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Noise, neoliberalism and Iain Sinclair

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Conclusion: Calling Time on the Grand Project

In *Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project* (2011), published as this project was drawing to its conclusion Sinclair offers a final figure of noise which condenses many of the themes worked out in earlier texts and charted above. Ghost milk, he explains, is “CGI smears on the blue fence [surrounding the London 2012 Olympics construction site]. Real juice from a virtual host. Embalming fluid. A soup of photographic negatives. Soul food for the dead. The universal element in which we sink or swim” (*Ghost Milk* 338). Ghost milk as the background noise of contemporary life, and particularly urban life, becomes a figure for an idea which is increasingly prominent in his most recent work. Namely, that “the city has become an enormous argument . . . between the virtual and the actual” (Sinclair, Hague, 1.00); that within the neoliberal city “dramas of territory” (24) typically take the form of a contest between politicians and corporate “imagineers” (*Ghost Milk* 142) who propose a succession of grand projects whose delivery is always just around the corner while the actual is experienced as a permanently suspended present of “dirt and dust and inconvenience” (99).

With the visitation of the 2012 London Olympics on Sinclair’s home in East London that argument becomes immediate and political as the CGI images of the completed park begin to drive out actual images. Photography of and on the site is forbidden for security reasons while, on the blue fence that marks London’s most recent episode in the long history of enclosure, “there [begin] to appear computer generated images of what this landscape would become that were so convincing that people are absolutely sure that it has already happened” (Sinclair, Hague 3.00).

Conceiving the city in terms of an argument between the virtual and the actual simplifies Sinclair’s understanding of the nature of his own task as a writer. In the face of this “ethically challenged fakery” (75) it is the task of the artist simply to witness and remember. Reviewing his own options after the “capture” of East London by the “cardinals of capital” (64) he writes,

I thought about leaving London for a few months, travelling around the country to investigate and record sites of collapsed lottery-funded millennium projects, ghost-milk architecture. Many of these GP disasters had been wiped from the files. They never happened. The New Labour era was about a remorseless push towards a horizon that must, of necessity, remain out of reach: the next big idea. And about mistakes of the past best handled with a blanket apology by a low ranking minister, soon to be rewarded with a joke peerage. I would also make it my business to interview surviving poets, not as unacknowledged legislators, but as witnesses. Witnesses to their own dissolution . . . (148)

Instead *Ghost Milk* employs the parasitic mode to find within an account of the 2012 Olympics an opportunity to discover a global within the local that takes Sinclair out from London to Beijing, Berlin and Athens, and reveals the Beijing, Berlin and Athens within London. To call time on this project, consequently, I want to simply note the recurrence of some of the figures of noise traced above within Sinclair's latest exploration of the dimensions of neoliberal urban space.

The noise of the Olympics as a "Grand Project" seeps into every aspect of Sinclair's life. Beyond the disruption of the urban fabric, the enclosures of common land and loss of facilities (the book is dedicated to the "huts of the Manor Garden Allotments"), East Londoners are warned that the "Olympics had set off a deluge of cyber crime" (92) while an expert in on-line security warns that "[t]he 2012 Games is going to attract a lot of criminal attention. There is going to be an explosion in junk mail and scams" (93). The profusion of spam in Sinclair's in-box is accompanied by a virtualisation of money - "the closer you get to the Stratford construction site, the more money, as civilians understand it, loses its meaning" (92) - which threatens to put an end to Sinclair's "survivalist economics" as he chases payments through an increasingly bureaucratic system: "As the postal service imploded, the old 'cheque in the post' excuse became a fact of life. Nothing made it on to the mat other than junk mail [and] free council propaganda (funded from the rates) . . ." (94). In Sinclair's account the Grand Project is, in other words, directly related to an increase in the noise of civic life which makes urban existence increasingly untenable.

Sinclair's critique of the 2012 London Olympics is developed around a number of related strands. There is the traditional, bread and circuses argument that the Olympics is simply a distraction, a "scam of scams" (60) to promulgate the operation of international and local capital: "The five-hooped golden handcuffs. Smoke rings behind which deals could be done for casinos and mosques and malls: with corporate sponsorship, flag-waving and infinitely elastic budgets" (60). This is developed along with an even more sinister vision of the "games" as a spectacle of biopolitics: "War by other means. Warrior athletes watched, from behind dark glasses, by men in suits and uniforms. The pharmaceutical frontline. Californian chemists running their eye-popping, vein-clustered, vest-stripping androids against degenerated state-laboratory freaks . . ." (60). The Olympics, he points out, has a long history of tragedy and violence, suggesting that "[t]he neurosis of stadium building is nothing more than an unconscious desire to prepare sites for ritual sacrifice" (73). The deaths and executions associated with Berlin '36, Mexico City '68 and Munich '72 all add an apocalyptic resonance to the pre-Columbian imagery favoured by the graffiti artists decorating the site of the London 2012 games.

More specifically, in London, the Olympics as the scam of scams is sold to a skeptical populace through the promise of "legacy", the promise, that is, that the Games will bring about the regeneration of an area of London suffering from urban blight through the reclamation of large areas of brownfield contaminated by industry. However, the claim that the Olympics will pay for themselves purely from the increased real-estate values is unlikely to come true, Sinclair contends, because the construction work has disturbed soil contaminated by Thorium used for the luminous paint on clocks and watches manufactured in the nineteenth century. Inert while buried in the ground, the thorium is activated once disturbed and is now in the Lea Valley ecosystem (70) with the result that "regeneration" has simply increased the toxicity of the environment at huge expense to the taxpayers. Once again, the return of the unselected is brought about by a refusal to acknowledge London's dark history, to recognize that every city needs wasteland in which to bury its secrets.

Thirdly, Sinclair seeks to show that the supposed legacy is simply providing East Londoners with facilities and opportunities that they in fact already had - sports fields

and recreational land - but which were ignored by politicians focusing on the idea of urban blight. “Everything they boasted of delivering as legacy, after the dirt and dust and inconvenience, was here already. It had always been here, but they didn’t need it. They lived elsewhere” (99). Here Sinclair contrasts the impact of the Grand Project vision of urban regeneration with the Victorian philanthropic movement - represented by the Eton and Oxford Missions to London. Despite their paternalism and imperialist mindset, Victorian philanthropists, he argues, actually produced tangible benefits in the form of common ground for the people of the East End. However they too succumbed to the Grand Project mentality represented by the Olympics, this time in an argument over whether Eton mission funds should be used for practical programmes or the construction of a great tower (103).

His main target, however, is the impact of the Games on discursive space: on the explosion of noise that accompanies the Grand Project, and particularly its corrupting impact on artistic production. Steve Dilworth, an old friend from his time at the Chobham Farm container depot, provides an illustration of its powers of corruption. A sculptor who worked with carrion and animal skeletons, when Sinclair first met him, he was “the fiercest, truest to raw material sculptor/maker I had ever encountered” who moved from London to live a subsistence life on the Isle of Harris producing a “necrophile” art which was “unexploitable” (123). However he is “shortlisted by Westfield to produce a suitable work of public art for the monster mall on the edge of the Olympic Park” (122) and is sucked into the noise of GP speak where the essential literature is,

the proposal, the bullet-point pitch, the perversion of natural language into weasel forms of not-saying. Dilworth, whose art as I understood it, was raw, impulsive and essential, was obliged to collaborate with a graphic designer on a PR document intended to flatter the inadequacies of the commissioning brief.

SAIL: Iconic Sculpture Proposal. Landmark Sculpture for WESTFIELD, Stratfordcity. (125)

In Sinclair’s account Sail epitomizes the distinction elaborated in *Downriver* between different forms of public art: “The vertical thrust of a single structure, dominating

place by overlooking it”, what *Downriver* terms the art of the state, that is opposed “by horizontal energies which are always democratic, free flowing, uncontained” (103). Those horizontal energies are illustrated by Stephen Gill whose *Archaeology in Reverse* and Sinclair’s essay on his work I have discussed above in the Introduction. Excluded from his beloved Hackney marshes by the erection of the blue fence around the Olympic Park, Gill becomes in *Ghost Milk* an avatar of John Clare, another man imaginatively dispossessed by the continuing process of enclosure.

Gill accompanies Sinclair on a guided tour of the Olympic site where “the first thing that goes, as we emerge beyond the fence, is any sense of place. There is nothing by which to navigate . . .” (69). He subsequently emails Sinclair in terms which directly echo Clare’s experience of enclosure: “I had a kind of territorial feeling, everything had been taken away. I almost cried in the back of the car. It is such a political experience” (70). Like Sinclair he recognizes that in the newly narrativised landscape, the real information is always located in the unselected: “Whenever the guide talked about removing fish, saving the newts, making homes for insects and butterflies, I always checked on the opposite side to the one he suggested, it was much more interesting” (70).

Sinclair’s sense of his own position as a “token dissident” (142) in this economy is typically ambiguous. In a passage that closely echoes his analysis in *Downriver* of the failure to “procure an opposition” to Margaret Thatcher, discussed above, he writes:

We have waved the disaster through, we have colluded: dozens of artists roam the perimeter fence soliciting Arts Council funding to underwrite their protests. It’s so awful, such a manifest horror, we can’t believe our luck. All those tragic meetings in packed café, the little movies. Blizzards of digital imagery recording edgeland signs clinging to mesh fences alongside compulsory-purchase notification: we buy gold, we sell boxes. Gold from the teeth of dying industries, cardboard boxes to bury murdered aspirations. (68)

He is aware of the ease with which the Olympics can be turned into a platform for protest. While the front of the fence is covered with CGI images of an Olympic arcadia, “self-sponsored galleries of opposition, occur at the back of the fence” (73).

However this art of the obverse, he suggests, will itself be commercialized. The Hackney Wick graffiti artists, Sweet Toof and Cyclops use the back of the fence to develop their own language of protest drawing on Aztec iconography to allude to the apocalyptic predictions associated with 2012 but they are auditioning to “come inside”, to move off the wall and into the gallery: “The social message is: Look at me. Admire me. Give me a show on Brick Lane” (74). Sinclair too is one of the “weasel subversives” who enjoy “their status as sanctioned critics corrupt enough to accept a fee for preaching disaster” (142-3).

It is in the nature of the Grand Project, he implies, that it subverts individual motives and agendas: “the regiments of fixers, puffers, bagmen, and conceptualizers, parasitical upon the Olympics . . . were not bad people” (142-43) rather they are caught up in the project’s chiasmic logic where everything becomes its opposite. This logic of contradiction is plainly evident on the site itself where the corporations that are the most vigorous proponents of individual liberty wall themselves into heavily policed zones: “Only by erecting secure fences, surveillance hedges, can they assert their championship of liberty. The threat of terrorism, self-inflicted, underwrites the seriousness of the measures required to repel it. Headline arrests in the Olympic hinterland followed by small print retractions” (71). Similarly, the Westfield supermall, the London Olympics’ only certain legacy, actually reduces the range of goods and services available to the shopper.

But the same perverse logic is evident in his own life when the “banning” of his book *Hackney, That Rose Red Empire* from Hackney public libraries by the Labour mayor, Jules Piper inevitably turns into a PR disaster for the council, to the delight of the Liberal Democrat opposition, and boosts his book sales: “The ‘banned’ book has acquired a momentum that would carry it . . . through six printings” (113). In this morally contaminated environment, he claims, the only ethical response is to “bear witness. Record and remember” (144). In one of his most condensed statements of this theme he invokes Ben Watson who “accused me of promoting no values in the contemporary world beyond a belief in poetry. And he was right” (145). Poets, he says are necessary to remind him of his own “[f]ailing to fail”, his failure to “let the voices through uncensored” (147). While writing about those such as Anna Mendelssohn whose refusal to censor meant that their work never reached a wider

public, his own text registers a growing sense of the danger of semantic exhaustion, of descent into repetition exacerbated by the media exposure attendant on the Olympics.

Responding to the criticism that his own work is in danger of becoming a simple denunciation of the new at a recent lecture in The Hague, Sinclair described his work as countering the cultural insistence of the virtual in favour of a city that is fundamentally, plural, complex and contradictory (Hague, 01:08:00). *Ghost Milk* suggests that while he may have surrendered his traditional terrain to the “imagineers”, the eruption of a global space in his own neighbourhood has presented him with an opportunity to renew and extend that story as he finds common ground with artists from other cities who are similarly engaged in the contradictions of neoliberal space. Showing the Malaysian-born photographer Ian Teh around Hackney he writes, “I was pushed to go beyond the story I had been peddling for so long, stones stamped flat by repetition” (109) and through Teh’s eyes he learns to look at “familiar things from a different angle . . . Beijing emerging out of Hackney Wick” (111). The Ian Teh section concludes with Sinclair contemplating taking up the offer of Chinese lessons from a private tutor announced in an advert in Broadway Market. The private tutor will turn out to be Yang Lian, a Beijing poet who has relocated to Hackney from whom he learns that “[t]here is no international, only different locals” (150); to exploit the shared disaster of globalization to make intelligible the local as a site of difference. It is this lesson which prepares him to cut himself adrift from London, initially for a journey by local buses across country from Liverpool to Hull and then for trips to Berlin, Beijing, Athens, Austin and San Francisco. In the exploration of this new global space Sinclair trusts to his ability to endow his reportage with a symbolic resonance - to turn the chronicles of the everyday into figures with the allegorical resonance of a *Pilgrim’s Progress*, to make the local luminous with the global.

Ghost Milk concludes with its own noisy joke. In the “American Smoke” section Sinclair informs us of the sale of his “‘archive’, otherwise known as skip-fillers” (392) to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas in terms which are familiar from Serres:

Forty years of scribble and grunt in eighty sacks and boxes: a still life writhing with invisible termites, micro-bugs, blisters on onion-skin paper. This material, stacked solid in Whitechapel was an insect ghetto, an unvisited Eden: until I became my own grand project and sold the memory-vault for the dollars to keep me afloat for another season. (392)

The transformation of the waste of writing - “spiked scripts and yards of indecipherable poems” (392) - into archive, signals his own transformation from witness into project. It is an act which seems to signal the termination of a narrative - “[m]any of the grey boxes had closing dates as well as dates of birth. When you are neatly sorted into chapters, you are sorted. Period. It seems rude to add another paragraph to the structure” (397). Sinclair, however, gives the lie to this attempt to sterilise the past by turning his own act of waste disposal into the activity of writing, generating thereby more waste, more food for parasites. Alongside its culture trove - “a provocation for theses (which would themselves be acquired, catalogues, filed away, pre-forgotten)” (396) - Sinclair reports that the Harry Ransom Center also

stored bottles of parasites, the collateral damage of archival preservation They were part of an unvisited museum. ‘Domesticated Beetle found on a manuscript, lived in the bug jar, without food, air, or water, for 4 months.’ They were already replete with the glue of Scott Fitzgerald’s nightmares, fear saliva from Ford Madox Ford’s moustache, wax from Soutine’s inner ear, dust of Man Ray’s silver gelatin. Sharers in secret sorrows. Collaborative intelligences. One consciousness splintered into sentences. (395-96)

The image returns us to Serres’ depiction of the Cartesian cogito as a householder who, having burned down his old home in order to drive out the rats, lies awake each night in his new residence, listening for their return (*Parasite* 12). The Harry Ransom Centre’s mission to preserve and catalogue the work of living writers is undone not by the parasites on display in the museum adjacent to the words in the vaults, but by the parasitic relationship of writing and value. In cashing in his pension to fund one more road trip which will furnish one more text, Sinclair delivers his text into a new scene of writing which is articulated against a new present. Rather than the present born out of the infinite delay of the never-to-be-realized Grand Project, *Ghost Milk* opens out

onto a time that is constantly reproduced in its consumption, a time where language is constantly reborn through its exhaustion. In this image of a text that produces itself through the description of its own enclosure, Sinclair also returns us to the trope of the locked room. Where the locked room of *Downriver* serves as a figure for controlling the instability of theological and enlightened perspectives, the vaults of the Harry Ransom Centre for the Humanities furnish an image of a space which is opened precisely by its impossible desire of containing itself. As such it stands as a topographic emblem of a global space where centres of learning emerge through the transformation of waste into cultural capital, and culture is produced through its productive operation upon its own waste. In this Sinclair's parasitic trope establishes a correspondence between his own relationship to production and the general condition of precarity instituted as the global condition of labour. Post-pension he produces a precarious writing that has sacrificed one habitus in the specificity of the local for a life on the road which is understood simultaneously in terms of the vanished locale and as a new commons where what is shared is the experience of a travel without destination.

Niall Martin, 12 August 2011