The problem being you've no-one to model yourselves on. "Even something like 'The Second Coming,' says Paul, "was fairly experimental. I don't think we had an idea how it was going to be like even a week away from performance. Even having participated, it's still unclear what the whole thing was. This huge monster."

The strength of the monster was and remains its enigma, in spite of itself. 'The Second Coming' ended with scenes and strokes too weird to explain: a flurry of dancing boxes with red crosses on their sides, a mass call for the return of King Arthur, a snowplough locomotive manhandled onstage. You can sellopago meaning to this for a while, but the heat of the art makes it curl up and drop off almost immediately.

The complaint made against the Department has after all never been that they lack visual flair or drama: it's always been their absolutely open-ended dealing with whatever it is pure spectacle uneartns. Huge communal emotions lurk in view, all mixed up, sinister as Laibach, funny as Arcahos, all at once. But what are we meant to be thinking, a part of us asks querulously. In pop Culture generally, we've long ago learnt to stop asking questions like this because Pop Culture is ours and we know it: so that it's up to us to make of it what we need; and always should have been.

"From the beginning there was a realisation that we wanted to make things pretty monumental."

But Test Dept are political also, and sometimes we aren't quite ready for the autonomy we're rightly demanding, aren't quite so confident about our rights and capabilities in high public discourse. Let us decide (tell us what to decide).

I love Test Dept because they still won't acquiesce to that backsliding little whimper in us - and the fact that that may not be a conscious move makes it all the more potent. They travel in the dark, the same dark as the rest of us:

"It was a bit of a weird ending. I don't think we had an ending up till about five days before. We had ideas of endings, but they'd proved technically impossible... All the endings we discussed, all of them were open-ended, we didn't want to say, THIS IS THE ANSWER, or anything like that. I think it worked that people had to make up their own minds about the show."
lessness, its street-level disinterest in its process or continued existence (especially among the young) contrasted with its high public obsession with ludicrous ritual and fake heritage ("mummery", in his word), gets more and more like the Hapsburg Empire in its closing stages.

Something bigger than Thatcher's over, forever: the mystical Union. We know this in our bones, and only our politicians haven't quite felt it: Scottish secession's next. It's because TD travel in the dark that they pitch into this before anyone else.

- "With the diversity of things that are going on now," says Graham, "people are much more open. Five years ago, people said I like that, I like that - they always put things in boxes. Whereas now people ADMIT to liking Heavy Metal and soul music, or whatever. So it's possible that people can like us AND Kylie without needing to be too much of a pervert. It's exciting. The possibilities are exciting, anyway. We'll have to wait and see, really."

What's it like working with an orchestra?

"John Eacott got them together," says Paul. "He told them he wanted this mood here, that one there. He was basically controlling it. We talked to him about it. It was quite strange. The whole process from when we were writing it, we were writing things with keyboards and computers, and at the same time in another room, John would be writing some stuff, and then we'd swap over. We'd give him our ideas, and he'd write them out. The whole process was really strange. Finally to have this stuff written out as a symphony, it was strange... In the end, it was really good, except that -

"- Classical Musicians can't play in time! They're very closed. The difference between a classical musician and a jazz musician. Ask a classical musician to improvise, and they just can't! They don't know what you mean! Some of them were interested in how this comes out. And for some it was just a job. But the basic problem was that they couldn't play in time. We had huge problems after that putting stuff on top. Stuff we'd done with computers, which has mechanical time, it was impossible. It was just unbelievable. Every other beat, the time would change. In the end, it was a compromise between what we did and what the orchestra did."

- in all the time they've existed - some nine years - Test Dept's worst suit has been explaining what they're about. Why they do what they do and what means what; they can be perfectly helpful and friendly, and still hopelessly adrift when it comes to discussion of their theory of AgitPopCult postrock Spectacle (or anyone else's). Critics and commentators - such as the tireless Biba Kopf - have probably papered over more cracks on their behalf than ought to be mentioned in smart company.

But this is really only half a criticism. If they're not good at it, why pretend? All around, turmoil is precipitating out of seamless and exhausting blandness: all the money's gone, sure, but every minor flurry that we saw absorbed and neutralised in the 80s is returning at once, all round. I wouldn't necessarily put faith in people who think they know the way through what's coming.

"With The Second Coming," says Graham, "we've taken on a scale of performance that can't go any bigger. Gradually over the nine years we've progressed to that point, and either you get bigger and bigger, or you find different ways. And I think it's probably time to start experimenting with different ways. There's room for us to experiment on different ways of communication. It might involve new people. Anything might happen really."

"We're looking," says Paul, "for ways of restructuring it - other ways of expressing it."

"I see us as having really been a mirror to the society all around us - and obviously things really are changing throughout the world. We did a lot of work involved with Eastern European ideas. And things have changed in South Africa. And who knows what's going to happen in the Middle East, but obviously there's going to be a new world order. The economy might collapse and it might not, but there's obviously lots of different ways of looking at things.

"This sort of chaos that there is at the moment, this uncontrollable side of things, something terrible might happen - but it does at least give you the feeling that something good could happen. And that just seems so rare after what we've been through, when it sometimes seemed that nothing good could ever happen again. There are parallels with Eastern Europe, where you lived under that system all your life and then suddenly it changed overnight."