

IAIN SINCLAIR AND THE URBAN IMAGINARY



A fine piece of writing from Iain Sinclair, a bit overblown maybe, in The Guardian today about the Thames in the urban imaginary that is London – Paint me a river.

Liquid prompts guide our steps towards the scintillae of the supremely visible Thames.

Here begins the work of poets and painters, their argument and co-dependence; treacherous depths, imported narratives, shows of light. Here begins the difficulty with representing a force that resists

representation. Here begins the substance out of which London's dreaming is made. The Thames floods, ebbs: a seductive surface, active, dirty, copywritten by Eliot, Pope, Spenser, Conrad, Celine.

When I worked, in the 1970s, as a gardener in Limehouse, I used to see the grey spectre, an X-ray with its own microclimate, of Francis Bacon. At the bus stop. Belted aluminium raincoat, hands in pockets. Solitary. He had a house in Narrow Street, convenient for social interaction, pub life, redundant dockers, but useless as a studio. He couldn't, he had no ambitions in that direction, paint the river. He kept the blinds down, promiscuous light was excluded. He couldn't paint at all; the shifts, the sounds, were overwhelming. He commuted to Kensington. The studio, in a noble tradition, was a down-river bolthole: off-limits, taking advantage of present malaise and a recoverable tradition of submersion and erasure.

Turner inherited property in Wapping, which included a pub, the Ship and Bladebone. He devoured river light and relished the potential profits that would accrue from Isambard Kingdom Brunel's Rotherhithe Tunnel. He enjoyed sexual favours hidden from the pinch of polite

society. The Thames at Wapping reflected low skies, migrating weather systems. Turner worked, as always, inside and out, filling his sketchbooks: the heat of women's bodies, muscle and fold, twinned with meaty sunsets. A poker-red eye burning off the murk, the sullen damp. Locals knew the short, peppery gentleman as "Admiral Booth". He was often out on the river.

London air was foul, soot coating the lungs, but attractive to painters: a thick membrane penetrated by prismatic shafts. Turner was a walker. Like old Betty Higden in Dickens' last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, he could manage 20 miles a day, if put to it. Even his ageing father, caretaker of the Twicken ham property, would trudge 11 miles, in and out of London, to open Turner's gallery. Painters shadow the river, struggling to fix the unfixable; trying to nail a fistful of mercury to a wet wall.

"I adore London," Monet said, "but what I love more than anything is the fog." Industrial pollution, sea coal fires, river fret: every element contributes to the London Particular. Light so thick you can taste it. Monet, a refugee from the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, factored strategic tourism into vision: unscripted

postcard views dissolving sky into river.

Sinclair is a favorite writer of mine. I drew on him for the piece Three Rooms– an experiment in writing about architecture, remains and the performance of everyday life.

Archaeologies of the contemporary past.

Laurent Olivier's great notion – [Link]

Tomorrow I am going to be talking about the temporal percolations that are our experience of archaeological time, and given promiscuous life in the urban imaginary. It is for the "Seeing the Past"? conference here at Stanford.

Sinclair's writing deals in the lapidary images and anecdotes that make the urban imaginary. So archaeological in its layering, cross references, deep mapping.

Mark Dion's Thames Dig also comes to mind.



Monet's Thames

[Link – Turner Whistler Monet Exhibiiton at the Tate in London]

I am trying to capture this experience of cities in the chapter on urbanization in my new book "Origins".