Multimedia and Websites

Chris Petit and Iain Sinclair, co-directors

**London Orbital**
2002, DVD, 100 min., £29.95, www.illumin.co.uk

Iain Sinclair

**London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25**
London: Granta Books, 2002, 400 pp., 8 color and 8 b/w illus. $27.95, ISBN 1-862-07547-6

The London orbital motorway, the M25, describes a circle around the city that has a diameter of approximately seventy miles. According to a recent poll, it is the most disliked thoroughfare in Britain; and it is now the subject of a film co-directed by Chris Petit and Iain Sinclair, developed from a book by Sinclair, a poet and essayist with a dark, fantastical imagination. Both works do as much to mystify as to elucidate, and that is their purpose.

If one doubts at the outset that the road can or should be considered as architecture, this doubt is eroded as associations accumulate around the pavement and boredom becomes charismatic. Blurred, drained of brightness, presented hugely enlarged on video or grainy scratched super-8 film, the documentary’s images are often determinedly dull: vehicles and asphalt drift endlessly past the lens in a watery haze. It is similar to the tediousness of films made to be shown in art museums, where we are signaled that what we are watching is serious work and not to be confused with the easy pleasures of entertainment.

Petit sets up a tension between the banality of the images, which are for the most part relentless in their dreariness, and the lurid assertions made by Sinclair on the soundtrack, mostly in his own voice. The steady motion of the traffic is underscored by soporific music and uningratiating ambient sounds, especially traffic noise. At the point where the tedious becomes unbearable, the narrator intones, unhurriedly, “More than other motorways, the M25 is designed to test thresholds of boredom. It eliminates any romantic notion of boredom. But for the addicted it has its attractions. It is mainline boredom. It is true boredom. The quest for transcendental boredom.” Watching the passage of traffic becomes a device for meditation. Petit finds himself traveling the motorway for days on end, despite the warning from Sinclair that it will claim him as one of the undead. The circulation of traffic evokes the circulation of blood, and vampires are not far away. They are at Purfleet, a small town by the Thames close to the Dartford crossing (take exit 31).

At one point, the film shows a soap factory beside an Anglo-Saxon church with a vast storage depot on the other side. Here the wobbly camera pans across industrial pipework and the silhouette of a castellated tower and comes to rest on a corrugated steel wall. Sinclair identifies this place as Carfax Abbey, where the fictional Count Dracula elected to dwell. The reality is less thrilling, but Sinclair makes it quietly surreal. “The smoking mass of the Procter and Gamble factory is Carfax Abbey... The neighbouring lunatic asylum, kept by Dr John Seward, is reconstituted as a colony of Barratt homes. The church remains.” In fact, the church is some distance away, at Thurrock, a twelfth-century structure visited by Canterbury pilgrims. There is a hint that it might have been founded by the Knights Templar, their reputation for holy savagery chimeric well with the vampirism and murderous dealings of the criminal underworld associated with this stretch of the road. Yet the church is in surprisingly good condition, the renovation work having been helped by payments made when some scenes of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* were shot here.

This is not a work of traditional architectural history, but in the book Sinclair regularly provides the reader with facts about the buildings that the highway passes. These are sometimes fictional, or they hover somewhere between truth and fiction. What we obtain from the reading is a crowded set of references to many different cultures. This material is drawn on in the film, but the information crowds less densely. We encounter the urban myths that are sometimes reported in sensational newspaper headlines, as well as things that really did happen in the London gangland, which we rarely hear about; Sinclair interviews members of that world, ensuring that we do hear about them. Then there are the works of literature, such as *Dracula*, and some careful empirical research—for example, trying to establish exactly where the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher performed the opening ceremony. She was filmed in October 1986 cutting a ribbon and declaring the M25 open, but the road in the background is not clearly identifiable as any part of it.

The road’s blandness is its predominant characteristic, and part of the game in the book—which becomes the theme of the film—is the mismatch between the visible and the audible, the banality of...
most of the views being set against a commentary that sometimes reinforces the boredom and sometimes contrasts with it, making unexpectedly lurid assertions. Bridge abutments stand upright like sentinels and evoke the bodies of “disappeared” thugs. Lacking beginning or end, this path to nowhere enables the continual movement of traffic and transforms perpetually circulating souls into the undead. Dracula haunts this place. Indeed, Sinclair suggests that he caused it to be. “The future M25 was a magic circle, a circle in salt. The Vampire couldn’t be excluded, he was already inside! . . . Stoker predicted the M25, made its physical construction tautological. The Count’s fetid breath warmed Thatcher’s neck as she cut the ribbon.”

Long delays and congestion make the road unpopular (while remaining so useful that it continues to attract motorists). No one travels completely around the M25. Its busiest part is the northwest section that links the M1 (the main route to and from the north) and the M4 (which connects to the west in general and Heathrow Airport in particular). Drivers tend to use a short section, maybe a quadrant. Taken literally, the circulation patterns have nothing in common with the circulation of blood through a body, as Sinclair would have us believe through a sleight of hand. His view was formed from within this charmed circle, from a place where the M25 looks like the horizon. Beyond it, there are dragons and Romanian asylum-seekers.

Sinclair has driven the entire circuit. More surprising, he has also walked it, and the book London Orbital includes accounts of these foot journeys, which took place discontinuously and led him and his companions through various wastelands to find occasional treasures but mostly to relish the bleakness of it all. There are charming moments, but their artificiality is exposed: “Countryside hangs on to anything that can be turned into a postcard.” We are not invited to enjoy these “traditional” idylls. “The duck pond is listed. And the ducks get a food allowance from the parish council.” Sinclair finds authenticity in places where the appearance is created less self-consciously. “Our early-morning ramble down Horton Lane confirms the atmosphere of elective paranoia that infects much of orbital fringe London. Something is happening but nobody will take responsibility for it: any formal announcement will let the cat out of the bag. Boredom has been synthesized into threat.” The film effectively translates this theme. Much of the anecdote is simply dropped, and the recurring image is one of tedium, enlivened from time to time by the wayward commentary and documentary footage of notable events, such as the opening ceremony.

Walking around the M25 turns into an existentialist pilgrimage, and the circularity of the route becomes a metaphor for its meaninglessness. This aspect of the walk is balanced by the associative voiceover, which has a tendency to invest things with an excess of meaning. There is a void at the heart of the book where one would expect its argument or plot to be. Although never formally announced, this project connects with others of Sinclair, such as Lud Heat: A Book of Dead Hamlets (London and New York, 1975), brought to wider public attention when novelist Peter Ackroyd developed some of its themes in his highly regarded Hauxmoor (New York, 1985). Although Lud Heat is called a poem, substantial parts of it read like an architectural history in which the author has not been held back by the need for hard evidence, but has allowed intuition and leaps of the imagination to take charge.

For example, in a section that seems to be sketching in the background on Nicholas Hawksmoor’s churches we find a map showing their locations with lines drawn between them that are labeled “The 8 Great Churches: The Lines of Influence, The Invisible Rods of Force Active in This City.” Sinclair speaks of “the unacknowledged magnetism and . . . control-power, built-in code force, of these places” evidenced in “the ritual slaying of Marie Jeanette Kelly in the ground floor room of Miller’s Court, Dorset Street, directly opposite Christ Church . . . the Ratcliffe Highway slaughter of 1811, with the supposed murderer, stake through heart, trampled into the pit where four roads cross to the north of St George-in-the-East.” London Orbital revisits some of the same themes: “Carfax. Quatre Face. The crossing of four roads. The traditional burial place for vampires.” Sinclair is not writing history but inventing memories, and they have just enough plausibility to linger and feed a need that is, apparently, widely felt. The M25 is a dull but sometimes convenient road, but after reading Sinclair our journeys along it will never be the same.

Therein lies the challenge for architectural historians. However dubious some of Sinclair’s assertions might be, they either articulate or establish things that we know or feel about a place, and those things are part of the place’s story. It would be a mistake to think that every driver on the M25 is prey to paranoia and vampirism, but not so far from the mark to see that the road fosters a tendency to enter a trance state and become susceptible to urban myth. Petri’s film does much to induce this condition, and effectively plants some “recovered” memories that become real when we return to our waking state. That effect is its advantage over the book, which has far more detail and more memories. The film works more viscerally, and after having seen it one drives on what feels like a different road—more highly charged but also more dull, yet with a hypnotic dullness that is now an invitation to meditate and experience the void.

It would not ease the highway’s congestion if hordes of solitary drivers flocked to it for the sake of introspective enlightenment, and this could hardly have been the intention of its designers. Nevertheless, the commentary tells us something very potent about how the road is experienced, and these discoveries are not something that we would necessarily infer by looking at it ourselves, by taking measurements of it, or by examining the engineers’ drawings. The M25 is less saturated with history and association than is the archaeological heart of Athens or Rome, but Sinclair
and Petit have done for the road what Walter Benjamin did for the decaying arcades in Paris, awakening their capacity to engage the imagination and to move us, turning them into something evocative and strange when before we might have thought of them as utilitarian mechanisms of no cultural import.

There remains the methodological problem of distinguishing between the “real” memories with which historians are comfortable and delusional “recovered” memories, a distinction that is not hard-edged. The urban myth and the sensationalizing storytelling in the daily press make a fabric that we may not perceive, even though it refracts our view. Two distinct but related endeavors—Sinclair’s memory project and Petit’s meditation project—combine in a mind-bending challenge to the idea of the self-evident, the factual, the concrete, while seemingly showing images of exactly that kind. Moreover, even when an utterly banal place has—by whatever means—developed associations or had associations attached to it by force, then those associations become part of the place’s story and part of the story that a historian might legitimately tell.

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