (Feaver, 1988, 15). The Harmonic Hall, built by the miners, was intended to foster an interest in classical music. There was a children's orchestra, a colliery band and a male voice choir. Ashington Operatic Society, founded in 1919, still operates today as the Ashington Music Society and once had backdrops and scenery painted by Oliver Kilbourn. There were several venues for theatre, five cinemas and numerous dancehalls. A philosophical society met in the Council Chambers and invited guest lecturers to 'debate the questions of the day'. In the 1960s, the late George Stephenson founded MidNag, the Mid Northumberland Arts Group, which brought the RSC to nearby Newbiggin-by-the-Sea and string quartets to Ashington itself. MidNag published works by Sylvia Plath, the Northumbrian Modernist poet Basil Bunting, books on local history, literature and poetry as well as organising funding to support other arts initiatives (Feaver, 2011). And, of course, there was the WEA, dedicated to 'linking labour with learning'. According to Kilbourn, there was 'a desire in all pitmen' 'to learn a little bit more than what they were taught in school' (Feaver, 1988, 15).

In the play, the men are portrayed as eminently well-read, articulate, politicised and self-aware and this was the case well before their exposure to the Art Appreciation class. Far from being the beginning of their education, many had already undertaken WEA classes on Geology, Biology, Evolution and other topics. In Hall's account, when no tutor could be found to teach their preferred class in Economics, they reluctantly opted for their second choice - Art Appreciation. Many were already avid readers. In a television interview in 2011 Fred Laidlaw's son, George, reported that his father had been 'steeped in reading' (Blair, 2011). And the 'learning by doing' ethos of Lyon's classes was not solely restricted to the group's attempts at painting and printmaking. Through their classes, the debates on art which followed them and their subsequent visits to galleries, some of the members of the group also began to write as well as read about what they had learned, publishing essays on art for the *Ashington Collieries Magazine*. Thirteen articles on art were written by members of the Group between 1936 and 1938, referencing everything from prehistoric art and Renaissance painting, to Ruskin and Barbara Hepworth. Several members also spoke eloquently on their own work and the work of artists they admired in a number of newspaper and radio interviews such as Harry Wilson's television interview for *Picture Page* in September 1937, Arthur Whinnom's account of the trip to London in the *Morpeth Herald* in 1936 and Leslie Brownrigg's radio discussion with Robert Lyon for the BBC in 1939.

In many respects, though, whether or not the men are representative of the traditional working class in their cultural and educational pursuits, the works of the Ashington Group *are* remarkable from a contemporary perspective. Whatever the intrinsic quality or broader significance of the works, the sheer fact of their existence *is* humbling when one acknowledges the energy and commitment required by the men to attend WEA evening classes in the first place, often after long,

gruelling shifts down the pit. In a society now obsessed with attempting to achieve a work-life balance, their efforts are, if not unique, then undoubtedly exemplary.¹⁵

It remains problematic and troubling, however, that it was the search for 'authenticity' and 'otherness' in art that led to Helen Sutherland's adoption of the group, in much the same way that Ben Nicholson had already courted and promoted the 'outsider art' of the Cornish fisherman Alfred Wallis in the same period, before his encounter with 'the miners'. Just as they had done in their appropriation of non-Western aesthetic forms such as African and Japanese art, many Modernist artists aped what they saw as a pure or 'naïve' aesthetic in the work of apparently untrained, uneducated artists. 'Outsider art' was highly fashionable for the elite art world in the early to mid-twentieth century. The North itself, and mining as an occupation, was similarly irresistible to artists seeking 'exotic' new subject matter. At best, many 'unprofessional artists' (and by extension their works) were romanticised and seen as the personifications of purity, innocence, honesty and humility. At worst, they were seen as little more than anthropological curiosities. As a scene from Hall's play recalls, and as Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster have noted: 'Even from their friends, the Ashington painters had to beware of strangers bearing gifts. [The founder of Mass Observation] Tom Harrison brought a crate of beer. [...] The anthropologist of proletarian 'tribal life'[...] was keen to do the right thing in a strange land. Hotfoot from a BBC talk on 'Art and the Working Chap', Harrison came to Ashington to meet the Great Proletarian Painter. Most of the group didn't drink' (Colls and Lancaster, 2005, 14). For many Modernist artists in Britain, including Henry Moore, Stanley Spencer and Graham Sutherland, factories, shipyards and mines – and often the North itself - became places in which artists would seek something more primal, more emotional or something 'different' and 'other'. Even their artist friend Julian Trevelyan claimed that 'it was more by way of the enthusiasm of the Ashington miners for their paintings that I regained my faith in the more permanent values of our civilisation'(Colls and Lancaster, 2005, 14).

Lee Hall has stated that 'a direct comparison [between the works of the Ashington Group and artists such as Henry Moore] is irrelevant because of the Group's avowedly "unprofessional status" (Hall, 2008b). In evaluating the works in purely aesthetic terms this may well be the case, especially if critical judgements regarding form and technique can be divorced from content or subject matter (which is clearly arguable). But I would argue, conversely, that it is worthwhile to compare the representation of northern working class life - and of mining and miners in particular – by the Ashington painters with contemporaneous depictions by professional artists. Indeed, is the very difference in the representation of the same subject matter which is such a compelling feature when the works are compared and contrasted: 'Miners were there to be painted, perhaps, but they were not supposed to do the painting. As Jan Gordon said in 1934 of how to paint 'Miners Coming Back from Work in the Dusk', do them 'with simple lines, merged masses, dim colours...' This was not original advice. A hundred years of painting had done it this way [...] miners were given their place in a moral chiaroscuro of light and shade ' (Colls and Lancaster, 2005,12).

Miners had been the subject of many nineteenth and twentieth century artists working in Britain, from William Bell Scott's monumental Pre-Raphaelite painting of heavy industry in Northumberland and Tyneside in Iron and Coal of 1861 to more intimate images of miners by Josef Hermann, Henry Moore and Bill Brandt in the 1930s and 40s. Moore was the son of a colliery worker and had spent a short time at Wheldale Colliery in the 1940s in order to produce a body of work on mining and miners. In photo-journalism, a more anthropological approach was adopted in works such as

Humphrey Jennings 1939 film *Spare Time*. Julian Trevelyan, as both artist and as part of Tom Harrisson's Mass Observation project, visited the Group taking photographs and drawing images of Ashington and its residents, as did Humphrey Spender, again under the aegis of Mass Observation.

The Ashington Group were aware of the disparity between how they were seen, and how they saw themselves. For some of them gaining a level of agency over the visual representation of miners was a powerful motivation. Unlike the largely observational, critically distant images of northern working class life in photojournalism and film, and the sometimes overly-romanticised, dramatic images of miners by artist-photographers such as Brandt, the art works produced by people intimately involved with coal-mining offered a different perspective.¹⁶ Rather than being depicted as 'types' (or as Jan Gordon suggested, as 'merged masses'), the Ashington Group represented themselves as individuals within a community made up of friends, colleagues and neighbours, not as a homogenous mass or as the collective 'lumpen proletariat'. Oliver Kilbourn made his views on the representation of miners explicit: "I am sick of miners being portrayed like lumps of wood – all downtrodden with work" (Feaver, 1988, 105). On a number of occasions he spoke of the Group's attempts to 'bring realism to the portayal' and to show miners as alternately courageous, happy, tired, skilful, hungry – in short, as multi-faceted. Whilst to an outsider, or even, as George Orwell put it in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 'a Southerner' the spectacle of miners coming off shift might appear 'strange and slightly sinister', to those miners who painted these images, this was quotidian.

The Ashington Group were aware that their primary audience were their peers and colleagues, and beyond that, their neighbours and friends. As works produced to provoke debate and discussion, to act as a catalyst for broader debates on art, the Ashington Group were keenly aware that the criticism and feedback they received from one another would be as unmediated and as direct as the works themselves. They thrived on the debate and dialogue provoked by examining art works in detail and only sold their works to raise funds for more materials.

As such, culturally-determined details, subtleties and nuances which were overlooked, or deemed insignificant by those from the 'outside' are rendered with sensitivity in the works of the Ashington Group, even down to the specificity and skill of the work. In 1938 Robert Lyon asked Oliver Kilbourn to sit for a drawing. The drawing, though technically accomplished, nevertheless aspires to a kind of universal, heroic or romanticised view of miners, an element which is recounted in Hall's play in which Kilbourn critiques Lyon's anachronistic use of pitmen's clothing and his 'facile' and idealised portrayal of miners (Hall, 2008a, 113-114).

Not all the works of Ashington Group could be said, objectively, to be 'accomplished' works of art. But it is not skill or technique which characterise these works, and it is patronising and disingenuous to pretend otherwise. Much like the message of Linda Nochlin's seminal feminist essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (Nochlin, 1971), to attempt to identify works of equal 'greatness' to those of the twentieth century's noted Modernists amongst part-time, 'unprofessional' artists misses the point. Side-by-side, the works of the Ashington Group, for all their qualities, may not be a match for the works of their educated, full-time and professional peers. The same, clearly, could be said of the inverse - that professional artists would likewise fall short as miners, having had no dedicated or formal training or experience in that field. We should not expect the works to be 'equal' in terms of technical expertise or formal innovation.

Ultimately, the works are inseparably tied to the biographical narratives which underpin them. Along with offering a visual record of a mining community in the mid-20th century, the works stand as a testament to the determination of the miners to speak for themselves, to represent themselves rather than being represented. An ethos of self-determination and auto-didacticism runs throughout both the works and the stories behind them. In this respect, the works of the Ashington Group are invaluable examples of a sensibility and approach to the production of art that sought to cut out the mediator and the middle-men standing between them and their access to and participation with art. In spite of these attempts, though, it seemed that for many onlookers 'the Ashington men were an anomaly in need of explanation' (Colls and Lancaster, 2005, 15). Hall makes frequent reference to the tendency for their middle and upper-class friends and supporters to speak on their behalf, to 'introduce' them, or to try to contextualise the men and their work as though they were incapable of speaking for themselves (Owens, 1983) Perhaps this accounts for their determination to retain their dignity, integrity and autonomy. Always gracious, even grateful, for interest and attention from the outside, the Ashington Group stuck to the principles they had set for themselves, where the emphasis was always on learning for learning's sake. As Colls and Lancaster have noted, 'given the prevailing claims on the regional culture and its representation, what could the Ashington painters do but retain their independence?' (Colls and Lancaster, 2005, 12).

The Ashington Group attempted to produce work which could be judged on its own merits, to be critically appraised and evaluated as art work like any other. In short, they asked for no special favours or consideration when they invited responses to their paintings, and took criticism seriously and as a constructive way to improve their understanding of art. But the historicisation of the works and their representation in broader culture, including Lyon's exhibitions and writing, Feaver's book and Hall's play, consistently foreground the fact that the works were painted by miners who, beyond the auspices of their WEA class, had no formal art training. However we might wish it otherwise, it is the non-professional and 'outsider' status of the works that intrigues both the art world and the broader public. It is for this reason that the Group have come to be known not as 'The Ashington Group', but 'the Pitmen Painters'. Much like the categorisation that follows every marginalised group who enters the world of art, the Ashington Group will continue to be known first as 'pitmen', and only then as 'painters'.

Rather than being used as emblematic of 'worker's art' in service to party political and propagandist agendas, the real value of the paintings, prints and sculptures which make up the body of the collection of the Ashington Group lies in the fact that, unlike many accounts of their work, it is the art itself which is the primary source material. The paintings document a working class lifestyle and culture which has all but disappeared, evidence of a deeply embedded form of participant, rather than Mass, observation. In some respects, the Group could be seen as sharing at least some level of affinity with many of the left-leaning artist-run initiatives of the 1970s and 80s in Britain. This may be stretching the point, but whilst not overtly oppositional towards the artworld (in some cases they were deferential towards figures such as Helen Sutherland), what perhaps links such endeavours is the emphasis for both on the creation of art divorced from any individual self-interest. The work of the Ashington Group and that of many artist-run groups in post-war Britain was produced and presented as a collective endeavour. Fellow members and participants, rather than the 'general public' or the artworld were the intended, primary audience for the works. In both cases, the membership of these organisations strove to be autonomous. They were frequently left-leaning in their political affiliation and did not actively seek either economic or critical validation from the

outside, even though they were frequently approached by 'strangers bearing gifts' (Colls and Lancaster, 2005, 14).

Undoubtedly, though, whilst the work itself could be said to be a largely unmediated, primary form of cultural production, the broader dissemination and interpretation of the work – certainly its public display - would very probably not have occurred without the 'gatekeeping', intermediary roles played by the figures such as Lyon, Sutherland, Feaver and, retrospectively, even by Hall. It would also be churlish, whatever the broader agendas or ethics of their courtship of the Ashington Group, to assume that Lyon, Sutherland and Nicholson did not aim to support the men in their efforts, or that they did not offer genuine admiration and friendship. It is simply a fact that Sutherland's money and contacts, Lyon's ambassadorial role in the media and his involvement in curating the works for public exhibition, and Nicholson's willingness to debate the principles of modern art, all presented opportunities for travel, reading, discussion and access to galleries and museums that would not otherwise have been possible (as the character based on Oliver Kilbourn notes in the play, 'Mr Lyon is very good at getting us noticed' (Hall, 2008a, 91)).

Lee Hall has also been very good at getting them noticed. Even though the play may be analogous with Hall's own political discontent, his re-telling of the story rarely feels exploitative. *The Pitmen Painters* is shot through with a deep sense of mourning for the traditional Leftist values the playwright regards as having been forsaken by the contemporary incarnation of the Labour Party in Britain. Indeed, it would be hard to see the final scene of the play as anything other than an elegy.¹⁷ The play concludes with music from the Gresford Hymn, written by Geordie miner Robert Saint, commemorating a pit disaster at Gresford Pit in 1934. After a rousing, collective speech about the value and power of art and learning and 'a creative life', the scene closes with a projection which reads: 'No University of Ashington was founded. Woodhorn Colliery was closed in 1981. In 1995, the call for the 'Common Ownership of the Means of Production, Distribution and Exchange' was excised from the Labour Party Constitution' (Hall, 2008a, 124).

This is far from a simple closing strategy. Though Hall's didacticism and lack of subtlety have led to accusations of nostalgia, these accusations surely beg the question - for many in the North East of England, what is there *not* to be nostalgic about in the expression of these sentiments? Further, why should 'nostalgia' be used as a pejorative term only when applied to working class culture? As Alex Niven has argued in his book *Folk Opposition*, 'the denial of folk sentiment, the denial of a common history and heritage, is one way in which popular opposition and resistance to rising inequality and a widespread revival of hierarchy has been slowly erased over the last thirty years [...] twentieth century phrases like "social democracy", "unionisation", and "solidarity" can scarcely be uttered without inviting accusations of nostalgia' (Niven, 2012, 1).

Few would argue that as an occupation the work of a deep coal miner itself is something to be wistful about. We need only know of the conditions in which many men worked, particularly pre-nationalisation, to understand why it was not an occupation to be envied.¹⁸ But the loss of community, the lack of any gainful employment for the majority of people outside the traditional industries on which entire towns were built, and the subsequent decline of confidence and civic pride which inevitably follows such disenfranchisement is undoubtedly melancholic. As Niven notes, 'insofar as popular collectivism still exists in this country, it exists as a memory of an earlier epoch in which social democracy was genuine and comprehensive' (Niven, 2012, 68).

In recent years Ashington has frequently been used as a prime example of the gradual erasure of self-respect and community spirit which followed the decline of British heavy industry in the 1970s and 1980s. In its current state Ashington embodies the tropes of 'broken Britain', representing the ultimate endgame of Thatcher's decimation of the coal mining industry. This is detailed with anger and sensitivity in Owen Jones's *Chavs: The Demonisation of the Working Class* – his case study of Ashington is a chapter called 'Broken Britain'. Yet the visual representation of the Northern working class in the mainstream media frequently infers that the shift has been an almost Dickensian one in which the 'deserving' poor rapidly become the 'idle' poor, that somehow Northern pride and politics have been deservedly quashed now that coals no longer go to Newcastle. The devastating effects wreaked by Tory policies in the 1980s went unresolved by the hollow spin of regeneration offered by New Labour in the 1990s and 2000s. The result was no less than the wholesale destruction of the families and communities who had been wholly reliant upon mining. These effects are writ large upon many of Ashington's residents and upon the town itself today. As Hall has stressed, 'I suppose I wrote the play to remind myself that something really did get lost, or at least that an opportunity was missed; but to regret the atrophying of our cultural muscles is not necessarily nostalgic – for if there is something to remember, there is also something yet to be won' (Hall, 2008a,viii).

Lee Hall, and the Ashington Group themselves, portrayed a town in an era which had already undergone a depression, but the struggles encountered by the unemployed in *The Pitmen Painters* seem very far removed from the epidemic of unemployment facing Ashington today. The sense of hopelessness and the so-called poverty of ambition experienced by many in the North East today was encapsulated in the 2002 Channel Four documentary *Wasted: After the Fall*, which followed the lives of Steven and Suzanne Longstaff and their family. Though the paintings of the Ashington Group seem to portray imagery specific to a particular era, the documentary highlighted 34 year old Steven's preoccupation with pigeon fancying, allotments and sea-coaling, hobbies and economic survival strategies all but unchanged since the 1930s and '40s. What has changed is the sense of optimism, desire for knowledge and self-awareness which gave rise to the WEA class, the paintings, and the other social and community projects committed to the notion of access to education and culture for all. At the time of filming *Wasted*, Steven, unlike his father, and most likely his grandfather and great-grandfather, had been unemployed for nine years. He and his wife, Suzanne, were both long-term unemployed, in ill-health and attempting to deal with their alcoholism whilst raising their children on benefits. The picture could not have been more bleak and made the images of Ashington in *the Pitmen Painters* appear as halcyon days by comparison. It is either fitting or ironic that the permanent collection of the Ashington Group is now on public display in Woodhorn Colliery Museum, on the site of the former pit. There could be no more appropriate or literal 'real-life' parallel to Private Eye illustrator Robert Thompson's cartoon, depicting a flat-capped man gesturing to a landscape dominated by a colliery wheel, which reads, 'One day, my son, all this will be art galleries'.

The Pitmen Painters, then, does more than simply recounting the story of the men and their works. It does more than bear witness to the self-determination and enthusiasm of the traditional working class to engage in and express their intellectual lives. The ultimate message of the play – and one that has been reiterated by Hall in numerous interviews - is that politics, art and culture should be accessible and available to everyone.

Conversely, though, the representation of the story of the Ashington Group on stage at this particular point in time could be seen as yet another co-option of the accoutrements of populist art by an affluent middle-class, much like the contemporary appropriation of folk music and culture discussed in Alex Niven's book. Whatever the aims and objectives of the director, cast and crew of the play, it would be naïve to assume that all, even the majority, of audiences for *The Pitmen Painters* will engage with the contemporary political resonances and parallels of the story. Many will no doubt read the narrative on face value, as an escapist, charming account of outsider art and an elegiac nod to a working class culture which is now extinct.

But the success of the play – and specifically the subsequent works and projects generated by it – surely indicates that its message has been received and its sentiments shared by many who have seen it. Frequently attracting five-star reviews in the press, the play was the Winner of the Evening Standard Award for Best New Play in 2008, and has achieved huge critical, commercial and popular acclaim with each incarnation. After the Newcastle debut, it transferred to the National Theatre in 2008 and continues to run at the Duchess Theatre in London the time of writing, with a further UK tour advertised in 2013. A German translation of the play premiered in Vienna in 2009, a Spanish version opened in Buenos Aires in 2012. In 2010, an adapted version travelled to Broadway with the original cast and it has been seen in Canada and numerous UK venues.

Beyond the performance itself, the play has generated renewed public interest in the story of the Ashington Group, including a 2007 play on BBC Radio Three, a BBC One North East documentary following the play's tour to New York in 2010 and a 2011 documentary made for ITV1 by filmmaker Jon Blair as part of the Perspectives series. In 2012 a WEA class in Whickham, Gateshead, promised to help students learn to 'Paint Like the Pitman Painters' whilst local history organisation Six Townships and Six-T Media collate and archive photographs and moving-image sources relating to coal-mining and local culture, including their 2011 DVD *The Real Pitmen Painters*.

Whatever the gaps or limitations of Hall's account in *The Pitmen Painters* and whatever problems it poses in terms of the representation of northern identity (some of which I have attempted to highlight), the play is ultimately a sensitive, considered and respectful account of the Ashington Group. It succeeds in being both popular and critical, both humorous and poignant. It often veers dangerously close to nostalgia, sentimentality and melancholy. Occasionally it tips over the brink. It can be unsubtle and heavy-handed in its expression of the 'moral message' of the story and contemporary political relevance it seeks to emphasise. In spite of their overall praise, some critics and commentators have found certain aspects of the play cloying, obvious or overly rhetorical. But even if this is the case, these elements have not served to undermine either Hall's achievement or those of the men he has represented. If audiences are being emotionally manipulated by Hall's story, if they are being too strategically directed, too closely instructed in their interpretation of the story, then most have been willing participants, complicit in their collusion.

As Glenn Jordan has observed, 'anyone participating in the arts or the media is in the business of creating meaning. It is this creation of meaning which largely dictates how we see events, both past and present [...] Unfortunately the means of creating and disseminating these 'meanings' are not equally distributed. There is a hierarchy of power, based on the ownership and control of the means of cultural production which restricts most people to a passive receiving role [...] our cultural experience come fast and highly packaged' (Jordan, 1995, 7). As a highly successful, popular

playwright, Hall is clearly aware of the structures of power which underpin the production and reception of culture.¹⁹ He is conscious of the power of historical example to illuminate such issues. His handling of the play, from dialect to visual imagery, from casting to fictional narrative insertions - all of these features work to offer a compelling, revisionist view of 'the North' and working class culture, and, most importantly, to encourage a questioning, participatory approach to the impoverished cultural situation in which many communities find themselves.

Ultimately, *The Pitmen Painters* stands as yet another culturally constructed re-presentation of a Northern story, just one more mediation between the Ashington Group and their works. So what makes it noteworthy or significant as a representation of the North? Beyond the fact that the play has seemingly effortlessly crossed the divide between 'critical' and 'popular', perhaps it is the fact it has been written by someone clearly conversant with northern-ness. Even when he acknowledges the truisms of some northern tropes, both celebrating and lampooning them in equal measure, Hall is intimately concerned with the representation of the north and its working class culture. In *The Pitmen Painters*, Hall has earnestly attempted to portray the north and its people as more than simply a clutch of kitsch signifiers or pantomime caricatures.

From the Ashington Group to BBC3's *Geordie Finishing School for Girls*, 'the North East has been seen [...] as a working-class region whose ability to know and represent itself outside itself was questionable' (Colls and Lancaster, 2005, 14). According to Alan Plater, the problem for artists and writers from the North East has been 'keeping as short a distance possible between them and their subjects' (Colls and Lancaster, 2005, 28). For Hall in *The Pitmen Painters* the distance was short: 'almost everyone in the North East has some connection to the mining industry, and this was certainly true of many of us in the rehearsal room; all of us were using our lives, like the pitmen in the play, to make art about the realities of the region' (Hall, 2008a, vii). For the members of the Ashington Group themselves, it was not only the distance between them and their subjects' that collapsed entirely, so did their view of themselves as both miner and artist, as both avid producers and enthusiastic consumers of culture.

REFERENCES

Bailey, C. 2008. *Black Diamonds*. London: Penguin.

Colls, R. and Lancaster, B. 2005. *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*. Newcastle: Northumbria University Press.

Feaver, W. 1988. *The Pitmen Painters – The Ashington Group 1934-1984*. London: Chatto & Windus.

- Feaver, W. 2011. Obituary - George Stephenson. *The Guardian*. 1 February. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2011/feb/01/george-stephenson-obituary>; INTERNET.
- Gardner, L. 2011. 'Drawing conclusions: the fine line between theatre and art', *The Guardian*, 16 February. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2011/feb/16/theatre-art-drawing>; INTERNET.
- Hall, L. 2008a. *The Pitmen Painters*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Hall, L. 2008b. 'High Culture and The Pitmen Painters', *The Pitmen Painters*, Theatre Programme, The Journal Tyne Theatre, 8-13 August 2011.
- Hall, L. 2011. *The Pitmen Painters*, dir. Max Roberts, The Tyne Journal Theatre: Live Theatre/National
- Hall, L. 2012. 'Lee Hall on Close the Coalhouse Door: "Populist art doesn't have to peddle an anodyne politics"'. *Socialist Worker*. 22 May. Available at: <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=28540>; INTERNET.
- Theatre on Tour. First performance: 8 August.
- Jones, O. 2011. *Chavs: The Demonisation of the Working Class*. London: Verso.
- Niven, A. 2012. *Folk Opposition*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Nochlin, L. (1971) 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' IN Nochlin, L. (1988) *Women, Art and Power*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Owens, C. (1983) "'The Indignity of Speaking for Others": An Imaginary Interview' IN Owens, C. & Bryson, S (ed.) (1992) *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Perspectives: Robson Green and the Pitmen Painters*. 2011. Television documentary. Directed by Jon Blair. Jon Blair Films.
- Pevsner, N. et al. 2002. *Northumberland – The Buildings of England*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Rose, J. 2001. *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Russell, D. 2004. *Looking North – Northern England and the national imagination*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Somerset, A. 2009. 'Acclaimed Production Lives Up to Its Reputation'. *Theatre in Wales: Theatre, dance and performance reviews*. Available from: http://www.theatre-wales.co.uk/reviews/reviews_details.asp?reviewID=2200; INTERNET.
- The Real Pitmen Painters*. 2011. DVD. Six-T Media.
- Tomlinson, W.W. 1888 / 1999, eleventh edition. *Comprehensive Guide to the County of Northumberland*. Morpeth: Newgate Press.

Wasted: After the Fall. 2002. Television documentary.

Young, J. D. 2009. *The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class*. Glasgow: Clydeside Press.

¹ For further analysis and discussion of the representation of the northern working class in the media, specifically contemporary comedy and reality television, see Jones (2011) and Niven (2012).

² Possibly as a result of the fees crisis and funding cuts in further and higher education in the UK, there has been a recent revival of interest in the history of the WEA and in the significance of adult and lifelong learning. WEA tutors have included high profile Leftist academics and thinkers including Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson. Turner Prize nominated artist Luke Fowler's 2012 film *The Poor Stockinger, the Luddite Cropper and the Deluded Followers of Joanna Southcott* takes Thompson's WEA work in the West Riding in the 1940s as its subject matter, combining archival material with new film and audio.

³ According to Russell (2004), 'The North's long association with notions of barbarism and philistinism has been directly connected to supposedly vulgar or comic modes of speech'. This is clearly the case, though in *The Pitmen Painters* the 'RP' accents of Robert Lyon, Ben Nicholson and Helen Sutherland are lampooned just as much as the accent of the Ashington Group, demonstrating Russell's further point that 'Standard English is itself a dialect but one which, through association with the nation's geographical and social bases, has come to dominate.'

⁴ In this, Lyon shared Raymond Williams's emphasis on 'lived experience' along with his commitment to informal, adult education and lifelong learning, and it should be remembered that Williams himself was the son of a coal miner.

⁵ Lee Hall credits William Feaver's book as the being the inspiration for the play. Certainly, though minor details have been changed, much of the narrative is directly based on Feaver's account and he has acted as a consultant for the play since its inception. Feaver's book itself was based on first-hand, primary research with the remaining founder members of the group, whom the author met by chance in 1971 at the Laing Art Gallery

in Newcastle at a private view of an Arts Council exhibition of the Helen Sutherland Collection, which included some of the works of the Ashington Group.

⁶ In Act Two, for example, a long exchange between Oliver Kilbourn and Robert Lyon takes place. When Lyon presents his view of what the group represent, and what makes them distinctive, Kilbourn gently cautions Lyon against making assumptions ‘that don’t actually end up patronising people or holding people back’ (Hall, 2008, p.87).

⁷ There is clearly much to be said about the gender in relation to the Ashington Group, though it is not the focus of this paper. At an early point a small number of women had attended the WEA class briefly, but left after one or two sessions. Other than the women depicted in some of the paintings, the nude models who sat for life classes, and patrons such as Sutherland, this was an all-male affair, something Harry Wilson discussed with William Feaver in 1971 (Feaver, 1988, 17).

⁸ Ellington, a village four miles from Ashington, was the last remaining operational deep coal mine in North East England until its closure in 2005. It was used as the fictional ‘Everington’ mine in the Stephen Daldry film adaptation of Billy Elliott.

⁹ Even sea-coaling was amongst the many activities depicted in paintings by members of the Ashington Group, such as Arthur Whinnom’s *Sea Coal* (1936). Sea-coaling on the nearby beaches at Lynemouth and along the stretch of coastline nearby continues as a way of sourcing free fuel – an activity that was especially eagerly pursued during the winter of the 1984 - 1985 Miner’s Strike and one that has been documented in the 1985 film *Seacoal* by Amber Films.

¹⁰ Such as Eric Ravilious’s 1930s *High Street* series of lithographs. (Robert Lyon had been a friend of Eric Ravilious and had travelled to Florence with him – see Feaver, 1988, 17).

¹¹ In Andy Rankin’s *Pit Accident* of 1938, for example, a miner holds a cigarette to the lips of his injured fellow worker whose leg is being tended to by a doctor. Jimmy Floyd’s *Bait Time* shows a pit pony stretching towards a resting miner for a bite of jam sandwich and many other works show miners chatting, laughing and eating together underground at break or lunchtimes.

¹² The Ashington accent and dialect is so specific and distinctive that it is frequently commented on by Geordies and other Northumbrians living nearby. See, for example, the ‘Ashington Dictionary’ which appeared in the several issues of *Newcastle Stuff* magazine, in print and online, as a way of ‘translating’ Ashington speech into Geordie (<http://www.newcastlestuff.com/ashington.htm>).

¹³ I am oversimplifying here, of course, as this is more than a class division. It is clear that those with so-called ‘regional’ accents, regardless of class, also frequently find humour in regional accents and dialects from other parts of Britain. See above.

¹⁴ This dilemma is discussed at the beginning of Act Two including a scene in which Kilbourn discusses the offer with the other members of the Group, who are divided in their opinion. At this juncture, a ‘them and us’ view of class is revealed clearly, with arguments raised about the difference between patronage and charity, between ‘art’ work and a ‘job’, between integrity and ‘selling out’ and about what Kilbourn would paint if he ‘retired’ from the pit. Jimmy Floyd claims that Kilbourn would ‘be an outsider’ and that taking the stipend would make him ‘like a scab’, stressing the solidarity and ‘common enterprise’ of the Group and cautioning him against giving up a secure job for the whims of a wealthy patron. Harry, the most explicitly political member of the Group in the play, contradicts Jimmy, and cites Marx to encourage Kilbourn to take the offer, referring to Sutherland’s offer as ‘a redistribution of wealth’ (Hall, 2008, 76-83). Against the assumption that he has sacrificed something in his refusal, whether fictional or factual, it should be noted that in Feaver’s account, Kilbourn has spoken at length about the pride he has taken in his work as a miner, and the skill involved in his job.

¹⁵ Robert Lyon loaned some of the Group books by critics such as Roger Fry and John Ruskin. The Ruskin quote used by William Feaver as the frontispiece for his book illuminates the perception of the divided labour between artists and others, a view which is contradicted by the Ashington Group and many other artists who have worked concurrently in other fields and occupations.

¹⁶ The Ashington Group were not the only ones to portray the work of miners, and the North more broadly, from an insider’s vantage point. Fellow artist-miners from the North East of England such as Tom McGuinness and Norman Cornish, and other artists from elsewhere in the UK, also produced images of miners based on a direct knowledge and experience of the specific conditions and processes undertaken in colliery work.

¹⁷ The documentary photographer Mik Critchlow has echoed these sentiments visually in works such as his series *Pitheads ‘88* and *Ashington – Coal Town*. See <http://www.mikcritchlow.com/>

¹⁸ See, for instance, Catherine Bailey’s *Black Diamonds*, Penguin, London 2008.

¹⁹ 'The globalisation of capital, the monopolisation of the media, and the deregulation of TV have produced a situation where we get less culture but pay more for it. It's both a joke and a tragedy as the working classes who are denuded of political power and spiritual succour are excluded also from the system of culture so ravenously enjoyed by their exploiters' (Hall, 2008 viii).