



In Conversation with Iain Sinclair

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by Anna Viola Sborgi and Lawrence Napper

IAIN SINCLAIR has been narrating London's life since the mid-Seventies. He has captured the city in a series of successful novels – *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* (1987), *Downriver* (1991) – and non-fiction books – *London Orbital* (2002), *Hackney*, *That Rose-Red Empire: A Confidential Report* (2009), *Ghost Milk* (2011), and *London Overground: A Day's Walk around the Ginger Line* (2015). He was trained as a filmmaker; his work is rich with interdisciplinary connections and he has collaborated with other artists both on their independent projects and on films inspired by his own work, such as, respectively, *Memo Mori* (Emily Richardson, 2009), *Swandown* (with Andrew Köttling, 2012) and *London Orbital* (with Chris Petit, 2002). In 2017, Sinclair published *The Last London*, an elegy to the impending disappearance of the city, and this – he claims – is also going to be his last London book. Our journal issue examines London's cosmopolitanism at a time of crisis, so we set out to ask him about its origins and about whether this will really be his 'last word on London'.¹

¹ Sinclair's new book, *Living with Buildings: Walking with Ghosts – On Health and Architecture*, has just come out in September 2018, and, to the relief of his affectionate readers, London is still there, though among other locations this time.



Sinclair has famously made his home in East London, so, on our way to the interview, we met on a cold day in February in the little green by Haggerston station, overlooked by All Saints Church. Haggerston – which often appears in Sinclair’s writings – is a small area around the canal with an intense concentration of creative businesses and a few artist collectives, aside the redeveloped Broadway Market. It has become attractively up-and-coming – and increasingly unaffordable – as a wider effect of the 2012 Olympic regeneration of East London. At the same time, its rich history lingers on. The church had just the day before played host to one of the more bizarre London traditions – the annual memorial service in memory of Joey Grimaldi (1778-1837), which is attended by dozens of working clowns, all dressed in their finery.

We were a little early, so we nipped into a coffee shop on the other side of the railway line in Downham Road in order to warm up and prepare our questions. The coffee shop was the epitome of the area’s hipster culture. Bearded 20somethings sat at reclaimed formica tables, tapping out their blogs while sipping cappuccinos from Duralex glasses. In *Lights Out for the Territory* from 1997, Sinclair wrote about this area elegiacally as one of decay and abandonment – a culture clinging on to its old traditions in the face of an uncertain future. Many of the rundown terraces and warehouses of that period have since been demolished to make way for new builds like the one which houses the hipster café and we found ourselves wondering what the people around us – who were not born when that book was written – would make of its arguments. To them, perhaps, the area has no connotations of regret, or of the past erased, since their past is conterminous with its rebirth.

Sinclair’s house is in a small pocket of rather handsome early Victorian streets which have survived the re-developers. As he lets us in he explains that when he first moved in their survival was by no means certain and one of his earliest experiences of the area was the fight to save them from the council’s wrecking ball, in a previous cycle of London’s incessant urban renewal. He recalls that the terraces were meant to be demolished and a new series of tower blocks was going to take their place, but then Ronan Point (1968) happened and, as a side effect of that, the project was halted.

Sinclair welcomes us in his book-covered little studio. He listens with a curious, intent look, as we explain to him the rationale of our project and why we want to hear his thoughts on the constantly changing nature of London and the impact Brexit might have on the city.

A.V. Sborgi: In our collection of essays, we asked our contributors to look at Brexit in relation to other critical moments in the history of London which challenged its cosmopolitan identity. Do you see Brexit as a crisis?

I. Sinclair: Brexit as a crisis? Crisis makes it seem very dramatic – as if the convulsion were a single incident, whereas it seems to me a symptom of a wider thing, a whole series of misfortunes and manifestations recurring, to do with a loss of nerve in the city



and that sense of the city's self-identity; particularly with London becoming more of a plaything or a libidinous zone where multinational capital is dominant and where money laundering goes on and where property has no reality in terms of the real needs people have. There is a plaque on a Health Centre on Walworth Road spelling out in block capitals what we have lost: "THE HEALTH OF THE PEOPLE IS THE HIGHEST LAW". One of the aspects of this communal loss of nerve was the strange decision to sever us from Europe as a financial entity. It was all to do with feeble political initiatives and the fact that politicians are not trusted. They are just PR facilitators for much bigger financial interests. I don't think of Brexit as a crisis in that sense, as if there had been a Blitz or Great Fire or plague. It was inevitable and stupid, but I don't think we have reached the critical moment. Everything is speeding up and losing moral traction.

A.V. Sborgi: In *The Last London* you tell us about a walk from London to Hastings in the run-up to the vote that you undertook with Andrew Kötting and a few of other "carnavalesque time-travellers" (Sinclair 2017: 280). Can you tell us a bit more about this and what inspired it?

I. Sinclair: At the moment of the vote, a disparate group, this random collective of six, decided to undertake a pilgrimage from Waltham Abbey to the coast, to Battle Abbey and Bulverhythe. We developed the idea with Andrew Kötting, the filmmaker, who lives in St Leonards-on-Sea. With an anniversary of the 1066 Battle of Hastings on the horizon, there was some funding for artists who wanted to create work that related to the Norman invasion. We thought it would be interesting to start our tramp at Waltham Abbey, where King Harold spent time, coming south after the Battle of Stamford Bridge, before making his doomed stand on the ridge at Battle. Waltham Abbey was a very significant place for him. It lays claim to his mutilated body. We would be marching straight through the regenerated Olympic Park area, the southern suburbs and the Kentish commuter towns. It would allow us to take the temperature of the moment, and to judge how much of our historic connection with Europe survived from this earlier successful invasion. The expedition was a mirror-image of the project we did with *Swandown*, which I thought of as the parody of a marathon, of mindless endurance.² When, at the end of our cruise, we eventually got to the river Lea, the back rivers were chained. On the reverse journey, south, in 2016, it was fascinating to discover that the Olympic Park had now acquired a fleet of swan pedalos as one of their main attractions, but you can only go a few hundred yards with them. It's such a metaphor for the whole thing!

A.V. Sborgi: So, how did this new walk inform your perception of the relationship with Europe?

² In the film Kötting and Sinclair pedal down the coast in a swan pedalo. The film is also accompanied by a book, charting the journey through maps and photographs (Kötting and Sinclair 2012).



I. Sinclair Well, the people you meet along the street, and the urban signage, everything makes you realise how strong the connection with Europe actually is: there's a sense of people being part of a wider, more generous European culture, rather than just weighing up the economic and social advantages of being in the EU or not. That illusion about keeping the alien outside the fence. And certainly, one of the important aspects of the divorce is that collaborations with artists in different parts of Europe are going to become more difficult from now on.

L. Napper: A key aspect of your work is the extent to which you collaborate with a range of other practitioners – artists, photographers, musicians and (perhaps most prominently) filmmakers. Also, many of your projects find expression not only as books, but as films as well. What are the benefits of collaborating across those different kinds of media?

I. Sinclair: There are huge benefits, really. My initial training and intention was to be a filmmaker.³ I started looking at the world in that way – finding out about London by travelling to find obscure cinemas and so on, and then to find the locations of different films. It was a very excited dialogue, I think, through the late 1960s and early 1970s because it was so rich. There was so much great stuff happening and the communities developed around the places where the films were shown and the people you would meet there. And there were also all those underground filmmakers' co-ops that were at work in the city and looking at the city. So, for me, anyway, at the start, that was the way I looked at things – through cinema. Also, coming here to live, the first thing that was happening was to be part of a group making a constant diary project film about our lives and what we were trying to do. It was a way of marking out the territory, and that then pushed me into making journeys and walks essentially to log it or catalogue it in terms of film, which later became more to do with photography because the 8 mm thing collapsed – you couldn't buy film on Kingsland Way market anymore and you couldn't get it developed so that – once it went digital I was out of it. But yes – that was my way of engaging with the city. The city was a kind of film and my history of London was quite film-based.

L. Napper: How did your collaborations with filmmakers develop?

I. Sinclair: For example, with Chris Petit, who is doing film essays and who had come from feature film into the kind of television that was available in the 1990s, we found a way that gave us a degree of freedom which was equivalent to writing for the first time. And something like *London Orbital* was as much a film as it was a book. And I would really like to go on working in that way – it was a really handy way to work. Because a lot

³ Sinclair studied film at the London School of Film Technique, which later became the London Film School.



of people would talk to you if you were doing something that was supposedly a film in a way that they wouldn't if you just turned up as a random person who was writing something. And then Kötting likes physical difficulties and journeys, which led to a series of collaborations which might or might not become something written. He was always keen on producing books alongside them as well – *Swandown* and the John Clare one, there's books of all of them.⁴

Later on, we return to the issue of filmmaking, and particularly the joy of making films on Super 8 and the ways that home movie material can capture the city and the way it changes. Sinclair mentions that when he used to run a bookstall in Camden Passage he had sold books to Derek Jarman and, later, they would run into each other intermittently now and again. He tells us that he was very sympathetic to the aesthetics of Super 8 and standard 8 filmmaking and to the idea that Jarman used this format to capture “those topographies of London, those places that he liked, as sort of end game architectures or industrial buildings”.

L. Napper: That Super 8 thing – you mentioned that it stopped being possible. But have you been inspired by the facility of mobile phones now to be able to...

I. Sinclair: No! Not at all!

L. Napper: Why not? What's the difference do you think?

I. Sinclair: Well... **(sighs)** Age! **(laughter)** And incompetence! You know I trained to make film – 16 mm really and, then, 8 mm, which was simpler. Yes – I mean theoretically there's no difference. And with Chris Petit it was really important that it was digital, because essentially we were for the first time able to do the same things. What I liked also was that you could interrogate the old Super 8 and 16 mm footage – project it on a wall and he would re-film it and it would become part of the texture. He's also got to the point of making a complete film on phones. But now – to me – much more dubious is when on this recent trip to the Hebrides I actually was doing some filming with a phone for the first time because it was so easy. And very often Andrew was getting Anthony to use an app that makes it look like Super 8. They're doing their best to make it look like that on the phone! Which seems incredibly perverse!... I could be drawn to it, I suppose.

We all laugh.

⁴ Sinclair wrote about Clare in *Edge of the Orison: In the Traces of John Clare's 'Journey Out of Essex'* (2006) and also features in Kötting's 2015 film *By Our Selves*. Both these works reconstruct Clare's four-day walk in Essex in 1841, as he fled the asylum where he was living and went in search of his first love Mary Joyce, who had actually died a few years earlier.



A.V. Sborgi: One of the recurring themes of your work has been your criticism of big urban regeneration projects, including the Olympic Park, which you campaigned against. Have your feelings towards that space changed in recent years?

I. Sinclair: I kept clear of it for a while because I'd been so pitched into the argument at the time – I felt 'I've had it! Let it go!' and now more recently I've started to look at it because you then have to know: what happened? What emerges? I mean it's still there! Something quite big will emerge, and I thought it's interesting now to start going back and looking at it.

Bearing in mind our thoughts in the hipster café, Anna Viola presses him on this idea, emphasising the ways in which communities sometimes adapt over time and begin to have a fondness for developments which initially had been unpopular, such as the Westway, which saw the re-appropriation of the space underneath by different community-based initiatives and is now being threatened by privatization. Sinclair, though, remains ambivalent about that idea.

I. Sinclair: Almost exactly the same thing is happening on the West side – a great sweep and a swathe which will create something very similar, which always involves parachuting in cultural bastions from somewhere else and establishing them there, which gives it some sort of credibility, and then, bit by bit, edging out the old renegade businesses that have operated in these territories because nobody wanted them, and then ends up creating these kinds of strange sterile zones which generally end up looking like business parks.

A.V. Sborgi: Yes... but there's a question I find myself asking all the time: is it always going to be like that – is it always going to look like that or will people eventually take the space over and transform it?

I. Sinclair: No, not always but... Well, I guess the way to do it is to look at older business parks and see what's happening with them – how did they evolve? And, actually, if you go down the A13 road, which I'm quite fond of, it really looks like the credit sequence of *The Sopranos*, it's this really... but the earlier primitive business parks were all setting themselves up along that road. And you can see the ones that have died – you know – as one moves from one generation to the next. The first lot collapsed and there's a complete no man's land and you go a bit further and there's a new one that's actually got a Sainsbury's and a Macdonald's and whatever – it's come in and it's doing ok, but then that will go and be overridden by something else. And the whole Olympic site feels like it's – everything's being pumped into it. There's nothing there organically to make it thrive other than the determination of Government to make it – it *has* to work because so much has been involved in it... And then maybe it *does* work because... human compost is in it and something grows out of that. You know. All of London has always



been like that, obviously. I mean, nobody could have predicted that this particular area of Hackney would have gone off the way it has, really! Whether it's good or bad, it's been quite extraordinary and that's not something that's been really planned for. It just occurred.

L. Napper: Is there a difference between the monolithic regeneration which the Olympic Park represents and something like Hackney which seems to be much more *ad hoc* almost?

I. Sinclair: Well, it does superficially – but when you go back to the battles that were happening here, it wasn't dissimilar, it's just that there wasn't anything like the sort of muscle that was behind the Olympic project. In the case of Broadway market, the council found out that the only way to raise revenue was to get in bed with a major developer and the smaller businesses found that even if they wanted to hang on to what they had, they couldn't, the only chance they had was going somewhere else. Or something like Dalston Lane – you know – another development done on the promise of the Olympic connection. Maybe you have fourteen or fifteen arson attacks in there of people who don't want to go and it ends up being owned by some sort of strange Russian conglomerate like everywhere else. Similar things are happening in Hackney as happened in Newham, except it wasn't complete ground zero erasure. A lot of it was though – and if you start to look what's happening around Dalston Junction you see more and more of that high-rise sort of architecture [around the library] – lifeless! All of that is very strange and lifeless and feels like the Olympic park. And then you think 'Has it grown a life?' Well, it hasn't really.

A.V. Sborgi: You mentioned the new luxury towers in London. Housing is one of London's 'permanent crises': from the radical inequality the housing market relies on, to the extreme conditions of vulnerability and neglect people in social housing very often have to live with, something that has been tragically expressed by the Grenfell Tower fire. How do you relate to the question of the home in your own work?

I. Sinclair: As of Grenfell, I thought I did not feel ready to write of it as yet: it seemed to me something so sensitive to write about without having a proper engagement with it. At the same time, I am currently working on a new project about buildings and mental health, commissioned by the Wellcome Trust. They are organising an exhibition on this topic, which will open in October 2018. Their take is obviously more sociological than mine, but they like the idea of having a book in parallel.⁵ I am going to write about the Pepys Estate, in South London, which features in one of John Betjeman's *Bird's Eye View* films. He filmed it from a helicopter and said: "Look, what a terrible place to live!", but he never went in! By coincidence, this is where my friend Andrew Köttling lived and he

⁵ See footnote n. 1 above.



actually says the estate was very supportive when he needed help for his daughter's health.

The other project related to housing I was recently involved with is a campaign for the Golden Lane Estate in the City, which was initially built, before the Barbican, with the intent to provide accommodation for service sector workers in the city. They are now putting up one of those luxury tower blocks just in front of the estate and it is going to take away all the light of the courtyard, which is where people meet. So, there is a campaign going on now there, but because many artists, like Chris Petit and Tom McCarthy, actually went to live there, it's taken a bit of an unusual form and we were all asked to produce banners, which would hang out of the windows and then would be on sale to support the campaign.⁶ And because of the particular composition of the residents, it got a lot of media attention.

A.V. Sborgi: Coming back to that discussion of the attitude to the past and renewal and redevelopment, I have to say that I am particularly interested in the contrasting attitudes towards the past. I have mixed feelings because I come from a country, Italy, and a city, in particular (Genoa), that are still very much attached to a strong sense of their past heritage, while at the same time struggling to come to terms with the more recent industrial past. A vast amount of our post-industrial architecture lies in dereliction. In this sense, when I first came here, I was impressed by the way London had been able to reconvert its most recent architectural heritage. At the same time, I can now see the possible downsides of the regeneration process, especially when gentrification comes into play. Is there a way in between?

I. Sinclair: Obviously, there are positives, even just the fact that we are here discussing it and there's an energy that comes with it, it's challenging to the city, a city can't just stagnate. It's an energy that requires positioning, which requires an intelligent response to it, to witness it, not just to allow yourself to be swept away by it.

We end the interview by going back to Jarman, as an example of someone who had a very intense relationship with the city and then, at one point, felt the need to distance himself from it, seeking refuge in Dungeness. Sinclair rightly points out that Dungeness was a "nice mixture, the almost nuclear apocalyptic landscape and the garden he created". We then end up talking about St Leonard, where Sinclair has a house and which now, he suggests, has started to look like "a sort of Hackney on Sea", where artists that cannot afford to stay in London anymore have moved.

A.V. Sborgi: Do you sometimes feel driven to go and leave London for good?

I. Sinclair: Tempted, yeah, but not driven, no.

⁶ See details of the campaign here: <<https://www.crowdjustice.com/case/save-golden-lane/>>.



L. Napper: So, do you feel that London is over, then?

I. Sinclair: I feel that maybe my London is over, but London evolves. Same with Jarman, there's a kind of an era, when you feel attuned to the city and you have a feeling you can contribute to the discussion – and then it's moved somewhere else, quite tragically.

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Lawrence Napper is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at King's College London. He is a leading expert in British cinema and has taught at King's College London for 10 years. Among his teaching specialisms are Silent Cinema, Hollywood Musicals and British National Cinema. He devised the summer school course 'London on Film' in 2009 and that course still runs successfully at KCL. In addition, he has taught on London on Film as part of the University of California London Programme. His publications include *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009) and *The Great War and British Popular Cinema in the 1920s* (London: Palgrave, 2015). He has contributed numerous articles and book chapters, including articles on London musicals for the *Journal of Popular British Cinema and Television* (2009) and for Steven Cohan (ed) *The Sound of Musicals* (2010).

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