Form, Place, and Memory
Materialist Readings of Iain Sinclair’s London Writing

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Abstract

The body of poetry and prose produced by Iain Sinclair between 1975 and 2002 represents a sustained engagement with the question of the role of art and literature in the representation and comprehension of the city. This thesis reads Sinclair’s work as a political intervention in the relationship between literature, urban space, and history, and takes its theoretical stance from the body of critical approaches to the city first articulated in Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. The thesis proceeds on a broadly temporal and geographical basis from the East End of the author’s 1975 poetic work *Lud Heat* to the suburbs of the capital in 2002’s *London Orbital*, and is split into three sections of two chapters each, entitled ‘Form’, ‘Place’, and ‘Memory’ respectively. This structure periodises the author’s *oeuvre*, demonstrating the ways in which his work responds to a series of historically specific cultural and political constellations; the titles name the perennial themes and critical concerns of Sinclair’s writing, and allow the investigation of the ways in which these are instantiated and elaborated in his texts.

Sinclair’s earliest work builds upon the formal innovations and ambition of modernist poetics. Through an analysis of his first major collection of poetry, *Lud Heat* (1975), and his first novel, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987), the first part of the thesis—‘Form’—argues that these texts constitute an interrogation of the institutions of literature in postwar Britain in the wake of what Peter Bürger identifies as the failure of the historic avant-gardes. These opening two chapters contextualise Sinclair’s work so as to reveal its anti-establishment, oppositional character; the second section of the thesis—‘Place’—moves on to examine how these concerns are expressed in relation to urban space. Chapter 3 turns to the figure of the *flâneur* in his second novel, *Downriver* (1991), and demonstrates how this work at once radically decentres this subjectivity and is conditioned by his limitations. *Downriver* marks a moment of political nihilism in Sinclair’s work, neither able to bring to representation Fredric Jameson’s aesthetic of ‘cognitive mapping’, nor the emancipatory potential of postmodernism. His later ‘psychogeographic’ writing articulates a response to this impasse: chapter 4 demonstrates the ways in which Sinclair’s use of this term at once divests it of the utopian character of its Situationist origins and transforms it into a dissenting, heterogeneous, literary mode. The final two chapters—‘Memory’—investigate the political potentialities of the models of history expressed in Sinclair’s work. Chapter 5 turns to the author’s use of the Gothic in relation to Benjamin’s ‘messianic’ notion of ‘the what has been’, and argues that whilst such strategies can be of great critical potential, they at once risk collusion with that which they attack. Chapter 6 then analyses 2002’s *London Orbital*, and argues that this work’s ironic, tentative nostalgia for both the author’s anti-establishment past and for the utopian character of former socio-political projects represents an attempt to find a way beyond the political malaise that Sinclair’s London corpus identifies.
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Dedication and Acknowledgements

For Meg & Frank.

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Introduction

The truth content of all authentic works of culture indicates utopia, the desired destination, or the distance yet to be travelled.¹

Always historicize!²

I

At one point in Iain Sinclair’s *London Orbital* (2002), the text makes reference to a Victorian parlour game called the ‘myriorama’. This consists of a pack of cards, each illustrated with scenes of country life, which are designed so that they can be arranged in any order to produce a “perfectly harmonious landscape”.³ They are described as follows:

A landscape of symbols: road, lake (or river), low hills, distant village, travellers on a highway. Time frozen at the edge of extinction. Something of Breughel, something of Christian Rosencruz: hermetic-cabbalist hieroglyphs. The scale of these pocket-Polaroids induces vertigo. The black birds hanging above the rocks are too big. Why should eagles or vultures be found at the outskirts of a pretty German town? Why is the solitary horseman blowing a bugle? Everything tugs and tosses. Two youths

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cling, terrified, to a lifting kite. A decorated hot air balloon drifts in one direction; the sails of a three-master billow, as it surges in the other. There is an obelisk like a war memorial with an unreadable inscription. Two walkers, rucksack-burdened, debate a signpost. The thing you can’t do with the twenty-four cards is arrange them in a circle. The pattern fractures, the road breaks; the drawings are revealed as cigarette cards from a prophetic tarot pack to which the key has been lost.4

This excerpt shall be returned to much later, but for the moment we should pause to consider what model this fragment offers for the understanding of Sinclair’s writing. *London Orbital* purports to document the epic walk conducted by the author and various others around the M25 in the months leading up to the turn of the millennium, yet this analysis of the myriorama presents us with something of a crisis of representation. Not only does the attempt to arrange the cards to echo the shape of the motorway lead to the fragmentation of the possible landscape that they might depict, but the individual elements of each card do not cohere even if arranged as their designer might have intended. Perspective, it is suggested, is broken; nature, in the forms of the wind which seems to blow in two directions at once and the anomalous fauna which populate the landscape, seems at odds with itself. Neither are the cards’ human inhabitants any more at ease, nor their actions more comprehensible: the bugle rallies an absent hunt, misadventure threatens, walkers are lost. As representation, the myriorama fails, yet even in abstraction from the motorway to which Sinclair attempts to make it fit, its elements are obscure and contradictory, the work’s promise of ‘perfect harmony’ left unfulfilled. *London Orbital*, and indeed Sinclair’s *oeuvre* more broadly, is characterised by just such fractured and contradictory forms: his earliest poetry adopts a scale, complexity, and aesthetic which owe much to the experimental poetics of Pound and Eliot; his fiction eschews many of the conventions of plot, character, and genre to formulate dense meditations on the relationship between history and place; whilst his later ‘non-fiction’, of which *London Orbital*...
is an example, encompasses a disorientating range of subjects and discourses. This makes for a challenging and often intractable body of work, yet if London Orbital’s description of the myriorama suggests that the artwork is necessarily incomplete, discontinuous, and fragmented, then its implication that there could be a key by which its meaning might be unlocked suggests also that the interpretative act is not a fruitless one.

Despite the text’s proposal to the contrary, there is no single key that might unlock the meaning of an artwork, or indeed, shackle it to a singular interpretation; nor would the reader be advised to follow the above fragment’s suggestion that interpretation might yield prophecy. Instead, this study argues for a political, materialist reading of Iain Sinclair’s writing. By materialist I mean, in an approach which derives from a line of Marxist thought that extends through the literary criticism of Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Raymond Williams, and Fredric Jameson – but includes also the work of art historians such as T. J. Clark and Griselda Pollock, sociologists of art such as Janet Wolff, and geographers such as Doreen Massey and David Harvey – that works of culture are conditioned by and respond to the historical circumstances of their production. This is not to suggest a reflective model of art, in which the conditions of a notional economic base find themselves unproblematically mirrored in superstructural phenomena; nor indeed is it to suggest that the intent of the artist is expressed by the work, is available to the critic, or is the yardstick by which a work must be judged. More, it is to say that artworks are

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5 Though these thinkers are grouped here on the basis of that which unites them, their approaches are not undifferentiated, the dispute between Lukács and Adorno over Modernism, for example, being well known. Similarly, whilst Benjamin has been latterly adopted by the Frankfurt School, his thought in many respects does not map exactly to the contours of their project. Adorno, for example, notoriously took issue with the lack of dialectical mediation in Benjamin’s essay ‘Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’; Theodor Adorno, ‘Letter to Walter Benjamin, 10 November 1938’, in Adorno et. al., Aesthetics and Politics, pp. 126-133 (p. 129). More recently, Pollock, Wolff, and Massey in their respective works Vision and Difference (London: Routledge, 2003); ‘The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity’, Theory, Culture & Society, 2.3 (January 1985), 37-46; and Space, Place and Gender (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), have made significant interrogations of Marxist theory in the light of feminism, and in the case of Pollock and Wolff, have challenged Benjamin’s theorisation of the experience of urban space in The Arcades Project and elsewhere. Harvey’s The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990 [1989]), and other works of the ‘spatial turn’ such as Henri Lefebvre’s The Production of Space (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) and Edward Soja’s Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory (London: Verso, 1989) have, where classical Marxism privileges history in its analysis of capitalism, insisted also on the importance of space – a development which, directly or indirectly, owes much to Benjamin.
produced, as Adorno argues, by way of the processes of mediation through which the artist transmutes materials derived from his or her experience of the world in accordance with the formal and aesthetic decisions by which the artwork is composed.6 Just as the cards of the myriorama might be read as the elements from which a text such as London Orbital is constructed, and their arrangement the aesthetic mediations by and through which they are synthesised into the fabric of the work, so must criticism mediate the part that is the work to the social whole. Politics, then, has a specific meaning in this context. Whilst this thesis argues that Sinclair’s work should be read as a political project inasmuch as it engages explicitly with such questions, it does not seek to judge his oeuvre on the basis of its manifest political content or on the stated stance of its author. To read Sinclair’s work politically means instead to illuminate the ways it expresses its relationship to the context within which it was produced and is now received. As Esther Leslie has it:

Immanent critique sparks off from the inner contradictions of an artifact. And it does this not in order to cast down the artifact, having won of it a moral victory, but in order to make a cool assessment of how the part fits or does not fit the whole, how social experience of the world has brought the artifact to life, and how and in what way it continues to let it live.7

II

There are now a number of studies which address Sinclair’s writing, and this thesis could not have been written without them. Robert Bond’s pathbreaking monograph, Iain Sinclair, reads his work between the poles of Adorno and Bourdieu: that is, if Adorno reads the commodity status of the artwork as redeemable in its ‘truth content’, then Bourdieu instead reads it as ‘sheer ideology’.8 For Bond, the enigmatic qualities of Sinclair’s work are

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7 Esther Leslie, ‘Space and West End Girls’, p. 112.
produced by the ways in which it at once confirms and rebuts both positions.\textsuperscript{9} There are two excellent literary histories of the author’s work: Brian Baker’s \textit{Iain Sinclair} reads his early poetry in relation to such countercultural figures as R. D. Laing and Allen Ginsberg, and traces the chronological path of Sinclair’s writing from these beginnings through to \textit{Edge of the Orison: In the traces of John Clare’s ‘Journey Out of Essex’} (2005);\textsuperscript{10} whilst Robert Sheppard’s \textit{Iain Sinclair} reconstructs the ‘intratextual’ (sic) relationships between the author’s poetic practices and his later prose works.\textsuperscript{11} Alex Murray’s \textit{Recalling London} reads Sinclair’s writing in relation to that of Peter Ackroyd, emphasising the ways in which each body of work produces differing notions of history and place.\textsuperscript{12} In addition to these full-length studies, the work of Julian Wolfrey, whose Derridean readings of Sinclair are both insightful and

\textsuperscript{9} Whilst the bodies of work produced by both writers are large and complex, aspects of the thought of Adorno and Bourdieu could be considered as diametrically opposed, particularly with regard to the question of the autonomy of the artwork. As Adorno expresses it in \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, ‘Every artwork is a picture puzzle, a puzzle to be solved, but this puzzle is constituted in such a fashion that it remains a vexation’; Theodor Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004 [1997]), p. 161. Though artworks are not outside of the realm of commodity exchange, their ‘value’ lies, then, in a historically contingent ‘truth content’ which they themselves do not express, but towards which they are oriented in negative through the mediations of aesthetic judgement and formal composition. This is the ‘puzzle’ that the artwork represents: its truth content ‘can only be achieved by philosophical reflection […] [which] alone is the justification of aesthetics’ (p. 169). The commodity character of the artwork is therefore redeemed in that art allows the thinking of the ‘determinate critique that [artworks] exercise through their form’ (p. 175). Adorno’s account of aesthetics, however, rests in part on a notion of art’s relative autonomy from everyday existence: as he puts it in another context, artworks ‘point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life’; Theodor Adorno, ‘Commitment’, in Adorno et. al., \textit{Aesthetics and Politics}, pp. 177-195 (p. 195). This implies also that the formal and aesthetic judgements which govern the creation of artworks are disinterested, a Kantian notion which Bourdieu characterises as ‘totally purified of all sensuous or sensible interest, as remote from concupiscence as it is from conspicuous consumption’; Pierre Bourdieu, \textit{Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste}, trans. by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010 [1984]), p. 495. Yet for Bourdieu, such disinterest is an illusion, and is in fact the ‘universalization of the dispositions associated with a particular social and economic condition’ (p. 495). Instead, Bourdieu insists on the class basis of aesthetic judgements, arguing that taste is one of the means by and through which social hierarchies are expressed and legitimated (p. xxx). Adorno and Bourdieu therefore disagree on the notion and function of the autonomy of art. For Adorno, whilst his conception of the relative autonomy of art recognises it as itself produced by the operation of capital, it is precisely this autonomy which secures for it a critical perspective on the capitalist order. As he states, ‘only what is useless [art] can stand in for the stunted use value’; Theodor Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, p. 298. For Bourdieu not only is this autonomy illusory, but the whole notion that art is in any way autonomous is an ideological manoeuvre which disguises the social function of the expression of taste. Thus that which for Adorno is the guarantor of art’s ‘truth’, however so mediated, becomes for Bourdieu that which signifies art’s complicity in the production and maintenance of class hierarchies.

\textsuperscript{10} Brian Baker, \textit{Iain Sinclair} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).


\textsuperscript{12} Alex Murray, \textit{Recalling London: Literature and History in the Work of Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair} (London: Continuum, 2007).
subtle, is invaluable, as are the essays contained in the collection City Visions edited by Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge, and the Literary London conferences and journal around which much of the critical activity surrounding Sinclair’s work is focussed in the UK. This thesis draws upon all of these bodies of work, both in terms of the histories of Sinclair’s work that they reconstruct and in their theoretical approaches. It assents, for example, to Bond’s insistence on the relevance of the Frankfurt School in the analysis of Sinclair’s writing, and, with Baker, Sheppard, and Murray, concurs also that his writing cannot be adequately addressed in abstraction from its historical context. Yet the approach that this thesis takes differs from these studies in that it reads Sinclair’s work through a particular problem which arises from the historical configuration within which his earliest work was produced. This moment in the early 1970s is marked by the end of Modernism in the arts, the failure of avant-gardism considered as a revolutionary convergence of artistic and political praxes whose high-watermark could be considered the événements of 1968, the end of the 1960s counterculture, and the rise of neoliberal economics as a force within British (and American) politics. Of this conjunction, which in its various forms will be addressed throughout the present study, the most important elements at this point are the first two, 13 Wolfreys has addressed Sinclair in a number of works, including Writing London Vol. 1: The Trace of the Text from Blake to Dickens (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998); Writing London Vol. 2: Materiality, Memory, Spectrality (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004); Writing London Vol. 3: Inventions of the City (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007); Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), as well as numerous journal articles and papers. 14 City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair, ed. by Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007). 15 The architectural theorist Charles Jencks locates the end of Modernism (in architecture at least) to ‘St Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3.32 pm (or thereabouts)’, this being the moment when the Corbusian Pruitt-Igoe housing scheme was demolished; Charles Jencks, The Language of Post-Modern Architecture (London: Academy Editions, 1991 [1977]), p. 23. Sinclair’s work, then, could be considered as developing on the cusp of the postmodern, though I have refrained from using this term in the above due to the breadth of cultural and philosophical concepts which it encompasses. The debates over modernity, Modernism, postmodernity and postmodernism, however, do inevitably inform the approach of this thesis, and the historical sketch given above draws on them. Whilst this is not the place to rehearse these arguments, my account rests with those readings of postmodernism which understand it as the cultural expression of the changing structure of multinational capitalism. The two major works that I draw on here are Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991); and David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity; but also Terry Eagleton, ‘Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism’, New Left Review, 1.152 (July-August 1985), 60-73. With reference to the specifics of British literature and culture in this period, this thesis draws here also on Alan Sinfield, Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain (London: Continuum, 2004 [1989]); and Patricia Waugh, Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960 to 1990 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
and it is from these that the following question arises: in what ways does Sinclair’s work express a model of dissenting literary practice in the wake of the failure of avant-gardism, and the broader Modernist moment of which avant-gardism was a component, considered as projects which sought to change the practices of life through art?

In this aspect, this study follows the logic of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which interprets the historic artistic movements of the late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth centuries – and in particular Dada and Surrealism – as attempting to destroy the boundary between art and everyday life through an attack both on the categories of artistic practice and on the institutions through which art is produced, legitimated, and consumed in bourgeois society. Bürger’s account of these movements reads them as protesting against the ideological role of art within the societies in which they were operating: he claims that art, as a sphere of relative autonomy from the means-ends rationality of capitalism, can critique that rationality; yet in its function as fiction ‘relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces to make for change.’ Thus the avant-garde assault sought to reveal the perceived hypocrisy of bourgeois mores, but aimed also to destroy the institutional framing conditions which prevented the values that art had traditionally preserved – ‘humanity, joy, truth, solidarity’ – from being realised in everyday life. As the most extreme manifestations of the politicisation of artistic practices, these movements represent a moment in which the questions of the political efficacy of art and of the possibility of provoking social change through cultural means are fought for and, in Bürger’s terms lost: whether or not their aims could have been realised, these attempts to revolutionise everyday life through an assault on the separation of art and life were

17 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 50.
18 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 50.
themselves absorbed by the art market, repackaged, and sold. Art has therefore proven itself perfectly able to absorb its own critique, and thus to neutralise criticisms of broader social structures from within its borders. The challenge for artists and writers such as Sinclair, whose practice dissents from the prevailing political and cultural milieu in which they work, is to negotiate this impasse.

This is not to argue for the continued possibility of artistic movements of the type exemplified by Dada and Surrealism, nor to read Sinclair himself as an avant-garde writer in Bürger’s sense; it is more to point out that the avant-garde impulse demonstrates most clearly the problems faced by a political art of whatever stripe in the wake of the failure of these movements to achieve their ambitions. What, then, is alive and what is dead in the legacy of the Modernist avant-gardes? Which, if any, of their practices still retain critical potential? Be it the shock tactics to which artists have returned repeatedly; their theorisations of the urban experience; the valorisation of the emancipatory potential of the unconscious mind; or the more or less explicit utopianisms which structure the whole notion of a revolutionary artistic praxis? If it is agreed that avant-gardism is politically dead, then what is the ‘correct’ way to address this? Do we celebrate or mourn its passing, in the knowledge that its tactics and revolutionary zeal can no longer be naively appropriated? Finally, is it any longer possible (if it ever was) for art to criticise existing social structures without colluding with their operation? As shall be demonstrated throughout this thesis, these questions (and related ones) condition many of the characteristics of Sinclair’s writing. His early poetry, exemplified by _Lud Heat_ (1975) responds to precisely the question of the relationship between artistic practices, their reception, production, and the practice

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19 To give but one example of this process, when Marcel Duchamp signed a mass-produced urinal and presented it as art with _Fountain_ (1917), the work negated the notions of the artist as the creator of the artwork and the signature as the imprimatur and guarantee of its provenance, and consequently was scandalous; Peter Bürger, _Theory of the Avant-Garde_, p. 52. This scandal, however, could not last: Andy Warhol’s _Campbell’s Soup Cans_ (1962), for example, which in taking a brand of mass-produced soup as its subject matter and in its creation through a semi-industrial screen-printing process, negates the categories of artistic production in a similar fashion to _Fountain_. Yet as Duchamp (and the other Dadaist provocateurs) failed to bring about the collapse of the art market through mocking its pretensions and hypocrisies, Warhol’s gesture cannot be in good faith, and these features represent not an assault on the values of commerce but an accommodation with them; Peter Bürger, _Theory of the Avant-Garde_, pp. 52-53.
of everyday life as did an earlier avant-gardism. His novels, in particular *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987) dramatise the ways in which literature is implicated in the processes of commodity exchange. Much of his work, from *Lud Heat* through to *Downriver* (1991) and *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997), explores the various models for synthesising the experience of the city (and its revolutionary potential) developed by avant-gardism, though relocated from what Walter Benjamin termed the ‘Capital of the Nineteenth Century’ – Paris – to the decidedly gloomier streets of London. Finally, moving to the suburbs of the city in later work such as *London Orbital*, an attempt can be discerned to revivify the sort of desires for a radical (and utopian) rearrangement of contemporary social structures that the historic avant-gardes struggled for.

Reading Sinclair’s work in the light of these problems, moreover, allows us also to make distinctions between his work and that of other writers of the postwar period. Patricia Waugh singles out Phillip Larkin and Martin Amis as writers who, though they dissent from the social and economic norms of their respective times, are at once complicit with that which they criticise. Waugh reads Larkin as disaffected with what Alan Sinfield terms the ‘welfare capitalism’ of the postwar settlement: a world whose ‘spiritual vacuity’ Larkin rejects. However, the ironised, “less-deceived” stance of his poetry ‘forestalls the expression of any alternative to it.’ Though Amis satirises the ‘nihilistic commercialism of style and surface’ of the 1980s in works such as *Money* (1984), these works ‘eschew psychological depth and actually espouse the slick style of the urban operator’. If these positions are read in the light of the questions sketched above, it can be seen that they represent a certain sort of answer to them. Fredric Jameson argues that:

One of the fundamental features of modernism with which it is hard for us to come

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21 Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, p. xxxii.
22 Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties*, p. 29.
23 Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties*, p. 29.
to terms in a postmodern age is precisely its trans- or even anti-aesthetic vocation – the will of the great modernist works to be something more than mere art and to transcend a merely decorative and culinary aesthetic, to reach the sphere of what is variously identified as the prophetic or the metaphysical, the visionary or the cosmic, that realm in which aesthetics and ethics, politics and philosophy, religion and pedagogy, all fold together into some supreme vocation.25

If, in precisely their ‘anti-aesthetic vocation’, the historic avant-gardes represent one of the more extreme manifestations of this broader modernist tendency, then Larkin’s irony defends a sensibility which is sceptical of such ambitions, though it finds a certain – but muted – consolation in a chastened literary practice in a compromised world. Amis, seeing nothing left untouched by the hand of the market, at the same time denounces and celebrates the pleasures of its corruptions, but posits no possibility of escape from it, least of all through art. If we take it as axiomatic that dominant political discourses express themselves as inevitable – in Margaret Thatcher’s words, ‘There Is No Alternative’ – then though Larkin and Amis might not embrace that which they write against, then they ultimately accept the terms of the debate thus framed. Neither position seems adequate to Sinclair’s writing. In its commitment to the visionary and emancipatory capacities of experimental artistic practices, bitter invective against contemporary politics, and in its continual return to and interrogation of the problem of the complicity of art with that from which it dissents, his work therefore rejects the compromises that Larkin and Amis ultimately make. Yet though it is far more sympathetic to the projects of the historic avant-gardes than either Larkin or Amis, in common with these writers neither can it endorse a revolutionary politics.

It is these characteristics that make Sinclair such an anomalous figure in contemporary British literature. Not only does his practice cross boundaries of form, genre, and media – in addition to poetry, fiction, and essays, his work encompasses also

performance and film – but his work can be read as at odds with some of the more dominant trends within British writing. For example, in its tendency to privilege epic and experimental forms, his poetry diverges from what Robert Sheppard has termed the ‘Movement Orthodoxy’. In their almost wholesale rejection of realist textual frames and linear plots, voluminous range of subjects, characters, and histories, and their problematisation of notions of stable subjectivity, Sinclair’s novels also rebut what Philip Tew identifies as the narrowed scope of Twentieth Century British ‘literary’ fiction for which ‘human personality […] seems too often simply a series of middle-class co-ordinates’. Similarly, whilst his purportedly ‘documentary’ writing such as *Lights Out for the Territory* is in many respects more approachable than either his poetry or prose, its dense and aleatory structure does not conform to the standards of argument and transparency that might be expected of the essay form. Yet if these features of Sinclair’s work separate it from some sorts of literary practice, they at once allow parallels to be drawn with others. His early poetry has been grouped with other lengthy poetic meditations on the city such as Allen Fisher’s multi-volume work *Place* (1971-1980) and Aidan Dun’s *Vale Royal* (1995). The metafictions of Paul Auster and Italo Calvino also bear comparison with Sinclair’s novels, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* sharing some of the same concerns with genre fiction (and particularly detective fiction) as works such as Auster’s *New York Trilogy* (1985-86) and Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveller* (1979). His later novels, for example *Downriver* or *Radon Daughters* (1994) might usefully be contrasted with the encyclopaedic works of Umberto Eco and Thomas Pynchon. Yet if Sinclair’s writing shares some of the self-reflexive and ludic qualities that have made have made such works amenable to theories of the postmodern, then his refusal of the sort of compromise represented by Amis or Larkin discussed above harks back to an earlier Modernism. Thus the work of a writer

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such as B. S. Johnson, whom Waugh describes as ‘paralytically torn between the epistememes of modernity and postmodernity, wanting but unable to believe in absolute orders existing below the contingent surfaces of everyday experience, yet equally unable to embrace the post-modern condition’, becomes apposite. Similarly, Sinclair’s connections with the 1960s counterculture allows one to place his work alongside writers such as Michael Moorcock, under whose editorship the magazine New Worlds published the experimental science fictions of William Burroughs and J. G. Ballard, two writers to whom Sinclair makes extensive reference in Slow Chocolate Autopsy (1997) and London Orbital respectively. Finally, though a number of Sinclair’s works stray beyond the envelope of the M25 – the novels Landor’s Tower (2001) and Dining on Stones (2004), for example, are set primarily in Wales and Hastings respectively – the majority of his works are either set in or are about the Capital, and it is primarily as a ‘London’ writer that he is best known. It is this that allows him to be placed with other contemporary writers whose work focusses on that city, such as Will Self, whose essay collection Psychogeography (2007) owes much to Sinclair; Peter Ackroyd, whose novel Hawksmoor (1985) shares overlapping concerns with Lud Heat; or, more tangentially, a writer such as Hillary Mantel, whose Beyond Black (2005) explores much of the same geographic territory and historical moment as London Orbital.

It is this London focus which provides some measure of justification for the fact that this thesis attends most closely those of Sinclair’s works which take this city as their primary object: there are, however, other reasons. In the questions that spill from the failure of a certain sort of political avant-gardism sketched above, I mentioned the models of urban space articulated by the radical artistic movements of the early Twentieth Century. These models, formulated for example by writers associated with the Surrealist movement such as Louis Aragon, those influenced by it, such as Walter Benjamin, but also the work of members of the later Situationist International such as the architect Constant

30 Patricia Waugh, Harvest of the Sixties, p. 133.
31 Sinclair has also written on the relationship between Ballard’s novel Crash and David Cronenberg’s cinematic adaptation of the same title; Iain Sinclair, Crash: David Cronenberg’s Post-Mortem on J. G. Ballard’s ’Trajectory of Fate’ (London: British Film Institute, 1999).
Nieuwenhuys and the writer, filmmaker, and revolutionary Guy Debord, attend to the transformative and utopian potential latent in the experience of the city. Moreover, these hoped-for utopianisms emerge from the ways in which space, capital, and culture interrelate: questions which, as David Harvey has demonstrated, are frequently (and most acutely), urban. The fact that Sinclair makes explicit reference to these models in his writing invites the comparison between his understanding of the city and those of these thinkers. Yet more than this, to read Sinclair’s London writing in comparison to these models is to stress also the ways in which it confirms or denies these utopian or revolutionary possibilities. There is, however, a geographic specificity to the avant-gardiste urban visions of the Surrealists and Situationists, in that these movements were responding to Paris as a city with a history of successive revolutions. Not only have these events become indelibly associated with the names of the streets of Paris, but they have shaped their design: Haussmann’s boulevards, for example, were designed in part so as to facilitate the easy movement of troops. Moreover, Haussmannisation had shown the plasticity of the city: as Benjamin points out in ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’, ‘along with the growth of the big cities there developed the means of razing them to the ground. What visions of the future are evoked by this!’ Much of the City of London retains its medieval street plan, and its history is not as volatile: as the unnamed and unseen narrator of Patrick Keiller’s film London (1994) to which Sinclair refers in Lights Out for the Territory notes, ‘The failure of English Revolution is all around us’.

It is this difference between the urbanisms of London and Paris which opens

32 Aragon’s novel Paris Peasant (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971) is one of the major influences on Benjamin’s Arcades Project. Nieuwenhuys’s vision for a post-revolutionary city is explored in the multiple models, drawings, and photographs of his proposed New Babylon, which is documented in Mark Wigley, Constant’s New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1998). Debord’s thoughts on the city can be found in texts such as ‘Theory of the Dérive’, in Situationist International Anthology, ed. and trans. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) pp. 50-54.
33 See, for example, his study of the Paris of the Second Empire, Paris, Capital of Modernity (London: Routledge, 2003).
34 David Harvey, Paris, Capital of Modernity, p. 113.
36 Patrick Keiller, London, (British Film Institute, 1994).
another justification for attending closely to Sinclair’s focus on the city in the light of the theories of urban space derived from the avant-garde movements. In an interview with Patrick Wright, Keiller connects his work with that of the Marxist historian Ellen Meiksins Wood.37 Wood argues that the features which differentiate London from other European cities are due to the history of capitalist development in England and its peculiarities. Firstly, as capitalism emerged earlier in England than in other European countries, the nascent ‘bourgeois’ communities which shaped early continental urban development, and whose legacy is still discernible in European capitals, were prematurely overwhelmed.38 Secondly, the early appropriation of the English landscape by mercantile capital led to the economic dominance of London and the South East over the regions when compared with other European states.39 The character of 1980s London, which Wood describes as marked by its ‘undistinguished modern architecture, neglect of public services and amenities from the arts to transportation, [and a] general seediness’,40 is a consequence of this trajectory of development. Moreover, this failure of Britain to produce a properly bourgeois metropolitan culture conditions the emergence of the Arts and Crafts movement in the late Nineteenth century, which takes, paradoxically, the form of a radical nostalgia:41

Nothing illustrates more strikingly the complete eradication of this pre-capitalist

39 Ellen Meiksins Wood, The Pristine Culture of Capitalism, p. 107. Both Keiller and Wood respond here to the theses of historical development formulated by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn in a series of articles published in the New Left Review between 1964 and 1976. To summarise, Anderson and Nairn argue that where the bourgeois revolutions in other European countries led to the development of fully-fledged capitalist democracies, the failure of the English revolution of 1660 means that British economic and cultural development has been hampered by the hangover of an aristocratic and feudal social structure. The outline of these positions can be found in Perry Anderson, ‘On the Origins of the Present Crisis’, New Left Review, 1.23 (1964), 26-54. Anderson and Nairn’s hypotheses were strongly criticised by the historian E. P. Thompson in his essay ‘The Peculiarities of the English’ which is collected in The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays (London: Merlin Press, 1978), alongside his lengthy broadside against Louis Althusser. Perry Anderson’s response to Thompson’s criticisms can be found in Arguments Within English Marxism (London: Verso, 1980).
41 Alastair Bonnet notes the complexity of nostalgia in British left politics also, and has related it to the writing of Sinclair and others: I follow his terminology here. See Alastair Bonnet, ‘The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia in British Psychogeography’, Theory, Culture & Society, 26.1 (2009), 45-70.
urban culture [European burgherism] in England than its reappearance in the late nineteenth century as a radical ideology. The arts-and-crafts movement, which was to exert such an influence on ‘modernism’, could only have emerged as a self-conscious subversion of the prevailing order here in England, where the past that it evoked was most irretrievably gone.  

Benjamin, taking his cue from the Surrealists, looked to the utopian potential of the unrealised future suggested by the still-extant glass and steel of the Parisian shopping Arcades; later, the Situationists, whilst denouncing Le Corbusier for his functionalism and describing Haussmann’s Paris as ‘a city built by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’, saw in both the possibility of reshaping and renewing the city in accordance with their desires. All of them, moreover, looked back to the denied promise of the Paris Commune. Thus, though it should not be forgotten that the Arts and Crafts movement was antecedent to these later European developments, it is surely significant that where the Surrealists and Situationists looked to find the future in that which was only just fading from memory – in Aragon’s words, the places which ‘were incomprehensible yesterday, and that tomorrow will never know’ – the Arts and Crafts movement looked back to rediscover instead a long-lost and bucolic past. Moreover, the restitution of the monarchy meant that the revolutionary moment, depicted for example by William Morris in *News from Nowhere* (1890), had to be imported from elsewhere. These differences indicate the value of reading Sinclair’s London work in the light of what remains of the urban avant-gardism formulated by movements such as the Surrealists and the Situationists: its purpose is not

45 Moreover, it might also be noted that the Arts and Crafts movement, in looking back so far for artistic and political renewal, differs also from the radical Parisian artistic movements that were its near-contemporaries. Thus in 1863 Baudelaire praises the illustrator Constantin Guys as the flâneur ‘whose object of study was modernity’; Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* ed. and trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), pp. 1-40 (p. 12). Similarly, as T. J. Clark demonstrates in his magisterial study *The Painting of Modern Life*, Impressionist painters tended to take as their subject the nouvelles couches sociales, whom they ‘depended on for a point of insertion into modern life’; T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985 [1984]), p. 258.
arbitrarily to impose a set of concerns onto Sinclair’s writing, but instead to emphasise the ways in which it vacillates on the cusp of utopianism and anti-utopianism, anti-sentimentality and nostalgia, in ways which articulate the experience of modernity in the particularity of its contemporary London modes.

III

In order to address these issues, this thesis is split into three parts, each composed of two chapters, entitled ‘Form’, ‘Place’, and ‘Memory’ respectively. These name the three inter-related perspectives from which the thesis will approach Sinclair’s work. As the above sketch demonstrates, the questions raised by the impossibility of an ‘authentic’ avant-gardism are related in complex and often contradictory ways, nor would it be trivial (or even desirable) to separate them. Avant-gardism, as theorised by Bürger, is a form of artistic practice which questions the legitimacy of the institutional formations through which art is produced and received. Sinclair’s work not only engages with such strategies, but does so in ways which relate to the geographical specificity and history of London. Moreover, that his work articulates a relationship to its artistic and literary forebears, returning repeatedly to both the utopian possibilities latent in artistic practices and the experience of the city, raises questions about the models of historicity, antecedence, and futurity that it expresses. Thus, by adopting such a structure, though it will by turn take different emphases, the thesis will be able to keep these multiple questions in frame concurrently. Yet more than this, this structure will allow the thesis to approach Sinclair’s oeuvre in multiple ways. All of the factors listed above serve to problematise the notion of a political reading of artworks in abstraction from their institutional, geographical, and historical contexts. To understand the politics of Sinclair’s writing, therefore, requires an heterogeneous approach which can understand both the politics of aesthetic form and the ways in which these forms are related to social structures. In her essay ‘Modernist Studies and Cultural Studies: Reflections on Method’, Rita Felski differentiates between
the methodologies of cultural studies, literary sociology, and political formalism. In Felski’s schema, literary sociology attends to the ways in which works are propagated through institutional formations, yet tends to either downplay, reject, or ignore questions of aesthetic value. Political formalism, conversely, is concerned instead with the ‘primacy and preeminence of aesthetic form’ to unpick the ‘patterns of hierarchy, exclusion, and inequality’ encoded within literary texts. What marks the approach of cultural studies from both of these positions is that it both seeks to intervene in aesthetic discourse to ‘alter its guiding assumptions and frames of reference’, yet insists also that the ‘political import of a text cannot be inferred from its internal form or logic, but derives from its position in a constellation of texts, practices, and interests’. It is for this reason that the thesis, in order to read Sinclair’s work in the light of its relationship to an earlier avant-gardism, to understand the political implications of its aesthetic forms, to track the ways in which these factors shift across his oeuvre and to think the political implications we might draw from these, takes an approach derived from cultural studies as Felski defines it, and must by turns draw upon the disciplines of literary criticism, cultural history, and critical theory.

Chapters 1 and 2 – ‘Form’ – will seek to demonstrate the ways in which the formal characteristics of Sinclair’s earliest writing are conditioned by and respond to precisely the questions of the institutional role of art that shaped the historic avant-gardes. Sinclair’s work emerges within a particular cultural configuration grounded in the counter-cultural milieu of 1960s London, and his earliest poetry can be read as an attempt to radically reconfigure the institutions that regulate the production and reception of literature in ways which seek to emancipate artistic praxes from commercial restraints and at once to ground them in a particular place and social sphere. Iain Sinclair’s first major poetic work, *Lud Heat*, which chapter 1 of the thesis will address, was written within the milieu

49 I would like to thank Scott McCracken for drawing Felski’s work to my attention to help clarify the methodological approach of the thesis.
of what the academic, poet, and critic Eric Mottram called the ‘British Poetry Revival’ of the late 1960s and 70s. This was a loose ‘school’ of poets who, whilst not definable by any single style, were committed to furthering the complex and experimental poetic initiated by the Modernist poets of the early 20th Century, continued by their (primarily American) inheritors such as the poets associated with Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and the Beats. Yet what is peculiar about the Revival poets is that they provide an extreme example of the ways in which questions of the relationship between aesthetics and politics can become suddenly urgent and polarising within a particular field of artistic practice. As Peter Barry has amply demonstrated in his history of the period, at the time during which Lud Heat was composed some members of the Revival group were performing what has been described as an ‘entryist’ coup of the Poetry Society of Great Britain, and saw themselves and their experimental poetic in opposition to the conservatism (and commercialism) of the poetry of the Movement writers. The extremity of the positions of those involved produced such an acrimonious dispute over the form, function, and politics of poetry that it was described by one (anonymous) critic as like ‘a knife fight in a phone booth’. Yet read through the configuration of problems generated by the notion of the political failure of avant-gardism, we have then a number of questions: why do political and aesthetic positions become such vexed issues for the poetry of this period? What is it that permits the Revival poets’ commitment to poetic experimentation to appear as an avant-garde at this time? What, then, does it mean for the politics of Lud Heat that it should take such an experimental form?

Chapter 1 will address these questions by investigating the ways in which the British Poetry Revival attempted to re-negotiate the institutional framing conditions of British poetry in ways analogous to the avant-gardiste assault on the institutions of early

51 Robert Bond, Iain Sinclair, p. 11.
twenty-first-century art. This is not just a question of socio-political tactics within institutions, however, but of poetic form: *Lud Heat*, characterised by its dense fabric of arcane and geographically specific references relating to a speculative and hidden history of London’s East End, in its ‘difficulty’, and in its ‘obscurity’, can be read as employing these as strategies in the pursuit of an active, engaged, and critical readership on the margins of ‘mainstream’ literary practices. Moreover, the tactic of self-publication adopted by Sinclair mirrors these aesthetic strategies, and can be considered as a constituent aspect of the intervention that Sinclair’s early poetry represents. *Lud Heat* can therefore be read as an interrogation the institutions that regulated the production and distribution of literature in 1970s Britain, institutions which, to cite Mottram once more, the Revival poets castigated for viewing literature as a commodity ‘like a double scotch or a cigarette’. Conversely, *Lud Heat* demonstrates an egalitarian and resolutely anti-commercial model of poetic praxis which sees the creation of meaning as a co-creative process enabled by the joint efforts of the poet and his or her audience. The Movement, to which Sinclair and the other writers of the British Poetry Revival were so explicitly and polemically opposed, represents one possible response to the waning of Modernism and the collapse of early Twentieth Century avant-gardism: to see such an aesthetics and experimentation as a cultural dead-end, aberrations from which literature must swiftly move on. *Lud Heat* represents instead another response: to at once adopt the ambition and methodologies of the Modernist tradition exemplified by Pound and his inheritors, to embrace such poetry’s ‘outsider’ status, and consequently to localise it radically, and to seek a community of like-minded artists and writers in that place.

The historical peculiarities of British poetry in the 1970s, then, allows a work such as *Lud Heat* to be read as an articulation of the avant-garde impulse: to renegotiate the limits of aesthetic practices through an engagement with both formal and institutional structures. Yet the self-limiting audience courted by *Lud Heat*’s aesthetic points to another

set of problems. Firstly, if the historic avant-gardes attempted to dissolve the bounds of art considered as a universal category in bourgeois society, then the localism of practices pursued by Revival poets such as Sinclair speaks also to a scepticism as to the achievability of such ambitions, and thus to the radically constrained horizons of such practices in 1970s Britain. Secondly, as Bürger argues, when such engagements fail to re-inscribe aesthetic practices within altered bounds, they cannot be repeated in good faith. Finally, though \textit{Lud Heat} strives towards a shared and communal understanding of poetry and place which is self-consciously articulated in opposition to the commercialism of a more ‘mainstream’ poetic, in its oppositional character it is itself not untouched by the logics of commodity exchange. That is, though such poetries might resist commodity aesthetics, in the act of resisting they themselves are implicated in the processes of commercialism against which they are nominally opposed. ‘High’ and ‘mass’ culture are not clearly divisible, but mutually implicated. As Adorno has it, they are ‘torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up’.57

Chapter 2 will therefore build on the analysis of the oppositional character of Sinclair’s literary aesthetics and publication strategies discussed in chapter 1, and will investigate the ways in which Sinclair’s first novel, \textit{White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings}, articulates a response to these problems. This novel covers much of the same ground as \textit{Lud Heat}, returning once more to the East End and in particular to the Whitechapel murders of late 1880s and early 1890s. Yet if chapter 1 reads \textit{Lud Heat} as a refutation of the demands of the literary market, then there enters into \textit{White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings} an acute awareness of the novel’s own status as commodity, and the ways in which writers (and their readers) are implicated in the structures of commercial exchange. This, again, is a formal question: \textit{Lud Heat}’s Modernist influences and poetry’s ‘high’ cultural status serve to distance it somewhat from commercial pressures, yet the distinctly compromised materials of pulp detective fiction and ‘true crime’ on which \textit{White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings} draws allow for

no such comfort. How, then, to write a novel whose primary focus is the ‘Jack the Ripper’
murders, without falling prey to the sensationalism, commercialism, and ideological
blindnesses of such literature? To address these issues, chapter 2 will analyse the ways in
which the novel draws on numerous Victorian literary sources, in particular Sir Arthur
Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, and will argue that the novel’s form and its use
of these sources function to undermine the assumptions that the significance of a murder
is reducible to the identity, motives, and means of the killer that these texts articulate. Yet
if the ideological presuppositions of detective fiction are undermined by *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, the mode by which it was first published at once encourages the reader
to engage in certain detective strategies themselves. The first edition of *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* was produced by the fine art publishers Goldmark in an extremely limited
edition, and contains material subsequently elided from the mass market paperback
edition. Moreover, of the first edition, 100 of these contain holograph material which not
only reinvests them with the ‘aura’ that Benjamin argues withers with the advent of the
mechanical reproducibility of the artwork, but place clues to the ‘final’ meaning of the
text out of reach of the general reader. One strand of the novel concerns the activities of a
trio of book dealers in search of a valuable first edition of ‘A Study in Scarlet’: as the reader
is encouraged by the elisions of the mass-market paperback to attempt to acquire the
more ‘authentic’ first edition, these very actions are parodied in the text. The chapter will
contend, then, that the novel draws attention to the commodity status of literary works,
implicating the reader and author alike in both the ideological project of the processes
of the production of ‘truth’, and the socio-economic structures which determine the
production and distribution of literature.

Between these two works – *Lud Heat* and *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* – we can read
two contradictory tendencies. *Lud Heat* can be read as an affirmation of the emancipatory
potential of art in its capacity to create and renew shared notions of place and history, to

localise and democratise the practices of an earlier avant-garde, and thus to endorse the authenticity of this impulse. *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, conversely, emphasises instead the compromises inherent to art’s commodity status. We can read these inconsistencies as symptomatic of the difficulty in addressing the legacy of the failure of avant-gardism to reshape the praxis of everyday life: to deny this ambition would be cynical, yet to believe in its continued possibility would be naive. To read these works in such a fashion is to emphasise the ways in which they engage with this problem from the perspective of form; yet as the geographic concerns of both *Lud Heat* and *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, and indeed the work of Alex Murray, Peter Barry, and others attest, Sinclair’s writing is perhaps equally notable for its attention to London and the primacy of the experience of the walking subject.\(^5\) It is to these subjects that chapters 3 and 4 of the thesis – ‘Place’ – will turn. As mentioned above, Sinclair’s work makes explicit reference to at least two of the models of the understanding of urban space formulated by the historic avant-gardes. Accordingly, Part 2 of the thesis will address Sinclair’s work in relation to two of these: chapter 3 of the thesis will analyse Sinclair’s second novel *Downriver* with reference to the *flâneur* of Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*; whilst chapter 4 will investigate how Sinclair’s work has shaped the British understanding of a term formulated by the Situationist International: ‘psychogeography’. Yet much as *Lud Heat* and *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* express an ambivalence towards the emancipatory possibilities of art, then so too does his work equivocate between an endorsement of the more or less explicit utopianism that these theorisations of space imply and a denial of such possibilities. These chapters will therefore seek to explore the subtleties and contradictions of Sinclair’s relationship with these ideas by addressing the following questions: how does Sinclair draw on these earlier models? In what ways is his work constrained by them? And in what ways does his work seek to transcend their parameters?

Chapter 3 will read *Downriver* through Benjamin’s ‘kaleidoscopic’ presentation of the

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59 Alex Murray, *Recalling London*; and Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*.  

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flâneur, the drifting and apparently disinterested wanderer of Parisian modernity, and will emphasise the ways in which both Sinclair and Benjamin find an inherently fragmented and discontinuous literary form necessary to the depiction of the city. Much as the truth claims of the detective or the pretensions of literature to be unsullied by commerce are undermined in *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, the fragmentary presentation of the urban experience of the walking narrator in *Downriver* shatters the illusion of a city that is ‘knowable’ to the artist-flâneur. Yet despite the novel’s determinedly oppositional stance – its most bilious outbursts are aimed at the economic and cultural hegemony of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative administration – the model of flânerie that Sinclair adopts finds itself restricted by the same limitations which impede Benjamin’s presentation of the same: Sinclair’s experience of 1980s London, like Benjamin’s experience of modern Paris, is blind to the ways in which it is conditioned by the flâneur’s masculinity. This, I argue, leaves *Downriver* at an impasse which reflects the sort of political contradiction Sinclair’s work finds in artistic production itself. *Downriver*’s dissolving subject lost in an unstable city cannot enact the form of ‘cognitive mapping’ that Fredric Jameson suggests might be a necessary component of an aesthetic which would further the realisation of the project of classical Marxism, yet neither can the novel bring to representation the emancipatory possibilities of a postmodern identity politics.

If this represents one of the more pessimistic moments in Sinclair’s work, then chapter 4 of the thesis shall argue that his treatment of the notion of psychogeography, a term that his work has done much to popularise (and modify) in the UK, diverges from this. The publication of *Lights Out for the Territory* marks both the first appearance of the term in his work and also inaugurates the essayistic, semi-autobiographical mode for which he today best known. In its original formulation, psychogeography (and its accompanying peripatetic practice of ‘dérive’ or drift) was an attempt to discern the

‘precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment […] on the emotions and behaviours of individuals.’ More than this, the Situationists hoped to discover through this research the contours of a post-revolutionary, utopian future life embryonic within the city as it actually exists. Chapter 4 will contend that whilst Sinclair’s use of the term retains the sense of a mutually constitutive relationship between subjectivity and the city present in the Situationist formulation, it at once divests it almost entirely of its utopian, Marxist ambitions. Instead, in Sinclair’s hands, psychogeography becomes transformed from a revolutionary praxis and into a literary mode, and, as I demonstrate through an investigation of his (and others’) use of the idea, it is through Sinclair’s work that it has come to be understood in this sense. However, while it is possible to read Sinclair’s use of psychogeography as an act of bad faith, an appropriation of a once-revolutionary notion for commercial or reactionary purposes, I read his understanding of the term instead as a reconciliation of a number of contradictions which were never fully resolved in the Situationist formulation of the concept and their faith in the possibility of a political avant-garde.

Yet if Sinclair’s psychogeographic work ultimately denies the explicit utopianism of this earlier avant-gardism, neither does it seem to wish to abandon it altogether. If we read Downriver’s flâneur as a moment of nihilism, then we can read his use of psychogeography not as a recuperation, but instead as the rescuing of a certain utopian impulse. Yet this act of rescue also implies a certain attitude to the past and to history, and it is to these issues that the final two chapters of the thesis – Memory – will turn: what, then, are the political implications of the models of history that Sinclair’s work articulates? And if the utopianism of the avant-garde experience of the city seems no longer plausible for Sinclair, does his work posit an alternative model? These questions will be addressed by exploring two aspects of Sinclair’s work: Chapter 5 will analyse the author’s use of the Gothic mode

64 Guy Debord, ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography’, p. 5.
throughout his work and how this constructs an image of history as ‘nightmare’, whilst chapter 6 will examine Sinclair’s use of nostalgia and national identity in his exploration of London’s suburban fringes, *London Orbital*. To turn to the former, Sinclair’s writing frequently employs or makes reference to images and themes derived from Gothic fiction: his London is frequently portrayed as a haunted space, its architecture becoming akin to haunted houses and ruined castles. This Gothic London is posited in opposition to the sanitised version of history presented by what Patrick Wright has termed the ‘heritage industry’, and the processes of ‘regeneration’ which have radically altered the physical and social fabric of London since the 1980s. Yet Gothic signifiers have proven to be politically polyvalent: where some critical traditions read them, in an approach which owes much to the Surrealist understanding of the mode, as radical and disruptive forces within a given textual frame, others emphasise instead how they function as warnings against transgressions of the social order. What, then, should we make of Sinclair’s use of such symbols? Chapter 5 will therefore explore Sinclair’s use of the Gothic through this divergence in the critical literature, and in relation also to the debate over the legacy (or otherwise) of Marxism engendered by the publication of Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. In so doing, it will seek to demonstrate that whilst Sinclair’s use of the Gothic might function effectively as satire, there is a danger that the model of temporality that structures the Gothic mode itself closes off the possibility of the sort of radical political change towards which Sinclair’s textual politics might be otherwise oriented.

Moreover, such a gothicised city risks, as T. J. Clark notes of Benjamin’s Paris, missing the ideological processes by which the bourgeois image Paris was constituted at its ‘edges, [its] *plein air*’. The final chapter of the thesis, then, will turn to one of the few

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67 For example, see Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1988).
works in Sinclair’s London writing that turns extensively towards the city’s periphery – *London Orbital*. I will argue that not only does this work explicitly bring to representation the sorts of spaces which are absent in the author’s earlier writing, and indeed, which are elided in Benjamin’s crepuscular Paris, but that it also articulates most fully Sinclair’s conflicted relationship with the utopianism of left politics. Suburbia has a peculiar place in English literature as both a reserve in which certain understandings of national identity are preserved – the gentle condescension of John Betjeman’s ‘Metro-Land’ is exemplary of this attitude – or, as Homi Bhabha notes, a place founded upon ‘fear of difference […] and a narrow minded appeal to cultural homogeneity.’ Yet Sinclair’s allusions in *London Orbital* to works such William Morris’s *News From Nowhere* or Ebenezer Howard’s foundational text of urban design *Garden Cities of To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898) reveal another, and distinctly utopian, strand to the suburban imagination. Interleaving these allusions with reflections on a journey taken with various companions around the M25 motorway and biographical material from the early days of the author’s life in the countercultural milieu of 1970s London, *London Orbital* reminds the reader of the utopian desires which propelled the historic development of the distinctly dystopian suburban fringes, and, moreover, reconstitutes the gap between the ‘now’ and the ‘what has been’ which, Pierre Nora argues, the present experiences as a ‘rift […] in memory’. If our contemporary situation is characterised, as Mark Fisher has suggested, by a sense that there is ‘no alternative’ to globalised, post-industrial capitalism, the thesis will argue, finally, that the ironic, tentative nostalgia for a past utopianism found in *London Orbital* articulates a sense that there were once other possibilities, and that the future of an oppositional politics might lie in a revivification of such desires.

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Part 1: Form
Chapter 1: A Communal Poetic

Though Iain Sinclair is perhaps best known today as an essayist and novelist, he first emerges in the early 1970s as a poet, and it is to *Lud Heat* (1975) that this study turns. The scale and formal complexity of *Lud Heat* – composed as it is of a collage of long-form free verse, essays, photography, and illustration – places it within a lineage of experimental writing which, as shall be discussed below, is at odds with many of the dominant trends in British poetry at the time of its composition. Indeed, the work can be considered as part of what the poet and critic Eric Mottram termed the ‘British Poetry Revival’ of the 1960s and 70s; a movement which, due to both the aesthetic qualities of poetry such as *Lud Heat* and the oppositional character of the debates which surround it, has invited the application of the label ‘avant-garde’. Yet this, in a sense, is telling, for whilst the avant-garde might now be considered the new, the provocative, or the shocking in art, the more restricted sense of the term suggested by Peter Bürger demonstrates the political basis of the concept. For Bürger, questions of the politics of aesthetic forms and the institutional contexts within which artworks are produced are inseparable, for in his reading of the ‘historic’ avant-garde movements, the use of shock tactics (in the case of Dada) or their insistence on the liberation of the unconscious (in the case of Surrealism), are aesthetic attacks on the institutional and ideological foundations of art as a practice apart from

everyday life. As Peter Barry has demonstrated in his history of the British Poetry Revival – the accurately but somewhat improbably titled Poetry Wars – not only did the Revival poets consider themselves (and were in turn regarded) as avant-gardistes, but the poetries they produced and the activities that they undertook were themselves responding to such institutional questions. Indeed, the British Poetry landscape of the 1970s reflects a split between those poets in the Revival who wished to build on the formal innovations of the various modernisms of the early twentieth century, and those who wished to turn away from or domesticate them. If we follow the logic of Bürger’s approach, however, the avant-garde project had at this point failed: its provocations – once considered outrageous assaults on bourgeois good taste – were now comfortably accommodated within the art market; to re-stage such assaults in the wake of this failure is therefore no longer to attack the institutions of art, but to adapt to them. Yet, as shall be demonstrated in what follows, the fact that the British Poetry Revival – and works such as Lud Heat that were produced within it – can be regarded in such terms speaks less to an imprecision in the use of the term ‘avant-garde’ in application to this movement, and more to the peculiarities of British poetry in the 1970s. This sector of culture, in its relative insularity and economic insignificance, provided an arena in which arguments over aesthetics and politics, which had to a certain extent been fought and lost in the other arts, were rekindled. Moreover, the debate between the Revival poets and the ‘mainstream’ to which they opposed themselves is shot through with the question of the social role and political efficacy of

3 Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. by Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 31. On the history of Dada, Surrealism, and the relationships between the two, see, for example Hans Richter, Dada: Art and Anti-Art, trans. by David Brit (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997 [1966]); and Maurice Nadeau, The History of Surrealism trans. by Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1978 [1968]). It should be mentioned that whilst this thesis assents to Bürger’s account of avant-gardism, it has not gone unchallenged. Amelia Jones, whilst careful to distinguish the contingency of Bürger’s argument from those who would use it to validate contemporary neo-avant-garde practices, argues that his model ‘has come to dominate Anglophone discussions about twentieth-century art to such a degree that ideas such as the Duchamp to minimalism or pop axis have become completely naturalized […] Fundamentally, any aspect of the work connecting back to the irrational flows of modernity and its subjects – to the messy, uncontrollable aspects of the artist’s subjectivity and, inevitably, of the viewer/interpreter’s (the artist’s embarrassing nonmasculine gender, nonwhite racial identity, sexual excess and/or irregularities, or any digression from the critique of capitalism proclaimed to be inherent to avant-gardism) – must be suppressed within this model’, Amelia Jones, Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 22-23.

4 Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, p. 52.
aesthetic practices, and it is therefore in the light of this debate that Lud Heat demands to be read.

As Alan Sinfield argues, insofar as ‘literature […] disseminate[s] […] certain representations through the culture, inviting our assent that the world is thus or thus. The text is […] in the larger analysis, telling a story about the world, and therefore it has a politics.’ It also, by virtue of its relationship to the social, technical, and economic formations (publishing houses, printing technologies, retail, newspaper and academic criticism) by which it is produced, disseminated, and legitimated, has an institutional politics. These should be attended to: as Peter Middleton puts it, ‘literary criticism of poetry tends to treat the poem as if its roots in publishing, the funding bodies that fertilized its growth, the readership that supported it, and the other institutions that made it possible could all be cut away without losing any of the significance of the poem itself.’ This raises questions about how the contents of a work are related to these structures, and how one might read the politics of such works in this light. It is not my intention in what follows to reduce aesthetics to questions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ political orientation, to elide questions of aesthetic judgement or quality on the basis of their use by particular social groups, nor, indeed, to elevate aesthetics to the realm of political discourse. Instead, I demonstrate that by attending to precisely these ‘roots’ in the analysis of Lud Heat, the ways in which politics and aesthetics are interlinked in this text can be read with more precision and clarity than an approach which limits itself to the formal qualities of the work alone would allow. Moreover, I will also demonstrate how Lud Heat, in its attention to place and its materiality as a printed work, itself renders notions of a textual politics divorced from material contexts problematic. Furthermore, the ways in which these institutional and formal questions are related reveal the ways in which Lud Heat represents both an

6 Alan Sinfield, Literature, Politics and Culture, p. 31.
8 For a discussion of these issues as they pertain to Cultural Studies more broadly, see Francis Mulhern, Culture/Metaculture (London: Routledge, 2000).
endorsement of the impulse of a previous avant-garde and a radical re-appraisal of the political possibilities offered by such practices.

It is necessary, then, to open this chapter with an historical sketch of the UK poetry scene, and in the process to outline some of the major literary influences which are evident in *LudHeat*. I then move on to explore the way in which many of the aesthetic and institutional arguments between ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ poetries hinge on notions of linguistic ‘difficulty’, and the ways in which particular linguistic codes have become associated with particular political positions and ideas about the function of art. The final two sections of the chapter then conduct a series of close readings, firstly examining how *LudHeat* enacts a notion of poetic practice which critiques a pejorative notion of difficulty; and secondly demonstrating the ways in which the publication and distribution of the first edition of *LudHeat* intersect with this critique. In conclusion, both the apparent ‘difficulty’ of *LudHeat* and the limited distribution enjoyed by the first edition work are read as aesthetic/political strategies which actively pursue a restricted and highly-engaged readership, demonstrating a model of artistic practice predicated on a model of communal creation and reception.

**Two poetries**

*LudHeat* can be placed, by virtue of its scale and ambition, its formal complexity, and by Iain Sinclair’s institutional affiliations, within the London fraction of what has been termed the ‘British Poetry Revival’ of the 1960s and 70s. As the vagueness of this

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9 Eric Mottram, ‘The British Poetry Revival’, p. 15. Sinclair is now one of the best known of the poets whose talents developed under the aegis of the Revival, having subsequently published many of the poets involved, anthologising them in the collection *Conductors of Chaos*, and championing them in his prose and journalism. However, it should be noted here that he was, at the time, less central to the Revival in comparison to older figures such as the ‘sound poet’ Bob Cobbing, the poet, musician, artist, and critic Jeff Nuttall, and Mottram himself. His present status as a prominent figure in the UK ‘serious’ literary scene, regularly writing for publications such as *The Guardian* or the *London Review of Books*, is anomalous, though it is significant that this status is largely on account of the popularity of his non-fiction rather than of his poetry. I follow Mottram’s lead here and capitalise ‘Revival’ as this serves to constitute these poets as a cultural formation with identifiable characteristics and bounds.
designation suggests, this movement did not necessarily amount to anything as concrete as a ‘school’. The poet and critic Eric Mottram, editor of the journal *Poetry Review*, the house publication of the Poetry Society, in which many of the Revival poets (including Sinclair) were first published, defines the term broadly as those poetries which embrace ‘open field, projective verse, sound text, concrete poetry, surrealist and dada developments, pop lyrics, and various conceptual forms’. This is a range of practices which encompass an enormous variety of differing aesthetic techniques, many of which – for example pop lyrics and Dada – could be considered as fundamentally antagonistic. It is, however, possible to trace certain concrete influences on these poets: the primary inspirations of the British Poetry Revival lie, almost in equal parts, in the American counterculture of the 1960s as it was interpreted (and mutated) in the UK, and in the international literary Modernisms of the early twentieth century. That which it reacted against can be summed up as the ‘Establishment’, and the ‘Movement’, with the latter being understood as the mouthpiece of the former.

Mottram’s combative essay ‘The British Poetry Revival, 1960-1975’, is illustrative

12 Wolfgang Görtschacher, *Little Magazine Profiles: The Little Magazines in Great Britain, 1939-1993* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1993), pp. 121-122. Jeff Nuttall explicitly links the 60s counterculture with the avant-gardes of a previous generation, and casts it as an extension of their programme. He describes the formation of the ‘Underground’ as follows: ‘The old rebel groups and rebel movements, Cubism, Surrealism, Dada, had been incorporated into the international art racket where they had been partially emasculated […]’ Society was subconsciously determined to destroy mankind. The artists were consciously determined to destroy society. So society bought them off. Many a good man fell. The money was so plentiful in some quarters that theft became the imperative act of integrity. All over Europe, America, then, artists, creative people, stepped aside into a deliberate sell-it-yourself amateurism; Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, pp. 170-171. This ‘sell-it-yourself amateurism’ has, as is explored later in this chapter, important connotations for *Lud Heat*. As an aside, the British Poetry Revival could be considered to incorporate one of the key events in the formation of the counterculture in the UK. In 1965 the ‘International Poetry Incarnation’ saw more than 7,000 people come to see leading Beat poets including Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso read at the Albert Hall, an audience which seems almost unthinkable today; Peter Whitehead, *Wholly Communion: Poetry at the Royal Albert Hall, London, June 11th 1965* (London: Lorrimer Films, 1966), p. 5. Further explorations of the links between the ‘high’ modernism of the early twentieth century and the counterculture can be found in Elizabeth Nelson, *The British Counter-Culture, 1966-73: A Study of the Underground Press* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*; Nigel Fountain, *Underground: the London Alternative Press 1966-74* (London: Routledge, 1988); and Jonathan Green *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture* (London: Pimlico, 1999).
of how Revival poets have conceptualised the British poetry scene. Mottram asserts that a major, vibrant and innovative strand of British poetry, published largely outside of the institutional structures of mainstream publishing by small presses and limited-circulation poetry magazines, was deliberately sidelined or ignored by what he terms the ‘literary establishment, that is the big controlling presses, the universities and schools, and the reviewing fraternity.’

Moreover, Mottram contests, they were ostracised by the Arts Council of Great Britain, who viewed ‘poetry as a market consumption article like a double scotch or a cigarette’. Instead, these institutions passed over the ‘difficult’ and heterogeneous work of the Revival poets whom Mottram champions in favour of what he terms an ‘officially-sanctioned’ poetics dominated by the influence of the Movement: principally Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin and John Wain, and the other poets collected in the anthology *New Lines*. In contrast with the Revival poets, this ‘official’ poetry favoured ‘minimal invention and information, and maximum ironic finesse, with personal anecdote, covered with a social veneer’ and ‘the urbanely witty or baroquely emotional rather than the thoroughly informed intelligence willing and eager to risk imaginative forms’,

with the criteria of value being based upon the notions that a poem should be ‘easily teachable’, ‘can be read rapidly without interference’, ‘reviewable reassuringly in the posh papers’ and should ‘have an easily paraphrasable meaning’ which is ‘not too disturbing’.

Though Mottram’s caustic tone here is somewhat intemperate (certainly, his choice of commodities with which to compare poetry is somewhat arch), it can be read as symptomatic of the institutional framework which characterised British poetry in this period. As a number of critics have concurred, the small audience for poetry, and the even smaller financial returns made available to poets in the UK, means that the major

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anthologies produced by the larger publishing houses, the poets on the lists of small but influential publishers such as Faber & Faber, and the grants-giving organisations such as the Arts Council of Great Britain, in the 1970s held (and to a lesser extent still hold) enormous power in determining what is published, and therefore what is read by the general poetry-buying public and taught in schools and universities. As a result, it has been historically possible for a small number of poets, editors, and critics to dominate the national poetry scene, and therefore the perceived national character of poetry itself. As Steven Burt has argued, during the 1950s, the changing social role of the poet away from the ‘bohemian’ or outsider figure of the past and towards a more conservative, middle class, professional or academic position allowed the Movement poets and the aesthetic forms they privileged to dominate English verse. As Robert Hewison notes, all of the poets collected in *New Lines* were Oxbridge graduates, and, as Larkin himself pointed out (though ironically in reference to Modernist writing and criticism), the links which developed between poetry, criticism, and the academy meant that the poet of the 1950s came to occupy the ‘happy position wherein he can praise his own poetry in the press and explain it in the classroom’. As Peter Barry and Robert Hampson have demonstrated, this situation also came about as a result of a (quite systematic) approach on the part of the writers concerned to become this dominant voice, forging an identity in the major weekly periodicals rather than the pages of the more specialist, and consequently less widely-circulated, poetry press.

Similarly, if one looks at the narrow range of names who occupied key positions

24 Peter Barry and Robert Hampson, ‘Introduction: The Scope of the Possible’, p. 5; see also Blake Morrison, *The Movement*, p. 3.
in the British literary establishment in the 1980s, one can see a similar pattern emerging. Wolfgang Görtschacher describes this situation as follows:

The triumvirate [sic] of Craig Raine, Andrew Motion, Blake Morrison, and Christopher Reid - Michael Horovitz dubbed them the Cranedrawn Moribreed [...] - have, since the early ‘eighties, as editors and reviewers, held important posts in the publishing trade and critical establishments. [...] Besides editing the very influential anthology *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, Morrison was (deputy) literary editor on *The Observer* from 1981 to 1989. Since 1990 he has been literary editor on *The Independent on Sunday*. His co-editor Motion held the posts of poetry editor and editorial director with Chatto and Windus between 1982 and 1989. Since 1989 he has been Craig Raine’s fellow editor at Faber & Faber.25

It therefore possible to see that those people who have occupied such positions in British literature, through the simple exercise and expression of taste, have been able to define what constitutes ‘good’ poetry, determine the horizons within which poetic practices can operate, and the subjects and discursive modes considered suitable for poetry itself. This has led to a situation in which poetry that adheres to what might be termed ‘traditional’ poetic form and technique has been privileged over more experimental work or that which seeks to extend the innovations of early twentieth-century literary Modernism.26 Moreover, as Sinclair himself points out, even when such poetry is included within anthologies, the

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26 This would not be so problematic for critics and poets such as Mottram were it not for the prevailing attitude, at least in the late 1960s and 1970s, of the major non-commercial funding body for poetry in the UK, the Arts Council of Great Britain. Historically, there have been major disagreements between the Arts Council and the producers and publishers of Modernist-inspired poetry in the postwar period, arising in part, as is discussed below, as a consequence of the controversial activities of the Revival poets. Moreover, it has been argued that a state has come about in which the poetry collected in the major anthologies becomes popular by virtue of that fact, leading to the further funding and publication of similar work at the cost of the omission of other types of poetry. See Iain Sinclair, ‘Introduction: Infamous and Invisible: A Manifesto for Those Who Do no Believe in Such Things’, in *Conductors of Chaos: A Poetry Anthology*, ed. by Iain Sinclair (London: Picador, 1996), pp. xiii-xx; and Peter Middleton, ‘Institutions of Poetry in Postwar Britain’. Charles Osborne, the literature director for the Arts Council of Great Britain between 1971 and 1986, attributes the exclusion of experimental poetry to the poor quality of such work; Charles Osborne, *Giving it Away: The Memoirs of an Uncivil Servant* (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1986), p. 193, p. 204. The opposing view is that the Arts Council pursued an artistic policy which was at best indifferent towards and at worst actively suppressed experimental poetry; Wolfgang Görtschacher, *Little Magazine Profiles*, p. 5.
selective nature of such volumes serves not to highlight the existence of a broad field of practices, but to contain it. The anthology serves as a ‘closing down, the suppression of a more radical and heterodox body of work [for] it’s always easier to trace the compendium edition than the dozens of difficult-to-obtain little press publications.’

The response of the Revival poets to this situation, as Peter Barry’s *Poetry Wars* documents, was to stage what could only be described as an entryist coup on one of the more conservative organisations of 1960s British Poetry, the National Poetry Society in London. The Society, which Barry characterises as at this point ‘the representative organisation for the amateur poetry lovers and weekend-poets who never really recovered from the shock of the new […] and were hoping that modernism might one day go away and yield the ground again to *Palgrave’s Golden Treasury*’, was transformed by a group of radical poets associated with the Revival of which Mottram speaks, and Mottram himself was appointed editor of the official organ of the Society, *Poetry Review*. As Mottram’s forceful championing of experimental work might suggest, these poets considered themselves to be at the forefront of an artistic and political avant-garde; concordantly, their activities in the Poetry Society proved themselves deeply controversial. Whilst the constraints of space (and indeed the comprehensiveness of Barry’s survey) make a rehearsal of these events in this context superfluous, the controversy that surrounded the events at the Poetry Society led to Mottram’s eventual deposition from the editorship of the *Poetry Review*, and, under the threat of the withdrawal of Arts Council funding, all of the Revival poets who had held administrative positions in the Society resigned in 1977.

The Revival had two major centres of activity: the majority were based around the

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29 Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars*, pp. 91-92. These events still have influence on the British poetry scene today, and are contributing factors in the continuing domination of what Robert Sheppard has termed ‘the Movement Orthodoxy’; Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950-2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), p. 2. Whilst Sheppard perhaps over-states the case, it is certainly true that the sort of lengthy, ambitiously experimental work of the type exemplified by the Revival poems such as *Lad Heat* does not enjoy a high public profile.
Poetry Society’s headquarters at Earls Court in London and the activities of the ‘sound poet’ Bob Cobbing, who was the proprietor of Better Books on Charing Cross Road. In Cambridge, a smaller group of poets with affiliations to the university were producing work influenced by developments at Black Mountain College in the United States and the ‘Open Field’ poetics of Charles Olson, the best known of whom being J. H. Prynne. Sinclair is most closely associated with the ‘London’ fraction. In an interview with Kevin Jackson, he described this period as follows:

In the early seventies I began to discover this community. There was one bunch, obviously, based in Cambridge, there was a London group under the patronage of Eric Mottram, with Bob Cobbing, who’d been a figure in Jeff Nuttall’s Bomb Culture… this lot took over the Poetry Society in Earl’s Court, so there was a venue there, there were presses there to be used, Bob Cobbing had his own presses… there was a degree of interchange, people who didn’t know each other would meet at readings and give readings together - that was happening all the time. So it didn’t matter what you were doing in your day-to-day life - I think Allen Fisher was a salesman of plastic pipes, Bill Griffiths was being a Hell’s Angel. Barry McSweeney was in the Maritime Museum in Greenwich - and yet here were these texts and you realised that people were doing extraordinary things.

Sinclair provides only a sketch in the above, and makes little reference to the poetry itself, but a sense is given of a community of artists and writers with at least a broad aesthetic programme in common, despite the differing backgrounds of the poets that Sinclair mentions. However, if the range of practices which Mottram ascribes to the Revival poets suggests a field which is neither easily summarised nor reducible to straightforward questions of a single style or school, Sinclair’s emphasis on the questions of self-publication

30 Peter Barry, Poetry Wars, p. 15.
31 Peter Barry, Poetry Wars, p. 2.
and the fora in which poetry was shared and performed chimes with the notion that these are ‘outsider’ potries. Moreover, the reader with a casual interest in poetry could be easily forgiven for not knowing that such a wealth of differing practices ever existed, and it would even be possible to assert, as Peter Barry and Robert Hampson have suggested, that these potries have been expunged from the historical record, consciously or unconsciously, by the major anthologists of the period.33 Certainly, even ignoring questions of artistic value, given the sheer quantity and diversity of work produced during the Revival, it would be difficult to read Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion’s assertion in the introduction to The Penguin Book of Contemporary Poetry that in the ‘1960s and 70s very little […] appeared to be happening’34 without discerning a surprising level of ignorance on the part of the editors. Less charitably, their statement could be (and has been) interpreted as expressing a deliberate malice.35

The Politics of Difficulty

If we return to Mottram’s essay, it can be seen that the aesthetic debates between the mainstream and Revival poets were tied to political positions. When Mottram chastises the poetics of the Movement for the ease with which they can be read and understood, he does so because he considers this a collusion with the operations of the market and consequently an inherently oppressive capitalist ideology. If a poem can be consumed easily as a ‘leisure hours’ product, it betrays that which for Adorno was the ‘authentic’ artwork’s redemptive character: its refusal, in its discontinuous and complex formal structure,

33 Peter Barry and Robert Hampson, ‘Introduction: The Scope of the Possible’, pp. 4-5.
35 Peter Barry states that Morrison and Motion’s statement ‘is often quoted with loathing by the radicals’, though he notes also that neither does their anthology endorse the Movement, but a postmodern poetic exemplified by the work of the ‘Martian’ poets (Craig Raine, for example) or the ‘whimsicality’ of Paul Muldoon; Peter Barry, Poetry Wars, p. 181. Motion has since modified his position on this matter, and provides a generous foreword to Poetry Wars, in which he acknowledges that ‘For most of the last century, Britain marginalised the heirs of the great Modernists’; Andrew Motion, ‘Foreword’, in Peter Barry, Poetry Wars, pp. xi-xii (p. xii).
to accommodate itself to the logic of commodity exchange. As Mottram expresses it, such a poetry becomes ‘a mere adjunct to politics, business and academic scholarship’. The Revival poets, by contrast, as their work expresses notions of ‘form, feeling and observation [which] might take months or years of trained appreciation to understand’, resist the logic of commodity capitalism, their fractured and conflicted aesthetic forms expressing the cracks in the social fabric which, Mottram appears to be asserting, the detached and somewhat aloof irony which characterises the work of the Movement seeks to paper over. Moreover, the broadsides that Mottram launches at the Arts Council of Great Britain signal an even greater betrayal of art: the very institution which for Mottram exists precisely to cushion art from the compromises that the necessities of commercial publishing might dictate is seen to be actively promoting (and, crucially, providing financial backing for) an aesthetic that was already amply represented by the mainstream presses.

The extreme polarisation of the views on either side of this issue suggests a deeply felt split between the old guard and the new; however, it is important not to take the claims and counterclaims of the various parties, nor indeed the outward signs of radicalism on the part of the Revival poets, at face value. As Julian Stallabrass notes of another, more recent artistic movement, the Young British Artists (YBAs) of the 1990s, the best known of whom is Damien Hirst, ‘since these artists form an identifiable tendency that reacts against the concerns of the previous generation, they look a little like an avant garde. The appearance may be deceptive, but it plays well in the press, both for those liberals who want to believe that high art lite [Stallabrass’s term for the YBAs] represents something

36 As Adorno puts it in Aesthetic Theory, ‘The principle of heteronomy, apparently the counterpart of fetishism, is the principle of exchange, and in it domination is masked. Only what does not submit to that principle acts as the plenipotentiary of what is free from domination; only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value. Artworks are plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity’; Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004 [1997]), p. 298.
radical, and for those conservatives who are afraid that it does.\textsuperscript{39} Read through such a lens, the \textit{Sturm und Drang} surrounding the Revival might not signify the extreme differences between the two camps, but mask the fact that their ideological bases are more similar than either side might care to admit. Yet there is a critical distinction between the Revival poets and the later YBAs: as Motttram’s anti-commercial rhetoric suggests, the Revival poets viewed their poetry as resistant to a broader economic tendency which was, in their view, corrupting mainstream poetics. What marks the YBAs out as cynics for Stallabrass is that they ‘generally wanted nothing more than to work within the status quo, hiding their essential conservatism and nostalgia behind a veneer of up-to-date pop cultural references, a scattering of demotic material, and constant assurances that they are the expression of the present’.\textsuperscript{40} The British Poetry Revival, conversely, did not wish to accommodate itself to the Poetry Society and the poetics that such institutions propagated, but to remodel both poetry and its institutions along resolutely anti-commercial, if not anti-capitalist, lines. It is this assault on institutional structures in concert with a formal experimentation that resists commodity aesthetics, which renders the term ‘avant-garde’ an accurate one when applied to the British Poetry Revival, though it is important to recognise the historical specificity that enables this designation. It is the niche status of poetry, and indeed, the insularity of the Poetry Society itself in the 1970s that enables such avant-gardiste provocations to occur in a form that does not represent what, in Peter Bürger’s terms, would be a capitulation to the commercial imperatives of the market.\textsuperscript{41} Fredric Jameson’s notion of ‘late moderns’ is apposite: ‘a literary frame of reference […] throws up names like Borges and Nabakov, Beckett, poets like Olson or Zukowsky, and composers like Milton Babbitt, who had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms’.\textsuperscript{42} We might consider the Revival


\textsuperscript{40} Julian Stallabrass, \textit{High Art Lite}, pp. 297-298,

\textsuperscript{41} Peter Bürger, \textit{Theory of the Avant-Garde}, p. 58.

poets, and Sinclair’s early works, as just such late moderns; yet where in other artistic fields, as Jameson states, the shocks mounted by such movements ‘no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized’,\(^4^3\) the relative economic insignificance and provincialism of the institutions of British poetry in the 1970s renders the Revival poets late avant-gardistes.

These aesthetic and political debates are not arbitrary, the ‘colours’, as it were, of each camp, but centre on the question of linguistic difficulty. As Drew Milne puts it, ‘from within versions of “mainstream” orthodoxy, alternatives are pejoratively positioned as “experimental,” “underground,” “elitist,” “obscure,” “difficult,” “inaccessible,” and so forth. From within avant-garde positions, mainstream orthodoxy is provincial, parochial, pseudo-populist, unknowingly ideological, or historically naive.’\(^4^4\) Milne goes on to suggest that ‘a suspicion emerges that the structures of reciprocal ignorance and hostility are mutually self-fulfilling’,\(^4^5\) and it is this need for each poetry to have an ‘other’ against which to define itself, compounded by the scant financial resources available for poets in Britain and its relative insignificance in the wider scheme of cultural production, which is no doubt part of what makes the partisan division between these two groups so sharply demarcated. Yet the adjectives that Milne uses in his schematisation of the field are telling in other ways also, and serve to illustrate the ways in which politics and aesthetics have become closely linked in debates within British poetry. Notions of difficulty seem here inseparable from ideas about what constitutes the natural audience for poetry, its popularity, and the purpose of art itself: an ‘experimental’ poem is at once ‘difficult’ and ‘elitist’; if a poem is ‘mainstream’ it is considered ‘ideological’. Conversely, from the perspective of the ‘mainstream’, to be of the experimental camp is to attack the ‘rational structure of language’\(^4^6\) and consequently to efface meaning, thus explaining or justifying such poetry’s relative unpopularity. Sinclair himself provides an excellent precis of the

\(^4^3\) Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 4
The work I value is that which seems most remote, alienated, fractured. I don’t claim to ‘understand’ it but I like having it around. The darker it grows outside the window, the worse the noises from the island, the more closely do I attend to the mass of instant-printed pamphlets that pile up around my desk. The very titles are pure adrenalin: *Satyrs and Mephitic Angels*, *Tense Fodder*, *Hellhound Memoirs*, *Civic Shame*, *Alien Skies*, *Harpmesh Intermezzi*, *A Pocket History of the Soul*. You don’t need to read them, just handle them: feel the sticky heat creep up through your fingers. If these things are ‘difficult’, they have earned that right. Why should they be easy? Why should they not reflect some measure of the complexity of the climate in which they exist? Why should we not be prepared to make an effort, to break a sweat, in hope of high return? There’s no key, no Masonic password; take the sequences gently, a line at a time. Treat the page as a block, sound it for submerged sonar effects. Suspend conditioned reflexes. You don’t need to sign on for Tom Paulin’s masterclass to reap the reward. If it comes too sweetly, somebody is trying to sell you something.47

There is a certain punkish valorisation of the ‘authenticity’ of such poetry in that its ‘instant-printed’ status serves as a guarantee of the fact that it has not been produced for commercial purposes.48 Yet it is not just the outsider status of such work that guarantees its ‘truth’, but the fact that its ‘remote, alienated, fractured’ qualities produces its very marginality. The world is complex, so poetry should itself be linguistically complex; that it is so guarantees that it has not been written in the expectation of commercial success. Those poetries which are not complex – ‘too sweet’ – become therefore suspicious not because they are more commercially successful (and thus mainstream), but because their more readily consumable form represents a compromise of artistic integrity and thus a

48 And indeed, a somewhat disingenuous anti-intellectualism, the claim that one doesn’t need to study such poetry within an academic context – or indeed to even read it – being undercut by the Shakespearean reference in the second sentence and the recognition of the ‘effort’ required in order to ‘reap the reward’ towards the end of the quote.
betrayal of poetry.

One of Modernism’s more vociferous detractors, Philip Larkin, articulates the converse position, arguing that experimental work affronts the direct evidence of the senses which, he asserts, inform the subject that what they are experiencing, be it Modernist painting, sculpture, poetry, architecture, or music, is ‘ridiculous, ugly, or meaningless’.\(^49\) This becomes associated for Larkin with a sterile academic culture which exists purely to elucidate such work. Larkin proposes instead that the poet should ‘write […] using words and syntax in the normal way to describe recognizable experiences as memorably as possible.’\(^50\) Larkin’s poetics insist on a rational and natural connection between experience, language, and truth, but from the perspective of ‘experimental’ poetry, such an approach is at best naive and anachronistic, and at worst complicit with an oppressive ideological structure: not normal, but normative. Each outlook condemns the other for its understanding of the purpose of art: reading the obverse of the first of Larkin’s quotes, art for the ‘mainstream’ is coterminous with ideas of beauty and harmony, with what is ‘normal’ and ‘memorable’; for the inheritors of Modernism, art is a process of experimentation and the creation of new meanings rather than the repetition of received ones; nor, indeed, can assumptions about ‘normality’ and ‘beauty’ be taken for granted. What both the Movement and Revival camps claim for themselves is a notion of poetic or artistic truth: for Larkin, the authentic artwork is true in that it reflects the universal which is unproblematically accessible through the memorable qualities of rational language. For Sinclair, such a language instead conceals truth: it is therefore the aim of the poet to create

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50 Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 75.
new meanings, to establish linguistic and formal structures which reveal the operation of
received opinions and ideological forms within such apparently lucid discourses.  

Allegory and Authority in Lud Heat

These questions are bound up with ideas of authority: for the ‘mainstream’, truth is
something that is expressed by the poet and transmitted to the reader or listener through
the medium of the poem; for the ‘experimental’ poet, truth is something that is uncovered
or revealed in the active relationship between writer, text, and reader. As Barthes has
it, whilst this displacement of authority is in many respects disconcerting, it is at once
liberating: the poem becomes the beginning of a ‘possible adventure [at] the meeting-point

51  The split in British poetry expressed here is between a broadly conservative ‘Movement’ which
champions a form of poetic ‘realism’ – Larkin’s ‘recognizable experiences’ – against a broadly left-
libertarian ‘Revival’ which champions a more discontinuous aesthetic. An interesting, though tangential,
point is that the correlation between these political and aesthetic positions is not universal: indeed, a similar
split can be found within the Marxist left. The debate between Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst
Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács, contained in the collection Aesthetics and Politics, is foundational,
the disagreement being most strongly pronounced between Adorno and Lukács. For Lukács, ‘literature is
a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected’; Georg Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’,
in Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács, Aesthetics and Politics
(London: Verso, 2010 [1980]), pp. 28-59 (p. 33). Thus the fractured aesthetic of modernism reflects the
contradictions of capitalist social reality but ‘never rises above the level of immediacy [and thus] remains
abstract and one-dimensional’ (p. 37). Moreover, such forms represent a regression from the realist novels
of Balzac, Dickens, or Tolstoy, which surpass this immediacy in that they show ‘how thoughts and feelings
grow out of the life of society and how experiences and emotions are part of the total complex of reality.
[… these parts [are assigned] their rightful place within the total life context’ (p. 36). For Adorno, such a
‘reflective’ aesthetic model does not take into account the necessary mediations involved in the production
of artistic works. Art does not ‘reflect’ that which exists, nor is the ‘content of works of art […] real in the
same sense of social reality’; Theodor Adorno, ‘Reconciliation under Duress’, in Adorno et. al, Aesthetics and Politics,
pp. 151-176 (p. 159). Artistic production is instead always a mediated process in which subjective
experience is organised and re-presented in accordance to ‘formal laws’: ‘in art knowledge is aesthetically
mediated through and through’ (p. 160). It is this mediation which constitutes aesthetic practices as a realm
apart from the social whole, and it is from this relative autonomy that art derives its critical power. For
Adorno, then, modernist aesthetic forms represent an advance over Realism in that they express in negative
the social totality in which they are produced, and in their fractured form critique that totality by refusing
to accommodate themselves to the logics of the market. He states: ‘even in the most sublimated work of
art there is a hidden “it should be otherwise”. […] The moment of true volition, however, is mediated
through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that
other condition which should be. As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art, including
literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life’; Theodor Adorno,
‘Commitment’, in Adorno et. al, Aesthetics and Politics, pp. 177-195 (p. 195). Arguably, one of the symptoms
of the moment of postmodernity is the sublimation of such fractured aesthetics into mass culture. Part
of what places Lukács and Adorno and Larkin on opposite sides of the right/left split, however, is that
where both Lukács and Adorno locate the universal in a social totality which can be discovered by
dialectical thought, Larkin finds it in the ‘normal’ or ‘common sense’: that which in Hegelian terms could
be considered undialectical ‘pure immediacy’, and thus in the realm of the abstract. In Adorno’s terms (and
indeed, Mottram’s and Sinclair’s), this ‘normality’ places Larkin’s poetics in collusion with the market.
of a sign and an intention’, 52 and opens up the possibility for a poetry which, through the co-creative efforts of the author and reader, becomes the space for the creation of new meanings rather than the propagation of existing ones. This liberatory poetic model is inscribed in the opening pages of Lud Heat. The work is prefaced by an excerpt from the second part of The Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan, in which the heroine, Christiana, is taken to the ‘House of the Interpreter’ and shown a series of tableaux. A scene is presented to her in which a man who can ‘look no way but downwards’ uses a ‘muck-rake’ to bring to himself the ‘straws, the small sticks, and dust of the floor’ whilst ignoring the fact that there ‘stood also one over his head, with a celestial crown in his hand [who] proffered him that crown for his muck-rake’. 53 On seeing this, Christiana recognises that ‘this is a figure of a man of this world’; the Interpreter says that ‘earthly things, when they are with power upon men’s minds, quite carry their hearts away from God.’ 54 ‘Oh,’ says Christiana, ‘deliver me from this muck-rake.’ 55 In the 1975 first edition of Lud Heat this quotation is accompanied by a detail from one of William Blake’s illustrations for The Pilgrim’s Progress, entitled ‘Christian Reading in His Book’, which depicts the protagonist of part one leaving the city, bent double under the weight of his sins, signified by a sack containing his belongings on his back, and holding in his hands an open book, the Bible (fig. 1). As Brian Baker has argued, there is a certain degree of autobiographical conceit here: the poems in Lud Heat were composed whilst the author was employed as a council gardener in the East End of London, and Sinclair incorporates many of the details of his daily work into the text. The man with the muck-rake can therefore be read as Sinclair himself. 56 It also serves as a suitable epigraph for the author’s imagining of the city, which Peter Barry describes as the ‘sombrely pessimistic topography of Sinclair’s London vision’. 57 Significantly, the use

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56 Brian Baker, Iain Sinclair, p. 38.
57 Peter Barry, Contemporary British Poetry and the City (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 166.
of Bunyan and Blake also links *Lud Heat* to a radical non-Conformist tradition of English Christian writing which considers the purpose of art to be allied with moral instruction and spiritual, social and political renewal. In so doing, the text raises some important theoretical questions, namely the not inconsiderable matters of what art is for, how it relates to other social practices and discourses, and thus its relationship to politics.

Sinclair’s use of Blake and Bunyan reveals a notion of aesthetics which does not consider them separable from political positions and practices; moreover, certain aesthetic techniques can be used for political purposes or by their very nature can meet social and political goals. If one is to conceive of art as being capable of delivering moral instruction and spiritual revelation (as was the case with Bunyan and even more so with Blake), then it can be an agent for change on the level of the individual. If art can change the behaviour of the individual in so far as it raises questions about the way in which one should live one’s life, then art itself becomes a political practice. The effect that it might have on the larger social body then depends on questions of the relative autonomy of art from the rest of the practice of everyday life. By quoting Bunyan and Blake, Sinclair is in effect allying his work to a particular model of art which considers it to be in the business of effecting change. Moreover, the anti-materialist sentiments evident in the section of *The Pilgrim's Progress* from which Sinclair quotes, and Blake’s well-known antipathy for the materialism


59 To return to the debates in Western Marxism discussed in footnote 50 above, Marxist critics have tended to emphasise art as a practice which develops as a relatively autonomous sphere apart from the everyday. For Adorno, this is its strength, as art’s relative autonomy allows it to function as critique at the level of form. Indeed, when politics enter into art as its content, for Adorno both the ethical content of these politics and the formal integrity of the work are compromised: ‘bad politics becomes bad art, and vice versa’; Theodor Adorno, ‘Commitment’, p. 187. Indeed, ‘the less works have to proclaim what they cannot completely believe themselves, the more telling they become in their own right, and the less they need a surplus of meaning beyond what they are’ (p. 187). For Peter Bürger, it was the project of the historic avant-gardes to overcome this separation of art and life through the negation of the categories which determine objects as artworks, and thus to negate the ideological character of art as a realm which sublates desires which cannot be met in everyday life. An evaluation of these various critical positions can be found in Herbert Marcuse, ‘The Affirmative Character of Culture’, in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (London: Free Association, 1988), pp. 88-134.
of his own time (as David Erdman puts it, for Blake “counting gold” is not abundant living’, and ‘grasping colonies and shedding blood whether in the name of royal dignity or in the name of commerce is not living at all, but killing’) suggest that *Lud Heat* shares at least some of the spiritual, anti-establishment, and pedagogical concerns of these two writers.\(^{61}\)

The narrative of *The Pilgrim's Progress* details the process of the redemption of Christian as he journeys from the City of Destruction towards his salvation in the Celestial City, and is to be read allegorically, the various adventures to be read as providing moral lessons for the reader.\(^{62}\) As Bunyan states in his ‘Apology’ which opens the work, ‘This Book will make a Travailer [toiler] of thee, / If by its Counsel thou wilt ruled be’,\(^{63}\) and his technique of naming his characters and locations synecdochically on the basis of their personality traits or roles within the story – for example Christian’s companions Hopeful and Faithful, Mr Worldly-Wiseman, The House of the Interpreter, The Slough of Despond – makes his didactic intent quite explicit. However, despite the clear edifying purpose of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, it is important to note that the work does not demonstrate an instrumental notion of art, nor does it subordinate aesthetics to pedagogic intent. Instead, *The Pilgrim's Progress* demonstrates the use of certain aesthetic techniques, which, as Bunyan at some points argues, are in and of themselves instructive: allegory, metaphor, obscurity. As Charles W. Baird has contended, Bunyan uses ‘purposeful obscurity’ with the intent to ‘entice the reader to further exploration, to produce pleasure when […] meaning was discovered, to aid the memory, and to train the mind’.\(^{64}\) Furthermore, the author defends his use of metaphor and allegory against those who would accuse him of veiling truth

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through obfuscation, stating that ‘Things that seem to be hid in words obscure, / Do but
the Godly mind the more allure’; and that though ‘By Metaphors I speak’, ‘was not Gods
Laws, / His Gospel-laws, in older time held forth / by Types, Shadows and Metaphors.
The dialectic of concealment and revelation that the reading of the allegorical work entails
is, for Bunyan, inherently more able to affect ‘the minds of listless men’, more fit for
instruction, and thus more capable of achieving the poet’s didactic, spiritual, and social
goals. Reading The Pilgrim’s Progress, then, is something to be worked at, in the best sense of
work as a process which renders both the material worked upon and the worker changed,
or as in this case, instructed. As the purpose of this instruction is to affect the way in
which people might live, Bunyan’s use of allegory could be therefore considered by its very
nature a political gesture.

We can read Sinclair’s invocation of Bunyan as indicating that Lud Heat should
be read allegorically, and that the difficulty or obscurity of his text has a purpose. If we
return again to Larkin’s castigation of the Modernist artwork for its ‘ridiculous, ugly, or
meaningless’ qualities, Larkin’s judgement can be read, effectively, as a category error:
because he believes that the purpose of art is to be a both memorable and aesthetically
pleasing representation of ‘universal’ experience, and thus that art is unproblematically
reflective of ‘real’ experience, he does not allow for the fact that work that is indeed
‘ridiculous, ugly, or meaningless’ might be so for good reason. Instead he diagnoses such
qualities as flaws in the work, those who produce it frauds, and those who appreciate it
dupes. Bunyan’s allegory, and Sinclair’s invocation of it, instead proposes that poetry is
not merely ‘beautiful semblance’, but a practice which strives towards the revelation of
truth or knowledge. It is precisely those qualities of poetry – metaphor, obscurity, difficulty

66 John Bunyan, The Pilgrim’s Progress, p. 7. On Bunyan’s (somewhat paradoxical) use of allegory, see Thomas
Luxon, Literal Figures: Puritan Allegory and the Reformation Crisis in Representation (Chicago, Ill.: University of
68 Philip Larkin, Required Writing, p. 293.
69 Philip Larkin, Required Writing, pp. 293-294.
largely absent from the ‘ordinary’ language that Larkin expresses preference for, that makes it suitable for such purposes. Much as Sinclair’s work as a gardener both transforms the city around him and gives him time to reflect on that place, the reader must work at the text, and change themselves in the process.

Yet this picture is somewhat complicated by Sinclair’s use of Blake. As with Bunyan, Blake considered the highest purpose of art to be inherently moral for, as Michael Ferber expresses it, it was the job of the artist or poet (united in the figure of Blake himself) to ‘cleanse away the incrustation’ of ‘experience’ and ‘bring out what is buried inside us.’\(^\text{70}\) Moreover, as Northrop Frye argues, drawing a comparison with William Morris, Blake believed that ‘real work [as opposed to mindless toil] and creative activity were the same thing’, and that consequently the ‘essential revolutionary act was in the revolt of the creative artist who is understood as a manufacturer in the original sense of one who works with his hands instead of automata.’\(^\text{71}\) As such, it was the moral duty of the creative artist to demonstrate the true character of creative work, and, simultaneously, to manifest its revelatory power: the instructive, moral quality of ‘authentic’ art and aesthetics are inextricably linked. As with Bunyan, it is not merely the aesthetic \textit{per se} which is best suited to this task, but a particular form of aesthetic practice. Writing to a patron in 1799 on the subject of the difficulty or obscurity of his poetry, Blake states that:

\begin{quote}
You ought to know that What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to art.\(^\text{72}\)
\end{quote}

Blake’s notion of what is best, the most powerful, and the most revelatory in art is that


which is not gained too easily: as Andrew Bradstock and Christopher Rowland contend, Blake’s work argues for a creative and prophetic engagement with scripture so that rather than ‘merely repeat[ing] texts’, people should find ways to ‘speak of God in their own way and in their own time.’\(^7^3\) Such a creative re-engagement necessitates an active reader: as Jon Mee argues, Blake was hostile ‘to the very notion of the pure text […] which gains authority from its claim to be sacred, invariable, and original’, and instead opposed scripture, an ‘oppressive mode of writing associated with the law’ with poetry, which is ‘multi-form, and seeks the imaginative participation of the reader.’\(^7^4\) Blake opposes a notion of truth as static and inviolate with an understanding of knowledge and wisdom as practices that are revealed through an active, dialogic process between reader and text, observer and artwork. In the same way, Bunyan’s use of allegory demands that the reader translate his ‘dark and cloudy words’ to reveal the spiritual truths which are contained within them as ‘Cabinets inclose the Gold.’\(^7^5\)

Yet *Lud Heat’s* use of these materials, however, reveals a disjunction between this work and that of Bunyan’s and Blake’s. The quote from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is an assertion of the purpose of art as moral or spiritual instruction: in the house of the Interpreter the principal characters of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian in Part 1 and his wife Christiana in Part 2, are shown a series of vignettes which are to serve ‘as a Goad in thy sides, to prick thee forward in the way thou must go’,\(^7^6\) this being away from Hell and towards Mount Zion, Paradise and salvation. The work of art is to be viewed and then interpreted for its moral lesson: as Christiana looks at the tableau, the Interpreter guides her to an understanding of the scene as depicting the deleterious effects of an obsession with the corporeal world; through viewing a fiction, therefore, Christiana becomes able to discern a higher truth. There is a doubling or paralleling of the experience of the reader here:


\(^7^4\) Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, pp. 11-12.

\(^7^5\) John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, p. 7.

\(^7^6\) John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, p. 41.
Figure 1: William Blake, *Christian Reading in His Book*, c1824, watercolour.

Figure 2: Sinclair outside St. George in the East, from Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat*. 
as Christiana decodes the images in the tableau, she decodes them for the reader, and simultaneously provides the model by which the text itself should be understood. The components of each scene are to be read not as mimetic of ‘real’ ‘muck-rakes’ or ‘crowns’, but as representative of something else. In uncovering these hidden meanings, relating the parts to the whole, the reader can discern the truth behind the allegory.

This model of artistic interpretation does not correlate exactly with Sinclair’s text: the meanings which are so readily available behind the symbols in the House of the Interpreter are not nearly so straightforwardly accessible in the opening pages of *Lud Heat*, nor is there a helpful Interpreter to guide the reader in his or her search for meaning. Moreover, Blake’s illustration does not in fact correspond to the section of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* from which Sinclair quotes (Part 2) but rather illustrates the opening of Bunyan’s narrative. This creates an ironic juxtaposition: the posture of the ‘man of this world’ in Bunyan’s text is mirrored in that of Christian in Blake’s illustration, yet where in the quote the posture of the ‘man of this world’ is brought about by an over-concern with the temporal, Christian bends not just under the weight of the burden on his back, but from his study of the Bible itself. As Christian states, in it he has read that ‘I am condemned to die, and after that to come to Judgement, and I find that I am not willing to do the first, nor able to do the second.’

The Bible becomes akin to the ‘straw and sticks’ with which the ‘man of the world’ is overly concerned, to his own spiritual cost. Moreover, whilst in the final line of the quote from Bunyan Christiana states ‘deliver me from this muck-rake’, on the opposing page the work proper opens with the title ‘Book One: The Muck Rake’. Whilst Bunyan’s text suggests to the reader that in order to gain spiritual insight one must turn away from material things, the parallel between Sinclair and Bunyan’s ‘man of this world’ and the subtitle of the first book of *Lud Heat* identify the work itself with precisely these. Similarly, the contradiction which is opened up by the discontinuity of the

78 Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat*, p. 3. And thus the text presents us with another puzzle: there is only one book. Further references to this text will be given in parenthesis.
quote with Blake’s illustration prevents us from finding an endorsement of either art as straightforward moral instruction or religion as the path to truth in Sinclair’s use of the two fragments. A definitive or final meaning remains elusive, a gulf having been opened between the constituent elements of the work: Sinclair’s use of Blake’s engraving does not serve to illustrate or elucidate Bunyan’s text, but instead renders it problematic.

This uncertainty, I would argue, is the point: where behind Bunyan’s allegory there is always the surety of the presence of religious faith, and behind Blake’s apocalyptic visions the hope of spiritual revelation, Lud Heat instead seems to suggest the much more disturbing possibility that meaning is always deferred, and that the symbols do not hide truth but instead conceal its absence.79 If Larkin’s ‘realist’ poetics assume an unproblematic relationship between art and the real that is guaranteed by the authority of ‘rational’ language, Bunyan’s text, conversely, proposes that the allegorical work of art has a claim to truth by virtue of its appeal to religious authority. In both cases this truth is mediated through the guiding hand of the author who leads the reader to a coherent and morally correct understanding of the work. Moreover, whilst Sinclair’s use of Bunyan and Blake represents a certain claim to the authority that their tradition of writing represents, as the reading above demonstrates, understanding these references does not serve to furnish us with a definitive or final meaning. As Daniela Caselli notes of Beckett’s use of Dante, ‘intertexts in Beckett do not work as the missing piece of the puzzle able to provide us with a complete picture. In an œuvre which asks where meanings come from and how they come about, sources will not restore an allegedly desirable full meaning; what they can do, however, is to raise important questions about how meanings take shape in Beckett.’80 Similarly, Lud Heat’s intertextual fragments serve not to present the reader with a puzzle to be solved whose solution is rendered by the reconstruction of their original context, but

79 Although Lud Heat predates the work by some six years, the existential despair that Sinclair expresses here resonates with Baudrillard’s discussion of iconoclasm in Simulacra and Simulation; Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 4-5.

to establish an interpretative and moral problem: from what authority do such meanings derive? Thus though _Lud Heat_ endorses the idea of the contradictory or obscure artwork as edifying or instructive, it rejects the appeal to authority that _The Pilgrim’s Progress_ ultimately makes, and instead of locating the answers to the questions of how one might live in religious truth, suggests instead that these must be discovered (or made) for ourselves.

**A Communal Poetic**

In the picture sketched above of the British poetry scene, I noted the ways in which writers who have pursued experimental or Modernist-derived poetic forms have tended to be excluded from major anthologies, leading (in the 1970s) to a necessity for poets producing such work to pursue alternative means for publishing and distributing their work. _Lud Heat_ is exemplary of this tendency, being published in an edition of 400 copies through the author’s own imprint, Albion Village Press.\(^8\) However, far from hampering the poetry, the limited audience that this form of distribution creates in fact enhances the effect that such ‘difficult’ aesthetics can have in the formation of an artistic community which constitutes itself in opposition to a perceived mainstream. The publishing history of _Lud Heat_ demonstrates the ways in which its printed form serves to foster such a space. The fact that the work was self-published is notable: whilst self-published work is often viewed as the ‘poor cousin’ of that produced by the major presses, there are a number of factors which allow this to be read less as a compromise and more as integral to the aesthetics of _Lud Heat_. The key distinction here is the fact that Sinclair did not pay for his manuscript to be published by a vanity press, but established his own in order to produce and distribute his work and that of others. There is a strong tradition of the use of such strategies in literary and artistic Modernism which can be traced back to magazines such as the _Little Review_, which allow artists and writers with similar interests to create their own spaces for

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81 Iain Sinclair, _Lud Heat_, p. 112.
the dissemination and discussion of work. Although not entirely analogous with a ‘little’ magazine, the production of limited circulation books and pamphlets of poetry can be considered very much a part of this tradition, and, whilst the limited audience for such work and consequent lack of financial viability which makes it unattractive for mainstream publishers is no doubt a factor in the decision (or necessity) to engage in such strategies, they do offer the poet/publisher a number of advantages over mainstream publication.

As the Revival poet and academic Allen Fisher, whose experimental multi-part poem *Place* shares many of the concerns that Sinclair engages with in *Lud Heat*, puts it,

> For much of my work, the aesthetic has included the need to carry the work process across into book production as an essential part of the process, partly out of a wish to *make* for oneself – to have autonomy in production – and partly to engage in ‘communities’ of artists similarly involved. I have also tried to publish as much contemporary work as my limited means would allow, irrespective of saleability and with an eye to widening readership possibilities. The overall activity-complex can be seen as a political one – against an established norm – but it is also one seeking to offer light, and even light relief.

By choosing to self-publish, the poet/publisher can attain a degree of creative and editorial

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83 As is the case with Sinclair, the operator of a little press is often a writer as well as an editor and publisher of the work of others. See Wolfgang Görtschacher, *Little Magazine Profiles*, p. 19.

84 Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*, pp. 165-192.

autonomy which might not be achievable were one to negotiate with the larger presses.86

If one compares the first, self-published edition of *Lud Heat* with the Vintage mass-market paperback edition, the omission of all of the photographs and most of the illustrations which accompanied the original in the subsequent version impose a qualitative change on the nature of the work: the collage aesthetic and the juxtaposition of text and image that are present in the original are lost. Moreover, many of the photographs which anchor the work in the particular milieu of London in the 1970s are also forfeited, with concrete repercussions on the comprehensibility of the text: for example, where in the first edition an essay responding to an installation by the sculptor Brian Catling is accompanied by a photograph of the work (p. 65), this point of reference is absent in the paperback, and thus the reader is left without a visual anchor for Sinclair’s comments. Finally, whilst the mass-market paperback edition is by no means an un-handsome book, as one might expect there are definite compromises in print and paper quality when compared to the first edition or the extremely limited edition hardback (only 100 copies) produced by the fine art publishers Goldmark in 1987.

Moreover, whilst the financial pressures which dictate the limited number of readers that one can reach through self-publication might at first seem a disadvantage, as the quote from Allen Fisher suggests, this can be seen as an advantage by the poet or small press publisher. A closer relationship is established with the readership, who are more than likely to be friends or fellow poets, and that sector of the readership that is unknown to the poet will at the very least have to have had a specialist interest in work of that type in order to encounter it in the first place. The purchaser of such an inherently exclusive item as the first edition of *Lud Heat*, therefore, was more than likely to have known Sinclair

86 The poet therefore has a greater degree of control over the appearance of the finished article, which, in the case of poetries which place an emphasis on the visual layout and typography of the words on the page, such as that of Ian Hamilton Finlay, or which contains photographic or illustrative material as a constitutive element, such as *Lud Heat*, can be vital to the coherence of the works themselves. Finlay’s work is an extreme example, his practice extending from poetry into sculpture, painting, and even horticulture. For an example of Finlay’s work and a short discussion of his practice, see Alan Young, ‘Three “neo-moderns”’, in *British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey*, ed. by Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980), pp. 111-124.
personally, have heard him deliver readings of his work, and would probably be a poet or artist themselves. As such, by publishing in such a fashion and through such limited networks, the poet can cultivate what Robert Sheppard describes as an ‘active readership’, who are closely aligned to the poet in terms of a shared common interest, more often than not living and working in the same location, and willing to expend significant time and energy in order to get the most out of the poetry itself. It would not be unfair to argue that this is merely the creation of a specialist discourse for a clique of initiates, yet one should not disregard the fact that this is also bound up with a sense of poetry as being a communal, active and participatory process which involves poet and audience alike. Such poetry’s often intimidating obtuseness or difficulty, far from being elitist (in Larkin’s terms), is instead framed by notions of artistic integrity or truth. Nevertheless, its success depends on both the willingness of the audience to put in a high degree of effort in order to comprehend the poetry – as Eric Mottram expresses it (somewhat dauntingly) such work might require ‘months or years of trained appreciation to understand’ – and on a shared set of textual, historical and, particularly in the case of Lud Heat, geographical reference points. We might summarise, however, by saying that the published form of the poetry and the deliberate pursuit of a restricted audience on the part of the poet/publisher is itself an aesthetic strategy, for the success of the work depends on the close relationship established between the poet and his or her audience; such strategies can then be considered alongside issues of form and content as constituent elements of the poetry.

An analysis of the formal qualities and thematic content of Lud Heat can begin to elucidate how this model of shared yet limited poetic reception is embodied in the work itself. Firstly, in sheer terms of scale, the work makes certain demands on the time and

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87 Crucially, the exclusivity of books such as Lud Heat was brought about through the limited print run, not cost – the first edition was priced at £1, or approximately £6.30 at 2008 prices. Private correspondence between Iain Sinclair and Charles Osborne, Literature Director, Arts Council of Great Britain, 14th December 1976. From the Arts Council of Great Britain archives, ACGB/60/70, Grants to Small Presses. 2008 price calculated from the Retail Prices Index using a tool available at <http://www.measuringworth.com>, accessed October 2009.
intellectual effort of the reader: 111 pages of un-annotated Modernist-inspired poetry and obscurely-referenced essay are not easily digested, and it requires multiple readings and a certain degree of secondary research on the part of the reader for the work to render its somewhat idiosyncratic qualities. Secondly, the poem’s sphere of reference ranges from canonical literature such as Blake and Bunyan through to the work of his immediate circle of friends, most notably that of Brian Catling, meaning that a reader without familiarity with this context is left at a disadvantage. Finally, much of the work would not even qualify as poetry to a hostile reader such as Larkin. Not only does the work incorporate lengthy prose sections, but even within the more 'poetic' sections there is little or no use of rhythm, metre, alliteration, or rhyme scheme which could be considered the defining characteristics of poetic language. Instead, the work makes much use of parataxis, awkward enjambement, and the visual layout of the words on the page. For example:

subdue all ego

(& rigorous eye)

into the unmarked

morning quality of autumn light

low sun sheathed above water

and the park is

an ideal

that has been there all along

PRAISE

the thick black shadows

south-east / north-west

the grooved trunks of chestnut

london plane
which is early century optimism

holds out

the street life hard channels

traffic ditches

the affair reduced to a pulse-stopped stillness

the urge is secondary to make note (p. 97)

Though the poem here largely abandons poetic technique such as rhythm or consistent rhyme scheme, it is definitely not prose: were this to be presented as a paragraph, the result would not be any more readily comprehensible, nor bear any more resemblance to the character of ‘ordinary’ language. The syntax is broken, and sentence fragments and phrases are contrasted with each other paratactically, rather than linked conjunctively. Instead, the arrangement of the individual lines into discrete blocks of uneven length creates a visual rhythm, a variety of what Apollinaire called ‘visual lyricism’, and serves to split the sparse description of the park into a series of individual perceptions on the part of the author/subject who speaks the poem. Each of these is extremely limited in scope, and the lack of punctuation and capitalisation and the use of ampersands creates a sensation of speed or hurried composition, giving the poem a rapid, almost note-like form – a series of jotted thoughts, hurriedly taken down. Moreover, the line breaks in each block serve to highlight individual words and phrases: for example, the split of ‘unmarked/morning’ across the third and fourth lines draws attention to the second word, suggesting a possible play on ‘mourning’, adding to the already slightly melancholy notion of an autumn daybreak. The overall effect is recognisably descriptive, yet it is a description into which the

91 The influence of Charles Olson’s essay ‘Projective Verse’ is strongly evident here, one of Olson’s prescriptions of poetic form being that ‘ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION […] get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perception, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen’; Charles Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, in Poetry in Theory, ed. by Jon Cook, pp. 289-295 (p. 289).
ego of the poet intrudes remarkably little. As the pun in the second line indicates, there is no ‘I’ in the poem: it does not tell us what the park looks like, nor even how it makes the poet/subject feel, but instead relays a series of impressions that strike the consciousness of the poet/subject, and hence that of the reader, as the park is surveyed.

Such descriptive moments in *Lud Heat* see the ‘I’ of the poet/subject called into question. For example, Mile End road is introduced with the lines ‘the problem when I am / “not quite myself” / what, (not who), is / walking this road’ (p. 37). Here, not only does the poem take as its subject the questioning of the speaking ‘I’, but the parenthetical and quoted interjections serve to problematise the unity of that voice. Similarly, a later fragment makes reference to the ‘apocalyptic dream of the moon disk growing, crashing down on the city, burying itself in the tower of St Anne’s, Limehouse’ (p. 16) described in the opening essay of the work. Yet where the essay is written in the first person, the poem slips into the third:

if he can look all day

at the alternating faces of St Anne’s

he is safe

   it is safe

then what did that moon dream mean

& why does he feel his eardrum beating through his cheek (p. 49)

The authorial subject of the earlier essay is here absent, and it is in moments such as this, where the apparently autobiographical character of the work is undercut by the dissolution, decentring or problematisation of the singular authorial voice, that we see the poem shift responsibility for the production of meaning away from the poet/subject and towards the reader. This suggests a rather different poetic than that proposed by Larkin in which the poet’s authority proceeds from his or her ability to use ‘normal’ language to ‘describe
recognizable experiences as memorably as possible’, or indeed the appeal to religious authority made by Bunyan and Blake. Instead, we can begin to read the visual and syntactic gaps that compose the description of the park in the quotation above as indicative of a model of poetic praxis that is less concerned with a linear or didactic communication of emotion or insight from poet to audience, and more with the creation of a semantic framework into which meanings can be read. The particular is universalised not through the evocation of an emotion or experience modulated by the ornamental (and hence memorable) function of traditional poetic language, but through the joint creative efforts of both the poet and reader; the poem not the origin or terminus of thought, but a node in an active network by and through which meanings are produced.

This metaphor of the poem as network can be usefully expanded. As indicated above, _Lud Heat_ is composed from a diverse collection of materials, and whilst the overall structure is provided by a loosely chronological diary format, the work includes drawings, photographs, and a wide range of different literary forms and linguistic registers. The poetry is interspersed with a number of interjections which incorporate a diverse and often obscure spread of reference points and allusions. The opening essay, for example, combines details from the history of the East End – the Ratcliffe Highway murders (pp. 12-15), the siting of ancient burial grounds (p. 16-17), the ‘Jack the Ripper’ murders (pp. 10-11) – with ‘occult’ knowledge of ancient Egyptian religious symbolism and material derived from Blake, Yeats, and De Quincey. Later, essays on the work of Sinclair’s associates such as the sculptor Brian Catling (pp. 59-63) or on the American experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage (pp. 40-44) sit next to diary entries detailing the daily routine of Sinclair’s work as a council gardener in the East End. Moreover, there are numerous, often un-referenced

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92 Philip Larkin, _Required Writing_, p. 75.
93 Brakhage is known for his innovative technique in his domestically-focused non-narrative films, from his attempts to use the camera to imitate the motion of the eyeball, through to drawing directly on film stock. See Lenny Lipton, _Independent Film Making_ (London: Orbis, 1983), p. 191, p. 392; David James, _Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties_ (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Stan Brakhage, _Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings, 1964-80_, ed. by Robert A. Haller (New Paltz, N. Y.: Documentext, 1982).
quotations throughout the text, requiring on the part of the reader either a fore-knowledge or a willingness to follow clues left in the text to understand.

This density of reference, and indeed the work’s tendency to ignore the boundaries between ‘high’ and popular culture or respectable and discredited sources, contributes to the difficulty of the text. Similarly, the ways in which the poetry refrains from using ‘normal’ syntax, from providing a stable authorial voice by which the text’s shifts and jumps might be decoded, and its non-linearity, make considerable demands upon the reader in order to synthesise its various elements. Furthermore, neither does Sinclair restrict himself to textual or historical references in the creation of aesthetic effects, but also includes social and geographic ones. Continual invocations of place are made, either directly, through the naming of specific landmarks in the East End in constructions such as ‘in Victoria Park the level & type of perception / changes’ (p. 56), through photographs which place the work and author in certain areas of London, such as the snapshot of Sinclair (with lawnmower, rake, and shovel) outside St George in the East (fig. 2).94 More oblique strategies, such as in the following, are instructive:

they do not spare the water to break up
the school, Old Church, tulip bed
it gushes,
Arthur & I sit in the sun
he: on a school-allowance milk crate
me: on the concrete that covers the ground
my eyes are sore
we both yawn
he has two weeks due in Cornwall

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94 One might note in passing the way in which this photograph connects Sinclair’s poetry with the working-class milieu of labouring and the un-gentrified East End: this is not the rarified space of academic poetic production and criticism that Larkin condemns above.
only one worm in the whole patch
“poor drainage,” says Arthur
does not care, obviously, for this ward
the water sound should soothe
he has a car (Ford Capri, GT)
but asks often for the time
& that becomes my function
teabreaks are calculated
the rituals pushed through
it is what we don’t notice
that is worth remarking, & without insistence (pp. 37-38)

In contrast to the excerpt analysed above, this is one of the few sections from *Lud Heat* in which the subjectivity that voices the poem is made concrete through the use of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘we’, though the fragmented, impressionistic style and broken syntax are retained. Once more, Sinclair relates an aspect of his work as a gardener in the East End, and although the poem appears to be referring to a single incident, the use of the plurals ‘teabreaks’ and ‘rituals’ suggests a sense of repetition or timelessness. However, unlike those moments where prominent geographic features are named directly, or the photographs and engravings which function as temporal and locative indices, the spatial reference here is indirect: Old Church School is not itself a notable landmark, but it is, however, in the grounds of St. Dunstan’s church in Limehouse. St. Dunstan’s is itself referenced at length elsewhere in *Lud Heat*, firstly on the map of London that accompanies the opening essay of the work,95 and secondly in an extended essay about the legend of St. Dunstan towards the end of the book (pp. 75-79). Therefore the final couplet – ‘it is

95  A more detailed analysis of these works can be found in chapter 4 of the present study.
what we don’t notice / that is worth remarking, & without insistence’ – performs a dual function: firstly, to alert the reader to the fact that there is something worth unpicking in or behind the description of the cycle of tea breaks and everyday conversation between the author and his work-mate; and secondly, to create a sense of the way in which the most prominent physical residues of the city’s past – its architecture – have a subliminal or unnoticed influence on the present.

In order to achieve such a reading of the poem it is necessary for the reader to approach *Lud Heat* in a non-linear fashion: that which came before must be re-read in the light of what comes later. Moreover, to find the component which lifts the poem from a description of a tea-break to a meditation on the way the past is coiled within the space of the present, the reader requires either a physical geographic knowledge of Limehouse, or a willingness to follow the hints given in the poem and sit down with an *A-Z* and work it out. Whilst such a technique is inherently exclusive in that it demands certain knowledge on the part of the reader, it is not quite the same exclusivity as is demonstrated by Eliot, say, in *The Waste Land*. Where much of the depth and subtlety of Eliot’s allusive work hinges on the reader having an extensive knowledge of the Western literary canon – as he puts it in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, the poet having developed a ‘historical sense […] that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order’⁹⁶ – Sinclair’s work instead depends on a geographic knowledge of the East End. Knowledge of the Classics depends largely upon education, and in Britain at the time of Eliot’s essay such an education would only have been available to the upper and middle classes, comprehensive secondary schooling having been introduced with the 1944 Education Act. Thus whilst knowledge of the East End is indeed specialist, and nor, crucially, is it without its class dimension, it is at once more democratic: possessed by anyone who has lived in the area, or to be gained by anyone with free time to spend

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there. Through the use of such techniques, which integrate the geography of the city into the body of the poem through a mixture of direct and indirect references, plays on presence and absence, Sinclair creates a poetics of place which subordinates the descriptive capabilities of the poet to a knowledge of London shared between poet and audience.

Such poetic strategies indicate an egalitarian model of literary production which emphasises the role of the reader in the creation of meaning, but one which comes about as the paradoxical result of the monopolisation of control of the published text on the part of the poet. By self-publishing, the poet gains a control over the finished product which would be difficult to attain under the commercial pressures of a mainstream publishing house where the overriding responsibility on the part of the publisher must ultimately be to the bottom line. The main aim of the operator of an outfit such as Albion Village Press is to produce poetry, not to turn a profit: as Peter Michelson puts it, such institutions ‘stay in business to be out of business, thereby violating the logic of business.’ As such, any concessions which the poet might feel need to be made towards notions of accessibility or ease of comprehension in the search for a wider audience can be eschewed in favour of a more experimental approach. At the same time, by relinquishing the mass audience that might be made available through mainstream publication, the poet can in a sense create his or her own readership, the limited print run of self-published poetry almost guaranteeing a self-selecting audience of like-minded fellow poets and artists who can approach the poetry on an equal footing. Therefore, whilst such self-publication techniques are by definition exclusive, it is a peculiarly democratic form of exclusivity: the published work relies on the network of shared associations, local knowledge and artistic references common to both the poet and audience in order to function as an intervention into a communal or socially based artistic praxis.

Conclusion

Tristan Tzara’s 1918 Manifesto states that the Dada signified ‘the abolition of memory […] of archeology […] of prophets […] of the future’; The Surrealist movement was, as André Breton’s ‘First Surrealist Manifesto’ argues:

Based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterested play of thought. It leads to the permanent destruction of all other psychic mechanisms and to its substitution for them in the solution of the principal problems of life.

If we take such statements at face value, they indicate the scale of the ambitions of the historic avant-gardes: the revolution of a whole way of life. I have argued that in its engagement with (and assault on) its institutional framing conditions, and its contestation of the meaning and purpose of poetry, the British Poetry Revival can be considered a late (and anachronistic) avant-garde. Yet the absence of such a manifesto and the limited model of poetic reception performed by a poem such as \textit{Lud Heat} speaks also of the radically altered horizons of the movement in the wake of the dissolution of their historic antecedents. To state this is not to find fault with the British Poetry Revival for its lack of revolutionary zeal, but to recognise, following Peter Bürger, that to attempt to realise the project of revolutionary Marxism through cultural means in the wake of the failure of Dada and Surrealism to achieve this must surely be an empty gesture. Instead, a Revival work such as \textit{Lud Heat} can be read as attempting a sublation of artistic practices on a radically localised scale: the confines of a restricted community of poets and readers, and the confines of a specific place. Moreover, such a work can be used as the starting point for a shared aesthetic praxis whose ultimate product is not a literary commodity but a shared and revivified understanding of place, history, and language.

Whilst *Lud Heat* can be read as meeting the criteria of Adorno’s ‘authentic’ artwork in that it refrains from explicit political content and instead, through its formal characteristics, resists a reconciliation with commodity aesthetics, the localism of the work problematises Adorno’s insistence on the autonomous status of art, and indeed, a notion of art as a universal category. Whilst it is true that certain aesthetic practices – that which was once regarded as ‘high’ culture – can operate as a sphere of relative autonomy from exchange relations, these are confined to particular communities whose compass is determined by those processes of commodity exchange to which they oppose themselves. If this relative autonomy grants such practices a certain critical power, the perceived ‘difficulty’ and restricted reception of a work such as *Lud Heat* suggests that the price paid for this is the ability to speak to an audience beyond such confines. That Sinclair should emerge from such a milieu, then, indicates not only his anomalous status as the only writer of the Revival to have attracted anything approaching a ‘mainstream’ audience, but also the seriousness with which his work should be taken as a specifically political intervention. If questions of the vexed relationship between aesthetics and politics, and the attempt to discover what might be a ‘valid’ oppositional politics condition *Lud Heat*, then, as this thesis shall consistently argue, it is precisely these questions which continually return and resurface throughout Sinclair’s work and which animate much of the complexity and contradictions of his later oeuvre.
Chapter 2: Dealers and Detectives

Sinclair has stated that *Lud Heat* (1975), *Suicide Bridge* (1979), and *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987) form a loose trilogy.¹ Yet whilst there are thematic concurrences between these works in that they all concern themselves with a history of East End violence, there are marked differences between them. The most significant of these is in many respects the most obvious: where *Lud Heat* and *Suicide Bridge* are extended poetic works, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* is a novel. If, as the previous chapter argued, Sinclair’s early poetry can be read as an engagement with the question of the political efficacy and social status of artistic works, what can we make of Sinclair’s adoption of the novel form, and how might we read his use of it in the light of these questions? The significant gap – nearly a decade – between the publication of *Suicide Bridge* and *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* provides us with a biographical starting point from which to explore these issues. Where *Lud Heat* dramatises the author’s work as a gardener in the East End, Sinclair’s principal source of income during the years between the publication of *Suicide Bridge* and *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* was as a dealer of rare books;² and, in common with his earlier work, the novel incorporates details derived from this into its fabric. Sinclair’s earlier employment, however, allowed for a certain construction of the author figure as a proletarian poet at the margins of cultural production, and indeed the anti-commercial aesthetic and ‘high’ cultural status of poetry permits a distance to be put between such work and commercial

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culture. Book dealing and collecting, on the other hand, places the cultural object at the heart of the exchange nexus, and the pulp sources of detective fiction and ‘true crime’ on which *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* draws are distinctly commercial genres. Moreover, if the form, content, and indeed the very materiality of a self-published poem such as *Lud Heat* serve to ground it in a particular, and necessarily restricted, social milieu in a particular time and place, then a novel such as *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* is an inherently more public utterance. Thus if Sinclair’s adoption of the novel form with *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* allows this work to explore the mythology of London in ways not available to his earlier poetry, it simultaneously somewhat deprives it of the ‘outsider’, anti-commercial status that a work such as *Lud Heat* enjoys.3

At one point, one of the novel’s numerous (and distasteful) book dealers, Dryfeld, monologises at length on the topic of motorways:

‘If the A1 had anticipated itself, Darwin would never have needed to leave these shores. It’s all here, Monsieur. Only the fittest and most insanely determined life forms can battle across that river of death to reach the central reservation – but then, ha! They are free from predators. They live and breathe under the level of the fumes. They stay on this grass spine, leave the city, or the sea-coast, escape, feral cats and their like, and travel the country, untroubled, north and south. The lesser brethren die at the verges. And are spun from our wheels, flung to the carrion. Grantham’s daughter, this is your vision! And when the cities are finished, abandoned, life will

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3 It is worth noting briefly that this thesis does not subscribe to a model of artistic worth in which ‘high’ and ‘mass’ culture are hierarchically ordered or incommensurate. Firstly, avant-gardism of the sort discussed in the previous chapter problematises a notion of ‘high’ culture as inoculated against the dynamics of the market. Secondly, ‘mass’ culture is not a uniformly standardised product, nor are its audiences somehow duped into merely passively consuming it; yet neither would I endorse a reading of popular culture as inherently transgressive. The question is more complex: as Scott McCracken has it, ‘One of the problems in arbitrating between the claims of negative theories of mass culture and a theory of transgression is that both have some claims to truth […] contemporary popular culture is characterised by mass production for a mass market and its products are often formulaic. However […] close analyses of popular texts also demonstrate levels of irony, satire and parody that show them to open many different interpretations, not all of which reinforce a view of the world as a model of rationalised capitalist efficiency’. Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 158.
steal back in down this protected tongue. The new world will evolve here.⁴

The daughter of Grantham to whom Dryfield refers is that town’s most famous scion – Margaret Thatcher – and the implicit invitation here is to read the book dealers themselves as precisely the ‘fittest’ and most ‘insanely determined’ of these life forms. Such beings might thrive in the margins or at the edges of the mainstream – the motorway – but they are implicated in it, warped and distorted by it. Moreover, as shall be demonstrated in the following, in the ways in which White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings draws on the notably discredited and commercial sources such as detective fiction, true crime, and pulp, it is not just the dealers but the substance of their trade that are affected by such processes. Thus if a work such as Lud Heat can be read as an engagement with the social and political status of literature, then Dryfield’s monologue suggests that such questions are not abandoned in White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings, but if anything become more urgent.

Moreover, these questions are related to literary form, and the ways in which Sinclair’s novel engages with, frustrates, or alters the generic conventions of the sources on which he draws. This might be illustrated by the following, in which one of the book’s several narrators, the purportedly autobiographical ‘Sinclair’, visits the studio of his friend, the sculptor Joblard.⁵ In the process of looking at the artist’s unfinished work, ‘Sinclair’ offers the following meditation on the nature of the incomplete artwork:

Joblard’s work is scattered: a pouring of lead; an anvil that might be for use, or might be the work itself; long bow or harpoon on the floor. Elements that could connect, or could be abandoned, broken down, turned into other machines. [...] He hits you with the basic counters: flayed skin, steel sheet, folding; rib, joint, poured; parchment, paper, salt. As we look at the objects – he does not speak of them, but of some other

⁴ Iain Sinclair, White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings (Uppingham: Goldmark, 1987), p. 12. Further references to this work in this chapter will be placed in parenthesis in the text. This chapter will analyse the differences between the the Goldmark first edition and the Granta paperback: all page references are to the first edition unless otherwise stated.

⁵ In order to reduce as much as possible the potential for confusion, ‘Sinclair’ shall be distinguished from the author of the same name by placing the fictional character in quotation marks.
thing, some thing they *might* become, or might once have been. His face reflects the potential light of the act implied in the object. (pp. 134-135)

It is unclear whether the objects enumerated here are constitutive of any one piece, but what entices ‘Sinclair’ here is not their unity as an organic whole, but their difference: the tension of the unreconciled elements leads the viewer to question what their selection and placement could mean. The artefacts become pieces – ‘counters’ – in a game whose objective is the generation of new meanings, each shifting of the physical components creating new cascades of symbolic resonance for the viewer. This is a model of artistic creation that views the source of meaning of the work not as residing ultimately with the artist, but as a process of co-creation between the artist and the observer. As such, the viewer is implicated in the creation of the meaning of the artwork at every stage, and for ‘Sinclair’ the ‘richest moment’ (p. 135) is therefore when it is inchoate, incomplete, as it is at this point that this is most obviously the case. Indeed, with the completion of the work (and the implicit imposition of a final meaning by the artist), part of this dynamism is lost, the narrator going on to state that ‘when the total assembly is made, when the action is fully described and named, then part of what is here now is closed off: there is a waxed seal’ (p. 135).

We might read ‘Sinclair’s’ interpretation of Joblard’s work as a suggestion not that it is the incompleteness of the artwork itself that gives it its richness, but that when it is in this state the fact that a work is more a dynamic process rather than a static object is most apparent. By placing emphasis on the thing that the objects in the unfinished piece *might* become, or might once have been’, ‘Sinclair’ introduces the temporal into his interpretation of the art work, and it is this temporality, the interplay of the potential and the actual, that gives the incomplete work its dynamism, sets the ambiguities of each of the symbolic elements of the work into play with one another, and thus gives it its richness and depth. The corollary of this is that whilst ‘Sinclair’s’ claim that ‘when the total assembly is made, when the action is fully described and named, then part of what is here now is
closed off’ at first reading seems somewhat defeatist, suggesting that a completed artwork is inherently flawed because its meaning has been limited by its very completion, we can instead read it as a call to arms: by refraining from ‘fully describ[ing] and nam[ing]’, the artist can somehow retain the dynamism, ambiguity and richness that ‘Sinclair’ finds in Joblard’s uncompleted work. If one takes this reading and applies it to the text of White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings as a whole, one can see that the novel itself is structured in such a way so as to forestall such a limitation of potential meaning, and thus retains the ambiguity and symbolic fecundity that ‘Sinclair’ finds in the scattered objects of Joblard’s studio. The novel is composed of a dense, allusive and fragmentary web of discrepant narrative and symbolic elements which resist easy categorisation or summary; mixing the apparently autobiographical with the fantastical, verbatim sections from historical and contemporary documentary sources with conspiracy theory and the language and symbolism of the occult, the novel effaces or de-centres the singular authorial voice; and indeed, the novel’s consistent deferral of narrative resolution and its lack of an ‘ending’ in any conventional sense frustrates the possibility of a single interpretation of the text.

Much as his fictional namesake enumerates the multiplicity of objects in Joblard’s studio and discovers in their arrangement a sense of dynamism and possibility that is lost in the completed artwork, Sinclair’s text becomes a system of unreconciled and contradictory fragments whose structure invites the reader to engage, much as his characters do in their explorations of London, in a process of ‘circling and doubling back, seeing the same sites from different angles’ (p. 35), each new juxtaposition resulting in a profusion of possible interpretations. The novel therefore becomes much less a source of meaning than a system of interlocking narrative shards whose arrangement creates a field of possibilities within which meanings might be produced. The complexity of this structure makes the novel difficult to pin down, and, indeed, leaves the temptation for the critic to try and discover what the text ‘really’ means; an endeavour that I would argue would be reductive, if not counter-productive. Therefore, rather than attempting to draw
out one possible interpretation of the text, I want instead to shift the emphasis away from what the text might mean, and towards the ways in which the novel resists any attempt to reduce it to a singular interpretation, and the implications that this has for the reader’s relationship with the text.

To do this, the following will examine those sections of the novel which most strongly defy the possibility of such a reductive reading, namely, those which concern themselves with the themes and codes of detective fiction. I shall look at two aspects of this: firstly, the explicit references to the first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), and how the text uses these motifs with reference to the ’Jack the Ripper’ murders that occurred in London’s Whitechapel district in the 1880s; and secondly, how these references are propagated more obliquely throughout the rest of the text, with particular emphasis on those passages which depict the operations of the rare books market. Both of these strands present an implicit invitation to the reader to partake in a search. In the first instance, for the identity of a murderer; in the second, for the first edition of *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* itself, and the truth contained therein. In both cases, through a process of obfuscation, deferral and effacement, the reader is frustrated in his or her attempts to ‘solve’ the puzzle that each strand presents, and any attempt to find an ‘answer’, a singular interpretation, is made impossible. The reader is therefore not only implicated in the creation of the meaning of the work at every stage, but is made aware of his or her own collusion with this process. In so doing, the text renders visible the ideological structures that underlie each strand: in the first, the tacit assumptions that underlie detective fiction; in the second, the commodity form of the book itself and the socio-economic structures which regulate the production and distribution of literature. As such, the novel draws attention both to its textual status as fiction and its material status as book, making these categories – and the reader’s investments and implication in their development and reproduction – available for critique.
Detective fiction

White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings is composed of three interlocking narrative threads: a picaresque focussing on a quartet of book dealers in search of rare first editions from the Victorian era; an apparently autobiographical component concerning the research that ‘Sinclair’ and his co-conspirator Joblard have conducted into the ‘Jack the Ripper’ murders; and a series of historical vignettes concentrating on the life of their elected suspect, Sir William Withey Gull. Whilst these three strands do not have any direct narrative or causal relationship, the events in one being effectively isolated from the other two, they do have certain thematic concurrences, not least of which is the motif of detective fiction. The most prominent examples of this are the appearances of Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet*, to which the title of the novel alludes: the discovery of a rare first edition of this work provides the starting point for the book dealers’ narrative; and it appears in ‘treated’ form as part of the ‘evidence’ which ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard examine in their investigation of the Whitechapel murders. The more oblique references to the concerns and conventions that this work inaugurated are of equal interest: forensic and medical science (and the philosophical assumptions which underlie them) make frequent appearance, and the twin figures of the genius detective and his faithful assistant/narrator are repeated through all three narrative shards in the guises of ‘the Late Watson’ and Nicholas Lane, ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard, and James Hinton and William Gull, in the book dealers’, autobiographical, and historical passages respectively. However, the text’s usage of these themes is never straightforward; on the contrary, it is explicit in its aim to undermine them. As ‘Sinclair’ states:

This is to reverse the conventions of detective fiction, where a given crime is unravelled, piece by piece, until a murderer is denounced whose act is the starting point of the narration. Our narrative starts everywhere. We want to assemble all the

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6 There is no ‘book’ of the first edition of *A Study in Scarlet*, the story having first been published in *Mrs Beeton’s Christmas Annual* in 1887, and then subsequently reprinted along with the rest of the first six Sherlock Holmes stories in the *Strand* magazine in 1891. A chronology of Doyle’s life and publication history appears in the 2001 Penguin Classics edition of *A Study in Scarlet*. 
incomplete movements, like cubists, until the point is reached where the crime can commit itself. (p. 61)

Whilst in the classic detective novel, exemplified by *A Study in Scarlet*, the mystery with which the story begins is solved by the application of reason, and the horrors that the murder unleashes are contained or defused by the apprehension of the guilty party, in *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* this situation is almost exactly reversed: at a temporal remove from the Whitechapel murders, ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard see the traces of violence dispersed through London’s East End and its cultural representations. Accordingly, as Robert Bond has argued, ‘rather as Cubist art brings together the formal scheme from a multiplicty of viewpoints, without uniting the juxtaposed planes in closed forms’, both the ‘real’ Sinclair and his fictional counterpart assemble these traces, the ‘incomplete movements’, but refrain from imposing a definitive interpretation on them. Their narrative cannot therefore have a single, fixed origin, and as a consequence has no single destination: the meaning of the crime is not resolvable in the identity of the murderer, will not be ‘laid to rest’ by the establishment of guilt. Indeed, although the narrative posits an identity for the murderer – Sir William Gull – it derives this suspect from the widely discredited (and somewhat indelicately titled) *Jack The Ripper: The Final Solution* by the journalist Stephen Knight, whom at one point ‘Sinclair’ describes as a ‘seedy and salacious […] hack’ (p. 57); and the murders themselves, as the gnomic notion of a crime ‘committing itself’ suggests, remain opaque, their meaning sublime in the sense that it is irreducible to a merely positivist comprehension.8

Furthermore, ‘Sinclair’s’ assessment of the ‘conventions of detective fiction’ bears a striking resemblance to that put forward by Catherine Belsey in *Critical Practice*, in which she argues that the classic detective story ‘begin[s] in enigma, mystery, the impossible, and

8 That is, Sinclair’s text reads the Jack the Ripper murders metaphorically. As Scott McCracken argues, read syntagmatically, the detective novel provides closure; yet if we understand the crime as metaphor, it ‘defers a final truth, suggesting a complexity that needs to be constantly reinterpreted’, Scott McCracken, *Pulp* p. 58. I would argue that the formal complexity of Sinclair’s novel encourages such readings.
conclude[s] with an explanation which makes it clear that logical deduction and scientific method render all mysteries accountable to reason.’9 Belsey goes on to argue that ‘these stories’ are ‘pleas for a total explicitness about the world’, but because they are constrained by the ideology of an inadequate ‘bourgeois scientificity’,10 they are unable to represent female subjectivity, and are therefore paradoxically ‘haunted by shadowy, mysterious and often silent women.’11 However, where Belsey uses the caesurae in the Sherlock Holmes stories to highlight the inconsistency of their ideological framework, it is the caesurae themselves that become the subject of Sinclair’s text: silence, mystery and shadow could almost be taken as watchwords for White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings. Where the classic detective story apparently works to dispel these qualities, Sinclair’s novel instead amplifies and intensifies them, frustrating the interplay of mystery and subsequent revelation that characterises the narrative drive of the Sherlock Holmes stories.

How this function operates within the novel and the effect that this has on the relationship between the reader and the text can be illustrated by the way in which it represents, or rather, fails to represent, the stories of those who are of primary importance to the novel: those of the victims of Jack the Ripper themselves. As with the Sherlock Holmes stories Belsey examines, the role of these women is ‘central and causal’,12 in that their deaths are the condition of possibility for the appearance of the narrative itself, yet as with the detective story, they are not given voice. Whilst this leaves the text open to the same accusations of misogyny that Belsey levels at the Sherlock Holmes stories, the fact that the novel does not merely leave these stories unsaid, but instead draws the readers’ attention to their absence, suggests that something more complex is in operation here. The victims’ absence becomes a kind of presence which ‘haunts’ the narrative, and in making the reader attentive to the women’s absence in such a way the novel invites him or her to question why this might be the case. The text continually refrains from

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11 Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice, p. 114.
12 Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice, p. 115.
providing an answer to these questions, or indeed any unambiguous answers about the crimes themselves, and in this way shifts the responsibility for the discovery of answers that in the classic detective story lies with the investigator (and hence the author), and on to the reader. In so doing, the novel highlights the ethical complexities involved in such a position, and ultimately brings into question any investigative project which would claim to provide the ‘answer’ to the Whitechapel murders as potentially morally suspect.

**Clues**

On opening *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, the reader is presented with an immediate puzzle: the three ‘books’ which subdivide the narrative are given the cryptic titles, ‘MANAC’, ‘MANAC ES CEM’, and ‘JK’. These apparently nonsensical words resemble a code or cipher which the reader is invited to decode, the implication being that their meaning and their relationship to the narrative fragments they head will be revealed in the course of the novel. However, whilst this is in fact the case, this revelation is not quite as straightforward as the reader might anticipate. The disclosure takes place in the ‘autobiographic’ strand of the novel, in which ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard are cast in the roles of Watson and Holmes respectively, ‘Sinclair’ narrating the action and providing the conduit through which his companion’s speculations are articulated. Joblard himself is continually defined with reference to the great detective: he lives in a flat described as ‘[a] surgery of tiny bottles, instruments, tubes, wires’ (p. 56), akin to the tools employed by Holmes, and is waited upon by a ‘Mrs Hudson’, who, in Conan Doyle’s stories, appears as the landlady of 221b Baker St.\(^{13}\) Not having a ‘violin or seven per cent solution’ to hand, he smokes a clay pipe with which he theatrically gestures to the evidence from which he derives his hypotheses. These references might lead us to expect that Joblard will ‘solve’ the crimes, ‘Sinclair’ revealing to the anxious readers the process of deduction which leads the detective to his unassailable conclusions, but the novel does not offer the reader any such

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At one point, the two investigators are invited by Mr Eves, an employee of Truman’s Brewery in Whitechapel, to look at his collection of materials related to the ‘Jack the Ripper’ murders. Amongst these are a series of cards on which are printed the names of the victims. Taking them, he deals them out, ‘a kind of tarot, across the green baize table’ (p. 49):

Mary Anne Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, Marie Jeanette Kelly.

‘No more.’ He anticipated us. ‘Your Tabrams, your Mylets, not part of this. The chapel could have swallowed them at any time. They wobbled over. Not willed. But look at my names – what do you see?’

We saw the names, we knew the names. There were other versions of them, the victims might have rendered themselves in a dozen ways, so did Shakespeare – did they remember who they were? These were the names of the victims and they were locked together like a famous football team: they were inseparable. Part of the doctrine. (pp. 49-50)

Here we see the elements of the detective story explicitly re-dramatised as a parlour game. The women are reduced to their names, the names inscribed on playing cards, which, taken at random, are spread across the gaming table. The victims are rendered as tokens, pieces in a game that ‘Sinclair’, Joblard, and Mr Eves are playing, a ‘riddle’ that they have to ‘solve’ (p. 50). The pretensions to the status of scientist that are made by the Holmesian detective are undermined: whilst this scene takes place in an atmosphere that ‘Sinclair’ equates with an ‘afternoon tutorial in an Oxford college’ (p. 49), the references to tarot – and consequently divination and prophecy – are more redolent of a seance than of science. Images of death and decay riddle the descriptions of the characters: Mr Eves
himself is cadaverous, a diabetic whose condition has left his skin ‘waxy and fibrous, unset parchment, cheeks hollow’, his body ‘refined by disease, eaten away to a great delicacy of gesture and movement’, his teeth ‘stumps’ of ‘broken pencils’ (pp. 49-50). Despite his illness, he sucks at a ‘film-surfaced’ cup of cold tea to which he has ‘ladled in a couple of inches of sugar’ (p. 50), and it is much as if the reader is invited to consider the link between Mr Eves’ unhealthy obsession with the murders and his current condition. Moreover, the repetition of ‘names’ in the third paragraph emphasises not only the partial way in which the victims are represented here – in name only – but the ritualistic or invocatory power that these names appear to have in this context: they are part of a ‘doctrine’, with all the religious overtones that this word implies. The scene is given a dark and unreal quality which is not in accordance with the revelatory empiricism that the invocation of Holmes might suggest.

Furthermore, despite his fascination with the crimes, it is clear that Mr Eves has never found the answer to the riddle that he himself has posed. Consequently, he gives the cards to ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard, stating that “they don’t mean anything to me anymore” (p. 50), simultaneously suggesting both that they have bad meaning, and therefore inviting ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard (and the reader) to find it, and undercutting their status as clues with any power to reveal the truth of the crimes. Finally, when the meaning that ‘Sinclair’ proposes for the names is revealed, it is less than illuminating:

And suddenly I recognise the sentence that Eves has given us.

Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, Marie Jeanette Kelly.
MANACESCEMJK. MANAC. ES. CEM. JK. MANAC ES CEM, JK. (p. 51)

If the names are a riddle, the answer is meaningless; understood as prophecy, they are inscrutable. Although the meanings of the titles that head the three ‘books’ of the novel are now revealed to the reader, this is in fact no revelation at all. Although it has been disclosed that the names of the victims head each of the sections of the novel – and in
this way, despite the absence of their testimony, they are present throughout the body of
the work – the relationship between these names and the text itself has not; instead, it lies
with the reader to discover (or impose) this relationship. The text has refrained from ‘fully
describ[ing] and nam[ing]’ (p. 135), but behind the code is not an answer, but another
question. Consequently, when Eves asks ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard to “look at [his] names”
and tell him “what [they] see”’ (p. 49), it is a question that is simultaneously asked of the
reader, and he or she is presented with his or her own implication in the discovery of an
answer.

Moreover, we see that the victims of the crime which, if this were a more
conventional detective story, would be the catalyst that drives the narrative, have been
once more diminished. Not merely names on cards, the names themselves have been
literally effaced. In the process, the ambiguity of their meaning is increased: where a name
represents a person, an initial could represent almost anything. This is illustrated towards
the close of the novel in figure 3, which takes up an entire page. We could take this as a
depiction of one of Eves’s cards, the illuminated letters ‘J’ and ‘K’ akin to those found on
the ‘Jack’ and ‘King’ in an ordinary deck, further suggestive of gambling and chance as
opposed to scientific investigation. Moreover, where previously the reader might have felt
secure in their understanding of the initials ‘J’ and ‘K’ as standing for the last two names
of Marie Jeanette Kelly, the final victim of the Whitechapel murderer, this is dissolved, and
instead these characters are shown to represent a host of possible objects.

There are a multiplicity of references in the above: conspiracy theory in the thread
of association between John F. Kennedy and ‘Jubela Jubelo Jubelum’, a reference to
Freemasonry;¹⁴ various strains of world mythology – Greek and Roman with the references
to Kronos and Jupiter, Hindu with that of Kali. Art and literature of the Victorian era are
invoked with J. K. Huysmans, Klingsor, and Robert Louis Stephenson’s Strange Case of Dr

¹⁴ William D. Moore, Masonic Temples: Freemasonry, Ritual Architecture, and Masculine Architecture (Knoxville,
Figure 3: A proliferation of meanings in *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*.

Figure 4: ‘A Study in Scarlet’ ‘treated’ in *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*. 
Jekyll and Mr Hyde, as are the great works of European Modernism, with the allusion to Kafka’s The Trial with his character Joseph K, and Conrad’s Kurtz from Heart of Darkness. The final statement ‘JUDAS KRISTUS!’, which has a certain apocalyptic ring to it, could refer to the short story ‘Three Versions of Judas’ by Borges, which takes the form of a scholarly article on a fictitious writer, Nils Runeberg, who publishes a book entitled Kristus och Judas, which speculates on the possible divinity of Judas.15 This short story is itself a web of fact, half-truths, and outright fabrications presented in the guise of a scholarly article, alluding to conspiracy theory and heretical interpretations of Biblical scripture, and Sinclair’s reference to it reveals the above list as just such an assemblage of disparate, controversial and contradictory signs. However, to confound the reader further, in this apparently random and unreliable list there are at least two ‘Jack the Ripper’ suspects: J. K. Stephen and James Kelly,16 thereby suggesting to the reader that this catalogue could yet be interpreted as a meaningful series of clues.

These references are both extremely diverse and, in many cases, obscure, and could be read in any number of ways, both in terms of their content, and the way in which each word sits as part of the visual composition of the page itself. However, rather than drawing out any particular meaning, I want here to direct attention to the fact that it is precisely the profusion of meanings here that is significant. If we interpret the initials ‘JK’ as a clue, as the reader is implicitly invited to in the coded titles of the three ‘books’ of the novel, then according to the conventions of the detective story, it should point to the guilt of a particular party. As Franco Moretti puts it, ‘the clue is […] that particular element in which the link between the signifier and signified is altered’, in that it ‘is a signifier that always has several signifieds and thus produces numerous suspicions.’17 Indeed, ‘part of the criminal’s guilt’ is that he has ‘created a situation of semantic ambiguity, thus questioning

the usual forms of human communication and human interaction’.\(^{18}\) It is thus the role of the detective ‘to reinstate the univocal link between signifier and signifieds.’\(^{19}\) Here we see *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* enacting precisely the opposite gesture: the univocal link between the name and the person of Marie Jeanette Kelly is broken, and instead the name becomes placed at the centre of a vast web of cultural and historical references. This is not the reductive process of an empirical investigation which painstakingly connects each piece of evidence with the truth of the murder, but an expansive one which suggests that the meaning of the murders is not containable within the fixed boundaries of such an analysis. The murders occurred within a particular cultural and historical context, and can be read as symptomatic of the sickness of that society. Any attempt to suture the wounds inflicted by the crimes on that society by ‘solving’ them will fail, because the social meaning of the crimes is greater and more diffuse than the empirical project that the figure of the master detective embodies can encompass.

**Suspects**

This complexity and instability is further illustrated by the novel’s selection of Sir William Gull as its prime suspect for the Whitechapel murders. This is based on the speculations ventured by Stephen Knight in his book *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* (1977), which proposes that Gull, a high-ranking mason, committed the murders in order to suppress a blackmail plot which threatened the reputation of the royal family.\(^{20}\) This theory has been widely discredited, one review of the book dating from the time of its publication stating that the case it proposes ‘does not stand up to careful and critical analysis and is no more “final” than its many predecessors’,\(^{21}\) but nonetheless ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard, and *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* itself, appear to accept its thesis. Part of their reasoning

\(^{18}\) Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 146.
\(^{19}\) Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 146.
in this comes, somewhat unexpectedly, from the fact that ‘Sinclair’ finds Knight’s story corroborated in the pages of *A Study in Scarlet*. He produces a copy of the novel which he has ‘treated like a prison censor, carefully blacking out, to uncover the mantic tremble beneath’ (fig. 4). Thus it appears that ‘Doctor’ refers to Gull himself, Netley to the coachman who is his accomplice in the murders,22 and the details of Watson’s injuries are reconfigured as the physical violence of the murders themselves. The final fragments refer to Knight’s hypothesis that following a series of strokes Gull was confined to an asylum where he later died.23 In this way, the rational surface of the opening of *A Study in Scarlet*, in which Watson narrates how he comes to lodge with Holmes following his discharge from the army, is peeled back to reveal a second, hidden narrative which appears to have synergies with Knight’s version of events. To attempt to corroborate Knight’s hypothesis with tenuous ‘evidence’ from an entirely unrelated and fictional source is somewhat unconventional, and here, once more the reductive empiricism of the detective is undermined.

In the conventional detective story – and indeed, *A Study in Scarlet* – we are presented, as Tzvetan Todorov expresses it, with ‘two stories’, that of ‘the crime’, and that of ‘the investigation’: ‘We might characterize these two stories by saying that the first […] tells “what really happened,” whereas the second […] explains “how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it.”’24 It is the second story that forms the main body of the prose of the detective novel: the examination of ‘clue after clue, lead after lead’ which ends in the ‘revelation of the killer.’25 Whilst the classic detective story therefore proposes that the ‘what really happened’ is always accessible to the detective, the first story always readable through the second, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* here complicates this picture. ‘Sinclair’ cuts through the fabric of the story of the detection to reveal not the solution to

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the murder in *A Study in Scarlet*, but the solution that Knight proposes to the Whitechapel murders. This has a dual function: firstly, the apparently straightforward difference between ‘factual’ and ‘fictional’ writing is complicated; and secondly, deriving from this, the conventional notion of the relationship between the text and the world is rendered problematic.

As readers we find ourselves in an uncertain position, as we are no longer sure quite what we are reading: is the novel ‘seriously’ suggesting that Conan Doyle has encoded the identity of the murderer in the text? Are we led to believe that Knight has just derived his hypothesis, as have ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard, from fictional sources? As usual, the text does not provide us with any answers to these questions, but in proposing that in the pages of fiction we can read what Knight proposes is the ‘truth’ behind the Whitechapel murders, the novel suggests that books such as Knight’s and stories such as Conan Doyle’s are engaged in a similar sort of project. This is substantiated by Sinclair in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *A Study in Scarlet*: ‘there is a symbiotic relationship between over-dramatised ‘true crime’ reportage and the transient works of fiction. […] On railway station book racks, shilling shockers are distinguished from the sensational journalism that inspired them only by their price.'26 There is a moral force being invoked here, suggesting that if detective fiction and ‘true crime’ are interdependent, then both have a responsibility to the ethical demands of the seriousness of their subjects. Like Sinclair in his introduction to *A Study in Scarlet, White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* appears to be suggesting that most ‘true crime’ and detective fiction does not honour this obligation: as Sinclair’s fictional namesake states of Knight’s book ‘there’s something inherently seedy and salacious in continually picking the scabs off these crimes, peering at mutilated bodies, listing the undergarments, trekking over the tainted ground in quest of some long-delayed occult frisson’ (p. 57). Here the text in a sense anticipates its own criticism, for the charge of voyeurism with which ‘Sinclair’ accuses Knight could hold equally true for *White

In inviting the reader to evaluate the motives of those with an interest in the Whitechapel murders, he or she is invited also to evaluate those of the author, and, consequently, his or her own. In this way, the text integrates the material of a real and horrific crime within the milieu of fiction, and raises the stakes of detective fiction itself: a *reductio ad absurdum* which reveals the genre’s understanding of murder as a puzzle to be solved, a sort of game played between the detective and criminal, reader and text, as reductive, voyeuristic and morally suspect. Indeed, the suggestion that is made is that in order to proceed in any meaningful way with an exploration of the Whitechapel murders, one should begin with the examination of one’s own motivations. On giving ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard the cards printed with the names of the murder victims, Eves offers the two investigators the following warning:

He swivelled a desktop magnifying glass, put his thumb against it, a tongue in a window. The whorl forensically enlarged.

‘This is the true spiral,’ he said, ‘the first map of the labyrinth.’ (pp. 50-51)

As Alex Murray argues, this suggests that ‘the truth of any Ripper investigation […] reveals more about the investigator than about the crimes’, and we see, once more, the undermining of the figure of the detective. Here, the magnifying glass – the archetypal symbol of Sherlock Holmes – reveals not the traces of the criminal and his guilt, but those of the detective himself. The warning here is not only that the detective might be fallible, but that the clues in which he reads the signs of the incontrovertible guilt of the criminal are themselves polysemous: they have a cultural meaning which extends beyond the mere establishment of the identity of Jack the Ripper. Thus we can read ‘Sinclair’s’ treated copy of *A Study in Scarlet* as a physical illustration of the fact that any investigation which might purport to ‘solve’ the Jack the Ripper crimes will bring with it a host of unacknowledged blind-spots and prejudices – an ideological framework – which work to question the basis

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of the project itself. By discovering this hidden meaning in this text, the possibility is raised that he could have chosen any work of literature and discovered the same, hidden, codes. This discovery is not a result of any ‘real’ hidden meaning in the story, but the discovery of his own subjective obsessions in the mirror of the text. As Joblard states, in providing us with a ‘final’ answer to the Whitechapel murders, Knight fails to address the meaning of his own project: ‘We are informed, heated, drawn into a collaboration with his version of the truth. But released and delivered? I think not. I don’t think that he understands that any delivery is required’ (p. 58). Whatever the factual ‘truth’ of Knight’s speculations, he cannot claim to have ‘solved’ the murders, as in failing to address his own subjective role in his investigation, and consequently his moral responsibility to real people who were killed by ‘Jack the Ripper’, he fails to provide the basis for a reflection on their broader social context. Instead, Sinclair’s text, through gathering the historical, cultural and fictional traces that the crimes have left, the ‘incomplete movements’, can provide the basis for an investigation of the murders that goes beyond unanswerable questions of identity – for as ‘Sinclair’ notes, the evidence is such that ‘there are so many Ripper candidates, so many theories’ because ‘they can all be right’ (p. 61) – and posits itself instead as a starting point for a meditation on their appalling meaning in the context of the social whole.

By refraining from fully ‘describ[ing] and nam[ing]’ in the manner of the conventional detective story, or indeed ‘true crime’ investigation, the novel continually draws attention to its own uncertain and unstable ethical foundations.

These moral questions are situated in a still broader framework, to which Sinclair also alludes in his introduction to A Study in Scarlet. As he states, ‘[o]n railway station book racks, shilling shockers are distinguished from the sensational journalism that inspired them only by their price.’28 Here, the concurrence between journalism and detective fiction is revealed not only to be their over-dramatic and morally suspect approaches to their subjects, but their commodity form: indeed, we might surmise that their sensationalism

derives from precisely this. It is suggested that the ethical questions raised by ‘true crime’ and detective fiction exist not only on the level of the ideology of any particular text, but extend into the social spheres which regulate the production and distribution of texts themselves. Thus not only is the reader confronted with his or her own identification with and implication in the prejudices of the supposedly empirical project of detection, but also invited to confront his or her own motives in purchasing and consuming literature dealing with such appalling subjects in the first instance. This extends not just to conventional detective fiction, the ‘shilling shockers’ and sensational journalism such as *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution*, but inevitably to *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* itself.

This becomes particularly apparent when one examines the publishing history of Sinclair’s novel. The first edition of *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* was produced by Goldmark books in an extremely limited run of very high quality, designed by the typographer Martino Mardersteig and printed and bound by hand at the Stamperia Valdonega in Verona. Of this edition, one hundred copies were signed and numbered, and contain additional illustrations and holograph material by the author, which were not subsequently made available, even in facsimile, in the reprinted mass-market paperback edition. This serves to draw attention to the inherently material nature of print, and to the publishing processes which govern its duplication and circulation. Moreover, it has had the effect of artificially restricting the inherently promiscuous nature of the printed word, making first editions of the novel extremely difficult to find, and, once found, extremely expensive to buy. By accident or design, the ordinary reader is therefore at a double disadvantage: not only is the first edition rare and expensive in and of itself, but through the omission of material present in the first edition from subsequent printings, clues to the ‘ultimate’ meaning of the text are placed out of reach.

The effects of this are threefold: firstly, a distance is established between *White
*Chapell, Scarlet Tracings* and the ‘shilling shocker’: the book, through the attention and expense dedicated to its physical form, is endowed with the status (or at least the trappings) of ‘high’ art, and becomes elevated from what might be considered the more ‘vulgar’ end of the publishing spectrum. Secondly, this in turn has the effect of making a fetish of the authenticity of the first edition, and apparently re-invests it with what Benjamin described as the ‘aura’ of the work of art.³⁰ Thirdly, and conversely, the book is revealed in this process to be uncontrovertibly a commodity, and is thus disclosed to be just as tainted by commerce as the ‘shilling shocker’, for it is precisely its ‘price’ which distinguishes it from such work. Just as in the ‘autobiographical’ sections analysed above, the motifs of detective fiction are brought into play in the book dealers’ narrative in such a way so as to destabilise this process of commodification and reveal it to the reader. The book dealers themselves are engaged in a process of hunting which parallels that of the detective, and just as the reader is implicated in the process of ‘solving’ the Whitechapel murders, they are implicated in the book dealers’ hunt through the invitation to participate in a similar hunt for a first edition of *White Chappel, Scarlet Tracings* itself. The ways in which the book dealers are portrayed in the novel, and indeed, the depictions of the book trade itself, leave little room for doubt that this project is just as morally fraught as that of the detective.

**Aura**

In order to proceed, it is necessary to examine in more detail the concept of ‘aura’, and how it pertains to *White Chappel, Scarlet Tracings* itself. The ‘aura’ is that which is lost with the invention of the technologies of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin refers here primarily to photography and film), which bring about a situation in which the artwork ‘substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence’.³¹ Before the possibility of mechanical reproduction, the artwork existed as a singular object with a unique place in time and

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space, accompanied by the testament of history which vouchsafed for its authenticity and authority. It is these qualities – the constellation of associations and values which adhere to what is perceived as the authentic and authoritative artwork – that Benjamin defines as aura. With the advent of mechanical reproduction, the artwork has an inherently multiple existence, and consequently its authenticity can no longer be attested to. One could go further and state that the concept of authenticity as such is wholly inappropriate to the consideration of the mechanically reproduced artwork: the photographic print is always one of a number produced from a single negative, the performance of an actor in a film is spliced together from a number of temporally and spatially distinct shots; in neither case does it make sense to ask to see the ‘original’ photograph or performance.

If one extends this analysis to print, one can see that there is no such thing as an original of a printed page, for it is one of any number of copies made from a letterpress forme or lithographic printing plate. Indeed, neither can the printing plate itself be considered ‘original’ in that it is merely the mechanical means through which the page is produced. The printed word, therefore, anticipates many of the changes that Benjamin identifies in the visual arts with the advent of reproductive technologies; as he notes, ‘the enormous changes which printing, the mechanical reproduction of writing, has brought about in literature are a familiar story.’ One of the principal strengths that Benjamin identifies in the mechanically reproduced artwork – that it ‘meet[s] the beholder halfway’ so that ‘the cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room’ – clearly applies equally to the printed book. Just as the written word dislocated language from the presence of the speaker, the printed word dislocated writing from the presence of the writer, removing the necessity of the scribe to read and reproduce a text by hand. This massively reduced the labour required for the reproduction of texts, leading

to an explosion in the availability and distribution of written material.\textsuperscript{36} In the process, the institutional framing conditions that had previously regulated the production and reception of texts were dissolved and reconstituted: before the advent of the printing press, manuscripts were produced, reproduced and distributed by and within the institutions of the church, university and state;\textsuperscript{37} with print, new divisions of labour developed, linking these institutions with those of commerce, exposing texts to new audiences, and enabling the printer’s workshop to flourish into what Elisabeth Eisenstein describes as the ‘message center for an expanding cosmopolitan Commonwealth of Learning.’\textsuperscript{38}

Moreover, the disassociation of the written word from the writing hand that the printing press enabled affected the text in precisely the same way as the advent of mechanical reproduction affected the artwork: in each case the object becomes ‘detached […] from the domain of tradition.’\textsuperscript{39} Within the scriptoria of the medieval monastery the authenticity and authority of each manuscript was attested to by the history of duplications that preceded it, a chain of manuscripts linking each document with its historic original:\textsuperscript{40} with the advent of the printing press this chain is shattered, each copy of a text no longer being dependent upon its having been duplicated from another, older source. This, in concert with the proliferation of printed texts, consequently diminishes the authority that was once inherent to the written word, almost by virtue of its \textit{being} written, and it begins to ‘lose the “aura” that it possessed in medieval culture as a guarantor of truth.’\textsuperscript{41}

If the advent of the printing press lead to a corresponding degradation of the aura of the written word, the first edition of \textit{White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings} employs a number of techniques which appear to re-invest the object with this quality. Whilst the book exists

\textsuperscript{37} Elisabeth Eisenstein, ‘Defining the Initial Shift’, pp. 157-159.
\textsuperscript{38} Elisabeth Eisenstein, ‘Defining the Initial Shift’, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{41} Jan-Dirk Müller, ‘The Body of the Book’, p. 145.
unequivocally as an inherently multiple object, the presence of hand-written material alters this status: each of the one hundred copies becomes unique. Moreover, if the printed word is the sign of the disappearance of the writer from the text, then the hand-written word is surely the sign of the writer’s presence, or, more accurately, the sign of his or her having been present, conferring to the first edition an authority that is as a matter of course absent from subsequent re-printings. Additionally, the exclusion of visual material present in the first edition from the mass market paperback, for reasons that are probably mostly to do with cost, frustrates attempts on the part of the casual reader to construct a ‘final’ reading of the novel: the first edition is not merely a more handsomely packaged version of the text that the owner of the paperback has in his or her hands, but is instead a more complete version whose authority surpasses that of the paperback. In order to acquire a ‘definitive’ understanding of the text, the reader is therefore implicitly invited to attempt to acquire a first edition, and those characteristics that were supposedly diminished by the appearance of the technologies of mechanical reproduction – the authenticity and consequent authority that constitute the aura of the artwork – apparently reappear in the first edition of White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings.

From the perspective of its circulation on the literary market, the first edition of the novel is therefore much closer to an art object than it is to the ordinarily produced and distributed mass-market paperback, and this status only serves to increase the ambiguity that is inherent to the interplay of elements from which the novel is composed. Whilst the tension between the first edition and subsequent re-printings of the novel could be interpreted as merely an amplification of the difference in value between any first edition and its mass market incarnations, this straightforward reading is compromised by the fact that one narrative strand consistently undermines the value that is placed upon the first edition novel, casting the invitation to engage in the acquisition of the first edition that the text offers to the reader in a decidedly ambiguous light. The discovery of a rare first edition of A Study in Scarlet sets the events which sustain the ‘book dealer’s narrative of
*White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* in motion. Much as in the ‘autobiographical’ sections, it is not merely the text of *A Study in Scarlet* which makes an appearance, but simultaneously a host of thematic convergences: the unnamed narrator refers to himself as ‘the Late Watson’, ‘the secret hero who buries his own power in the description of other men’s triumphs’ (p. 15); the figure of Holmes is reincarnated in that of Nicholas Lane, a book dealer of surpassing skill who is described as a ‘subterranean visionary’ to whom ‘the word genius could be applied without any fear of hyperbole’ (p. 15).  

In addition, much like Conan Doyle’s hero, Lane is dependent on the use of stimulants to enhance his powers of detection: at one point he is shown to run ‘a line of badly adulterated Bolivian snuff across the top of his briefcase’ which he takes ‘in the nostril’, which strikes the ‘brain jelly’ like a ‘white dart’ (pp. 16-17). The usage of the archaic word ‘snuff’ to stand in for cocaine could be interpreted as suggestive of the Victorian era, providing another connection with Holmes. Where in the ‘autobiographical’ sections ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard imitate (and consequently undermine) the detective in their search for the cultural meaning of the Whitechapel murders, here Lane, the analogue of the Holmesian detective, is instead on the hunt for rare books. However, just as the detective is interested in objects only in so far as they are clues which are indicative of facts, Lane (and the other book dealers) are only interested in books in so far as they have a price. On the discovery of the rare edition of *A Study in Scarlet*, Lane reflects that ‘he had, once again, uncovered a piece of history, a true splinter of the 1880s. And this was it, this was the big one, the white whale, the reason why we’re all in the game: he’d brought it in, finally, the ultimate score’ (p. 26). The rare edition, precisely through its scarcity, becomes infused with an authenticity that more common editions lack: it is a ‘piece of history’, an object capable of illuminating the archaeology of the past. The emphasis is placed on the book’s quality as a ‘true’ fragment from the nineteenth century – its authenticity – suggesting that it is indeed ‘auratic’ in the sense that Benjamin intends. In

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42 The character Lane shares many features with the book dealer and rock guitarist Martin Stone. He is described by John Baxter as a ‘legend […] At various times cokehead, pothead, alcoholic, resident of a Muslim enclave, international fugitive from justice, and a professional rock musician rated by historian Brian Hinton as “one of the two greatest guitarists of the era” who “makes Clapton look boring and provincial”’; John Baxter, *A Pound of Paper*, p. 8.
the same section, however, Lane notes:

Taped into a romance by H. Fitzgerald entitled *Madeline’s Temptation* was what appeared to be some version of the legendary Christmas Annual with the first printing of the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes, *A Study in Scarlet*.

The covers had gone, there were some annotations to the text. The date ‘1878’ had been altered to ‘1888’. The word ‘Nettley’ had been altered to ‘Netley.’ […] ‘At worst,’ he said, ‘a variant. At best, a unique issue. A trial copy, or a proof of some kind.’ (p. 25)

The text is not what it appears to be: the first edition is disguised in the covers of another book; it is not the definitive version that Lane has discovered, but ‘some version’.

Moreover, discrepancies from the ‘official’ version of the text make this particular document *more* valuable, not less. What makes this particular first edition auratic is not its conformity with other first editions, but its variance from the general template.

What contributed to the aura of the written word in the era before the invention of the printing press was the guarantee of authority conferred upon it by the processes of manual reproduction, as mediated by the institutions of the church and state. Consequently, what was most highly prized was the degree to which any given copy resembled its antecedents. In the era of print, this situation is exactly reversed: if the mechanical reproduction of writing allows for the perfect duplication of text, then it is the variant, the imperfect copy, which becomes valuable. The aura of the singular artwork inheres in the book that Lane has discovered, but in a changed form: the book’s uniqueness does not signify its supposed accuracy and hence authority, but merely its own uniqueness, and it is this that becomes valued for its own sake. If one is to complete the quotation above, the reason for this becomes apparent: ‘and this was it, this was the big one, the white whale, the reason why we’re all in the game: he’d brought it in, finally, the ultimate score. And it was for sale’ (p. 26). Lane’s interest in the book begins and ends with its monetary value, and, far from the
demystification in the withering of the aura that Benjamin hoped for, what occurs instead is its re-mystification by the spectre of commodity fetishism. Just as the detective reduces objects to clues which univocally indicate the identity of a murderer, and thus deprives them of their social meaning, so the book dealers, in their reduction of cultural products to their prices, are presented as being just as morally impoverished as the imperfect detectives of the ‘autobiographical’ section.

The moral problematics of this are further underlined by the description of the book dealers themselves, their actions and motives. Lane is described elsewhere as an ‘alchemist, turning shit to gold, and gold straight back to shit again’ (p. 41), the shit in this instance, being the books that he deals. His profession, that of travelling the British landscape in search of ‘used books […] anything that could be painlessly converted into money’ (p. 13) is described as ‘tawdry’; the books that are the object of the dealers’ labour are ‘the stigmata of guilt’ (p. 24). The book trade brings about a situation in which the use value of a book – its contents – are supplemented for its exchange value – its price. This would not be so problematic were it not for the fact that this has the consequence of robbing future generations of their intellectual inheritance: as a result of the book trade, ‘[a]ll the floating street literature has been trawled-in and priced out of the range of any remaining students who might like to sample it; in effect functioning as a ‘cultural condom’ ‘slipped over the active, the errant and the beautiful tide of rubbish’ (p. 41).

If the end result of the book trade is a cultural sterility, then the effects that it has on those who participate in it are no less undesirable. Without exception, the book dealers are described as physically grotesque: the less successful practitioners who haunt London’s street markets become variously ‘Scufflers’, ‘Outpatients’, ‘the Glums’ (p. 40), who, at the bottom of the food-chain, scavenge for ‘half respectable waste’ such as ‘the Penguin Classics: strictly for penguins. Who waddle up to the stalls with numbers to check in their

notebooks. Books for bingo callers’ (p. 39). As with those higher up the ladder, they have no interest in the contents of the books, and here the text exposes their pedantic interest in the completion of a collection as both intellectually incurious and ridiculous. Lane himself is introduced (on the opening page of the novel) as follows:

Nicholas Lane, excarnate, hands on severely angled knees, stared out across the dim and featureless landscape, then dropped his gaze to the partly-fermented haddock, mixed with mucus, that poured from his throat, that hooked itself, bracken coloured, over the tough spears of roadside grass. Lumps, that were almost skin, split and fell to the ground. New convulsions took him: his bones rattled with their fury. Patches of steaming bouillabaisse spilled a shadow pool across the thin covering of snow. (p. 11)

There is a relish here to the extremity of the image described in this passage, with unpleasantness layered upon unpleasantness. Lane’s sick and wasted body becomes the site of the corruptions of his occupation, a corruption that is shared by an insipid and obfuscated landscape. Just as Mr Eves’ inability to move beyond the confines of his own obsession with the Whitechapel murders has left him physically degraded, so Lane’s body bears the imprint of his own questionable practices. The book trade and those who engage in its unscrupulous practices become utterly debased, and, moreover, the rare book itself is characterised as inauthentic, the value ascribed to it illusory. When the reader is therefore invited to acquire a copy of that first edition through the play of omissions and inclusions that characterise the difference between the first edition of *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* and the mass-market paperback, one can see that the reader must replicate the behaviour of the book dealers that are portrayed in the novel in such an unflattering manner. In this way, the book dealers’ narrative draws attention not only to the novel’s own textuality, but also to its own materiality as print, and the reader is forced to confront his or her own engagement with the physical object of the book itself and to acknowledge the ways in which he or she is implicated within the social institutions which regulate the production
and distribution of literature. In the process of this confrontation, the fetish character as it operates in this sphere begins to disclose itself.

**Conclusion**

*White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* places the reader in a position whereby the very act of reading, the discovery of meaning, and the act of buying and consuming literature are rendered unstable and uncertain by conflating the literary object with an empiricist project whose moral foundations have been revealed as suspect. The reader is invited to occupy the positions of both the book dealer and the Holmesian detective, and is thus invited to re-evaluate the moral positions of the author, the text and themselves as consumer of literature. In this way, the text places the reader in a position of moral uncertainty which is mirrored in the destabilising syntactic, formal, and social structures which shape the novel as a whole. What is important here is not that *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* suggests that either book dealing, detecting, or indeed reading crime fiction itself are inherently compromised, but rather that their ideological groundings need to be addressed. However, these underpinnings cannot be addressed directly, for to provide an ‘answer’ to the moral questions that they pose runs the risk of merely repeating the same epistemological mistakes. For this reason, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* can only explore these issues through the creation of a complex web of instabilities and uncertainties which continually confounds the reader, and leaves them with no firm ground, no singular reading or authority to be relied upon within the text. Rather than providing a direct critique of the ideological assumptions of detective fiction, and indeed, the commercial nature of this literature, the text instead makes these ideological assumptions apparent, and thus exists as a catalyst for the readers’ own subjective investigation of these categories. Yet this represents in itself a significant modification of the self-consciously ‘outsider’ stance of Sinclair’s earlier poetry. As explored in the previous chapter, a work such as *Lud Heat*, both in its formal qualities and through its engagement with the institutional framing conditions
by which literature is produced and disseminated, can position itself in apparent opposition to the logics of commodity exchange. Such a stance, as we have seen, is not available to a work such as *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, and the novel takes as its subject the way in which artworks stand not apart from the market, but are themselves part of it, are shaped by it, and perpetuate its logics.
Part 2: Place
Chapter 3: *Downriver’s flâneurs*

In the previous two chapters, we have seen how *Lud Heat* and *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* exemplify the difficulty faced in positioning cultural works in opposition to the logics of commodity exchange, and the ways in which Sinclair’s work draws upon and responds to the successes and failures of avant-garde practices in order to negotiate this problem. As we saw in chapter 1, Sinclair’s early poetry employs formal techniques derived from modernist literary practices to pursue a restricted audience in a particular time and place. This speaks at once of its endorsement of the avant-garde impulse to realise a transcendent aesthetic, and of the radically constrained horizon of such practices in 1970s Britain. Conversely, as explored in chapter 2, a work such as *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* dramatises the ways in which cultural objects, whether considered ‘high’ art or ‘pulp’, are implicated in such processes. Yet the localism of the former work – the way in which *Lud Heat* both explores the history and geography of the East End and seeks a restricted readership which must necessarily engage with its formal qualities to come to a renewed understanding of both – indicates other ways in which Sinclair’s work is indebted to the historic avant-gardes. Moreover, Sinclair’s work does not restrict itself to an engagement with the question of the commodification of art, but also investigates the question of the commodification of space: he is, almost paradigmatically, a ‘London Writer.’ It is for these reasons that chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis turn to this aspect of his work, reading it through two of the models for understanding urban space developed or influenced by the historic avant-gardes. In this chapter I shall examine the figure of the *flâneur* in relation to Sinclair’s second novel, *Downriver*, in the one that follows I shall examine the way in which his writing engages
with and transforms the notion with which it is now near-synonymous: psychogeography. In so doing, the following will seek not only to demonstrate how a reading of Sinclair's work through these concepts reveals the ways in which his writing is conditioned by these earlier models and to what extent it works to modify, extend, or transcend them; but will show also how such readings illuminate the nuances of the political dimensions of his writing. Furthermore, I will demonstrate the ways in which the contradictions inherent to the models for engaging with the urban question that Sinclair adopts are played out in his work and the (concrete) effects that these have for his oeuvre.

There is an identifiable break in Iain Sinclair’s bibliography between the fiction and poetry that marks his early career and the ‘psychogeographic’ non-fiction that began with the publication of Lights Out for the Territory (1997), and which continued with London Orbital (2002), The Edge of the Orison (2005), Hackney: That Rose-Red Empire (2009), and Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project (2011), his most recent volume at the time of writing.1 It is this latter body of work for which the author is best known. However the novels published just before Lights Out for the Territory: Downriver (1991) and Raidon Daughters (1995) sit on the threshold between Sinclair’s ‘early’ and ‘late’ works, expanding the author’s peripatetic praxis from the East End to the outer reaches of London, and bringing in the strain of explicit political diatribe that marks much of his later documentary work.2 Yet, though

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1 This schema is necessarily incomplete, Sinclair being an unusually prolific writer: he has published innumerable limited-run chapbooks of poetry on a consistent basis throughout his writing career, and has produced a number of collaborative works, such as those with the illustrator Dave McKean, the artist Rachel Lichenstein, and the photographer Marc Atkins in the books Slow Chocolate Autopsy (1997), Rodinsky’s Room (1999), and Liquid City (1999) respectively. It should also be noted that though Sinclair did not stop writing fiction following Lights Out for the Territory, the novels Landor’s Tower and Dining on Stones being published in 2001 and 2004, it is still as a writer of non-fiction that he is best known. Since 2004, at the time of writing he has published no further novel-length fiction. In addition to his writing projects, Sinclair has a not-insignificant number of cinematic and video titles to his name, the majority of which have been made with the director Chris Petit, best known for his 1979 film Radio On. These works include the television ‘documentaries’ The Cardinal and the Corpse (1992), The Falconer (1997), and Asylum (2000), the film of London Orbital (2002), discussed in chapter 6 of this thesis, and most recently, Swandown (2012), directed by Andrew Kötting. As the publication dates suggest, the years 1997-2002 represent an extraordinarily fertile period in what is by anyone’s standards a dauntingly voluminous literary and artistic output. The works I have listed in the above are those that could be considered the major ones, either by virtue of their significance in resolving or articulating major concerns found through the author’s oeuvre, their critical acclaim, or commercial success.

2 The apotheosis of which could be considered his collection of essays on the Millenium Dome (and prescient condemnation of the Blair government), Sorry Menicus: Excursions to the Millennium Dome (1999).
critically commended – *Downriver* won both the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Encore Award – these two works have achieved comparatively little commercial success: in the author’s own words, ‘people found [them] unreadable’.³ His later work attempts, as he attests, to present ‘very much the same material [as in the novels]’ as ‘non-fiction’;⁴ a strategy which has ‘turned things round […] and gained [him] some kind of audience.’⁵

Anticipating some of the debates that will be pursued in the following chapter, I would like to suggest that the author’s shift to documentary writing represents more than just a relocation of his works from the ‘fiction’ shelves of the bookshop to the ‘travel writing’ section.⁶ Instead, I would like to explore the possibility that Sinclair’s move from fiction to non-fiction comes about as an attempt to resolve some of the contradictions that manifest themselves in his novels, and in particular, in *Downriver*. These contradictions are perhaps best highlighted by thinking about the different ways in which Sinclair’s books conceptualise their own methodologies. The author’s work tends to make a virtue of the peripatetic praxes that inform it: be this through the ‘circling and doubling back’⁷ by which the narrator of *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* explores the East End, or the extraordinary distances covered by Sinclair and his companions in works such as *London Orbital* or *The Edge of the Orison*, the walk is always central. What differs between the early and later work is the level of critical engagement with the history of the walking subject and his or her engagement with the city that they display.

This can be demonstrated by looking briefly at an early passage in *Lights Out for

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3 Kevin Jackson and Iain Sinclair, *The Verbals*, p. 124. The James Tait Black Memorial prize is awarded by Edinburgh University for the best work of fiction published in the UK; Anon., <http://www.ed.ac.uk/about/people/tait-black/about>, accessed December 2011. The Encore is awarded to the best British second novel, and in 1992 was judged by the author Hilary Mantel (whose *Beyond Black* is discussed briefly in chapter 6 of this study) and John Gross, the former literary editor of the New Statesman; Anon., <http://www.encoreaward.com/>, accessed December 2011.


5 Kevin Jackson and Iain Sinclair, *The Verbals*, p. 124.

6 It should be noted here that questions of genre are not straightforwardly answered: as Sinclair’s assertion that his travelogues are composed of the same stuff as his novels might suggest, the clear demarcations between types of writing made by the publishing and bookselling industries are not necessarily reflective of the substantive content of individual works.

the Territory, in which the narrator places himself in the role of the ‘born again flâneur’, who claims that ‘walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city’. For Sinclair, ‘drifting purposefully […] in alert reverie’ ‘stitches it all together’, allows the ‘fiction of an underlying pattern [to the city] to reveal itself’ through the ‘illicit cocktail of bodily exhaustion and a raging carbon monoxide high.’ Sinclair’s reference here to the figure of the flâneur – stroller or idler – places his work explicitly within a particular lineage of thinking and experiencing urban space which has its roots in 19th century Paris, which enters critical theory as a crucial figure in Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project, from whence it becomes dispersed (in various refracted forms) through a whole series of related discourses, including the work of the Lettriste and later Situationist Internationals, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau. Moreover, whilst apparently programmatic, Sinclair’s statements are at base contradictory. Though Sinclair takes on the mantle of the flâneur in order to synthesise his vision of the city, he feels it necessary (as Brian Baker points out) to distance himself from the earlier version: he is ‘born again’. The patterns he perceives as he moves through the city are not truth, but ‘fiction’, arrived at through the intoxicating (and accordingly hallucinogenic) effects of the walk and the urban environment itself.

There is a recognition here that whilst aping the habits and manners of the nineteenth-century flâneur might be a way of both exploring urban space and of bringing it to representation, there are risks entailed in such an endeavour, and a price to be paid. In the same way that his early poetry and prose, emerging as it does from the consciously avant-garde self-publication strategies discussed in the previous two chapters, demonstrates an acute awareness of the questions of ‘who writes?’ and ‘who reads?’, Lights Out for the Territory seems to be equally concerned with the conflicted politics of the question of ‘who walks?’ We might ask why the text chooses to foreground such an awareness, and why its

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9 Iain Sinclair, Lights Out for the Territory, p. 4.
narrator might be so adamant that his version of the flâneur is ‘born again’ – a statement which provokes the immediate question of ‘born again’ from what? Downriver is relevant to this discussion for two major reasons. Firstly, the interplay of the novel's narrators (principally the named ‘Sinclair’ and an unnamed, third-person narrator whose subjectivity appears to overlap with the first) and their experience of London and its tidal reaches, and indeed the text’s fragmented narrative form, bear extended comparison with the praxis and subjectivity of the historic flâneur, and in particular Benjamin’s discontinuous and ironic presentation of him in The Arcades Project. Secondly, reading Downriver as engaging in a mode of flânerie reveals also the ways in which the novel is riven by some of the same contradictions, ambiguities, and blindnesses that restrict the Benjamianian flâneur. These limitations cluster around questions of the historic flâneur’s gendered experience of the city.

In order to explore these arguments, in the first section of the following chapter I shall demonstrate the way in which Downriver’s narrator/s can be read as flâneurs, and the ways in which Sinclair’s presentation of them ironises and complicates them in ways which create similar textual effects to Benjamin’s presentation of the flâneur of the era of the haute-bourgeois. This reading will emphasise the way in which the flâneur’s experience of the city cannot really be separated from his literary existence, and, through a brief comparison between Downriver, passages from Benjamin’s Arcades Project and his memoir Berlin Childhood Around 1900, and the Dickensian novel, the ways in which differing literary modes serve to reflect this experience and its ‘phantasmagoric’ quality. In the second section, I shall move on to look in detail at the character Edith Cadiz through the lens provided by the feminist critiques of the flâneur articulated by Griselda Pollock, Judith Walkowitz, and Janet Wolff in their respective works Vision and Difference (1987), City of Dreadful Delight (1993), and ‘The Invisible Flaneuse’ (1985). These are key texts in what Andrew Thacker has succinctly termed ‘the great flâneur debate’ of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which concerned the ways in which the understanding of modernity that the flâneur articulates is one, in

12 Andrew Thacker, Moving Through Modernity (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 82.
Wolff’s words, that ‘totally excludes women.’¹³ Cadiz is a complex – if not overdetermined – figure in the novel,¹⁴ whose identity encompasses the disparate roles of artist/dancer/nurse/prostitute/revenant, and who in some respects acts as a female counterpart to Downriver’s drifting male narrators. Sinclair has described the novel as an attempt to bring to representation the female experience of the East End and the Whitechapel murders that he felt had been effaced from White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings,¹⁵ yet Cadiz’s ‘story’, narrated by a knowing, self-conscious ‘Sinclair’, is not that of the observing flâneur, but of the observed woman whose femininity seems to preclude the possibility of agency or speech.

In conclusion, I shall then broaden this argument to situate Downriver in the debates in Marxist and feminist criticism that were contemporaneous with its composition, and

¹³ Janet Wolff, ‘Memoires and Micrologies: Walter Benjamin, feminism and cultural analysis’, in Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory Vol. 3, ed. by Peter Osborne (New York, N. Y.: Routledge, 2004), pp. 319-333 (p. 328). As an aside, it is interesting that these debates are near-contemporaneous with the composition and publication of Downriver, though I am unsure that conclusions any more firm than ‘there was something in the air’ can be drawn from this. It is also worth noting that these debates on the masculinity of the flâneur’s experience of the city predate the translation of The Arcades Project into English in 1999, meaning that much of this dispute takes place without reference to Benjamin’s most extensive (though also most mercurial) musings on the subject. As the bibliographies of ‘The Invisible Flàneuse’ and Vision and Difference attest, both Wolff’s and Pollock’s source for Benjamin’s thoughts on the flâneur in these works is Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, which presents the figure in a fashion that is much closer to a conventional essay than it is to the discontinuous ‘constellation’ of fragments found in the Arcades, whether or not one takes this characteristic of this work as Benjamin’s methodology or as a symptom of the work’s incomplete status. Moreover, as Adorno points out, in this essay Benjamin presents ‘individual features from the realm of the superstructure [such as the flâneur] […] to corresponding features of the infrastructure’ without sufficient theoretical mediation; Theodor Adorno, ‘Letter to Walter Benjamin, 10 November 1938’, in Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács, Aesthetics and Politics (London: Verso, 2010 [1980]), pp. 126-133 (p. 129). Benjamin’s response to this criticism was to assert that the Baudelaire text should be considered as the second, philological half of a larger work, the first half of which would contain the theoretical mediation absent in the extant text; Walter Benjamin, ‘Letter to Theodor Adorno, 9 December 1938’, in Adorno et. al, Aesthetics and Politics, pp. 134-141 (p. 138).

We do not have this complete text, though if the armature of ‘theoretical transparency’ of which Benjamin speaks is to be found anywhere, it is to be found in The Arcades Project. Though I do not think that the flâneur of the Arcades escapes the critiques that Pollock, and particularly Wolff, level at him, as a consequence of Benjamin’s ‘kaleidoscopic’ presentation, he is more ambiguous in this work than in Charles Baudelaire. Moreover, the methodological statements to be found in Convolute N, ‘On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress’, particularly N1a, 8 (‘Method of this project: literary montage’) and N2, 6 (‘to assemble large-scale construction out of the smallest and most precisely cut components […] to discover in analysis […] the crystal of the total event’) clarify Benjamin’s theoretical (indeed, revolutionary) aims; Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 460-461.

¹⁴ That is, Cadiz has multiple, overlapping, if not contradictory meanings in the fabric of Downriver. As Freud puts it in relation to dream images, ‘each element of the dream-content turns out to be over-determined, to be represented many times and in many ways in the dream-thoughts’; Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 216.

¹⁵ Kevin Jackson and Iain Sinclair, The Verbal, p. 120.
explore the way in which the impasse that the novel represents conditions Sinclair’s move to non-fiction.

**Downriver’s flâneur/s**

It is easy to see why Sinclair might make reference to the flâneur to describe his own praxis, and equally why he might want to accentuate the distance between him and his adoptive forebear. Like the historic flâneur of high Parisian modernity, Sinclair ‘drifts’ through the city on foot; like him, he transforms (or purports to transform) the material of this experience into literature and art. Yet the historic flâneur also makes certain truth claims about the nature of his experience: as Benjamin reminds us, in the hack journalism of the feuilleton or the ‘physiologies’ that were his main source of income, the flâneur pretends to an ability ‘to read from faces the profession, the ancestry, the character’, perpetuating the misapprehension that every ‘inhabitant of a big city’ was able, ‘unencumbered by factual knowledge’, to ‘make out the profession, the background, and the life-style of the passers-by’. For Benjamin, this truth claim must be countered, for it creates an image of the world in which ‘people appear only as types’; a reification which reduces the individual to merely one thing circulating in the marketplace amongst many others. The flâneur is more than just one walker amongst the many, but one who, by virtue of his class-position, is able to retain a coherent identity where others lose theirs in the anonymity of the crowd. As Baudelaire expresses it in his foundational essay on the artist Constantin Guys, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, the artist-flâneur is possessed of a subjectivity that allows him to distil from his impressions the essence of Parisian life: a ‘kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness’, an

“I” with an insatiable appetite for the “non-I”, at every instant rendering it in pictures more living than life itself.21

This experience of the city is depicted in Benjamin as granting access to a certain truth about Paris yet somehow deceived by it, and as producing deceptive images of it. So, for example, whilst the *flâneur* at some points appears to have an almost somatic connection with place and history – ‘at the approach of his footsteps, the place has roused […] he stands before Notre Dame de Lorette, and his soles remember […]’22 – that (Proustian) remembrance is compromised, false, a ““mechanical picture””23 of the world that mystifies as much as it entrances. It is these images that are the ‘phantasmagorias’ of the marketplace to which the *flâneur* abandons himself.24 The ambivalence that Sinclair expresses in *Lights Out for the Territory* evinces the same tension that animates Benjamin’s presentation of the *flâneur* in *The Arcades Project*: a recognition of the ‘fictional’ quality of the products of his *flânerie*, yet a concurrent reluctance to give up on them entirely; that the mediation of his experience of the city through art both constructs an image that contributes to an understanding of what the city is, and at once makes such understandings available to the task of criticism. Sinclair cannot present his London with a straight face, and this irony is arguably the same as the lesson which Susan Buck-Morss claims Benjamin drew from the 19th century figure: that the role of the intellectual is to be at once ‘socially rebellious bohemian’ and ‘producer of commodities for the literary market’.25 As much as the author’s own invocation of the *flâneur*, it is this ambivalent attitude to the veracity of the walking

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24 Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Exposé <of 1939>’, p. 14. Thus, through Benjamin’s work the *flâneur* has come to be understood not just as a dandy or idler, an historical curio that might serve to illustrate or embellish our knowledge and understanding of the texture of life in Haussmann’s Paris, but a character who serves to represent and to embody the dialectical contradictions of nineteenth-century capitalism. As Terry Eagleton argues, ‘the *flâneur’s* every dallying step speaks ideological volumes; in the very poise of his head and rhythm of his gait Benjamin reads the imprint of the class struggle itself’; Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: NLB, 1981), p. 154.
experience and his presentation of it – as much distrustful of it as it is enchanted – that makes this particular model a productive point of comparison.26

Yet where this ambivalence is given explicit expression in *Lights Out for the Territory*, elsewhere in the author’s *oeuvre* Sinclair makes his reader work somewhat harder. Though *Downriver* shares the peripatetic methodology of the author’s later writing – the twelve individual ‘tales’ that make up the novel are structured by the journeys that the narrator ‘Sinclair’ takes through various parts of East London and the reaches of the Thames Estuary – the methodological statements which pepper *Lights Out* and *London Orbital* are absent.27 The emphasis that the work places on the experience of the city as it is experienced on foot therefore makes the transposition of the *flâneur* question from *Lights Out for the Territory* to *Downriver* a straightforward one; yet in the absence of the explicit methodology found in the former, the latter text requires a different form of exegesis in order to reveal its ambiguous articulation of the subjective experience of London. In order to demonstrate this, I shall look firstly at how the apparent subjective coherence of *Downriver*’s narrator/*flâneur* asserts itself and dissolves in the opening ‘tale’ of the novel; I shall then go on to explore how this motion towards dissolution is replicated at the level of plot, before finally examining how these characteristics of the text evince a similar (though not necessarily dialectical) structure to Benjamin’s presentation of the historic *flâneur*.

26 Though Sinclair makes many references to the Romantics throughout his *oeuvre* – the major figures here being William Blake in *Ludd Heat* and *Suicide Bridge* and John Clare in *The Edge of the Orison* – the determinedly ‘modern’, ambiguous, if not fraught relationship that the *flâneur* has with the city give this comparison its specificity. Sinclair’s London is not, for example, that of Wordsworth’s ‘Upon Westminster Bridge’, nor even is it that of Blake’s ‘London’, for these are much more uncomplicated (though not unsubtle) celebrations or condemnations of the city than the dialectical approach of the Benjaminian *flâneur*.

27 In *London Orbital* Sinclair reformulates his praxis as he moves away from the urban setting of his earlier work to the semi-rural landscape of the M25 motorway, expressing his preference for the term ‘*fugueur*’ over the ‘now overworked *flâneur*’; Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Granta, 2002), p. 120. Similarly, Sinclair goes on to quote Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* on the supposed ‘healing’, amnesiac effects of the countryside on melancholics (p. 141), explicitly situating his thought within a philosophical context.
The narrator/flâneur

Despite the novel's self-description as ‘A Narrative in Twelve Tales’, an overarching plot is precisely what *Downriver* lacks: indeed, one of the work's most striking characteristics is its rejection of what might be considered the defining features of the novel form. As Robert Bond has argued, *Downriver* displays a strong aversion to 'naturalistic' prose; nor do Sinclair's characters have much sense of coherent psychological identity or ‘realism’, or indeed, ontological stability within the work. Events in the novel occur without causal or temporal relationship to one another, characters disappear and reappear throughout the text, appear to take on different guises, and engage in activities that from a realist perspective would be impossible. Within the individual ‘tales’ that make up the work, although there are concordances of theme and character, a sense of narrative thread or progression is secondary to the singularity and peculiarity of the individual scene; indeed, each tale is composed of a series of individual, numbered vignettes. The novel makes frequent borrowings from different (and often opposed) fictional modes and genres, whilst textual frames, such as the apparent realism of the opening pages, are continually erected only to be rapidly broken. Despite this fragmentation, however, the voice that dominates

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28 Iain Sinclair, *Downriver*, p. iii. Further page references to this work in this chapter will be given in parenthesis.
30 This inherently fragmented form and self-awareness with regard to the novel's own effects suggests points of comparison with postmodern, metafictional works such as Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1979) or Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1985–86), which, through their systematic undermining of realist conventions, draw attention to their own textuality; Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), in which Lyotard’s ‘grand narratives’ disappear only to return in the ghostly, parodic form of the conspiracy theory or the secret history, are also apposite references; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). This in turn suggests that *Downriver* might evince a similar epistemological scepticism towards the truth-claims of the literary text, emphasising instead its inherently unstable and polysemous nature, and correspondingly the ways in which texts and textuality condition the real; Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 18. Indeed, the text resists attempts on the part of the reader or critic to impose a univocal or linear reading of the text. As Julian Wolfreys has pointed out, Sinclair's texts open themselves 'to the multiple voicings of the city's historical and cultural others' in such a way so as to 'interrupt normative models of urban representation'; Julian Wolfreys, *Writing London Vol. 2: Materiality, Memory, Spectrality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), p. 162. Attempting to impose such an interpretation on such an inherently polysemous text is to risk 'express[ing] what Sinclair has already expressed, and by which process he has already forestalled and resisted any act of critical appropriation' (p. 161). If we are to take Wolfreys's warning seriously, a critical approach to Sinclair's work that would only use the categories of flânerie as an index against which to read his work would inevitably tend towards description, that is, to adapt Ezra Pound's dictum, to retell in mediocre criticism what has already been done in good prose; Ezra Pound, ‘From “A Retrospect”’, in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources*
the novel is the ‘I’ of ‘Sinclair’ the narrator, or the ‘us’ or ‘our’ of his companions, and the episodes that structure Downriver are frequently synthesised through the perspective of the coherent ‘I’ of the narratorial subject. This, as Sinclair’s assumption of the role of the ‘born again flâneur’ in Lights Out for the Territory might suggest, is to make the same claim for authenticity, authority, and verisimilitude as the Baudelarian artist-flâneur. However, if we pay attention to the appearance of this ‘I’ in the text and the slippage of this narratorial voice between different textual frames, the apparent coherence that this lends the text is undermined.

The opening tale of Downriver, ‘He Walked Amongst The Trial Men’,31 departs rapidly from its opening overlooking Victoria Park in Hackney, following the narrator ‘Sinclair’ to Tilbury on the Thames Estuary in search of the promise of rare books:32

Tilbury town is a single street, and it is shut. European rain brings down the dirt that floats so enticingly from the massed pipes of the power station. The innocent sightseer abandons his guidebook to relish a haberdasher’s grease-streaked window, which features underwear so outdated it has all the nostalgic allure of a fetishist’s catalogue. There is a ‘Financial Consultant’ with a twenty-four-hour sideline in radio-controlled mini cabs. And yet more mini cabs. The chief industry of the place is providing the means to escape from it.

Cranes from the docks seal the set, and diminish it; preposterous as the Bureau de Change that is gratefully dying into its varnish.

After a couple of hundred yards the buildings simply give up. I am lost among the terminal hobs. Locked yards with sheeted secrets, contracts that lack a signature, contracts that lack a signature, contracts that lack a signature.

32 As with White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings, many of Sinclair’s characters work in the book trade. An exploration of the implications of this can be found in chapter 2 of the present thesis.
consignments that were never collected: a killing ground for lorries, misdirected, with an inadequate cargo. (pp. 6-7)

The subjective nature of the impressions related here is explicitly acknowledged, the narrator identifiable as an embodied ‘I’ who witnesses the scene described, the fragment following his journey down Tilbury High Street. The first two paragraphs, which effectively take the form of a list, operate like an establishing shot in a movie, a slow pan which takes in the scene, establishes place and mood, the reference to Tilbury as a ‘set’ only serving to deepen this impression. The off-guidebook attractions that the narrator picks out – the underwear, the accountancy firm, the Bureau de Change – reflect the idiosyncrasies of his attention, as does the sardonic, paratactic repetition of ‘mini cabs. And yet more mini cabs.’ Yet as the town itself loses its identity amongst the yards and shipping containers, so too does the narrator, lost in the ‘secrets’, forged documents, and missing shipments. As with Sinclair’s later declaration at the opening of *Lights Out for the Territory*, in which he declares that ‘walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city’,33 or the essay in his early poem *Lud Heat* in which the ‘subservience of the grounded eye’34 is emphasised over the abstractions of the cartographer, this is the perspective of the pedestrian, or, to adopt Sinclair’s own phrase, the ‘born again flâneur’.35 We have a dual claim here: to the authenticity of the subjective experience of the ‘I’ who narrates the passage; but also, as the cinematic references suggest, a recognition that the passage itself is artifice, mediated.

The passage above enacts a motion from apparent coherence to dissolution: a motion which is replicated as the tale moves forward. The coherence that the subjectivity of the narrator appears to give to the passage discussed above dissolves, and as the tale continues, it jumps between various times, characters, and narrational perspectives: a man has a vision of the Native American princess Pocahontas walking across the Thames Estuary

surrounded by the bodies of those drowned in the *Princess Alice* disaster;36 a group of men discuss various East End crimes in a Tilbury pub, the World’s End; ‘Sinclair’ reappears to purchase a Conrad first edition in a Tilbury junk shop. The voice that narrates these events remains consistent throughout, as the description of the aforementioned hallucination demonstrates:

They floated in never-connecting circles; going under, dipping from sight. They were all dead. They swam to fetch him. Wavelets, drowned angels; pale-green billows. There were women in hats, holding their children above the waterline. Infants slipping from their arms, slipping from sight. The river’s net was churned, and the ropes were cut. […] But the morning light would resolve it, sweep away the visible traces. Except the Indian woman. She was always there. Walking across the water towards him, daintily stepping from wave crest to wave crest: down from the church, court habit, throat hidden in a ruff of sea-bone, most severe. (pp. 8-9)

Though the caustic tone of ‘Sinclair’s’ disparaging description of Tilbury has eased, the distinctive paratactic sentence construction evident in the former passage remains. The voice is recognisably the same as in the previous extract, yet the ‘I’ of ‘Sinclair’ has vanished: though the transition has not been signalled, to use Gérard Genette’s terminology, the text has shifted from an homodiegetic narrator (the narrator is present as a character in the narrative) to an heterodiegetic one (the narrator is external to it).37 Who

36 Pocahontas died on board a ship moored off Gravesend in 1616; Grace Steele Woodward, *Pocahontas* (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), p. 185. In September 1878, the paddle steamer *Princess Alice* was struck by the collier Bywell Castle and sank. The death toll of the disaster was 544, and it remains the worst recorded shipping accident on the Thames, but it did not, as Sinclair implies here, occur at Tilbury, but off Tripcock Point near Greenwich. See Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), p. 264. *Downriver* returns repeatedly to this event. It is also worth noting that the sinking of the *Marchioness* in 1989 in which 54 people died, an event contemporary with the composition of *Downriver*, holds striking parallels with the *Princess Alice* disaster, the pleasure boat having been hit by the dredger Bowbelle in the Thames near Cannon Street Railway Bridge. The findings of the police and Maritime and Coastguard Agency investigations of the disaster can be found at <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20101013092119/http://www.marchioness-bowbelle.org.uk/>; accessed February 2011. The layering of these three historical events and the presentation of them within a single textual frame collapses the past into the present: a recurring motif within *Downriver* and indeed, Sinclair’s work more broadly. The technique bears a certain Benjaminian stamp, fragment N7a, 3 of the Arcades reading ‘telescoping of the past through the present’; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 471.

then is reporting these events? There is here a shift of perspective in the text, the locus around which the text’s claims to authority are centred. In the first-person narration of the former section, the authority of the text lies with the narrator ‘Sinclair’: this voice attests to the authenticity of events ‘really’ witnessed. In the above passage there is no explicit or named ‘I’ to take responsibility for the narrative, and instead the authority proceeds from the author, understood in the Foucauldian sense as a function of the text itself.38 Crucially, as the text draws attention to the differing narratorial voices, the author-narrator in this passage appears here under erasure: a presence that is necessary to the text, indeed presupposes its existence, yet is at once absent from it.39

With the disappearance of ‘Sinclair’, the scene described (unlike the earlier description of Tilbury) no longer pretends to documentary or ‘realist’ status, the Thames estuary becoming an haunted space. Yet the continuity of voice and dearth of textual signposts to register the narratorial shift complicates the boundary between the author/narrator and his ‘fictional’ namesake. The text is no longer delimited either by the authority of the witnessing ‘I’ of ‘Sinclair’, nor by Sinclair the author/narrator, for we no longer have a stable textual frame by which we might distinguish the one from the other. The problem is given explicit formulation later in the text. ‘Sinclair’ is portrayed as having submitted a novel, itself entitled ‘Downriver’, to an unnamed major publisher. His manuscript is returned to him, heavily edited and, it is implied, the novel cancelled:40

I dragged the spurned and tattered rewrite from my pocket and shoved it across the table. Pencilled comments speared the margins: messianic tutorial. ‘Who is “I”?’ was the first controversy. An existential dilemma that stopped the present writer

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39 ‘Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible’; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Translator’s Preface’, in Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1976]), pp. ix-xc (p. xiv). In this instance, at the level of the text the presence of the narrator is indicated as the teller of the tale, yet the logic of the scene dictates that the narrator cannot have witnessed these events.
40 And thus another textual frame is broken in addition to that of author/narrator/s. Which ‘Downriver’ are we reading?
dead in his tracks. On that single incisive challenge the whole smear hangs. *Who is “I”?* Answer that riddle, or get out of the maze. The slippery self-confessor, the closet De Quincey (I, Me, You, He), speaks of ‘the Narrator’, or ‘Sinclair’: deflects the thrust of the accusation. The narrator exists only in his narration: outside of this tale he is nothing. But ‘Sinclair’ is a tribe. There are dozens of them: Scots, Jews, Scribblers, Masons, Cathars (even Supernaturals, such as Glooscap, the mangod of the Micmacs). It’s an epistemophiliac disguise. A small admission to win favour: a plea bargain. And what gives this self-designated ‘I’ the right to report these events? How deeply is he implicated? Is he (I) a liar? Can we (you) trust him? (p. 352)

The implied coherence granted by the ‘I’ of ‘Sinclair’ is fragmented, dissolved and multiplied into the ‘dozens’ of his namesakes. ‘His’ appearance and existence is de-naturalised, his right to report and that report’s consequent veracity called into doubt. The constructions ‘he (I)’ and ‘we (you)’ problematise distinctions between author/s, narrator/s, and reader/s (and of course, Sinclair the writer has been all three). As Patricia Waugh argues, whereas in ‘modernist texts such as *The Waves* (1931), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *The Sound and the Fury* (1931), the contextual shifts can be “naturalized” by the construction of a narrator whose ontologically non-problematical “full” subjectivity gives significance to the discourse’,41 *Downriver* offers no such stable frame of reference. Brought back to the notion of the flâneur understood as an individual who retains an aloofness, integrity, and unified subjectivity where others lose theirs, and thus is able to perceive (in Baudelaire’s phrase) the ‘eternal and immutable’ in a ‘fugitive and […] contingent’ Modernity,42 we can see that the very possibility of this subjectivity is brought into question by Sinclair’s text. The centred subjectivity of the narrator – the observing, documenting flâneur – has collapsed.

Dissolving plots

The dissolution of narratorial voice in *Downriver* is mirrored by the marked absence of an identifiable plot. In the final vignette of the opening tale, ‘Sinclair’ and his companion Joblard visit the World’s End pub where they discover 12 postcards behind the bar, which are then arranged into what is described as ‘Joblard’s HEART OF DARKNESS. A Narrative in Twelve Postcards’ (p. 25). As with the broader context within which they appear, these elements ultimately do not cohere, ‘Sinclair’ stating that ‘this fiction could, of course, be reassembled in any order, and read in whatever way suits the current narrator’ (p. 29). The passage bears striking similarities to Sinclair’s use of Blake in *Land Heat* or the ‘myriorama’ image in *London Orbital*, discussed in chapters 1 and 6 of this thesis respectively, in that the text offers a model for its own interpretation: it will provide the reader with fragments, elements, but to construct a narrative is arbitrary, an imposition. The allusion to the subtitle of the novel in Joblard’s construction should give us pause for thought, as should the disjunction between its stated aim of constructing a ‘narrative’ and its actual form, and we should consider why the novel eschews plot so strongly. Whilst the reference to Conrad offers one fertile avenue of investigation, the framing narrative of *Heart of Darkness* being set on a ship moored off Gravesend, I want instead to look briefly at the strong contrast between *Downriver*’s fragmented or absent plot and that of one of its other major points of literary reference – Dickens – in order to address this question.43

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43 To attend briefly to Sinclair’s use of Conrad in *Downriver*, in evoking *Heart of Darkness*, the Thames and London under Thatcher become readable as an allegory of Charlie Marlow’s Congo. As Cedric Watts argues, Conrad’s novella invites the reader to compare the Congo with the Thames, and thus the colonial project and the European societies from which this project originates, and does so in such a way as to render Victorian binary oppositions between Europe and Africa as ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’ respectively as ‘paradoxical’; Cedric Watts, ‘Heart of Darkness’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. by J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 45-61 (p. 47). As *Downriver*’s apocalyptic 8th and 9th tales suggest, both of which take aim at the Docklands developments on the Isle of Dogs, the heart of darkness is unambiguously at the heart of Empire, at the Greenwich meridian. It is also worth briefly noting the debate over the canonicity of Conrad on account of the racism that some readers have seen in his work. For contrasting views on this issue, see Chinua Achebe, ‘An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*’, in Josef Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism* ed. by Robert Kimbrough (London: Norton, 1988 [1899]), pp. 251-262; and Cedric Watts, ‘“A Bloody Racist”: About Achebe’s View of Conrad’ in *Yearbook of English Studies*, 13 (1983), 196-209. Edward Said gets to the root of this problem best, identifying the fact that it is perfectly possible for Conrad to have been both a racist and an anti-imperialist: ‘it is no paradox, therefore, that Conrad was both anti-imperialist and imperialist, progressive when it came to rendering fearlessly and pessimistically the self-confirming, self-deluding corruption of overseas domination, deeply reactionary when it came to conceding that Africa
Dickens makes for an apposite comparison firstly because of the importance of plot for his work, which contrasts markedly with Downriver, but also because of his function in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. The city as it is represented in the nineteenth century novel is strongly linked with the ‘psychology of the flâneur’. Benjamin cites G. K. Chesterton:

‘Dickens himself had, in the most sacred and serious sense of the term, the key to the street … His earth was the stones of the street; his stars were the lamps of the street; his hero was the man in the street. He could open the inmost door of his house – the door that leads into that secret passage which is lined with houses and roofed with stars.’

Whilst Chesterton’s description of Dickens’s peculiar talent is laudatory in tone, Benjamin’s quotation of it in the context of *The Arcades Project* reveals its ambiguity: the ‘street’ Chesterton describes is to be found not in the city itself, but through the ‘secret passage’ that leads to Dickens’s imagination; his vision of the city is more ‘real’ than the reality it purports to describe. The street becomes as interior to the flâneur: he steps into the street and sees himself reflected in it, just as in the living quarters of the bourgeois

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44 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 438. Balzac and Hugo are Benjamin’s other major references in the *Arcades*. Balzac’s apparent empathy with the people of Paris is cited by Benjamin: “He [Balzac] was with a friend one day when he passed a beggar in rags on the boulevard. His companion was astonished to see Balzac touch his own sleeve with his hand; he had just felt there the conspicuous rip that gaped at the elbow of the mendicant.” Anatole Cerfbarr and Jules Christophe, *Répertoire de la Comédie Humaine de H. de Balzac*, cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 448. The serial nature of the *feuilleton* novel has consequences also for narrative structure. Maria Adamowicz-Hariasz points out: ‘there is no doubt that – because it forced the *hommes de lettres* to write as fast as journalists and because the product of their work had to attract and sustain the interest of as many consumers as possible – serialization had a great impact on narrative discourse and on the structure of the novel. A successful *roman-feuilleton* made frequent use of clichés, it privileged dialogue over description, and it delighted readers through swift action and rapidly and unexpectedly changing events’; Maria Adamowicz-Hariasz, ‘From Opinion to Information: The *Roman-Feuillete* and the Transformation of the Nineteenth-Century French Press’, in *Making the News: Modernity & The Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. by Dean de la Motte and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pp. 160-184 (p. 165).

his possessions reaffirm his identity as markers of his good taste and judgement.⁴⁶ This is to endorse the veracity of Dickens’s vision of London, yet, as Benjamin’s ambiguous suggestion that the phrase “he has the key to the street” is said of someone to whom the door is closed”,⁴⁷ it is not self-evident that this truth claim can be entirely trusted.⁴⁸

The opening of Bleak House reveals why this might be so. The novel opens with a description of a London enveloped in fog, a metaphor for a sick city, obscure, invisible, and unknowable to its inhabitants, who perceive it only partially as if it were wrapped in ‘misty clouds’.⁴⁹ The city is rendered illegible, yet the narrator has no difficulty in reading it: whilst the fog affords the characters of Bleak House only a partial view (Esther, the second narrator of the novel attests as much, admitting to the ‘difficulty’ she has in ‘beginning to write my portion of these pages’ on account of the fact that she is ‘not clever’)⁵⁰ for the narrator who opens the novel it brings the disparate regions of London – ‘up the river’, ‘down the river’, Greenwich, Temple Bar – into an apparent coherence and unity.⁵¹ Though on the bridges and parapets – those places where the geography of the Thames valley offers the city up to the viewer as landscape – Dickens’s Londoners are unable to take stock of their environment, the narrator finds no such obstruction, collapsing the distance from the Essex marshes to the Kentish heights to the width of a comma. It is, in Judith

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⁴⁶ Benjamin speaks of the ‘intoxicated interpenetration of street and residence’ of nineteenth century Paris; Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, p. 423. The flâneur’s experience of the city – as if he were walking in ‘his [own] room’ – is reflective of this; Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, p. 421.
⁴⁸ Michael Hollington puts forward the case for considering Dickens as a model for the flâneur, though he does not recognise the stress that Benjamin places on the ambivalence of this figure; see Michael Hollington, ‘Dickens the Flâneur’ in The Dickensian, 77, 1981, 71-87.
⁵⁰ Charles Dickens, Bleak House, p. 27.
⁵¹ Jeremy Tambling picks up on the ambiguities of Bleak House’s fog, its obfuscating and de-centreing properties testifying to the tension between the representable and ir-representable textual city: ‘to begin with “London” is not to start with a place that is known and can be read, but to bring something into textual existence. While it produces “London,” the writing makes the city a place of disappearance: of growing indistinguishability, as the mud comes up and engulfs, and as first smoke, the rain and the black soot come down, and then the amorphous fog’; Jeremy Tambling, Lost in the American City: Dickens, James and Kafka (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.18. Karl Ashley Smith notes that Dickens’s language complicates literal and metaphoric readings of the fog, and it is ‘difficult to tell when ‘fog’ and ‘mud’ stop being applied to the external conditions around the court and when they begin to describe the complexity of the court’s procedures’; Karl Ashley Smith, Dickens and the Unreal City: Searching for Spiritual Significance in Nineteenth-Century London (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 76.
Walkowitz’s terminology, the viewpoint of the ‘privileged [male] urban spectator’ who ‘stroll[s] across the divided spaces of the metropolis, whether it was London, Paris, or New York, to experience the city as a whole’; that is, the characteristic viewpoint of the flâneur himself.

Moreover, Dickens gives his fog a centre and a source: ‘the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery’. In so doing, Dickens foreshadows the eventual resolution that the plot structure of the novel both offers and requires. A cause is mooted to the fog (and its accompanying blindness and sickness), and thus an eventual revelation is implied, suggesting that the fog that envelopes the first pages of the novel will eventually lift. This becomes a metaphor for storytelling itself: as the mystery of the plot is uncovered, so are the mechanisms of London, the interaction of its differing social strata, the mysteries at the heart of its hidden places, uncovered also. For Bleak House, not only is space rendered transparent in the act of narration, but it becomes subservient to the needs of plot; or, to put it another way, Dickens’s particular narrative mode appears here to be adequate to the ‘realistic’ depiction of urban space. The problem with this, as Catherine Belsey argues in her analysis of Dickens’s novel, is that ‘classic realism cannot foreground contradiction. The logic of its structure - the movement towards closure - precludes the possibility of leaving the reader simply to confront the contradictions which the text may have defined.’ Though Belsey here is discussing the way in which the dual narrators of Bleak House, whilst apparently presenting a multiplicity of viewpoints ultimately offer the reader, in the ‘interests of a single, unified, coherent “truth”’ a position, an attitude which

52 Judith Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 16. Walkowitz’s syntax here universalises both the male ‘urban spectator’ and ‘the city’; to cite Tambling once more, Dickens’s ability to ‘map’ the city is restricted to the European city in general and London in particular, and ‘disappears in America’; Jeremy Tambling, Lost in the American City, p. 4.
53 Charles Dickens, Bleak House, p. 27.
54 Which in a sense happens, as another archetype of the flâneur, Inspector Bucket, reveals through his investigations the connections between the various characters and institutions of the novel. As Benjamin states, ‘preformed in the figure of the flâneur is that of the detective’; Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, p. 442.
is given as non-contradictory, fixed in “knowing” subjectivity, her arguments apply to the depiction of space. In presenting London from the supposedly omniscient perspective of the flâneur whose vision and movement know no bounds, and suggesting that it is from this perspective that the city’s contradictions can be read, understood, and resolved, the cracks in which alternative readings and experiences of those same spaces might appear are covered over. Despite the sharp criticism of the institutions of the society within which *Bleak House* is set, the ends-oriented plot structure of the novel demands that the contradictions therein must ultimately be laid to rest.

The twelve, discontinuous tales that make up *Downriver* allow for a markedly different model for the comprehension of the city, and the ‘closure’ that the novel offers is (inevitably) no closure at all: ‘Sinclair’ abandons his narration to Joblard in what is described as a ‘dreary post-modernist fraud’ (p. 380). As Peter Brooks argues, the ‘tenuous, fictive [and] arbitrary status of ends’ of metafiction ‘speaks of an altered situation of plot, which no longer wishes to be seen as end-determined, moving toward full predication of the narrative sentence, claiming a final plenitude of meaning’ as ‘we have, in a sense, become too sophisticated as readers of plot quite to believe in its orderings.’ The ends-determined structure of the realist novel can no longer be considered ‘realistic’, and *Downriver*’s eschewal of plot reflects this. Yet more than this, though *Downriver*’s narrator/s do indeed stride across London’s ‘divided spaces’ and experience it ‘as a whole’, this whole is not one in which contradictions must resolve through the motion towards narrative closure demanded by the highly structured plot of the realist novel. Moreover, the perspective from which this ‘whole’ might be perceived – the flâneur as narrator/artist/author – is both de-centred and de-legitimated, and the spaces through which he travels remain fractured. If the realist novel, as Belsey argues, ‘cannot foreground contradiction’,

56 Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, p. 75.
57 The text here denies the reader even the frame of metafiction. Joblard then continues to narrate the story in ‘Sinclair’s’ voice, writing his ‘account of the Sheppey journey as if he were imagining me writing it. In other words, I will write my version of him writing as me’ (p. 380).
contradiction seems to be the very stuff of Sinclair’s novel. Where Dickens’s work subjugates the landscape of London to the demands of plot, the inverse holds true for Downriver: geography – space – takes precedence over time.

It is at this point that Benjamin’s method of presentation in The Arcades Project, that is, the accumulation of quotations, ‘the rags, the refuse’ of high Parisian capitalism, becomes reflected in Sinclair’s text. The discontinuous structure of The Arcades Project serves to both multiply and accentuate the contradictions of the flâneur’s vision of Paris, and to create a framework that disturbs his pretensions to knowledge as observer of social mores and fashions. The flâneur, as feuilletonist, caricaturist, or physiognomist sought to classify the ‘types’ that could be found on the boulevards and in the arcades of the newly Haussmanized Paris, and thus created a system of representation – a skein of knowledge – through which the bourgeoisie might understand (and control) the emergent modernity that they themselves were creating. Benjamin’s ‘literary montage’ serves to puncture the illusory skein of knowledge to the extent that the flâneur, himself a ‘type’ to be found in the Paris evoked in the feuilleton, cannot be grasped as such. There is no simple description of him or of his city in The Arcades Project, but a continually shifting presentation of contradictory evocations, quotations, and aphorisms. In his memoir Berlin Childhood around 1900, Benjamin describes how, as a boy, he would stare into the snowstorm outside his bedroom window and see in it images from his storybooks. ‘What it [the snowstorm] told,’ he ‘could never quite grasp, for always something new and unremittingly dense was breaking through the familiar.’

59 Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, p. 460
60 It should be noted here that whilst it is possible to infer a methodology from The Arcades Project both from the structure of the work as it exists and from Benjamin’s (often cryptic) statements on procedure in Konvolut N, the work’s unfinished status leaves us with no ‘definative’ Benjaminian method, only the outlines of what this might have been. The fragmented form of the Arcades is not without precedent in Benjamin’s oeuvre, however, the key texts here being One Way Street and Other Writings (London: NLB, 1979) and ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in Illuminations ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999 [1968]), pp. 245-255.
speed of the movement prevents them from ever being perceived in their entirety, only as moments of becoming and dissolution. In the same way, Benjamin does not delineate the precise contours of the flâneur’s outlines, but sets in motion the whirl fragments into which he can appear. In such a fashion, the text therefore reflects the contradictions that Benjamin finds at the heart of the flâneur’s social base without reanimating – indeed, hoping to dispel – the illusions that the flâneur’s portrayal of Paris served to sustain. It is in this moment that the flâneur becomes less a figure with a concrete socio-historic existence (in quite literal terms, for the moment of his historical appearance has passed) and more a textual or figurative strategy for interrogating the city’s representations. 64

In Downriver’s ‘Narrative in Twelve Postcards’, we see a similar discontinuity: the text presents us with a series of images – the fragmentary tales relayed to us by the ontologically unstable narrator/flâneur – analogous to Benjamin’s whirl of quotation. The novel presents us with a field of complex, contradictory meanings onto which a narrative must be imposed. Moreover, from these contradictory pieces, a representation of the city that is alive to its contradictions appears, and which at all points refutes the possibility of a closure of meaning: a single, linear reading of the city and its disparate spaces. Sinclair’s references are frequently cinematic, a medium which depends for its effects on the passage of time; Joblard’s postcards, conversely, are snapshots in which time has been arrested. Plot, such as it is, is inferred through the comparison of images and the discontinuities between them, not the continuous story that would approximate temporal flow. As Sinclair states in the hybrid novel/comic Slow Chocolate Autopsy: ‘Stick any two postcards on the wall and you’ve got a narrative. Unedited.’65 Yet where Benjamin’s primary theoretical armature in The Arcades Project, the ‘dialectical image’ in which the relationship between

65 Iain Sinclair and Dave McKean, Slow Chocolate Autopsy: Incidents from the Notorious Career of Norton, Prisoner of London (London: Phoenix House, 1997), p. 88. This work is addressed in greater length in chapter 5 of this thesis.
his fragmentary past and the present come together to illuminate the political potential of an historical moment, expresses a belief in a form of ‘truth’, no matter how fleeting or contingent, to his construction; Sinclair’s ‘any two images’ suggest a much more sceptical reading of the emancipatory potential of any such aesthetic or philosophical strategy.66

The patterns, shocks, or disruptions that the text might generate, the congruencies we might read between the past and the present, are merely random; they do not signal our emancipation from history but our enmeshment within it.

**Whither Downriver’s flâneuse?**

Sinclair’s narrator/s step into the shoes of the flâneur in their explorations of London, yet the mode in which this flânerie is presented serves to highlight the ambivalent character of this role. The narrator/flâneur’s status as observing artist and the right that he implicitly claims to ascribe to his experience of the city the status of ‘truth’ is undermined by his unstable position within the text; moreover, the plot structure (or lack thereof) of the

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66 One of Benjamin’s formulations of the ‘dialectical image’ is as follows: ‘It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation’; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 462. The concept is quite opaque, but can be understood as the recognition of similitude between fragments of the ‘what has been’ of the dreams of the past – the detritus that Benjamin presents in *The Arcades Project* – and the contemporary situation of the reader. In this moment, the individual fragment’s status as ruin and the latent possibility of its future reconstitution or redemption is revealed to the reader, to critical (and revolutionary) effect. For further explanation of this idea, see Rolf Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 929-945; Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 207-209; Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. by Jeremy Gaines, Rachel McNicholl, and Georgina Paul (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 48-51; and Peter Buse, Ken Hirschkop, Scott McCracken, and Bertrand Taïthe, *Benjamin’s Arcades: An unGuided Tour* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 30-39. Though there is a definite resonance between Benjamin’s formulation and Downriver’s presentation of history – one thinks of the passage analysed above in which Pocahontas and the victims of the *Princess Alice* disaster appear in a single temporal frame – I do not think that it is plausible to read Downriver’s ‘tales’ as dialectical images in Benjamin’s sense. Firstly, in Sinclair’s work the past as often as not comes to us in supernatural guise as ghosts, a formulation which Benjamin, given his scepticism towards the Surrealists’ obsession with the same, would have regarded as ‘persist[ing] within the realm of dream’ from which he was trying to find the ‘constellation of awakening’; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 456. Secondly, the ‘dialectical’ aspect of Benjamin’s image speaks of a truth immanent to the constellation of his historical fragments and the present, the ultimate horizon of which being the Revolution. Sinclair’s work is not as rigorously philosophically grounded as Benjamin’s, and, whilst I think it is possible to read his writing as sympathetic to the emancipatory energies of the Marxist project, it is ultimately sceptical towards the possibility of its realisation. For example, in *London Orbital* he describes the Marxist leanings of the Cambridge School poets (referred to in chapter 1 of this thesis) as ‘respectable as marquetry […] and about as relevant’; Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital*, p. 431.
‘tales’ that he narrates prevent the city that is his primary object from achieving coherence. Not only does the London of *Downriver* seem always to shift, but the eyes through which we must view it seem to alter also. As with Benjamin’s presentation of the Parisian flâneur, though ‘Sinclair’ claims a certain access to the *genius loci*, the rendering of his perceptions in such a way compromises them, and testifies to a recognition that such claims are at best misleading. Yet despite this attempt to ironise the truth claims of the flâneur, the deployment of such strategies does not necessarily mean that one has managed to escape the contradictions of his mode of being. As Janet Wolff reminds us, Benjamin’s dialectical images are not without their blind spots. She states:

> In principle, I think it very likely that certain constellations capture for us the dynamic and the contradictions of a historical moment or a cultural event, and often do so by by-passing the contortions and pedantries of theory (though, of course, they are never purely ‘naive’ or primitive – they are never innocent of theory). What I worry about is the inevitable exclusions which always come into play with the adoption of such micrologies.

Benjamin’s presentation of the flâneur is one of these constellations: the major elision in his construction of this figure is the question of gender. As Wolff points out, as a product of nineteenth century modernity, the flâneur is unavoidably and inevitably male: he was a creature of public space, and the sharp division ‘between the public and the private [in modernity] was also one which confined women to the private, while men retained the freedom to move in the crowd or to frequent cafés and pubs.’ There could be no female equivalent of the flâneur: in Wolff’s terms, no flâneuse.

Benjamin’s use of this figure in the *Arcades*, no matter how fractured or ironised, creates an image of modernity that is not only blind to the city as it is experienced by

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women, but is blind to the fact that this experience is conditioned by gender at all. *The Arcades Project* might well produce an alternative, fractured (if not revolutionary) image of modernity that undermines that generated by the 19th Century bourgeoisie. Yet as women ‘weren’t (and, for that matter, aren’t) at liberty to engage in aimless and anonymous strolling’,\(^1\) it is nonetheless an image of modernity that ‘totally excludes women’\(^2\) except as objects of male scrutiny. If we transpose these concerns to Sinclair’s work, not only is the ‘born again’ flâneur of his narrator/s male, and thus the experience of the city he narrates is a masculine one, but the way in which the novel presents its female characters seems to close off the possibility of the recognition that this experience is a gendered one. This is particularly evident in the character of Edith Cadiz, who appears in *Downriver* in a number of contradictory roles: artist, nurse, prostitute, dancer. Women are generally notable by their absence in Sinclair’s writing: in his early poetry and the novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, whilst the Whitechapel murders are a continual presence, the women who were the victims of ‘Jack the Ripper’ appear only tangentially or parenthetically;\(^3\) whilst his companions in both *Lights Out for the Territory* and *London Orbital* are all men.\(^4\) Sinclair has stated elsewhere that *Downriver* represents an attempt to bring the female victims back into the narratives explored in *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*,\(^5\) yet the way in which Cadiz is portrayed in the novel – observed, not observing; silent, not speaking – seems to preclude this possibility.

Cadiz appears (and disappears) in multiple places in *Downriver*. As nurse, she works at Hackney Hospital where she looks after sick children; elsewhere, she appears variously as a dancer, a prostitute, an artist, and, eventually, a ghost. In these roles, she captures some of

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\(^1\) Janet Wolff, ‘Memoires and Micrologies’, p. 328.
\(^3\) There is here a comparison with Catherine Belsey’s reading of Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* stories: unable to represent female subjectivity, they are ‘haunted by shadowy, mysterious, and often silent women’; Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, p. 114. See also chapter 2 of this thesis.
\(^4\) The major exception to this pattern in Sinclair’s non-fiction is *The Edge of the Orison*, which is largely concerned (amongst other things) with the exploration of the family history of Anna Sinclair, the author’s wife.
\(^5\) Iain Sinclair and Kevin Jackson, *The Verbals*, p. 120.
the ambiguity of the historic flâneur. Her occupation (and hence class position) is uncertain, ‘unable to live as a nurse, she was also unable to live as a prostitute’ (p. 71); as dancer/artist, she is (or should be) a creator of meanings, yet she is silent; at one point in the text it is implied that she is killed, yet she comes back from the dead to haunt the narrator.\(^7\) She is at once respectable and condemned; creator and bearer of meanings; ‘real’ and ‘fictional’; living and dead.

Cadiz first appears in a photograph that ‘Sinclair’ discovers in a Spitalfields tenement:

But the point with the photograph that had taken my fancy was that the subject, this girl, was obviously aware of the camera, and its technical limitations; and yet the result seemed natural, spontaneous, a challenge. She was naked. The print was deceptively grey and soft - which made it difficult to date. The photographer had been careful not to impose a queasy subtext: to make a confession of his own inadequacy. He was not ‘saying’ anything. He could have been blind. The starkness and brutal directness of the final image suggested that the girl had taken the shot by an act of will, controlling the light and the focus for the precise exposure she wished to celebrate. ‘This,’ she said, ‘is how I want to remember myself.’ (pp. 59-60)

As I have argued above, the subjectivity of the flâneur is, in both Sinclair’s ‘born again’ variant and in the historical archetype, associated with the figure of the observing (male) artist or writer. Though Cadiz is presented here as the subject of a photograph, the suggestion of the ‘inadequacy’ of the photographer, his lack of ability to ‘say’ anything, his ‘blindness’, and that Cadiz has somehow ‘taken the shot by an act of will’, suggests that she is the creative or generative force behind this image, that is, the artist. Yet though the role of the (absent) photographer is here diminished, that photographer is conceived as

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\(^7\) Sinclair’s use of a character who embodies the role of both nurse and prostitute is not without its analogues in Victorian fiction, Wilkie Collins’s The New Magdalen (1873) being perhaps the best known example. Collins’s novel is unusual for the genre in that the ‘fallen woman’ is fully rehabilitated into middle-class society and marries her ‘saviour’, though at the cost of her ‘real’ identity. See George Watt, The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel (London: Croom Helm, 1984).
masculine: it seems impossible that the photographer could have been female, or that the intended viewer of the image would be other than male. Despite the radical decentring of the narrator/\textit{flâneur} and his narratives elsewhere in the text, the model of creativity here articulated seems curiously reactionary, collapsing into an unreflective model of artistic activity that positions the feminine as inherently uncreative. As Griselda Pollock argues, ‘creativity has been apportioned as an ideological component of masculinity while femininity has been constructed as man’s and, therefore, the artist’s negative.’

Moreover, the voice ascribed to Cadiz cannot be hers: the way in which she ‘want[s] to remember [her]self’ is a ventriloquism of the narrator, precisely the ‘queasy subtext’ that the absent photographer has apparently refrained from imposing. This presentation of a central yet ultimately silent Cadiz appears elsewhere in the novel. In a disturbing, violent scene in which the unnamed narrator visits a Whitechapel strip club, Cadiz is depicted as a dancer (and therefore once more in the role of artist). Her performance is described as follows:

She wears her costume of maps. There are rings sewn to districts that have previously been cut so they will tear away, at a touch. […] Edith Cadiz invites her sweating jackals to sing out the street names: \textit{Heneage, Chicksand, Woodseer, Thrawl, Mulberry}. She gives them a voice to relieve their tension. And - if they nominate a name that has been prepared - her wolf-dog leaps from the audience, rushes to her, takes the brass ring in his wet mouth, and pulls away a Spitalfields terrace with a twist of his powerful neck. The jagged gap reveals new streets, fresh relations: Edenic glimpses. The tired city is transformed: a dustpit fades to expose an orchard, a church lifts through a sandbank, a hospital (with blazing windows) slides beneath the surface of a slow-moving river. The punters are maddened. The Thames attacks Hornsey. Leadenhall Market removes to Chingford. (p. 63)

The text here appears to be giving us another model for its own interpretation: just as the postcards of ‘Joblard’s Heart of Darkness’ might be rearranged to compose any narrative, so the pages of Cadiz’s *A-Z* might be ordered at random to map an alternative cartography. Where the narrator/ *flâneur* has access to the city – the relative safety afforded by his gender to navigate it, and thus to describe it – Cadiz instead becomes the surface onto which the city is inscribed. Her body becomes a metaphor for the city: eroticised, consumed by spectators. The narrator is secured in his position as the *flâneur* who possesses ‘the privilege or freedom to move about the public arenas of the city observing but never interacting, consuming the sights through a controlling but rarely acknowledged gaze, directed as much at other people as at the goods for sale.’

The passage continues:

Edith was left alone on stage, in a scatter of torn paper. She was bruised and scratched by the dog’s claws, his slavering enthusiasm. Some of the colour had run with her sweat: it was moving over her shoulder down across her belly. Her wounds were an urban survey, promoting fresh deltas and rivulets, revitalizing dead hamlets, soon to be linked by fantastic railways of silver and bronze: animal-headed marvels, belching fire. She had succeeded; but she was not sure what that meant. She found herself, suddenly and dangerously, prophetic. (pp. 63-64)

As performer, Cadiz at this moment occupies the subject-position of artist, yet whilst Joblard’s postcards are arranged and described to suit the purposes of the ‘current narrator’, Cadiz has no such control over the meanings she creates. Whilst Cadiz’s performance unsettles the expectations of the male punters at the strip-club in which it occurs it is still the spectating male – the narrator, the audience (including also the implied reader?) – who is given the final arbitration over its interpretation. Where the *flâneur*, in both his historic ‘high’ and contemporary ironised incarnations, at once claims and denies

78 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. 94.
the right to speak of the city, to say of his experiences that they indicate that the world is thus or thus; Cadiz, despite the fact that she is the ‘author’ of her own performance, is not capable of making such a claim. Not only do the spectators determine the way in which the map of London is redrawn, but the meaning of this rearrangement – the ‘edenic glimpses’, the transformation of the ‘tired’ city, the ‘revitalizing [of] dead hamlets’ – is ascribed by the narrator, not by Edith herself. Judith Walkowitz argues that in 19th Century London, in the ‘structured public landscape of the flaneur’, women ‘lacked autonomy: they were bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning’.79 In this context, Cadiz is precisely this: she is the screen onto which the narrator, the spectators, and the reader project their interpretations. In granting Cadiz the status of artist, the text appears to give a space here for a female perspective on the city, yet in fact it does no such thing. Cadiz does not (cannot?) give voice to her interpretation of her own work: though she judges it a success, ‘she was not sure what that meant’; though ‘prophetic’, she is the omen, not the seer.

Conclusion

As Peter Brooker has pointed out, Sinclair explicitly states that ‘the great shame, and dishonour, of the present regime is its failure to procure a decent opposition’,80 the ‘present regime’ in this instance being that of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative administration. It is no great stretch to suggest that Downriver represents an attempt to find what such an opposition might look like. Yet if, as we saw in chapter 1 of this thesis, in a work such as LudHeat that opposition is active and available within certain forms of artistic practice, then this possibility, already problematised in White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings, seems closed to Downriver. At one point in the novel a group of cultural bigwigs – the unnamed ‘Producer’, ‘Architect’, ‘Laureate’s Wife’, and one ‘Professor Brian Catling’ – are tasked by Thatcher to

79 Judith Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight, p. 21.
construct a monument for her deceased husband in East London.\footnote{Brian Catling is the ‘real’ name of Sinclair’s friend who appears in \textit{Downriver} and elsewhere as the sculptor Joblard.} Having been ordered to ‘flatten Greenwich’ if he has to (p. 222), the Minister of Sport and Recreation describes to the assembled luminaries the proposed development:

‘A continuous frieze of speeches by Winston and Margaret will remind us of our duties of citizens, prepare us for the tapes of ack-ack guns over Dagenham, cones of concentrated fire, tracer shells. White parachute discs over the Isle of Grain. A distant thunder from the Thames Estuary. […] All the razzamatazz of Nuremberg, without any of the chthonic excesses. The showbiz side, if you like. They certainly knew how to throw a party!’

‘Right!’ enthused the Producer, his eyes moist with possibilities. ‘Those production values! Technically speaking, \textit{Triumph of the Will} stands up; it’s a hell of a movie. Give me extras from the old school who’ll really go for it, give me a monster-monster budget – and anything is possible.’

[…] ‘I see it, I see it!’ the Architect cried out, with all the agony of a convert. ‘You’re reviving Speer. I’ve thought that for some time – though one has been reluctant to admit it – he’s quite a respectable figure, once you remove him from the sleazy milieu in which he operated.’ (pp. 233-234)

In works such as \textit{Lud Heat} the past, though often dark and unsavoury, offers also the potential for a form of social and spiritual renewal through the communal processes of artistic production and reception. Here, history appears instead as entirely appropriable by the most base of political instincts, the ‘blitz spirit’ being seamlessly co-opted in the service of contemporary \textit{realpolitik}. Moreover, where in \textit{Lud Heat} artistic practice remains a vital, though compromised, form of resistance, the Minister’s later claim that he has
taken inspiration from ‘William Blake and his “hiding of Moses”’ (and indeed, Catling’s presence) leaves this avenue closed. Art and history, far from sources of antagonism, resistance, or spiritual sustenance, become here either a source of symbols for the valorisation of temporal power or the cultural sticking-plaster that validates the violent reshaping of the city.

This scene, despite its blackly comic aspects, is a notably bleak moment in a work which seems to find very little hope for a ‘decent opposition’. In his criticism of Sinclair’s novel, Brooker has suggested that this might be because Downriver searches for it in the wrong places, the novel’s antagonistic stance being compromised by a lack of recognition of the critical potential of the ‘others’ to Sinclair’s white, male, model of artistic practice. For Brooker, Sinclair’s ‘art’ is not ‘various’ enough to address London’s metropolitan character adequately, and therefore the novel, by the terms of its own political project and not by some externally-imposed yardstick of political correctness, is in a sense compromised. There is, however, another direction in which to push this argument. Downriver’s inability to bring to representation the ‘other’ to his inevitably masculine artist/flâneur places the novel at the intersection of a debate between Marxist and feminist scholars which was very much alive at the time of the novel’s composition. Sinclair’s adoption of the modernist methodology of flânerie traps his political project in a particular, partial, and gendered model of urban space, which insofar as it describes the experience of modernity in terms of its public spaces, describes (to cite Janet Wolff) the ‘experiences of men.’ Wolff traces this inevitably partial understanding from Baudelaire, through to Simmel, Benjamin, and then to later critics such as Marshall Berman and his work All That is Solid Melts into Air (1982). Rosalyn Deutsche extends this list further, and includes T. J. Clark’s The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers (1984); Fredric Jameson’s, ‘Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’ (1984); Edward Soja’s Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory (1989); and David

82 Brooker, Modernity and Metropolis, pp. 102-103.
Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1989). The major axis of contestation between these critics was the primacy or otherwise of the categories of class or gender in the structuration of social and spatial hierarchies, and thus the production of inequalities and injustices.

In its presentation of a dissolving subject lost in an unstable and perpetually shifting city, *Downriver* can be read (perhaps too neatly) as symptomatic of the lack of the sort of ‘cognitive map’ that Jameson calls for in his ‘Postmodernism’ essay. Yet where Deutsche contrasts an emancipatory postmodernism of ‘feminist, anticolonialist, and radical democratic discourse’ with what she terms the ‘totalizing’ impulse of the ‘traditional left political projects’ of Soja, Jameson, and Harvey, Sinclair’s text appears unable to bring such a heterogeneous array of discourses to representation. Whilst I would quarrel with Deutsche’s characterisation of these thinkers, it is certainly the case that *Downriver* is open to charges of nihilism from both perspectives: at once denying the possibility of the mapping and attendant production of class consciousness that would be prerequisite for the realisation of the classical Marxist project, yet neither able to embrace the emancipatory potential of a postmodern identity politics. We might, I would suggest, read this impasse as arising from the novel’s attempt to revivify the exhausted theoretical framework provided by the historic *flâneur*. Yet if, as Sinclair has stated in interview, the years of Albion

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85 The categories of gender and class need not be considered mutually exclusive determinants in the production and comprehension of spatial and/or social hierarchies: Doreen Massey’s *Space, Place and Gender* in particular discusses how these categories are linked, and how ‘ways of thinking about space and place are tied up with, both directly and indirectly, particular social constructions and gender relations’; Doreen Massey, *Space Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), p. 2. Similarly, Griselda Pollock’s call for a feminist history of art (and thus a theory of artistic production) does not elide questions of class: ‘What we have to deal with is the interplay of multiple histories - of the codes of art, of ideologies of the art world, of institutions of art, of forms of production, of social classes, of the family, of forms of sexual domination whose mutual determinations and independencies have to be mapped together in precise and heterogeneous configurations’; Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. 42.
87 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions*, p. xii.
88 Indeed, the critic Ben Watson has levelled similar criticisms at Sinclair’s work on the basis of its failure to endorse a revolutionary politics; ‘Iain Sinclair: Revolutionary Novelist or Revolting Nihilist’, <http://www.militantesthetix.co.uk/critlit/SINCLAIR.htm>, accessed November 2009.
Village Press and the production cycle which begins with *Lud Heat* and ends with *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, represent a moment of creative opportunity and optimism, then *Downriver* represents perhaps the darkest moment in his work, and it is for this reason that I would not follow critics such as Brooker in their censure of Sinclair's novel. The text takes as its subject a government that was both antipathetic to the 1960s counterculture from which Sinclair emerged as a writer and which dealt a mortal blow to left politics: that it should be so readily readable as conditioned by the gloomy horizons of Benjamin’s flâneur; then, is perhaps only fitting.

89 Kevin Jackson and Iain Sinclair, *The Verbals*, p. 67.
Chapter 4: Psychogeography in Translation

The models of urban exploration on which Iain Sinclair draws in his work are not limited to that of the *flâneur*. Indeed, the term with which Sinclair is most strongly associated is ‘psychogeography’, which in the late 1990s and 2000s at least, acquired a certain level of ubiquity in the discussion of a number of contemporary writers whose unifying characteristic appears to be their taking of the city of London as subject.1 These writers include authors as diverse as Will Self, Peter Ackroyd, Michael Moorcock, and J. G. Ballard, but the figure whose work is most strongly associated with the concept is Sinclair himself. Indeed, the word has become so connected with Sinclair’s writing that it is becoming increasingly uncommon to read an article in the press discussing the topic which does not find his name appended to it, and, as recently as February 2008 *The Guardian* labelled him (in a phrase echoing the author’s own description of William Blake) the ‘godfather of modern psychogeographers’.2 It would seem necessary on this basis to investigate Sinclair’s usage of the term, and to explore the reasons why it seems to have become so prevalent in the discussion of a certain strain of ‘London’ writing: it is therefore to this topic that this chapter turns.

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However, to investigate contemporary usage of psychogeography in isolation from the concept’s history would be to produce a somewhat one-sided account of Sinclair’s deployment of it. Indeed, the marked differences between Sinclair’s understanding of the term and the ways in which it deployed by those who initially coined it – the French avant-garde groups the Lettriste, and later Situationist, Internationals (S. I.) of the 1950s and 60s – provide a useful frame through which we might explore Sinclair’s spatial and textual politics. Many of the characteristics of contemporary psychogeography, most notably its concern with the darker aspects of history and a preoccupation with the occult, are entirely absent in its original formulation, and can instead be traced back to themes explored by Iain Sinclair in his work, from his earliest poetry through to his most recent ‘non-fiction’ (a term which I use advisedly). Moreover, whilst there is a history of London psychogeography that predates Sinclair’s first usage of the term in the mid-1990s, most notably the artist Ralph Rumney’s establishment of the London Psychogeographical Association in 1957 (of which Rumney himself was the sole member), it is only in recent years that the idea has come to be so strongly associated with London as opposed to the Paris of its inception, and, as I hope to show in the following, this geographical and temporal movement has also been accompanied by a political shift away from the

3 On the relationship between these groups, see Tom McDonough, ‘Ideology and the Situationist Utopia’, in Gay Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents, ed. by Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), pp. i-xix (p. ix). Whilst the militancy of the Situationist International has led to a vexed relationship between them, their inheritors, and the academy, there are now a number of academic texts devoted to them. One of the first academic publications in English to address the Situationists is Sadie Plant’s The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age (London: Routledge, 1992). This was rapidly joined by The Hacienda Must Be Built: On The Legacy of the Situationist Revolt, ed. by Andrew Hussey and Gavin Bowl (Huddersfield: Aura, 1996), which is the proceedings of a conference held at the Hacienda (sic) nightclub in Manchester. This was not an uncontroversial event, as is discussed below. More recent contributions include Simon Sadler, The Situationist City (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998); Simon Ford, The Situationist International: A User’s Guide (London: Black Dog, 2005); and McKenzie Wark, The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International (London: Verso, 2011). The two major theoretical texts produced by the Situationists are Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, N. Y.: Zone Books, 1995); Raoul Vaneigem, The Revolution of Everyday Life trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Rebel Press, 1983). Ken Knabb’s Situationist International Anthology collects English translations of many of the Situationist and Lettriste documents published in their various journals, and, despite Knabb’s editorial bias against the Situationists’ artistic activities, remains an indispensable collection, as does Tom McDonough (ed.), Gay Debord and the Situationist International, which contains new translations of many foundational Situationist texts in addition to a number of valuable essays on their legacy. A great deal of Situationist-related resources, including translations of articles from the journals International Situationniste and Potlach not included in Knabb’s or McDonough’s collections, can be found online at <www.nothingness.org>, <www.notbored.org>, and <www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/>. 
concept’s distinctly revolutionary roots. This shift in the meaning and usage of the term is significant enough so as to make a clear distinction between the historic Parisian and contemporary London schools of psychogeography possible, a distinction, as shall be demonstrated in the following, made possible by Sinclair’s work. Moreover, if we might understand the Benjaminian flâneur as representing a Marxism of defeat, the moment at which thought attempts to wrest the ‘tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it’; then psychogeography, in its Parisian formulation, represents Marxist thought instead at its most expansive and utopian. As we saw in the previous chapter, to read Downriver through the lens provided by the flâneur reveals the novel’s starkly pessimistic character. Yet whilst Sinclair’s transition to ‘non-fiction’ marks the point at which he starts using psychogeography as a conceptual tool, the term first appearing in Lights Out for the Territory (1997), it would be difficult to read his usage of it in such utopian terms. What, then, should we make of his use of such an explicitly utopian mode? We might, as I will suggest in the following, interpret Sinclair’s usage of the term as an attempt to employ the critical capacities of psychogeography and to attest to the authenticity of its utopian impulses, yet to at once deny what would be for Sinclair the hubris of its world-transforming ambitions.

For its first practitioners, psychogeography was conceived of as a set of techniques for the exploration of the urban environment in such a way so as to reveal those areas of a city that offer resistance to the spatial and social domination of capitalism, with the explicit hope that the utilisation of these techniques would produce the theses by which a future city free from capitalism’s alienating effects might be designed and constructed. As such, it was above all a practice that was intended to be used to literally revolutionary effect, and, despite the Situationists’ vehement criticism of ‘high’ Modernist architecture, one

4 On Rumney’s relationship with the Situationist International, see Alan Ward, The Map is Not the Territory (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).
6 Though not, it should be noted, at its most triumphant, as the ultimate collapse of the strikes and riots of May 1968 confirm.
which shared with it a fundamental optimism about the potentially emancipatory power of urban design, and indeed, the plausibility of a radically altered, post-revolutionary world. Parisian psychogeography strives towards an as-yet unrealised future, and in this sense can be fairly described as utopian in character. As Brian Baker succinctly puts it in his study of the author’s work, Sinclair uses the concept ‘rather differently’, and argues that Sinclair’s psychogeography is instead a ‘depth model’ which ‘reveals the “hidden” strata of the city’, its “archives” and erased “communal histories”’. I concur with Baker’s judgement here, and, as we shall see, although rooted in the spatial practices established by the Situationists and their historical antecedents, Sinclair’s psychogeography is if anything deeply sceptical of any project that would strive to erase or remodel the city, no matter how laudable the intentions that might lie behind it.

As a consequence, whilst Sinclair’s usage of psychogeography shares many of the same methodological foundations as its historical forebear, it can be at once distinguished from it by the circumstances of its use and its teleological assumptions. Furthermore, Sinclair’s utilisation of the techniques and terminology of psychogeography has translated this determinedly practical discipline into a literary mode, and has therefore repositioned it (somewhat paradoxically) in opposition to its initial articulation; the leader of the Situationist International, Guy Debord, having stated of psychogeographic practices that ‘written descriptions can be no more than passwords to this great game.’ By comparing contemporary understandings of psychogeography with the term’s historical usage, it will become possible to evaluate whether the term holds any theoretical validity for the analysis of Sinclair’s texts and how they function, both in themselves and as currents within a wider discourse, and, moreover, to establish what this shift in definition might mean for psychogeography itself. It is the contention of this chapter that the shift in the meaning of psychogeography has occurred less because Sinclair has in some sense indiscriminately

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borrowed Situationist terminology and used it without concern for its original context and usage, and more because certain contradictions in the initial formulation of Parisian psychogeography have in fact made this shift possible, and furthermore have been resolved through Sinclair’s use of it. As a consequence of the attention that this chapter pays to the historical fluctuations of the definition of the term, this chapter is perhaps closer to a cultural history than it is to literary criticism, and accordingly is structured on a broadly chronological basis. The chapter opens with an exploration of the meaning of psychogeography in the Parisian context, firstly discussing some of the enigmatic (though frequently militaristic) statements produced by the SI; and then secondly analysing the drawings and models produced by the Dutch Situationist architect Constant Nieuwenhuys (henceforth Constant, to adopt his preferred title) for a utopian city, New Babylon. Moreover, the contradictions between these methodological statements and their realisation as artworks, I argue, made necessary the Situationists’ eventual abandonment of psychogeography as a revolutionary praxis. I then move on to demonstrate how it is these contradictions which enable Sinclair to transform this praxis into literature, and how the formulations in his earliest poetry and fiction have conditioned the ways in which psychogeography has been interpreted and mutated in a British context.

Parisian Psychogeography

The word ‘psychogeography’ undoubtedly has a certain resonance, suggesting as it does an examination of the relationship between place and mental states; yet is at once somewhat ambiguous. Its first appearance in print, perhaps appropriately, is cryptic, the following (rather pithy) article appearing in Potlatch, the journal of the Lettriste International in 1954, entitled ‘Psychogeographical Game of the Week’:

Depending on what you are after, choose an area, a more or less populous city, a more or less lively street. Build a house. Furnish it. Make the most of its decoration and surroundings. Choose the season and the time. Gather together the right
people, the best records and drinks. Lighting and conversation must, of course, be appropriate, along with the weather and your memories.

If your calculations are correct, you should find the outcome satisfying. (Please inform the editors of the results.)

Whilst this statement is near-useless in providing us with a definition of what psychogeography is, it is quite useful in delineating the scope of its ambitions: the course of action suggested to the reader in the above fragment seems to imply that this is nothing more nor less than an individual’s whole mode of life. If one goes on to explore both the context in which the word was formulated and its more comprehensive later definitions, the scope of psychogeography that this fragment hints at is confirmed. The Situationist International was, above all, a utopian revolutionary socialist avant-garde whose unambiguous intent was ‘the most liberatory possible change of the society and the life in which we [the Situationists] find ourselves confined.’ Any understanding of what psychogeography was must grasp it as part of this undertaking. Moreover, the development of such an understanding should furnish us with the tools by which we might begin to understand psychogeography’s contemporary incarnations with greater historical accuracy and theoretical rigour.

The city was the prime site of Situationist activity, both as object of criticism and as inspiration: it was here that all of the problems that the Situationists found in modern capitalism were at their most heightened: alienation, the emergence of an embryonic consumer culture reflected in advertising hoardings and billboards, the machinations of power and money as they are exercised on the fabric of the city; but also the shards of a future mode of life free from these problems intersecting with the present. In a text

entitled ‘Formulary for a New Urbanism’, which was both lament and eulogy for the possibility that the city represented for the Situationists, Ivan Chtcheglov stated:

We are bored in the city, there is no longer any Temple of the Sun. Between the legs of the women walking by, the dadaists imagined a monkey wrench and the surrealists a crystal cup. That’s lost. We know how to read every promise in faces – the latest stage of morphology. The poetry of the billboards lasted twenty years. We are bored in the city, we really have to strain to still discover mysteries on the sidewalk billboards, the latest state of humor and poetry.12

With his plea that ‘the hacienda must be built’,13 Chtcheglov goes on to describe in rhapsodic terms a city that ‘could be envisaged in the form of an arbitrary assemblage of castles, grottoes, lakes, etc.; the districts of which ‘could correspond to the whole spectrum of diverse feelings that one encounters by chance in everyday life.”14 In such a city, in Chtcheglov’s words, ‘everyone will live in their own personal “cathedral,” so to speak. There will be rooms more conducive to dreams than any drug, and houses where one cannot help but love.”15 In order to construct a city of this type, an art that integrated all of the technologies and approaches developed in the separate fields of creative endeavour would need to be developed. The Situationists termed this hoped-for set of techniques ‘unitary urbanism’, a philosophy of urban design that would ‘use the whole of arts and techniques’ for the creation of ‘an integral composition of the environment.”16

If the utopian overtones of these statements might sound politically suspect to the contemporary reader, I would argue they should be taken at face value. Indeed, an examination of what the Situationists envisaged unitary urbanism might look like supports...
such a reading. The most comprehensively developed articulation of this was Constant’s *New Babylon*. Between 1956 and 1974, Constant produced an enormous quantity of models, sketches, drawings and painting depicting what life would be like in a post-revolutionary society, and, whilst he explicitly refuted the charges of utopianism levelled against him, arguing that *New Babylon* was ‘feasible from the technical standpoint, desirable from the human standpoint, and from the social standpoint […] indispensable’, it is hard to take this rejection too seriously when one reads the following extraordinary passage from his essay ‘A Different City for a Different Life’:

The future cities that we envisage will offer an unusual variety of sensations in this realm, and unforeseen games will become possible through the inventive use of material conditions, such as air-conditioning and the control of sound and lighting. Urban planners are already studying how to harmonize the cacophony that reigns in present-day cities. Before long they should find there a new arena for creation, as with many other problems that will emerge. Space travel, which has been predicted, may influence this development, since bases established on other planets will immediately raise the problem of sheltered cities, which may provide the model for our study of future urbanism.  

Whilst it is perhaps easy to find the technological optimism expressed here naive, it is arguable that Constant is only here expressing something that might have been commonly felt at the time, the article having been written in 1959, just two years after the successful launch of the first artificial satellite, the Russian spacecraft *Sputnik 1*, and at the dawn of the ‘space race’ between America and the Soviet Union. However, whilst Constant viewed *New Babylon* as a real possibility and hence not utopian in that he was of the opinion that it

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18 Constant Nieuwenhuys, ‘A Different City for a Different Life’, p. 99.
could technically be constructed, the designation still stands if one reads the above passage with respect to Fredric Jameson’s definition of the Utopian mode:

The Utopians not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems [to capitalism]; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet.  

Inasmuch as the Situationists were attempting formulate precisely this ‘radical otherness’ to capitalism and its stultifying and alienating effects, *New Babylon* is one of these sparks. The social and technical achievability of the project is immaterial to its utopian character: what makes *New Babylon* a utopia is that it attempts to envisage another place and time whose existence might be brought about through a fundamental change in our current mode of life in the present. *New Babylon* was conceived of as a spur to action, and there can be no tactical action without first imagining its possible consequences.

Whilst Jameson’s definition of utopianism makes its visions a necessary part of any politics which would seek to transform a society fundamentally, the Situationists strongly rejected Modernist architecture at least in part on the basis of its utopian currents. They criticised Modernism for its narrow and functionalist conception of the subject, the nadir of which being Le Corbusier and his notion of the house (and by extension the city) as a ‘machine for living in’. Constant attacks the notion of the ‘garden city’ as envisaged by architects such as Le Corbusier ‘where spaced and isolated skyscrapers must necessarily reduce direct relations among people and their common action’, and describes the newly-built suburbs of Paris as ‘cemeteries in reinforced concrete […] where the great masses of the population are condemned to die of boredom.’ These constructions, Constant

22 Constant Nieuwenhuys, ‘A Different City for a Different Life’, p. 95.
Figure 5: Le Corbusier, *Ville Contemporaine*, 1922.

Figure 6: Constant, *Gezicht op New Babylonische sectoren* (detail), 1971, watercolour and pencil on photomontage.
suggests, are ‘obviously at variance with established modes of behavior, and all the more so with the new ways of life we seek’, that is, they were inherently repressive to life as it is lived as opposed to how it might be imagined by the planner/architect. The abstract, elegant beauty of Modernist architectural utopias such as Le Corbusier’s *Ville Contemporaine* (fig. 5) finds its corollary in an oppressed and bored populace.

*New Babylon*, conversely, would avoid the narrow conception of subjectivity that Modernist architecture was given to by being plastic to the whims of its inhabitants. Instead of a rationally ordered city built for what the Situationists would have considered a fictional rational Enlightenment subject, a city constructed according to the principles of unitary urbanism would be a chaotic, extensible labyrinth, privileging desire and play over work and consumption, the spiral over the grid. Constant elaborates:

> The different levels will be divided into neighboring and communicating spaces, climate-controlled, which will make it possible to create an infinite variety of environments, facilitating the casual movements of the inhabitants and their frequent encounters. The environments will be regularly and consciously changed, with the help of all the technological means, by teams of specialized creators, who will thus be professional situationists.24

Yet here, despite the promises of freedom that Constant assures us will be realised in *New Babylon*, we can begin to see the emergence of the same totalitarian tendencies, the very same abstract utopianism for which the Situationists criticised high Modernism. Already in this early description of a post-revolutionary city a division of labour between ‘professional situationists’ and the rest of the populace has been established: is there not a danger that in this vision of the future the potentially hegemonic viewpoint of the architect has merely been replaced by that of the Situationist? This unease is reinforced when one notes that the models and sketches of *New Babylon* are often devastatingly bleak in their emptiness (fig. 6),

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23 Constant Nieuwenhuys, ‘A Different City for a Different Life’, p. 95.
and, where people are present, they don’t appear to be overjoyed to find themselves in the city (fig. 7). As Mark Wigley points out:

Their blotchy form now looks like blood stains. And any doubt is removed when they become red. There is a sense of ongoing violence. As we finally get close to the figures, close enough to make out faces, they have been piled up or are splattered across every surface as if there has been horrific carnage. Human life becomes just a stain of its extinction.  

Moreover, as Simon Sadler suggests in his book *The Situationist City*, in places Constant’s sketches of *New Babylon* are ‘strangely reminiscent’ of Le Corbusier (fig. 8). This is all the more surprising given that as a group the Situationists were acutely aware of the dangers of what they termed ‘recuperation’, the process by which the dominant social order was able to appropriate and re-tool revolutionary impulses and techniques to counter-revolutionary effect, and it is likely that the reactionary tendencies that were latent in Constant’s *New Babylon* were at least contributing factors to the architect’s eventual expulsion from the Situationist International and their abandonment of the project of unitary urbanism. In an editorial entitled ‘Now, the S. I.’ in *International Situationniste* #9, the group stated that:

There is, however, a deviation that has threatened us more gravely than all the others: it was the risk of not differentiating ourselves clearly enough from the modern tendencies of explanations and proposals regarding the new society to which capitalism has brought us – tendencies which, behind different masks, all lead to integration into this society. Since Constant’s interpretation of unitary urbanism this tendency has been expressed within the SI, and it is infinitely more dangerous than the old artistic conception we have fought so much.

26 Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, p. 139.
Figure 7: Constant, *Labyrismen* (detail), 1968, series of 11 lithos with texts by C. Caspari.

Figure 8: Constant, *Vogelvlucht groep sectoren I*, 1964, ink, pencil, and pen on paper.
The tendency towards utopianism and world-building, despite the highest of motives that might drive it, inevitably contains within it the risk of the very repression, tyranny and, moreover, boredom, that it seeks to abolish. As Sadler asserts, ‘early situationism did indeed threaten to replace the totalitarian ideologies of capitalism and communism with a new totalitarian ideology of situationist play’.28

Yet despite the eventual abandonment of the concept of unitary urbanism by the Situationists, it is vital to understand that the concept of psychogeography was originally formulated as a part of it. If a unitary urbanism, a city constructed to facilitate the realisation of desire, was the goal, then psychogeography was the fieldwork that would inform its creation: as Constant claimed in 1959, ‘[a] study in depth of the means of creating environments and their psychological influence is one of the tasks we [the Situationist International] are presently undertaking.29 However, the word is given its first comprehensive definition much earlier than this, in an essay by Guy Debord entitled ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography’ in the Belgian surrealist journal *Les Lèvres Nues* in 1955:

The word psychogeography, suggested by an illiterate Kabyle as a general term for the phenomena a few of us were investigating around the summer of 1953, is not too inappropriate. It does not contradict the materialist perspective of the conditioning of life and thought by objective nature. Geography, for example, deals with the determinant action of general natural forces, such as soil composition or climatic conditions, on the economic structures of a society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a society can have of the world. Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective *psychogeographical* can be applied to the

findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.30

Debord asserts elsewhere that that ‘psychogeographical research’ ‘takes on its double meaning of active observation of today’s urban areas and the establishment of hypotheses on the structure of a situationist city.’31 The Situationist critique of the city, of which psychogeography was a central part, is not merely about examining its structure, its effect on the mind and the problems thereof, but for the future creation of a post-revolutionary city that reflects the desires of its inhabitants.

However, whilst this definition is paradigmatic, and in many ways succinctly encapsulates the Situationist formulation of psychogeography, it is not unproblematic. The contradictory and, perhaps, irreconcilable tensions that led to the abandonment of unitary urbanism are observable even here, and the trajectory towards utopianism and its corollary in recuperation is mirrored in the irresolvable conflicts contained within this definition of psychogeography. If this fragment takes the appearance of a definitive methodological statement, closer analysis reveals it to be more suggestive of a certain subjective understanding of the urban condition than it is programmatic of any possible objective representation or, crucially, reworking of that environment. Through his definition of the term in relation to the already established discipline of geography, he claims for psychogeography the status of a science, and concordantly its remit should therefore be the understanding of the world and the discovery of objective truths, a claim reinforced through his use of the phrase ‘precise laws and specific effects’. However, if this is the case, one is led immediately to the questions of what sort of knowledge, what sort of results, and

30  Debord, ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography’, in Situationist International Anthology, ed. by Ken Knabb, pp. 5-8 (p. 5). Debord’s reference to ‘an illiterate Kabyle’ is somewhat obscure, but it is likely that Debord is here referring to the Algerian Lettriste Hadi Mohamed Dahou. See <http://www.notbored.org/LL.html>. On the relationship between the Algerian war of independence and the Situationist International, see Simon Sadler, The Situationist City, p. 52.
to what purpose? The answers to these questions are not easily apparent, and Debord is ambiguous in his addressing of them, as his application of the epithet ‘charmingly vague’ to the adjectival form ‘psychogeographical’ suggests. Debord’s prose, from the allusive title and explicit references to materialist philosophy, through to his (almost wilfully partisan) definition of geography, has a distinctly Marxist cast. We might read this as suggesting that psychogeography, straddling as it does both the subjective mental and objective natural categories, is not merely a lumpen assemblage of two unrelated terms by an ‘illiterate Kabyle’, but a discipline that strives towards the dialectical synthesis of the particular of subjective psychological states and the general of urban geography. That is, psychogeography could be considered as a dialectical practice which was intended to produce what Hegel termed concrete universal truths. The Situationists’ abandonment of unitary urbanism, and moreover, all forms of artistic activity, is perhaps indicative that this form of synthesis was not achievable for the Situationist project. Moreover, neither is it clear whether this form of synthesis could be achieved through the medium of art.

**Drifts**

The principal method that the Situationists employed for the exploration of psychogeographic effects was the *dérive* or ‘drift’, in which ‘one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.’ By engaging in such a practice, the *dériveur* or *dériveurs* would be able to discern the ‘psychogeographical relief’ of the city, the ‘constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.’ Debord states that because of the ‘playful-constructive’ nature of activity, it is ‘completely distinguish[ed] … from the classical notions of the journey or the stroll.’

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Dérive - it’s a French word that’s become pretentious now, there’s been a sort of sacralisation of it - it basically means wandering, but as Debord defined dérive it was going from one bar to another, in a haphazard manner, because the essential thing was to set out with very little purpose and to see where your feet led you, or your inclinations … You go where whim leads you, and you discover parts of cities, or come to appreciate them, feel they’re better than others, whether it’s because you’re better received in the bar or because you just suddenly feel better.35

It was with ‘data’ gathered from practices such as these that Debord created artworks such as The Naked City (fig. 9), a psychogeographic map of Paris, and, in tandem with the Danish painter Asger Jorn, Memoires, a book (notoriously bound in sandpaper in its first edition) composed of textual and graphic fragments evocative of the spirit of dérive.36 The Naked City in particular goes some way towards illustrating the concept of psychogeography, the work consisting of a map of Paris that has been cut up and reassembled, not in accordance with any geographic principles, but according to ‘unities of ambiance’.37 In this way it provides representations of the ‘fixed points and vortexes’, the ebb and flow of the atmosphere of place that Debord evokes in ‘Theory of the Dérive’. Moreover, as Tom McDonough asserts, its use of collage subverts the impossible and indeed, non-existent viewpoint of the conventional map, asserting instead the possibility of a map ‘as narrative rather than as tool of “universal knowledge.”’38 Similarly, Ralph Rumney’s psychogeographic investigation, The Leaning Tower of Venice (fig. 10), takes the form of a photo essay, an assemblage of images and text that illustrates Rumney’s wanderings...

36 Simon Sadler, The Situationist City, p. 76.
through that city. 39

These works, all of which employ strategies of fragmentation and dissolution that disturb any attempt to represent the city in a holistic or programmatic fashion, are suggestive of the sense of play and possibility that the Situationists perceived in the city through the technique of dérive. However, whether they constitute a movement towards the form of extrapolative model that Debord hints at in his writing is deeply questionable. Debord asserts that ‘psychogeography’s progress depends to a great extent on the statistical extension of its methods of observation’, 40 yet it is difficult from these works to see how this might have been possible. How could a map such as The Naked City be anything other than a representation of a subjective experience? Or, to put it another way, how could one express the nature of the experience of dérive in a way which was not merely self-expression, that is, art? Looking at Rumney’s The Leaning of Tower of Venice, this is reinforced: by representing Venice through a series of photographs tracing a single journey through the city, the primacy of the city as it is experienced on foot is given priority over the city as it is abstracted; a plurality of perspectives rather than the singular vision of the map. Yet despite fragmenting the truth claims of conventional cartography, The Leaning Tower of Venice still only represents a single journey on a single day, and it remains questionable as to whether the aggregation of a number of individual moments and perspectives coalesces into a knowledge greater than the sum of its component parts.

Both The Naked City and The Leaning Tower of Venice question and subvert cartographic abstractions and hence their claims to truth and legitimacy, exposing to view the experiences that the map cannot represent; but what they are incapable of providing us with is an answer to the crisis of representation they so elegantly expose:

39 Rumney was expelled from the Situationist International for failing to complete this work for the first issue of International Situationniste. It was eventually published in full in Ark, the magazine of the Royal College of Art in 1959. The title comes from the picture of the leaning tower which can be seen in the first photograph of the work. See Ralph Rumney, The Consul: Conversations with Gérard Berréby, trans. by Malcolm Imrie (San Francisco: City Lights, 2002), p. 47.
instead, they merely invert it, and the unity of subjective and objective categories that Debord’s formulation of psychogeography hints at is not reached. Debord goes on to admit that ‘the methodology of psychogeographical observation is still in its infancy’, yet when one examines the Situationists’ attempts to present the results of their dérives it becomes increasingly apparent that it was not just observation that was in its early stages: arguably, a method for the representation of psychogeographic data was never adequately formulated. This problem is apparent in the disjunction between Debord’s definition of psychogeography and his understanding of the nature of dérive. He states that the spirit of this practice is embodied in the ‘loose lifestyle and even certain amusements considered dubious that have always been enjoyed among our entourage – slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition, hitchhiking nonstop and without destination through Paris during a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion, wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public’, and asserts that ‘written descriptions can be no more than passwords to this great game’. Whilst this suggests that the whole practice is in itself irreducible to representation, he goes on to excuse the ‘inevitable imprecision’ of maps such as The Naked City, for ‘at this early stage [it] is no worse than that of the first navigational charts’. Debord is suggesting on the one hand that a greater accuracy will be possible in the future with the conduction of further research, more dérives, more maps, yet on the other that the experience of dérive, the primary method for the investigation of psychogeographic effects, cannot be represented. If this is the case, how will later maps aggregate the subjective experiences of the dérive and produce the concrete truths of psychogeography in a fashion that does not itself betray those experiences?

When one looks back to Constant’s plans for New Babylon, the explicit utopia-building vigour that these display is only the most visible manifestation of the contradiction at the heart of the Situationist formulation of psychogeography. The

Figure 9: Guy Debord with Asger Jorn, *The Naked City: illustration de l’hypothèse des plaques tournantes en psychogeographique*, 1957, screenprint.

Figure 10: Ralph Rumney, *The Leaning Tower of Venice* (detail), 1957, photographic collage.
subjective truth of one person’s speculation does not equate to a universal utopia for all, and, moreover, threatens to overwhelm the very basis of its formulation. This problem emerges from the attempt to present as universal those experiences which can only ever be particular, and in this the Situationists are following nothing less than Hegel’s conclusion that ‘art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.’\textsuperscript{45} For Hegel, the art of Classical Greece reflected universal (social) truths in part because the un-alienated position of the artist as spokesperson and, indeed, priest, within Greek society meant that he could represent in sensuous form the values and truths of that culture. With the passage into romanticism, the critical position of the artist vis-à-vis his society meant that art could no longer be anything other than self-expression,\textsuperscript{46} and as a consequence, art has been supplanted by philosophy as the medium by which truth can be expressed. As the Situationists’ attempts to represent their psychogeographic experiments had not and could not have transcended their status as subjective expressions of subjective experience, that is, art, neither could they therefore transmit universal values. Moreover, it is in this realisation that they learned the full meaning of Marx’s defence of \textit{Capital}, in which he asserted that he deliberately ‘confine[d] [him]self merely to the critical analysis of the actual facts, instead of writing recipes […] for the cook-shops of the future.’\textsuperscript{47} Democratic socialism is a process to be worked through: attempting to figure out what the end point of this might look like risks the creation of a hypostatised ideal that enslaves rather than liberates. It was with this conclusion that the rich possibilities suggested by psychogeography were abandoned by the Situationists in favour of more strictly theoretical and political tactics and activism.

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\item \textsuperscript{46} Fredrick Beiser, \textit{Hegel} (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 304-305.
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London Psychogeography

There can be little doubt that contemporary London psychogeography does not share the explicit utopianism of its Parisian counterpart, and, despite the polemic that often infuses the writing of those authors now considered ‘psychogeographic’, especially that of Iain Sinclair, nor does it have a revolutionary intent. Instead, it seems to have expanded to include a whole host of seemingly unrelated ideas, not least of which is a bizarre mixture of ‘New-Age’ concepts such as ‘ley lines’, alignments in the landscape along which ‘energies’ flow, mysticism, and the occult. These additions come, almost exclusively, from Sinclair’s writing. Merlin Coverley succinctly sums up what contemporary London psychogeography shares with its historical Parisian counterpart as ‘urban wandering, the imaginative reworking of the city, the otherworldly sense of spirit of place, the unexpected insights and juxtapositions created by aimless drifting, the new ways of experiencing familiar surroundings’. When compared to the full-blown revolutionary-utopian-Marxist aims of its inception, however, this variant of psychogeography sounds decidedly toothless and even somewhat woolly, and as Coverley argues, expands the definition to include a great many writers whose work is concerned with the experience of living in a great city. However, if the contradictions I have traced in psychogeographical thought in the above led to its eventual abandonment by the S. I., and what is more, put the whole possibility of its revolutionary project into serious doubt, it is perhaps to be expected that the concept has been picked up and re-worked in ways that would have been surprising to its creators.

From a Situationist perspective the inclusion of mystical ideas such as those that are associated with psychogeography today would be not only unfortunate, but downright regressive. One of the group’s principal criticisms of Surrealism was that it displayed a regrettable tendency towards a ‘mystical idealism’ that merely expressed

48 The work of Peter Ackroyd, for example, contains many of the themes which are now associated with psychogeography, but presents it in accordance with a largely (small ‘c’) conservative world view. See Alex Murray, Recalling London: Literature and History in the Work of Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair (London: Continuum, 2007).
49 Merlin Coverley, Psychogeography, pp. 31-32.
“bourgeois impotence, artistic nostalgia and a refusal to envisage the liberating use of our era’s superior technological means.”

This meant for the Situationists that whilst ‘the general public thinks of surrealism as the furthest extreme of modernism’, it was in fact increasingly dominated by a ‘reactionary flight from reality’, had abandoned its revolutionary roots, and degenerated into a ‘senile-occultist’ stupor. Whilst the elements of occult and New-Age ‘weirdness’ that litter Sinclair’s texts, and hence contemporary psychogeography, could be seen as just this, this would be to do an injustice to both the complexity of Sinclair’s writing and the political currents that operate within it. If one traces the reappearance of psychogeography as a term used within artist/activist circles in the UK in the early 1990s, and from here into Sinclair’s work, one can begin to see that these elements actively work to destabilise ideological understandings of the city as the site of capitalist rationality, in essence redeeming the power of psychogeography as subjective critique whilst abandoning those elements that strive towards an explicit utopianism. However, this comes at the cost of abandoning any hope for attaining universal truths about the city through psychogeographic means.

It may be an understatement to suggest that the founders of the Situationist International would have been surprised, not to say disgusted, by the changed status of psychogeography today which has permitted the novelist Will Self to publish a weekly column in the Independent on Sunday under its name. A practice that saw as its end point the fundamental transformation of the fabric of urban space and human consciousness has changed into what, in its most insipid forms, can amount to nothing more than musings on the supposed 
genius loci of London. There is a definite trajectory by which psychogeography has come to occupy this position, however. The term first reappears on the streets of London (after a considerable absence) in the pages of a publication entitled the London Psychogeographical Association Newsletter, which was irregularly and anonymously produced.

52 Guy Debord, ‘Contribution to the Debate “Is Surrealism Dead or Alive”’, p. 68.
between 1993 and 1996.\textsuperscript{54} It is important to note at this point that this publication has nothing to do with the organisation of the same name established by Ralph Rumney. Instead, one of the prime suspects for the authorship of these leaflets is Stewart Home,\textsuperscript{55} an activist, artist and author of a number of books on the history of European avant-gardism, including \textit{The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War} (1991). The \textit{Newsletter} combined Situationist-derived jargon with a series of mystical tropes that were lifted wholesale from Iain Sinclair’s work, the authors openly acknowledging his influence, praising the author for the usefulness of his ‘psychogeographical account of Limehouse’ in the prose poem \textit{Lud Heat}.\textsuperscript{56}

It is from the \textit{Newsletter} itself that Sinclair then picks up the term, as he states in an interview with Kevin Jackson:

I think the word first crossed my path in the late 1960s, but it didn’t really take. The Situationist Era drifted through me, and I didn’t think I was practising anything that resembled it, until it kicked in as a term employed by Stewart Home and his associates, who were re-working cultural history, and using Situationist terms to parody the National Front’s activities in Limehouse.\textsuperscript{57}

From this point onwards, around 1996, the word starts appearing in Sinclair’s writing, in particular the book that announced Sinclair’s arrival in the literary mainstream: 1997’s \textit{Lights Out for the Territory}. Interestingly, the word is never applied by Sinclair to his own writing, but in reference to the city itself, and to the work of other artists and writers. Describing his former job as a book dealer selling stock on the now largely-defunct

\textsuperscript{54} See \textit{Mind Invaders: A Reader in Psychic Warfare, Cultural Sabotage and Semiotic Terrorism}, ed. by Stewart Home (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1997).

\textsuperscript{55} Or possibly his associate and collaborator Fabian Tompsett. The facts of the matter are somewhat difficult to verify due to the infuriating web of claims and counter-claims that Home has deliberately established around his practice.


\textsuperscript{57} Kevin Jackson and Iain Sinclair, \textit{The Verbal: Kevin Jackson in Conversation with Iain Sinclair} (Tonbridge: Worples Press, 2003), p. 75.
London open-air book markets, Sinclair perceives a ‘psychogeography of retail’ in these spaces. The borough of Hackney, he asserts, has its ‘psychogeographic badlands’ off Kingsland High Street (pp. 25-26). These hints as to what psychogeography might be are extended in the author’s descriptions of the financial heart of the capital, where Sinclair plays with a subterranean imagery that connects the high rationality of multinational capitalism with blood sacrifice, culminating in the extraordinary claim that the act of ‘Mithras cutting the bull’s throat – as depicted on the votive tablet discovered near Bond Court in 1889 is one of the crucial icons in any understanding of the psychogeography of the City’ (p. 115). Much as with the Situationist understanding of the city as possessing a ‘psychogeographic relief’, Sinclair’s psychogeography is something that the city has, and, moreover, can be perceived by its inhabitants. Crucially, however, perceiving the psychogeography of a place is not necessarily a moment of revelation: Sinclair’s description of the City of London re-enchants that place with the ghosts of its pre-Christian, Romanic past; his stygian metaphors suggesting that psychogeographic practices do not necessarily illuminate the truth. Indeed, when the London Psychogeographical Association Newsletter is mentioned early on in Lights Out for the Territory, although its contents might be described by Sinclair as ‘the only accurate temperature chart of the city’s fevers’, those contents are at once ‘fantasies’ (p. 25). Thus, whilst the term psychogeography first makes its appearance in Lights Out for the Territory, as we shall see, the Gothic themes that Sinclair attaches to it are present throughout the whole body of his writing. By this sleight of hand, in combination with the London Psychogeographical Association’s publications, the themes that dominate Sinclair’s work – the malign influence of the unquiet dead in the landscape of the contemporary city, occultism, myth, the London criminal underworld, the ‘Jack the Ripper’ murders of the 1880s, all explored through the device of the author walking the city streets – are retroactively ‘re-branded’ as psychogeographic. The word, now detached from its origins but with still just enough frisson to retain a sort of anti-establishment

58 Iain Sinclair, Lights Out for the Territory, p. 21. Further references to this work will be given in parenthesis.
credibility, then becomes more widely applied to the work of a number of other authors who share similar themes and concerns.

The extent to which psychogeography has changed through this process can be illustrated both by the way in which it came to be reused in Britain, and the judgements that former members of the Situationist International have expressed about this revival. Having been abandoned on the battlefield by its original creators, as I mentioned above it was with the publication in the early 1990s of a series of anonymously-authored pamphlets entitled *The London Psychogeographical Association Newsletter* that the term re-surfaced in British artistic and literary circles. In 1998 Ralph Rumney referred to the organisation that he established in 1957 as the ‘Comité Psychogéographique de Londres’, now based in Geneva, on account of ‘élucubrations mystico-amphigouriques d’un groupuscule londonien usurpateur du titre [the arcane/mystical wild imaginings of an insignificant political sect in London who have usurped the title]’.\(^{60}\) Rumney’s dissatisfaction with the operations of this organisation and its re-appropriation of Situationist terminology can be further attested to by the contents of a bad-tempered lecture delivered *in absentia* to the audience of a conference dedicated to the exploration of the Situationist legacy at the Haçienda nightclub in Manchester in 1996:\(^{61}\)

Situationism is another matter. People who employ this meaningless term merit only contempt. Perhaps they cannot read (in that case our contempt should be tempered with pity). Perhaps they are going by hearsay. CONTEMPT. Perhaps they are trying to achieve some nugatory credit by pretending understanding to something they do not comprehend. CONTEMPT. Perhaps they think that the nonsense that emanated from Leeds had something to do with the Situationists. CONTEMPT. Perhaps they thought that the Situationists had something to do with the totalitarian and violent

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terroristic attempts to destabilise global terrorism. CONTEMPT. I could persist.

The objects of contempt are all around you. […]

A quarter of a century ago, the Situationists decided that the time had come to pass the baton to a new, equally creative, generation.

The baton was dropped.

Since then we have suffered, largely in silence, pro-situs, proto-situs, meta-situs, post-situs, neo-situs, and all sorts of Situationist derived cults. Soon we will find Moonies-situs, Hare Krishna-situs, sects in Manchester and Wapping connected by the ley line through the Watford Gap, nourished by ill-digested, unverified and unresearched rubbish like the article that appeared in the Independent consequent upon the death of Guy Debord. Scurrility reigns. […]

Ley lines went out with Hawksmoor.

Now the ball is in your court.62

His disassociation of the works of contemporary ‘pro-situ’ groups from the Situationist project, and by extension his own work, could not be more pronounced, he seems somewhat baffled by the way in which the Situationist legacy has been, in his eyes, squandered. When one examines the contents of the London Psychogeographical Association Newsletter, it becomes clear that not only is it this group in particular that is the target of Rumney’s ire, but also that his confusion is to some extent justified, for it is difficult to see what they have to do with psychogeography as it was originally conceived.

62 Ralph Rumney, ‘Some Remarks Concerning the Indigence of Post-Situationists in their Attempts to Recuperate the Past’, in The Hacienda Must be Built: On the Legacy of the Situationist Revolt, ed. by Andrew Hussey and Gavin Bowd (Huddersfield: AURA, 1996), unpaginated. The Situationists considered the term ‘situationism’ as fundamentally antagonistic to their project as they were determined not to be reduced to an artistic movement with an identifiable ‘style’. See Anon. ‘Definitions’, in Situationist International Anthology, pp. 45-46 (p. 45). The reference to the Independent refers to an article by the organisers of the conference, Andrew Hussey and Gavin Bowd, published in the newspaper in the same year. This article was the main reason for Rumney’s non-attendance at the conference, stating in a letter to Bowd that to speak at it would be a ‘betrayal of everything I have stood for all my life’; Ralph Rumney, ‘Letter to Gavin Bowd’, in The Hacienda Must be Built, unpaginated.
The issues of the Newsletter are a bizarre mix of occultism, conspiracy theory and veiled references to revolutionary Marxist politics. Claiming that the ‘spectre’ of psychogeography is ‘haunting Europe, nay, the world’, and proposing that through their activities they would bring about the ‘reconstruction of urban life using the principles of anti-Euclidean psychogeometry’, the group issued a number of leaflets with titles such as ‘Smash the occult establishment’, ‘Who rules Britain?’, and ‘Nazi Occultists Seize Omphalos’, from which the following is an extract:

The election of Derek Beackon as a Councillor on the Isle of Dogs caused shocked outrage across the Establishment. Beackon is a dedicated Nazi occultist. He graduated to the British Nationalist Party after serving his apprenticeship in the British Movement. Beackon is an adept of Enochian magic. [...] From his home at Mallon House, Carr Street, Limehouse, Beackon was able to tap into the powerful ley line running through his front room. This ley line is readily visible from the Observatory at Greenwich. It goes through the macabre Queen Anne House, and guided by the symmetry of the Naval College it crosses the Isle of Dogs, clipping the corner of Canary Wharf complex before exactly passing through the tower of St Anne’s Limehouse. Then it passes through Beackon’s lair before going on to Queen Mary and Westerfield College [sic].

This ley line has been in the hands of the Establishment for years.

The text was issued in 1993 in response to the election of the BNP member Derek Beackon to Limehouse council, which came of something of an unpleasant shock to more mainstream politics at the time, and goes on to describe a detailed and joyfully deranged conspiracy theory involving the Elizabethan alchemist John Dee and an occult plot by

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the British Establishment to use far-right politics and race riots to ‘prop up the decadent masonic system’ and hence develop a ‘new weapon in its arsenal of terror’,\(^{67}\) The ‘ley lines’ of which Rumney was so critical appear here, as does Nicholas Hawksmoor, the architect of St Anne’s Limehouse, and these references, in combination with the other bizarre claims contained in the article, makes it quite difficult to know how to take the piece, nor indeed to fathom what it might have to do with psychogeography. Whilst a plausible reading of the text is as a satire of far-right politics, is it not equally possible that in employing occult concepts that the piece is satirising psychogeography also? In combination with the fact that there is no reference to psychogeography at all in the article other than in the name of the organisation that published it, it is perhaps understandable that Rumney reacted with such anger and bafflement to the use of such mystical tropes in association with the concept that he had helped to develop.

Yet when one examines ‘Nazi Occultists Seize Omphalos’ next to Sinclair’s writing, however, what is going on here becomes clearer. For example, a distinct thematic similarity can be seen with this extract from the opening essay of Sinclair’s 1975 *Lud Heat*:

> A triangle is formed between Christ Church, St George-in-the-East and St Anne, Limehouse. These are centres of power for those territories; sentinel, sphinx-form, slack dynamos abandoned as the culture they supported goes into retreat. The power remains latent, the frustration mounts on a current of animal magnetism, and victims are still claimed.

> St George, Bloomsbury, and St Alfege, Greenwich, make up the major pentacle-star. The five is reversed, beggars in snow pass under the lit church window; the judgement is ‘disorder, chaos, ruin, discord, profligacy.’ These churches guard or mark, rest upon, two major sources of occult power: The British Museum and Greenwich Observatory. The locked cellar of words, the labyrinth of all recorded

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\(^{67}\) London Psychogeographical Association, ‘Nazi Occultists Seize Omphalos’, p. 29.
knowledge, the repository of stolen fires and symbols, excavated god-forms – and measurement, star-knowledge, time calculations, Maze Hill, the bank of light that faces the Isle of Dogs.  

Writing at the time at which the City of London was just at the beginning of the process of transforming itself into the global financial centre that it is known as today, Sinclair articulates a vision of the City radically opposed to the technocratic rationalism asserted by such developments. The newly built skyscrapers simulate the artificially totalising perspective of the cartographer, in opposition to which Sinclair offers an account of urban space which emphasises the ‘subservience of the grounded eye’. In a theme which is echoed by the references to ancient sites of sacrifice in *Lights Out for the Territory*, the landscape of London becomes reanimated by ancient alignments, the misdeeds of power and the malign influence of the past.

With this as context, the antics of the London Psychogeographical Association become more intelligible, and moreover, they throw into starker relief the political currents in Sinclair’s writing. One of the first instances of the use of the word psychogeography in Iain Sinclair’s work is in a description of the *Newsletter*, in which he depicts the authors as ‘freebasing among archetypes and video clips, speeding through the image bank. A paranoid poetic whose lies are so spectacular they have become a new form of truth’ (pp. 25-26). This is precisely what Sinclair is doing in the above section: inventing or uncovering histories that subvert the operations of power in the present, or as Brian Baker has it, his writing ‘resists the contemporary configurations of urban space, and reveals the history of that space which is deliberately erased or overlaid by late capitalism’. What the London Psychogeographical Society have done is to take Sinclair’s occult speculations and distil them into grotesquely amplified form, exaggerating their ambiguity and in the process subverting ‘the most corrupt of all forms, the tabloid’ (p. 25).

In presenting the subjective experience of the city as primary over the ‘false’ objectivity presented in more programmatic and empirical understandings of urban space, this passage is similar in intent to Debord’s depiction of Paris in *The Naked City* (fig. 9), a similarity further reinforced through examination of the map that accompanies Sinclair’s poem (fig. 11). Despite the fact that *The Naked City*, as I have argued above, undermines the rationalising, hegemonic viewpoint of the city planner, the fact that it shatters the existing fabric of Paris and remodels it according to subjectively perceived ‘unities of ambience’, both demonstrates the scale of the Situationists’ ambitions to transform the nature of the city, and therefore simultaneously betrays that this very ambition will only serve to re-perpetuate the same hegemonic tendencies that they so despised. The map that accompanies Sinclair’s poem instead offers a vision of the city of London that retains the cartography that is found in conventional maps, yet radically re-imagines what that cartography might mean. Instead of the site of the high capitalist rationality of a modern world city, London becomes a territory burdened with hermetic codes and mystical significances; roads are replaced by speculative alignments between the ancient monuments that have diminished all other landmarks into insignificance. This provides a critique of rationalist visions of London and articulates a landscape not marked on ordinary maps, the city’s unspoken dark side, and therefore, as with *The Naked City*, undermines the claims to objectivity made by conventional maps. However, the *Lud Heat* map does not pretend to anything other than a subjective viewpoint, a fact reinforced by Sinclair’s house on Albion Drive in Hackney being marked as one of the ‘sites of power’ in this rendering of the city. What Sinclair’s text abandons is any hope of going beyond the representation of this subjective reading of the city. The invention and repurposing of a history that subverts the operations of contemporary political and economic power and casts them as fundamentally irrational, but offers no vision of a post-revolutionary life where these influences have been superseded and dissolved, maintains the power of psychogeography in its aspect as critique whilst divesting it of the utopian tendencies that operate in its original, Situationist, formulation.
Methodologies and representations

If the principal point of similarity between London psychogeography and its Situationist forebear is the emphasis on the experience of the city from the perspective of the inhabitant rather than that of the city planner or architect, then one of the principal points of difference must be the scepticism that contemporary psychogeography shows towards the utility of such subjective visions in imagining alternatives. The Situationists at first hoped that the experiences of the city acquired through the practice of dérive could deliver, to put it in Hegelian terms, concrete universal truths that synthesised subjective and objective categories, the results of which could be used for the creation of a future city. Contemporary London psychogeography, through its transformation into a literary mode, fundamentally refutes this. It in effect accepts, as the Situationist movement did with its abandonment of psychogeography and the whole project of unitary urbanism, that subjective experiences cannot be represented in ways which deliver universal truths. However, this flaw, as I have argued above, was already at the core of the concept in its original formulation. Despite this critical difference, the starting point for both is the walk, and this raises interesting questions about the relationship between psychogeographic methodologies and their representation. This can be illustrated by citing in full the methodological statement on Sinclair’s ‘born again’ flânerie in Lights Out for the Territory with which I opened the preceding chapter:

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself. To the no-bullshit materialist this sounds suspiciously like fin-de-siècle decadence, a poetic of entropy – but the born-again flâneur is a stubborn creature, less interested in texture and fabric, eavesdropping on philosophical conversation pieces, than in noticing everything. (p. 4)

If, as I argued in the previous chapter, Sinclair’s insistence on the ‘born again’ nature of his
flânerie indicates a certain discomfort with the figure’s historical resonances, then conversely the points of similarity between Sinclair’s methodology and the Situationist dérive are obvious. Both praxes insist on an attention to detail and the change of atmosphere in the city as one moves between different areas; both engage in a deliberate practice of ‘drift’ that simultaneously does not embrace a Surrealistic valorisation of randomness for its own sake. However, if the Situationists imbued the experience of urban space offered by such techniques with a certain purpose – that of the discovery of a future city for a new way of life – and their militaristic communiques suggest that psychogeography might be one strategy through which it might be attained, then despite Sinclair’s insistence on the belligerence of his praxis, his is at once much more lyrical, as the bucolic images of ‘breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water’ might suggest.

This goes to the heart of the difference between contemporary psychogeography as articulated by Sinclair and that formulated by the Situationists: where Guy Debord asserts that the experience of the dérive is inaccessible to representative techniques, Sinclair either does not think this or is doing something quite different. Arguably, it is the latter: with his characterisation of the patterns he finds in the urban environment as imaginary, Sinclair tacitly acknowledges that we can no more verify the ‘truth’ of his urban experiences from the text than we can accept that text as evidence of his wanderings. Whilst Sinclair’s writing asserts that it is derived from a methodology that has walking at its heart, in and of itself it can only ever be working at the level of the text. Henri Lefebvre’s assertion of the value of using literature for the understanding of the urban experience in his book *The Production of Space* provides a useful corrective:

When codes worked up from literary texts are applied to spaces – to urban spaces, say – we remain, as may easily be shown, on the purely descriptive level. Any attempt to use such codes as a means of deciphering social space must surely reduce
Figure 11: Brian Catling, *Being a Map of the 8 Great Churches: the Lines of Influence the Invisible Rods of Force Active in This City*, from Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat*. 
that space itself to the status of a *message*, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a *reading*.\footnote{Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 7.}

Sinclair’s accounts of his *dérives* are exactly this: descriptions which reduce space to a (necessarily subjective) reading. In acknowledging that such textual descriptions are themselves both partial and reductive, and thus concurring with Debord’s assertion that they can be no more than ‘passwords’,\footnote{Guy Debord, ‘Theory of the Dérive’, p. 53.} Sinclair’s materials become, not, as the Situationists hoped could eventually be the case, the city itself, but instead the narratives and myths that come through time to be associated with it – in short, art and history.

This position is made more explicit through Sinclair’s own references to the restored London Psychogeographical Association. To quote more fully from the passage in *Lights Out for the Territory* where Sinclair refers to the organisation, the author recounts a walk through Hackney:

> By now we’re cruising past the accommodation address (Box 15, 138 Kingsland High Street, London E8 2NS) of that mysterious and fugitive publication, the *Newsletter* of the London Psychogeographical Association (“35 Years of Non-Existence”). This anonymous, unsponsored, irregular, single-sheet squib is probably the most useful of all London’s neighbourhood tabloids. And certainly the most entertaining. It has no fixed cover price and no distribution. If you need it, if finds you. It writes itself. It invents rumours that it purports to discover. The deranged geniality of its prose offers the only accurate temperature chart of the city’s fevers: reality as an infinitely accommodating substance. […] The psychogeographers are operating an equivalent to James Ellroy’s novel *American Tabloid*, freebasing among archetypes and video clips, speeding through the image bank. A paranoid poetic whose lies are so spectacular they have become a new form of truth. (pp. 25-26)
Sinclair describes this practice elsewhere as ‘re-working cultural history’, and this is precisely what his own work does: uncovering and reworking existing narratives of London, the myths attached to a particular place – the very same ghosts that Ivan Chtcheglov asserts that one cannot ‘take three steps without encountering […] bearing all the prestige of their legends’ when wandering the modern city. However, whereas the Situationists found in these spectres the hints of the future life that the revolution would come to realise, Sinclair instead identifies their power as a moral corrective in the present. This entails, however, an abandonment of the concept’s revolutionary potential, and moreover, opens the door for what would be, in Situationist terms, its recuperation by conservative and counter-revolutionary currents.

Conclusion

Psychogeography, therefore, has changed (probably irrevocably) from a revolutionary discipline into something markedly different. Yet in tracing the historical path of the concept as it has been used within differing artistic and literary circles in Europe since its inception in the 1950s, it is arguable that the changes that the term has undertaken in recent years were inherent or prefigured within its first incarnations. The psychogeographic data gathered through spatial practices such as dérive, as Debord presciently argued, cannot be represented in a way which does not reduce them to abstractions, that is as art, and art, as Hegel had concluded more than a hundred years earlier, is no longer the medium of truth. The mistake that the early Situationists therefore made was to hope that it might be possible to extrapolate from the rich possibilities suggested by these practices and representations, and, combined with their largely positivist faith in scientific progress, this finds its expression in the exhilarating but ultimately terrifying vision of Constant’s New Babylon. Psychogeography now is almost entirely literary, a state of affairs that, as the above

73 Kevin Jackson and Iain Sinclair, The Verbals, p. 75.
demonstrates, owes much to Sinclair, and in this form it retains many of the themes that the Situationist formulation identified – the rich potential offered by the experience of walking the city; the freedoms offered by disengaging from one’s habitual routes through it; the unexpected and surprising erupting in the everyday as a consequence of such activity – but as a consequence of its status as literature necessarily abandons the revolutionary and utopian ambitions that was part of the concept in its original formulation. Moreover, the shift in meaning of psychogeography and its abandonment by the Situationists follow a similar trajectory, and respond to a similar problem: the possibility or otherwise of a revolutionary avant-gardism. If the Situationists abandoned psychogeography because its status as an artistic practice limited its revolutionary potential, then Sinclair can pick it up as a critical tool precisely because of the residual power of critique which, in Adorno's terms, is latent to the ‘high’ art object by virtue of its relative autonomy from exchange relations.

Yet if we turn to the broader political questions which lie behind both this chapter and the one which preceded it, how might we characterise Sinclair’s use of both psychogeography and the *flâneur*? Both of these terms have specific meanings within a Marxist context, yet, as is clear from my readings of his work, it is difficult to fit Sinclair’s project within such a framework. If we might differentiate the two terms by characterising the *flâneur* as oriented towards the past, and Parisian psychogeography as oriented towards the future, then we might also say that if psychogeography is explicitly utopian, then the political hope that Benjamin places in his dialectical presentation (and his attention to Fourier), makes his *flâneur* implicitly so. In this sense both of these models of spatial (and literary) praxis are variants of a certain (weak) utopian mode; yet the ambivalence that Sinclair expresses towards the utopian in his use of psychogeography and the almost entirely negative cast of *Downriver’s flânerie* suggest a scepticism towards such notions. Yet I would not on this basis consider Sinclair a cynic: on the contrary, the trenchancy of his critique of existing politics, and the seriousness with which he handles the political
and ethical dimensions of the cultural histories he unearths in his non-fiction, suggest that there is a progressive politics to be fought for. I would suggest instead that we read Sinclair’s use of such terms, in Fredric Jameson’s words, that of a ‘fellow-traveller of Utopia itself’; one ‘only too wary of the motives of its critics, yet no less conscious of Utopia’s structural ambiguities’, and for whom ‘the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism might well offer the best working strategy.’

Part 3: Memory
Chapter 5: Gothic Histories

In the opening chapters of this thesis, we saw the ways in which Iain Sinclair’s early work endorses the liberatory and transcendent capacities that the historic avant-gardes sought in art. Yet in its localism and in its dramatisation of the ways in which art inevitably colludes in commercial processes, his writing simultaneously disavows the ambitions and capacity of these movements to revolutionise a whole way of life. Similarly, the previous two chapters explored the ways in which Sinclair’s work engages in a spatial politics derived from models practised and articulated by these movements. Through all of these readings we have seen the ways in which Sinclair’s texts draw upon and engage with their literary and artistic antecedents so as to resist the commodifying and homogenising tendencies of contemporary politics. Moreover, if the historic avant-gardes articulated a utopian understanding of art, and in the figures of the flâneur and of the psychogeographer, by turns an implicit or explicit utopianism of space, then they imply also a certain, and similarly utopian, understanding of the temporal. Thus Benjamin’s flânerie searches for those historical images which would bring the ‘present into a critical state’; whilst in works such as New Babylon the Situationists attempted to synthesise a vision of a post-revolutionary future. Sinclair’s work, in its search for pockets of resistance in artistic practices, in the city, and in history, expresses a similar, though modified, temporal politics. The following two chapters will therefore explore the models of history that Sinclair’s work suggests, turning firstly in the present chapter to the political implications of the gothicisation of the past throughout his œuvre; and in the one which follows to his

treatment of suburbia and the futures he finds there in *London Orbital*.

Sinclair’s work is peppered with ghosts, sinister rituals, and haunted houses. His narrators and characters frequently experience events which could only be described as supernatural – one thinks of the ritual performed at the apex of One Canada Square in *Downriver*, or in the same novel when Adam Tenbrücke has a vision of a satanic ritual which precedes his own death by suicide.\(^2\) In *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* ‘Sinclair’ and his companion Joblard become haunted by a third presence whose physiognomy is a composite of their two selves.\(^3\) Another of the author’s avatars, Norton, appears in *Slow Chocolate Autopsy* at the murders of both Christopher Marlowe in 1593 and the gangster Jack ‘The Hat’ McVitie by Reggie Kray in 1967.\(^4\) In *Lud Heat* Nicholas Hawksmoor’s churches become centres of malign power on the map of London (pp. 4-26),\(^5\) whilst in *Radon Daughters* the preserved head of the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg is consulted to reveal the interconnections between London’s subterranean rivers and the entrances to Hell.\(^6\) Moreover, Sinclair’s densely allusive literary mode invokes a spectrum of figures and locales derived from *fin de siècle* literature, from well-known examples such as Stevenson’s Mr. Hyde in *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* and Stoker’s *Dracula* in *London Orbital*, to less familiar sources such as William Hope Hodgeson, the apocalyptic landscape of his novel *The House on the Borderland* making multiple appearances in *Radon Daughters*. As a number of critics have pointed out, if one were to group these diverse figures under a single sign, that sign would be the Gothic,\(^7\) and the range of phenomena which haunt Sinclair’s work comfortably sit within the frame provided by the preface to *The Castle of Otranto*.

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which enumerates a series of tropes that have since served to characterise Gothic fiction: ‘Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, [...] preternatural events’,8 to which one might add the ‘haunted house’ of the Castle itself. This thesis has consistently argued that Sinclair’s works demand to be read both historically and politically as interventions in particular cultural and social configurations. His project can be interpreted as a radical, antagonistic, and self-reflexive examination of art and the role of the artist in relation to the social whole, which stands in opposition to the compromises of the neoliberal consensus, but can neither fully endorse the possibilities offered by the Marxist left. Sinclair’s use of the Gothic therefore demands analysis through precisely this constellation: what does the Gothic do for the politics of his work? And, conversely, what does Sinclair’s work do for the politics of the Gothic?

Sinclair’s use of such figures raises a number of problems, however, because the politics of the Gothic are themselves not easily delineated, and indeed, varying critics have read Sinclair’s use of the Gothic as both radical and as conservative. Robert Mighall’s work, particularly his study *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction* demonstrates firstly the way in which Gothic signifiers, in their 18th and 19th century contexts, express an effectively reactionary politics, functioning to shore up protestant, bourgeois cultural identity against a foreign (and Catholic) other;9 Mighall argues that for contemporary accounts which derive their intellectual framework from an (often vulgar) application of Freud, the Gothic becomes instead an unsettling force which disturbs the plenitude of such identities through its representation of a repressed sexuality in radically uncanny or horrific forms. That Gothic symbols should acquire such differing meanings depending on the reading strategy employed by the critic speaks to their ambiguity; rather than agreeing with either one side of this debate or the other, therefore, I will instead pursue here a line of argument which derives from Shoshana Felman’s essay ‘Turning the Screw

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of Interpretation’. If vulgar psychoanalytic readings of the Gothic tend to reduce such symbols to symptoms from which the critic diagnoses a sexual repression, and therefore reveal sexuality as the ‘hidden’ meaning of a text, then Felman’s essay, conversely, reads sexuality instead as that ambiguous force within a text which generates interpretative problems. As Felman argues, criticism of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* tends to read the novel as a ‘straightforward’ ghost story, or, conversely, as a story of the madness of the Governess in which the ghosts of the narrative are ‘in fact’ symptoms of her neurosis. Felman argues that this split in the criticism in effect echoes the undecidability of the meaning of the text, an undecidability generated by the ambiguous meaning of sexuality itself:

> Sexuality is not [...] the “text’s meaning”: it is rather that through which meaning in the text does not come off, that which in the text, and through which the text, fails to mean, that which can engender but a conflict of interpretations, a critical debate and discord precisely like the polemic which surrounds *The Turn of the Screw*.

I want, in the following, to pursue a similar strategy with reference to Sinclair’s use of the Gothic: such symbols are not what render Sinclair’s texts variously radical or reactionary, but those symbols whose polysemy allow such contradictory interpretations to be read in them. What determines the politics of the Gothic is less its signifiers than the uses to which they are put.

**The Politics of the Gothic**

The term Gothic itself is a slippery one which, in addition to literature, art, and film, has specific meanings also in architecture, music, subcultural studies, and in European history. Secondly, within literature and art the litany of Gothic symbols has not only

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11 David Punter and Glennis Byron’s *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) provides a good overview of the scope of the term; the Introduction (pp. xviii-xx) and the chapters ‘Civilization and the Goths’ (pp.
grown since the inception of the genre – the inaugural ghosts of _The Castle of Otranto_ having been joined by supernatural beings of various sorts, from Frankenstein’s monster, _Dracula_’s vampire, through to the zombie of more recent works such as the films _Dawn of the Dead_ (1978) or _28 Days Later_ (2002) – but these signifiers have historically acquired differing political interpretations. Though it focuses its most trenchant criticism on what might be termed a ‘vulgar’ application of Freudian thought, Robert Mighall’s work provides a good framework for understanding this historical change, noting as he does that contemporary criticism of Gothic fiction has tended to rely on psychoanalytic ideas to interpret these texts, against which he proposes a geographical-historicist approach. Following Mighall, psychoanalytic readings of Gothic literature have tended to privilege the unsettling and destabilising effect of its grotesqueries, an approach derived, as Rosemary Jackson notes, principally from Freud’s essay on the uncanny.12 To translate the German _unheimlich_ literally – ‘unhomely’ – the uncanny is, according to Freud, always ‘in some way a species of the familiar’,13 that is, the homely. The uncanny therefore represents the irruption of that which has been repressed by the unconscious into the frame of the familiar, so, for example, in Bram Stoker’s _Dracula_, taboo sexual desires find themselves expressed in the monstrous form of the vampire who invades the domesticity of the Victorian home. As Christopher Craft attests, ‘Modern critical accounts of _Dracula_, for instance, almost universally agree that vampirism both expresses and distorts an originally sexual energy’.14 In Craft’s reading, the vampire transgresses Victorian sexual and gender codes so that ‘Dracula’s ungratified desire to vamp Harker is fulfilled instead by his three vampiric daughters, whose anatomical femininity permits, because it masks, the silently interdicted homoerotic embrace between Harker and the Count’.15 In this sense, whilst

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3-6), ‘Art and Architecture’ (pp. 32-38), and ‘Goths and Gothic Subcultures’ (pp. 59-64) are of particular relevance here.


15 Christopher Craft, “‘Kiss Me With Those Red Lips’”, p. 262.
the manifest content of such works may be misogynistic or heteronormative, in expressing the inexpressible in monstrous terms, the Gothic functions, as Jackson argues, to undo ‘those unifying structures and significations upon which social order depends [and to] subvert and undermine cultural stability.’\textsuperscript{16} The Gothic (and the Fantastic more generally of which Jackson argues the Gothic is a subset) derives its power from the deployment of the uncanny, therefore becoming a radical, disruptive, and countercultural force ‘opposed to institutional order’\textsuperscript{17}.

Conversely, Mighall argues that psychoanalytic approaches which privilege readings of Gothic symbols as signifiers of repressed desire, rather than revealing their unconscious politics, in fact efface them. In a combative essay written with Chris Baldick, Mighall has asserted that such readings, in foregrounding ‘psychological “depth” and political “subversion”’, have ‘abandoned any credible historical grasp on [their] object’, and therefore ‘mistakenly [present] Gothic literature as a kind of “revolt” against bourgeois rationality, modernity, or Enlightenment.’\textsuperscript{18} As he elaborates at greater length in his \textit{Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction}, when read against contemporary political and scientific discourses, far from being ‘revolutionary’, the politics of Gothic fiction are at best ‘Whiggish’: they dramatise a confrontation between history and the present in which the ‘regressive’ characteristics of the past are measured against the yardstick of contemporary ‘progress’.

\textsuperscript{16} Rosemary Jackson, \textit{Fantasy}, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{17} Rosemary Jackson, \textit{Fantasy}, p. 70. Such readings derive much from the Surrealist interpretation of Freud, and indeed, of the Gothic, André Breton having praised \textit{The Castle of Otranto} as a proto-Surrealist work; André Breton, ‘Limits not Frontiers of Surrealism’, in \textit{Surrealism}, ed. by Herbert Read (London: Faber, 1971), pp. 93-116 (p. 110). The antipathy between Surrealism and Freudianism is well known. As Freud himself expressed it in a vexed letter to Breton, ‘that which I called the “manifest” dream, is not of interest to me. I deal with the search for the “latent dream content” which one can extract from the manifest dream by analytical interpretation. A collection of dreams without enclosed associations, without knowledge of the dreaming’s circumstances, says nothing to me, and I can hardly imagine what it could say to others’; Sigmund Freud, ‘Letter to Andre Breton, 8 December 1937’, cited in David Lomas, \textit{The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity} (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 5. For Freud, the Surrealist aim of liberating the unconscious desires of the artist could have no broader social meaning apart from the process of psychoanalysis, and therefore none of the revolutionary effects that the Surrealists might have hoped for. Moreover, for psychoanalysis the psychic mechanisms of repression and displacement are not pathological except in extreme cases, but the normal and necessary operations of the unconscious mind.

and are found wanting. Where vulgar psychoanalytic approaches emphasise the disruptive capacities of Gothic literature, Mighall’s insistence on context reveals its politics to be at best Liberal (in the European sense) and at worst reactionary: far from threatening the political and cultural order within which it was created, the Gothic serves as a bulwark against those which it imagines as its enemies. As Fred Botting reminds us, ‘The terrors and horrors of transgression in [historic] Gothic writing become a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue, and propriety: transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits.’

These two readings of the Gothic appear to be almost totally opposed: in psychoanalytic approaches, the supernatural elements of the Gothic function as a radical, unsettling force within their respective texts; from the perspective of an historically and geographically contextualised reading, such elements reveal the comfortably bourgeois, if not ultimately conservative character of such literature. Sinclair’s writing has come to be identified as engaging with or utilising Gothic tropes, and the dichotomy of critical readings sketched above finds itself replicated in criticism of his work. For example, for Julian Wolfreys, Sinclair’s London, composed of innumerable textual traces of which the figures derived from fin de siècle Gothic are but one, is a ‘haunted’ city which “interrupt[s] normative models of urban representation”. As he states elsewhere, the ‘effect of the gothic’ in such writing is therefore:

To destabilize discourses of power and knowledge and, with that, supposedly stable subject positions. […] In these and other disturbing ways, the gothic and so many heterogeneous signs of haunting manifests itself as both a subversive force and a spectral mechanism through which social and political critique may become available and articulable, as we come to apprehend material realities, political discourses and

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epistemological frameworks from other invisible places.  

Wolfreys reading derives much from Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, whose notions of the spectral and ‘hauntology’ themselves share with psychoanalytic criticism of the Gothic something of a debt to Freud’s notion of the uncanny; and here, the Gothic acts as an unsettling force, a kind of solvent which dissolves the apparent ontological stability of any given discursive frame. Sinclair’s project therefore becomes for Wolfreys a ‘kind of terrorist warfare with all representations of the city.’ Though Roger Luckhurst argues that ‘spectral’ interpretations of the Gothic such as Wolfreys’s, which read Sinclair’s work as symptomatic of Derrida’s generally and structurally haunted modernity, run the risk of evacuating such texts of their specific political content, he concurs with Wolfreys as to the radical aspects of Sinclair’s Gothic. Much as Mighall pays attention to the cultural and historical specifics of *fin de siècle* literature to reveal their specific political content, Luckhurst argues that what he terms the ‘Contemporary London Gothic’, of which Sinclair’s work is foundational, forms a satirical response to the baroque and anti-democratic politics of the capital in the 1980s and 1990s – ‘that curious mix of tyranny and farce that constitutes London governance.’

On the other side of this debate, Alex Murray has argued that whilst a London Gothic might well critique contemporary politics, such fictions participate in the

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24 Where psychoanalytic approaches read the unsettling effect of Gothic figures (such as the ghost) as deriving from that which they symbolise and thus repress, in Derrida’s reading it is not sex which produces the ghost’s unsettling character, but its anachrony. That is, the ambiguous temporal status of the ghost, neither alive nor dead, present nor absent, serves as a figure to demonstrate the relationship of the past to the present: history is in a sense always with us, but not, to adopt a phrase from Benjamin, ‘in the immediacy of its perceptible presence’; Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Exposé <of 1939>’, p. 14.


26 As Derrida notes, somewhat ambiguously for it is not clear whether he refers here to neo-liberalism, to Stalinism (and thus to all Marxisms?), or to both, ‘Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony’; Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 37.

spectacularisation of London history, presenting an image of the city which colludes with that which it purports to criticise. London Gothic both glamorises past horrors and contributes to an image of the city that is perfectly amenable to capital: as he states, the ‘idea of London Gothic is a pathetic fabulation of tourist operators, a deluded illusion of novelist and film-makers, the preserve of capitalism in its most vulgar and insubstantial forms.’28 One need only think of the numerous ‘Jack the Ripper’ tours that can be found wandering the streets of Spitalfields on any given evening to attest to the cogency of Murray’s criticism here, and indeed, Sinclair’s reflections on the Whitechapel murders in White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings and Downriver suggest an awareness of the problem. However, for Murray, to reject Wolfreys’s deconstructive position as Luckhurst does in favour of a specifically ‘London’ Gothic, is also to reinstate a conservative idea of place by the back door. Place, for Murray

is culturally contingent and inessential, a fact which must be obfuscated in an attempt to make each manufactured locale appear specific and singular. Literary and other forms of cultural production are often complicit in an attempt to construct organic myths of place, myths that tend to cover over the politics at work in privileging a ‘generative loci’.29

To speak of an idea of a ‘London Gothic’ is thus, for Murray, to ‘reproduce [a] logic of continuity and essentialism’30 that literature which employs such tropes is itself complicit in producing. Murray goes on to argue that whilst ‘Sinclair is […] keen to remind us [that] his counter-mythography of the city is in contradistinction to that of the banal images of gaslight and fog that feature in marketing of literary London’, his work, it is implied, nonetheless ‘suffer[s] the same fate as its more compromised counterpart.’31 Neither Wolfreys’s radically destabilising spectre nor Luckhurst’s pointed satirist, Murray’s Sinclair

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28 Alex Murray, “‘This Light was Pale and Ghostly’”, p. 65.
29 Alex Murray, “‘This Light was Pale and Ghostly’”, p. 68.
30 Alex Murray, “‘This Light was Pale and Ghostly’”, p. 68.
31 Alex Murray, “‘This Light was Pale and Ghostly’”, p. 73.
here ultimately colludes with capital, in opposition to which Murray posits the apocalyptic qualities of Stuart Home’s experimental novels and the notion of a transcendent eschatology of ‘horror’ derived from the aesthetics of H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘weird fiction’.32

The Gothic, then, be it in its Eighteenth-century, Victorian, or contemporary London incarnations, appears to inspire radically differing political interpretations depending on the reading strategy employed by the critic: the expression of the inexpressible and thus a radical, destabilising force within a given textual frame; a mode by which the present and ‘progress’ expresses its supremacy over the past; a subversive force which enables the articulation of political critique; a satire on contemporary power; and finally, a capitulation to commerce. What remains a common concern to all these readings, however, to borrow Mighall’s phrase, is a shared notion of ‘history as nightmare’. Both the Gothic novel and its critics seem to be concerned with the relationship between history and the present: the historic Gothic text inoculates a progressive present from an atavistic past; the psychoanalytic critic finds in the monster of the Gothic novel the disruptive seed from which a post-Freudian present has emerged; Wolfreys and Luckhurst find in Sinclair’s texts a Gothic which disturbs the plenitude of the present with disturbing reminders of its own historicity; whilst for Murray to evoke the past, even with Sinclair’s insistence on the marginal or the buried within that past, is at once to package it up and sell it.

32 Whilst such an aesthetics of horror might indeed question essentialist notions of place, Lovecraftian horror can itself be just as reactionary as the Gothic (if not more so), if that is the concepts of the Gothic and the horrific can themselves be split with any degree of exactitude. Indeed, the novelist Michel Houellebecq has gone as far as to argue that the horror that characterises Lovecraft’s fiction is derived precisely from the author’s fear of ethnicities other to his own; Michel Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2006), p. 107. Of particular relevance here is Lovecraft’s short story ‘The Horror at Red Hook’, which depicts sinister and occult happenings amongst New York’s immigrant communities, though this story has been largely excised from contemporary Lovecraft anthologies as it is, even in the author’s own opinion, a poor work; S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz, *An H. P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2001), p. 114. Furthermore, the ubiquity of Lovecraftian themes throughout pop culture – Guillermo del Toro’s *Hellboy* films (2004 and 2008), the comics by Mike Mignola on which they are based, or the fiction of China Miéville being but a handful of commercially successful examples – indicates that such an apocalyptic aesthetic is just as amenable to capital as any notion of a London Gothic.
Gothic Temporalities

If it is difficult to cut a clear line through these various readings, it is perhaps because Sinclair’s texts are sufficiently polyvalent to make all of them plausible, for these critical positions are already inscribed within them. As Wolfreys puts it, the critic who ‘interprets’ Sinclair’s work risks ‘express[ing] what Sinclair has already expressed, and by which process he has already forestalled and resisted any act of critical appropriation.’33 A shift in emphasis is therefore required from ‘what’ Sinclair’s texts say to an analysis of ‘how’ they say it; yet if Wolfreys’s approach attests to the complexity of Sinclair’s work and its propensity to articulate its own critique, in a sense it puts it beyond the scope of political criticism. I am not so sure that this is the case: whilst Sinclair’s work does tend to express the myriad perspectives of the particular thematic concern of any given text, Sinclair’s use of the Gothic mode in these texts expresses a model of temporality and of history. This model of history allows us to circumscribe Sinclair’s textual politics with more precision, and can furthermore reveal why readings of his texts generate such fundamentally opposed readings. However, the question here is not, exactly, of reading Sinclair’s work through Mighall’s interpretive framework. The following from London Orbital is instructive:

Drummond realises, in one of those vulture-on-the-shoulder moments, that he is older than Tony Blair. In actuarial time, maybe. By birth certificate. But look, on TV, at those folds, those bruised pouches; look at the eyes. Nothing on earth is older than Blair. The skin job, the hair teasing, the diamond-dust orthodontics don’t help. The grin that threatens to meet itself at the back of the neck. Blair is so weary. He’s tireder than a coprolite. Older than oxygen.34

Sinclair’s castigation of one of progress’s more recent and prominent self-appointed avatars

reveals a deep suspicion of any notion that ‘things can only get better’, making a reading of this fragment as evincing a Whiggish politics problematic. However, in transforming Tony Blair into some kind of preternaturally long-lived grinning revenant, Sinclair’s metaphorical devices are recognisably Gothic both in the everyday usage of the term and, given that the past and the ancient are given here an unmistakably negative expression, in Mighall’s more restricted sense. This is not to endorse liberal political values in the present, but nor is it to seek succour in the supposed values of the past. In this sense the above fragment illustrates what Gothic tropes have become for contemporary critics whose model of it derives from Freud’s notion of the uncanny: the unruly element which disturbs the plenitude of a particular political discourse. Thus the political purpose to which the signifiers of the Gothic might be put changes historically: in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to deprecate the values of the past; for a contemporary, post-Freudian psychoanalytic criticism, to critique the sexual and cultural values of the Victorians; for London Orbital, to critique the notion of progress itself.

Whilst both the historic usages of the Gothic and the psychoanalytic critic establish a distance between the past and the present, Sinclair’s usage, in depicting a political ‘progressive’ as himself an atavistic remnant suggests that any attempt to establish such a distance is to conjure up ghosts. From this proceeds the amenability of Sinclair’s texts to Derrida’s notion of hauntology: as Derrida states, “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept […] that is what we would be calling here a hauntology.” In the airbrushed visage of Tony Blair, and synecdochically the notion of progress itself as embodied in the New Labour project, Sinclair finds the traces of its opposite: age, history, atavism. Whilst Derrida introduces the notion of hauntology in his discussion of Marx’s figuration of the commodity form, as

Fredric Jameson suggests, his comments apply equally to neoliberals: ‘It is as though Derrida, in what some call postmodernity, is in the process of diagnosing and denouncing the opposite excess: that of a present that has already triumphanty exorcized all of its ghosts and believes itself to be without a past and without spectrality, late capitalism itself as ontology, the pure presence of the world-market system freed from all the errors of human history and of previous social formations, including the ghost of Marx himself’.37 The ritual of ‘exorcism’, to adopt Derrida’s terminology,38 that the New Labour project enacted towards its own past returns, for Sinclair, in the haunted features of its chief architect.39

As the above reading demonstrates, moreover, to follow Luckhurst, the politics of this haunting here has a specific content: Sinclair’s satire would not work without the historical and geographic specifics of British parliamentary politics in the 1990s and the history of the Labour Party. As Luckhurst states, stressing the particularity and contingency of Derrida’s spectral mode, ghosts ‘appear precisely as symptoms, points

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37 Fredric Jameson, ‘Marx’s Purloined Letter’, in Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx, ed. by Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 26-67 (p. 59). Jameson here distances his Marxist position from Derrida’s deconstructive one. Nonetheless, Derrida’s exegesis of Fukuyama’s The End of History and the Last Man in Specters of Marx itself reveals the empirical ‘truth’ of neoliberalism to be haunted by a teleological ideal that cannot be easily expunged: ‘On the one hand, the gospel of politico-economic liberalism needs the event of the good news that consists in what has putatively actually happened [...] on the other hand, actual history and so many other realities that have an empirical appearance contradict this advent of the perfect liberal democracy, one must at the same time pose this perfection as simply a regulating and trans-historic ideal’, Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx, p. 62. Thus Fukuyama makes his case for neoliberalism as the logical and inevitable end point of human history on the basis of empirical facts – its supposed realisation in Western democracies – yet when the evidence contradicts this argument he then relies on an a priori Ideal to argue for its inevitability. His argument, in short, begs the question.


39 Similarly, Downriver’s caricature of Margaret Thatcher, ‘The Widow’, has something of the ghostly about her: she is a “demonic entity, a blue-rinse succubus draining the good will of the people. [...] But she’s not self created. [...] The Widow is the focus of our own lack of imagination; the robot of our greed and ignorance. Therefore, she is indestructible”’ (p. 267). The Widow haunts Downriver’s London, but she cannot be banished for she embodies the darkest desires and basest instincts of the city’s populace. As an aside, a possible critique of Sinclair’s satire of Thatcherism might run along the lines of Adorno’s criticism of Brecht’s Arturo Ui, though inverted. Adorno argues that the dramatic form requires Brecht to make the Nazis buffoons, and thus the ‘true horror of fascism is conjured away; it is no longer a slow end-product of the concentration of social power, but mere hazard, like an accident or crime’; Theodor Adorno, ‘Commitment’, in Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács, Aesthetics and Politics (London: Verso, 2010 [1980]), pp. 177-195 (p. 184). The opposite here is the case: Sinclair’s satire turns Thatcher into a far more horrifying proposition than she represented to even her most trenchant political opponents; moreover, opposition to her is taken out of the realm of politics and into the domain of the supernatural.
of rupture that insist their singular tale be retold and their wrongs acknowledged: we therefore ‘have to risk the violence of reading the ghost, of cracking open its absent presence to answer the demand of its specific symptomatology’.40 It should be noted that although Sinclair adopts the language of the Gothic to satirise the values of contemporary political ‘progress’, and thus appears precisely to invert Mighall’s reading of the politics of the historic Gothic, what he shares with his predecessors is a sense of the past as ‘nightmare’. The historic Gothic novel, in evoking the ghosts of the past hopes to warn of the social transgressions that they represent, and thus to banish them. It therefore imagines history as something that might be escaped, as does the criticism of the Gothic novel which performs the act of psychoanalysis which would allow us to diagnose and resolve the sexual neuroses of the past. Sinclair’s Gothic seems to suggest instead that the nightmare cannot be awoken from.

This temporal structure has a politics, and it is on this basis that we might begin to explore the limits of the Gothic as a mode of critique per se, and, indeed of Sinclair’s particular uses of it. Amongst the responses to the challenge represented by Specters of Marx in the collection Ghostly Demarcations, Fredric Jameson’s essay articulates two possible criticisms of Derrida’s work, both derived from Walter Benjamin. Firstly, he historicises Derrida’s philosophical project by recasting its use of the messianic in the Benjaminian sense. The messianic, according to Jameson, is a ‘unique variety of the species of hope that scarcely bears any of the latter’s normal characteristics and that flourishes only in a time of absolute hopelessness […] like the Second Empire […] the years between the Wars, or the 1980s and 90s, when radical change seems unthinkable’.41 Derrida’s ‘certain spirit of Marxism’ then becomes a ‘hope against hope’, a way of keeping the door to any notion of radical political change ajar in hopeless times. Secondly, Jameson questions whether Derrida’s haunted modernity can imagine the possibility of the sort of revolutionary temporality that Benjamin’s understanding of the messianic admits. He states:

In this sense, Benjamin had a more historically vivid feeling of how revolutions actually happen, unexpected by anyone, even their organizers, a few people gathering in the streets, larger and larger crowds, suddenly the rumour spreads that the king has secretly left the city. It is this temporality which is the messianic kind, and about which the very peculiarity of the messianic idea testifies, which cannot be ‘hoped’ for in any familiar way; nor is ‘belief’ in the Messiah comparable to any ordinary thinking about the future.42

Benjamin’s Marxism is one in which ‘every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah’ – for which we might read also ‘the revolution’ – ‘might enter’.43 This speaks of a radically different relationship of the past to the present, and indeed, of the present to the future: moments in which what was impossible or unimaginable yesterday is now commonplace. Whilst Sinclair’s use of the Gothic might have a specific, satirical, or critical political content, the question remains whether, in imagining history as a nightmare which persists into the present, it too can admit this sort of radical temporal disjunction.

Haunted Ground

Another repeated motif in Sinclair’s fiction is, to cite Benjamin, the ‘telescoping of the past through the present’,44 that is, the irruption of the historic into the fabric of the contemporary. This occurs in a number of forms: decidedly non-realist examples include the incident in Downriver (discussed at greater length in chapter 3 of this thesis) in which one of Sinclair’s characters witnesses the simultaneous appearance of the Native American princess Pocahontas and the sinking of the Princess Alice paddle steamer in the waters of the Thames estuary.45 Similarly, in the same novel, there is the episode in which ‘Sinclair’ and

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45 Iain Sinclair, Downriver, pp. 8-9. Further references to this text and to Slow Chocolate Autopsy will be given in parenthesis in this chapter.
his companion Joblard trespass into a ruined Seaman’s Hostel in Tilbury:

We broke into a ghost-hut masquerading as a Seaman’s Hostel; a spectacular and previously unrecorded brochure of photo opportunities. The roof had been bombed. Curtains of red dust fell through the chill air. Voices of departed voyagers. Quarrels, drink. Tall tales, unfinished reminiscences. (p. 17)

In these examples, the past and the present are brought together within the same temporal frame: in the first, this occurs through the concurrent appearance of historically distinct events; in the second the present-tense paratactic fragments of the final three sentences echo the voices of the not-yet-departed dead, their ‘unfinished’ stories still somehow present. The ghostly nature of these instances reinforces the ‘spectral’ reading of Sinclair’s work discussed above, the spectral being, as Wolfreys has it, ‘a matter of recognizing what is disorderly within an apparently straightforward temporal framework’. Here, the uncertain temporality of the voices in the Seaman’s Hostel or the simultaneous appearance of historically separate moments disturb notions of linear chronological progression. As Fredric Jameson defines the term, the spectral is what ‘makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world – indeed of matter itself – now shimmers like a mirage’. The circumstances of the appearance of Pocahontas are described in Downriver as in an ‘early light […] grey, crumbling, flaky’ (p. 8), and we might read this vision reflected in the surface of the Thames as an example of precisely that which Jameson describes.

The specific politics of such instances are not immediately apparent, however, but can be illuminated if we turn to a somewhat less hallucinatory example of the same technique in Downriver. ‘Sinclair’, having been invited into a house in Spitalfields, catches a glimpse of the spaces between the streets:

46 Julian Wolfreys, Victorian Hauntings, p. 5.
From the first-floor window I looked back over the garden, and north towards Princelet Street; and I was amazed to discover how much of this area was still covert: hidden space, old courts, outhouses, industrial yards tethered in hawsers of convolvulus, protected by hedges of thorn and nettles. The heart of Whitechapel remained in purdah, sheathed in a prophylactic of neglect: from the streets there was no hint that this unexploited kingdom even existed. Had I stumbled, after all these years, on a method of painlessly visiting the past? (p. 97)

Whilst this third example lacks the manifestly supernatural qualities of the first two, it provides us with an insight into the qualities that Sinclair’s writing seems to value in the places that it returns to. Here, the narrator supposes that the uneven economic development of London – as the terms ‘covert’, ‘hidden’, ‘purdah’, and ‘prophylactic’ suggest – has preserved certain social and architectural structures, which exist as oases of past time (and ‘authenticity’?) within Downriver’s deracinated present. The comparison with one of the foundational texts of Benjamin’s Arcades Project – Louis Aragon’s Paris Peasant – is apposite. For Aragon, the shopping arcades of Nineteenth Century Paris, with the passing of their historical moment (and indeed, only when ‘the pickaxe menaces them’), become ‘the last true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral, the ghostly landscape of damnable pleasures and professions. Places that were incomprehensible yesterday, and that tomorrow will never know.’48 Similarly, it is London’s abandoned, ruined, or liminal spaces – the isolated banks of the Thames at Tilbury, the ruins of the Seaman’s Hostel, and the overgrown yards and workshops of Spitalfields – which become privileged sites for Sinclair’s channelling of the past.

Yet the ruin itself is an ambiguous figure. As Didier Maleuvre argues:

The ruin protects the living by giving an image of a past sealed off from the present: the obsolescence of the past is irrevocable, no matter how much the dead may be

revered in memory. [...] Lying dead in ruins, the past signifies its deference to the living. In a word, the romantic ruin lets the dead be dead and puts the past in its place. By the same token, it lets the living live.49

Whilst we should therefore be wary of taking Sinclair’s mediumistic reading of place at face value; moreover, surely the answer to the rhetorical question in the quote above can only be ‘no’. Whilst the cloistered yards and workshops of Spitalfields appear to the narrator as an ‘unexploited kingdom’, as Sinclair’s friend and co-conspirator Patrick Wright notes in *A Journey Through Ruins*, Spitalfields, at the time of *Downriver*’s composition, was itself undergoing a peculiar sort of redevelopment.50 The decrepit Georgian terraces, precisely because they were ruins, were becoming desirable properties: under the aegis of the Spitalfields Historic Building Trust, Eighteenth Century Huguenot weavers’ houses were being purchased and restored with a fetishistic attention to period detail, and indeed, to period dilapidation. The ‘New Georgian aesthetic’, as Wright has it, saw the house as ‘an antique for living in’, in which, in a perverse reversal of historical class conditions, ‘it became positively virtuous not to have electricity or running water. Squalor itself was authenticated and “saved”’.51 The house into which ‘Sinclair’ has been invited is in precisely this condition: its current occupier ‘had been drawn [there] on a track of dreams […]. The ruin was now a valuable property in which he camped with with his mother, while he breathed life into a shell of bricks and plaster’ (p. 96). In the wake of this first wave of ‘conservationists, avant-garde artists, gays and other Bohemian or single-minded types’, Wright argues, came ‘the estate agents and financiers’;52 a prophecy whose fulfilment can be witnessed in the gleaming surfaces of Bishops Square, the Foster + Partners

50 *A Journey Through Ruins* is contemporary with *Downriver*, having first been published in 1991, and has been described by the author as ‘connected’ to Sinclair’s novel; Patrick Wright, ‘Going Back to Dalston: Ruins and Hackney, that Rose-Red Empire’, <http://www.patrickwright.net/2008/12/18/ruins-and-hackneys-rose-red-empire/>], accessed April 2012.
redevelopment of the Old Spitalfields Market, which was completed in 2005, some ten years after the publication of *Downriver*. As ‘Sinclair’ notes, ‘what we relished, we also exploited’ (p. 97): thus, far from being untouched, Spitalfields is revealed as a site of burgeoning economic activity; or, to formulate this in a more properly dialectical fashion, ‘unexploitedness’ becomes itself a commodity to be exploited, not just by developers and gentrifiers, but by authors also.

If we return to the second of our examples, on entering the Seaman’s Hostel, in addition to the voices of the dead, ‘Sinclair’ and Joblard discover the floor of the building covered in broken glass: ‘a lake of dangerous powder, from which you might reassemble a version of the past – by sweeping this snowstorm backwards into the projector’ (p. 17). History, the text suggests, is somehow recoverable, but never, as both the cinematic metaphor and the insistence that this past is a ‘version’, in unmediated fashion. Yet though the image of broken glass suggests a physical threat, the precise nature of the ‘danger’ inherent in such a project is not specified: is it history that is dangerous, or the act of reconstruction itself? If we follow Julian Wolfreys’s identification of the ways in which Sinclair’s texts tend to anticipate their own criticism (and to a lesser extent Alex Murray’s problematisation of the whole notion of a ‘London Gothic’) we might read this as an acknowledgement of the implication of cultural producers in the gentrification process. The text here expresses an awareness of the dangers of recuperation: the risk of collusion with that which it criticises attendant on any work of critical cultural production. Sinclair’s

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53 Foster + Partners, *Catalogue*, ed. by David Jenkins (Munich: Prestel, 2008), p. 288. The following from the Foster + Partners catalogue – essentially a large-scale brochure the architectural practice’s work – is instructive: ‘The Charnel House, a twelfth-century chapel discovered during archaeological excavations on the site [of Bishops Square], has been preserved and exhibited with other artifacts in a sunken courtyard, sheltered beneath a glass pavement’ (p. 288). The text tactfully refrains from noting the morbid associations of the Chapel’s name, and provides us with an image of the way in which the present attempts to inoculate itself from its origins that chimes pleasingly with *Downriver*’s concerns here.

54 The Parisian Arcades themselves were similarly disputed. As Robin Walz notes: ‘Generally, the arcade’s historical reputation was one of marginal commercial success and social disrepute. By the 1920s, the passageway had become an impediment to the completion of boulevard Haussmann, an urban renovation that would facilitate the flow of automobile traffic in the metropolis at the expense of the neighbourhood’s residents and the arcade’s proprietors. In addition to being an “ur-form” of modernity and an “outmoded space,” in 1925 the Opera Passageway was a socially contested urban space’; Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), p. 14.
response is not to attempt an exorcism of that which he opposes, but instead proposes the
text as precisely that space in which the relationship between differing ‘versions’ of the past
and present (and the political ramifications of such) can be brought into conjunction with
their multiple – and ghostly – others. As Derrida notes:

If he loves justice at least, the ‘scholar’ of the future, the ‘intellectual’ of tomorrow
should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to
make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let
them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in
the other in oneself: they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if
they are no longer, even if they are not yet.55

*Downriver*’s London is haunted by such spectres, the novel a prism through which time
is refracted into a spectrum of its ghostly figures: the ‘New Georgians’, in attempting to
preserve the past, are haunted by a future in which that past is effectively swept away by
the ‘market forces [that] would conspire, in time, to expel [them]’;56 the outsider novelist
is haunted by the spectre of his own (inevitable) collusion with capital; and the newly-
gentrified Spitalfields, we might infer, is in turn haunted by what it has expelled and what it
will eventually become.

**History as Fate**

The abandoned, ruined, and haunted spaces of Sinclair’s London propose a relationship
of the present to history in which what has passed is still somehow alive: as he states in
the opening essay of *Lud Heat*, a text which speculates on the possible hidden meaning
and baleful influence of Nicolas Hawksmoor’s churches, ‘in this air certain hungers

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56 Iain Sinclair, *Downriver*, p. 96.
were activated that have yet to be pacified.\textsuperscript{57} As Julian Wolfreys suggests, whilst at ‘any moment in any novel or, indeed, poem, by Sinclair, one may read the opening of different temporalities, narrative trajectories, and other potential lines of flight from the subject’s encounter with or experience of location’,\textsuperscript{58} in this simultaneity of possible narratives there is a suspicion that none can end happily. \textit{Lud Heat} traces a pattern of violence that repeats itself through history, reciting the following litany:

\begin{quote}
... The ritual slaying of Marie Jeanette Kelly in the ground floor room of Miller’s Court, Dorset Street, directly opposite Christ Church ... the Ratcliffe Highway slaughter of 1811, with the supposed murderer, stake through the heart, trampled into the pit where four roads cross to the north of St George-in-the-East ...\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

This fragment, as with the examples above, brings historically distinct events within the purview of a single textual frame, and, in listing the events in non-chronological order, suggests a relationship between them which is neither causal nor temporal, but instead, as the references to the churches suggest, geographic. Moreover, the ellipses with which this list begins and ends suggest, that though here truncated, the catalogue of deaths could continue interminably in either direction.

Turning briefly to Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell’s graphic novel \textit{From Hell}, we find a vivid example of what this might represent. This work derives many of its speculations on the identity of ‘Jack the Ripper’ from the same discredited source as does Sinclair’s novel \textit{White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings: Stephen Knight’s \textit{Jack the Ripper: The Final

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} Iain Sinclair, \textit{Lud Heat} (London: Albion Village Press, 1975), p. 4. In distorting history and the behaviour of the people who live in their shadows, Hawksmoor’s churches can thus be read in \textit{Lud Heat} as analogues of the historic Gothic’s haunted castle. As David Punter and Glennis Byron put it, a ‘common feature of many Gothic castles is that they seem to distort perception, to cause some slippage between what is natural and what is human-made; they act as unreliable lenses through which to view history and from the other side of which may emerge terrors only previously apprehended in dream’; David Punter and Glennis Byron, \textit{The Gothic} (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 261.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Iain Sinclair, \textit{Lud Heat}, p. 11. Ellipses in original.
\end{itemize}
Solution, and indeed, Sinclair appears in the appendices as a corroborating source. As discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis, Knight’s work posits the identity of the murderer as the surgeon and high-ranking Mason Sir William Gull, who performs the killings as part of an attempt to suppress a blackmail plot which threatened the reputation of the royal family. Chapter 10 of From Hell illustrates in graphic and lengthy detail the murder and ritualistic dismemberment of the final ‘canonical’ victim of the Whitechapel murderer, Marie Jeanette Kelly, and supposes that in the ‘apocalypse’ that this act represented, Gull experiences some sort of vision of the future (fig. 12). Where in the passages from Downriver above the past interjects into the textual present, as it were, parenthetically, the visual character of the comic book form allows the bloodied Gull to appear in a contemporary office building. Invisible to the men and women around him, Moore has

60 Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, From Hell (London: Knockabout, 2000), Appendix II, p. 21. From Hell was initially published serially over a number of years; I have consulted the collected edition which retains the pagination of the individual comics. Sinclair and Moore have worked together on a number of projects: Moore appears in the Channel 4 documentary The Cardinal and the Corpse (1992), directed by Sinclair and Chris Petit; he provides a chapter for Sinclair’s prose collection London: City of Disappearances (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007); and he and Sinclair performed together with a number of other writers and musicians in English Journey: Re-Imagined at the Barbican Centre in 2011. At the time of writing, Annalisa Di Liddo’s Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel (Jackson, Miss.: University of Mississippi Press, 2009) is the only academic monograph dedicated entirely to Moore’s work: chapter 2, which addresses From Hell in relation to Bakhtin’s ‘chronotope’, is of some relevance here. Though tangential to the present discussion, Di Liddo’s comments on the role of English national identity in Moore’s work in comparison with the novels of Raymond Williams, are perceptive: ‘in their focus on the individual experience of place as a means to reach more universalizing perspectives on society as a whole […] both [Moore and Williams] manage to avoid slipping into boorish nationalism disguised as regionalism or localism. […] Moore’s geographical specificity and emphasis on sense of place becomes a means to enrich his perspective on Englishness’ (pp. 132-133). Such concerns can be mapped onto Sinclair’s work, and are explored in greater depth in the final chapter of this thesis. See also Elizabeth Ho, ‘Postimperial Landscapes: “Psychogeography” and Englishness in Alan Moore’s Graphic Novel “From Hell: A Melodrama in Sixteen Parts”’, Cultural Critique, 63 (April 2006), 99-121.


62 Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, From Hell, Appendix I, p. 35.

63 The relationship between time and space in comics has been noted by a number of critics. As Scott McCloud argues, the relationship between the frames of the comic book page is sequential: from the gutter between the frames we infer the passage of time. Thus, ‘in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same’; Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (New York, N. Y.: Harper Perennial, 1994), p. 100. In the example from From Hell cited above, whilst the frames of the page are read sequentially, Moore and Campbell’s presentation of the ‘historic’ Gull within a ‘contemporary’ frame complicates or undercuts the spatiality of the narrative time of the comics form, producing multiple possible readings of this page. Has Gull ‘really’ travelled through time? is he experiencing some sort of premonition, as I have read it above? or instead, should we read the sequence from the frame of the present, with Gull appearing as a ghost? All of these readings are viable, and this polysemy of meaning, and indeed the anachrony of Gull’s appearance, resonate with the Derridean themes discussed in this chapter. We might also note at this point that the spatiality of narrative time in comics presents an interesting problem for narratological analyses, particularly those which engage with Gérard Genette’s Narrative Discourse: see, for example, Marc Singer, ‘Time and Narrative: Unity and Discontinuity in The Invisibles’, in Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and
him deliver the following admonition:

‘With all your shimmering numbers and your lights, think not to be inured to
history. Its black root succours you. It is INSIDE you.

‘Are you asleep to it, that cannot feel its breath upon your neck, nor see what soaks
its cuffs?

‘See me! Wake up and look upon me! I am come amongst you. I am with you
always!’64

If Derrida’s spectre is that inexpulsible other which demands to be addressed, then Gull
appears here as just such a figure. Yet Gull does not just seek our attention, he seems to
threaten violence on the present, and indeed, this comes to pass. In the final chapter of
*From Hell*, a series of historical murderers – the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’ Peter Sutcliffe, and
the ‘Moors Murderers’ Ian Brady and Myra Hindley – have visions of Gull, suggesting
that his actions are echoed in theirs. If we transpose these concerns to the potentially
unending litany of murders that Sinclair recites in *Lud Heat*, it seems that not only is history
inescapable, but that it does not mean us well. The ghost of Hamlet’s father, attended to
so closely by Derrida in the opening of *Specters of Marx*, appears both as a warning and as a
symbol of that which is owed by the present to its others. Sinclair’s ghosts appear more as
powers which at any moment might break through and overwhelm a present that is always
under threat of collapsing into the ‘fen of undisclosed horrors’ of history.65

If we extrapolate from this notion, what is threatened by the past is not only the
present but the future also. *Slow Chocolate Autopsy*, a hybrid work of short stories and comics
written with the artist Dave McKean, provides a useful illustration of what is it stake here.
The work provides another avatar for the author – Norton – a fictionalised version of

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64 Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, *From Hell*, Chapter 10, p. 21.
65 Iain Sinclair *Lud Heat*, p. 4.
Figure 12: Gull's Vision, from Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, *From Hell*. 
Sinclair who, in a conceit which makes literal Downriver’s portrayal of a city haunted by the past, can travel through time, though he is confined to the boundaries of London. One of the stories, ‘No More Yoga of the Night-Club’, has Norton become the intended target of the abortive ‘hit’ which led to the murder of Jack ‘The Hat’ McVitie at the hands of Reggie Kray in 1967. Norton is not the only character in this story who appears to be able to transcend the boundaries of history: the story has McVitie hearing the titular refrain, which derives from a lyric on the dub musician Jah Wobble’s 1993 album Take Me to God, just before his death. Driving to perform the deed with which he has been tasked, he has a vision of 1990s London: ‘Roofs and church towers and flashes from distant glass pyramids. Was this London? Not that he recognised’ (p. 68). Where in the examples discussed above the past interjects into the continuum of the present, here the present – or rather, from the chronology of the story, the future – intrudes into the fabric of the past. What if, Jack speculates:

We was a future nightmare? What if the things we done couldn’t be shifted? Knocked out of the book. What if we was the aliens some stupid bastard saw? A fireball over Wapping? The motor like a disk of red light? Still cruising for human meat, still on active service. Moving without touching the pedals. (p. 68)

Jack is haunted by his own ghost, sees himself appearing as a future phantom, trapped in a vehicle which drives itself. Though he appears to be able to move in and out of the stream


67 Jack McVitie was an associate of the Kray twins who was paid to kill Leslie Payne, whom the Krays suspected of being a police informer. McVitie’s failure to carry out this act led to his eventual killing, and the subsequent trial resulted in the imprisonment of the brothers; Donald Thomas, Villains’ Paradise: Britain’s Underworld from the Spivs to the Krays (London: John Murray, 2005), pp. 412–413. Sinclair documents Ronnie Kray’s funeral in Lights Out for the Territory. There are a vast number of books on the subject of twentieth-century East End gangland, though amongst these there are few academic studies: Thomas’s account of the killing of McVitie has the virtue of being comprehensive in the absence of a more properly scholarly source. Though it does not detail the lives of the Kray twins, also relevant here is Raphael Samuel’s extraordinary East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), which transcribes a series of interviews with an East End gang member and provides a vivid picture of life in this milieu from the late Victorian period until the 1970s.
of linear time, the model of history implied in Jack’s suggestion that the ‘things we done’ (and will do) ‘couldn’t be shifted’, unable to be excised from ‘the book’, suggest that this future history has already been written.

The opening story of Slow Chocolate Autopsy has Norton inadvertently killing Christopher Marlowe:

Marlowe, poet and espion, has their attention. Their eyes on the candle flame. The spill of shadows making a single hydrocephalic head. Norton breaking time into a stutter of single frames. Close-ups, wide shots. Marlowe, unexpectedly, rushing straight at the camera. As Norton lifts his hands to protect himself. Lifts the sharpened branch. In time to pierce the hot eye, spear the brain jelly. It grinds, it snaps in the wound. A root in the socket of bone. (p. 11)

The lack of contextual material and connective syntax makes this fragment difficult to read: it is not clear, for example, whether Norton is physically present with Marlowe and his killers, or if he has somehow intervened in the past through some supernatural mechanism. However, the cinematic language that Sinclair employs here seems to indicate that Norton has the ability, in a manner similar to the cutting and splicing of film, to edit and re-order the past, and echoes the language of projection and reconstruction in the Tilbury Seaman’s Hostel in Downriver. Yet despite this apparent ability to edit what has been, to intervene in history, what seems un-erasable is the death of Marlowe himself, and we might read these cinematic references as metaphors for both the writing process and the act of historical reconstitution. Norton can edit the film – the mediated, material residues of history – but the event of Marlowe’s death (and its consequences) remains untouchable. What Jack McVitie’s visions of the future and Norton’s inability to alter the past seem to suggest is a model of history which comes very close to a notion of fate. If

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68 The circumstances of Christopher Marlowe’s death are somewhat murky, but what is known is that the playwright died from a stab-wound to the eye in a pub in Deptford in the company of Ingram Frazer, Nicholas Skeres, and Robert Poley; Charles Nicholl, The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 18-21.
history is a nightmare that cannot be awoken from, and what will occur is already fated, then what hope is there of a political action which might relieve us of these terrors?

Conclusion

In Sinclair’s images of the broken glass in the ‘ghost-hut’ in Downriver or Norton’s apparent editing of time in Slow Chocolate Autopsy, what seems recoverable for the present is not ‘the past’, but that which in Benjaminian terminology could be designated the ‘what has been’:69 the category of historical knowledge which for Benjamin is always the object of construction, not a body of neutral ‘facts’.70 One of the strengths of Sinclair’s writing is the way in which it dramatises these processes of historical construction and their attendant risks; yet in moments such as those analysed above, what his work appears to elide is the progressive political potential latent in such acts. In the passage from Downriver in which ‘Sinclair’ has his epiphany in the Spitalfields terrace, in the garden of the house he and his companions are assailed by ‘the prevailing winds that gifted us with all the odours of Truman’s Brewery: odours you can taste, Whitechapel’s madeleine’ (p. 96). That Truman’s is now given over to bars, galleries, and shops rather than to the brewing of beer is testament to the ‘chance’ involved in the discovery of what Proust terms that ‘material object’ in which the ‘past is hidden’,71 and from which memory might unfold. Benjamin’s reading of Proust, however, emphasises two concepts: remembrance, in the form of the mémoire involontaire, in which the contents of memory spill from the sensation inspired by a material object; and awakening, in which consciousness reassembles its


70 Benjamin’s notion of historiography is shaped by Marx and Engels’s conception of knowledge in The German Ideology: ‘The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch’; Karl Marx and Fredric Engels, The German Ideology Part One with selections from Parts Two and Three, together with Marc’s ‘Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy’, ed. by C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), pp. 64-65. Benjamin’s object was to de-naturalise the ‘ruling ideas’ of history through his method of presentation in The Arcades Project.

material circumstances and comes to an awareness of its time and place. As Pierre Nora notes, Proust signals a ‘transformation of memory [that] marks a decisive shift from the historical to psychological, from the social to the individual, from the concrete message to its subjective representation […] Memory becomes a private affair.’

‘True’ history, for Benjamin, is closer to memory: just as Proust ‘did not describe life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it’, so did Benjamin’s Arcades Project attempt to translate the atomised moments of remembrance and awakening into the psychology of a ‘dreaming collective’, a process synonymous with revolution. It was in the ruined arcades of Aragon’s Paris Peasant that Benjamin found a suitable aide-mémoire, and in the Arcades Project’s fractured structure Benjamin hoped to construct a configuration of fragments – a ‘constellation of awakening’ – that might prompt this collective recollection and liberate the ‘now’ from the ‘what has been’. Yet the mémoire involontaire signifies not only the capriciousness of memory and the power of the material world to re-awaken the past, but the capacity of remembrance to reconfigure the meaning of the present. In those moments in which history is presented as fate, such a reconfiguration seems lost to Sinclair’s writing. The Benjaminian reading of the ‘what has been’ brings with it a messianic hope that the correct configuration of its ruins might liberate the present from its grasp: ‘theory’ itself breaks ‘like a single ray of light into an artificially darkened chamber’. Necessary to the Derridean interrogation of spectres is a notion of justice which is structurally necessary both to any idea of deconstruction and to the establishment

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76 Scott McCracken explicates Benjamin’s notion of awakening as follows: ‘For Benjamin, awakening does not imply that dreaming is false consciousness, nor is being awake the same thing as reality. The dialectical moment of awakening is a threshold moment between sleep and wake. In awakening, the dream has not faded, but is already being wrenched from the dreamworld into waking consciousness. In the Janus-faced portal between the two, the truth of the modern city emerges’; Scott McCracken, Masculinities, Modernist Fiction and the Urban Public Sphere (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). p. 101.
of a progressive politics. Both conceptions of history therefore carry within them something that might be said to resemble optimism: here, Sinclair’s model seems here to be much more intractable. On leaving the Spitalfields terrace, ‘Sinclair’s’ companion Frederik Hanbury – a pseudonymous Patrick Wright – suggests that:

Those cultists who look longingly on such as Wilde, Chatterton, Rimbaud, Blake, Stevenson, or Keats are themselves trapped as in a liquid mirror. Obsession matures into spiritual paralysis. The cultist relives borrowed lives, is bound to gross matter; to ghosts of the undead, and the always-dying. (p. 98)

At its most Gothic moments, the ruins that figure so insistently in Sinclair’s work and the ghosts which haunt them appear as just such mirrors, and Sinclair himself such a cultist.

Moreover, the art historian T. J. Clark, noting the paucity of attention that Benjamin pays to Impressionism, has suggested that the Paris of The Arcades Project ‘is all interior, all gas lit or twilit. It has no true outside – no edges, no plein air […] no place […] where Nature itself is put through the sieve of exchange value and laid on in the form of day trips and villégiatures’ […] no Déjeuner sur l’Herbe or Grande Jatte.’ That is, whilst the gothicised, crepuscular city that Benjamin renders in text makes legible the underside of those representations of urban space that pretend to transparency and knowledge, in concentrating on the manifestly strange there is a genuine risk of missing what is strange about that which is, as it were, hidden in plain sight. Benjamin’s Paris is a city of illusions and dreams, and his project was one of ‘awakening’, the discernment of the true from the false in these visions. Yet his idiosyncratic theorisation of dreams and his later use of the notion of the phantasmagoria (an early nineteenth-century proto-cinematic projector) as metaphors for ideology, whilst recognising the intractability of ideological thought, are models in which the discernment of truth from fiction is an achievable (though always

problematic) goal. Upon waking, the fantasies that we believed real in sleep become revealed as falsehoods; whilst an audience might be entranced by the flickering images of the phantasmagoria, when the house lights are thrown up and the magic lantern revealed, the illusion can no longer be sustained. Clark’s observation reminds us not just that the new spaces of leisure in the gardens, parks, and at the edges of Paris were as much a product of Haussmannisation – and as much ‘fata morgana’ – as the deceptive perspectives of the boulevards or the phantasmagoria of the arcades, but that ideology does not always present itself to us as illusion. Indeed it is when things appear to us as the most ‘natural’, as opposed to manifestly illusory or artificial, that we should be most acutely attuned to its operation. Whilst Sinclair’s gothicisation of London satirises contemporary politics to great effect, and indeed reveals the ways in which the operations of commerce seek to bury or efface uncomfortable histories, it is at these moments that his work is most open to similar charges. In presenting politicians such as Blair or Thatcher as somehow supernatural, or such locales as Spitalfields as haunted, Sinclair draws attention to their compromised politics and to the socio-economic forces which threaten to change or overwhelm them; yet in so doing his texts run the risk of effacing the hopes, desires, and ambitions which allow such figures to occupy such positions of power, or such developments to go ahead unchecked.

Chapter 6: Nostalgia for the Future

If the most Gothic moments in Sinclair’s writing seem to deny the hope of realising the desire for a better life, then *London Orbital*, to which this chapter turns, appears much more reluctant to give up on such a possibility. There seems here a recognition of the limitations of a purely negative critique and, much as Sinclair’s treatment of psychogeography can be read as an attempt to redeem its utopian spatial politics, his treatment of suburbia (and of its future) can be demonstrated to evince a similar redemptive temporal politics. This work takes its structure from the walk around the M25 which the author undertook and completed, with various companions, over the course of 1999.1 Starting from Hackney, the text follows the Lea Valley north, meeting the motorway at Waltham Abbey. From here, the walkers follow the ‘acoustic footprints’2 of the road, travelling anti-clockwise, and returning to their starting point on the eve of the millennium. As befits a work of such a scale, the topics to which the text returns are various, touching on subjects as diverse as the crimes associated with the M25; the history of the idea of the construction of the orbital motorway; through to the fictional representations of the landscape that the road cuts through. The familiar themes of contested spaces and effaced narratives which one finds throughout Sinclair’s body of work are also present in *London Orbital* though, as one might expect, they take on a different emphasis and character as the writer’s field of view shifts from the densely overwritten urban landscape of central London to the semi-rural environment of the outer suburbs. In this respect, then, *London Orbital* also represents

1 In addition to the book, there is also a film of the same title co-directed by Sinclair and the filmmaker Chris Petit. Both works will be referred to in this chapter.
2 Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital*, p. 14. Further references to this work in this chapter will be given in parenthesis.
something of a break with the author’s previous poetry, essays, and fiction, which (with some exceptions) are set in or are concerned principally with the centre of the capital.

The following will explore the ways in which *London Orbital*, whilst sharing a similar faux-journalistic *modus operandi* to Sinclair’s earlier work *Lights Out for the Territory*, represents an attempt to grapple with a specific problem of framing an adequate response to the suburban, industrial, and semi-rural landscapes which are the work’s subject matter. This is primarily a question of form: whilst there are a great number of fictional and artistic works which take suburbia as their setting (and to many of which Sinclair refers either directly or indirectly in *London Orbital*), amongst these works Sinclair’s approach to his subject matter – to collage the ‘realist’ conventions of journalism and travel writing with visionary invocations of the artistic representations of the motorway landscape – is unconventional.

The following will therefore firstly explore the way in which this literary mode allows Sinclair to engage in a comprehensive critique of the cultural meanings of the motorway and its environs. Secondly, it will examine the specific thematic and critical questions regarding the political status of the dissenting artwork and the role of memory that are raised (and left unresolved) by the text in the process.

In order to do this, the following will read *London Orbital* through the notions of satire and utopia. As shall be argued in greater depth later in this chapter, these are the two poles around which much literary and artistic discourse concerned with English suburbia clusters. On the one hand, many of the works of British fiction and popular culture which engage with suburbia and its social mores utilise satirical modes to explore them. Conversely, many of the texts which served as blueprints for the expansion of the modern suburbs – most notably Ebenezer Howard’s *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (1902) or (somewhat ironically) William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) – are utopian either in more or less strictly generic terms or in their impulse towards the evocation and description of a radically altered future life. Moreover, the desires that the original architects of suburbia wished to realise – what Robert Fishman describes as the ‘reconciliation of man and nature
[and the exclusion of] the urban world of work\textsuperscript{3} – are distinctly utopian in their ambitions.

*London Orbital* refers to or quotes directly from many of these texts, but does not adhere to their generic conventions. Instead, its distinctive literary style allows the text to counterpose the utopian against its satiric inverse, neither endorsing the optimism of the one nor the nihilism of the other. For a writer such as Sinclair, whose artistic roots (as demonstrated earlier in this thesis) lie in the rediscovery of the tools of the historic European avant-garde movements which occurred in Britain in the late 1960s, and whose writing continually attempts to engage seriously with the British political and economic landscape, the question of the critical efficacy of the artwork remains a concern, and haunts the text of *London Orbital*. Sinclair’s methodology – to interleave journalistic reportage with avowedly anti-realist, visionary, or hallucinatory imagery, often derived from fictional, artistic, and cinematic sources, or alternately from the personal and family histories of either himself or his various collaborators – can be shown to be an engagement with precisely this issue. In the second part of this chapter, I therefore want to move on from how Sinclair’s work differs from other works which critically engage with the notion of suburbia, and to focus more closely on the way in which the collage aesthetic in *London Orbital* functions. Sinclair’s interweaving of realist and anti-realist modes – for example, the motifs of vampirism and the circulation of blood that Sinclair derives from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (p. 403); the language and imagery of science fiction and eroticised disaster that originate in J. G. Ballard’s novels *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition* (p. 177); or the 8mm footage that Sinclair shot of his wife Anna Sinclair in 1970s Hackney that is interleaved with digital video of the M25 in the film of *London Orbital* – opens a split between the journalistic ‘real’ of the description of the territory through which Sinclair and his collaborators walk, and an ‘ideal’ realm of art and memory. By interleaving these two modes, the text can therefore use the richness of the latter to critique the impoverished nature of the former.

Suburbia and Amnesia

The inner city setting of Sinclair’s earlier writing provides the author with an environment in which the evidence of historical change and the existence of the past within the present are a continual presence: as the Situationist theorist Ivan Chetcheglov asserted, one cannot take ‘three steps’ in the modern city without encountering its ‘ghosts’. The motorway and its suburban fringes, whilst no less a product of historical and social processes than the inner city, obscure that which Sinclair describes as ‘the vertical view of history [in which] the back story is not forgotten’ (p. 20) more completely and effectively. Consequently, these landscapes and the behaviours by which they have been shaped and which they have in turn influenced become in London Orbital associated with amnesia and madness. A recurring motif in the work is that of the asylum, the territory through which the motorway travels being the location of many Edwardian and Victorian sanatoria, and the figure of the ‘mad walker’ (p. 167) who attempts to overcome a crisis of identity or memory through some form of heroic pilgrimage – the archetype here being the poet John Clare – is encountered in many differing guises throughout the text, not least of which being the figure of the author himself.

In this respect, Sinclair is repeating a familiar interpretation of suburbia which characterises it as both anonymous and conducive to a kind of cultural blandness and the loss of both history and memory, and furthermore associates it with ideas of artifice and inauthenticity. Suburbia has a peculiar place within English literature, derided and ridiculed by critics of all stripes as both boring and vulgar, yet is at the same time the

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5 Sinclair refers a number of times to Clare’s ‘Journey out of Essex’ in London Orbital. In 1841 the poet escaped from the asylum to which he had been confined to treat his ‘mania’ and walked from Epping Forest to his birthplace in Northampton. For Clare’s own account of his journey see John Clare, Autobiographical Writings, ed. Eric Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 143-161. For an in-depth biographical study of Clare, see Jonathan Bate, John Clare: A Biography (London: Picador, 2003), which provides an account of both the context of Clare’s confinement and his escape on pp. 421-465. Sinclair returns in much greater depth to Clare and replicates his journey in Edge of the Orison: In the Traces of John Clare’s ‘Journey Out Of Essex’ (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005). Alan Moore (discussed in the previous chapter) also attends to Clare’s walk in his novel Voice of the Fire (Marietta, Ga.: Top Shelf, 2009 [1996]).
home territory of certain images of English national identity: it has a long history as a
place in which history has been forgotten.\(^6\) Examples of this sort of discourse can be
found from academic commentators such as Robert Fishman, who in his study *Bourgeois
Utopias* describes suburbia as the ‘self-segregation [and] alienation of the middle classes
from the urban-industrial world they themselves were creating’;\(^7\) a place where the
emergent bourgeoisie ‘could pretend to be happy villagers.’\(^8\) Homi Bhabha describes the
‘conservative suburban attitude’ as ‘founded upon the fear of difference […] and a narrow-
minded appeal to cultural homogeneity’;\(^9\) whilst the critic Roger Webster goes as far as to
assert that ‘Suburbia has no “history”; its archives are empty.’\(^10\)

Similar viewpoints are to be found throughout fictional and artistic representations
of suburban life, most notably in Sir John Betjeman’s television documentary *Metro-Land*
or Mike Leigh’s 1977 play *Abigail’s Party*, the former expressing a condescending yet
affectionate view of the life of the suburban clerk (‘Over the points by electrical traction,
/ Out of the chimney-pots into the openness, / “Til we come to the suburb that’s / thought to be commonplace, / Home of the gnome and the / average citizen’); the latter
withering satire on lower-middle-class suburban aspirations to cultural sophistication

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6 It is worth noting at this point that both Sinclair’s text and this study are concerned with British
suburbia, and specifically the suburbs of London, as distinct from suburbia as it has evolved in America.
Whilst the American suburb and the British suburb have much in common, it is important to recognise
that, as Robert Fishman argues in *Bourgeois Utopias*, the world’s first suburbs were built in late eighteenth-
century London (p. 9). Moreover, whilst American (and late-twentieth-century British) suburbanisation
was made possible by widespread car ownership, much of British suburban expansion, particularly around
London, was (and still is) made possible by the train. See, for example, James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age*


9 Homi Bhabha, ‘Postscript: Bombs away in Front-Line Suburbia’, p. 299.


11 John Betjeman, ‘Metro-Land’ in John Betjeman, *The Best of Betjeman* ed. by John Guest (London:
Penguin, 1985), p. 220. It is striking how the energy, power and noise of the tube train is here domesticated
through the echo of its rhythm in the poem, whose depiction of the suburb to which the train travels
is decidedly cosy. Where earlier commentators on urban mass transport emphasised its dehumanising
elements, Betjeman makes it safe. Benjamin for example describes the Paris Metro as a ‘labyrinth [which]
harbors in its interior not one but a dozen blind raging bulls into whose jaws not one Theban virgin once a
year but thousands of anemic young dressmakers and drowsy clerks every morning must hurl themselves’;
Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin
(“Macbeth. Part of our heritage. Of course, it’s not something you can actually read”12). In certain variants of the English imagination – as exemplified by Betjeman’s work – suburbia is gently condescended to as the home of admirable yet ‘unfashionable bourgeois values’,13 and many of the best known depictions, such as The Diary of a Nobody (1892) by George and Weedon Grossmith or George Orwell’s Coming Up for Air (1939), tend towards the comic: as Andy Medhurst persuasively argues, in many respects the TV sitcom of the type exemplified by The Good Life (1975-78) is the British suburban genre par excellence.14 When works do explore the darker underbelly of suburban life – in Abigail’s Party, or in Hillary Mantel’s 2005 novel Beyond Black (2005) – it is its darkly comic aspects which tend to take the foreground.15

The ‘comedy of manners’ of the sitcom or comic novel provides a method by which the perceived cultural poverty of suburban lifestyles can be satirised, and, as such, these works are (implicitly or explicitly) ‘always already political’.16 As no less an authority than Jonathan Swift argued, satire has two purposes: ‘one of them less Noble than the other, as regarding noting further than personal Satisfaction, and pleasure of the Writer; but without and View towards Personal Malice; The other is a Publick Spirit, prompting Men of Genius and Virtue, to mend the World as far as they are able.’17 Whilst we must guard against

15 Beyond Black makes for an interesting comparator with London Orbital, it being set in precisely the territory of shopping centres, industrial estates, and Barratt Homes as Sinclair’s work, and dealing with many of the same historical events, principally the death of Princess Diana in 1997. In many respects a ‘state of the nation’ novel, Beyond Black assesses the political and cultural legacy of the Major and Blair governments through the story of a Spiritualist medium who lives in ‘the nice part of Slough’ (p. 140). Whilst Mantel’s work adheres to a more readily identifiable novelistic and narrative template than does Sinclair’s, it is interesting that she too finds it necessary to abandon the strictures of social realism in order to explore her chosen subject matter: the primary conceit of Beyond Black is that Mantel’s central character can indeed speak with the dead; the bathetic foil to this being that the dead have nothing to say that is worth listening to. For a more extended examination of the relationship between Mantel’s novel and London Orbital, see Catherine Spooner, “[T]hat Eventless Realm: Hilary Mantel’s Beyond Black and the Ghosts of the M25’ in London Gothic: Place, Space and the Gothic Imagination, ed. by Lawrence Phillips and Anne Witchard, pp. 81-90.
taking Swift’s definition at face value as in this context he is defending himself against charges of spite, it is this notion of satire as a public-spirited (and consequently morally-justified) social critique which aims at inspiring the ruling classes to attempt to change society for the better that gives it its political character: as Erin Mackie argues, ‘rational and benevolent reform is satire’s social alibi.’ However, the form of critique that satirical works such as Abigail’s Party offer is often partial and one-sided: excellent at exposing the problems and pretensions of a given social structure, but poor at identifying the historical and cultural origins of the same. Consequently, these works are not so damning a critique of the current order as they appear at first reading.

What differentiates Sinclair’s representations of suburbia from those of Abigail’s Party is not only a question of literary form, but of the thematic scope that London Orbital’s collage form allows. Where the (often vicious) satire of works such as Abigail’s Party pokes fun at the residents of suburbia, these same residents are conspicuous by their absence in Sinclair’s text. Conversely, where the aspirations of the lower-middle-classes are the subject of mockery in Leigh’s play, London Orbital instead takes these aspirations – and indeed the real needs and desires which are the inspiration and justification for the suburban lifestyle – seriously: a part of the cultural fabric which both reflects and drives the outward expansion of London itself. As Sinclair points out, the process of suburbanisation is sustained by the desire for the pleasures of a rural existence – ‘the green fantasy, the forest on the horizon, the fields and farms that represent a picture book vision of a pre-Industrial Revolution past […] the illusion of sap in the vein’ (p. 70) – an environment that the expansion of suburbia itself threatens. Sinclair continually reads the landscape of the motorway not just as a physical space, but as an imaginative one: a place which has been shaped by human needs, desires, and dreams, and which bears the traces of these dreams in its physical form. Accordingly, a rhetorical gap between the ‘illusions’ which have driven the development of the outer suburbs and the inevitable contradictions which emerge in

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the process of their realisation is continually opened up by the text.

*London Orbital* therefore attempts a much more holistic and fully-realised critique of the experience and expansion of the outer suburbs than is possible from within the framework of the comedy of manners of works such as Leigh’s, and which instead attempts to see these phenomena as an integral part of larger forces of social change. Much of the humour in *Abigail’s Party* comes from the way in which the rising lower middle-class characters in Leigh’s play get things wrong, and the crass obsession they show with material objects and wealth. However, whilst the anti-materialist sentiments of Leigh’s play could from one perspective be considered iconoclastic, I would argue that the work suffers from the symptoms of a form of cultural amnesia that it purports to ridicule: merely to mock lower middle-class suburbanites – be it from the position of a more ‘cultured’ metropolitan perspective or from a more ‘authentic’ rural one – is to forget the historical bases on which the English class system rests. Consequently, Leigh’s play does not question the terms of English class prejudices, but restates them. Furthermore, such a strategy fails to recognise that none of the categories – city, country, suburb – by which we conceptualise landscape is the ‘better’ one, nor indeed is any one of them somehow ideologically ‘purer’ or untouched by materialism than the others. Such categories are instead continually shifting moments in the motion of the social system which produces them and which in turn they serve to reproduce.19 In short, whilst works such as *Abigail’s Party* might point out what is lacking in suburban life to great effect, they do not address the larger issue of how and why suburbia developed, and why it was (and remains) such an attractive idea. *London Orbital* is no less suspicious of suburban aspiration and culture than Leigh’s play, but in its attempts to situate this criticism within broader questions of ‘how did we get here?’, this criticism is at once less cruel and more cogent. The text frames its

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19 For further exploration of the constitution of the categories of country and city in English literature and the deficiencies of criticisms of either category which depend on the idealisation of one over the other, see Raymond Williams, *The Country and The City* (St Albans: Paladin, 1975 [1973]). Of particular relevance here are the discussions of the works of George Eliot (pp. 219-220) and of H. G. Wells’s novel *Tono-Bungay* (p. 277).
broadsides against what Sinclair concurs is the banality of suburbia within a context that attempts to make its appearance comprehensible, rather than berating those who choose to live in the suburbs for their poor taste or for their audacity to aspire to live a better life.

This comparison illustrates the way in which *London Orbital* can be read as an attempt to overcome the representational deficiencies of certain literary modes, and to develop an artistic method capable of completing the critique of suburbia of which works such as *Abigail's Party* are a partial fragment. Sinclair’s principal tool in this project is the synthesis of historical, artistic, and literary images within the context of a work which, through its claim to documentary status as the record of a real walk, pretends to a kind of journalistic verisimilitude and authenticity. This approach allows the author to assemble the disparate and often contradictory (or even incoherent) representations of the suburban landscape surrounding the M25 and take them at face value as expressing a form of ‘truth’. An example of this strategy can be found early in the work, in an episode in which the author describes a visit to a former royal house close to the motorway:

Theobolds Park: a royal residence, landscaped by Tradescant, then the estate of a brewing family who could afford to reassemble Christopher Wren’s Temple Bar at the bottom of the garden as an overambitious folly. And now? The Abbey National Centre of Excellence. A surveillance checkpoint and voice box to interrogate unlicensed visitors. I loved it. This was the true territory for the fiction that is England. (p. 14)

This fragment opens with an invocation of place and proceeds to sketch its history, and as such could be read as an implicitly conservative statement which asserts the primacy and dignity of the past over the banality of the present. However, I would suggest that this fragment invites a more sophisticated reading: whilst the reference to royalty is suggestive of tradition and continuity, the authenticity that this might suggest is always already compromised: the Park is not natural, but ‘landscaped’. Succeeding generations have
then re-appropriated the house, but none of these inhabitants is better or more authentic than the others: the brewing family’s attempts to reconstruct a monument of the past is a ‘folly’; the ‘surveillance checkpoint and voice box’ to which the estate is reduced then only one more indignity on top of many others. The conjunction of major names associated with English history – the horticulturalist John Tradescant, gardener to Charles I,20 and Sir Christopher Wren, architect of St Paul’s Cathedral21 – with the ungainliness of ‘The Abbey National Centre of Excellence’ is bathetic, and invites a comparison with the past which leaves the present undoubtably wanting. What I would argue the text laments here, however, is not the passing of a bygone age, a sentimental idealisation of the past or a wish to rebuild it in the present, but the process by which this past is forgotten: by bringing to consciousness the historic figures associated with Theobolds Park, Sinclair attempts to recall that which has been erased by the Park’s new tenants. It is then in this process of recollection that the ‘truth’ of the territory is revealed: the images of a certain idealised England or Englishness – the country house, the cathedral, tradition, stability, grandeur, which are evoked by the names Tradescant and Wren – are recognised as ‘fiction’, yet in recalling them the text reveals the truth content of such myths in their power to reveal the disjunction between the landscape as it is experienced in the present and the landscape of the imagined past.

In these moments of synthesis, in which the text brings together images from history and literature with the ‘real’ of the motorway, demonstrate the tendency of the text to associate landscape with memory in its twofold character as both remembrance and forgetting. Development and gentrification – the overwriting of the landscape with new buildings or the repurposing of existing structures for new purposes – for Sinclair become analogous with amnesia; the walk and the text that follows an act of anamnesis. However, the text is not suggesting that the answer to the maladies of the present lies in


a renewed attention to history: quite the contrary, Sinclair is as scathing of the operations of the ‘heritage industry’ (p. 105) as he is of those who disregard the past entirely. By associating the walk with recollection, *London Orbital* instead asserts the power and primacy of memory, in all its incompleteness, inaccuracy and partiality, as a method by which to critique contemporary social and political formations. Conversely, whilst the act of forgetting is both loss and erasure, the text is attentive to the positive side of this process in the opportunities that it might present for new beginnings. Pierre Nora asserts that the accelerating forces of modernity have introduced a gap between the present and the past which is experienced as a ‘rift […] in memory.’\(^{22}\) As a consequence, certain places, things, or ideas become sacralised as ‘historic’ places which memorialise the past: *lieux de mémoire*. If these places can be taken as signs of the threat that modernity poses to memory, then *London Orbital* can be read as an attempt to restore the *lieux de mémoire* which might make it live once more.

**Suburban Utopias**

If one aspect of the repressed in suburbia are the physical traces of the landscape that it has physically overwritten, then its own history and the desires for a better life that in part motivated its expansion are another. Yet if we were to give a name to the place in which these desires might be met, it would be Utopia. To cite Jameson’s comments on the necessity of utopian form in art and politics once more:

> Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet.\(^{23}\)

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What Sinclair’s reading of the landscape of the M25 does is to recognise that the environs of the motorway, and the motorway itself, are the results and causes of ‘fundamental change[s] in our social existence’, and which have indeed thrown off Utopian (and dystopian) visions of their own. It is these visions and the desire for a better (or at least different) future that have driven and sustained their creation.

We can see a concrete example of this in the second section of London Orbital, the first following the motorway proper from Waltham Abbey to Shenley, and which is entitled ‘Paradise Gardens’. This refers specifically to the work which provided the blueprint for the ‘New Towns’ of the early twentieth century, and thus for many of our key notions of what suburbia is, Ebenezer Howard’s Garden Cities of To-morrow:

Howard’s vision, originally published in 1898 as Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform, imagined a Utopian community, public buildings at the centre, surrounded by parks, houses with gardens, set within ‘an agricultural reservation’. Such reservations, check out Milton Keynes and Welwyn Garden City, don’t really work. It’s too swift an enactment of something that needs to evolve, through compromise and bodge, through centuries. Lay it out overnight and you get Mormon dormitory or an unoccupied cemetery that looks great in the catalogue. (p. 70)

Here, Sinclair refers explicitly to the Utopian character of Howard’s work, and, from the standpoint of the present, criticises their execution, repeating the often-made charge that the suburbs are bland and depthless, lacking in history and character. However, by evoking Howard, Sinclair draws our attention to the origin and history of such spaces. To illustrate the lyricism of Garden Cities of To-morrow, it is worth quoting from Howard’s text at length:

Human society and the beauty of nature are meant to be enjoyed together. The two magnets must be made one. As man and woman by their varied gifts and faculties supplement each other, so should town and country. The town is the symbol of society – of mutual help and friendly co-operation, of fatherhood, motherhood,
brotherhood, sisterhood, of wide relations between man and man – of broad, expanding sympathies – of science, art, culture, religion. And the country! The country is the symbol of God’s love and care for man. All that we are and all that we have comes from it. Our bodies are formed of it; to it they return. We are fed by it, clothed by it, and by it we are warmed and sheltered. On its bosom we rest. Its beauty is the inspiration of art, of music, of poetry. Its forces propel all the wheels of industry. It is the source of all health, all wealth, all knowledge. But its fullness of joy and wisdom has not revealed itself to man. Nor can it ever, so long as this unholy, unnatural separation of society and nature endures. Town and country must be married, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilization.²⁴

Howard’s vision of the garden city, the suburb which combines the best of both the town and country (and it remains to be seen as to whether this binary is not a false one) and thus will (somehow) provide the basis for a new society is unambiguously Utopian. Howard’s prose heaps superlative on superlative for the best aspects of the rural and the urban, which should they be combined, would result (naturally) not in compromise, but in the best of all possible worlds. There is no notion of the sublime in this text: nature and the city are here anthropomorphised, domesticated and knowable, the ‘marriage’ of the two being somehow both achievable and desirable. There is a confidence in the text that human society and the natural world are both fundamentally masterable and malleable, the rhapsodic language the same bizarre mixture of arrogance and naivety that one might find in a Victorian hymn. Despite (if not because of) Howard’s somewhat overblown prose, it is difficult not to find his enthusiasm for his subject charming, and one can see why the text was so influential in early twentieth-century British urban planning. However, by evoking Howard at the same time as castigating the results of his work, Sinclair reminds us of the dual character of such Utopian visions: that their power lies precisely in their quality as

²⁴ Ebenezer Howard, Garden Cities of To-morrow (Eastbourne: Attic, 1985 [1898]), p. 11.
fictions, abstractions, rhetorical devices which orientate themselves towards the future, yet whose proper territory is the political present.

Sinclair employs a similar technique of comparing the Utopian urge and its quotidian realisation in the following description of the motorway:

Stand on a footbridge over the M25, anywhere between Junction 26 on the edge of Epping Forest and the Junction 25 exit for Enfield, and you'll watch traffic through tattered sails of greenery, roadside plantings, overripe saplings fed on diesel. The context of the valley is revealed: mud paddocks bulldozed for future development, new systems of access roads, sour yellow Wimpey boxes for first-time buyers; low, wooded hills; the persistent chlorophyll of Enfield Chase and environs. Captured estates. Garden centres. Pubs that offer Thai, Chinese and Indian lunches, while hanging on to their fustian titles: The King and Tinker, The Pied Bull, The Volunteer, The Woodbine. (p. 73)

This passage contains a number of stylistic features and thematic figures which recur throughout the work. The description takes the form of a list, with Sinclair utilising what could be considered his signature motif of paratactic, staccato, two-word sentences or clauses, which have the effect of accumulating a wealth of individual details, yet which – through the absence of connective syntax – do not synthesise into what could be considered a single, holistic ‘scene’ or vision. The non-naturalistic character of this passage and its lack of verisimilitude can be simply illustrated by trying to imagine it: whilst the details Sinclair enumerates are all features of the motorway landscape, it is difficult to imagine seeing all of them at once from just one bridge. Adjectives such as ‘tattered’, ‘overripe’, ‘sour’, modify the enumerated items to create an image of an environment despoiled by the motorway; yet the imperative form of the first sentence, as well as turning the description into an instruction or proposal for the reader to follow, lends a sense of the epic or universal to the passage. Sinclair’s ‘I’ becomes the ‘you’ of the reader, who, if he or
she were to accept the invitation that the text extends, would also perceive the motorway in the same way. The pubs, with their imported cuisines and names which pretend to a historic authenticity, begin to point towards the strange mixture of the historic and the new, the authentic and the inauthentic, that the text finds in the landscape. The passage continues, referring explicitly to the ‘Paradise Gardens’ of the title:

We dream of a green paradise. The solution to [Sinclair’s associate] Gimpo’s teasing riddle - ‘to find out where the M25 leads’ – is here. After the circuits of madness, pilgrims must claim their reward: the secret garden. Residual desire is articulated in street names. Paradise Road and Paradise Row are both located in Waltham Abbey.

(p. 73)

The contradictions that the text began to pick up in the first paragraph – hinted at in the conflict between the newness of what the pubs are serving and the image of authenticity they project through their names – are deepened through the evocation of a ‘green paradise’ immediately following the description of the landscape in which this ‘paradise’ supposedly sits. The M25, located at the point at which the city bleeds into the countryside, becomes the place in which the contradictions between the pastoral dreams which Sinclair argues are needed to sustain the city and its inhabitants, and the reality of the semi-industrialised landscape of motorway, underpass, poisoned trees, and bulldozed earth, are thrown into starkest relief. The hopes of the good life, the retreat from the unpleasantness of the city, from work, from stress, which suburbia represents are at once confirmed and refuted in the names which are given to its streets, and by their proximity to the motorway which makes their existence as commuter dormitories possible at all.

Whilst it is important not get mislaid by rigid or typological definitions of genre, it would be accurate to say that Sinclair’s text does not belong to the utopian genre proper: what it does do is to provide a critique (in the positive sense of the term) of the notion of utopia as such. Crucially, this critique recognises the inherently conflicted politics
of utopia, whether understood as a literary genre, an idea, or as a political programme. From its inception with More’s text, the utopian genre has been Janus-faced: in *Utopia*, the tension between the political discussion of Book One with the speculations of Book Two, the punning and nonsense names of the text’s places and characters, and indeed the fact that the word utopia itself is both a pun on ‘no place’ and ‘fortunate place’,\(^25\) constructs an irresolvable contradiction between interpretations of the text which read it as a satire on pie-in-the-sky wish-fulfilment, or those which ‘take More’s vision seriously’\(^26\) as a meditation on how life might be otherwise ordered. As Jameson suggests, such stark choices between different reading strategies suggest not that one or other understanding is ‘correct’, but that the ‘objective and incompatible alternation’ between the two readings is itself generated by or is an ‘interpretive phenomenon’\(^27\) of the text itself. Sinclair’s reading of the motorway and the territory that surrounds it against its fictional, visionary, or imaginary counterparts not only opens up a critical (and often satiric) gulf between the contradictions of the ideal and the actual (which is itself a feature of utopian writing), but sustains the interpretative inscrutability of the utopian form: can such visions be considered politically progressive, inspirations for meaningful action in the present? Or are they instead frivolous indulgences in the fantastic, or worse, ideological barriers to such political betterment?

This ambiguity that Sinclair finds in the utopian form leads to one of the more striking images in *London Orbital* in which the author describes a 19th Century German parlour game entitled ‘Myriorama’ (fig. 12). This is a set of twenty-four illustrated cards which can be laid out ‘in any order’ to ‘achieve “a perfectly harmonious landscape”’\(^28\) (p. 133). In its intention to create the image of a ‘perfectly harmonious landscape’, the Myriorama can be interpreted as (weakly) utopian in scope; that is, in its depiction of an ideal terrain in which the problems which afflict the world as it actually are no longer

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Figure 13: An Example of a Myriorama, c1820.

Figure 14: Still from Chris Petit, *London Orbital*
present, it is (following Jameson after Bloch) exemplary of a ‘Utopian impulse [which]
govern[s] everything future-oriented in life and culture’.28 Sinclair’s use of this image,
however, not only reveals the ambiguity the text expresses towards the Utopian visions
which have inspired the civic projects at the edge of London, but also the fundamental
interpretative uncertainty of the utopian mode or impulse. Sinclair describes the cards as
follows:

A landscape of symbols: road, lake (or river), low hills, distant village, travellers on a
highway. Time frozen at the edge of extinction. Something of Breughel, something
of Christian Rosencreuz: hermetic-cabalist hieroglyphs. The scale of these pocket-
Polaroids induces vertigo. The black birds hanging above the rocks are too big. Why
should eagles or vultures be found at the outskirts of a pretty German town? Why
is the solitary horseman blowing a bugle? Everything tugs and tosses. Two youths
cling, terrified, to a lifting kite. A decorated hot air balloon drifts in one direction;
the sails of a three-master billow, as it surges in the other. There is an obelisk like
a war memorial with an unreadable inscription. Two walkers, rucksack-burdened,
debate a signpost. The thing you can’t do with the twenty-four cards is arrange
them in a circle. The pattern fractures, the road breaks; the drawings are revealed as
cigarette cards from a prophetic tarot pack to which the key has been lost. (p. 133)

The suggestion that the cards cannot be arranged in a circle turns their description into
an invitation to the reader to interpret the passage as an allegory for the orbital motorway.
However, once the reader accepts this invitation the apparent simplicity of this image – the
comparison of the landscape of the motorway with the ‘symbolic landscape’ of the cards –
proves, on analysis, to belie a surprisingly subtle layering of meaning and resonance.

Firstly, and most apparently, we can read the ‘two walkers’ as the transposition of the
author and his principal companion on the journey around the M25, the painter Laurence

‘Renchi’ Bicknell, into the landscape of the Myriorama. The ‘landscape of symbols’, then, becomes the hinterlands of the motorway through which they are travelling. In this reading, the M25 and its environs become a code to be deciphered, and the Myriorama a metaphor for the author’s difficulty in assembling a coherent narrative through which to do so: the cards can be assembled in any order, yet no matter how they are arranged, they do not cohere into a single vision, and the individual elements and symbols on the cards do not correspond or agree with one another without contradiction. This impression is only deepened by the reference to the tarot and to Christian Rosencreuz, the supposed founder of the esoteric Rosicrucian society, both of which are suggestive of hermetic, secret, concealed, or untrustworthy knowledge. The interpretative or representational crisis of the motorway is compounded when the cards are bent to fit the shape of the road: the ‘pattern fractures’, the key to their decipherment lost. We can extend this reading to include the relationship between the reader and the text itself: if the Myriorama becomes the road for Sinclair, then it becomes the text for the reader. Much as the author must attempt to come up with a system for the presentation of his materials, so must the reader synthesise the symbolic material of the text. As is often the case with Sinclair’s work, the text more often than not refrains from explaining its images, but leaves the reader to decipher them themselves. More than this, Sinclair’s solution to the problem of structuring the text is to use the pattern of his walk round the M25 itself, and thus the work of thematic synthesis, of translating the material of the walk into the material of the text, is repeated by the reader through the act of reading.

Finally, if this image can be read as symbolic of the relationship between the walker and motorway, author and text, reader and text, then it can also be read as symbolic of the relationship between art and representation, and it is in this reading that the political ambiguity of the utopian mode becomes most clear. The cards, although they can be arranged in ‘any order’ to form a ‘perfectly harmonious landscape’, have to be

laid out laterally or in a grid. Sinclair’s attempt to lay them in a circle and thus represent more accurately the shape of the motorway causes the conceit of the cards’ harmony to disintegrate, revealing their (and thus art’s) abstract character and its inability to ‘truly’ represent the real. The utopian artwork, of which the Myriorama is one, the text appears to be suggesting, has a value, but this value does not lie in its representational veracity or for its apparent quality as a ‘blueprint’\textsuperscript{30} for the creation of a better life. It presents an image of an impossible world where history has stopped, ‘frozen at the edge of extinction’, a beautiful abstraction which should not be mistaken for either truth or a plan of action: its value lies instead as a marker or index of desire.

Actually-existing Utopias

The uniting factor between the amnesia that Sinclair finds in the suburban landscape surrounding the M25 and the critique of the utopian ideal that has sustained it is that both posit a world divested of history. Suburban expansion overwrites the history of the landscape on which it is built, and the utopian visions that sustain it are dependent for their power on their timelessness: as Fredric Jameson argues, a utopia can be considered ‘an enclave outside of historical time’.\textsuperscript{31} However, whilst in the utopian text – Jameson gives the example of Morris’s \textit{News From Nowhere} – the elision of history comes about by virtue of the elimination of the causes of strife, allowing the inhabitants of utopia to neither dwell on the past nor worry about the future, Sinclair’s reading of the suppression of the historical in the suburban landscape is deeply pessimistic. The utopia represents at once the achievement of an ideal state and a consequent freedom from the weight of history, yet as the repeated motifs of the asylum or the delusional patient or walker that one finds throughout \textit{London Orbital} indicate, for Sinclair the absence or forgetting of history is an indication of disease or social pathology. Indeed, a lack of history becomes associated for

\textsuperscript{30} Fredric Jameson, \textit{Archaeologies of the Future}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{31} Fredric Jameson, \textit{Archaeologies of the Future}, pp. 186-187.
Sinclair with the erasure of political agency: coming to a former manor house, Porters Mansion \([sic]\), now ‘parcelled up into executive apartments’ (p. 125). Sinclair picks up a brochure:

‘For centuries this house and its surrounding estate were a dominant feature of the local landscape and witness to many changes not least its encirclement by Shenley Hospital in the 1930’s … The Mansion has had a fascinating history.’ Has bad.

Present perfect. History, once again, put in its place. The future all used up. (p. 125)

Sinclair’s attention to the tense in which the advertising copy is written indicates the way in which he interprets such material as emptying the real of its historical dimension. As Sinclair points out, the present perfect tense both insulates the present from the past and asserts the primacy of the present over the past. History becomes reduced to backstory, merely one feature amongst a number of others which might make an executive flat a desirable item, and consequently – were we to take the rhetorical gesture of the brochure literally – the temporal progression of which the Mansion was part has stopped at the moment at which it was converted into apartments. Time having been stopped, the potential for change (and consequently political action) vanishes also. It would be difficult to conclude from this that the M25 and its environs could itself be the realisation of the utopian ideal. However, if the hallmark of the utopia, as Jameson suggests, is the end of history,\(^{32}\) how should we read Sinclair’s negative reading of the same?

A major key to answering this question comes by paying attention to the way in which *London Orbital* refers frequently to the work of the British science-fiction writer J. G. Ballard, at one point taking a detour to visit the author at his home in Shepperton. Ballard’s work, particularly the novels *Crash* (1973) and *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), largely deals not with the future – as one might expect of Science Fiction writing – but explicitly with the present, and explores the same motorway territory, in the ‘isthmus between the

Westway, Heathrow and Shepperton, as *London Orbital*. We can see this most explicitly in *Crash*, in which Ballard utilises the spaces of the motorway to explore the association of the car with celebrity and sex. Cool descriptions of the automobile and the road are brought into conjunction with pornography and the technical language of science and engineering, creating what Baudrillard has described as a ‘violently sexualized world totally lacking in desire’, yet beyond critical and moral judgement. The effect is deeply unsettling and, whilst in parts flagrantly misogynistic, undeniably powerful, making an explicit connection between sex and death in the image of the car. As Ballard states in his introduction, taken on an objective level the car is an absurd, dangerous invention that ‘kills hundreds of thousands of people each year and injures millions’, and yet is marketed as an object of luxury and desire. As Scott McCracken argues, Ballard introduces the body into descriptions of cars so as to make ‘explicit the already implicit erotic charge contained in the marketing of technology in a consumer society’, yet in doing so as a ‘list of injuries […] creates a horrific reflection on the power of the machine to damage as well as enhance human life.’ Moreover, a mythic quality is bequeathed to celebrities such as James Dean or Jayne Mansfield, whose early deaths in car accidents perversely keep them forever young in the imagination. The following passage is instructive:

During the months that followed, Vaughan and I spent many hours driving along the express highways on the western perimeter of the airport. On the calm summer evenings these fast boulevards became a zone of nightmare collisions. Listening to the police broadcasts on Vaughan’s radio, we moved from one accident to the next. Often we stopped under arc-lights that flared over the sites of major collisions, watching while firemen and police engineers worked with acetylene torches and lifting tackle to free unconscious wives trapped beside their dead husbands, or

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waited as a passing doctor fumbled with a dying man pinned below an inverted truck. Sometimes Vaughan was pulled back by the other spectators, and fought for his cameras with the ambulance attendants. Above all, Vaughan waited for head-on collisions with the concrete pillars of the motorway overpasses, the melancholy conjunction formed by a crushed vehicle abandoned on the grass verge and the serene motion sculpture of the concrete.37

The unspecified number of crashes visited by Vaughn and the narrator and the use of multiples – ‘unconscious wives’ and ‘dead husbands’ – create a sense of repeated, relentless, and inevitable disaster. Crash presents us with the dystopia of the present: a post-apocalyptic landscape in which the apocalypse itself is strangely absent. Whilst this section is quite different in tone to London Orbital, and nor does Sinclair explore the symbolism of the car crash, we can see very clearly the same motorway landscape, and the same association of this territory with the threat of endless repetition, and thus with the loss of history and with amnesia.

Though in some respects this thematic concordance makes Ballard’s work an obvious point of reference, what is interesting here is that Sinclair chooses not to emphasise his critique of the utopian impulses which drive suburban expansion by referencing straightforwardly dystopian ones, but instead chooses to quote Ballard’s critical engagement with the psychopathologies of the present. Dys- or, to follow Jameson once more, anti-utopias,38 of the kind exemplified by Orwell’s 1984 or Huxley’s Brave New World present us with a vision of the future which represents a radical (or attempted) break with the continuum of history, and thus retain one of the key structural aspects of the Utopian text. Ballard’s work, conversely, takes elements of the contemporary media landscape and, as Jeannette Baxter argues, through a number of techniques which owe much to Surrealism, reconfigures them in unexpected and often disturbing ways.39 The most clear

37 J. G. Ballard, Crash, p. 4.
example of this is his experimental novel *The Atrocity Exhibition*. This work, which forgoes the conventions of linear narrative and character, presents the reader with a series of titled paragraphs organised in short thematic groups which explore contemporary historical events such as the Vietnam War, the assassination of President Kennedy, and media figures such as Marilyn Monroe. The work is provocative, with sections bearing titles such as ‘Why I want to Fuck Ronald Reagan’ and ‘The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motorcar Race’, though it is not without a certain deadpan black humour. What is relevant in this text, however, is not just its preoccupation with contemporary events, but the way in which the text, through a number of techniques, refuse a notion of temporal progress. Cause and effect are unsettled by the structure of the novel, whose events have no logical chronological connection. Instead, images and events are repeated: helicopters, hotel lobbies, laboratories, the faces of the rich and famous. Moreover, Ballard’s prose frequently repeats the same phrases, which in combination with its almost complete dearth of emotive language, renders the text cold:

**The Geometry of Her Face.** In the perspectives of the plaza, the junctions of the underpass and embankment, Talbot at last recognized a modulus that could be multiplied into the landscape of his consciousness. The descending triangle of the plaza was repeated in the facial geometry of the young woman. The diagram of her bones formed a key to his own postures and musculature, and to the scenario that had preoccupied him at the Institute. He began to prepare for departure. The pilot and the young woman now deferred to him. The fans of the helicopter turned in the dark air, casting elongated ciphers on the dying concrete.  

Ballard’s use of terms derived from mathematics serves to distance the reader from that which it describes. Where in a realist novel one might expect the text to attempt to depict the appearance and personality of its characters, here the (unnamed) ‘young woman’ is described in the most abstract terms possible: what Talbot finds notable about her

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face is the way it repeats the geometry of the plaza in which he stands. Similarly, whilst words such as ‘diagram’, ‘posture’, ‘scenario’, or ‘musculature’ give the text the character of a progress report or medical manual, their use here denudes them of their technical meaning. It makes no sense to talk of a ‘modulus’ that is somehow multipliable within consciousness, nor is it clear how the young woman’s bones could form a ‘diagram’. Where in their technical context these words are used to elucidate, in the context of a novel they defamiliarise that which they are used to describe. As well as the repetitive terminology, Ballard’s syntax here tends to repeat itself, as in ‘the Geometry of Her Face’, ‘the perspectives of the plaza’, ‘the junctions of the underpass’, ‘the descending triangle of the plaza’, and ‘the facial geometry of the young woman’. Not only are these phrases all in the present tense, their repetitive structure creates a sense of stasis: the text doesn’t move forward, but instead reconfigures the same elements in different orders. This echoing imparts a sense of meaninglessness and emptiness, but also serves to reinforce the absence of chronological time in the work: there is no past and no future in the world of *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

We can see Sinclair engage in a similar, but modified, technique in *London Orbital*. This is at its most obvious in the encounter with the object that inspires Sinclair to visit Ballard himself at his home in Shepperton. The office building belonging to the software company Siebel is characterised as the ‘visible manifestation of Ballard’s coming Medipark psychopathology’ (p. 215), and is described as follows:

Yesterday there was nothing here. The Siebel building appeared, fully formed, from nowhere. You can’t date it: elements of the Thirties, Sixties, Nineties. No irony, no pastiche. Something clinical or forensic, germ-repelling. The building doesn’t impose, it insinuates: no sweat, today is your tomorrow. (p. 216).

Despite realising that Siebel is ‘the future’ (p. 215), what Sinclair emphasises once more is a lack of history. Not only is the building of no identifiable period, lacking even the
jouissance of postmodern architectural pastiche,41 the building appeared ‘yesterday’ from ‘nowhere’ and has consequently has no past. More than this, Sinclair’s suggestion that ‘today is your tomorrow’ and the images of sterility remove the possibility of future action or of change. On entering the building, Sinclair finds that the ‘air is better, the temperature is gentler’ and that ‘light dazzles from every surface’; the lobby is filled with ‘criminally comfortable armchairs’ (p. 217), the building is a perfect, hermetically-sealed world in which ‘criminality and vandalism [are] impossible concepts’ (p. 215).

Visiting the London suburb of Uxbridge, Sinclair and his companions encounter the Xerox building:

The Xerox building is designed to look like office machinery, a shredder or printer. The windows are an enigmatic blue-green. Like chlorine. Xerox, Western Avenue, is a swimming pool on its side; from which, by some miracle of gravity, water doesn’t spill. That’s the concept: intelligent water. X marks the spot. Uxbridge is made from Xs. Lines of cancelled typescript. Fields planted with barbed wire.

The Xerox building duplicates itself; come back tomorrow and there’ll be another one, and another. X started out as a narrow four-storey column, then multiplied in the night. Horizontal ‘lanes’ of aqueous green glass play with notions of flow and drift, the river captured and tamed. The front elevation, serene as it is, gives me the bends: it’s like looking down from the high board on to an Olympic swimming pool. Sun-sparkling lanes and dividing ropes which, in this case, convert into metaphors of a clean white road. Motorway and canal system seamlessly linked. (pp. 180-181)

Not only does the Xerox building share the same temporal depthlessness that Sinclair finds in the Siebel building, it acquires the characteristics of the photocopier itself, its description providing a distorted image of Ballard’s prose. As with the passage from *The Atrocity Exhibition*, repetition structures the text: short sentence fragments create a

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rhythm to the prose, the repeated ‘X’ of ‘Xerox’ and ‘Uxbridge’ recurring in an echo of the duplicating copier and the repeating patterns of the building’s own architecture. Modernist images of architectural purity and beauty – the ‘aqueous green glass’, ‘sun-sparkling lanes’, or the ‘clean white road’, the motif of the swimming pool – are given a sterile quality by the evocation of chlorine, which is then extended to metaphors of death with the image of the ‘fields planted with barbed wire’, redolent of a First World War battlefield. Whilst the effect of this accretion of detail is to create a grotesquely and hyperbolically described representation of a seemingly inescapable and endless present, Sinclair himself explicitly states his disbelief that all this is inevitable: ‘if we believe in Siebel world, we might as well give up the walk now. But there’s another option: I decide to visit J. G. Ballard at Shepperton’ (p. 218). The question is raised as to what sort of option Ballard therefore represents.

Conclusion

If Sinclair’s refusal of a straightforward satirical mode allows LondonOrbital to elaborate a more fully-rounded critique of the utopian desires which have fuelled the suburban expansion of London, then his use of Ballard allows him to at once critique the notion of utopia as such. In the film of LondonOrbital, the repetitive and overloaded description that Sinclair engages in with his depictions of the Siebel and Xerox buildings becomes literalised in endlessly repeated footage of the motorway itself. The film is saturated with images of the motorway shot from the perspective of the passenger seat of a car (fig. 13), each frame containing the same combination of landscape, vehicles, and the mandala of an air freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror, differentiated only by time of day and the weather. As Chris Petit states in his voiceover, the whole notion of narrative breaks down when confronted by the landscape of the motorway: its repeating architecture of embankments, bridges, and flyovers obsures the landscape through which it cuts, place
reduced to the cypher of the road sign. However, the effect of repetition in all of these instances is not to elucidate the object repeated, but to make it strange and to de-naturalise it. At one point in *America*, Baudrillard suggests that the United States is ‘utopia achieved’, and thus that the crisis of America ‘is the crisis of an achieved utopia, confronted with the problem of its duration and permanence.’

What Sinclair’s Ballardian references, and indeed, his references to utopian and anti-utopian texts in *London Orbital* more broadly, allow is for the text to take the banality of a utopia which believes itself achieved and to be found around London’s orbital motorway, and to amplify its claims to ubiquity, universality, and inevitability to the point at which their absurdity is made manifest.

Conclusion: After London

The old men say their fathers told them that soon after the fields were left to themselves a change began to be visible. It became green everywhere in the first spring, after London ended, so that all the country looked alike.¹

It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations.²

This study takes as its cut-off point 2002’s London Orbital. This is primarily because it marks the geographic limit of Sinclair’s ‘London’ writing, but also because of the way in which a particular set of concerns culminates in this work. The demise of socialism as a viable force in mainstream British politics, the rise of New Labour, and thus the triumph of neoliberal economics and the concordant ‘end of history’ are both implicit and explicit concerns in London Orbital. Yet where his earlier works and their somewhat Gothic tendencies evince something which at points resembles political nihilism, London Orbital is much more ambivalent: its treatment of the past can be read as a re-opening of the spaces of historical time and of social memory in a landscape which has become associated, in English culture at least, with the impossibility of both. Though this thesis has traced

Sinclair’s work largely sequentially, focussing firstly on his early poetry, his mid-period fiction, and finally on his essays, a narrative of his career in which various forms are tried and then discarded in favour of more ‘successful’ ones does not stand up. As the breadth of critical readings and the influence of these works on London writing more broadly might indicate, it would be a gross mischaracterisation to describe his poetry and fiction as artistic ‘failures’ and, moreover, Sinclair has continued to write in both forms since the publication of London Orbital. Nonetheless, this thesis does choose to read this essayistic work as the most politically successful of Sinclair’s writings in that it rises to the challenge, as Fredric Jameson has it, ‘to think the negative and the positive at one and the same time’:3 that is, to think suburbia and its history dialectically.

Yet the political configuration to which London Orbital responds might itself be considered as bracketed by the dramatic reappearance of history in the guise of the attacks of 11 September 2001; moreover, the inevitability of the neoliberal economic model that has been predominant for the past thirty years has been called into question by the financial crisis of 2008. Neither has Sinclair himself been inactive in the past decade, and since London Orbital has published (excluding essays, minor works, and pamphlets, of which there are many) Dining on Stones (2004), Edge of the Orison: In the Traces of John Clare’s ‘Journey Out Of Essex’ (2005), London: City of Disappearances (editor, 2006), Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire (2009), and Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project (2011). These more recent works have in many respects returned to the perennial themes of Sinclair’s writing: the walking subject, history, memory, and London itself. Yet if Sinclair continues to investigate London and its environs, then this is perhaps in consequence of its continually-changing nature: indeed, one of the strengths of Sinclair’s repeated return, as it were, to old ground, is that it both documents the changes of its territory and inscribes it ever more densely with new meanings and associations. Sinclair’s most recent work responds to one of the most significant changes to the city in recent years: the disruption caused to the physical

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and social fabric of Sinclair’s home borough of Hackney by the construction of the facilities for the 2012 Olympic Games. This study opened with a series of questions which emerge from the problem of the failure of the historic, modernist avant-gardes to realise the latent political desires they found expressed in art. In the course of this study I have demonstrated how, in various ways, Sinclair’s work can be productively read through these questions. Yet few things point more dramatically to the continuing truth of this failure than the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics. In what might be considered an example of neoliberal space par excellence, in all its privatised and spectacularising tendencies, Danny Boyle had the audacity to re-stage the story of the emergence of capitalism in Britain as one of successive stages of enclosure, dispossession, and industrial transformation, which is then redeemed through the birth of the welfare state.4

The show was enthusiastically embraced by many commentators on the left,5 and accordingly, conservative critics have condemned it for both its celebration of multiculturalism and of the NHS.6 Yet surely what made it so affecting for so many was not only that it presented a story of Britain and of British culture from the ‘bottom up’ in its most heterogeneous and vibrant popular forms, but that it demonstrated so clearly how easily capital neutralises artistic challenges to its dominance. At a time during which all of the major UK political parties are united in their agreement on the need for austerity in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, the scale and associated costs of the Olympics are staggering: the Public Accounts Committee, the UK Parliamentary spending watchdog, has estimated that the final cost of the games to the taxpayer will reach as much as £11

4 Boyle’s landmark work is Trainspotting (1996), an adaptation of the 1993 novel of the same name by Irvine Welsh. Alan Sinfield addresses the differences between the film and the novel in the essay ‘The politics and cultures of discord’, collected in the second edition of Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain (London: Continuum, 2004 [1989]), pp. xxi-xl. Sinfield argues that the differences between the film and the novel—particularly the elision of the difference between Renton’s ‘leftish rebellion’ and Sick Boy’s ‘Thatcherite selfishness’ (p. xxxix)—remove some of the novel’s more challenging political overtones.

5 See, for example, Zoe Williams, ‘Olympic opening ceremony a Labour party broadcast? Yup, that’s about right’, The Guardian, 28 July 2012. At the time of writing most of the information related to the London 2012 Olympics is available only from journalistic sources or online.

billion, exceeding the current budget of £9.3 billion,\(^7\) which is itself significantly larger than the initial forecast cost of £3.4 billion on which basis in 2005 London won the bid to hold the games.\(^8\) The NHS, to which a lengthy segment of Boyle’s £27 million extravaganza was dedicated, at the time of writing faces budget cuts of around £20 billion,\(^9\) and is in the process of being restructured to allow the further involvement of for-profit companies in the delivery of healthcare. It would not be unfair to point out, then, that Boyle’s celebration of social democratic values and institutions, in a very real sense was enabled by and predicated upon the further dismantling of the infrastructure and communal values of the postwar consensus. Thus it becomes abundantly clear that capital will not only accommodate but will quite happily supply images of a left politics, though it would deny their realisation: read in this way, Boyle’s ceremony becomes not a celebration of the welfare state, but its epitaph.

This thesis has argued for a reading of Sinclair’s work which attends to the ways in which it opposes itself to the processes by which culture, space, and history become commodified. Whilst it is probably safe to say that Sinclair will never be invited to take the helm of a project with as large a budget as the Olympics opening ceremony, it is certainly true that his work represents an attempt to negotiate the political impasse that it so spectacularly exposes: that is, how might works of culture resist the processes of commercialisation and commodification in which they are inevitably complicit? As we have seen, addressing this question has required an approach which recognises the ways in which Sinclair’s work problematises the notion of a political reading of artworks in abstraction from context. Literary forms are not in and of themselves expressive of particular political positions, but can be seen instead as strategies whose valences shift

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through time, and which are propagated by and through social structures which are themselves fluid, geographically bounded, and historically contingent.\(^{10}\) Thus in the opening chapters of this thesis – ‘Form’ – we saw the ways in which Sinclair’s writing represents an engagement with the institutional questions which, as Bürger’s work shows, were critical to the projects of the historic avant-gardes.\(^{11}\) As explored in chapter 1, Sinclair’s earliest poetry at once adopts the discontinuous, fractured structure of modernist poetics, and uses these forms as strategies to seek an active readership opposed to a ‘commercialised’ mainstream, and which, through the nexus of the text, seeks a revivified and shared understanding of place. The broadly conservative and insular character of British poetry in the 1960s and 70s, and the unproblematically ‘high’ cultural status of poetry renders this stance coherent in this moment. Yet the move to the novel form with *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, discussed in chapter 2, sees this problematised, and we see brought to representation the ways in which such spaces of ‘high’ culture are themselves no less implicated. If the localism of Sinclair’s early work represents one of the ways in which it grounds itself within particular social, geographic, and historical structures, then the peripatetic methodologies that his work adopts from the historic avant-gardes is another. In the second section of the thesis – ‘Place’ – we therefore saw the ways in which Sinclair’s work engages with such modes to both critique positivist understandings of urban space and to subvert and parody the operations of power in the present. In the final chapters – ‘Memory’ – we saw the ways in which the models of time and memory his writing expresses, by turns attempt to subvert the conflict-free nostalgia of ‘heritage’ by gothicising it, and to disconnect the future from an imaginary which would understand it only as an airless, computer-generated extension of the present.

We can therefore read Sinclair’s work as an exemplar of a strand of late-Twentieth

\(^{10}\) Indeed, the reading of Boyle’s work given above demonstrates this: when one sets aside the questions of the cost and spatial enclosure entailed by the Olympics, there is a strong argument for interpreting Boyle’s work as progressive.

century British culture which attempts to deal firstly with the absence of a British parallel to the sort of avant-gardism represented by the Surrealists and the Situationists, yet which found itself grappling with the same set of problems that their political failure represents. Moreover, it reveals also the way in which artists of the libertarian left might attempt to address the implausibility of previous modes of opposition. Yet woven through this project are the threads of remembrance and utopianism; or, more accurately, the remembrance of the possibility of the utopian mode. Guy Debord once wrote that the Situationists desired ‘the most liberatory possible change of the society and the life in which we find ourselves confined’. Sinclair’s early poetry, in seeking a communal poetic, testifies to the authenticity of this impulse – the desire to satisfy the emancipatory and utopian possibilities of artistic practice – yet, in its localism, at once denies the possibility of the realisation of such projects at the level of the social whole. This speaks of the radically altered horizons of avant-garde practices in 1970s Britain. Similarly, both Benjamin and the Situationists saw in the human capacity to remake the city a potential for the utopian transformation of a whole way of life. Sinclair’s texts instead tend to see such developments as almost wholly destructive. As he states of the disruption caused to East London by the Olympic developments:

The urban landscape of boroughs anywhere within the dust cloud of the Olympic Park has been devastated with a beat-the-clock impatience unrivalled in London since the beginnings of the railway age. Every civic decency, every sentimental attachment, is swept aside for that primary strategic objective, the big bang of the starter’s pistol.

Arguably, the sort of disruption inflicted in the name of the Olympics spectacle, and indeed, the futurism of the designs of its stadia, bear uncomfortable similarities with the

vision of the city elaborated by Constant in *New Babylon*. Thus, whilst Sinclair’s texts might take up a tool such as psychogeography to critique the contemporary city, it at once denies the radical potential represented by the ability to reshape it, and the violence that such a project might inflict becomes unconscionable.

For Sinclair, the principal damage that such developments threaten is the erasure of memory. The unreliability of our remembrance of the past and the incompleteness of our appreciation of it is precisely the resource that enables resistance to the iniquities of the present. We can therefore read Sinclair’s work as attempting to locate pockets of opposition, to rescue notions of otherness, of utopianism, and of political change, within the past as it is remembered: to find that which is buried in memory which might rupture and remake our understanding of the present. Yet if Benjamin envisions such moments as being imbued with a revolutionary social charge – in ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ he speaks of revolutionaries spontaneously firing their rifles at the clock towers of Paris as if to explode ‘the continuum of history’14 – then Sinclair’s are more typically the personal epiphanies available to the subject exploring the city alone and on foot. This is a form of utopian hermeneutic, yet it is a deeply qualified one, and one which cannot be expressed directly or with a straight face. To endorse the revolutionary impulses of the historic avant-gardes, their desire for wholesale social change, and their imagining of a future city, would be politically naive, but to deny them would be at once to capitulate to cynicism. We can therefore read Sinclair’s work as attempting to redeem the utopianism a failed political avant-gardism, and at once to rescue a modernist tradition from what Benjamin called ‘a conformism that is about to overpower it.’15 Such an undertaking is an urgent one, but is fraught also with the danger of collapsing into a narrative of nostalgia and loss. Yet if Jameson’s counterpointing of utopia with apocalypse in the quote that serves as an

epigraph to this conclusion speaks of the urgency and necessity of rediscovering such an imaginative space, then his observation on the ‘weakness’ of our capacity to imagine such a utopian other surely testifies also to the scale and difficulty of such a task.
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