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### Locating the Personal within the M25

#### A study of 'London Orbital' by Iain Sinclair and Chris Petit

*'On the M25, fixed in their lanes, trying to make sense of flashing overhead signs and warnings, smoking, finger-drumming, jumping radio bands, jabbering into cellphones, the motorists are out of time, out of place... Tensed travelers, sweating in their metal pods, discover the insides of the outside. Nerves are stretched. Memories of the miles they've driven, to arrive at this compulsory stasis, melt into exhaust fumes' - Iain Sinclair*

This paper will discuss two works. Firstly, Iain Sinclair's 'London Orbital', a literal documentation of his epic 120 mile walk around the M25, and secondly, Iain Sinclair's collaboration with Chris Petit in the film 'London Orbital' where I will focus on Petit's contribution to the documentary in which he circumnavigated the M25 solely by car. I intend to discuss how their experiences differed from one another in trying to locate a sense of identity within the M25.

Iain Sinclair is a filmmaker, psychogeographer and author of the book 'London Orbital', which is his account of being a pedestrian on the M25. Sinclair recalls that when standing by the Millennium Dome that he was impelled to *'to walk away from the Teflon meteorite on Bugsby's marshes. A white thing had been dropped in the mud of the Greenwich peninsula. The ripples had to stop somewhere... A journey, a provocation. An escape. Keep moving, I told myself, until you hit tarmac, the outer circle. The point where London loses it, gives up its ghosts.'* Once he hit the M25 at Waltham Abbey Sinclair spoke of a future England *'London itself being completely enclosed by a motorway... A kind of concrete island'*

Sinclair, in a lucid verse, describes the past and present features of the landscape he is passing through, excavating the history of the sites, some of which that were destroyed by the roads passage. He goes into immense detail drawing

figures out of the landscape such as Bram Stokers' 'Dracula' in Carfax Abbey, H.G. Well's and Woking Surrey (where the Martian invasion takes place in War of the Worlds) and J.G. Ballard residing in Shepperton. Sinclair's obsessive attention to detail in the descriptions of his thoughts allows for a historical narrative to develop.

Michael de Certeau supports the importance of a narrative within how we understand place in his writings of the relationship between space and place. Certeau highlights that narratives ceaselessly '*transform places into spaces and spaces into places...There follows, naturally a distinction between 'doing' and 'seeing', observable in everyday language which by turn suggests a picture ('there is...') and organises movements ('you go in, you cross, you turn...')* Certeau writes of the journey narrative which is compatible with the double necessity of 'doing' and 'seeing' where '*histories of journeys and actions are punctuated by the mention of the places resulting from them or authorising them*'

By meticulously archiving this information Sinclair generates a new language for the landscape and one that authorises some of its secrets. But it is a narrative of history, and although important, by itself it fails to create a personal connection to the space, more a recognition for the landscapes past.

This narrative only becomes truly successful, for this papers intention, when Sinclair unites it with a more individual one. With chronological accuracy he pinpoints his presence within this historical landscape by combining it with his thoughts and conversations with the people who joined him for various stretches of the journey. Namely these people were photographer Marc Atkins, journalist Kevin Jackson, painter Renchi Bicknell, and musician Bill Drummond. Through Sinclair's words we get a feel for each individual as they add their own personal approach to the road. Sinclair carefully records these experiences adding a colourful yet personal character to the journey. In this example Sinclair recalls an experience with Kevin Jackson, who accompanied him for 3 sections of the walk, and each time came drastically misprepared, '*boots when he needed trainers, trainers when he needed boots, a leather jacket which will cook him if he wears it; cripple him if he carries it*'. Sinclair eventually leaves him on the last stretch of the journey in a public house named the Welsh harp near Waltham Abbey when '*his socks have to be cut from his*

*feet. His blisters have blisters. ' Sinclair with an evocative tone ends with, 'we leave him where he is. As far as I know, he's there still. He's probably taken out membership at the Waltham Abbey library. Signed up for night classes in runic prophecy and Pataphysics. He'll never make it across the market square to the mini-cab office. And they haven't got any available cabs. '*

In contrast to Sinclair's pedestrian experience of the M25 is Chris Petit's contribution to the documentary film 'London Orbital' in which he takes to the road by car. Iain Sinclair spoke of the reasoning for this shift from foot to car saying:

*The whole point was to walk the motorway spaces, and thereby to suck out information slowly and gradually from the ground. Chris is famous as a maker of road movies, and he couldn't cope with filming the walking aspect because by the time he'd set up his camera the walkers had gone over the horizon. He shifted it all into the car. Once you are in the car, the landscape shifts. '*

Petit has over recent years become fascinated with the compositing and textural possibilities of new digital technologies. He spent days circumnavigating the M25 looking for the 'perfect shot'. After much experimenting Petit discovered that the only way to truly capture the motorway was to never turn the camera off, '*The only way to make sense of the road was to keep the camera running right the way round the whole thing*'

In keeping with Sinclair, Petit also aims to exhume the secrets of the landscapes past and through this process locate a connection too it. He drives endlessly in orbit attempting to find a narrative. As the journey begins to repeat itself Petit has visions of Margaret Thatcher, Augusto Pinochet, Bram Stoker and J.G. Ballard, he attempts to uncover the history within the places that he passes through and to create a '*museum of memory*', to find the lost voices of London and create a visual map of '*all of the M25's secrets*'.

Petit, like Sinclair, skillfully extracts the socio-political and historical associations from the landscape, but he finds that the narrative eventually becomes overwhelmed by his senseless repetition, continuous speed, and movement through

this space. He says that we become ' *a patient of the M25, we become like Bram Stokers 'undead'*. Any narrative that Petit attempts to withdraw is essentially lost within the state of continuous transience.

Marc Auges' additional views of Michael de Certeau's theory of the relationship between place and space further support this happening:

Auge argues that:

*'Like the journey, this narrative that describes it traverses a number of places. This plurality of places, the demands it makes on the powers of observation and description (the impossibility of seeing everything or saying everything), and the resulting feeling of 'disorientation' causes a break or discontinuity between the spectator-traveler and the space of the landscape he is contemplating or rushing through. This prevents him from perceiving it as a place, from being fully present in it,'*

In conclusion Sinclair found that by slowly circumnavigating the M25 on foot gradually a narrative with the landscape developed. He pulls out the history as he slowly passes through it, but most importantly he had the company of several people who accompanied him on various stretches of the journey, and these people punctuate the experience with their own idiosyncrasies that become part of the personal, part of the experience and part of the journey.

In contrast, Petit found that when in a car, which is a sealed, stable, weightless environment and confronted with the continuous blur of the landscape slowly perpetuated a dream like state. It is at this stage in the process that Petit's narrative becomes fragmented and obscured by the continuousness of the journey. Petit's accelerated experience of the landscape prevented him from truly being within it. This idea is supported by Marc Auge who wrote:

*'Space, as a frequentation of places rather than place stem in effect from the double movement; the traveler's movement, of course, but also a parallel movement of the landscape which he catches only in partial glimpses, as a series of 'snapshots' piled hurriedly into his memory and, literally, recomposed in the account he gives to them'*

Most interestingly though is how the sense of narrative develops for Sinclair, yet deteriorates for Petit. Sinclair's pedestrian experience allows for a narrative to develop at a memorable rate, the process of walking makes Sinclair's experience vivid yet personal; this experience acts as a connection between himself and the landscape. In contrast Petit's narrative is manipulated by constant speed and repetition, where the sights, tastes, smells and sounds are reduced to a two-dimensional view through a car windscreen, this experience eventually blurs Petit's narrative into something un-identifiable. The M25 sends Petit into a state of narcosis and this eventually breaks any personal connection with the landscape that he attempts to find.

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