



The Alien in Greenwich. Iain Sinclair & the Millennium Dome

by Nicoletta Vallorani

THE DOME THAT FELL ON EARTH

For Iain Sinclair, London is a life project. It tends to take the same ideal shape of the city he tries to tell us about: a provisional landscape (Sinclair 2002: 44), multilevel and dynamically unstable, invaded by memories, projects, plans and virtual imaginations, walked through and re-moulded by the walker, finally fading away at its endlessly redrawn margins. One gets lost, and in doing so, he learns something more about the place he inhabits¹:

I'm in mid-stride, mid-monologue, when a deranged man (French) grabs me by the sleeve [...] There's something wrong with the landscape. Nothing fits. His compass has gone haywire. 'Is this London?' he demands, very politely. Up close, he's excited rather than mad. Not a runaway. It's just that he's been working a route through undifferentiated suburbs for hours, without reward. None of the landmarks – Tower Bridge, the Tower of London, Harrod's, the Virgin Megastore – that would confirm, or justify, his sense of the metropolis. But his question is a brute. 'Is this London?' Not in my book. London is whatever can be reached in a one-hour walk. The rest is fictional. [...] 'Four miles' I reply. At a venture. 'London.' A reckless improvisation. 'Straight on. Keep going. Find a bridge and cross it.' I talk as if translating myself into a language primer (Sinclair & Atkins 1999: 38-43).

Here, though conjured up by specific landmarks (Tower Bridge, the Tower of London, Harrod's, the Virgin Megastore) and a few permanent inscriptions (the river and its bridges), the space of London stands out as a fiction made true by the steps of the walker. It is made true, but not real: despite his hard work, Sinclair reveals that London will always elude him as well as any other city-teller².

¹ On the matter, see Chambers 1990, and Sennett 1994.

² His current work that is being done on London geographies reveals an increasing tendency to get lost in the city. This tendency seems somehow to culminate in Will Self's latest book, *The Book of Dave* (2006), developing around the story of a London cabbie losing his knowledge.



As a whole, it is a topography made of disappearances³, keeping the peculiar quality of Sinclair's absences: "Because something has vanished, because it can no longer be seen, this doesn't mean that it's not there" (Sinclair 2002: 14). Therefore, in Sinclair elusions and vanishings become the fruitful ground for multiple urban narratives that read as hybrid texts: neither fiction nor documents, they occupy the in-between land of uncertainty, where no final answer, linear interpretation and unambiguous gaze are possible. In a way, a double drive is to be detected: a strong impulse to urban knowledge and understanding, and the full awareness that this knowledge is impossible, for at least three reasons. First, the city spreads faster than you realize⁴; second, the growth of a city is a complex tangle of chance expansions, rash gentrification, nitpickingly planned colonisations of a forgotten or invented past, and cutely devised frauds meant to support the imagination of a future; third, any urban imagination, when applied to London, tends to become curiously self-directed: it acquires its own life, and, as the creature of Frankenstein, it claims its own right to narrate its story. Sinclair proves to be very good at listening to this story, and even better at re-narrating it, trying not to intrude too much and keeping the voice of the city as clean as possible. It is not *one* voice, actually, but a polyphonic intermingling, a jazz session where improvised solos are built according to a template only Sinclair knows. One of these solos, and the one we are focussing on, is the one played by the Millennium Dome in *Sorry Meniscus*.

The text in itself is patently given – by Sinclair's words – as a piece in a puzzle. In the acknowledgements at the end of *London Orbital*, the author places *Sorry Meniscus* side by side with other texts published in the same year (1999), namely *Crash*, *Rodinsky's Room*, and *Dark Lanthorns*. They are designated as "missing chapters of a larger whole, outstations" (Sinclair 1999: 554). Among them, *Sorry Meniscus* is the first to be mentioned, and probably also the nearest project in terms of the sinclairian approach to a physical and fictional journey.

As so often happens in Sinclair, the written project was the offspring of an actual walk: two "Expeditions to the building site on Bugsby's Marshes", made respectively in 1997 (1 September) and 1999 (12 February). The walks were actually commissioned by the *London Review of Books*, and first published in two segments before being conflated in one quest, in a volume published by Profile Books in the same year.

Obviously enough both the walks and their reports were meant to explore the Millennium Dome as a "primary symbol" (*Ibid.*: 11) whose appearance in the Greenwich peninsula echoed – both in the physical journey and in the ideal one – a Wellsian Martian landing within the borders of London. The sense of being foreign to the city is integral to the Dome: its deeper sense resides in being Other, the objectified

³ Sinclair himself has recently edited a collection of essays titled *London. City of Disappearances* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 2006).

⁴ Sinclair actually tries to draw a line marking a possible border and overlapping with the M25, in his *London Orbital* (book & film). But the operation fails, and it is bound to fail. Sinclair is more interested in showing how any attempt at circumscribing the city ends up showing precisely the opposite.



version of a man who fell on earth, and took residence in Greenwich. The alien flavour marking the Dome is given by Sinclair right at the beginning of his exploration:

Crunching over the shingle, beneath Folly Wall on the Eastern shore of the isle of Dogs, at first light on an early summer morning, the Dome shines across the leaden water like a brilliant shell. This is a setting that deserves to be recognised as one of J.G. Ballard's terminal beaches: the last council-operated high-rise block behind me and an unscripted future ahead, the yellow-spiked Teflon tent like a genetically modified mollusc. It's a fossil from some provisional era that will never have to be lived through in anything beyond virtual reality. I've lost all sense of scale, time itself is on the drift. In my rucksack is the most convincing evidence that this dome is something other than a low octane hallucination: a photographic memento from the early days of the project, from 22nd June 1997 (*ibid.*: 7)

In his usual semantic density, Sinclair provides the rationale for his journey. The Dome is physically described ("yellow-spiked Teflon tent") and geographically located ("beneath Folly Wall on the Eastern shore of the Isle of Dogs"), but it soon acquires a much stronger symbolic meaning. It is a "brilliant shell" or "a genetically modified mollusc", floating in a landscape sharply reminiscent of "J.G. Ballard's terminal beaches". It belongs less to the actual site than to a virtual reality where time as a sequence towards an "unscripted future" has gone irretrievably lost. It combines fact and fiction, and it is therefore to be narrated through a hybrid text. It was born as the celebration of an unconvinced labour ideology and soon made into the timeless icon of a political failure, still to be emended today. It is a physical place, doubled and multiplied – as it often happens in Sinclair – in a host of imagined possibilities sometimes unable to cross the threshold to reality. One can easily understand how deeply committed Sinclair is to the social character of urban memory. The latter never becomes an undifferentiated whole; rather it is a fabric interweaving several voices that keep their individual identity while combining in the jazz of the city⁵.

Voices are heard while stalking through the city. Assuming that a definition is possible, Sinclair could be loosely described as a London serial walker. Most of his texts report on peculiar journeys rooted in the sinclairian tradition of stalking through the city and revising the concept of *flanerie* to make it into the process of "walking with a thesis. With a prey" (Sinclair 1997: 47). Each text is a further piece in the puzzle of what Sinclair himself defines as his London Project: a collection of volumes of varied length, covering a time span from the early 70s to today, and an open riddle for both critics

⁵ The production of spatiality in conjunction with the making of history can thus be described as both the medium and the outcome, the presupposition and embodiment, of social action and relationship, of society itself. Social and spatial structures are dialectically intertwined in social life, not just mapped one onto the other as categorical projections. And from this vital connection comes the theoretical keystone for the materialist interpretation of spatiality, the realization that social life is materially constituted in its historical geography, that spatial structures and relations are the concrete manifestations of social structures and relations evolving over time, whatever the mode of production (Soja 1989: 127).



and booksellers. As we said, one never knows if the story that is being told is primarily fact or fiction, or whether the book is an essay or a novel. Whichever shelf the librarian or bookseller puts it on, it is always the wrong one. Nevertheless Sinclair's narrative purpose is crystal clear. His primary concern, both as a writer and a member of the *polis*, consists in tracing the political processes responsible for stealing the imagination of a definite urban site to the people actually inhabiting it. While focussing on some specific areas in the city⁶, he elaborates on gentrification as a demagogic operation erasing the history of the place and removing a memory mostly formed by *petits récits*, small, humble, forgotten and unedited stories made redundant by the insolence of political power.

Sinclair's grounding in the concept of psychogeography is obvious, but equally obvious is his purpose of revising it. As Coverley states, "Here, once again, Sinclair offers his own highly successful brand of psychogeography in which urban wanderer, local historian, avant-garde activist and political polemicist meet and coalesce" (Coverley 2005: 122). His urban topographies result from a sort of poetic documentation: politics and art, urban archaeology and future imagination of the metropolis go hand in hand, and produce a highly original and disturbing landscape. From a global perspective, Sinclair appears very much interested in recent political projects exploiting the urban landscape as a gigantic promotional screen. Given this preliminary assumption, it is somehow obvious that Sinclair harbours an interest in the Millennium Dome, the "Monumentally expensive folly" (Sinclair 1997: 51) epitomizing the very end of Blair/liar's popularity. This interest is therefore to be seen on the background of Sinclair's steady investigation of the sort of territorialized politics that has been defacing London in recent years. "If places are the locus of collective memory – writes Harvey – then social identity and the capacity to mobilize that identity into configurations of political solidarity are highly dependent upon processes of place construction and sustenance" (Harvey 1996: 322). According to Sinclair, the Millennium Dome, both in its project and its highly slippery reality, accounts for this interweaving of city planning and political power. In its ephemerality, this "installation made to disappear" (Sinclair 1999:42) perfectly epitomizes the absence of a global vision of the community as an organic whole, to be translated into the architectural structure of the place this community inhabits.

Therefore this is the basic issue both for the author and for the reader of this unusual text: Sinclair's idea of the Millennium Dome as "...a mega-budget version of the Rachel Witheread *House*. 'A mute memorial,' as the artist said, 'to the pathos of remembering'" (Sinclair 1999: 42).

⁶ East London writer.



SLIPPERY REALITIES

From the purely technical point of view, the building of the Millennium Dome is related to a gentrification project of the Greenwich peninsula: a ballardian site, a suburb of the soul sharply reminiscent of Ballard's terminal beaches.

The basic ratio guiding the planners is that the place is to be remoulded, reconfigured. The computer lexis is not accidental. Virtual reality has an outstanding role right from the beginning of the project. It is the magic tool conjuring up the Dome long before it comes true. The planning takes a very long time and it is intensely promoted to a still absent public. The border between the virtual and the actual Dome fades at once and it is practically erased in the presentation of the project. Greenwich becomes the site of a magic transformation, an alchemic metamorphosis. The way it is advertised is astonishingly effective, to the extent that it removes the need for the place to be actually built:

We don't need the tent, we're already inhabiting the invisible dome, an inverted bowl of protein soup (courtesy of Hays Chemicals) in which new life forms are breeding and taking shape (Sinclair 1999: 33).

The basic concept is blurred. It takes clear-headedness to realize that what is sold does not actually exist: an imagined alien that is to be made true. The project is an end to itself; its practical feasibility – or usefulness – is not relevant. When called to account for the Dome, the people involved in it get understandably confused:

'And the vision is?' I asked.
'Er, time,' Mr Gibbons replied. 'Time,' he repeated, after a significant pause, remembering to capitalise the abstraction (*ibid.*: 30)

Time becomes therefore *the* keyword. Like many architectural projects concerning the metropolis, the Dome is not post- or pre-modern: it is simply out of time. History, as Foucault maintains (1986: 25-27), unfolds in its adherent spatiality, hereto taking quite varied forms in different sites and on the background of different relations. This is the case with contemporary metropolitan spaces where the patterns of power interweave in an urban landscape increasingly provisional and subject to endless change, no longer developing according to an orderly sequence and not reflecting the collective life of the community.

This may lead us to assume that our present modernity – or better, the complex tangle of other modernities we are referring to – is marked by the unreliability of time as a sequence. Under this perspective, the Dome is a very effective icon.

The offspring of an abstraction, it results in an imaginary architecture that will never be integrated in the existing landscape. On the contrary, it will destroy the



topography of the place, erasing the primary landmarks that the traveller is used to look for.

This improved landscape cuts directly from the Royal Naval College to the Thames Barrier, so that the Peninsula is not merely occulted, it doesn't exist. Geography shifts to suit the strategic needs of the mappers. Territory belongs to those who sponsor the means of transport. (*Ibid.*: 61, 62)

To Sinclair, the political rationale of this kind of projects is very clear, and it coincides with a planning ritual endlessly replicated in London's recent history. In an interview released in 2002, the writer efficiently epitomizes the underlying political purposes of this process:

It is *the* thing that is happening to London itself. Ken Livingstone's and the Labour Government's idea now is to develop the fringes, the 'brownfield sites', all the old industrial sites on the edge of London, and build new cities there, which are going to be hideous ghost cities, based on the fact that they are close to motorways, and it's a huge scam, because developers and builders are going to make huge fortunes. The Millennium Dome was the first experiment in all of this, to shift London out, because nobody can afford to pay more to live in the centre of London, it has become so ridiculously expensive, and they're going to redefine all; so my interest is now on this, because that's where the story is *now*. The century is getting more of a horrible time. The river itself has become a sort of 'parody museum', the Globe Theatre, the fake-authentic theatre, the power station that becomes the art gallery⁷, the funfair wheel, Salvador Dali, all of this, it's completely unreal, kind of like "Madame Tussaud's" written large across the water (Fusari 2006: 83).

David Harvey suggests that no transformation of space, place and environment is neutral and innocent in relation to practices of domination and control (Harvey 1996: 44). Therefore a very clear political responsibility is implied in the Dome project, and Sinclair points it out in uncontroversial terms and with unequivocal irony. More specifically, he follows the development of the project, exposing the guidelines of power – namely New Labour's leadership – traced on its surface. "The fabulous album" inaugurated by the Dome is thought as Tony Blair's more visionary idea, more effective than "anything New Labour will achieve by dumping something closet o a billion pounds into the deadlands" (Sinclair 1999: 8).

The idea is given substance by Hayes Davidson for the New Millennium Experience Company and his 'computer-generated realisation', or the virtual alien in a familiar surrounding:

Put these images on a screen and they could evolve, shift, *breathe*, like M.R.James mezzotint. I mean that sharing at this unpeopled, radiant city would be to

⁷ The Tate Modern.



imagine movement, pick up on spectral traces; to treat this flat rectangle of card like a scrying glass or crystal ball (*Ivi*).

To be honest, the project is older than Blair's term of office. The cleaning-up of the polluted area where the Dome was to be built was conceived and completed by John Major's Deputy PM, Michael Heseltine. He also was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the Dome project, never to come true during Major's term of office. In spite of his different political stance, Tony Blair inherited the project and greatly expanded it, in order to produce an icon of his New Labour's political power and reliability. In short, what is put into practice is an operation of political make up, resulting in the creation of a symbol that could stand for the vision of the New Labour. Simplifying things a little, we know that the nature of the symbol is that it is created as an abstraction referring to a multiplicity of existing objects. Now the problem with the Dome is that it has no reference: it is the symbol of something that does not actually exist. This depends on the process of creation, which was conceived according to a somehow reversed pattern. The fathers of this freak offspring were actually two: Stephen Bayley – "the image Broker" – and Peter Mandelson – as "the Dome Czar (swingle shareholder)" (*Ibid.*: 11). Their visions of the world soon result incompatible:

Bayley gave the impression that he would have been happier if the whole 'experience' could have been shifted to the Design Museum that he had launched with Sir Terence Conran, a few miles upstream near Tower Bridge. On the other hand, Mandelson the master of consensus politics, required the Dome to shapeshift, become all things to all men. The shared ground between the two men was the actual lack of consistency of the whole project. "It [the Dome] didn't exist as a fixed point on the geography of London. It was theoretical. He [Mandelson] had commissioned these advance portraits and he damned reality to contradict him (*Ivi*).

Mandelson also shows a curious awkwardness in handling time as a sequence. He prefers presenting the Dome as something unique, eternal, the emblem of a turning point in history. In a document issued from his Cabinet Office, he proudly states that 'millenniums only come once in a thousand years'.

And this means – Sinclair adds – "at approximately the same interval as Labour governments with a mandate to do whatever they want, with absolutely no comeback, in the wake of the Tory meltdown and the merciful extinction of the sorriest rump of chancers, carpetbaggers, and self-serving pondlife ever inflicted on a masochistic democracy" (*Ibid.*: 23).

According to Lefebvre, any socio-political contradiction is reflected in the organization of shared spaces of a specific community. This means that spatial discrepancies are to be read as explicit manifestations of conflicts between socio-political interests and forces: "it is only *in* space that such conflicts come effectively into play, and in so doing they become contradictions of space" (Lefebvre 1991: 365).



The basic contradiction coming into play in the Dome affair is that the building itself is useful in that it does not exist. Not yet, at least, when the New Labour starts promoting it, through any available strategy:

New Labour, after a few misgivings, was ready to pick up the tab. Opinion formers and massagers of statistics went into action. It was suggested that TV soap operas should slip in positive references to the Millennium Experience and arrange, budget permitting, day trips to East Greenwich. The credits for *EastEnders* might be revised, so that the location of the Dome would be imprinted on the minds of submissive viewers (Sinclair 1999: 20).

In a way, Blair becomes at once a vanishing profile. Any public presentation is soon taken over precisely by Peter Mandelson, "the Kubla Khan of New Labour" (*Ibid.*: 26), who takes the burden of advertising the enterprise. In Sinclair's interpretation, Mandelson metamorphoses into a mythic figure, vaguely disquieting, "a Blair's replicant", attending public meetings and presentations in place of the Prime Minister:

Doubters began to wonder if Mandelson was a replicant. They froze their videotapes trying to decide if all the muscles in his face were working as he spoke out of the side of his mouth, issued the latest denial. Modestly, Mandelson's title stressed the negative: Minister Without Portfolio. The man was a positive discrimination amputee. But the media jackals suggested that it wasn't the portfolio that had been carelessly lopped off but the prefix. 'Prime'. It was Mandelson who was running this show, ironing the stretchmarks from the Blair grin, convening subcommittees to rethink the Chairman's haircut (*Ibid.*: 35, 36).

The final step is to be taken, and the Dome needs endorsement by its putative father. In the meanwhile, the whole thing has turned into a painful travesty that is to be concluded by a fake celebration:

Captain Smirk at the controls of the starship *Enterprise Culture*. "I am determined to do all that I can to ensure that the Dome stands as an enduring legacy for the future", Chairman Blair announced. A legacy like the South Sea Bubble. The landscape was so strange, so alienated, that you were practically deafened by the noise of conspiracy theorists (Stewart Home and Associates) licking their lips (*Ibid.*: 70).

As so often happens with magnificent imaginations, when the Dome becomes real, it is obviously a failure. The alien proves to be precisely what it seems: a foreign body marooned in a familiar landscape. Nothing can justify its presence on earth. It evokes the ancient fear of an invasion through a breach now opened by a well-known politician. And Tony Blair reappears, conjured up by the need to account officially for this enormous waste of public funds.

He chooses to admit letdown, but also insists in suggesting some positive outcomes, though he seems unable to specify them further:



Mr Blair told the BBC's Breakfast with Frost programme: "It's not been the success we hoped," but added "neither has it been the disaster that it has been portrayed in some parts"⁸.

Sinclair takes side with the Dome's detractors, stating that "The Millennium experience was the first major misjudgement by the New Labour conceptualists" (*ibid.*: 40). Even so, this "blob of congealed correction fluid" and "flick of Tipp-Ex to revise the mistakes of nineteenth-century industrialists" (*ibid.*: 12) keeps its secret allure and, precisely through its failure to become the successful icon of the New Labour, it triggers a new enigma:

How can Blair, who emerged so powerfully, a sensitive manipulator of national emotion, from the week of public mourning for the Princess of Wales, have been persuaded to give his blessing to the Teflon hedgehog? (*ibid.*: 41)

In trying to unfold the mystery, Sinclair couples the Dome and the Royal Family:

The two most unpopular concepts in the country were the Royal Family and the Millennium Dome. (They seemed to be twinned in a Daliesque cartoon.) The consensus was: dump the first (tumbrels to Tyburn) and turn the second into a shrine to Diana.

Should the secret of the tent be a mummified Snow White cadaver? A demi-waxwork that would be a place of pilgrimage, a Soviet/Byzantine relic in a glass coffin? Take back all the money wasted on this millennial junket, said the tabloids, and initiate a cult of the White Goddess. Build a plague hospital. Do something. The disaffection for the Dome was hyped by an unprecedented mourning frenzy. Public grief was contagious, but public anger was contained by paying witness to a realtime funerary procession, from the Abbey to the motorway (*ibid.*: 40, 41).

Again Sinclair unveils the usual strategy of selling fake history for a fake political credit, giving voice to a fraud we are very familiar with, in the UK and everywhere. In the fantasy land of political discourse, the real *polis* gets lost: it is, simply, a *different realm*, not easily marketed and therefore to be simply forgotten when reporting on *the real world*. And this is the first step of a new journey, to be told while the alien in Greenwich looks for its place in the city. Made into part of a large entertainment district – the O₂ – it seems to have found a new satisfying identity: a fake world where the real city – whatever it means – has no place.

⁸ Sunday, 24 September, 2000, 10:31 GMT 11:31 UK - "Blair admits Dome letdown" available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/uk_politics/2000/conferences/labour/939581.stm> (07 February 2009).



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