looking-beyond-seeing: the interwar interior as mediated

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abstract

In his article on the houses of the designer Oliver Hill (1887–1968) for the magazine *Country Life*, the architectural historian John Cornforth suggested that it was only through the experience of Hill's domestic settings that it would be possible to get an understanding of his approach to interior design. While the primacy of lived experience cannot be ignored, mediated images offer an equally valid and productive means of understanding interwar interiors. Through close examination of interwar press photographs, such as images of Hill's dining room at Chantrey House, London (1924), this essay examines how photography is approached not merely as representation but as a mediating and performative object through which aesthetic intention, social performance, and sensory suggestion converge.

The following text provides a methodological framework, entitled *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, based on material and affective readings of the photographed interior. Within this framework, the photograph is understood not as a deficient surrogate for lost space but as a mediating surface through which spatial, social, and sensory relations can be reconstructed. Repositioning mediation as an analytical opportunity, rather than a form of loss, it shows how staged interior photographs are able to generate nuanced knowledge of interwar domestic environments beyond the limits of direct physical access.

keywords

photography; interwar period; mediation; domestic interiors

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introduction

During the interwar period (the years between the Armistice of November 1918 and the German attack on Poland in September 1939), well-known designers such as Oliver Hill (1887–1968) sought to work with the best photographers of the time. Partnerships with photographers such as Dell and Wainwright, Millar and Harris, and Frank Yerbury resulted in the creation of the best possible shot, which played a key role in selling modern design to the public, an awareness of which is as important today as it was then. Architects and photographers became increasingly skilled in producing images that responded to the needs of multiple stakeholders, including designers seeking professional recognition, clients seeking social distinction, and magazines seeking compelling visual material. Photography thus became integral to how interiors were presented, circulated, and understood.

When it comes to the study of the interwar interior, these mediated images are often the only access we have to designs that were produced during this time. Examining the interactions between the interior-as-space and the interior-as-staged, as observed in the published image, offers a productive means to expand our understanding of the interwar interior. Using the domestic work of Hill as a case study, this analysis starts from the premise that interior spaces, though no longer available to us in any physical form, can, with validity, be assessed through their representation in the contemporary press.

The assumption that mediation necessarily constitutes loss is challenged by understanding staged interior photographs as mediating objects that actively construct spatial, social, and sensory meaning. Rather than treating these images as substitutes for direct experience, they can be approached as sites where aesthetic intention, editorial framing, and social performance converge. The photograph operates not simply as a passive record but as a structured interface between private interior space and public visual circulation.

To address this interpretative potential, *Looking-beyond-Seeing* is proposed as a methodological framework for analysing interior photography. This approach begins from a reading of the interior photograph, understood as a produced and circulated object shaped by photographic technique, editorial framing, and publication context. From this position, two interrelated stages of analysis are undertaken. First, a material reading attends closely to the spatial and decorative cues visible within the photograph itself. Second, an affective reading draws on contemporary sources to interpret the sensory and social atmospheres suggested by the image. Taken together, these stages position the photograph as a mediating surface through which spatial and experiential conditions can be interpretatively reconstructed.

Published photographs of Hill's dining room at Chantrey House, London (1924), serve as a case study through which the interior can be examined as both represented space and mediated image. Approaching the photograph as an object in its own right allows Hill's interior to be understood not as a fixed or inaccessible environment, but as a dynamic spatial condition that continues to operate through its photographic mediation. Through this framework, staged interior photographs emerge not as inadequate surrogates for lost interiors but as essential sites for understanding the spatial, social, and cultural dynamics of the interwar domestic environment.

Looking-beyond-Seeing therefore also shares affinities with methodologies developed within visual and cultural studies. For instance, Stuart Hall's work on understanding the relationship between the reader and the image, Gillian Rose's emphasis on images acquiring meaning through being embedded in the social world, or Nicholas Mirzoeff's emphasis on visuality as social practice.[1] Each of these reinforces the importance of examining interior photographs not only as representations but also as mediated objects whose meanings emerge through production, circulation, and viewing.

interwar photography and its visual dissemination

In Britain, a variety of journals and magazines, such as *The Architectural Review*, *Ideal Home*, *Country Life*, *Vogue*, and *The Studio*, rapidly expanded the dissemination of professionally photographed and seductive images of newly built architecture and interiors, shaping how design was encountered by both professional and popular audiences. The photograph thus functioned as a record of interior space and as an essential medium through which interiors entered public and cultural discourse.

For the historian of the interwar interior, such photographs often constitute the primary surviving point of access. When working with this material, it is important to emphasise that the interiors under discussion are realised, finished, and published settings. Because the majority of images and texts were produced for publication, or circulated within printed media, the roles of consumption and mediation must be considered alongside the production of these interiors. Approaching published images of Hill's work as designed objects in their own right opens them up to historical analysis. Rather than functioning as transparent records, photographs must be understood as mediating channels through which interiors were communicated, interpreted, and encountered. In this sense, the published photograph operates between producer and consumer, shaping how Hill's interiors were understood by contemporary audiences.

The Production–Consumption–Mediation (PCM) paradigm, as developed by Grace Lees-Maffei, provides a useful framework for analysing these relationships.[2] Lees-Maffei identifies mediation as a third stream in design history, alongside production and consumption, emphasising the importance of channels such as magazines, photographs, and other forms of visual and textual communication in shaping how design is understood and experienced.[3] Crucially, mediation does not simply transmit meaning but actively participates in its construction. Mediating channels themselves are designed and therefore constitute objects of design historical analysis, while simultaneously shaping consumption practices and ideas about design. This PCM paradigm thus shifts attention away from a sole emphasis on the production of interiors toward the processes through which they were circulated, represented, and interpreted.

Previous research on Hill has primarily examined his interiors through the lens of production, focusing on authorship, stylistic development, and design intention.[4] While these approaches remain essential, the PCM paradigm highlights the importance of examining how Hill's interiors were mediated through publication and subsequently consumed by readers. The photographic image, as published in journals and magazines, functioned not merely as documentation but as a mediating device that structured the viewer's encounter with the interior. The meanings of Hill's interiors were therefore formed through their design and physical execution and through their photographic representation and circulation.

Production, consumption, and mediation do not operate as separate or sequential stages. Rather, as Lees-Maffei argues, these three core issues co-exist and overlap, forming an interconnected framework for understanding design.[5] Hill's interiors were produced in dialogue with clients, mediated through photography and publication, and consumed visually and imaginatively by readers. The photograph thus becomes a critical site where these processes intersect, positioning the interior within a broader network of representation and reception.

Within this context, the photographed interior exists simultaneously as physical space and mediated image. As Charles Rice has described, this condition produces a 'doubled interior', which he defined as 'an interior that is consciously understood as both an image and a spatial condition.'[6] The photograph does not merely reproduce the interior but actively participates in its construction as a spatial and cultural entity. Through processes of mediation

and consumption, the interior acquires a second mode of existence within print culture, where it is encountered, interpreted, and imaginatively inhabited by viewers. The 'doubled interior' therefore emerges through the interrelationship between production, mediation, and consumption, rather than through representation alone. Approaching Hill's interiors through the PCM paradigm allows the photographed interior to be understood not as a secondary representation, but as an integral component in the historical formation, circulation, and experience of the interwar domestic interior.

This mediated condition of the interior forms the basis for the methodological framework of *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, through which the photograph can be approached as a mediating surface connecting spatial, social, and experiential dimensions. The relationship between the material and affective readings proposed through this methodology need not be understood in a single way. In some instances, the two readings operate in parallel, allowing the researcher to attend separately to the material properties of the photographed interior and the sensory or social qualities it suggests. Such parallel readings remain valuable because they preserve the specificity of different forms of evidence and interpretation. At the same time, the framework also permits a diffractive mode of analysis, in which material and affective dimensions are read through one another. Following this approach, reflective surfaces for instance become entangled with practices of domestic labour, lighting strategies with social hierarchies, and photographic absences with the presence of bodies excluded from representation. *Looking-beyond-Seeing* therefore accommodates both parallel and diffractive readings, recognising that different interpretative contexts may produce different forms of knowledge from the same image.

fear of the mediated image

Writing in 1910, the architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933) warned the readers of his article 'Architecture' that 'a true building makes no impression as a picture, reduced to two dimensions.'[7] Loos continued that it was 'my greatest pride that the interiors which I have created are completely lacking in effect when photographed; that the people who live in them do not recognize their own apartments from the photographs.'[8] This lack of effect was, according to Loos, due to the context in which these images were encountered.[9] As Beatriz Colomina later observed:

> The inhabitants of a house perceive it as an environment, not as an object, whereas a photograph of a house published in an architectural journal requires a different kind of attention, which presupposes a certain distance and is therefore closer to the contemplation of a work of art in a museum.[10]

As John Potvin more recently highlighted, 'The modern interior was a product of a mass image and of claims that architecture was less a physical site than a sight — or image — to behold through cinema, periodicals, photographs, theatre, and important exhibitions.'[11] Photography thus transforms the interior from immersive environment into visual object, shifting the terms under which it is experienced. For Loos it was therefore impossible to recreate a spatial effect and its sensation within the context of photography, as photographs simply draw the viewer's attention to the artifice that is involved in making the photograph.[12]

This artifice Loos referred to might also have been experienced by Hill's clients, gazing back at their own interiors as published on the pages of many popular magazines. The assortment of journals, magazines, and newspapers encompassing wide-ranging subjects from architecture, through decorative art, to women's interests, meant that Hill's work reached a wide variety of audiences. A positive communication with the magazine's audience was key. How this played out can be seen in editorial approaches by comparing the drawing room of Hill's Gayfere House, London, as it was published in the *Architectural Review* [Fig. 01] and in *Country*

Life [Fig. 02].[13] Dell and Wainwright (working for the *Architectural Review*) have emptied the interior to better display the highly reflective surfaces of the spatial elements, while A. E Henson (working as a photographer for *Country Life*) privileged the furnishing and decoration of the interior, therefore creating a different atmosphere with the same interior.[14] Comparisons such as these are invaluable in highlighting the different stakeholders at play in the mediated image, and clients would certainly have recognised the gap between their lived interiors and the images of them in magazines.



Figure 01.
View of the Drawing Room at Gayfere House for *The Architectural Review*. O. Hill, Gayfere House, Drawing Room, London, 1931. Photographer: Dell and Wainwright, RIBA Collections.



Figure 02.
View of the Drawing Room at Gayfere House. O. Hill, Gayfere House, London, 1932. Photographer: A. E. Henson, *Country Life*.

Such images foreground the distinction between the interior-as-space and the interior-as-staged. The photographed interior presents an idealised and composed version of domestic space, structured for visual consumption rather than lived use. This constructed quality contributed to the perception that photography could not adequately convey the character of interior environments. The photographed interior appeared to transform the interior from lived setting into aesthetic object, reinforcing concerns regarding its ability to communicate spatial and sensory experience.

Yet it is precisely this shift (from lived environment to visual object) that establishes the photograph as a site of mediation. Rather than simply documenting interior space, photography constructs a new mode of encounter shaped by distance, framing, and interpretation. This recognition raises a critical question: if photography mediates rather than reproduces interior experience, how might its mediating qualities be understood not as limitations but as analytical opportunities?

The necessity of the focus on idealised interiors should not be feared or be seen as problematic. Indeed, it only becomes problematic if photographs are approached as a stable 'fixed' copy of reality. Photography as truth is a clear position or understanding of the photograph, as encountered within photography theory. For Susan Sontag, writing on photography, the act of taking an image means it becomes frozen in time.[15] If we follow this argument through, it would mean that the image we try to analyse would have to be based on our understanding of the exact moment when the image was taken/ fixed, because that moment is seen as the truth.

Approaching the image as frozen in terms of interior design photography during the early twentieth century seems closely related to a Modernist approach towards photography. Within this vein, images such as those used here rely on form, pattern, and repetition. Through the work of photographers such as Dell and Wainwright, audiences were

conditioned to see a certain way. Images such as the dining room at Joldwynds, Holmbury St Mary, Surrey [Fig. 03], highlight the distancing, objectifying, and controlling approach towards vision. As a viewer we remain on the outside, similar to the position required of us when we use a plan. Plans, although useful, will give us very similar results as the use of images in a documentary way, as they will give us the perspective of an 'outsider' from an omniscient elevated position. Such a 'frozen' perspective reduces these images to mere documentation, making more expansive reading difficult.

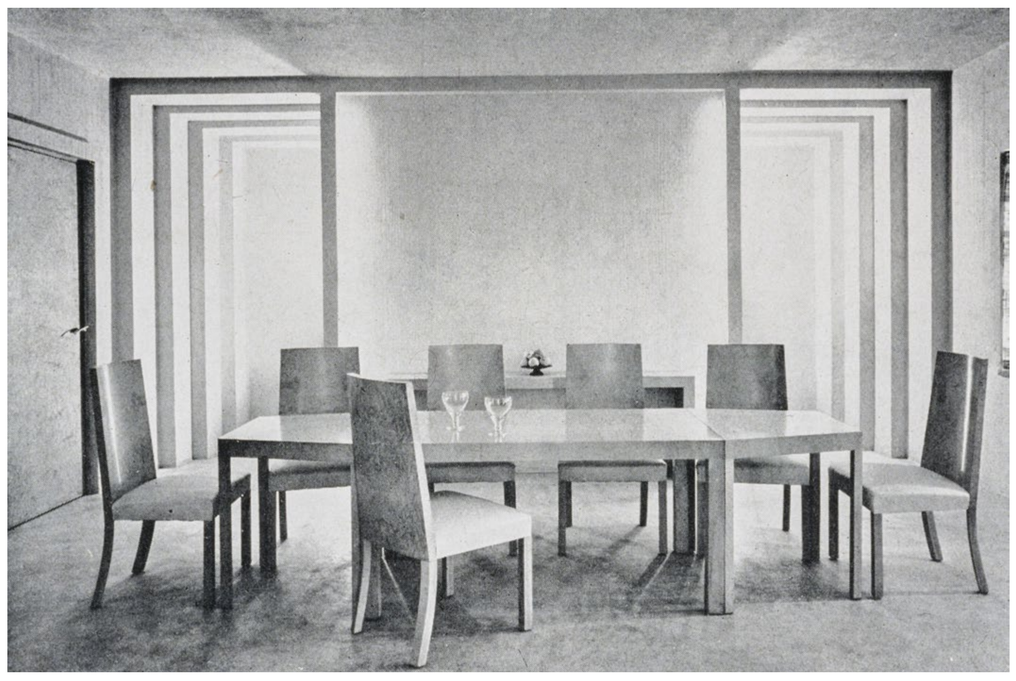


Figure 03.
O. Hill, 'Joldwynds, Holmbury St Mary, Surrey', *The Studio*, 102 (1936), p. 338. Photographers: Dell and Wainwright.

Overall, such an understanding of photography would mean that no other context is possible or truer than the original photographed one. Michelle Henning, on the other hand, proposes to move away from understanding photography as frozen or a 'trace of the real.'[16] She proposes to 'invoke the idea of images as migratory, journeying, wandering, and vagabond, against the grain of a theoretical and historical discussion that tends to represent photographs as static, fixed, and relatively unchanging.'[17]

With this approach in mind, the image of the interior can be understood as a designed object, and therefore as possessing a mediating presence. As Grace Lees-Maffei's PCM paradigm suggests, mediation plays a crucial role in shaping how design is understood and experienced.[18] Consequently, the meaning of the interior cannot be separated from the context in which it is studied. The context is not just 'out there' as something that needs to be reunited with the image for an appropriate interpretation to be possible.[19] Such a view would be detrimental to any study of the photographed interior, as it would pay very little attention to the image's representation and/or the context in which it is studied. Contexts, as Henning further highlights:

> are human constructions, historical interpretations and, ultimately, acts of imagination, but the photograph never arrives entirely context-free; instead it bears the marks of experience even if, as in the digital, electronic transmission of images, the routes are hard to reconstruct.[20]

This shift in understanding has significant implications for the study of interior photography. If photographs are approached as mediating objects rather than fixed documents, their interpretative potential expands. This approach allows us to move away from understanding the photograph through binary conditions of either being 'true or false' but rather as something that interacts with those studying or looking at it.[21]

looking-beyond-seeing: the dining room at chantrey house

Bringing these different layers of knowledge together allows us to approach the photograph of the interior as a window offering different angles and viewpoints onto the domestic setting. Although we remain on one side of this window (we are not allowed in as we would be in virtual reality for instance) *Looking-beyond-Seeing* offers a greater degree of interpretative freedom by moving away from a singular, fixed point of view. This shift allows the researcher to occupy perspectives other than their own, engaging with the interior not simply as an image but as a mediated spatial condition: a 'doubled interior.'[22] In doing so, it invites us to empathise with the

bodies that may once have inhabited these spaces but are now present only through their absence. In images of the dining room at Chantrey House, for instance, what stands out most is not what is shown, but the striking absence of a body that might otherwise occupy the space [Fig. 04].



Figure 04.
O. Hill, 'Chantrey House, London. Dining room', *The Architectural Review*, LV (January–June 1924), p. 59. Photographer: F. R. Yerbury.

The selection of parts of the interior to be made available for viewing in the contemporary press was also of great importance to Hill's clients and crucial to how they performed their identity in relation to class.[23] These idealised interiors enable us to examine how owners displayed their personalities and status through their interiors as published. Through their photographs, Hill and his clients offered the magazine-reading public a curated view and description of certain rooms that best communicated their understanding of self — and how they wished to be understood — without necessarily being present themselves. The rooms that the clients allowed the public to see are staged interiors, which through their mise-en-scène helped the clients to support their identity, not only to those around them, but also to the world outside. The magazine-reading public would therefore only be introduced to those rooms that formed part of the inhabitant's onstage space, similar to what Erving Goffman described as their presentation of self.[24] Photography played a role 'not simply in the creation of subsequent advertising of identity, but also the role it performed in the perpetuation of a distinctly modern lifestyle' as Potvin has highlighted.[25] Readers were usually introduced to spaces such as the hall, living room, dining room, bathroom, and boudoir. Backstage settings such as kitchens, bedrooms, and studies remained largely hidden from the public eye. Therefore readers, much like visitors, are unable to freely view or move throughout the house. There is a clear, albeit invisible, demarcation between what can be seen and what cannot, which Goffman presents as the distinction between the 'front region and the back region'.[26] Creating a link between Hill's domestic designs and stage design is especially important since, as Arnold Aronson points out, both disciplines 'involve the transformation of space, the control of movement through that space, and – through the use of colour, line, texture, volume, and iconography – the communication of information while manipulating the emotional response of spectator-occupants'.[27] The theatrical concept of mise-en-scène is key in the communication between inhabitant and spectator. Furnishing and decoration can be used to investigate how Hill and his clients presented their personalities and status in their photographed domestic environments. Mise-en-scène therefore relates to its physical and psychological connotations. The physical mise-en-scène concerns itself with the staging of the physical environment and the props it contains, while the psychological mise-en-scène works with the physical mise-en-scène to 'elicit an emotional response by influencing our perception of space'.[28]

The dining room at Chantrey House provides a focused case through which to apply the framework of *Looking-beyond-Seeing*. Approached as both representation and mediating object, the photograph allows the interior to be examined not simply as a visual record but as a site where material, social, and sensory dimensions converge. Through this framework, the photograph becomes a point of entry into the spatial, sensory, and social conditions of the interior, allowing us to reconstruct aspects of its experience through interpretative engagement.

Within the context of the Chantrey House dining room we can begin to situate the image within the wider framework of the interwar dinner party. The placement of chairs, candles burned halfway down, and the arrangement of objects on the table act as cues suggesting recent social activity [Fig. 04]. These elements do not simply depict the interior but stage it as an environment structured around use and performance. The image can therefore be understood as an utterance of the dinner party, invoking a social event that extends beyond the limits of the photographic frame. Yet this utterance is not fixed. It deviates, changes, and acquires new meanings each time it is encountered. The photograph is not frozen but operates as an ever-changing citation of a dining room in which a dinner party took place.

It is through this mediated image that the case study of Chantrey House will now be examined using the framework of *Looking-beyond-Seeing*. This involves analysing the photograph across its material, social, and sensory dimensions, recognising it as a mediating object through which the interior was constructed, communicated, and experienced. By attending to the material cues visible within the photograph, the social relations embedded in its staging and circulation, and the atmospheres it suggests, the image becomes accessible as both representation and experiential environment. These material and sensory readings are undertaken through an understanding of the photograph as a mediated object. Through this approach, the photograph allows the interior to be understood as a dynamic spatial and social condition, reconstructed through mediation rather than direct physical access.

looking-beyond-seeing: material reading

Readers of *The Architectural Review* encountering the black and white images of the Chantrey house dining room [Fig. 04 and Fig. 06] were able to recreate the dining room more sensorially in their own minds through the accompanying description letting them know that:

> The table had a glass top sunk in a panel covered with wine coloured foil. The furniture is of silvered wood upholstered in the palest jade colour. The walls of the room are painted and glazed a colour resembling flesh and heather, and the ceiling is covered with a wine and silver foil. The curtains and pelmet round the ceiling are of wine-coloured silk trimmed with metal foil. All these materials would have worked together to enhance the quality of the light.[29]

These materials formed an integrated reflective ensemble structured around the dining table as the spatial and visual centre of the room. The polished glass surface of the table would have greatly enhanced reflections of surrounding materials, amplifying the interaction between light and surface. Reflective table surfaces were not new to the interwar period. Highly finished surfaces can also be seen in portraits of the eighteenth-century middle classes, such as the painting by John Singleton Copley of Mr and Mrs Isaac Winslow (1773), in which the mahogany table nearly resembles a mirror [Fig. 05]. Those viewing the Singleton Copley painting would have understood the Winslows' weighty mahogany table as a sign of 'elite status, social stability, and cultural refinement impervious to the vagaries of fashion or the marketplace.'[30] The patina on the table would have been achieved through years of use and polishing, further adding to the status of this piece of furniture.[31] The mahogany of earlier times, and the glass surface of the table during the interwar

period, would have been interpreted as signs of refinement and wealth. Indeed, Charles Holme (1848–1923), the editor of *The Studio* reviewing Hill's work and his use of glass, wrote, 'Unchanged by the most violent of disinfectants, glass presents its highly polished and richly antiseptic surface to the reflection of polite society.'[32] The gleam of surfaces evoked fashionability while simultaneously signalling cleanliness, control, and modern domestic efficiency. Read through *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, these polished surfaces also point to the often-unseen labour required to maintain them, drawing attention to the servants whose work underpinned the appearance of effortless domesticity.



Figure 05.
John Singleton Copley, *Mr and Mrs Isaac Winslow* (Jemima Debuke), 1773, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, The M. and M. Karolik Collection of Eighteenth-Century American Arts. (39.250), commons Wikimedia [accessed 10 June 2021].

It is also important to highlight that when encountered through photography, the effects of gloss do not disappear but are translated into tonal contrasts, guiding the viewer's eye across the printed image. This is a social interaction, as Monika Wagner has demonstrated in terms of gloss. As a mediating agent, 'gloss operates between an onlooker and reflective surfaces.'[33] Gloss thus mediates not only the lived dinner party but also their photographic afterlife both then and now. Reading shine through *Looking-beyond-Seeing* allows the reflective surface to be understood as more than a decorative finish, as a mediating agent shaping perception, sociability, and photographic reception. Through this reading, gloss emerges as event rather than surface: a dynamic interplay of material, light, labour, and social performance that extended Hill's interior beyond its physical boundaries into the realms of perception and mediation.

By the mid 1920s the public would have become acclimatised to product advertising and Hollywood star portraiture. Photographers such as Cecil Beaton (1904–1980) were at the forefront of this mode of photography, which 'consisted of sharp focus, high contrast, artificial lighting, and simplified backgrounds.'[34] Indeed, the shifting relationship between light and darkness was an intrinsic characteristic of the imagery of the interwar period, as Ruth Hommelen has highlighted, and photographs, architectural or other, are key witnesses of this shift.[35] The play between light and shadow in the images of Hill's interiors used in this research gives the viewer an understanding of overall scale, as it allows for the representation of three-dimensionality.

As with Hollywood star portraiture, images such as those of the dining room at Chantrey House were meant to arouse desire and excitement among magazine-reading audiences. Using the language of glamour similar to the star language of Hollywood, Hill and the magazine editors sought to entice both readers and potential consumers with their staged environments. These images allowed audiences to 'put themselves in the picture' even though most of them would never be able to afford a Hill commission.[36] These depicted interiors can in turn be linked to John Berger's discussion of the publicity image.[37] Further, the articles published on Hill's work should also be seen as advertisements for a lifestyle. The images present us with things that are to be envied, which, according to Berger, is what constitutes glamour.[38] Publicity, Berger continues, is about social relations, not objects. Its promise is not of pleasure, but of happiness: 'happiness as judged from the outside by others. The happiness

of being envied is glamour.'[39] The owners of these interiors were also aware of the role they played in the creation of these glamourous images and positioned themselves in the press as people to be envied, or, as Stephen Gundle notes, as 'magnificent versions of themselves', continuing that glamour:

> is an enticing and seductive vision that is designed to draw the eye of an audience. It consists of a retouched or perfected representation of someone or something whose purpose it is to dazzle and seduce whoever gazes on it.[40]

Glamour is a fundamental part of our understanding of how people made sense of interiors like those analysed in this research.

looking-beyond-seeing: affective reading

An affective reading draws on visual cues and contemporary sources to interpret the sensory and social atmospheres suggested by the photograph. Candlelight would have been key to the experience of this room during a dinner party. As described in contemporary articles and adverts, candlelight was not just there to create visibility but was used to mediate social and emotional connections.[41] What could be seen and how was important to both designer and client and had an important role to play in the overall design of room and table layout. Candlelight mediated the surroundings to the dinner guests and, equally, mediated how the guests saw each other. From the dining room table at Chantrey House candlelight would be used as mediating light to draw all attention to the table arrangement, which operated as both luminous and social focal points, inviting arriving diners toward the table. Although candles are not visible in all photographs of the Chantrey House dining room, its image makes it possible to imagine how candlelight would have structured the visitor's first impression upon entering the room [Fig. 06].

Once seated, these candles would continue to mediate the diners' performance by managing the



Figure 06.
O. Hill, 'Chantrey House, London. Dining room', *The Architectural Review*, LV (January–June 1924), p. 58. Photographer: F. R. Yerbury.

interplay between light and dark, as the ambient lighting in the room would have been dimmed. The dining room table as the main focal point would have been experienced as a frame within the larger frame of the room. As Simon Unwin describes, '[a] table, in its space, frames the life of a meal. It even frames the people sitting around it, though they are outside its rectangle.'[42] The candlelight radiating from the table can be approached as a further frame, framing the faces of the diners without a physical border. Candles are a perfect example of light that generates mediated visibility through their 'colour, angle and intensity', which Katherine Graham refers to as 'a lighting designer's stock-in-trade' that 'can radically transform the appearance of a person, space or object.'[43] The influence stage lighting could have on domestic lighting and decoration was also discussed in the early twentieth century, especially in relation to the psychological and emotional wellbeing of its

occupants. As exemplified by Potvin with a quote from *The Wall-Paper News and Interior Decorator*:

> [s]ince the lighting may enhance or ruin the beauty of a decorative treatment and may make the occupants of a room appear to advantage, or otherwise, it is essential to consider it and much may be learned from the investigation recently conducted in stage lighting.[44]

We can further add that this was equally the hostess's stock-in-trade, helping her to manage the success of her dinner party. The candles on the table would draw the attention of the diners arriving in the room, directing their attention to what would have been the centrepiece of the room.

Contemporary magazines repeatedly emphasised candlelight's capacity to focus attention and cultivate intimacy at the dining table. The hostess's role intersected directly with this reflective staging. Kathleen Kershaw, writing for *The Studio* in 1931, proposed that 'In this age of strong personalities, when every woman is assiduously developing her ego, the dining-table ought to prove to her friends what a very well-balanced mind she has.'[45] The reflective table surface would have enhanced these effects, amplifying the visual presence of both objects and diners through reflection. The use of candles played a significant part in how atmosphere was created on and around the dining room table. Regardless of the style of the room, the hostess who wanted her guests to feel comfortable would have to seek out the best candles and their most effective arrangement. The softening glow of candlelight at the dinner table, according to Len Chaloner writing in *Ideal Home* of 1925, would help to enhance good conversation.[46] Chaloner further highlighted the all-comforting glow of candlelight, reminding his readers of 'The charm of Tinker Bell dancing and twinkling merrily on the walls with the other fairies circling around the little flame restoring a homely familiarity to the chairs and furniture that had loomed huge and strange in the darkness.'[47]

Guests and hosts would not be the only people experiencing the dining room. Households such as these would still rely heavily on domestic service, especially when entertaining. As the light would draw attention to the diners around the table, it would equally exclude those outside of the distinct space created by the candlelight. Servants, for instance, would only penetrate this boundary created through light when called for. Light helped to create a boundary between the public and the private. The experience of the room would therefore not only change according to the time of day but also according to the position within the household.

Even though the majority of Hill's clients still relied heavily on the work of domestic servants for the upkeep of their home environments, many letters between Hill and his clients speak of financial constraints, often leading to alterations in the choice of materials and/or room size.[48] Although expensive materials were used throughout Hill's designs, it can be argued that more practical matters such as cleaning and upkeep also played a role in what was ultimately chosen. In her description of Hill's most well-known design, Gayfere House (1923–1926), for the magazine *Architecture Illustrated*, Lady Mount Temple (Hill's client) highlights practical considerations in relation to the choice of glass, stating that irritating mouldings and dust-collecting cornices can now all 'be swept away without regret.'[49] As Lucy Delap has shown, domestic service remained central to the performance of class identity, sustaining environments of visible refinement through largely invisible work.[50]

If we extend *Looking-beyond-Seeing* beyond what is visible in the photograph, the photograph begins to register not only what is shown but also what is excluded. The absence of servants' bodies in the published image does not signal their absence from the event itself. On the contrary, the smooth functioning of the dinner party depended upon their constant yet carefully managed presence. Their movement (approaching the table, replenishing dishes, and withdrawing again) would

have been meticulously choreographed so that service remained largely invisible within the dining room itself.

Candlelight, as demonstrated, played an important role in structuring this spatial and social choreography. The soft illumination of the table created an intimate visual field centred on the diners, reinforcing the privacy of the room, and equally created a visible separation from the more brightly lit working spaces of the household. As Laura Lutdke has observed in relation to modernist fiction such as *Night and Day* (1919) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf, electric light was often associated with functional spaces such as kitchens and service areas, while rooms of sociability were characterised by softer, more atmospheric forms of illumination.[51] In this sense, candlelight in the dining room not only produced a romantic and sociable atmosphere but also signalled the social status of the household. The carefully controlled lighting conditions helped maintain the distinction between the visible world of bourgeois sociability and the largely unseen labour that sustained it.

Within this environment, the intrusion of stronger electric light from adjacent service spaces, such as when a servant entered the room, would have disrupted the carefully calibrated atmosphere of the dinner party. Light therefore operated as a boundary between the private interior and the working spaces of the household, marking the threshold between sociable intimacy and domestic labour.

Through the framework of *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, the photographs of Chantrey House emerge not as a static record but as a mediating surface through which material, social, and sensory relations can be reconstructed. Approaching the photographed interior as a mediated object has positioned the interwar interior photograph as an active site of spatial encounter. Rather than functioning as a deficient surrogate for direct experience, the image operates as a mediating object through which the interwar interior remains accessible. Through *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, Hill's dining room at Chantrey House can be understood as both a photographed space and as an experiential environment reconstructed through mediation.

conclusion

This essay has argued that photographs of interwar interiors should not be dismissed as inadequate surrogates for direct experience, but rather as mediating objects through which spatial, social, and sensory relations can be accessed and reconstructed. By challenging the assumption that mediation constitutes a loss of experiential authenticity, this research has demonstrated that the photographed interior operates as representation and as an active site of encounter.

The framework of *Looking-beyond-Seeing* has provided a methodological means of engaging with interior photographs as mediated spatial propositions. Through material reading, the reflective surfaces, spatial arrangements, and tonal contrasts of Hill's dining room at Chantrey House reveal how material conditions structured perception and communicated social meaning. Through affective reading, the photograph allows the sensory atmospheres of the interior, including the mediating effects of candlelight, the structuring of social interaction, and the invisible labour sustaining the environment, to be interpretatively accessed. In both the material and affective readings, the photograph functions not as a static record but as a mediating surface through which the interior continues to operate beyond its physical existence.

Approaching the photograph as a mediating object also situates Hill's interiors within the broader Production–Consumption–Mediation paradigm. The meanings of these interiors were formed not solely through their physical design, but also through their photographic staging, editorial framing, and circulation within architectural journals and popular magazines. The published photograph became the primary means through which these interiors were encountered, shaping both contemporary

understanding and their subsequent historical interpretation. Mediation was therefore not secondary to the interior but integral to its existence as a cultural and spatial environment.

The case study of Chantrey House demonstrates that staged interior photographs encode material, social, and sensory information that can be accessed through interpretative engagement. Reflective surfaces mediated perception, photographic staging structured social meaning, and the controlled atmospheres of light and sound shaped the experiential conditions of the interior. Through *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, the photograph emerges as a site where spatial experience, social performance, and visual mediation converge.

More broadly, this research suggests that the study of historic interiors can extend beyond the analysis of physical space to include the mediating systems through which interiors were constructed, communicated, and experienced. For many lost or inaccessible interiors, photography does not simply preserve their appearance but constitutes the primary mode through which they continue to exist as spatial and cultural objects. By repositioning mediation as an analytical opportunity rather than a limitation, *Looking-beyond-Seeing* offers a methodological framework applicable to Hill's work and the interwar period, as well as to the wider study of interiors encountered through photographic mediation.

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