



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Noise, neoliberalism and Iain Sinclair

Martin, N.

**Publication date**  
2012

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Martin, N. (2012). *Noise, neoliberalism and Iain Sinclair*.

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## Chapter 2: The Northwest Passage: psychogeography and the production of urban space

As Sinclair notes, the London Psychogeographical Association had already enjoyed “35 Years of Non-Existence” (*Lights Out* 25) before he publicised its “accommodation address” in his 1997 collection of psychogeographically generated prose, *Lights Out For the Territory*. The publication of that collection, however, effectively put an end to that non-existence by transforming a term previously associated with a marginal tradition of the European avant-garde into a cultural buzzword that could command regular column inches in a national broad sheet. As Alastair Bonnett (59) points out, this resurgence of interest in psychogeography in 1990s London formed part of a more general revival of interest in the term across Europe and North America with local psychogeographical associations springing up in cities as diverse as Toronto, Nottingham, New York and Bologna. In London however, the interest in psychogeography as mediated through the work of, among others, Peter Ackroyd, Patrick Keiller, Alan Moore, Michael Moorcock, and Will Self was such that it came to define an immediately recognizable *fin de siècle* London imaginary. Explanations for the sudden popularity of a term which had remained invisible for some four decades centre on the notion that it was a response to the impact of assumptions about the relationship of public and the private space associated with neoliberalism. Phil Baker, for example, identifies an increasing sense of “[a]lienation” as “an important factor in the . . . popularity of psychogeography” (325). The interest in personalizing a space perceived to have been appropriated by capital, he suggests, is a response to the progressive disappearance of any sense of the

collective. Aligning psychogeography with more general forms of cognitive mapping he writes:

Even in its most basic aspect, the feel of place, “psychogeography” is a useful shorthand for aspects of place that are not reducible to economics, and for the effect of the built environment on the quality of life, which has been the subject of unprecedented anger and dissent. As for cognitive mapping, it is universal and inescapable. But its recent fetishization has accompanied a post-consensus, post-societal sense that society as a whole (famously declared not to exist in 1987) offers no salvation, only one’s own routes and places. Its overlap with histories and myths of place is a further way of gaining a purchase on the inhospitable environment of the metropolis. People want to inscribe marks and find traces in the city, like the stories they used to tell about the stars and constellations, in order to feel more at home in an indifferent universe. (325-26)

His analysis is echoed in a recent conversation between Sinclair and Will Self, two of London’s most prominent psychogeographers, who link its renaissance to the more practical experience of life in the neoliberal metropolis. The new interest in psychogeography “marches with [the] environmental”, suggests Self, in that it reflects a desire to re-invent the notion of the picturesque in terms which correspond more closely to the daily experience of urban life. Psychogeography, he argues, is simply a response to the fact that, for city dwellers, there is “so much shit to wade through” before they can reach the “picturesque” and that this leads to a growing sense “that they have to reintegrate where they live, they have to know where they are in a new sense it has just become sort of unspeakable” (Self).

Similarly, describing psychogeography as a “geography of resistance”, Sinclair attributes its London renaissance to the increasing unworkability of the city once the erosion of public space and public services after successive Thatcherite governments had begun to take effect:

There was a necessary moment when resistance was required, psychogeography was summoned up, and exactly as Will says, the city was

unworkable. I remember vividly in Hackney there was no Underground so you had to use the buses . . . the buses were privatised and run by out of town companies who were given the franchise. And you would see the driver holding an A to Z, to work out where the hell he was (laughs). And the queues were enormous and I discovered that to get to the middle of town it took me an hour and ten minutes, a walk along the canal. The bus, back then, took longer. So I just abandoned public transport. I think a lot of people were doing that. (Self)

Self in turn endorses Sinclair's account with the suggestion that "[o]ne of the climacterics might have been the sort of tube strikes in the late eighties . . . when the city was gridlocked for weeks on end. I mean, it was laughable the sort of constipation of metal in London streets" (Self).

Baker, Self and Sinclair, in other words, are united in explaining the London psychogeographical renaissance as a form of resistance to the conditions of the neoliberal metropolis. This seems a compelling argument, not simply because of the authority of those who advance it, but because psychogeography in its London incarnation seems to respond directly to the political climate of Thatcherism. However, drawing such a direct causal link between the psychogeography revival and the impact upon urban space associated with neoliberal economic and urban policy, raises questions about the relationship between its earlier incarnation and the spatial regime of classical or embedded liberalism - the spatial regime which neoliberal urbanism is commonly described as having displaced. What, in other words, is the relationship between psychogeography in its French and British incarnations, or to deploy a figure favoured by psychogeography itself, what is the "Northwest passage" (Self; De Quincey; Debord) that leads from 1960s France to the London of the 1990s?

In this chapter consequently I want to complicate Baker, Self and Sinclair's appealingly noisy account of the relationship between psychogeography and the neoliberal city, firstly by attending to the differences between its British and French incarnations, and then by suggesting ways in which Sinclair's psychogeographic practice addresses the progressive enclosure of the urban within the categories of the individual and the public. To anticipate my argument I want to suggest that the

original incarnation of psychogeography is articulated around a Freudian construction of the psyche as a site of absence, or lack, whereas the London incarnation registers the transformation in the relationship of individual and collective consequent on the neoliberal transformation of the wider spatial regimes in which the subject and collective are “surfaced” (Ahmed) or produced. Rather than reading psychogeography as an attempt by individuals to orientate themselves in a world lacking traditional coordinates, I present psychogeography as a series of practices which investigate the logic of neoliberalism as a scene of “reforgetting” where what is reforgeotten is both radicalism’s complicity with the order it seeks to overthrow and the common on which neoliberalism and radicalism depend.

## Genealogies

Although the practices and concerns now associated with psychogeography can be traced back to Surrealism and the writings of André Breton, who in turn supplied it with its own genealogy stretching back to Thomas De Quincey, the term itself was coined by “the French avant-garde-cum revolutionary group the Letterists who later became the Situationists” (Baker, “Psychogeography” 323). According to Guy Debord, its putative father:

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 . . . Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. The adjective psychogeographical, retaining a rather pleasing vagueness, can thus be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and even more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery. (McDonough 59)<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography” *Les Lèvres nues* no. 6 (September 1955) 11-15 (McDonough 59). Unless otherwise indicated, page references to Situationist texts will refer to Tom McDonough’s critical anthology, *The Situationists and the City*, and be marked parenthetically in the text, however, the original context will be indicated by footnote.

According to this definition the term psychogeography is itself typically Situationist insofar as it unites precision and vagueness, is both objective and subjective and is, and isn't, to be taken seriously. It is, in other words, a playfully serious term designed to tease and provoke and hence, to resist being tied down to the sort of unequivocal meaning that will serve as a stable object of academic analysis. As such it is more useful to concentrate on the ambivalences and contradictions engendered by the articulations of the term than to embark on a quest for definition. Of these ambivalences, perhaps the most important relates to its status as a form of critique. Initially psychogeography's function in this respect seems clear and unambiguous: as originally conceived it is evident that as a form of critical praxis, psychogeography's primary target was the prevailing philosophy within architecture and urban planning represented by Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret) and the idea that cities, like houses, should be "machines for living in", that they should, in other words, be designed on functionalist principles in order to eliminate the inefficiency and discomfort arising from the *ad hoc* growth of traditional, un-planned cities.<sup>20</sup> A flavour of the Situationist view of functionalism, and consequently of psychogeography's role as critique, is indicated by the caption to a photo of the Corbusier-built new town, or *grand ensemble*, at Mougins in the South West of France:

The city of Mougins. 12,000 residents live in the horizontal slabs if they are married, in the towers if they are unmarried. To the right of the picture lies the small neighborhood of mid-level personnel, composed of identical villas symmetrically divided between two families. Beyond in the neighborhood for higher-paid personnel, we find repeated a different type of villa assigned

---

<sup>20</sup> "We leave to Monsieur Le Corbusier his style that suits factories as well as it does hospitals. And the prisons of the future: is he not already building churches? I do not know what this individual - ugly of countenance and hideous in his conceptions of the world - is repressing to make him want thus to crush humanity under ignoble heaps of reinforced concrete, a noble material that ought to permit an aerial articulation of space superior to Flamboyant Gothic. His power of cretinization is vast. A model by Corbusier is the only image that brings to my mind the idea of immediate suicide. With him moreover any remaining joy will fade. And love - passion - liberty". Ivan Chitchelgov, "Formulary For a New Urbanism", *Internationale situationniste* No. 1 (June 1958) (McDonough 35, 44).

entirely to its occupant. The personnel who most truly manage the labor carried out at Lacq are lodged in Pau, Toulouse, and Paris. (McDonough 24)<sup>21</sup>

As Tom McDonough notes, for the Situationists, Mourenx and the other new towns were “nothing less than the physical embodiments of the hierarchical organization of advanced capitalism, a concrete expression of the graduated set of rewards that awaited the new cadres of ever-modernizing France” (24). As such psychogeographical practices were typically described as a critique of capital’s influence on the urban environment. However, in identifying the International style too closely with the interests of capital it is easy to overlook psychogeography’s more fundamental critique of the underlying assumption of Corbusier-inspired urban planning, namely, that the city is fundamentally unruly and chaotic and needs to be made legible through attention to improving its communicative efficiency. Thus although the Situationists present psychogeography as a response to the panoptical urbanism of Le Corbusier which is held to be synonymous with commercialism and capital - the work of a latter-day Haussman (McDonough 44) - it is more useful to see it as a response to a rationalist city planning predicated on the need to impose order on a fundamentally chaotic, or noisy, city which extends across the ideological divide of the Cold War. Ivan Chtcheglov (Gilles Ivain), for example, notes this fundamental ambivalence when he observes in the “Formulary for a New Urbanism”, “Marxist or capitalist architecture does not exist, although these two systems show similar tendencies and common aims” (McDonough 36).

Considered as a critique of the urban functionalism of the International style practiced by the Le Corbusier-inspired International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), psychogeography thus effectively reveals a gap between different legibilities: it registers the impossibility of recognising a human image in the vision of

---

<sup>21</sup> *Internationale Situationniste* no. 6 (August 1961), 149-155 (McDonough 24). For the importance of Mourenx within the symbolic geography of the urban, see Stathis Kouvelakis: “This is what is reactivated and revived during the traumatic shock - an obvious repetition of the primal scene - triggered by the construction, towards the end of the 1950s, of the new town of Mourenx alongside the Navarrenx of Lefebvre’s childhood and adolescence: the reflection on space and the urban phenomenon has its source here - in the brutal intrusion of an aggressive modernity, effected by an anonymous and normalised ‘machine for inhabiting’, functional for the needs of capitalism and carefully planned from above by the postwar technocratic state” (Kouvelakis 712-13).

the citizen returned by urban planners.<sup>22</sup> As Gary Bridge notes, this view that “the purpose of planning was to impose order on an inherently chaotic and unruly city” (1572) effectively reveals a conflict between two different sorts of legibility:

For the planners and architects legibility meant the ability to adopt a god-like view from above, to see the whole city, and plan its efficient organisation accordingly . . . For urban residents legibility is seeing your place in the city and the ways through it. (1572)

For the architect/artist Constant, psychogeography is in effect a prelude to an architectural programme that would result in a new type of city - New Babylon - which, with zones devoted to separate desires and affects, would return an image of a more completely human subject. Where the CIAM privileges sight and the gaze, psychogeography consequently emphasises the ambient, the embodied, and the pre-cognitive - the aura and elusive feel of a neighbourhood. It attempts to reinstall an affective subject within the city under the slogan “unitary urbanism”.

It is this affective trope that psychogeography turns back upon the urban planner whose projects can then be presented as a form of explicit psychological violence. As Ivan Chatcheglov writes of Le Corbusier: “I do not know what he is repressing . . . to make him want thus to crush humanity under ignoble heaps of reinforced concrete” (McDonough 35). In answer to this repression the Situationist International takes from Surrealists such as Breton a concern with asserting the irrational as an equal part of the human subject and, as such, an essential component of the environments that make us intelligible to ourselves.

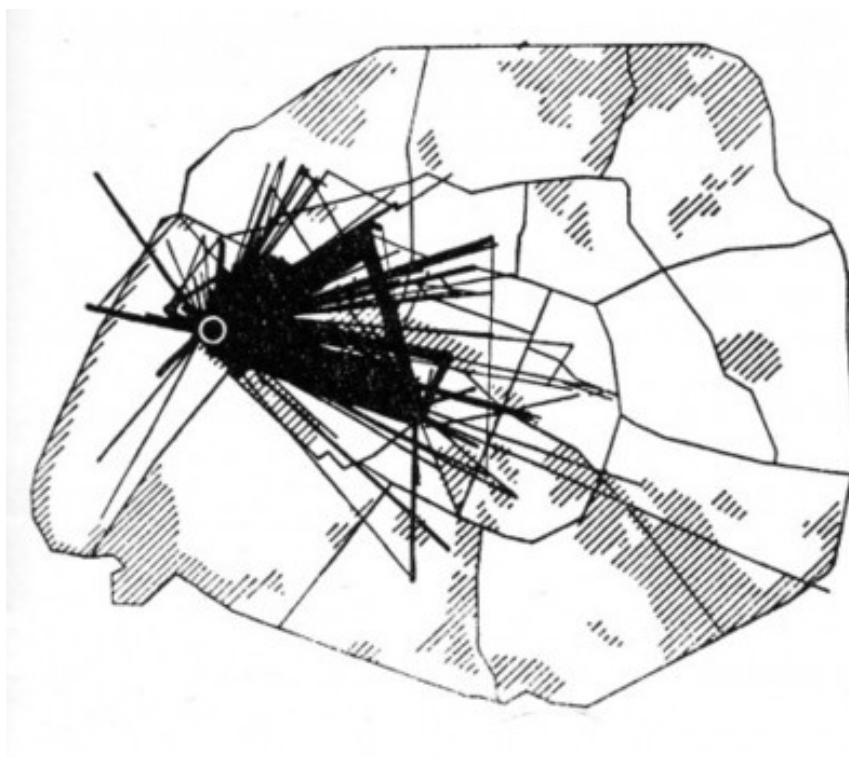
The second major ambivalence engendered by the Situationist deployment of the term psychogeography is centred on the question of urban design. Whereas Constant sees psychogeography as heralding a new form of urbanism to be expressed in a new,

---

<sup>22</sup> Asger Jorn’s critique of functionalism identifies the elimination of the “aesthetic” as the problem: “Aesthetics is the ‘science of the beautiful and ugly.’ Starting from platonic ideas, the functionalists ended up denying beauty’s autonomous existence by saying that ‘what is true and good is always beautiful’: that is, that beauty is contained within the logic of ethics themselves. Because of this false idea, they devised an aesthetic belief in making the exterior of an object a reflection of the practical functions of the interior and of the constructive ideal”. “Image and Form” (McDonough 54).



utopian, architecture, others within the Situationist International look to psychogeography as a means of reinventing the existing city through a perceptual transformation of the quotidian or “revolution of everyday life” in Raoul Vaneigem’s phrase. As McDonough notes, the later Situationist writings on psychogeography are more concerned with the techniques for recovering the experiential heterogeneity of existing cities than with designing alternative cities such as Constant’s New Babylon. Here the object of psychogeographic critique shifts: the impoverishment of urban experience is attributed not simply to the functionalism of the new town, but to a more generalised rationalisation of our encounter with the urban. It is an impoverishment that finds its graphic expression in the maps drawn by the sociologist Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe in *Paris and the Parisian Region* (1952) one of which, captioned “Commutes during the course of a year by a girl in the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. The central triangle has four vertices: home, piano lessons, and courses in Political Science” [Fig. 1], has achieved iconic status within the Situationist canon:



**Figure 1: “Commutes during the course of a year by a girl in the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. The central triangle has four vertices: home, piano lessons, and courses in Political Science” (McDonough 83).**

What the map reveals in its Situationist reading is the extent to which the citizen's encounter with the urban environment is programmed, or conditioned by the basic imperatives of capitalist rationality. It provides an image of the city as motivated by the grammar of capital, as a space which is structured around the activities of work, consumption, education and leisure. Considered in relationship to this map, the key psychogeographic techniques can be likened to poetic devices insofar as they are intended to defamiliarize the habitual space of the citizen and to reinstall an affective subject within the city through a recovery of the city's heterogeneity. Chief amongst these devices is the concept of the *dérive*, or drift, a form of movement which Debord explains in the following terms:

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.

But the *dérive* includes both this letting-go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities. In this latter regard, ecological science, despite the narrow social space to which it limits itself, provides psychogeography with abundant data. (Knabb 50)

The *dérive* opposes the functionalist logic of CIAM-inspired urban planning at a number of levels. Firstly, as an avowedly purposeless activity it exposes the motives involved in the production of space. In Debord's words, "it is futile . . . to search in our theories of architecture or *dérive* for any other motive than the passion for play" (McDonough 46). Further, in practical terms, as a pedestrian activity it resists the planners' increasing emphasis on the swift and efficient circulation of people, goods and information expressed in Le Corbusier's assertion that "[t]oday the main problem that urbanism must resolve is that of the smooth circulation of a rapidly increasing quantity of motor vehicles" (McDonough 60). In the context of this desire to

eliminate the pedestrian in the name of efficiency, the *dérive* represents an attempt to reassert the place of the street within the city (McDonough 44) and identifies the street and the pedestrian as forms of noise within the urban machine insofar as they frustrate the smooth circulation of goods and information.

Most importantly, however, the *dérive* acts as a practice that, in transforming the city into an unmotivated environment, also transforms the nature of the *dériviste*. The pedestrian adrift in the city in effect becomes an interface: by walking, the walker transforms the city into a guide to her unconscious. She discovers what she did not know she knew about the city and about the self: “from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones”. Against the functionalist view of the city as chaotic and contingent, psychogeography via the *dérive* thus asserts that the city’s apparent chaos and contingency is in fact the expression of other logics which are hidden to the rational mind: “Events depend upon chance only so long as the general laws governing the category are unknown” (McDonough 47). It is also useful to note the close association between *dérive* as a form of urban wandering which provides access to the unconscious and the wandering of the signifier celebrated in the play of post-structuralism, for, insofar as the *dérive* transforms the city into an expression of the unconscious, it becomes, by that token a place of lack and of radical homelessness. As such the drift of *dérive* becomes in effect a technique for transforming the city into the material expression of the lack that is in the Freudian account of the psyche, constitutive of the subject.

The ambivalences surrounding the object of psychogeographic critique (capitalism or functionalism) and purpose (architectural renewal or perceptual revolution) inevitably surfaces in the form of a political ambivalence. Psychogeography’s object of critique - the modernist movement in urbanism - was, after all, informed by an ostensible desire to improve the living conditions of the urban poor, and opinions originating in an antipathy to modernism on the basis of its crass materialism quickly become indistinguishable from opinions originating in a spirit of pure reaction. Chtcheglov, for example, rationalises the Situationist antipathy to functionalism thus:

This state of affairs, which arose out of a struggle against poverty, overshoots its ultimate goal - the liberation of humanity from material cares - and becomes an obsessive image hanging over the present. Between love and a garbage disposal, young people of all countries have made their choice and prefer the garbage disposal. (McDonough 37)

Chtcheglov's radicalism is aimed at the recovery of a form of sociality occluded by modernism, to bring about "[a] complete and sudden change in the spirit . . . by bringing to light forgotten desires and creating entirely new ones" (McDonough 37). In his stark opposition between love and garbage disposal, between Romantic love and a debased materialism, however, his "intensive propaganda in favor of these desires" also conjures into being the reactionary spectre of the bourgeois *flâneur* for whom the city is a spectacle to which poverty adds an enjoyably picturesque element. This spectre, also evident in Asger Jorn's assertion that "[m]odern human beings are suffocating under necessities like television, refrigerators, etc." (McDonough 54) appears again in the letter sent by Michele Bernstein, Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman to *The Times* to protest against the proposed demolition of the Chinese quarter in Limehouse, London. The letter, although an act of provocation rather than statement, suggests the extent to which social concern is subordinated to a gendered and class-based notion of the aesthetic:

We protest against such moral ideas in town planning, ideas which must obviously make England more boring than in recent years it has already become . . . We hold that the so-called modern town-planning which you recommend is fatuously idealistic and reactionary. The sole end of architecture is to serve the passions of men. (McDonough 52)

Despite its professed concern with the radical transformation of the city to give expression to an imagination repressed by modernist functionalism, psychogeographic praxis in its anti-modernist attraction to the old and arcane retains its affiliation to the tradition of the bourgeois *flâneur* for whom the city exists as a spectacle to be enjoyed from a perspective which is, typically, masculine and leisured. The "passions of men" should thus, despite Michelle Bernstein's signature, be taken literally. The subject the psychogeographer wishes to reinstall within the space of heterogeneity is

recognisably liberal-humanist: the individual who is defined by his emotions and psychic interiority and by his aesthetic relationship to his environment. In Debord's formulation psychogeography as "the point at which psychology and geography collide" (Coverley 10), quickly resolves itself into the point where urban space is organised around the familiar subject of liberal humanism, the subject who possesses psychological "depth" and in whom rational and irrational are combined in a "pleasing vagueness"; its plea that the "emotion and behaviour of individuals" needs to be factored into the thinking of cities quickly becomes a plea for a city fit for *flâneurs*.

Insofar as the antipathy to new towns is emblematic of that desire it is evident that the Situationist plea has to some extent been answered by the evolution of capital itself. The architecture of Mourenx is geared towards an economy structured around permanent employment and promotion within the corporate structure. It is an architecture which gives direct expression to the principles of efficiency and the localised concentration of labour power which distinguishes a Fordist economy based on the priority of material production. It is an architecture which, moreover, also invokes the larger narrative of that mode of economic production which Alan Sinfield (1997) terms "welfare capitalism" and David Harvey (*Brief History*), among others, "embedded liberalism".<sup>23</sup> The narrative is articulated around a belief in capitalism's

---

<sup>23</sup> The term is important insofar as it contests the portrayal of economic *dirigisme* as a form of top-down management: "This form of political-economic organization is now usually referred to as 'embedded liberalism' to signal how market processes and entrepreneurial and corporate activities were surrounded by a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment that sometimes restrained but in other instances led the way in economic and industrial strategy. State-led planning and in some instances state ownership of key sectors (coal, steel, automobiles) were not uncommon (for example in Britain, France, and Italy). The neoliberal project is to disembed capital from these constraints" (Harvey, *Brief History* 11).

For neoliberalism, Harvey provides the following extended, but still succinct, definition: "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit" (*Brief History* 4).

power to raise the general standard of living of its workforce, and when supplemented by a government welfare programme, to minimise the effects of its worst excesses, represents a progressive and modernising force, a narrative which is articulated around the promise “that capitalism will soon produce enough wealth for welfare to get round the remaining pockets of deprivation” (Sinfield 305). The transition from a Fordist to post-Fordist economy can be characterised in terms of a shift in emphasis from production to consumption, and from structural to flexible accumulation, it can also be characterised in terms of an implicit acceptance that the old promise of welfare capitalism no longer holds. Instead of the liberal consensus, the premise of the “disaster capitalism” associated with neoliberal economic policy by, among others, Naomi Klein (2007), David Harvey (*Brief History*) and BAVO (2007) is a growing acceptance “that the system is not going to deliver for very many people and it cannot be helped” (Sinfield 305).

If the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist regimes effectively puts an end to the modernist project denounced by French psychogeographers, it also complicates the politics of Situationism insofar as they are formulated in opposition to that programme. As Sinfield notes, the denunciation of the modernist project can be reclaimed as a form of revolutionary thought insofar as it marks a recognition that “welfare capitalism was not introduced at whim, but to cope with the disastrous and threatening conditions of 1900 to 1940” (Sinfield 305); that socialised welfare programmes effectively sustained capitalism by protecting it against the consequences of its worst excesses, or “even out the capitalist cycle of boom and slump” (xx). In alleviating the worst effects of urban poverty, the new town socialises the reproduction of the means of reproduction, thereby increasing the efficiency and profitability of capitalist production. As such, suggests Sinfield, much of post-war Left-wing politics was effectively dedicated to sustaining capitalism: “The attraction of welfare-capitalism was that we might yet socialize - humanize - the system without having to go to the improbable length of overthrowing it” (xxi). As such it is not difficult to recover a radical reading of Situationist anti-modernism: in insisting on the picturesque character of urban poverty, Debord can be read as presenting a far more radical critique of capital than the modernist architects of the welfare state.

However in the context of the risk society and disaster capitalism it becomes increasingly difficult to recover a radical reading of the Situationist critique of modernist urbanism. The aestheticisation of urban poverty becomes an integral part of the dynamic of regeneration within every city. Rather than an agent for the revolution of everyday life, the latter-day psychogeographer becomes a connoisseur of the sublime prospects thrown up by the operation of disaster capitalism upon the urban fabric. The transition of psychogeography from Paris to London and from an urban context where the production of space is governed by the requirements of a Fordist production regime to that of a post-Fordist organisation regime seems, in other words, to strip it of any potential for a radical intervention in the production of space.

A reading of that transition which preserves its radical potential, however, is formulated by Alastair Bonnett, who presents psychogeography as part of a wider politics of loss. Psychogeography, he suggests, is less a critique of modernism than a return of the unselected within modernism itself insofar as it is an expression of nostalgia which is the repressed category within a radical modernist tradition predicated on the need to make a constant break with the past. He argues that “[a]s hostility to nostalgia developed into a radical orthodoxy, the past became more attractive to the unorthodox” so that “[it] came to take on forbidden connotations and acquired transgressive qualities . . . that attracted the avant-garde” (51).

Psychogeography in this reading becomes a discourse for articulating the problematic place of home and attachment in a modernist discourse which is uncomfortable with all forms of attachment and which prizes mobility and flexibility above all other qualities. Psychogeography, in other words emerges out of the noisy contradiction within liberal thought in general. Consequently to investigate psychogeography’s peculiar position in relation to the transition from liberal to neoliberal spatial economies, from Paris to London, it is instructive to look at it in relationship to the correlations between political economy, the production of urban space and the operation of desire. To explore this intersection in detail we can turn to a text which in its central position within both the Parisian and London traditions of psychogeography constitutes in itself a form of “Northwest Passage” both between the two cities and liberal and neoliberal regimes of capital accumulation.

## De Quincey's mighty labyrinths

It is, suggests Debord, the “love story of Thomas De Quincey and poor Ann” that marks *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) as one of the found (rather than founding) texts of a canon that can retrospectively be identified as “psycho-geographical” (Debord. “Psycho-geographical Venice”).<sup>24</sup> If Piranesi is “psycho-geographical in the stairway” and “Saint Just is a bit psycho-geographical in politics”, De Quincey’s fruitless search for Ann in “the immense labyrinth of London’s streets”, says Debord, “marks the historical moment of the awakening to psycho-geographical influences upon the movement of human passion” - a moment which he claims can be “compared to the legend of Tristan”. To help make sense of Debord’s typically apothegmatic pronouncement and thereby give some form to the term “psycho-geographical” it is useful to recall some of the circumstances of that love story. In 1802 the 16 year-old De Quincey (1785-1859) ran away from his family and guardians (his father, a wealthy Manchester textile merchant, having died when he was seven). After a brief period in Wales, De Quincey eventually “contrived . . . to transfer himself to London” (*Confessions* 66) where he met Ann, or alternatively Anne, “one of that unhappy class who subsist upon the wages of prostitution” (70). Even younger than himself and more friendless, having been cheated out of her “small property” by a “ruffian”, Anne shows her true character when she spends a large part of her earnings on a glass of port and spices to revive De Quincey after he had fainted from hunger in Soho Square - an action which De Quincey is convinced saved his life. To repay this debt Thomas resolves to speak on Ann’s behalf before a magistrate to see if he can restore her to her property. Before he can perform this “small service”, however, he has to travel to Eton to secure a letter from an aristocratic acquaintance to vouch for his identity in order to borrow funds from a Jewish moneylender. On his return, Ann had vanished, and although he “sought her daily, and waited for her every night” as agreed, “at the corner of Titchfield street”, he

---

<sup>24</sup> Guy Debord, “Psycho-geographical Venice”, intended as a preface for a book by Ralph Rumney, who was excluded from the Situationist International a short time later because he failed to write the book as promised: “The love story of Thomas de Quincey and poor Ann - who are fortuitously separated and seek in vain to find each other ‘in the immense labyrinth of London’s streets, perhaps a few steps away’ - marks the historical moment of the awakening to psycho-geographical influences upon the movements of human passion, and the importance of this moment can, in this regard, only be compared to the legend of Tristan, which dates the formation of the very concept of love-passion”.

<http://www.notbored.org/psycho-geographical-venice.html> accessed 29.07.11.



never saw her again, nor in the intervening years, despite leaving his address with a mutual acquaintance, did he ever hear “a syllable about her” (83).

And that’s it. A couple of turns up and down Oxford Street and an unfulfilled promise of legal representation in exchange for a glass of port and spices seems a flimsy foundation on which to base claims for a romance to rival that of Tristran and Isolde. The power of this love story lies of course in the fact that Anne’s insubstantial narrative presence is filled out by her narrativisation: that this love story is above all a *love story*. Anne’s disappearance without trace is, for example, vividly prefigured by that of the mysterious child with whom De Quincey camps out, Crusoe-like, in the uninhabited Greek Street mansion belonging to the mysterious Mr ---- “one of those anomalous practitioners in the lower departments of the law” (69). She too is a figure without a background - possibly the illegitimate daughter of the proprietor, possibly a domestic servant, who disappears during the day and communes with De Quincey by night. She too exists primarily as the lost object of sentiment - her marginal social position and absence of a patronym rendering her unrecoverable as anything other than an object of memory and speculation. The symbolic association of Anne and that “forsaken child” is formally marked by their textual enjambment:

Her, by the bye, in after years, I vainly endeavoured to trace . . . I loved the child because she was my partner in wretchedness. If she is now living, she is probably a mother, with children of her own; but, as I have said, I could never trace her.

This I regret, but another person there was at that time, whom I have since sought to trace with far deeper earnestness, and with far deeper sorrow at my failure. (70)

If Ann is prefigured in the nameless child, she is even more vividly realised in acts of recollection, as the absent object of his apostrophes - “Oh noble-minded Ann” (71) - but more particularly, in his lurid speculations about her subsequent fate: “but now I should fear to see her; and her cough, which grieved me when I parted with her is now my consolation. I now wish to see her no longer; but think of her more gladly, as one long since laid in the grave” before “the brutalities of ruffians had completed the ruin they had begun” (84). Ann inhabits the meanwhile: “Meantime, what had

become of poor Anne?" (83). She resides in a condition which is at once narratological - a time that only exists in stories - and spatial in that it is also the dimension of parallel streets and parallel lives. For the real frisson of this romance, we recognise, is topographical: it lies in De Quincey's conjecture that, somewhere out there, at the same time as he was desperately seeking Ann, Anne was desperately seeking him, that,

[i]f she lived, doubtless we must have been sometimes in search of each other, at the very same moment, through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps even within a few feet of each other - a barrier no wider in a London street, often amounting in the end to a separation for eternity! (83)

As this passage makes plain, the affective force of De Quincey's love story is derived not from its lost object, Anne, so much as from the topography of the metropolis itself: a topography of "knotty problems of alleyways . . . enigmatical entries, and . . . sphynx's riddles of streets without thoroughfares" (98) which is imbued with an almost palpable sense of sexual frustration. It is this world whose texture is reproduced in De Quincey's tortured syntax where it is possible for lovers to miss each other by inches, where a moment's delay results in an eternity's separation, which makes possible that new kind of emotion attendant upon that new kind of loss which Walter Benjamin recognising in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire termed "love at last sight" (*Illuminations* 169): a perception of that which might have been.<sup>25</sup>

The story of Thomas de Quincey and poor Ann, in other words, is psychogeographical insofar as it marks the emergence of a metropolitan subject fashioned through the interrelationship of topography and narrative. As Julian Wolfreys notes, in *The Confessions* we see possibly for the first time a writing which is confronted by the city as obstacle and co-author: "In its insistent, endlessly iterable acts of difference, the city imposes on writing its own shapes which, in turn, proscribe the desire to enunciate a unified self. And as the city dictates its own

---

<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin: "In a widow's veil, mysteriously and mutely borne along by the crowd, an unknown woman comes into the poet's field of vision. What this sonnet communicates is simply this: Far from experiencing the crowd as an opposed, antagonistic element, this very crowd brings to the city dweller the figure that fascinates. The delight of the urban poet is love - not at first sight, but at last sight" (*Illuminations* 169).

writing, so anxieties are produced in the face of this other writing of the city” (*Writing the City* 102). It is psychogeographical in that it presents a city whose unknowability is elevated to a principle of subject formation. However, where Wolfreys characterizes this relationship between the written self and the city as one of anxiety, it is evident that other forces are also at work in De Quincey’s psychogeography. This multiplication of narratives implied by the search for Anne is not just a topographical trope, rather it is intrinsic to what Timothy Morton terms “Romantic consumerism” (111): that form of reflexive consumerism that is devoted, not to the consumption of any particular object, but to the consumption of the idea of consumption itself. A consumerism which takes the form of an endless trying on of possible versions of, or narratives about, the self. The retrospective trying on of an affair with a passerby implied in love at last glance or speculation on the fate of a brief encounter on Oxford Street, constitutes consumerism “raised to the highest power [which] is free-floating identity, or identity in process” where the “(necessarily) external event becomes the piece of grit that helps to generate the pearl of revised selfhood” (111), an endless self-fashioning, or trying out of the self in its myriad possibilities. A consumerism in which the actual always represents the foreclosure of the possible: a message which can only arrive because it could have gone astray.

The distinctive topography of De Quincey’s metropolis thus serves to materialize an idea of the possible as that which cancels the actual, and it is this consciousness that constitutes the narrative identity of Ann, a woman who, without a patronym, and hence an address in social-symbolic space, is reduced to little more than an indefinite article, an orphan, an illusion, an apparition. She becomes desirable wholly through her disappearance, desirable that is as a signifier of that which can never be possessed, the ever-disappearing object which Jacques Lacan, in order to distinguish it from other possible objects of desire, designated the *objet petit a*. As an *objet petit a*, insofar as she signifies a lack, or absence, within any object actually present to the senses, Ann acts as a model of addiction itself: a compulsion to consume which can never be satisfied by any possible object of consumption. In De Quincey’s eyes Ann literally transforms all other women into not-Annes: “I suppose that, in the literal and unrheterical use of the word *myriad*, I have looked into many, many myriads of female faces, in the hope of meeting her” (*Confessions* 83-4). Similarly De Quincey’s speculations on her ruin, and horror of meeting her in the present correspond to

Lacan's observations on the disgust attendant on any actual manifestation of the *objet petit a*. Anne thus comes to symbolize a desire which is in excess of any possible object, a desire for lack itself, which seems to gesture towards that which resists symbolization absolutely, the Real. As such Anne stands as a sign for the unknowability of metropolitan space, an unknowability which returns the Romantic subject an image of its own unknowability and hence its ability to always escape the finitude of the actual. It is the same principle which aligns De Quincey's metropolitan narratives with his contributions to the still infant discourse of political economy.

### De Quincey and the noise of liberal economics

In nominating De Quincey as a progenitor of psychogeography then, Debord precisely identifies a nexus of concern with romantic self-fashioning and the production of urban space. In De Quincey he nominates too a figure whose writing exemplifies the contradictory role of noise within the production of liberalism's imagined space: the contradiction, that is between noise as that which frustrates the free communication that is the source of value in liberal ethics and noise as the producer of value within liberal economics theory. As Nigel Leask observes, De Quincey's "writings are full of panegyrics to the organic power of capitalism, a network of communications across the nation forged by technological advance, first of the mail coach system, then by telegraphs and railways" (196). The idea that the unrestricted circulation of information is a pre-requisite for a healthy political economy receives one of its most memorable expressions in his essay *The English Mail Coach: Or the Glory of Motion* (1849).<sup>26</sup> Founded by the MP John Palmer, the mail coach system provides De Quincey with an image of

---

<sup>26</sup> "That great national sentiment surmounts and quells all sense of ordinary distinctions. Those passengers who happen to be gentlemen are now hardly to be distinguished as such except by dress. The usual reserve of their manner in speaking to the attendants has on this night melted away. One heart, one pride, one glory, connects every man by the transcendent bond of his English blood. The spectators, who are numerous beyond precedent, express their sympathy with these fervent feelings by continual hurrahs. Every moment are shouted aloud by the post-office servants the great ancestral names of cities known to history through a thousand years, - Lincoln, Winchester, Portsmouth, Gloucester, Oxford, Bristol, Manchester, York, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Perth, Glasgow-expressing the grandeur of the empire by the antiquity of its towns, and the grandeur of the mail establishment by the diffusive radiation of its separate missions" (*English Mail Coach* 253).

the conscious presence of a central intellect, that, in the midst of vast distances, of storms, of darkness, of night, overruled all obstacles into one steady co-operation in a national result. To my own feeling, this post-office service recalled some mighty orchestra, where a thousand instruments, all disregarding each other, and so far in danger of discord, yet all obedient as slaves to the supreme baton of some great leader, terminate in a perfection of harmony like that of heart, veins, and arteries, in a healthy animal organization. (*The English Mail Coach* 232)

This memorable image of the postal system as a form of organisation in which a thousand instruments all working independently constitute an organization capable of overcoming the fury of the elements encodes both of the liberal conceptions of noise. Even as it celebrates the power of the mail to overcome natural obstacles and to usher forth the new subject, the nation, as a single organism, it provides an image of order emerging from apparent chaos through the operation of some invisible agency. It illustrates in other words the liberal economic theorist's understanding of noise as anything that obstructs the circulation of people and goods, and hence as that which should be removed from a system to improve its health, and at the same time, the recognition of the ways in which value and meaning arise from the operations of delay and deferral that he displays as a poet of the city.

This understanding of the economic function of noise is, as Otto Mayr (1986) notes, enshrined within the founding texts of economic liberalism as a resistance to external structures of authority. It is this resistance to the sovereign and the planned economy that makes liberal thinkers particularly sympathetic to images of systems which achieve a state of order or equilibrium through self-regulation, which, in other words, demonstrate an ability to produce order out of chaos. If Adam Smith's invisible hand provides the paradigmatic instance of this principle of self-organisation, an even more striking example is furnished by Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1705). Mandeville's thesis substantiates the claim of its subtitle with the argument that the profligacy of the libertine is more beneficial to

society because he keeps money in circulation than the parsimony of the Puritan whose moral rectitude provides nobody with employment.<sup>27</sup>

A similar argument is woven around De Quincey's account of his opium addiction. De Quincey's polemical argument within *The Confessions* that opium is not dangerous or injurious to the health when taken in moderation, but as an agent of pleasure is actually beneficial to the health of the individual, and of a society grown irritable and fractious by phenomena such as urbanisation and industrialisation. The danger of opium, De Quincey seeks to show, lies in over-indulgence, and in his case this was because after years of using the drug as a form of "portable ecstasy", he began using it as a palliative to cure the return of a stomach condition consequent, he believed, on his weeks as a runaway. This polemic point, argues Nigel Leask, effectively transforms De Quincey's "confession" into an accusation addressed to all those numerous addicts who, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, hid not only their addiction, but also its roots in pleasure. De Quincey's true confession is thus that he is a eudaemonist. This valorisation of pleasure, his insistence that his private vice is in reality a public virtue, forms part of a wider re-evaluation of "luxury" as an agent of economic growth, as Anne Jannowitz observes:

there was a de-moralizing of luxury in the course of the eighteenth century, linked to arguments about the national interest and the exigencies of the trading economy - the old debates about the corruption of luxury were becoming new ones about the national obligations of productivity. (249)<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> The idea of the market as a self-organising system is explicitly formulated by Friedrich Hayek: "Spontaneous social orders are 'the result of human actions but not of human design,' the unintended consequence of the independent decisions and actions of many individuals" (Kley 102).

As Alan Marshall notes, Hayek, "always embraced the order from chaos worldview of liberalism and often set about to detail some of its workings. Spontaneous orders, as he called them, are the results of the actions of individual entities but not of conscious planning by these entities. Humans act, so thought Hayek, individually and rationally upon decentralized information flows, most notably price levels, to contribute to a spontaneous economic order" (143). While several neoliberal thinkers have cited complexity theory to argue that capitalism is, as a self-organising system, spontaneous and natural.

<sup>28</sup> For a further discussion of this point see Anne Jannowitz: "at the centre of the austerity of Romanticism's highest reason is sublimity, which is a luxurious site, in which both the objects the imagination contemplates, and the emotions generated by that observation overflow their boundaries and become wonder, astonishment and awe" (249); "Romanticism is thus paradoxically credited with generating the dream of the luxurious commodity while its moments of sublimity are taut with alpine

De Quincey's economic theory, formulated in *The Logic of Political Economy* (1844), as Margaret Russett notes, contributes directly to this transformation of luxury through the notion of "affirmative value". In this concept he tries to correct a tendency within political economy to consider only questions of production and use value:

Founded upon the "labour theory of value", political economy excludes from consideration items that appear to be priced subjectively, or according to "the caprice of taste". Thus it also excludes any conception of power inassimilable to a hydraulic or Newtonian model . . . The concept may be understood as De Quincey's attempt to reintegrate the pole of consumption into a science that had, since *The Wealth of Nations*, concerned itself solely with production.  
(140)

De Quincey in other words, attempts to find a place for the operation of desire as a consciousness of lack within the new science of political economy - to assert the structural importance of absence in a science hitherto predicated on presence; of waste in the production of value.

Similarly De Quincey describes the opium eater not as an addict, but as an "intellectual creature" who finds in opium a means of restoring the equilibrium that is disturbed by the social environment. Opium is, in De Quincey's account, an artificial, or preternatural, means of achieving those spots of time that the older generation of Romantics sought in Nature as the locus of the pre-social. At the same time it performs those spots of time narratologically - ostensibly providing an account of those incidents which were later transfigured in the dreams, it effectively allows the

---

austerity, a double structure of excess and anxiety. The sublime, that is, recapitulates at the level of transcendence the moral debate about luxury" (249). And again: the "crossover between luxury and sensibility was available in the vivid figure of the 'luxury of grief,' which demonstrates how the metaphor of superfluity was shaped into a positive moral attribute" (249); "Both the aesthetic category of sublimity and the economic-moral one of luxury are positively re-valued in the second half of the eighteenth century. As Majorie Hope Nicholson made clear, the mountain emerges as glorious after its history of being a wart and pimple on the face of the earth; similarly, luxury is discovered to be productive and not corruptive" (249).

dreams to dictate the narration of the life, reversing the causality of the *bildungsroman*. Only after he has dreamed does he remember in the sense of recognise the significance of a period in his earlier life - the return of the streets of London - return in the sense of psychic cost. *The Confessions* thus presents narrative as *Nachträglichkeit*, as the scene of *recognition*.

Given the intricacy with which the narrative of Romantic self-fashioning is structured around patterns of loss and return, its assumption that nothing can be lost, that within the narrative economy, everything signifies, the question arises, what is the unselected that can return as noise? If De Quincey's narrative, as I have argued, registers the operation of noise within the process of self-fashioning and dramatizes the consequences of the cessation of return, the same insistence on the importance of noise to the operation of a healthy system is embedded in his account of the psychosomatic operation of the drug. Insofar as the Romantic self is constituted in and through loss, what returns as noise is the loss of loss, or in narratological terms the loss of any delay between thing and supplement, reality and fantasy, life and dream, and it is precisely this loss of loss that in De Quincey's account constitutes the pains of opium. Thus he notes that the first indication of the "important change going on in my physical economy" was the return of "a state of eye generally incident to childhood" (*The Confessions* 118), an ability to paint "upon the darkness, all sorts of phantoms", or an ability to exercise a "command over apparitions" (118) with the result that "whatsoever I happened to call up and to trace by a voluntary act upon the darkness was very apt to transfer itself to my dreams" (119):

In the middle of 1817, I think it was, that this faculty became positively distressing to me: at night, when I lay in bed, vast processions passed along in mournful pomp; friezes of never-ending stories . . . whatsoever I happened to call up and to trace by a voluntary act upon the darkness was very apt to transfer itself to my dreams. (118-19)

Psychosis is, in other words, identified with the break down of any distinction or gap between the voluntary act of imagination and the involuntary act of dream:



So that I feared to exercise this faculty [imagination]; for, as Midas turned all things to gold, that yet baffled his hopes and defrauded his human desires, so whatsoever things capable of being visually represented I did but think of in the darkness, immediately shaped themselves into phantoms of the eye; and, by process apparently no less inevitable, when thus once traced in faint and visionary colours, like writings in sympathetic ink, they were drawn out by the fierce chemistry of my dreams, into insufferable splendour that fretted my heart. (119)

In presenting the pains of opium as a form of absolute wish-fulfilment, and giving, in the allusion to Midas, that erasure of the gap between desire and its fulfilment an explicitly economic figuration, De Quincey combines his psychological and economic theories of opium around an understanding that delay is an absolute pre-requisite for social and physical well-being. In so doing, he indirectly affirms the liberal's implicit conviction that noise as the signal of difference is the fundamental condition of a healthy economy.<sup>29</sup> De Quincey's text, in other words exhibits liberalism's dual investment in the economy of noise. While he explicitly argues for the removal of restrictions to the free circulation of goods and information in, for example, *The English Mail Coach*, his *Confessions* demonstrates its commitment to the principle that physical and economic health requires the operation of the excesses of luxury and pleasure, that economic wealth is generated through profligacy and waste.

In De Quincey's text, then liberalism's contradictory investment in noise as simultaneously that which must be eliminated in the interest of free movement and that which generates value through the principles of delay and difference is intimately entwined with his figuration of metropolitan space and those qualities which lead

---

<sup>29</sup> In its intricate manipulations of the times of *histoire* and *recit*, its constant interruption of narrative flow to identify the time of composition, *The Confessions* continually attempts to restore that room for difference obliterated by opium. A simple division of *The Confessions* into experience and dream thus does violence to the subtlety of De Quincey's management of the temporality within his text and the ways in which he illustrates his thesis that "years that were far asunder were bound together by subtle chains of suffering with a common root". In one spectacular instance he recalls how as a youth he would walk up and down Oxford Street wishing to be transported to a cottage in the North, little knowing that one day he would be in that cottage in the North being hounded by visions that had their origins on Oxford Street, but that he would then be nursed back to health by the love of a good woman, whom he now misses as he once more walks up and down Oxford Street.

Debord to identify him as a proto-psychogeographer. Psychogeography, consequently, becomes a spatial performance of the more general Romantic principle of love at last glance, at that politics of loss that Bonnett identifies as the repressed force within the discourse of modernity as a radical forgetting. It is in this context that I want to consider the ambivalences worked out within the psychogeography of Iain Sinclair.

### Sinclair and the matter of London

“If there is one person who, more than any other, is responsible for the current popularity that psychogeography enjoys, then it is Iain Sinclair” (Coverley 119). As Merlin Coverley notes, psychogeography’s elevation from the obscurity of the *Internationale Situationist # 1*, 1957 to a weekly column in a UK broadsheet is intimately associated with the work and influence of Sinclair. However, Sinclair’s own commentary on the term and concept suggest his attitude to psychogeography is rather more equivocal than Coverley’s attribution implies. In conversation with Kevin Jackson in 2003, for example, Sinclair emphasises the opportunism involved in his use of the term: “I thought psychogeography could be adapted quite conveniently to forge a franchise - which is what happened, more than I could have imagined! [Laughs] It took off!” (Jackson 75)<sup>30</sup> while he strikes a similarly ambivalent note when he tells Stuart Jeffries:

For me, [psychogeography] is a way of psychoanalysing the psychosis of the place in which I happen to live. I’m just exploiting it because I think it’s a canny way to write about London. Now it’s become the name of a column by Will Self in which he seems to walk about the South Downs with a pipe,

---

<sup>30</sup> In full: “I think the word first crossed my path in the 1960s, but it didn’t really take. The Situationist Era drifted through me, and I didn’t think I was practising anything which 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. I mean, they weren’t seriously interested in where things fell on the map, they were just using those forms, but I seriously was interested in where things fell on the map. I thought psychogeography could be adapted quite conveniently to forge a franchise - which is what happened, more than I could have imagined! [Laughs] It took off!” (Jackson 75).

which has got absolutely nothing to do with psychogeography. There's an awful sense that you have created a monster. In a way I've allowed myself to become this London brand. I've become a hack on my own mythology, which fascinates me. From there on in you can either go with it or subvert it. (Jeffries 2004)

Insofar as Sinclair's frequently signalled ambivalence registers his unease at the unexpected popularity of psychogeography - and his own translation from the fringe of literary culture to Radio 4 book of the week status - it is important to return to the strategies for contextualising the 1990s psychogeographic revival noted at the opening of the chapter. For Phil Baker, we remember, the resurgent popularity of psychogeography in Thatcherite London, is due to the fact that it answered a need to personalise an increasingly anonymous space. In the absence of any collective narratives that would serve to help us locate ourselves in time and space, personal maps and private mythologies become the only means of making sense of our immediate environment. Psychogeography in its London incarnation is, in other words, a response to precisely the opposite situation than that of mid-twentieth century France. In neoliberal London psychogeography becomes a means of making sense of a place rendered unreadable not by the alienating effects of an excessively rationalist urbanism, but by the more generally disorientating effects of a "post-consensus, post-societal" (Baker 326) postmodernity: as a consequence of the atomisation of society and disappearance of any functioning notion of collective space.

It is an analysis which, at first sight, seems to chime with the "withdrawal from political commitment" (3) which Brian Baker reads in the trajectory of Sinclair's work and which Baker takes to be characteristic of the counter-culture generation as a whole. For Baker, as we have noted, Sinclair "exemplifies the utopian aspirations of the late-1960s counter-culture, disillusionment with its failure, and the subsequent realignment of critiques of contemporary conditions of life from an explicitly Marxian politics to an oppositional stance concerned with the configuration of urban space" (2-3). The resurgence of interest in psychogeography in general and Sinclair's texts in particular can then be read as symptomatic of the wider problematisation of politics in a neoliberal regime characterised by the evacuation of the political in the face of what

Fisher (2009) terms “capitalist realism”: the belief that the economics of the market represent the ultimate horizon of any political action. By pressing this reading I want to argue that in the ambivalences evident in Sinclair’s use of psychogeography we see less a retreat from the political than an attempt to formulate a new, dissensual model of the political whose mode of expression is spatial.

The nature of the ambivalences informing Sinclair’s psychogeography and of his nuanced understanding of the praxis becomes apparent from his most explicitly psychogeographical text, the prose collection *Lights out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London* (1997). Here the opening essay of the collection, “Skating on Thin Eyes: The First Walk” provides one of Sinclair’s clearest statements of psychogeographical intent. The essay begins:

The notion was to cut a crude V into the sprawl of the city, to vandalise dormant energies by an act of ambulant signmaking. To walk out from Hackney to Greenwich Hill, and back along the River Lea to Chingford Mount, recording and retrieving the messages on walls, lampposts, doorjamb: the spites and spasms of an increasingly deranged populace. (*Lights Out 1*)

The emphasis on cutting immediately marks the distance between Sinclair’s psychogeographic practice and that described by Debord.<sup>31</sup> Where Debord advocates a practice of submission and drift Sinclair invokes psychogeography as an active practice which in its hinted anti-social inclinations - “to vandalize dormant energies” - mirrors the psychosis attributed to the wider population.

In this emphasis on cutting as opposed to drift, Sinclair also alerts us to the presence within the traditional repertoire of the avant-garde of two techniques whose differences although apparently minimal are of critical significance. With its emphasis on drift and the suspension of volition, the *dérive* closely resembles other techniques for accessing the unconscious by evading the mediation of consciousness such as the free association exemplified by automatic writing. Sinclair’s conceit of the walk as a

---

<sup>31</sup> Debord’s description, however, does not accurately reflect the broad range of psychogeographic techniques practiced by the SI, some of which, such as using a map of London to navigate the Harz mountains, more closely resemble Sinclair’s psychogeographic practice.

mark inscribed upon or incised within the city, however, is more readily identified with an other equally well-established avant-garde genre typified by the technique of the cut-up, a technique which can be traced back to Tristan Tzara, but which achieved its greatest prominence in the work of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin (who serves as an important link between the European avant-garde and the North American counter culture). As earlier practitioners of the technique had discovered, the power of cut-up lies in its ability to release images and energies whose affective power would otherwise have been contained and rationalised by the cognitive structure of narrative, or other forms of conscious patterning. Just as cutting up and re-assembling existing texts reveals imagery contained within, but not articulated by, the original, in carving a crude V into the sprawl of the city, Sinclair in effect marks out an itinerary which will conjoin, or constellate, within the space of his text, figures and events whose connections are initially topographical. Here, the V-shaped walk is intended to reveal the presence of a city which cannot be articulated within more structured or more rationally motivated encounters with urban space. It is this perception that encourages us to gloss the title, “Skating on Thin Eyes”, as gesturing towards the fragility of the mechanisms - the subject denoted by the first person pronoun and its attendant scopic regime - through which we normalise the city. Sinclair’s text gestures towards the chaos of a space unstructured by the grammar of capital and the eyes/ ‘I’s that sustain subjectivity.

Where the notion of *dérive* as drift is easily associated with the endless play of the signifier celebrated in post-structural accounts of textuality, and hence, invites us to read the notion of *dérive* as symbolic of the radical homelessness of the Freudian subject, a cut-based psychogeographic praxis invites other constructions of the relationship between the city and the subject. In terms of the classical structuralist distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic linguistic operations, Sinclair’s use of the *dérive*-as-cut represents a form of radical syntagmatism in that it elevates pure contiguity to the primary principle of textual organisation. Critically this methodological insistence on the syntagm transforms the city into a place of encounter from the site of self-encounter implied by the *dérive*-as-drift. Whereas the *dérive*-as-drift produces a city which reflects the operations of the *dériviste*’s unconscious, the *dérive*-as-cut shifts the focus away from the unconscious of the *dériviste* towards the population as a whole and a wider cultural unconscious so that

psychogeography becomes in Sinclair's formula, "a way of psychoanalysing the psychosis of the place in which I happen to live". It is this concern with minimising the role of the *dériviste* that informs Sinclair's anxiety that as originally conceived the "proposed walk was far too neat" (5), and his hope "for an accident to bring about a final revision" (5). The desired accident which he "finds" in an "invitation six months out of date" to the opening of a site-specific installation at the University of Greenwich, entitled "the curve of forgetting" constitutes the sort of "arbitrary revision" which can authorise his walk precisely because, as a message from the city to the walker, it seems to provide a motive which, paradoxically, will eliminate any residual shred of intentionality.

Crucially, the discovery of an accidental motive also transforms the V from a sign imposed upon the city, a letter, into the trace of a gesture, an incision which will release the energies and voices harboured by the city as text. This sense of the V as a mark which hovers somewhere between a signifier and a purely graphic form is also strongly indicated in his account of his inspiration for his V-shaped route:

I had developed this curious conceit while working on my novel *Radon Daughters*: that the physical movements of the characters across their territory might spell out the letters of a secret alphabet. Dynamic shapes, with ambitions to achieve a life of their own, quite independent of their supposed author. (1)

The revision of Paul Auster's similar conceit in *City of Glass* (1985) is subtle but important. Where the apparently arbitrary movements of Auster's character around the streets of New York spell out the name of the mythical city of noise - "OWER OF BABEL" - a message which becomes visible only from the panoptical perspective of the cartographer, Sinclair's "secret alphabet" will be composed of characters which, even from a panoptical perspective, may not be recognised as letters but are rather "dynamic shapes". One such dynamic shape is "LAING" (10) the sign simultaneously of the construction company responsible for much of the redevelopment of the city and of R.D. Laing the anti-psychiatrist whose theories of the social construction of mental illness provide an alternative model for understanding the "psychosis" attendant upon that redevelopment. Where a Freudian

inspired psychogeography would find an expression of its own constitutive lack within the material environment, a psychogeography drawing on R.D. Laing's account of mental illness as visited upon the individual by her social environment can be expected to provide a far less individual-oriented version of the psyche. Where the notion of drift points us to a Freudian subject and a politics of loss, the notion of cut, consequently, encourages us to attend to the social and material aspects in the construction of psychosis.

The way in which the distinction between cut and drift serves as a figure for the distance between Paris and London is again registered when Sinclair writes:

Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, trampling 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*. (4)

In locating his psychogeographic investigation at the point where letters hover between sign and shape, Sinclair quite literally opens his text to “everything”, refusing even the meta-selection that distinguishes the sign from its noisy material substrate.<sup>32</sup> In this concern with the tension between the material and the semiotic, we glimpse the more general ambiguity that informs Sinclair's depiction of the “matter of London” (26), itself a phrase which, echoing the medieval traditions of “the matter of France” and “the matter of England”, combines the materialist with the archaic sense of the mythography of London, “the refleshing of Lud's withered hyde” (26). Equally we should note that the shift away from the nation and towards the city as the locus of a new mythos points to the transfiguration of the relationships between city and nation attendant upon globalisation.

---

<sup>32</sup> The friability of the material substrate of urban iconography is one of the dominant notes within the visual aesthetic of Sinclair's texts generally and Marc Atkins photography for *Lights Out* in particular.

The thematic concern with the matter of London as simultaneously material and mythical is evident in the lengthy meditation on “tagging” that opens the first essay. As the poor relation of graffiti and street art, tagging constitutes a sort of background noise which, Sinclair suggests, approaches the condition of phatic within the streetscape - “the only constant on these fantastic journeys” (4). As background noise, graffiti’s unselected, Sinclair is attentive to the ways in which the instability of sign and form evident in tagging carry messages about the wider culture:

Urban graffiti is all too often a signature without a document, an anonymous autograph. The tag is everything, as jealously defended as the Coke or Disney decals. Tags are the marginalia of corporate tribalism. Their offence is to parody the most visible aspect of high capitalist black magic . . . The name, unnoticed except by fellow taggers, is a gesture, an assertion: it stands in place of the individual artist who, in giving up his freedom, becomes free. (1)

Tagging as a compulsive assertion of identity which dissolves identity in noise effectively marks the *reductio ad absurdum* of liberal principles of freedom of expression: “The public autograph is an announcement of nothingness, abdication, the swift erasure of the envelope of identity” (1-2). Tagging as a form of psychosis and as a form of logo in this sense can be read as mirroring the mystery of commodity fetishism itself and, in identifying the tag as a parodic commentary on the language of capital Sinclair alludes to Theodor Adorno’s dictum that modernist art in its refusal of function - its insistence on form and materiality - apparently scandalises the utilitarian rationale of a culture where value is associated with the instrumental, but actually reveals the concealed truth of that economy: the principle of commodity fetishism. The constant presence of these jealously defended but semantically empty marks - tags and logos - within the margins of our culture act as a suture of seemingly opposed categories: the individual and the corporate, the aesthetic and the commercial, but above all of the material and the “black magic” that produces capitalist value. In choosing to open his essay with this meditation on the relationship between the tag and the logo, the similarity between the marginalised script at the edge of culture, a form of cultural production which seems almost uniquely resistant to commodification, and the heavily policed signs that drive an economy based largely on the operation of “signs, affects and code” (Hardt and Negri,



*Commonwealth* 299) Sinclair also prepares us to read his walk as exploring the city as the expression of a particular kind of space produced by the various forms of immaterial labour. And, as the conjunction of the tag and logo indicate, it is a space in which the post-Fordist economy is understood in terms of the identity of value and waste.

In the juxtaposition of the tag and the logo, two signs whose outward similarity serves to highlight the polarities of value and waste within the immaterial economy, Sinclair effectively allows us to glimpse the space that is occluded in the articulation of experience around the binary categories of the public and the private. According to Hardt and Negri, language serves as an important example of the cultural commons upon which capital relies in order to produce value. Language is neither public nor private but, precisely and necessarily, common, for “if large portions of our words, phrases or parts of speech were subject to private ownership or public authority - then language would lose its powers of expression, creativity, and communication” (*Commonwealth* ix). As a paradigmatic form of the common, the tag and the logo as linguistic operations provide a useful demonstration of the dynamics of appropriation upon which capitalist value is produced through immaterial labour. If the logo is emblematic of the strategy through which capitalised value is generated through the privatisation of a common resource, in its juxtaposition with the tag, it is evident that this privatisation is achieved not simply through the parcelling off of a particular area of language or sign, but that it involves a more general process of eviction. Brand identity is, in effect, achieved at the expense of individual identity. The corporate body materialises itself through the appropriation of a graphic form as the marker of individual identity, while the taggers in their parody of that model of individual identity as a form of private property, perform their own dispossession, and in so doing provide that surplus required for the production of value in an immaterial economy.

For Hardt and Negri language thus serves an important heuristic purpose in that it can “help readers retrain their vision, recognizing the common that exists and what it can do” (*Commonwealth* ix). Sinclair, in his insistence that his project should be seen as an act of “ambulant signmaking” and devotion to “recording and retrieving” the language of the city, effectively describes a project which is positioned to explore the

relationship between the language of the common - language which is neither public nor private and its corresponding dimension of urban space.

The nature of this project becomes clearer as Sinclair continues his account of London's graffiti. If tagging presents us with a graphic instance of the ways in which matter emerges through semantic exhaustion and points to the operation of this process at the heart of the liberal economy, his account of the writing on East London walls goes on to reveal another inversion of sign and matter insofar as these walls provide the material substrate for voices which have no other place within the rapidly privatising media ecology of what is, in 1997, still a proto-digital period: "As newspapers have atrophied into the playthings of grotesque megalomaniacs, uselessly shrill exercises in mind control, so disenfranchised authors have been forced to adapt the walls to playful collages of argument and invective" (3). These "disenfranchised authors" include creative voices that have matched their message to the precarious ecology of the wall, but also voices who find in the wall an opportunity to deliver messages which would otherwise be unheard:

My own patch in Hackney has been mercilessly colonised by competing voices from elsewhere: Kurds, Peruvians, Irish, Russians, Africans. Contour lines of shorthand rhetoric asserting the borders between different areas of influence. Graffiti could, I hoped, be read like a tidemark. In the course of our walk we'd find precisely where the "Freedom" of Dursan Karatas gave way to the "Innocence" of George Davis - OK. (3)

In this account the walls of the neoliberal city provide the material substrate for voices whose physical and discursive locations have been erased, or are under threat of erasure, by the forces of globalization. The walls mediate messages that emanate from regions which are unrecognised on other maps or which cannot survive in an increasingly privatised mainstream media ecology. The walls of Hackney, in other words present the psychogeographer with a space that provides a map of spaces which could not otherwise be mapped.

As such, rather than a vision of the metropolis as an endless drift which mirrors the psyche's homelessness, attention to the graffiti on a walk through Hackney allows us

to see the metropolis as a home to those voices that it has itself “disenfranchised”: a city which is the home of the homeless, of parts with no part. This homelessness can be territorial as in the case of the displaced Kurdish “mountain people . . . queuing politely for their turn at the photocopier” (13-14), or temporal, as in the legend “George Davis is Innocent” which persists as an echo of a forgotten crime. The persistence of messages long beyond their topicality, such as George Davis and the Angry Brigade graffiti points to the ways in which the history of the district has been made up of successive communities of the displaced who have in turn been displaced from the locality. These communities include the successive waves of immigrant populations - Huguenot, Irish, Jewish, Cypriots and Bangladeshi - but also historical and socio-cultural groups such as hippies, 70s radicals and East End gangsters. In this place of the displaced, even attempts to thematize transience produce their own exclusions: elsewhere Sinclair notes that the plans to turn the Princelet Street synagogue into a “Museum of Immigration” refused to feature the room of the Jewish caretaker also in the building as “too gothic” (Hague 2011).

Informing this vision of East London as a place of radical homelessness, a place where even the exclusions of a rhetoric organised around exclusion become visible, is an understanding of the city’s peculiar relation to the logic of enclosure. If the metropolis is historically the product of the wealth generated by the ongoing processes of appropriation exemplified by the enclosure of the English commons - as Sinclair will explore through the figure of John Clare in *Edge of the Orison* (2001), discussed below - it is also produced as a new commons by those dispossessed in that process: a new commons which then becomes available for the new acts of appropriation and enclosure that define the cityscape of London in the 1990s. It is this double process which produces London as simultaneously a new common and the site of a new enclosure that generates the ambivalence in the title, *Lights Out For the Territory*. In one sense, through its allusion to Mark Twain’s “Territories” and the yet-to-be-appropriated lands beyond the American frontier, it identifies the space explored in Sinclair’s texts with a form of commons, a realm of freedom beyond the spatial categories of the public and the private. At the same time it provides an unequivocal message about the fate of this space for which it will soon be “lights out”.

It is in the context of this broader understanding of the metropolis as both product and site of enclosure that we should contrast Sinclair's use of the noise endemic to metropolitan space with that of De Quincey. Among the pleasures of the metropolis detailed by De Quincey were his opium-fuelled visits to the Opera where he recounts that his joy in hearing the Italian contralto Giussepa Glissini sing was further enhanced by his ignorance of the Italian language:

For the gallery was usually crowded with Italians: and I listened with a pleasure such as that with which Weld the traveler lay and listened, in Canada, to the sweet laughter of Indian women: for the less you understand of a language, the more sensible you are to the melody or harshness of its sounds.  
(*Confessions* 79)

The similarities in Descartes' and De Quincey's creative use of the noise endemic to metropolitan space deserve to be separately noted. For both Descartes and De Quincey that which would seem to be most quintessentially characteristic of the urban - the incomprehensible language of the stranger who is also the neighbour - provides a means of transforming the urban into its other, of providing the listener with privileged access to the city's mythical outside. In Descartes' letter to Balzac the "bustle of the crowd" in providing the philosopher with a degree of solitude and tranquility equal if not superior to any "leafy grove" invokes the Arcadian scene traditional for philosophical reflection and relocates it within the city, thereby making the cogito a creature of metropolitan space. So too in De Quincey's anecdote we are transported to the genesis of the metropolis in an archetypal scene of colonial encounter: it is the noise of the metropolis rather than its cultural riches which provides the aesthete with a means of imagining the metropolis's birth in the encounter between the voyeuristic gaze of the civilized male and an eroticized "native" whose laughter gestures towards the existence of some language which is universal.

Like the noise of De Quincey's nights at the opera, graffiti as the noise of the-language-I-do-not-speak serves to exoticise the city. That is, by revealing the presence within the city of that which it has excluded, it presents the city in terms of its nominal outsides. For Descartes the "leafy glade", for De Quincey the colonial

encounter, for Sinclair the “Territory”. However, whereas in De Quincey’s text, the presence of noise as the marker of cultural particularity serves to open up a space for a transcendent liberal subject, in Sinclair’s text, the noise of graffiti no longer marks that to which we must say goodbye in order to arrive in the metropolis, it is the very stuff of the metropolis insofar as the city is woven out of voices that have lost their culture without thereby achieving the transcendental home promised by modernity.

This concern comes into sharper focus when Sinclair’s itinerary takes him to Amhurst Road in Stoke Newington, which, in the 1970s, was the home both of the poet Tom Raworth’s Matrix press (one of the most significant publishers of small press verse) and, at no 359, the “John Bull printing set” used by the “supposed members” of the anarchist/libertarian faction, the Angry Brigade. Here the principle of topographic contiguity established by the cut enables Sinclair to elaborate on the connections between politics and poetics in what, from the perspective of the 1990s, might seem to be a lost era of British radicalism. Quoting one of the Angry Brigade dispatches composed by Anna Mendelson [sic]<sup>33</sup> (who went on to write poetry as Grace Lake) he remarks its resemblance to the “suppressed urban poetry of the Thatcher years” (27) and notes with irony that the “Angry Brigade communiques were the only small-press publications to be thoroughly reviewed and debated in the nationals” (28). The textual resemblances of poetic and political texts, he suggests constitute a

hybrid form [which] prophetically alludes to the coming state of English poetry, when the technical language of psychoanalysis and political rhetoric (plus Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno) would respond to the crisis in our cultural and social lives by striking a spectacular treaty with the imperatives of the gutter. (28)

Again, as in the tag and the logo, similarities of form and material are juxtaposed to reveal the resemblance of apparently antithetical cultural forms. Just as the hand-printed political communiqué resembles small press poetry, so the headlines of the tabloid - the “imperatives of the gutter” - provide the stuff for the poetry of, for

---

<sup>33</sup> Anna was born Mendleson and her obituaries are in the name Mendelssohn, as she is named in Sinclair’s *Ghost Milk*.

example Peter Reading, while he explores their potential as a resource for dystopian imagery in *Downriver*. The formal similarity of these small press publications are not superficial: both poetry and politics, he notes, are marked by their distinction between the communal and the popular. As he observes: “So selfless and communally based was the spirit of this poetic that it was universally denounced as elitist and resistant to ordinary intelligence” (28). The irony here marks the recognition that, just as the territorial and ideological enclosures that constitute the logic of neoliberalism have produced the metropolis as the home of the disenfranchised, so the continuing processes of cultural enclosure mean that it is now almost impossible to articulate any notion of the communal or the collective outside of that recognised by the market in the form of popular culture.

To further unpack the ironies condensed in this observation, however, it is necessary to look more closely at the perspective in his account of the “conjunctions of Amhurst road” (30). Initially this seems to be a simple rehearsal of the familiar narrative of the 1990s that presents the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s as the product of an era whose final demise was signalled by the almost total collapse of state communism in the late 1980s. In his account of Amhurst Road, Sinclair seems to view the moment of British radicalism represented by the Angry Brigade as a mistake from which it is now possible to move on. His remarks on Anna Mendelson’s life after the Angry Brigade suggest this sense of leave-taking. The real meaning of Mendelson’s political actions, he suggests cannot be recovered from the official history presented in the national press. They are only revealed subsequently in her poetry: “*This* is what was always true, the courage of her attack, the intelligence operating with and through her stress: the achievement in her transcribed internal monologues . . . The rest, the tabloid stuff, was an accidental apprenticeship” (29). This suggestion that radical politics was simply an “accidental apprenticeship” to the real business of writing poetry, seems to provide *prima facie* evidence of that “withdrawal from political commitment” which Brian Baker discerns in Sinclair’s work. However, in his depiction of Mendelson’s life in terms of a move from terrorism to quietism and in his eulogy on Mendelson’s poetry, Sinclair also provides a pen portrait of something like Hegel’s beautiful soul - or *belle me*: of a figure that preserves the illusion of its own innocence by projecting its disorder onto the world from whose corruption it believes itself to be radically detached.

In this respect Mendelson's narrative stands in stark contrast to the autobiographical thread worked into the essay. While Mendelson was hand-printing communiqués for the Angry Brigade, we learn that Sinclair was supporting his own small-press aesthetic and communitarian politics by taking casual work from the Manpower commission. Elsewhere he notes that this provided him with privileged access to the hidden spaces and scenes of the "endgame of industrialism" (Birkbeck 00:36:10).<sup>34</sup> Here he records how, as a casual labourer in an economy undergoing the traumatic transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, he inevitably found himself caught up in the industrial disputes that marked the end of organised labour and which gave birth to the landscape of deserted factories and docks explored in his subsequent writings. Recalling his time as "[c]heap scab labour . . . bought in to circumvent the union stranglehold on the docks" (*Lights Out* 50), Sinclair duly annotates his place in the city's wider historical and topographical transformations: "The docks were finished. Chobham Farm was the final dispute . . . The Chobham speculators, hard-hats and pinstripe suits, were the forerunners of the LDDC pirates, the cardinals of the Isle of Dogs" (50). The death of the port of London and his early entry in to the precariat, however, does not diminish the lyricism of his reminiscence:

Heartbreaking sunrises as we drove to work, chill autumnal mists over the Lea Valley. Lunchhour picnics among the sunflowers, effluent-fed weeds. Trains shunting in the background. Talk of travel, gossip with the drivers. Letters from Tony Lowes in Kabul. (50)

The elegiac tone of the passage is achieved not simply through the recollection of a vanished London, but because Sinclair acknowledges his part in bringing about that disappearance. Where Mendelson retreats from radical politics into an even more radical poetics, the form in which the beautiful soul finds its truest expression,

---

<sup>34</sup> "This is how it worked - when I was down to my last ten pounds in the world I would take whatever the Manpower Agency had to offer, employment on the day for the day . . . introducing opt-out casual to endangered industries desperate enough to hire unskilled dope-smoking day-labourers who would vanish before the first frost or the first wrong word from the foreman. Everybody knew on both sides of the deal - it was 1971 - knew that it was all over the places we were dispatched by the unemployment agency were by definition doomed - the excitement of being parachuted into areas I'd never visited" (Birkbeck 00:30:07).

Sinclair discovers his subject in his recognition of his complicity with the processes of destruction. At the same time as he charts the London that is vanishing before the forces unleashed by the liberalization of the financial markets in 1986 and the rapid expansion of the City he is also describing the London that gave birth to these forces. Similarly, even as his text presents an auratic vision of culture as a counter to the commodified version presented by city branders, by authenticating and sanctifying places and figures that are on the point of erasure - the disappearing city of his 2006 anthology, *London City of Disappearances* - the auratic city he describes is simultaneously created and destroyed by the forces unleashed by neoliberalism. It is in this dynamic that Sinclair's psychogeographic project most closely resembles De Quincey's: both register the connection between presence and absence in terms of the disappearance which engenders a love at last glance. They register a world - the city - where something can be seen only when it is about to be consumed by the forces which gave it birth.

Thus, if Mendelson's trajectory from radical politics to radical poetics represents one iteration of the radical, it has to be distinguished from Sinclair's intimation of his own complicity in the disasters he describes, and it is in light of this complicity that we can read Sinclair's "concern with the configuration of urban space" as exploring the possibilities of politics and the notion of the radical in the wake of the counter-cultural moment. Critical to his exploration of this axis of the spatial and the radical is the temporal notion of the "reforgotten" which, as noted above, constitutes one of the principal forms through which Sinclair engages with the return of the unselected. "Skating on Thin Eyes" provides a useful illustration of the critical role of this concept within his historiography.

### **Reforgetting**

In its most straightforward articulation the notion of the reforgotten points to the operations of forgetting in historiography. In place of an historiography which constructs a past out of the materials which enable us to narrativise the present as the culmination of what has gone before, it alerts us to the critical role of forgetting in the



construction of history as the narrative of community - a process discussed at length by Benedict Anderson (2006). From this perspective history as the story of a community, is regarded as a discourse fashioned as much by what is forgotten, or unselected, as by what is remembered and consecrated, in, for example, the blue plaques attached to the houses of the notable. It is by concentrating on the unselected, Sinclair shows, that we see the metropolis as the city of the disenfranchised. This is particularly true in an area so steeped in Benjamin's tradition of the oppressed as Hackney and London's East End with its successive waves of immigrant populations. In his depiction of the "the conjunctions of Amhurst Road" (350), however, the re-forgotten does not point simply to the unselected within the dominant narrative of history (the defeat of radicalism, the failure of utopian politics), it also alerts us to the ways in which the counter-culture has been incorporated within enterprise culture. Thus Sinclair recalls that, as a young film-maker interviewing two fringe members of the group, "what struck [him] the most was the Habitat domesticity, polished mugs on hooks, cut flowers in jars" while their paranoia about being under surveillance and constantly checking the road for suspicious vehicles resulted in a "twitchy net-curtain syndrome that would not have been out of place in Carshalton or Purley" (30). In thus pointing to the middle-class trappings of the Angry Brigade Sinclair alerts us to the more general complicity of the political radicalism of the 1970s with the economic radicalism of the 1990s. A point reinforced by his suggestion that if the fusion of radical politics and radical poetics is marked textually, the same is also true commercially:

This material [evidence from the Angry Brigade trial] is of enormous interest to wealthy nostalgics (those who *were* there and can't remember, and those who like to play dangerously in retrospect). Counter-culture ephemera, throwaways, psychedelic posters, the "School Kids" issue of *Oz*, the Burroughs toy in *IT*, *Sigma* papers, Situationist durables; all have their price-tag, their accountants and their archivists. Mimeo'd single issue chapbooks of free verse, or anarchist bulletins, they are fused in second generation meltdown. (28)

As such the re-forgotten denotes not simply that which is repressed and denied by blue plaque history - already ironised in the mock plaque commemorating Jane Gifford

(37) - it also points to that which the supposedly lost history of radicalism wishes to forget about itself: its complicity with the order it wishes to displace, the precorporation of counter culture within enterprise culture. The Habitat domesticity of the fringe members of the Angry Brigade invites us to speculate on what the counter culture shares with enterprise culture, to read the neoliberalism of the 1990s not as the defeat of radicalism but as already latent within its radical aesthetic. Sinclair's indication of the Angry Brigade's Habitat domesticity serves as a reminder of the more general point that the Left "has never recovered from being wrong-footed by Capital's mobilization and metabolization of the desire for emancipation from Fordist routine" (Fisher 34). It reminds us of the ease with which Thatcherism co-opted the anti-establishment rhetoric and beliefs of the counter-culture in order to present itself as a radical force within politics.

However, if Sinclair's portrayal of the Angry Brigade points towards the operation of the re-forgotten in radicalism's forgetting of its own complicity in the order it wishes to overthrow, Sinclair's text also reveals the operation of other forms of re-remembering at work in neoliberal London which concern capital's own re-remembering of, and reliance upon, the notion of the common occluded in the contest between private and public space.

For Hardt and Negri, as we have seen, the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism takes the form of a shift from "material to immaterial production" in that the value of those material goods that are produced is "increasingly dependent on immaterial factors and goods" (132), that is, on factors external to the process of production. This process is particularly evident in the city where property values are determined not by the intrinsic value of a property but by the neighbourhood, a fact registered in the estate agent's adage "location, location, location" (156). For Hardt and Negri, consequently, the metropolis has a critical role in the production of the common insofar as "*the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class*" (*Commonwealth* 250). Immaterial value, in other words, is increasingly located in forms of production and ownership outside the capitalist system of private property, in the realm of the common: "the 'externalities' are no longer external to the site of production that valorizes them. Workers produce throughout the metropolis, in its every crack and crevice. In fact production of the

common is becoming nothing but the life of the city itself” (251).

An important part of the way in which the metropolis produces the common, Hardt and Negri argue is precisely as a site of the aleatory or chance encounter:

The great European modernist literary representations of the metropolis, from Charles Baudelaire to Virginia Woolf and from James Joyce to Robert Musil and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, emphasize this relation between the common and the encounter. Village life is portrayed as a monotonous repetition of the same. You know everyone in your village, and the arrival of the stranger is a startling event. The metropolis, in contrast, is a place of unpredictable encounters among singularities, with not only those you do not know but also those who come from elsewhere, with different cultures, languages, knowledges mentalities. (252)

Here Hardt and Negri distinguish between the metropolis as the site of a common comprised through the contact of singularities or difference, and the village as the site of community, understood as a group articulated around the repetition of the same. An important part of the common, in other words is located precisely in the noise endemic to the metropolis, and just as language can maintain its communicative function only through the operation of noise, so noise, the return of the unselected, the possibility of going astray, is necessary to constantly re-create the common (without the tag, no logo, without the tabloid no experimental verse). Noise as the language I do not speak becomes the condition of the common which is itself predicated on the possibility of encounter. Cities become pathological, consequently, insofar as they prevent the production of a commons by reducing the opportunities for aleatory encounter. “All contemporary metropolises are pathological in the sense that their hierarchies and division corrupt the common and block beneficial encounters through institutionalized racisms, segregations of rich and poor, and various other structures of exclusion and subordination” (257).

Sinclair’s insistence on the city as encounter, in other words, is readable in terms of a production of the commons, a reassertion of the space that is occluded by the division of the world into the public and the private. The nature of that occlusion becomes

apparent if we map the itinerary of his walk schematically in terms of the type of space it figures as formed by encounter. The walk is conceived within the domestic space of Sinclair's home on Albion Drive in Hackney. This is presented, however, less as a domestic space than as an interface with the public world. It is a place of address in that it is the place where messages addressed to the writer as writer (eventually) reach him. These messages include the invitation "six months out of date, to attend the inauguration, in Seminar Room 178, Technology Faculty, University of Greenwich, of *seminarium*, 'a permanent site-specific installation by' by Richard Makin" (5) and the call inviting him to the site of the anti-road protest at Claremont Road from "an audibly distressed woman, a writer, enraged by a sense of her own powerlessness in the face of near-demonic forces" (7). The domestic as public interface is further suggested through his depiction of home in terms of "the chaos of my desk, the bills, unanswered letters, unsolicited typescripts, fliers for last season's poetry readings" (5). It is a desk which is, in other words, less a scene of writing than of noise: of the messages which can reach him by virtue of being at home. Home is home it seems by virtue of being the scene of a particular kind of (mis)communication.

This domestic space seems to have its antithesis in the walk's "arbitrary revision" (7), the visit to Makin's *seminarium*. This piece of institutional art is nominally public but in fact reveals the labyrinthine character of public space. The "bureaucratic comedy" in which the department secretary denies all knowledge of Makin's work and the existence of room 178 only to discover that it adjoins her own office mirrors the chaos of Sinclair's own desk while Sinclair's extensive quotation of the text accompanying the invitation serves as a silent commentary on its own reflections on the relationship of word and place:

*Makin was given complete freedom regarding the site and the nature of the piece . . . The piece is textual and is condensed from the site's appellation, the artist working with the constraints of synonyms, associations and the etymology of the compounded words seminar room. These served to focus heterogeneous responses to the subject environment and its broader surroundings and were instrumental in producing a poetic constellation evoking various motifs correlational to the function of that environment. The*

*yield is an equivocal conjunction intended to instigate a pondering and contemplation of simultaneously the presented semantic arrangement and the functions of the host space, the receiver situated within this weave of locus and stream of words that have emerged from the nominative of a particular physical domain: a transparent and resonant superimposition of word and place. (5-6)*

The monstrous language of explication, we recognise, is the price of admitting Makin's text into its chosen location, the academic context of the seminar room and becomes in turn metonymic for the interface between art and public space and specifically the wider academic context of "difficult" verse and serious art. The suspicion that the third person of the opening sentence is just a flimsy guise for Makin's own voice adds uncertainty about the text's ironic intent to the general discomfort of the reader/viewer encountering his "sponsored graffiti of the most elevated kind" (6):

*germinal*

*storm*

*(driving towards the harbour)*

*empty*

*chamber (46)*

The juxtaposition of text and exposition suggests that public language operates according to a basic economy in which excessive reticence has to be countered by excessive prolixity in order to restore some form of semantic equilibrium. It suggests that public space is articulated around a sign that delivers a public meaning. As a space of encounter it seems particularly unsatisfactory: "My take on the affair was over with the nod of acknowledgement. If the poet hadn't been around, we've [sic] have been back in the corridor in seconds. Fine, got it, nice plot; check out the photo at home" (46).

Confronted with Makin's "uplifting tags" Sinclair registers the demands of this semantic economy as forms of anxiety: first of interpretation, "I muttered something about Ian Hamilton Finlay. Which was clearly a mistake" (46), and then of self-

justification, “[w]e are the ones forced to come up with an explanation, to defend our presence, as we stalk the table, dripping puddles across the floor. Spoke aloud, put into words, our journey sounds insane. It *is* insane” (46).

The walk’s second destination, Claremont Road and “the barricaded remnant of the M11 motorway extension protest” (46) presents an alternative account of the relationship between art and public space.<sup>35</sup> At this site Sinclair’s conceit of the cut is literalised by planners forcing a motorway extension through a residential area and the violence latent in the contested boundary between public and private is actualised in compulsory purchase orders. Claremont Road represents a fault line in the articulation of public and private where the private has become public in the most literal of senses: “Clusters of communards sit in the middle of the road on battered sofas. Furniture that was once private, kept for best in front parlours, is left to the mercy of the weather. Outside is inside. There are no secrets” (53). In response to this focus on the boundary of the private and the public as a zone of contest, the forms of protest have also evolved to become a negotiation between the expression of a particular grievance and a dramatization of the metropolis as the scene of conflict between the different spatial orders of the private and the public: “The encampment has evolved to the point where it looks staged, a forum for bored journalists, But it’s real enough for the people who live here in a state of semi-public siege” (54).

The significance of the protest, Sinclair suggests, lies in the fact that it cannot succeed: the construction of the motorway cannot be resisted, the residents cannot prevail over the city’s imperative to modernize and improve its efficiency as a system. As such the caller “enraged by a sense of her own powerlessness in the face of near-demonic forces” (7) is emblematic of the more general sense of powerlessness in the face of capitalist realism: “The situation would be insupportable if it wasn’t finite”. Sinclair, however, recognises that this powerlessness fundamentally alters the function of protest in that it is undertaken not to prevent something but to bring about a redistribution of the forces that existed before the protest, to effect, in other words, what Jacques Rancière terms a “redistribution of the sensible” or *partage*, a separation which is also a form of sharing. This redistribution of the sensible includes the

---

<sup>35</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M11\\_link\\_road\\_protest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M11_link_road_protest) for background. Accessed 29.07.11.

realignment of social groups such as residents and activists (and those who find their homes in protests) but it also involves a new perception of the environment which is generated by the familiar psychogeographical trope of love at last glance: “Alliances have been struck between ancestral enemies. They are no longer opposing motorways, they’re celebrating a forgotten parade of houses that would otherwise not be worth a glimpse out of the car window” (53).

Claremont Road, in other words, is an art of the faultline between public and private realms, but itself points to the realm of the common.<sup>36</sup> The activists’ understanding that this protest is finite but that the eviction of the residents from the houses provides a temporary home for a larger protest movement who can in this interstice, between eviction and demolition, find a means of producing a new common which temporarily dissolves the entrenched lines between communities. A new collection of techniques and vocabularies and expertise in the medium of protest that will enter the national vocabulary is a means of producing a new space in the interstices of the public and the private.

This exercise in redistribution of the sensible chimes with Sinclair’s depiction of the walk’s discovery of its own “comfortable” space in Silvertown and “the unselfconscious ordinariness” of Prince Regent’s Lane:

These streets . . . are operational, with no hidden agenda. They are content with disaffection. Resigned to something less than mediocrity. The shops don’t make much profit, but they survive . . . Mechanics prepared to take things to pieces . . . You can walk here without appearing freakish. The streets don’t give a damn. (49)

In this celebration of the spaces in which it is still possible to walk without feeling “freakish” Sinclair’s practice of psychogeography identifies walking as a form of practicing the common, of tracing a space which is neither public (where presence

---

<sup>36</sup> Literally in fact in that the threatened destruction of the chestnut tree on George Green, Wanstead became a focal point and a symbol for the protestors: “A chestnut tree (later capitalized and given a definite article) suddenly became the focus for protestors and increasing numbers of locals. ...The protection of the Chestnut Tree came quickly to symbolize what was under threat from the road” (George McKay 149).

requires justification) nor private in that it is articulated against the public. In this his psychogeography provides a rationale for the recovery of the space that would otherwise be occluded in the intensified conflicts between public and private attendant on neoliberalism. His text provides a site for the joyful encounters that prevent the city becoming pathological, that act as a form of exorcism, by reacquainting the reader with a spatial order that would otherwise be occluded in the imperative to forget.