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edited by
Maria Rita Cifarelli and Jane Garnett

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Laura Colombino

Transcending the Human Scale: Ruins and Traumatized Cultural Memory in Texts on London by Michael Moorcock and Iain Sinclair

“What then,” Scott Bukatman wonders, “has changed in the transition from the condition of modernity to postmodernity? Quite simply,” he argues, “through the shift in the experience and the definition of the city from centralized space to dispersed ‘non-space’, the city has passed beyond the sensory powers of the individual” (1993: 168). Going beyond the normal boundaries of one’s senses to encompass all the spaces and times of the city, as well as other people’s thoughts and perceptions, is one of the central features with which I shall be concerned here. My field of observation will be a (necessarily) restricted sample of texts published from the late 1980s to the late 1990s: Michael Moorcock’s novel *Mother London* (1988), and Iain Sinclair’s travelogues *Liquid City* (1999) and *Lights Out for the Territory* (published in 1997 but arranging materials gathered at the end of the previous decade). The aim will be to understand how their large, choral canvases of London – its architecture and inhabitants – are motivated by the attempt to reconstruct cultural memory and retrieve a sense of commonality which the political ideology of the time was sweeping away; as rapidly as it was razing broad areas of historical London buildings to the ground. As Sinclair suggests:

it was the period when the whole Thatcherite explosion in Docklands

was taking place, and the back-story was being eliminated in front of my eyes. Buildings disappearing overnight, huge principalities being thrown up, and it couldn't have been better for me... things were so bad that they were really great to write about. (2003b: 121)

The fact that, though far from being comparable, this was the largest destruction of London's architecture since the Blitz may be the reason why the capital is represented by these authors as physically or metaphorically in ruins. Real or fantastic, remembered or re-imagined, material or psychological, this wrecked locale is the trace of what they perceive as a violent discontinuity, a trauma in cultural memory. As stated by Patrick Wright, the author of *A Journey through the Ruins: The Last Days of London* (1991):

In the 1980s, with all those changes going on, history came to seem weirdly disconnected. The old postwar machinery of 'progress' had ground to a halt, and there was a morbid sense of ruin everywhere. (Wright 2002: 490)

This "new gothic sensibility" (*ibid.*) depicts London's architecture as the avatar of a memory threatened, doomed, or verging on dissolution. Such a vision – so I argue here – is strongly, if often covertly, influenced by the experience of the Blitz when "the very real – and readable – remains of the devastated architecture" "form[ed] a new language of remembrance": a "highly literal form of urban memorial" which "[could] be witnessed universally – in Coventry, Dresden, and Hiroshima as well as in London" (Kerr 2002: 79). Indeed, the Second World War inaugurated an aesthetic vision of the ruin which was entirely new by comparison with classical, medieval, or romantic examples: a damaged architecture whose major connotation was the physical and psychological trauma it represented.

For the authors analyzed here the present is an orphan of the past; an abandoned, gutted house, like the ones emerging from the Blitz; a scar left on the body of the city, like those produced by bulldozers of (predominantly American) speculative developers. These are one of the emblems of the age along with, as Sinclair reminds us, pit bulls and "Murdoch's electronic ecstasy":

Satellite TV is a longdistance heart attack, incremental cancers: the narcoleptic trauma in which the dreams of the dog and the dreams of

the man (lager, sport, steroids, blood and sawdust) meet and mingle. [...] Recycled imagery is pumped into your home, disbelief is given a general anaesthetic: you see dogs everywhere. Nerves frayed by envy, the urge to consume; we summon up the things we fear most. PIT BULLS. Everybody has their favourite pit bull story; yarns that pull the community together, like V2 myths in wartime. (2003a: 56)

Similarly, Moorcock is critical of the consumer society of the time and portrays it as predominantly made of “confidence tricksters, modern witch-doctors, publicists, predators of myriad varieties” (2004: 30). This is why, as Brian Baker rightly points out, “[t]he Blitz, the myth of London’s survival, and one that is used to obscure class conflict and foster a coherent sense of British nationhood” is “appropriated by Moorcock to reaffirm communal feeling but countermand sentiments of ‘national pride’” (2003: paragraph 12) and aggressive individualism. It goes without saying that, confronted with this society and dominant ideology, the practice of a counterculture inspired by the memory of commonality during the Blitz (as well as the recollection of the 1960s experience) cannot but be clandestine; suitably confined, for Moorcock and Sinclair, to marginal or marginalized beings. All of them, though different, are “martyred by the agony” (Sinclair 1999: 9) of a titanic task: trying to sew together, down to the tiniest fragment, everything belonging to London’s human and architectural scene, so as to produce unimaginably comprehensive, choral canvasses. Traversed by trajectories of different spaces, times, and consciousnesses, these minds and bodies, strained or even in pain, are the unacknowledged sages of their time. They are Kiss, Gasalee, and Mummery, the three psychopathic patients of *Mother London*; and Sinclair himself, committed, in *Lights Out for the Territory* and *Liquid City*, to the exciting as much as exhausting activity of registering urban anarchy; always on the alert, for, sooner or later, the hidden pattern *will* reveal itself. All these subjects stubbornly pursue the same impossible aim of “procuring a perfect representation of chaos” (Sinclair 1999: 9) but also of the secret, intensely poetic order behind it. The scientific theories of complexity (the idea of a self-organizing, rather than merely entropic, universe) which came to the fore in the 1980s had – so I

argue here – a great impact on the two authors. As we will see, they provided them with a new language to express their longing for a commonality which national culture seemed to have left behind. This, therefore, is my double contention here: trauma and chaos, in the human and architectural cosmoses, are the alpha and omega of these urban texts; their means to remember and regain a more humane and collective vision of London.

Intimate Spaces: the Mind, the House, the City, the Cosmos

In *Mother London* the narration moves backwards and forwards between the Second World War and today, enacting three traumatized psyches striving to cope with London's cacophony. Their ability to transcend the human scale and stitch together events, lives, and consciousnesses belonging to the city's different times and spaces allows them to reactivate in the reader the sense of cultural memory. In Moorcock's novel, as in many texts by J.G. Ballard, psychopaths are the new heroes of modern fiction. But their mental explorations beyond the boundaries of the human senses and society's received ideas display a sense of sympathy rather than, as in Ballard's characters, a (self-)destructive impulse. They certainly share the motherly quality announced by the novel's title and featuring prominently in the first epigraph chosen for the novel: Mervyn Peake's poem "London, 1941". Here a ruined house, the symbol of the city and its inhabitants, is portrayed with womanly traits and evokes the iconography of charity in traditional painting (a woman breast-feeding):

Half masonry, half pain; her head
 From which the plaster breaks away
 Like flesh from the rough bone, is turned
 Upon a neck of stones [...]
 Her breasts are crumbling brick where the black ivy
 Had clung like a fantastic child for succour.
 (Quoted in Moorcock 2004)

“[T]he house is the first universe for its young children, the first cosmos,” argues Stilgoe in his foreword to Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, “shap[ing] all subsequent knowledge of other space, of any larger cosmos” (1994: viii). Moorcock’s London is a multitude of places – physical or mental – which, thanks to their magnified sensory powers, the protagonists are able to experience and hold dear as if they were their own: the voices and thoughts of Londoners which Gasalee and Kiss hear telepathically, the city’s underground secrets probed by Mummery, the surface architecture known by Kiss, who divides his time between his numerous London “homes commanding all four points of the compass” (Moorcock 2004: 44). The intimate relationship Kiss cultivates with so many different parts of London is a methodical as much as illuminating exercise: by spreading and multiplying across the whole city the sense of domestic space, Moorcock suggests the idea that, through this net of intimacy, the random and floating fragments of urban chaos can be sewn together.

The city, for him, is like a natural cosmos governed by a sublime harmony of intricate force fields, energies, and geometries:

Frequently Mummery imagines the city streets to be dry riverbeds ready to be filled from subterranean sources. From behind the glass he watches his Londoners. This *fabulous flotsam*. They come from Undergrounds and subways (*their ditches and their burrows*) flowing over pavements to where myriad transports wait to divert them to a thousand nearby destinations. The mist has dissipated. A cold sun now brightens this eruption of souls [...]. As the bus passes a curved metal railway bridge and runs under a white flyover he thinks of the millions of predestined individuals driving or being driven in a million directions, their breath, their smoke, their exhausts softening the sharpness of the morning air.

Momentarily Mummery feels as if London’s population has been transformed into music, so sublime is his vision; the city’s inhabitants create an exquisitely complex geometry, a geography passing beyond the natural to become metaphysical, only describable in terms of music or abstract physics: nothing else makes sense of relationships between roads, rails, waterways, subways, sewers, tunnels, bridges, viaducts, aqueducts, cables, between every possible intersection. Mummery hums a tune of his own improvising and up they come

still, his Londoners, like premature daisies, sometimes singing, or growling, or whistling, chattering; each adding a further harmony or motif to this miraculous spontaneity, up into the real world. *Oh, they are wonderful like this, today.* (*Ibid.*: 7)

The principles governing the orchestration of this multifarious urban scene are provided by chaos theory. Its discovery, as Moorcock admits about some later novels of his,¹ was, for him, particularly illuminating.² The studies of complex systems came on the scientific scene in the late 1970s with Ilya Prigogine (who was awarded the 1977 Nobel Prize in chemistry) and Isabelle Stengers, the authors of the popular *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (1984). Chaos theory claims that apparently random natural phenomena have a secret, implicit order. The movements of a dynamic system may escape us, due to its infinite variations, yet – as recent developments in computer simulations of uncertain, complex trajectories have shown – these are invariably confined to more or less stable patterns, the so-called strange attractors. These studies had an enormous impact on several scientific fields such as physics, economics, psychoanalysis, weather prediction, animal migration patterns, and quantum mechanics. Hardly less prominent and documented are the forays of chaos theory – along with other, related scientific concepts such as complexity and fractals – into art and architecture. The aesthetic appeal of the theory comes from its revelation that the laws of the universe are complex and beautiful (as shown by fractals) and that the cosmos is driven by creative forces (rather than blind entropy). Their “miraculous spontaneity”, to borrow Moorcock’s phrase, derives from the self-organizing and self-regulating quality of chaotic form. Significantly, all these tenets pervade Moorcock’s passage. If, for example, “predestined individuals” appear “driving or being driven” in predetermined directions it is because the irreversibility of movement is conceived by chaos theory as the major source of order at all levels (negentropy). Even the ref-

¹ *Blood* (1995), *Fabulous Harbours* (1995) and *The War Amongst the Angels* (1996).

² Moorcock refers to chaos theory in many online interviews. See, for example, J.C. Neves, “Acclaimed British Writer Michael Moorcock”, <http://www.alanmooreesenbordocaos.hpg.ig.com.br/entrevistas33.htm>.

erence to people's breath and car exhaust fumes mitigating the cold of the air is inspired by the law according to which in dynamic systems, in this case the weather, the final state is heavily determined by even small differences in the initial condition (the so-called butterfly effect).

"For some commentators, the city's non-linear phenomena can be mapped like nature's, from economic booms and busts to urban growth. Essentially culture is considered to work like nature" (Hagan 2000: 349). Fittingly, Moorcock's Kiss becomes an "urban anthropologist" (Moorcock 2004: 5) who studies the dynamic patterns of human settlements and migrations within London's natural-urban environment:

This afternoon I think we'll stroll around Battersea to observe the migrated young of Chelsea who have crossed the river; the interloping tribe which has now claimed an entire border country, a wave of conquest familiar in history. (*Ibid.*: 51)

Moorcock, therefore, is thoroughly in tune with the anthropological or ethnographic turn described by Hal Foster as the reaction, in the 1990s, to the inflated paradigm of art-as-text in the 1970s and art-as-simulacrum in the 1980s. The shift, he contends, consists in "a return to the referent as grounded in a given identity and/or a sited community" (Foster 1999: xviii). If, in *The Savage Mind* (1962), Claude Lévi-Strauss famously prophesied the *dissolution* of man in the structural-linguistic reshaping of the human sciences,³ the anthropological emphasis of the 1990s tended to *restore* the subject as a material, physical entity, superseding also the simulacral reductions and commodity aesthetics of the 1980s. "However subtle it may seem," argues Foster, "this shift from a subject defined in terms of *economic relation* to one defined in terms of *cultural identity* is significant" (1999: 173).

Summing up: in *Mother London* the new emphasis placed by anthropology and natural sciences on the physicality of bodies and places intersects with the collective memory of the Blitz to produce a renovated sense of humanism and community. The new laws of

³ His critique was mainly aimed at Sartrean dialectics (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 247).

complexity, with their conception of the human being as part of a larger anthropological and urban-natural world, provide Moorcock with a contemporary language to revive the sense of commonality and city/national identity experienced by Londoners during the war.

Minds Plundering the Ruins

I do not know how many tons of high explosives have been tipped out upon the gigantic target of London since the Battle of London began on August 24th, 1940 [...]. The people of London, having developed a technique of living in the face of repeated danger, now accept the preposterous, and what was until recently the incredible, as the normal background of existence. I often think that the ability to reduce the preposterous and the incredible to the level of commonplace is a singularly English gift. (Moorcock 1988: 3)

This passage from H.V. Morton, quoted by Moorcock in the epigraph of the first part of the novel, could be equally applicable to recent terrorist events in the capital: “7/7 was markedly dissimilar to 9/11,” writes a commentator in the aftermath of London’s 2005 bomb attack, “both because of the physical difference between the two disasters and because of the ineffable thing that is the British character” (Lyll 2005: 1). Is the ability to adjust to the outrageous a distinctive feature of Britons’ and especially Londoners’ temperament? Or, more to the point, is there something about contemporary London which evokes the idea of an ever-present though somehow psychologically absorbed trauma?

The connection with the Blitz is never made explicit in Sinclair’s travelogues. Yet, I think, we are not wide of the mark if we say that the Blitz functions as the ur-trauma – certainly juxtaposed with the recent demolitions of the Thatcherite era – behind his sense of architecture as physically and, even more, metaphorically wounded or wrecked. Everywhere, he suggests, “[b]roken sentences and *forgotten* names wink like fossils among the ruins” (2003a: 3, emphasis added): all the memories, existences, and texts (especially graffiti) inscribed within the city spaces are different scenes of the same des-

tiny of traumatic interruption (fossils, in particular, stand for lives violently taken away, incorporated, and forever imprinted in solid matter). Despite this – or better, for this very reason – past existences still resonate to Sinclair’s ears from the London walls which have become imbued with their spirits; these are like restless ghosts that, murderously torn from existence, continue to haunt the scene of the crime. Unlike Moorcock, Sinclair does not conceive trauma as a unique and definitive occurrence infinitely reverberating through the multifarious folds of chaotic time: “[e]verything happens in the present tense,” he states, there is “[n]o history, no future” (*ibid.*: 2). The *space* of the city is definitely more momentous for him. It presents memory crisis as a diffuse, “background” phenomenon, scattered through the urban landscape; and, for that matter, assimilated by the distracted modern wanderer in homeopathic doses. These act as an immunization from the enlightening pain of memory:

Memorials are a way of forgetting, reducing generational guilt to a grid of albino chess pieces, bloodless stalagmites. Shapes that are easy to ignore stand in for the trauma of remembrance. Names are edited out. Time attacks the noble profile with a syphilitic bite. These funerary spikes, unnoticed by the locals as they go about their business, operate a system of pain erasure; acupuncture needles channeling, through their random alignment, the flow of the energy field. (*Ibid.*: 9)

The theme of pain is important and I will briefly comment on it below. Here, however, another element must be noticed: Sinclair’s overpowering impulse to register everything which appears to be on the brink of disappearance. Whether real or supposed, presaged or just imagined, this sense of impermanence is absolutely central to Sinclair’s aesthetics. It is what turns the recording of every old building, funerary monument, or neglected and unwonted part of the capital’s heritage into an intensely poetic experience. There is something methodical about this recording practice, which reminds us of Kiss’s pilgrimage from one home to the next: “[a]s with alchemy it is never the result that matters,” writes Sinclair, “it’s the time spent on the process, the discipline of repetition. Enlightened boredom”

(2003a: 5). His registering is both on paper and through the camera eye, with the two means intersecting or mingling indissolubly: “[a]rmed with a cheap notebook, and accompanied by the photographer Marc Atkins, I would transcribe all the pictographs of venom” (the graffiti) “that decorated our near-arbitrary route” (*ibid.*: 1). The role of photography is especially decisive in the definition of the memorial-as-ruin, in that it is partly responsible for the loss of memorializing power which Sinclair detects in the architecture of remembrance. In a similar vein, Roland Barthes contends that the advent of photography marked the very death of the monument:

Earlier societies managed so that memory, the substitute for life, was eternal and that at least the thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal: this was the Monument. But by making the (mortal) Photograph into the general and somehow natural witness of “what has been”, modern society has renounced the Monument. (2000: 93)

The capital’s recent history provides a cogent example of this. The only London monument commemorating the Second World War, Berthold Lubetkin’s Lenin Memorial (1942), was destroyed in 1948 as a result of the cold war. Yet, the Blitz has been remembered over the ensuing six decades through photographs. They are the “lasting images that showed ‘London can take it’”, above all Herbert Mason’s celebrated photograph of 29 December 1940 “which showed the apparently undamaged St. Paul’s Cathedral rising stoically above the flames of incendiary bombs” (Kerr 2002: 77). Photographs, along with propaganda posters, served as powerful means of gathering consensus around a shared identity; a function which is usually entrusted to monuments.

But let us return to Sinclair. If architecture becomes an *aide-mémoire* only by being transformed into the “image précaire” (Durand 1990: 26)⁴ produced by the camera eye, it also ends up absorbing the very fragility and transience photography seems to entail: in *Liquid City* Atkins is “[q]uick to notice vulnerable structures. He doesn’t want to photograph anything that will still be there tomorrow” (Sinclair and Atkins 1999: 66). But the emphasis is

⁴ Durand borrows this term from Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L’image précaire du dispositif photographique* (1987).

not so much on destruction as on “transformation” (*ibid.*: 178): crumbling sculptures and monuments appear magically overcome and transfigured by lichen and other growing vegetation. “[R]eality”, for Sinclair, “is an infinitely accommodating substance” (2003a: 25), a constantly mutating, far-from-equilibrium system. No doubt, chaos theory has a hand in the definition of this instability, as shown by his use of meteorological references (so similar to the ones found in Moorcock): at Petrilli Terminus Café, he writes, “[w]e steam in the window, knees rattling the formica; affecting the biosphere with our transported weather systems” (*ibid.*: 42). A particularly fascinating aspect of this dynamic logic is that it includes the transformation of architecture into (human) nature and vice versa:

Forcibly exposed to the climate of London, [Atkins] shifts exterior into interior: broken statuary in a wilderness graveyard is revealed as stone furniture, skies are liquid ceilings becoming rivers of swift light. Pores of cracked plaster in an abandoned house breathe and sweat like tired skin. Grass is hair. (Sinclair and Atkins 1999: 9)

To a certain extent, what drives Sinclair to walk across this fluid cityscape is, avowedly, the influence of American on-the-road literature (mainly Kerouac),⁵ especially as far as the search for continuity in the experience of landscape is concerned. Yet his texts differ from this model in many ways. Driving across America’s often standardized landscape usually implies the idea of emptying experience of all content and meaning: “[w]e have been everywhere,” states Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, “[w]e have seen nothing” (quoted in Jackle 1985: 198). Contrariwise, Sinclair’s London scene is a dense, turbulent chaos of people and architectures. His texts are overcrowded by minor figures: London-obsessed and often obscure literati, a dizzying whirl of booksellers, (minor) artists and common people; most of them presented as survivors of pre-Thatcherite culture. In their own way, Sinclair’s canvasses, like Moorcock’s, aim at being vast, detailed, and comprehensive, presenting collectivity as the site of cultural practice and memory. To this effect, a slow pace is needed, so walking takes the place of driving (another departure from the

⁵ See Sinclair (2003b: 27-28, 54).

American model). Sinclair conceives his way of striding the city as the late evolution of European situationist practices.⁶

the born-again *flâneur* is a stubborn creature, less interested in texture and fabric, eavesdropping on philosophical conversation pieces, than noticing *everything* [...]. Walking, moving across a retreating townscape, stitches it all together: the illicit cocktail of bodily exhaustion and raging carbon monoxide high. (Sinclair 2003a: 4)

Interestingly, he defines his “geography” as “psychotic” (*ibid.*: 128), because it implies a mind in pain because of the titanic effort to which it has committed itself. Psycho-physical strain is crucial to the success of the enterprise. The act of furiously “saturating yourself with” “these matters of London” – to the point of “dooming yourself to fall apart” (*ibid.*: 128) – and sewing, in an exhausting frenzy, all the defiant bits of the immensely diverse patchwork *will* finally be rewarded: order behind chaos will unfold as a fleeting but undeniable epiphany, “that monosecond when the pattern was revealed, before it vanished forever” (Sinclair and Atkins 1999: 8).

Suitably, the chaotic city described by Sinclair, former dealer in used books, resembles an antiquarian bookshop – London is a “stone library, books read by statues” (Sinclair 2003a: 40) – whose books-ruins of past ages, recent or remote, are plundered, metaphorically but methodically, by the new purposeful walker. The covert violence behind Sinclair’s “despoiling” use of London’s architecture-library is sometimes made explicit, as in the following passage. Here London bibliophiles are imagined as having turned into cannibals who, after having voraciously pillaged for years a book-dealer’s mobile shop, finally devour his own dead body:

I like to imagine a Viking funeral: George laid out on the barrow on a cushion of Saturday-special books, a comfortably-fleshed mound beneath the roped tarpaulin. At a signal from his son or daughter, the biblio-cannibals would be let loose, elbowing, scratching and spitting, forced to devour the great procurer, down to the last knuckle and curl. They should carry him away in their distended bellies to the obscure rooms where they have stashed their dusty treasures. (*Ibid.*: 20)

⁶ On the situationist legacy in Sinclair, see Colombino (2006: 613-614).

Conclusion

In the film *84 Charing Cross Road*, set in London in the aftermath of the Second World War, English literature is perceived as something belonging to the past: its symbol is the antiquarian bookshop from which an American woman writer, who stands for the new thriving culture of the time, purchases insatiably for years. The idea that the war marks a symbolic caesura after which Great Britain loses its cultural, political, and literary supremacy is hardly new. What is yet to be appreciated is that today's enormous surge of interest in London's *architectural* features on the part of many British writers is often secretly connected to this cultural shift. Architecture is, for them, the real and only extant (but endangered) living form of an otherwise vanished literary tradition: "[t]he disappearance of the old Victorian asylums," Sinclair significantly suggests about the buildings pulled down during the 1980s Big Bang, "is like the disappearance of Victorian literature" (2003b: 134). In his travelogues, this conflation of literature and architecture is complete. With the former felt as disappeared, the latter has been textualized: as if books had been transfused into the solid matter of the city's buildings. The same can be said of Moorcock's *Mother London* where the numerous houses are so many accesses to earlier periods, tiny pockets of past culture and literature felicitously entrapped in the stretching and folding of time postulated by chaos theory. So, it is fitting that Sinclair's and Moorcock's London narratives should spring, as it were, from the very walls of the city. When visiting the Midland Grand (the old railway hotel in St. Pancras, London) to decide what to stage there, British director Deborah Warner tellingly said: "I set about looking for a text to put in it, but, as I got to know the building, I began to realize that *it was its own text*" (quoted in McEvoy, 2006: 593, emphasis added).

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