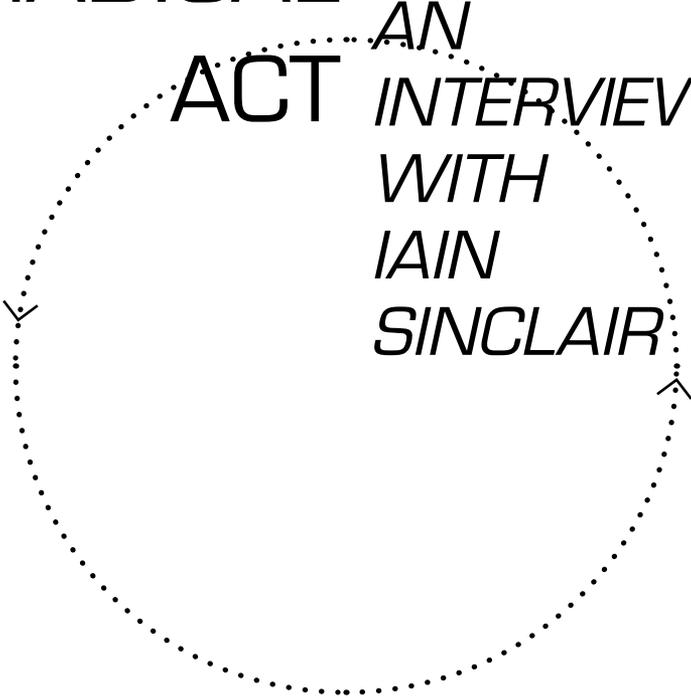


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JARETT KOBEEK

WALKING IS A RADICAL ACT

An Interview with Iain Sinclair

JARETT KOBEK



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KOBEK: One of the things that's fascinating about your work is the general arc of your career as a writer, because it seems to me that it's a little improbable.

SINCLAIR: Highly.

KOBEK: Do you have a sense of its shape?

SINCLAIR: I do now, retrospectively, at the age of 70. It's possible to look back and to identify a shape shortly before that shape disappears. There never was a plotted career as a writer. That isn't how things worked out. It was accidental. I always wrote, but I didn't have the feeling that what I wrote would find a public form, allowing me to support myself by this activity. I didn't think that what I was writing *could* be published by any sort of mainstream market. In the early days, I wrote all the time but I was just featuring in fugitive magazines. By 1970, after I'd been dabbling for ten years, it struck me that the time was right to launch a small press.

There'd been a lot going on in the late '60s and early '70s; a good network of people, maybe a couple of

hundred, and they were exchanging material. Artworks in padded envelopes were always thumping on the mat. This was a live scene supported by the independent bookshop Compendium in Camden Town in London, a great market for exchange. You couldn't deliver a dozen copies of your own poetry booklets without walking out of there with two dozen books by other writers, from Ed Dorn and Ed Sanders and Kathy Acker to our local masters, Allen Fisher, Bill Griffiths, Barry MacSweeney.

For the next ten years, Compendium was somewhere where I could place books. I was my own editor and I was also publishing the work of writers like Brian Catling, Chris Torrance and J.H. Prynne. I didn't have a career as a poet. I didn't have a career as a labourer at the odd jobs, in breweries, cutting grass, emptying containers, I did across East London. My career was to live and survive in the city. And to keep some kind of record of that activity.

My 'career', in the sense of being noticed, didn't start until *White Chapell*, *Scarlet Tracings*. My earlier, self-published books, *Lud Heat* and *Suicide Bridge*, oscillated between poetry and prose, hybrid forms, lurching between London's darkness and light. *White Chappell* was the capstone for a trilogy. The book was too substantial to be published by my own press. It had become too expensive by this point. From £50 for our first books to £2000. *Suicide Bridge*, my singular act of punk-vorticism, arrived with the advent of Margaret Thatcher. Not great timing in retrospect. Thatcher's chill shadow fell across any small pockets of funding left: the readings stopped, the union of poets was disbanded. Quietly, without much protest, we went the way of the miners.

I was lucky to get *White Chappell* accepted by Mike Goldmark, an enterprising book dealer (and double-

glazing salesman) I'd come across in the small Midlands town of Uppingham. We used to chat in the pub, after we'd finished our book-haggling business. He said that he was interested in becoming a publisher, combining high-quality design with 'difficult' content. My novel seemed to fit the bill. I rambled about the themes, the Whitechapel conspiracies. He said, 'Write this thing and I'll do it for you! I'll take it to the finest printer in Europe, Mardersteig of Verona.'

The novel was shortlisted, a shortlist of just two; it was the official runner-up for the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1987. A good thing in those days, won by people like Ballard, Angela Carter, Mike Moorcock. *White Chappell* got some attention and, from then on, I began to have a part-time career as a writer. I was picked up in paperback by Nick Austin at Paladin. I even became poetry editor there for a time. Although I stayed on the road as a used bookdealer, running around the country, stalling out at book fairs, printing small catalogues.

The situation changed again in 1997 with *Lights Out For The Territory*, my first mainstream book of non-fiction. I felt after *Radon Daughters* that I'd run out of permissions, in terms of what I could get away with in fiction. And *Lights Out* was not greeted with any great enthusiasm by my publishers. They went back on their promise to do a hardback. But for once the timing was right. There was a very generous review from Peter Ackroyd and the book took off in London, copies were flying from the shelves. This was a strictly local phenomenon, but it did help. I was part of a movement that was being branded and marketed: psychogeography lite. It was a long way from the Situationists but it suited the English sentiment about walking, deep-topography, historical scavenging.

Now I feel we've reached the end of that era. The

kind of books that I was doing certainly wouldn't be welcomed by a serious publisher in the current climate. They'd be smuggled out somewhere weird on the Internet. Nobody is inviting me to return to fiction. Which means that is probably where I'll decide to go next - after crossing the border so many times in disguise, posing as a bespoke travel writer or gonzo essayist.

KOBEK: Preparing for this interview, I went back and re-read as many of your books as I could. I re-read *Kodak Mantra Diaries*, about making *Ah! Sunflower*, a documentary film with Allen Ginsberg in 1967. It was your second book?

SINCLAIR: It was, yes. My first prose book.

KOBEK: It was surprising how close *Kodak Mantra* is to the work that you've been doing for the last sixteen years.

SINCLAIR: I have a new book coming out in November from Hamish Hamilton called *American Smoke*. It's quite odd to see how close this late work is to the point where I started: working from photographs, sampling tapes, interrogating diaries. I realized that the influences I'd had back at the beginning, American Black Mountain poets and Beat Generation writers, were so remote, so much an imagined tribe. Homeric presences not humans living in a place I recognized or understood. I devoured the books and the films, but I stayed at home. I never travelled to the land where these people went about their business. I poked around the East End of London. I explored the reaches of the Thames. I drove to Liverpool, Newcastle, Glasgow. I walked to Oxford, Peterborough, Glastonbury. I missed the moment for expeditions to the USA. What about those landscapes of the mind? New Mexico, Arizona,

Seattle, Reno? Now, as a pensioner, was the moment to strike out.

I headed off to the USA and met up with people like Gary Snyder and Michael McClure and stayed in towns like Gloucester, Massachusetts, so closely associated with Charles Olson. I made it my business to investigate the places where the people I'd been obsessed with had lived. Kerouac's Lowell. San Francisco. Burroughs in Lawrence, Kansas. And of course those places were not the *written* places, any more than my fictional Wapping was the Wapping you could sample on an afternoon's walk.

The memory book of this new project draws on and recalibrates *Kodak Mantra Diaries*. There were so many episodes I misinterpreted in 1967, so many complexities I didn't comprehend. Returning to the same geography, walking through the same door: a different world. It's been a fascinating process to watch my first non-fiction book become the refracted fiction of *American Smoke*. What it means to be here and not-here, and to call on the dead as unreliable witnesses. 'To write novels you don't need an imagination,' Roberto Bolaño said, 'just a memory.'

KOBEK: *Kodak Mantra* is the only book where the setting is somewhere other than your current house in Hackney, which you've lived in for the past forty something years.

SINCLAIR: That's not quite true. I've written books set in Wales and the south coast of England, in Oxford and Cambridge, Berlin and Athens, but they didn't register. It's not what I'm supposed to do. Those books were off-brand. They disappeared very rapidly.

But it's true that all my books, apart from *Kodak*

Mantra Diaries, have been written in the same Hackney house. The odd one out was written on the Mediterranean island of Gozo. The prose sections of *Lud Heat* were written, one freezing winter, in a cottage in Dorset. At the time of the action described in *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, we were lodging in a single room on Haverstock Hill. My expectation at that time, in terms of career, was that I would be teaching film in a technical college in Northeast London and also trying to work, on my own account, with documentaries. A film on Allen Ginsberg was commissioned by WDR in Cologne. I really thought at that point: *here we go*. It was all too easy. The next film I proposed, the one with William Burroughs, was plotted, discussed, agreed—but it never happened. Some old friends from Dublin had moved into a communal house in Hackney, and we came over just to stay with them for a while, and ended up being here for the rest of our lives. The set was waiting. And the set was right. Meanwhile, William Burroughs vanished into Scientology. We've been in the same house, once condemned, now affordable only by bankers, since 1969. Nobody could have foreseen the nature of the transformation of Hackney, from a paradigm of inner-city blight to picnic grounds of smart, wired, and probably connected, youth.

KOBEK: You wrote a piece in *The Independent* about the import of the house on your writing and your general stability.

SINCLAIR: This house was the only sensible economic thing I've done in my whole life. It made the hand-to-mouth business of writing and publishing possible. Those zones of subversive activity are no longer available. The culture dies (or re-invents itself entirely). You sign away your future to put a roof over your head. It's a high price, a Faustian contract, for the availability of fresh croissants and good coffee. Nobody *owned* a house,

everybody I knew rented, stayed on the move. It cut down nicely on possessions. After forty-four years, I'm now a prisoner of archive, of books, DVDs... paper!

Friends of ours decided they were going to get a house and we followed them. The old intricate pattern of terraced streets was being cleared away for mushrooming tower blocks. But they were badly built. There was a lot of corruption. Plagues of cockroaches. Nineteenth-century properties were very cheap. We got this house for a few thousand pounds, the amount of money that I'd earned for doing the Ginsberg film for German television. The house wasn't seen as an investment. It was a brick tent, a shelter. A temporary solution that worked so well that we're still here. I didn't have a mortgage or high utility bills. We could live very cheaply, grow some of our own vegetables, and survive on labouring jobs. My wife taught in a local primary school. And was able to take a few years out when we had young children. I carried on in that way—casual jobs, a period of writing, another job—until 1975, when I inherited a bunch of books from an old lady in Wales and I started to work on a book stall. For a few years those activities were all absorbing, getting up early, off to markets, out on the road, and writing became spasmodic, publishing stopped.

The house also became a nexus for the imagination; a cave, a source of inspiration, a potential subject for fiction. A small book, *Red Eye*, written in 1973, but never published by Albion Village Press, is about to appear from a new Hackney outfit, Test Centre. This is a spare text with the house, the garden, my family, at the heart of it. A sounding of boundaries. My son was born in this house. I discovered, when I was researching *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire*, that this was actually the first house put up on this ground. Even though we're very close to the City of

London, the area consisted of farmland, allotments and brick kilns. With the development surge of the Victorian period, rivers and canals, speculative building projects were rampant. The dimensions of the generic Victorian terraced house seem to work; the family home, the small strip of garden. People stayed a long time, they hung on. It had the kind of super-urban identity that works. Larger houses, offering bigger profits on investment, changed hands often. People sold up and moved on, but that didn't happen on this strip. Our neighbors have been here almost as long as we have. It was a fortunate accident that I somehow blundered into a place that would give me the space in which to write and also material to fire that writing. *Where* you write may be as important, in the end, as what you write about. Every house is a self-portrait.

KOBEK: And by virtue of being in Hackney, which radically transformed under Thatcher and New Labour, it's set the stage for your last few books in which you have become a writer of urban gentrification.

SINCLAIR: The identity of this place changed so dramatically. We arrived in Hackney in 1968. And it felt like 1945. The atmosphere was shifting in a very slow dissolve from the London of black-and-white movies about bomb sites, the period after the Second World War when documentarists were moving, hesitantly, into fiction. The period of films like Robert Hamer's *It Always Rains On Sunday*. There were prefabricated houses down at the end of a Victorian square celebrated by John Betjeman. Bomb damage was still visible. A lot of the older people had strong memories of the war. There weren't a lot of cars. The house didn't have a bathroom, it had a tin tub on a nail. There was an outside lavatory. It felt as if we'd time-travelled into the era of the postwar Attlee government. With spivs, petty thievery, public baths, bent coppers

and spied-on communists.

Change was barely noticeable: a measure of gentrification, the retreat of the white working classes into Essex and the Epping Forest fringe. A migration led by taxi drivers and self-employed builders. Until the Thatcher period when things exploded and it was necessary for City workers, share-dealers, currency speculators, to be at their desks early, in order to handle the wide-open global markets—at the very moment when public transport was collapsing. And London bus franchises were handed over to country cousins who had no idea where they were. The big wind blew and trees tumbled in public parks. The council took it as an excuse to fill in swimming pools. House prices started to rise. Houses were now an investment, a subject for dinner-party conversations. Buying to let rather than to occupy was a Thatcherite wheeze. Council houses were thrown on the market with the notion of creating new, property-owning Tory voters.

All this febrile activity was leading towards the philosophy of the Grand Project, the scam of scams, the Olympic Games. What a smokescreen! The media would buy in, absolutely, and pump up a moment of national hysteria and mass hallucination. Marginal land was enclosed. History was rewritten. Travellers dispersed. Surveillance systems imported from war zones. Self-assembly, flatpack stadia and unnecessary council buildings that looked like airports were dumped on our doorstep. Along with all the quantifiable losses: the sweeping away of allotments, boat houses, bakers, warehouses occupied by artists. The scorched-earth destruction of locality in favor of a virtual-reality topography underwritten by fast-food giants and the manufacturers of industrial pollutants. I have written extensively of this period, as an elegy for the kind

of people and the kind of books that have been lost in the tidal wave of dead language and reckless development.

But at the same time, Hackney had its highly localised riots. Collateral damage. An expression of deep resentment in sections of the submerged community. The same houses that nobody much wanted at £2000 are now changing hands for more than a million. High-court judges are moving into properties once owned by neighbourhood gangsters. Alongside the predatory housing market, there are extremes of poverty at a Victorian level, rough-sleepers in parks and under motorway bridges. The two worlds live side-by-side without interaction. London is fragmented and it's a much tenser than most people recognize. The big projects, in the City or beside the river, look like target architecture. Provocations. Dead-faced monsters built to be blown apart.

KOBEK: When the Olympics were going on you were suddenly appearing on television.

SINCLAIR: It was odd. And unexpected.

KOBEK: I'd see people post clips of this on Facebook and I'd be slightly freaked out by it.

SINCLAIR: Not as much as me.

KOBEK: I can only imagine. The narrative of the Olympics that I received here in America, it seemed as if there was some skepticism and then once Danny Boyle's opening ceremony happened, the media became incredibly positive. The negative criticism seemed to disappear entirely.

SINCLAIR: The further away from the Games you

were, the more successful they appeared. From the very beginning, the whole thing was a media construct: wild celebrations followed by bombs in the Underground, on buses. You could surf images of future stadia that would never, in fact, be built. Not in the form on display. CGI spins were treated like documentaries. The only serious objectors were embattled clusters of the expelled and the disaffected, those who were close to the point where it was happening. The ones who were affected by the enormous pollution, the dead rivers, the dust of demolition. Which nobody discussed or saw. We were told, repeatedly, that the Lower Lea Valley was a wilderness. There's never been such a media whitewash. Even cynical journalists that I was talking to early on were waving the flag by the end. Looking for an athlete in a wheelchair, any athlete, to clutch in a tearful embrace. The same athletes who couldn't wrestle their chairs into lifts on the new railway stations six months before the opening ceremony.

None of this is grounded in any kind of reality. Most of what goes on is horrendous. There have been programmed expulsions from Newham and Stratford. Social cleansing, people put on buses and shipped out. The new properties are being bought out of catalogues by Chinese investors. By speculators in Kuala Lumpur. The last public swimming pool in Stratford closed recently. Boat clubs along the River Lea have gone. There are no fishes in our stretch of the Regent's Canal: dead water. Football pitches built on wartime rubble have been taken and made into car parks. Endless, endless obituary lists, but that is not what the message was.

And the message worked. The whole nation was hypnotized by this moment. The bills, you know, are gigantic and way beyond what was pitched. None of that actually mattered. The thing became a TV channel

of its own. A loyalty test. Orwellian predictions hosed at us from giant screens in public squares and from parks. Play makes us free.

I did something like 300 interviews. Journalists were coming from Germany, Mexico, Spain, Finland, god knows where. I was endlessly walking around dirty tracts of East London, pointing out horrors to slightly bemused foreign film crews. And that just went on and on. I'd never had so much exposure, while, at the same time, the book I'd written on this topic, *Ghost Milk*, was spectacularly unpopular. Nobody was going to bother to read the book, but they were very keen to have the argument performed in the media in the usual combative, for and against style, they like for interviews.

KOBEC: I had assumed going into *Ghost Milk* that it would be predominantly about the 2012 Olympics. But you move away from it.

SINCLAIR: That was the obvious big moment, but the book I wanted to write was much more about a process that went back to New Labour and the erection of the Millennium Dome on the East Greenwich Peninsula. This was the identifiable instant—Millennium Eve—when content started to dissolve, while spin replaced it. At the start of the New Millennium, there were a series of pointless, sub-Olympic projects spread across the North of England in a form of colonialism by stealth: destroying modest local initiatives by flooding them with absurd windfalls of cash. Patronage of the Other England, north of Watford, by computer-surveying metropolitans. The age of the awayday bagmen with their reserved first class tickets. Cultural asset strippers who always got in and out before the shit hit the fan. All of these dim regeneration projects, bogus museums and heritage theme parks failed, and were abandoned. The budgets were never seriously challenged. Let's stay

upbeat! Send for Danny Boyle and his dancing nurses. All of this got swept away by the Olympics. I didn't want to get bogged down in that story. I wanted to visit Athens, which was on the point of collapse, and still had a grand Olympic park that was derelict and apocalyptic. And I wanted to visit Berlin. The Hitler Games of 1936 was the model for much that happened here. Control of the media. Clearing away of dissidents. Compulsory celebration. Mass hysteria. Although you were not allowed to say that, you were never allowed to make those references.

KOBEK: Re-reading *London Orbital*, I realized that I'd forgotten that the whole point of the book was to exorcise the Millennium Dome by walking around the M25, the orbital motorway that encircles London.

SINCLAIR: That's right. That was the teasing occult reason for doing it. The idea of escape, just walking to get away from this emptiness - which is what the Dome was, ice floes of money being poured into a swamp, in a polluted landscape that had not been remediated, for dubious housing projects that were hidden behind it. The tent was left, standing empty, expensively patrolled by security guards, for years. Before being bought by a US fundamentalist capitalist and relaunched as a venue for cryogenic rock acts. Like Michael Jackson brought back from the dead. It's now a canvas mall on the flightpath of the City Airport. Offering access to the fairground insanity of a cross-river chairlift operated by Emirates Airlines. These are weird, weird times.

For my walk away around the M25, the Dome was the perfect point from which to start: you pick up the line of zero longitude and you follow it north up the Lea Valley, the ground of future enclosures, until you hit the orbital motorway. Our tramp right around the fringes

of London became a science-fiction conceit. The only way to exit the madness of this eternal circuit, going nowhere, stopping and starting forever, was to drop into the Thames at Purfleet or at Staines. In other words, to connect with the imagined London of earlier viral invasions: Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or *War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells. Those metaphors still played: real-estate piracy, blood fears, alien paranoia, storage and distribution. With the added bonus of encountering the future in the form of J.G. Ballard at Shepperton. The hallucinated road was a good indicator of everything that was coming. Even the black clouds of toxic filth that choked it when one of the oil storage depots went up in flames.

KOBEC: As you traverse the M25, you keep stumbling upon hospitals that are all closing down or have all ready closed.

SINCLAIR: The M25 defined the distance at which the mad would be removed from the heart of the city. A Foucault notion. Damaged psyches, brain-burnt babblers, urban visionaries, socially inconvenient wives, prematurely pregnant daughters: move them fifteen miles out, hide them away. You are at the edge of the countryside, you are in a false arcadia, a park where the mentally diseased or disturbed, the excluded of Whitechapel and Lewisham, are encouraged to find themselves, to mend, adjust to society. But they have also been expelled so they don't infect the ordinary citizens of the centre.

And then in the period of our M25 walk, with no discussion, there was the erasure of history. All the records of the hospitals were being burnt. The buildings were given new names, converted into gated communities. Alongside this piracy, there was also a cutting back of ordinary hospitals, a criminal failure in the level of care: more bureaucrats, fewer nurses

and doctors. Budgets were trimmed, newly constructed hospitals cost so much to deliver that there was no energy left to run them effectively. We witnessed the last rites of the Welfare State as we walked. We met crocodiles of discharged patients, some with coats over their pyjamas, wandering through new, empty housing estates that had grown up overnight in the places where hospitals once stood. They had been returned, so government said, to the community. But there was no community left. Without medication, with supervision, some of the expelled ran amok. Machete attacks, random violence. Early-evening local news, soon forgotten.

The orbital walk felt like a lucky project. Right time, right place. I didn't appreciate when I set out quite what a freight of memory the M25 would bring with it. This was one of the only books of mine that I can summarize in a single sentence: a walk around London's orbital motorway. Pretty much snakes on a plane. Editors get it.

KOBEC: There's an amazing scene where you go into the office building of a software development company, or a software security company? Something with software.

SINCLAIR: Siebel. The Siebel building. I still don't know what it was. But it seemed like the future, it really did. Most of the way around the road we'd been challenged by security: razor-wire fences, CCTV, security guards. Yellow jackets coming at us. 'What are doing? Don't you know there's a war on?' Then, out of nowhere, coming over the bridge in Staines, one of the few sections where you can walk on the hard shoulder of the motorway, alongside the screaming traffic, this rather interesting, vaguely modernist building, green glass - and nobody stopping you from walking right

in. Help yourself. Pick up a leaflet. The operatives are a bit like Moonies; they're smiling, it's some millennial cult. There's nothing to get hold of, there's no information about what they do. They're *there* because it's convenient for the motorway, it's convenient for Heathrow. Siebel became one of the great mysteries of the whole expedition. When they let you in, you know something is wrong.

The fascination of this building was that it represented the next move in the game: post-surveillance. Everybody seemed to be indecently healthy, as if they'd spent the morning in the gym, before drifting down these corridors in a Zen dance. But the next time, when I went back, the whole thing had disappeared. The building was still there, but there was no trace of that particular Siebel operation. It's now something else entirely. And I thought this is wonderful, this is really it, you can just phase these things in for a week, a month, as a trial, a mirage, and then it's gone. That was a sensational moment.

You wouldn't get it if you drove past. I've driven past and it looked moderately interesting, nothing special. There's no way of looking properly unless you walk up to the entrance. It's only when you're doing something as mad as walking around the entire circuit of London, alongside the motorway, that you actually confront these buildings and therefore confront the mysteries of the secret state: the pharmaceutical research depots, the weapons-testing facilities, the helicopter pads that are not on the map. The road is very carefully planted and screened so that you don't see those things.

KOBEK: It's Siebel where you took some of the professional literature—

SINCLAIR: Yes, I did. I couldn't make any sense of it at all.

KOBEK: And then you brought it to Ballard and Ballard had no interest.

SINCLAIR: He feels that he invented this motorway microclimate, so he didn't need the actual confirmation. He was somebody who was locked very firmly into his own world. He'd been supportive of *London Orbital* because it took in a lot in his own territory, but in a different way. His last novel, *Kingdom Come*, with its super-mall fundamentalism, is a powerful fictional sidebar to our pedestrian investigations of the Bluewater Shopping Centre in Kent. I don't think, in his later days, Ballard ever walked further than to the car. He was fascinated by the kind of things that were out there, but he didn't need evidence. He knew it already.

KOBEK: You did a book on Cronenberg's *Crash*, which in my opinion is less about Cronenberg and more about Ballard.

SINCLAIR: Oh, true, true, absolutely true.

KOBEK: I have a very basic question which I couldn't get from the text. Did you actually like Cronenberg's film?

SINCLAIR: I liked the early Cronenberg films but I parted company, a little, when he started to do versions of hip catalogue literature, *Naked Lunch*, *Crash*. You can't translate that material into the mainstream without substantial loss. The strength of those books is that they are unfilmable. You have to unpick the magic. But there are ways *Crash* might have been done, as I suggest in the book. There's quite a back story. By the time of Cronenberg's film, this was a posthumous project. He was probably right to move it out of London, away from those specifics, into Toronto. It's almost like getting an infusion of William Gibson. The film certainly has its virtues, the casting is good. It's

the Ballard tone you can't get, the perverse humour, the flirtation with the sinister mundane. But my whole take on it was through Ballard. I was very interested in talking to him and using the film book as an excuse to do something in the way of that excellent RE/SEARCH book put out by Vale.

KOBEK: I can't remember if it's in your *Crash* book, but you write somewhere about your attraction to Ballard as the producer of this enormously perverse and prophetic body of work who is also essentially a family man living in the suburbs.

SINCLAIR: Well, he's in part a family man. He was a master at creating mythologies and he created the myth of the suburb as being somewhere where boredom incubates violence. The suburbs are dangerous, dormitory places, not a benign escape. The relation of the suburb to the airport is significant. Then there is the myth of his childhood, Shanghai, detention, the return to a grey England. All of that biographical material is factored by Ballard, crafted and re-crafted, polished in interviews. People tend to believe an over-literal version. In his final book, *Miracles of Life*, Ballard tweaks the detail. Suddenly there is a sister, his parents are with him in the camp. He was a storyteller, a master fabricator. He made his own world.

So the heroic family business, while it had a lot of truth in it, is also somewhat mythologized. His wife died during a holiday to Spain, he brought up the children, while working away as a jobbing writer. But there was much more to the story. He was getting support from his wife's sister and various other people. The myth is a literary construct stitched from telephone interviews and fans picking over the traces of published fictions. I guess we all do it. All writers shape the mess of autobiography into a convenient and more dramatic form.

I was fascinated to interview Brigid Marlin, the woman who painted the Delvaux copies for Ballard. She's in *Ghost Milk*. She spoke about how complicated she found this relationship, what a challenging presence Ballard was. She wanted to do the portrait of him, and he wanted her to do these copies of Delvaux. A painter she doesn't like. And that battle, as she described it, really gave me an insight into aspects of Ballard that I hadn't got from my own acquaintance with him. 'I'd never seen defences like those put up by Ballard,' Brigid said. 'There was no way I was going to get into his inner spirit.'

KOBEK: There's a certain parallel in Ballard's life with you and your own house. Like you, he lived in the same house for a long period of time. And Ballard has something that I also find in your work, which is the quality of being someone capable of writing outré material but who is also very practical. I think that's also a tension running through your work. One of the moments where it became clear to me was when I was reading *Electric Eden* by Rob Young, about British folk rock, and there's a casual mention of you being friends with the members of Dr. Strangely Strange. Because your critical and commercial prominence came so much later in life, there's a tendency to view you as a product of Thatcherite culture, where you emerge in the '80s and you're writing mad books about book dealers and film crews and Jack the Ripper conspiracies, but you're also very much are tuned into the culture of the late '60s.

SINCLAIR: There's a necessary curvature to this. There are some similarities with Ballard: many years in the same house, young family growing up, a certain detachment from mainstream literary culture. But there are huge differences between us too, in the sense that he mistrusted the centre, he didn't like historic

London, the mess and the mass, the old buildings. He's very dismissive of the material I feed on. He was quick to understand the fault lines: primitive motorway flyovers, tower blocks downstream from the City, all the perimeter fences. His prose is elegant, forensic, and clear. It's almost a technical prose, whereas mine tends to be fairly wild and Celtic, moving out like lava flow, then snapping and flashing. It is a form of cinema. Ballard said that his ambition was to be a painter. His prose is constructed in that brilliant light. He's like a very precise, intelligent kind of painter who has found his grid, and who plays the variations.

But the point about the roots of my practice being in the late '60s, in the world of earth mysteries and ley lines, alternative realities, shamanism, theatres of memory: this is true. That is precisely the ground from which my early work emerges. The members of Dr Strangely Strange, who I'd known in Dublin, passed through London. They lived in the Hackney community when they recorded their first LP, *Kip of the Serenes*. They feature in the 8mm diary films we were shooting at the time.

By the Thatcher period, we were confronted by an entirely new kind of energy. It's much more of a battleground. You had, by way of response, the Punk movement, and manifestations like Chris Petit's road film *Radio On*, an obituary for European art cinema. Philosophies like Situationism came back into play, perverted and exploited by Stewart Home and his associates. Out of that soup of conflicted energies emerges the monster now known as psychogeography.

KOBEK: Like *Kodak Mantra*, *Lud Heat* is predicative of your later work. There's a chapter that's film criticism of Stan Brakhage and there's another chapter that's art criticism of Brian Catling. This is almost exactly what

can be found find twenty-two years later in *Lights Out for the Territory*. The persistence of vision seems to continue on and on.

SINCLAIR: The style and mode and method of writing *has* changed. The interests, the substrata of what I'm interested in, really hasn't. Even as far back as *Lud Heat*, there is an element of social critique in dealing with the lives and conversations of fellow workers. The ways that certain political and social realities impinge on them—and indeed, very soon after that book was done, they all lost their jobs. When I went back, the Parks Department had been rationalized and there was one person doing the jobs of five. Or not doing them, because it was impossible to cover the ground, Whitechapel to the Isle of Dogs. Aspects of *Lud Heat* take on a prophetic tinge.

The adaptation of the ley line philosophies into a new mapping of London did become a fountainhead for things like Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* and Alan Moore's *From Hell*. The subterranean booklets of 1975 were rebanded and became enormously popular and visible in the Thatcher period, as a form of palatable gothic. On their way to fame and fortune and Hollywood movies with Johnny Depp.

KOBEK: I wanted to ask about you both *Hawksmoor* and *From Hell*. In particular, *Hawksmoor*, how did that happen? Did Ackroyd stumble across your book?

SINCLAIR: Peter Ackroyd had a toehold in the poetry underworld by way of his Cambridge contacts and Ferry Press. He was already launched on a proper literary career - which made him a unique figure among the poets of the time. He was literary editor of *The Spectator*, but he published several little booklets of modernist verse with Andrew Crozier: *London Lickpenny*

and *Country Life*. At some point in the early '70s, when I was working on *Lud Heat*, we did a reading together, at the Poetry Society in Earl's Court. I was performing this odd stuff about the malign influence of Hawksmoor churches and Peter was reading poems in the manner of the New York School. He'd lived there and he'd been in contact with some of the major figures. Our worlds couldn't have been further apart. I was still working as a gardener. But Peter was always very sharp about London and he picked up on what I was doing. We got into correspondence, but it still came as quite a shock when *Hawksmoor* was published, to see my obscure speculations translated into the pitch of a best-selling novel. And then, on television, to see Peter and Melvyn Bragg, in their pinstripe suits, lounging against the pyramid of St Anne's in Limehouse, talking about how the inspiration for such an astonishing fiction had arrived out of nowhere.

KOBEK: *From Hell* is heavily indebted to your work.

SINCLAIR: I think the characters in the strip actually come down Albion Drive.

KOBEK: I was going to say. The characters end up on your street.

SINCLAIR: Obviously *From Hell* draws on some aspects of *White Chapell* and *Lud Heat*, but with Alan Moore it's oceanic. He reads everything, he draws on everything. He subverts the complete register of Ripper scholarship and Ripper weirdness to create his own black gospel. It's not about kicking stones, picking over the cobbles of the territory in my plodding fashion. It's about ritual possession. A casting of the runes. Clearly, one strand acknowledges my peculiar way of looking at the city. But Alan is not a Londoner, that's part of his

strength. He's embedded in Northampton. His work is a demonstration of the genius of his reading. Now I get a ghostly cameo, in the character of 'Norton', in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

KOBEK: And then *From Hell* was adapted into a film. Which is terrible.

SINCLAIR: Apparently.

KOBEK: It's quite bad. Thinking about it, this is a fascinating model of the way that—

SINCLAIR: That's the way the world works, isn't it? I have this idea I call the Xerox Principle. Anything that becomes massively popular and visible, you can trace back three, four, five jumps and it'll be heroically obsolete; a little room somewhere, a mimeographed text read by five people. Borrowed by ten other people. Published in a fugitive magazine. Then a small-press booklet. A sensationalist paperback. By this time, 'difficulty' has been smoothed over, heretical notions are floating just beneath the surface. Then, suddenly, after twenty years: 'Wow!' and you've got Dan Brown. It all goes back to the nutty theories of a ponytail in Notting Hill. You can apply the same model to most popular successes.

KOBEK: I wanted to talk to you about David Rodinsky, who was something of a hermit, a mystical Jewish scholar, who disappeared in the late '60s and his room above a synagogue was somehow left untouched and unopened until the early '80s. He first appears in *Downriver*, and then you did a book with Rachel Lichtenstein called *Rodinsky's Room* and simultaneously published *Dark Lanthorns*, in which you have Rodinsky's *London: A to Z* and walk the routes that he'd marked out. Rodinsky strikes me as almost the perfect Iain

Sinclair character.

SINCLAIR: Struck me too. How it worked was this: I had been labouring in the ullage cellar of Truman's Brewery in Brick Lane. As did the poet and performance artist Brian Catling. We found time to explore the area and pick up on rumors. The first significant mention of Rodinsky that I noticed came from Patrick Wright—in the *London Review of Books*, he wrote a long piece on *White Chapell, Scarlet Tracings*. He started with a major detour to Rodinsky's room, above the decommissioned synagogue in Princelet Street.

Around this period, if I remember it accurately—1988, '89—we went down there and managed to gain access to the room. It was still in its original state with the old shoes filled with dust, and the books all piled up, saucepans on the stove, everything. I was fascinated, at first, by the haunting aspect of the room, as a set, as much as by the man. The man seemed unreachable, but the room and the occulted things that had happened there, and the building, were all available to me as terrain for a new novel. I took the myth and cooked it, heated the romance, for *Downriver*. Rodinsky, as he appears there, is a complete fabrication. The fiction is based on my very limited knowledge of the human being, but a thorough acquaintance with the room and its contents. The mysterious diaries, the books, the scraps of paper. The clothes. The pictures. The eloquent dirt.

After writing a little piece in the *Guardian*, I was contacted by a man called Mr Shames who told me the story about meeting Rodinsky and being shocked that a person he remembered as a childhood innocent, almost a simpleton, on the cusp of being autistic, was now, just a few years later, speaking various Middle Eastern languages and seeming like a scholar, and that

seemed extraordinary. This episode happened in another former synagogue, in Heneage Street, the room where Catling lived at a later date. The narrative, in the spirit of the Whitechapel labyrinth, becomes very convoluted, and drifts somewhere between fiction and documentation. That became the version in *Downriver*.

It was only later, after I'd noticed her exhibition in Mr Katz's string shop in Brick Lane, that I got to know Rachel Lichtenstein. We met as part of a film being shot in Nicholas Hawksmoor's Christ Church, with the saxophonist John Harle. Rachel had a residence in the Princelet Street synagogue. She gave a presentation of her researches at an event launching my book *Lights Out for the Territory* in a Smithfield slaughterhouse cellar. My agent heard her. And suggested that she write the book that became *Rodinsky's Room*. He took it to Neil Belton at Granta. Rachel was a diligent cataloguer of everything to do with Rodinsky. She was also open to being, on many levels, possessed by his spirit. Her documentation was comprehensive. She set herself to find out *everything* about this mysterious personality. It became a quest, a detective story. She had never actually written a book before. It was a strange idea to her, she wanted some kind of editorial support. I wrote those more general pieces, overviews, in order to set up the narrative dramas Rachel provided. It became an interesting collaboration. I mean, it's really Rachel's book, but the combination makes it something else too. Rachel went on to become a fine writer and a great, impassioned explainer and presenter of her research.

KOBEK: I have a question about Rodinsky, and I ask it with a certain amount of caution, but I think it's a question that everyone should be asked at least once in every interview, and it's this: why should anyone care?

SINCLAIR: That is the basic spike for authorship. That's the challenge, every time. Why should anyone care? No reason. Do you care enough to go through the troublesome process of living with the pain of shaping a narrative? Over years? If you care enough, transmit it. If your interviewer asks that question, perhaps it hasn't worked. Too bad, Move on. Why should anyone care about a council gardener poking about graveyards and Hawksmoor churches in the East End? Why should anyone care about another meditation on Jack the Ripper, when there are already many thousands of lurid books on the subject? You have to trust your own instincts, trust your obsessions. David Rodinsky's room drew me in. The small history of this man was a large history for Rachel. And her book found its audience.

KOBEK: In *Lights Out for the Territory*, you have an excellent essay that makes it sound like you went to possibly the worst film school of all time.

SINCLAIR: Could be, yeah. And there was no better place to be.

KOBEK: You made the film with Ginsberg and you tried to make a film with Burroughs, and then there's a long period where you didn't work in the medium, and then in the '90s you and Chris Petit did a series of commissioned films for Channel 4. It took a little bit of effort, but I managed to track them down.

SINCLAIR: Wow. Well done. Do you know about this thing that's going on at the moment, the 70 film business? My curation of 70 films for my 70th birthday. A year-long invasion of venues right across London, from boats and bunkers to the Barbican.

KOBEK: Yes, I also wanted to talk about that. I had to find an Alan Moore expert to get a copy of *The*

Cardinal and the Corpse.

SINCLAIR: We showed *The Cardinal* as the first film in the 70x70 festival, at the Hackney Picture House. It was great. It looked pretty good on the big screen, I must say, after many years of not seeing it. Those Channel 4 collaborations with Petit have remained so elusive, so occulted even in an era when every last shred of slasher trash has been put out on DVD. I'm not quite sure why. In part it's down to Chris Petit who likes the idea of films being lost and invisible. It allows him to foster a mythology, to float what he calls 'The Museum of Loneliness'. The producer Keith Griffiths goes along with it: too much hassle. The immaculate sustainability of the unseen. It would make a lot of sense to put the three missing films - *Cardinal*, *The Falconer*, *Asylum* - out as a boxed set. People are always bugging me for copies. I don't have them. And there's no particular impulse towards getting it done. Petit, in fact, has a considerable catalogue of essay films, short pieces. If he had Godard's business hustle, there would be a cottage industry for life. Andrew Kötting, on the other hand, gets all his work on the shelf: DVDs, CDs, plastic swans stuffed with books and postcards and bricks.

KOBEK: I ended up seeing them in reverse order. With *London Orbital*, it's almost apocalyptic but when you get back to *The Cardinal and the Corpse*, it's quite playful.

SINCLAIR: There was a notion, cooked up between Chris and myself, to subvert established cultural values, received history, with a complex, on-going project known as the Perimeter Fence. My reason for getting involved with film again was that the technology had evolved to the point where you could actually make something like a written construct. Digital editing made it practicable

to work and rework materials, to incorporate, or re-interrogate, some of the early 8mm or 16mm stuff I'd been shooting, off the cuff, back in the '60s. Now that freedom had come around again; we were able to create structures like essay films, or alternative forms of the book in progress. That was quite exciting. I enjoyed working that way, being able to spend two or three months in the editing suite.

The commissioning was the strange part, that these films could actually be commissioned by a terrestrial broadcaster. The Perimeter Fence project became, rather like the books, all of a piece, a continuum. Starting with *The Cardinal and the Corpse*, looking at people who didn't seem to be getting their cultural dues from the mainstream, and also providing a film version of the background of something like *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* - in that Martin Stone and Driffield, who had become fictionalized characters, were playing themselves. Even though this documentation looks suspiciously fictionalized as well. Each of those films shadowed a particular book. Obviously, in the case of *London Orbital* book and film were almost superimposed, one on top of the other. With the others, the connections were more obscure: *The Falconer* with *Slow Chocolate Autopsy* and *Asylum* with *Landor's Tower*.

KOBEC: One of the people that you also write about in *Lights Out* is Michael Reeves. You seem to have single-handedly created a minor industry in books about Reeves. I don't think there was a single thing out about him before *Lights Out* and now I think there's about 4 or 5 books on his work. *The Sorcerers* is a remarkably weird film. One of the questions that I had while re-watching it was whether or not Reeves understood what he was doing?

SINCLAIR: I wouldn't say so. I think he thought he

was doing something else. He thought he was an English Don Siegel. He was going to make efficient Hollywood genre films on his own terms. In England at the start. Then - who knows? It didn't really matter too much what they were. He would take on a project as it came up. The darker impulses that were always there, the incipient psychosis, I don't think he was very self-conscious about that. He didn't like high-flown discussions of motives or any of the *Cahiers du Cinema* stuff. He was suspicious of art films. He liked the practical business, how you move the camera around, how you get the best out of the actors, all those things. He was very good at slipping a prophylactic over the excesses of Vincent Price, persuading Boris Karloff, as a fellow public-school man, to take a part in a London horror film for a modest fee. I don't think he really knew quite what he was doing, but he caught something of the spirit of the times. He was certainly his own man.

KOBEK: I had forgotten that by the time you get to the last 20 minutes or so it can be seen as a pastiche of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* It's a strange movie. Both of his major films.

SINCLAIR: I was more interested in *Sorcerers* because it was so perverse, although it didn't have the lyricism and landscape grandeur that was in *Witchfinder*. *Witchfinder* to me was an English western, a revenge story like something by Anthony Mann, with a psychotic conclusion. *Sorcerers* touched on many layers of London mythology - Hitchcock's *Frenzy*, Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, Cliff Richard coffee bars, Hammer Films, Jack the Ripper. There were also parallels, through Karloff, with Peter Bogdanovich and *Targets*. With the theme of possession and violence activated by the radar of place, there is an anticipation of *Performance*. In various ways, Reeves

and Bogdanovich reference film history. They are both children of the movies. There is an ugliness there, for Mike, exploited but not exorcised. He wasn't somebody who had a feeling for violence in his own life, for sure. He was an upper-middle-class English public school boy with private means who was interested in toy cars and playing poker with Lee Marvin. It really was unexpected and unexplained, how he became he so proficient as a filmmaker so early.

KOBEK: And you're showing *The Sorcerers* as part of 70x70, aren't you?

SINCLAIR: I've shown it. The whole 70x70 programme started, a perfect start for me, with a double bill of *The Cardinal and the Corpse* and *The Sorcerers*. With Alan Moore and Chris Petit in attendance.

KOBEK: I was looking at the program notes for 70x70 and showed them to a friend of mine. We both noticed your ability to make any film sound interesting. And also by your real devotion to British Cinema. One of the British films that's fascinating in terms of its appearance in your work, and in terms of being a cinematic prophecy, is *The Long Good Friday*—

SINCLAIR: Very prophetic, certainly.

KOBEK: It's prophetic both in its content and your prescience in hitting upon it as something worth discussing. It does effectively predict the topic of at least your last two books.

SINCLAIR: Uncanny, right down to the Olympics. I saw this film as soon as it came out. It took a while to work that it was really the writer who was the influential element. Not the director. Barrie Keeffe lived in the area, knew the area, got it from the ground up

and so not only was it prophetic about the nature of what the Olympics would be, and the whole riverside development, and the attempted mergers between London underworld faces and the corporate entity that is the Mafia, but it anticipated, beautifully, the coming Thatcher era, the spin doctors of New Labour. All of those things were present - along with the shadow of bomb-paranoia and urban terrorism. The locations, using Hawksmoor churches, familiar pubs and so on, depended on someone who knew the area. I think that this gives the film its strength. Like the setting, so many years early, of the railway sequences in *It Only Rains on Sunday*.

KOBEK: Do you think that walking is a radical act?

SINCLAIR: Yes, I do. More than ever. It's the last urban act that's pretty well incapable of being exploited. The bicycle, which I have written about, was once a liberty-giving tool. It was a proletarian device, cheap transport, and it was also used by feminists in the early days. A way of getting yourself out of the city. H.G. Wells writes about that moment very well. But the bicycle has now become predatory. The angry peloton has colonised the canal banks. They are taking over the pavements, they're sponsored by politicians. You ride around on a blue bicycle and you're advertising Barclay's Bank. The last freedom left is the walker. You can't do much with a walk. You can't get money out of pedestrians. There is no political currency in watching walkers. Walking is the last radical act. A way of putting yourself into places where people don't want you to be; walking is not 'pedestrian permeability', it's not about going obediently along the enclosed path between station and super-mall. You are going to take off in some impulsive direction. I think walking is a vital aspect of keeping the city alive.



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