

City Visions

City Visions
The Work of Iain Sinclair

Edited by

Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge



CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING

City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair, edited by Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge

This book first published 2007 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2007 by Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN 1-84718-153-8; ISBN 13: 9781847181534

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	vii
Abbreviations.....	viii
Introduction.....	1
Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge	
Part I: Contexts	
Chapter 1.....	10
“A Dark Insect Swarming”: The Vorticist Visionary Mode of Wyndham Lewis and Iain Sinclair Robert Bond	
Chapter 2.....	32
Everything Connects: The Cultural Poetics Robert Sheppard	
Chapter 3.....	44
“You Can Get It From The Street”: The Prose Style of Iain Sinclair Peter Barry	
Chapter 4.....	56
High Occulting and Pulped Detectives: Sinclair Sells Out? Paul Sutton	
Part II: Culture and Critique	
Chapter 5.....	68
Literary Genealogy and the Aesthetics of Critique in the Work of Iain Sinclair Alex Murray	
Chapter 6.....	82
<i>The Kodak Mantra Diaries</i> : The Politics of Sinclair’s Poetics Ben Watson	

Chapter 7.....	90
Image Refusal in Iain Sinclair’s Refuse Aesthetics: <i>London Orbital</i> , the Film Esther Leslie	
Chapter 8.....	99
Iain Sinclair’s Textual <i>Obscenery</i> Kirsten Seale	
Part III: Connections	
Chapter 9.....	110
Re-Writing Conrad Robert Hampson	
Chapter 10.....	120
Sinclair’s Poetics: From <i>Lud Heat</i> and <i>Suicide Bridge</i> to <i>Saddling the Rabbit</i> Brian Baker	
Chapter 11.....	134
Re-Placing the Novel: Sinclair, Ballard and the Spaces of Literature David Cunningham	
Part IV: Spaces	
Chapter 12.....	148
As He Stalks His “Pillar To The Dispossessed”: Confessions of the Cryptographer David James	
Chapter 13.....	162
“Ghosts And Texts And Photographs”: Sinclair’s Overwritings of the Dead John Sears	
Chapter 14.....	175
“Full Of Eyes Round About And Within”: Iain Sinclair’s Carceral London Sebastian Groes	
Bibliography	188
List of Contributors.....	198
Index	202

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Editors would like to thank the School of Humanities of the University of Greenwich for supporting and hosting the *City Visions* conference.

Special mention should also be made of Iain Sinclair's unceasing encouragement of the project.

ABBREVIATIONS

In citing works written or edited by Iain Sinclair in the notes, abbreviated titles have generally been used. Works have been identified by the following abbreviations:

<i>Conductors</i>	<i>Conductors of Chaos</i> . London: Picador, 1996, ed.
<i>Dining</i>	<i>Dining on Stones: (or, The Middle Ground)</i> . London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004.
<i>Downriver</i>	<i>Downriver: (Or, the Vessels of Wrath), a Narrative in Twelve Tales</i> . London: Paladin, 1991.
<i>Flesh</i>	<i>Flesh Eggs & Scalp Metal: Selected Poems, 1970-1987</i> . London: Paladin, 1989.
<i>Landor's</i>	<i>Landor's Tower: or The Imaginary Conversations</i> . London: Granta Books, 2001.
<i>Lights</i>	<i>Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London</i> . London: Granta Books, 1997.
<i>London Orbital</i>	<i>London Orbital: A Walk around the M25</i> . London: Granta Books, 2002.
<i>Lud/ Suicide</i>	<i>Lud Heat/ Suicide Bridge</i> . London: Vintage, 1995.
<i>Radon</i>	<i>Radon Daughters: A Voyage, between Art and Terror, from the Mound of Whitechapel to the Limestone Pavements of the Burren</i> . London: Cape, 1994.
<i>Rodinsky's</i>	Sinclair and Rachel Lichtenstein. <i>Rodinsky's Room</i> . London: Granta Books, 1999.
<i>Saddling</i>	<i>Saddling the Rabbit</i> . Buckfastleigh: Etruscan, 2002.
<i>Slow</i>	<i>Slow Chocolate Autopsy: Incidents from the Notorious Career of Norton, Prisoner of London</i> . London: Phoenix House, 1997.
<i>Verbals</i>	Sinclair in conversation with Kevin Jackson. <i>The Verbals</i> . Tonbridge: Worple Press, 2003.
<i>White Chappell</i>	<i>White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings</i> . London: Vintage, 1995.
<i>White Goods</i>	Sinclair and Emma Matthews. <i>White Goods</i> . Uppingham: Goldmark, 2002.

INTRODUCTION

ROBERT BOND AND JENNY BAVIDGE

The trajectory of Iain Sinclair's production in poetry, prose and film has often been described as involving a passage from small press obscurity to a metropolitan visibility. The neo-modernist practice of self-publication—in particular through his own, Hackney-based, Albion Village Press throughout the 1970s—established Sinclair as our major poetic celebrant of the city's hidden experience, its myths and subcultures: a true poet and hip priest, grounded in the Beats, Burroughs and the post-war American poetic avant-garde. Yet the visionary, even ritualist, high poetic experimentalism which marked Sinclair's major 1970s texts, *Lud Heat* (1975) and *Suicide Bridge* (1979), was still being developed in his first published novel, *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings* (1987), and it was not until the London anti-epic *Downriver* (1991) that Sinclair achieved full newspaper recognition as a hugely talented practitioner within the more public genre of fiction. Sinclair went on to achieve a measure of real mainstream popularity only through the peripatetic reportage mode of *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997)—a mode to which he adhered for the even more commercially successful *London Orbital* (2002). It seems significant that in *Lights Out for the Territory* Sinclair returned to the distinctively idiosyncratic genre of the documentary essay—he had of course adopted a documentary form as early as *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* (1971)—in order to explicate, render more accessible, much of his earlier production. *Lights Out for the Territory* makes many of his occult matters of the 1970s a lot clearer and more accessible to a wider readership—but in its own uniquely strange way, so that a new obscurity evolves in its turn. It is as if the freedoms and fluidities afforded by his later documentary genre, and by the essay form—Sinclair's true form, arguably—helped return his imagination to the essentially ungraspable poetics and subcultures from which it originally emerged. This is why Sinclair today can at once operate as editor of a prestigious volume called *London: City of Disappearances* (2006), and himself remain one of the exemplarily disappeared.

These tensions which characterize Sinclair's "career"—between genres, between writing and film, between obscurity and visibility, hermeneutic inaccessibility and accessibility—are recurrent concerns of many of the essays collected in this volume, which develops from the proceedings of the

international conference *City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair*, held at the University of Greenwich in June 2004. Many of these pioneering essays enquire precisely *why* it should be that, as one contributor, Alex Murray, phrases it, “the field of contemporary literary studies has found the task of analysing Sinclair’s writing problematic.” Of course the very range of Sinclair’s preoccupations and knowledges—the multidiscursive and multi-encyclopaedic range of his sources and references—has made it difficult for commentators hitherto to grasp the scope, and identities, of Sinclair’s various colliding projects. We hope therefore that this collection’s diverse range of approaches will suggest a dialogue between them all, and so begin to increase understanding of Sinclair’s own intrinsically diffuse and disparate work.

The anthology divides into four sections. The articles included in the opening part, “Iain Sinclair in Context”, all address the problematic—yet central—issue of the critical definition or categorization of Sinclair’s oeuvre. Robert Bond’s article shows that Sinclair’s writing—and particularly that of the mid-late 1970s—can be defined as an energizing perpetuation of the Vorticist aesthetic propagandized in London by Wyndham Lewis. Yet Bond’s research also indicates that in an important way Vorticism is itself an anti-category, an amorphous if prophetic spectre, on account of the centrality within Vorticism of a concept of visionary formlessness. It is just such visionary formlessness which, Bond suggests, chimes so well with the furious undefinability, obscurity and singularity of Sinclair’s practice. The question of the context that Sinclair repeatedly casts himself in, that of the British Poetry Revival and its afterlives, is examined in Robert Sheppard’s essay “Everything Connects: The Cultural Poetics”. Sheppard’s approach refuses to slot Sinclair neatly into a history of the Revival, suggesting that “[t]he lines Sinclair draws explicitly complicate or refute existing lines of ‘influence’; they scribble over the maps of affiliations and allegiances, official and unofficial. They delete as well as connect.” Sheppard suggests that Sinclair’s own position as the “consecrator” of outsider figures renders his own position problematic: does the phantasmagoria of figures celebrated in *Lights Out for the Territory* valorise the individual marginal figure rather than the work of a larger movement?

Peter Barry’s essay works hard to analyze the nature of Sinclair’s writing itself. In a narratological analysis of Sinclair’s prose style, Barry tries to uncover why he finds it difficult to follow the plots of Sinclair’s novels, while revelling in the “registerial fluidity” of the writing. In discussing the characteristic swerves “from an elevated or academic register to a kind of pub-talk casualness” Barry identifies warring “drives” in Sinclair’s prose: the quest form and structured narrative which drives towards resolution or revelation; the poetic rhythms and linguistic fireworks which the novelist cannot resist returning to; the angry polemics which again halt the action in favour of statement. The

fraught status of Sinclair's artistic production is also addressed by Paul Sutton's article for this volume. As Sutton notes, within Sinclair's authorship "the author as knowing subject is comically and obsessively problematized, thereby revealing a field of competing knowledge systems which interact dialectically. So, within and between Sinclair's various writings—whether poetry, fiction or non-fiction—are constellated property development and paranoid delusion; poetry and pulp; and reportage and rant." Sinclair's working methods, Sutton sees, enable a pertinent questioning of the status, and even validity, of the very category of contemporary fiction. "The many correspondences between his fiction and non-fiction, the obsessive concern with books as commodities and the fictionalization of friends and acquaintances all conduce to a questioning of writing *per se*." Focusing on Sinclair's ongoing reliance on a documentary, essayistic register—which can involve the creation of a collaborative, dialogue form (as in *London: City of Disappearances*), or the incorporation of interviews (as in *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* and the forthcoming *Hackney: A Fiction*)—suggests the replacement of the novel now by a new investigative, cognitive, research-based mode of prose writing. In this connection it is difficult not to think of the way in which Ben Watson shelves his Sinclair books: alongside his copies of John Berger's art historical investigative essays.

A danger of the critical adoption of notions such as undefinability and idiosyncrasy in order to describe Sinclair's work, is an investment in a naïve cult of genius and concomitant reduction of Sinclair to the status of a singular freak. Certainly, as Watson puts it in his essay for this anthology, "as a literary phenomenon, the Sinclair freak out is unique", but by focussing strongly on the original countercultural context for Sinclair's writing, Watson valuably restores attention to the work's socio-cultural determinants, political contexts and complex aesthetic backgrounds. Indeed all of the essays in the second, "Culture and Critique", section of this anthology explore the political import and contexts of Sinclair's production. In the course of his essay, Murray notes that "Sinclair's texts are, on a political level, concerned with challenging both the manipulation of history in contemporary Britain, and the restrictive and inequitable nature of British society." Murray's article suggests that this form of critique is enabled by Sinclair's engagement in what Murray calls a process of genealogy: the re-writing of London's multifarious literary histories. Within Sinclair's work there is, Murray writes, "a necessary division between a bourgeois memorialisation of the past and a fluid, organic, oppositional sense of historicity." The sense of social agency foregrounded and fostered by Sinclair's texts is a central concern of Watson's article too, which argues that Sinclair's dense poetic of lived experience is twinned with a continuing commitment to the idea of social change.

Watson, rather like Murray, observes that “for Sinclair, the desiccation of the literary establishment is a psycho-social problem”. Watson therefore turns to an analysis of the political aesthetic contained within *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, in order to shed light on the political intent of Sinclair’s later work. This approach enables Watson usefully to trace and advance a poetic of “democratic eyeball particulars”: a poetic “originary, direct and honest”. He quotes some lines from *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, which, arguably, have orientated Sinclair’s entire work:

And this is what Geoffrey goes for in Grogan, the life experience, with its fictional density: the weight of his conviction. The fats have been burned off, the hard shoulder of reality is there. And all the rest of it, the Congress, the Mass Media, the psychedelic gangsters, the aesthetic mafia with their fancy brand names, their *Cahiers du Cinema*, Black Mountain college, Living Theatre, Jonas Mekas—it’s all bullshit. TV will have endless programmes on Ginsberg, on Carmichael, even on Grogan. Turn them into faces. Into more brand names. They won’t have programmes BY them. And they won’t have programmes FOR them.

Esther Leslie’s contribution to this volume turns to Sinclair’s later film-making, with *London Orbital*, and in some ways identifies a contrasting aesthetic of indirection. As Watson’s article notes, already in *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, “technologies of recording—film, photographs, tape-machines—have an important part to play in the generation of the text”. But by the time of the *London Orbital* film, Sinclair is now in a way resisting the operation of contemporary technologies of recording.

For Leslie *London Orbital* is “about resistance, a resistance tangible at the level of the image, and, at the film’s close, a proposed resistance to everything that video-culture sets in train is voiced.” Leslie’s approach to Sinclair, like Murray’s, invokes Walter Benjamin—but in a less optimistic way. For Leslie, in *London Orbital*, “the hopes of Benjamin and Brecht [...] that democratic access to image-making, photographic technologies would be both herald and outcome of a politically progressive social shift, are dashed.” This very resistance to recording technologies can be seen to be an effect of the visionary undefinability of Sinclair’s practice. Moreover the supernatural, the miraculous, abjures representation. “Just as Sinclair’s ‘novels’ persistently question the process of fictionalisation, so too his films are in a profound sense ‘unwatchable’.” Leslie’s analysis attends to Sinclair’s film’s replication of contemporary visual technologies’ manufacture of such visual absence and suggests that precisely in this replication lies its potentially subversive, even magically subversive value: as Sinclair’s own non-film offers up to its viewer a sort of negative theology of the (blurred) image. “Part of the strategy of recovery in *London Orbital*—in as much as it exists—revolves around incompetent filming, the technical failure of the

machines, ‘blind’ filmmaking, processes that reinvent a fascination in the image, even in its refusal.”

This politics of “refusal” is also a key idea for Kirsten Seale and her essay, “Iain Sinclair’s Textual ‘Obscenery’”, defines Sinclair’s stylistics and frame of reference by his own term “obscenery”. “Obscenery” is described by Seale as “the completely visible manifestation of what is normally segregated, managed and disposed of by disciplinary apparatuses”. Beginning with a Foucauldian reading of the passage from *White Goods* (2002) which takes in the view of London as seen from Beckton Alp, Seale proposes that Sinclair’s “recycling” of the marginalized texts which infiltrate his work, and his refusal of the panoptic gaze enacts the same resistance to smoothness and legibility which Leslie identifies in Sinclair’s film-work.

Yet a renewed fascination for images, for what Benjamin termed our collective optical unconscious, suggests a salvaging of precisely the urban histories and memories which M25 experience progressively disavows. Urban literary histories certainly form a major concern of the essays collected in the third part of this book, “Connections”, which all address the intertextuality of Sinclair’s production. As Murray observes in his article, the theoretical processing and generic categorization of Sinclair’s work can result in a neglect of its formal qualities, and in an accompanying neglect of his writing’s relation to earlier forms within the historical tradition of London writing:

Critics such as Julian Wolfreys place Sinclair’s texts into an elaborate theoretical framework, in this case deconstruction, in order to render his work palpable. Others, such as Dent and Whittaker prefer the stop-gap tag of post-modernist, while critics such as Roger Luckhurst and Wilhelm Emilsson prefer to place his writing within clearly defined genres—respectively “the gothic” and “detective fiction”—in order to suggest its transgressive potential. Within all of these examples there seems to be an implicit acknowledgement that the texts of Sinclair contain no formal, logical properties, and therefore it is necessary to impose theoretic and generic frameworks. This process results in the specificity of Sinclair’s work becoming obscured. One of the primary features of Sinclair’s writing that can become lost in the process is his engagement with the texts and writers of the past.

In this collection, both Barry’s reading and Sutton’s article—which features an extended analysis of Sinclair’s paratactic style within *Lights Out for the Territory*—helpfully begin to treat the formal qualities of Sinclair’s writing. Robert Hampson’s essay, included in “Connections”, also addresses the stylistic aspects of Sinclair’s work, and traces what Hampson calls the “sustained engagement with Conrad and his works” throughout Sinclair’s authorship, by providing a detailed record of the two writers’ imagistic affiliations. Hampson’s essay details the structural and formal influences exerted by Conrad on Sinclair:

“from a technical aspect, Conrad’s use of Marlow as narrator has clearly impacted on Sinclair’s deployment of Norton as *alter ego*, and the narrative complexity of *Nostramo* has encouraged the different narrative complexities of *Dining on Stones*.”

Brian Baker’s essay in this section focuses on Sinclair’s poetry and the plurality of influences within it. Tracing the presence of Blake, Charles Olson, J. H. Prynne, William Carlos Williams and Pound (as well as the visionary quantum physics of Stephen Hawking), Baker recalls the primacy of myth for all these thinkers, and Sinclair’s invigoration of his own concerns—London, place, origins—through repeated and obsessive return to their images and impulses. Sinclair’s practice of Olsonian “open field” poetics results in poetry best described as, Baker borrows from Sinclair himself to say, “a burst suitcase of images”.

David Cunningham organizes his essay around a contemporary pairing: Sinclair and J. G. Ballard. Sinclair, of course, has repeatedly acknowledged his debt to and interest in Ballard’s work, not least through his BFI book on *Crash*. Cunningham however, displays the same distrust of maps of writerly influence as Robert Sheppard does in his essay for this volume. Rather than emphasizing the similarities between the two, Cunningham suggests that their meeting point in Sinclair’s work is marked by a tension: the “textual presence of Ballard is a rather more disturbing presence within Sinclair’s writing than are the familiar allusions to Blake, Dickens, Conrad, et al.” For Cunningham, this tension is created by the two writers’ differing apprehensions of contemporary space and place. While Ballard writes a London characterized by the “non-places” of undifferentiated spaces of global capital (Castell’s “space of flows”), Sinclair continually asserts the specificity of place (and place-myth, as Brian Baker points out) and seeks its re-enchantment. The Sinclair-Ballard connection, in Cunningham’s reading, is not a straightforward question of influence, still less a decision readers must make between persuasive versions of the same city, but an opportunity to trace, “through their immanent confrontation, the role of writing, and of cultural production more generally, at an historical moment marked by the particular spatial relations generated by the dialectic of places and flows.”

The final part of this anthology, “Spaces”, contains three considerations of Sinclair’s treatment of London’s urban spaces. However, rather than retreading the familiar critical ground of “Sinclairian London”, David James suggests that Sinclair’s writing reveals “not *what* we know from reading about the city but *how* we can achieve a fresh understanding of its plenitude.” In this spirit, the essay examines the means by which Sinclair’s city visions are continually, and increasingly, undercut by a self-denigrating “confessional register”. James argues that in recent work such as *Dining on Stones*, the ironizing voice of self-exposure which refuses and rages against authorial authority, has consequences for the documentation and social critique of a London that seems to disappear

more completely with every work: “consequences Sinclair faces as an alchemist of genres, as his own “onlooking rhetoric” braids together social commentary with stylized confession when tackling London’s ruins and botched renovations.”

John Sears’s essay likewise links Sinclair’s writing practice with the city, but his focus is on London as necropolis, a city comprised of “ghosts and texts and photographs”. Sinclair’s signature means of investigating and representing the city, Sears argues, are caught up in thanatological rhythms of replication and revision: “Sinclair’s writings explore death as trace, event, residue, detritus, phenomenon, experience, destiny, inheritance, logic, faith, moment and place; in relentless, reiterative detail they assert the absolute authority of death as persistent past and imminent future amid the banal transience of the present.” The “overwriting” which Sears sees as the major characteristic of Sinclair’s work, is nevertheless recognized as also constituting a response to the lived experience of London’s palimpsestic nature.

In the final essay of the collection, Sebastian Groes also addresses Sinclair’s resistance to the city’s dominant culture and its social space. His essay points up the novels’ carnivalesque assertion of forces of disorder and transgression against the imprisonment, confinement and Foucauldian discipline which organize urban spaces. Groes then contrasts the explicit critique of Sinclair’s non-fiction with the necessary reimagining of London that takes place in the fiction, in particular, the ways in which *Downriver* releases the “language of the mad” and the energies of Bakhtinian carnival into the carceral city.

Groes’s foregrounding of the themes of imprisonment and Sears’s necrospectral tropes return us to Sinclair’s—and Peter Ackroyd’s—repeated characterization of the city in terms of the duality of darkness and light. In his memorable address to the *What is London?* symposium held at City Hall in 2004, “How the Thames Has Shaped London”, Sinclair explained this urban duality as an opposition between “strategic reality” and poetic reality—between the imperatives of “realpolitik, the political language of business”¹ and the imperatives of the visionary imagination. The darkness-light duality hence expresses itself in the very tension between the commodification of culture and small press production, or between the centre and the margin, which preoccupies so many of the essays collected in this volume. Yet precisely Sinclair’s focus on the crucial significance of the river at *What is London?*, suggested a way of thinking beyond the margin-centre binary. For the very physical presence of the Thames unites the city’s margins with its centre; and so

¹ Iain Sinclair, “How the Thames Has Shaped London”, in *What is London?: A Collection of Presentations at a Seminar at City Hall on 2 April 2004* (London: Greater London Authority, 2004), pp. 5-12 (pp. 5, 6, 9): <http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly/reports/londongov/whatislondon.pdf>.

even offers us a spatial image for a freer, more collaborative relation between visions and capital. Moreover the river, in the way that it is both bounded (by its banks) and fluid, ever-shifting, emblemizes a dialectical relation between form and formlessness—the sort of relation which Bond’s essay for this volume identifies within Sinclair’s own visionary aesthetic. This anthology assembles a wide range of academic responses to Sinclair’s output, and so shows how even Sinclair’s work can be grasped—to some extent—by formal professional methodologies, and processed through existing literary-critical vocabularies. Sinclair’s own way of thinking about the river at *What is London?*, however, suggests our potential for another and rather different set of responses to the culture of the city. Discussing the Weather Project in the turbine hall at Tate Modern, Sinclair suggested that the river could teach us a way of interacting with urban history and culture—a fluid imagination-work, as it were—which is as playful, democratic and formless as nature itself: as organic, grounded and experimental as the city could continue to be.

Another Danish invader has come along, a man called Eliasson, and produced this thing which is like an artificial sun shining in this hall, with slightly sugary smoke and a reflective ceiling. This thing was very simple but it really worked. It was like a winter sun in the blood of Londoners. It was free and people were going into this extraordinary building which gives a resonance of what the history of London had been, and it gives them a sense of what a future could be. There it is, and it does not cost them a penny. They are lying on the floor making shapes; they are making star clusters; they are just drinking in this very simple event. I think we can do those things on the river. We can do those things that grow out of the river and grow out of these buildings. If we can do that, there is genuine hope and imagination for the future.

PART I:
CONTEXTS

CHAPTER ONE

“A DARK INSECT SWARMING”: THE VORTICIST VISIONARY MODE OF WYNDHAM LEWIS AND IAIN SINCLAIR

ROBERT BOND

pages of concrete flutter in mitigation
voice-
less oracle pronounces before the silver
coin dents the carpet
K'UN K'UN TUI KUN

(Coins cast by Carol Katz: February 4, 1974)

—Iain Sinclair, “Lud Heat: The Invisible Fly-Sheet”

Still I like the notion of a mystic whispering amongst the lettered leaves—and perhaps at night when London is asleep and Cornhill desert, when all your clerks and men are away and the warehouse is shut up—such a whispering may be heard—by those who have ears to hear.

—Charlotte Brontë to George Smith, 18 September 1850¹

Introduction: To Enrich Abstraction

Both the literary Vorticism of Wyndham Lewis’s *Enemy of the Stars* (1914; 1932), and the neo-Vorticism of Iain Sinclair’s writing of the 1970s, can appear to be identified by their creators with sheer abstraction. In *Rude Assignment* (1950) Lewis associates abstraction with his visual art, when he clarifies that “I can never feel any respect for a picture that cannot be reduced, at will, to a fine formal abstraction.” Yet he also narrates the literary Vorticism attempted in *Enemy of the Stars* as having been precisely an attempt to import abstract visual

¹ “Lud Heat: The Invisible Fly-Sheet,” *Transatlantic Review* 57 (October 1976): 176; Juliet Barker, *The Brontës: A Life in Letters* (London: Viking, 1997), p. 297.

techniques into writing. “My literary contemporaries I looked upon as too bookish and not keeping pace with the visual revolution. A kind of play, ‘The Enemy of the Stars’ (greatly changed later and published in book form) was my attempt to show them the way.” It was only the later *novel*, *Tarr* (1918)—a reversion to straightforwardly bookish “writing-literature”, which, Lewis maintained, “dragged me out of the abstractist cul-de-sac.” The pre-war literary Vorticism of *Enemy of the Stars*, it appears, represented a probing of the textual limits of purely abstract method: an intensive probing which was revoked post-war, when “the geometrics which had interested me so exclusively before, I now felt were bleak and empty. They wanted *filling*.” On the evidence of *Red Eye* (1974) at least, Sinclair’s neo-Vorticist writing seems similarly whole-heartedly motivated by the definition of compacted abstract forms, such as the urban grid of Nicholas Hawksmoor’s churches. In “Frog Killer Memorial (Whitechapel)”:

an ox, out of himself, in thunderous terror
stamps a density
between church pinnacles

(some temple algebra sealed off)

Sinclair’s lines uncritically relay the principles of Vorticist abstraction: the beast’s stamping movements reproduce the automatized, machine-like, antihumanist, “more or less abstract compositions in pure form and colour” memorialized in *Rude Assignment*.²

Yet Lewis’s manifesto “Our Vortex”, in *Blast 1* (1914), had invoked “a New Living Abstraction”; and his note on the London Group in *Blast 2* (1915) had stated that “in Vorticism the direct and hot impressions of life are mated with Abstraction.” “Frog Killer Memorial (Whitechapel)” likewise advocates “a working geometry”; and goes on to involve the sacrificial abstraction of temple algebra with a visceral physicality.

to confront the raw meat identity
(greedy for image magic)
that we are sinew and blood, cartilage
bone heraldry revealed
foul body cage cut open
screams out its unspited beauty

Rather as with Sinclair’s contemporaneous film *Maggot Street*, this poem seeks to accrue visionary “image magic”, yet precisely by staging an autopsy of

² Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*, ed. Toby Foshay (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow, 1984), p. 139; *Flesh*, p. 52; Lewis, p. 139.

sacrificial, living-dead vagrants—“humanoid relics”—which sets out to identify the shaping abstract form of their “bone heraldry”. Sinclair thus renovated the Vorticist project “to ENRICH abstraction”, outlined by Lewis in “A Review of Contemporary Art” in *Blast 2*, which would cut open the abstract forms of the physical world only so as to identify and nurture them as the shapes of visionary “vibrations”. “We must constantly strive to ENRICH abstraction till it is almost plain life, or rather to get deeply enough immersed in material life to experience the shaping power amongst its vibrations, and to accentuate and perpetuate these.” One suggestion made by Lewis’s and Sinclair’s Vorticisms, therefore, is that whilst abstract physical forms—or the automatized, algebraic modes of behaviour through which we seal off our environments and into which we seal ourselves—define our experience of the city, the geometries will remain not “working”, pauperized: until we enrich them with the recognition that it is visionary formlessness that they shape. The impoverishment of abstraction in art and the sealing off of cognition within discrete spheres of intellectual labour, are hinted to be instinct with the ongoing economic reduction of humans to humanoid relics. Sinclair’s essay “Servant to the Stars” (1978)—his commentary on Brian Catling’s *Pleiades in Nine* (1976)—can be understood to refer to the contrary Vorticist objective to enrich abstraction, to accentuate the visionary “unspited beauty” of caged forms, when it echoes Lewis’s call for “a New Living Abstraction”. “A succession, or hierarchy, of posed images rapid steps, flicked so that the stiff elegance is crazed into everyday lunacy.”³ This recognition of a diffusion of ritualist formalisms into quotidian chaos within Catling’s text could be taken to hint at a grounding of postmodern social models in the “shaping power” of archaic social models; certainly it rearticulates a Vorticist dialectic of form—the stiff “posed” image—and formlessness, disintegration, which surfaces in *Blast*. This article sets out to show how both Lewis and Sinclair invoke a literary *practice* (as well as recognition) of visionary formlessness, in the course of their struggles to enrich abstraction.

Bursting the Granite Flower

As is well known, Lewis’s conception of Vorticist abstraction at the time of *Blast* was influenced by T. E. Hulme’s mediation of Wilhelm Worringer’s aesthetic theory. Hulme’s 1914 lecture “Modern Art and its Philosophy”

³ *Blast 1*, ed. Wyndham Lewis (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow, 1997; first publ. 1981), p. 147; *Blast 2*, ed. Wyndham Lewis (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow, 1993; first publ. 1981), p. 78; *Flesh*, p. 53; on *Maggot Street*, see *Lights*, p. 261; *Blast 2*, p. 40; “Servant to the Stars: B. Catling’s *Pleiades in Nine*, the Autolytic Defiances,” in *Tending the Vortex: The Works of Brian Catling*, ed. Simon Perril (Cambridge: CCCP, 2001), pp. 46-56 (p. 48).

defended avant-garde abstraction by referring to Worringer's account of primitive abstraction in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908).

[Primitive people] are dominated by what Worringer calls a kind of spiritual "space-shyness" in face of the varied confusion and arbitrariness of existence. In art this state of mind results in a desire to create a certain abstract geometrical shape, which, being durable and permanent shall be a refuge from the flux and impermanence of outside nature.

But, as we have seen, Lewis in 1914 was hardly a pure abstractionist. In *Blast*, Paul Edwards has noted, Lewis was in fact "repudiating" Hulme's analogy of the modern artist with the space-shy primitive artist. Lewis sensed that in contemporary London durable and permanent—integral—form was being discarded; and so, as Edwards writes, "a new artistic objective appeared: the embodiment of a new sensibility concomitant with a new, disintegrated and multiplied sense of the body and the emotions." Metropolitan aggregation ensures that, as Lewis put it in "The New Egos" (*Blast* 1), "we all to-day (possibly with a coldness reminiscent of the insect-world) are in each other's vitals—overlap, intersect, and are Siamese to any extent." Due to new communications technologies all our discrete body cages are now, in a sense, "cut open": and so in art too archaic figural integrity can be disrupted. Lewis noted that "just as the old form of egotism is no longer fit for such conditions as now prevail, so the isolated human figure of most ancient Art is an anachronism." Modernist self-fashioning becomes a similarly disintegrative procedure; Lewis defined the modernist individualist as diversified, diffuse. In *The Ideal Giant* (1917) he asserted: "Contradict yourself, in order to live. You must remain broken up." It was precisely because for him (as in that play) "revolution is the normal proper state of things", that Lewis could later reject ideological form as artificial self-stabilization, stating his political position in *Enemy* 3 (1929) as "partly communist and partly fascist, with a distinct streak of monarchism in my marxism, but at bottom anarchist with a healthy passion for order"⁴. This statement is neither evasive nor politics-shy. The modernist individualist's mockery undermines polemical formalities, but itself springs from a lived relation to the disintegrative "flux and impermanence" of modern ideologies.

⁴ Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 112-13 (quoting Hulme); *Blast* 1, p. 141; Wyndham Lewis, *Collected Poems and Plays*, ed. Alan Munton (Manchester: Carcanet, 1979), p. 132; *Enemy* 3 quoted from William M. Chace, "On Lewis's Politics: The Polemics Polemically Answered," in *Wyndham Lewis: A Reevaluation*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (London: Athlone Press, 1980), pp. 149-65 (p. 155).

Three years later the stage arrangements to the 1932 *Enemy of the Stars* appeared. “THE EARTH HAS BURST, A GRANITE FLOWER, THAT IT MAY DISCLOSE, IN EARTHQUAKE FASHION, THE APPOINTED PROSCENIUM.” In the 1932 version the idea of a disintegration of a “durable and permanent” form, the “granite flower”, continues to set the scene for—and so revivifies—the play. The image of the “granite flower”, I want to suggest, refers both to the text itself and to the play’s preoccupation with compacted form; with stagnant densities and repressed energies. The stage arrangements suggest that such a compressed mass must be disintegrated for the play’s scene to be revealed and the play performed; just as Lewis’s own creative energies had to be released for the text to be written. “You must remain broken up.”

I remained, beyond the usual period, congealed in a kind of cryptic immaturity. In my social relations the contacts remained, for long, primitive. I recognized dimly this obstruction: was conscious of gaucherie, of wooden responses—all fairly common symptoms of course. It resulted in experience with no natural outlet in conversation collecting in a molten column within. This *trop-plein* would erupt: that was my way of expressing myself—with intensity, and with the density of what had been undiluted with ordinary intercourse: a thinning-out which is, of course, essential for protection. [*Rude Assignment*]

The dense *trop-plein* that is *Enemy of the Stars* demands interpretation and explication precisely because it forces us, as readers, to experience the very condition of psychic accumulation *sans* diffusion with which the text is preoccupied. Such Vorticist writing, I would argue, encourages a hermeneutic agency and ingenuity, which would enable us to break free from the relation of stagnation which the writing’s compacted formal mass sets up between reader and text. Confronted by *Enemy of the Stars* the reader’s first reaction can be to close off and stagnate; being initially, like Arghol, “glutted with others, in coma of energy.” Yet in voicing Arghol’s relation to Hanp the text hints that its own verbal glut can at least begin to be distributed, “broken up” and enlivened, by interpretation or readerly use: “That mass, muck, in the corner, that he hated: was it hoarded energy, stolen or grabbed, which he could only partially use, stagnating?”⁵ There is of course a striking analogy here with the accumulation of surplus capital defining today’s society, which would be re-used and redistributed in a free society.

“This *trop-plein* would erupt.” Crucially, *Enemy of the Stars* hints that aesthetic formalization or massification itself enables its own disintegration, precisely through a process of transcendental, visionary release. This is “to burst

⁵ *Collected*, pp. 145, 98 (for the 1914 version); *Rude*, p. 126; *Collected*, p. 116.

Death's membrane through—slog beyond—not float in appalling distances!”, as described in these words of Arghol's in the 1932 version:

A soul, that is the wettest dough, the doughiest plumber's stock-in-trade. It is the perfect bullet. To drop down Eternity like a plummet—accumulate in myself, day after day, a dense concentration of pig life! Nothing spent, stored rather in strong stagnation, till rid at last of the evaporation and lightness characteristic of men! Thus to burst Death's membrane through—slog beyond—not float in appalling distances!

In these lines, to slog through and “beyond” the process of the accretion of mortal form is for Lewis to disintegrate liminal form—to “burst Death's membrane through”; such a disintegration occurs through a visionary release into immortality, or “drop down Eternity”. This particular verbal mass of Lewis's was itself plumbed and diffused within Sinclair's *Suicide Bridge* (1979), the final sentence being re-used by Sinclair as the opening quotation for his essay “Beneath Brass, Bone: The Prophecy of Slade, The Fate of England”. In *Enemy of the Stars* star-forms resemble the text itself, in that they become temporary holders of spiritual—for instance linguistic—content which can then be disintegrated, its transcendental, visionary charge diffused, when it is released and plummets to earth (or into a neo-Vorticist text). Such ideas hint at Vorticism's relation to Gnosticism, a relation also hinted in Sinclair's and Chris Petit's film *The Cardinal and the Corpse* (1992), in which Catling is labelled “Gnostic heretic”. In his essay on Lewis's involvement with Gnosticism, Michael Nath notes that “in Gnostic thought, the divine spark is that spiritual remnant of man's original place in the Realm of Light; on Earth, it is imprisoned in matter.” *Enemy of the Stars* inverts the Gnostic topography; here the spiritual remnant is imprisoned in the “stone of the stars”:

Anything I [Arghol] possess is drunk up here upon the world's brink, by big stars, and returned me in the shape of thought, ponderous as a meteorite. The stone of the stars will serve me for my seal and emblem. I practice with it a monotonous “putting,” so that I may hit Death when he comes.⁶

“Servant to the Stars” indeed revivifies—and so in a sense immortalizes—precisely Lewis's idea of the stars as quaffers and repositories of spiritual content, when the formal “shape” of Lewis's thought in this area disintegrates

⁶ *Collected*, p. 163; *Lud/ Suicide*, p. 293; see *The Cardinal and the Corpse* (Koninck, 1992), and Liz Brooks, “Of Knowing and Haunting the World: The Gnostic Art of Brian Catling,” *Performance* 65/66 (Spring 1992): 11-17; Michael Nath, ““Monstrous Starlight”: Wyndham Lewis and Gnosticism,” in *Volcanic Heaven: Essays on Wyndham Lewis's Painting & Writing*, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1996), pp. 149-67 (p. 162); *Collected*, p. 168.

within Sinclair's essay, and he quotes the following line from the 1932 version of *Enemy of the Stars* as a point of comparison with Catling's compacted phrasing: "Throats iron eternities, drinking heavy radiance, limbs towers of blatant light." But a little before Sinclair's and Catling's neo-Vorticist writing of the 1970s, the visionary release which Lewis associated with the disintegration of massified thought-forms, when they "drop down Eternity like a plummet", was already a concern of J. H. Prynne's *The White Stones* (1969). Arghol's question—"Will it some day, says he to himself, will energy some day reach Earth, like violent civilization descending—smashing or hardening all?"—is echoed in "Star Damage at Home".

[...] That some star
not included in the middle heavens should
pine in earth, not shine above the skys and
those cloudy vapours? That it really should
burn with fierce heat, explode its fierce &
unbearable song, blacken the calm it comes
near. A song like a glowing rivet strikes
out of the circle, we must make room for
the celestial victim; it is amongst us and
fallen with hissing fury into the ground.

Here it is precisely because its content, the "song", holds a visionary charge—because it is "like a glowing rivet"—that the star can "explode" and release that linguistic content. Prynne's neo-Vorticism inherits Lewis's sense that formalization or massification itself enables its own disintegration, through a process of transcendental, visionary release. Commenting on Catling's "written sculpture" *The Stumbling Block: Its Index* (1990), in *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997), Sinclair perpetuates this Vorticist idea when he describes the form-maker's marginal perspective on the contemporary capitalist economy. Catling's text identified the social exclusion of unsponsored artists with that of the homeless, in that for both social categories "expulsion" promotes the creation of peripheralized form: "a cage", that in actuality defines the capitalist city which the dispossessed surround.

In the gutters and elbows of curbs, in the approved architectural contrivances they have threaded themselves in a necklace cleated to ring a living, dreaming wall; a perimeter fence. Their expulsion has constructed a cage that concentrates the greed in its own bitter well.⁷

⁷ "Servant", p. 56 (*Collected*, p. 148, in fact has "Throats iron eternities (drinking heavy radiance) – limbs towers of blatant light"); *Collected*, p. 148; J. H. Prynne, *Poems*

Sinclair could thus suggest that the form represented by the “barrier wall” offers visionary access to—*insight into*—formlessness, or clairvoyance of the irrational rationality of the capitalist system. This visionary perspective is Catling’s own scrying-ball: “The visions that Catling offers are all made from the advantage of this barrier wall with its sealed gates, looking inward on a seething chaos.” But just as in *Enemy of the Stars* Lewis speculated the fall of violent rationality, compacted thought-forms, as “*smashing or hardening all*”, in Catling’s text the process of urban compression or formalization itself engenders both form and disintegrated formlessness: post-compression “the compacted density smoulders”, and buzzes as a “chattering fusion”. We can then begin to see how scrying the formlessness of capitalist activity might itself enable art’s formal abstraction to be enriched; or why Vorticist writers persistently invoke a practice of visionary formlessness to assist their struggles to enrich abstraction: the “mute lexical friction gives the heat that *powers the flexibility* of the shifting mass.”

The Stumbling Block has made itself of carbon paper, sucking the increasingly obsolescent material from offices at the centre of the city. It is compressed to become a pivot; diamond hard. The compacted density smoulders in the deep night blue of its waxy, slippery layers. The tiny scar letters are thick and noisy at its centre, their planktonic clusters bite and disengage continually, re-focusing the chattering fusion. This mute lexical friction gives the heat that powers the flexibility of the shifting mass.

It can be heard only in the quiet times; its static, a translucent muscle pulling between infinities.⁸

Dark Insect Swarming

Sinclair has often transcribed Catling’s invocation of a “chattering fusion”, a density or “static” which becomes audible only once integrated as quiet. Sinclair’s essay “From Camberwell to Golgotha”, in *Lud Heat* (1975), defined the “frenzied calm” characterizing one of Catling’s sequences of “monochrome line-drawings”. “Detail sows the eye into a labyrinthine chaos of arrow lines, highly energized black wires that cancel their opposing thrusts: so that the total effect is a frenzied calm.” The violence of Catling’s cognition, descending into the sketchbook, is seen by Sinclair to self-negate, as its analytic disintegrative impulses integrate themselves into a calm form. “Servant to the Stars” saw this occurring, eventually, with *Pleiades in Nine* too: “A succession, or hierarchy, of

(Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1999), p. 108; *Lights*, p. 263; *The Stumbling Block: Its Index* (London: Book Works, 1990), [n.p.].

⁸ *Lights*, p. 262; Catling, [n.p.].

posed images rapid steps, flicked so that the stiff elegance is crazed into everyday lunacy. Gibbering of dung flies slowed to a priestly and archaic dignity.” In *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings* (1987) the “seething chaos” of capitalist activity was proposed to be stilled by Catling’s competing black lines: “Joblard now was sketching rapidly, black contours, rib and vein, the heart’s heart, the labyrinth of the secret city, the temperature-graph of the dying stones: neutralizing the spread of madness.” The poem “Crossing the Morning” in *Fluxions* (1983) showed Sinclair once more concerned with how the most microscopic and self-contradictory—vortical—analytic movements aim at charting space into formal integration. The “blade” of the cutting tool, however sharp, becomes identifiable with stability and a rooted grasp of place:

here the feather the ant
 does its work,
 versing and reversing, willing its will,
 a system of hair-fine lines;
 by its direct movements, abrupt to the eye
 by its blade, its balance
 making this place whole⁹

These lines convey Sinclair’s sense that a calm form is necessarily frenzied too, because the process of formal integration, of “making this place whole”, is an ongoing process of “versing and reversing”. Sinclair’s comparison of the frenzied calm of form-making to the self-contradictory wilfulness of ant-movements—a will which itself continually needs to be willed anew—recalls Lewis’s advocacy of “a momentary organization of a dark insect swarming”, in “A Review of Contemporary Art”. The relation of Lewis’s entomological imagery here to his description of modern urban aggregation in terms of the intersections of the “insect-world”, in “The New Egos”, could hint to us that Sinclair’s ant-analogies similarly refer us also to the mechanical, more urban, “hair-fine” analytic behaviours with which his neo-Vorticism is typically concerned. Both Lewis and Sinclair posit contemporary art as a site of cognition sharing in contemporary science’s analytic, microscopic fervour. Yet they suggest that Vorticist form-making, as a scientific immersive practice, can only achieve an enriched abstraction if it claims at a recognition of visionary formlessness. In “A Review of Contemporary Art”, Lewis spurned primitive, “durable and permanent”, abstract form as an optic offering a view of nature “too proudly compact or monumental”; and he also praised Cubism for a rejection of chaotic formlessness. In “Servant to the Stars”, Sinclair similarly ironized the poles of “everyday lunacy” and “priestly and archaic dignity”,

⁹ *Lud/ Suicide*, p. 78; “Servant”, p. 48; *White Chappell*, p. 113; *Flesh*, p. 120.

versing and reversing between them in successive sentences so as to show up the absurdity of this false opposition. For Lewis and Sinclair Vorticist form-making is instead *itself* a capturing of formlessness: “a momentary organization of a dark insect swarming”; a frenzied calm. “A Review of Contemporary Art”:

The other link of CUBISM with IMPRESSIONISM is the especially scientific character of it's [sic] experiments. [...] But CUBISM, as well, [...] rejects the accentless, invertebrate order of Nature seen en petit. Any portion of Nature we can observe is an unorganized and microscopic jumble, too profuse and too distributed to be significant. If we could see with larger eyes we should no doubt be satisfied. But to make any of these minute individual areas, or individuals, too proudly compact or monumental, is probably an equal stupidity. Finite and god-like lines are not for us, but, rather, a powerful but remote suggestion of finality, or a momentary organization of a dark insect swarming, like the passing of a cloud's shadow or the path of a wind.

The moment the Plastic is impoverished for the Idea, we get out of direct contact with these intuitive waves of power, that only play on the rich surfaces where life is crowded and abundant.

We must constantly strive to ENRICH abstraction till it is almost plain life, or rather to get deeply enough immersed in material life to experience the shaping power amongst its vibrations, and to accentuate and perpetuate these.¹⁰

Concept and Motiveless Excitation

Vorticist form—which aims to accentuate “the shaping power” of the urban world—resembles the Hegelian concept which, as Giorgio Agamben emphasizes in *Language and Death* (1991), was posited to be constructed or crystallized out of a “mystical ecstasy”, analogous to frenzied calm. Agamben stressed that for Hegel it was the stilling of turbid ecstasy within a calm mystical condition—“mystic silence”—which enables the ineffable pure concept to be released or spoken. “Through the reference to the Eleusinian mystery, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* begins with a ‘truth-taking’ (a *Wahrnehmung*) of mystic silence: as Hegel wrote in an important passage from the *Preface*, that should be carefully considered, mystical ecstasy, in its turbidity, ‘was nothing other than the *pure Notion*’ (*der reine Begriff*).” One set of stage arrangements in the 1932 version of *Enemy of the Stars* indeed identified form, qua “*flames*”, with the conceptual, “*thought*”, and pictured how cognition or a scientific understanding of the natural environment is crystallized out of frenzied calm. Here compacted concepts are shown to be instinct with the “vibrations” of

¹⁰ *Blast* 2, p. 40.

material life, because such “*brain-specks to the vertiginous vertebrae, slowly-living lines of landscape*” are drummed out of the mystical ecstasy of the material: when these portions of violent rationality descend they perpetuate and accentuate precisely “the shaping power amongst its vibrations”, the environment’s frenzied calm. “*Two small black flames, wavering, as their tongues move, drumming out thought, with low earth-draughts and hard sudden winds—dropped like slapping birds from climaxes in the clouds.*” Sinclair’s “The Lightning Ball” (2002) develops the Vorticist identification of flame-form with the pure concept. Here cognition again approaches out of frenzied calm; “burning and absorbing—without hurt.” It is precisely this wide-open harmless fury which enables a reciprocity between the subject and an ineffable intelligencing which, though singular to him, he cannot claim for an instrumental rationality:

He knew: this was an intelligence, the manifestation of an intelligence in which he was somehow implicated. The approach of the lightning ball, though not controlled by him, was controllable, eccentric. Its trajectory was personal. It meant. Its advance, burning and absorbing—without hurt—everything in its path. A fierce clarity. It challenged and redefined matter. But was itself immaterial. You saw it because it wasn’t there. And, in this act, this seeing, you yourself became invisible, translated. Plural.

In *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings* such an intelligence, focussed, “intent”, is found in the child’s understanding of the urban environment. Joblard’s son’s pure cognition crystallizes out of a frenzied calm which is precisely a street-level apprehension of a fraught city. His “ancient” concepts form out of a condition of self-containment, of being rooted (“strapped”) in place; a condition which paradoxically is delimited only by the formlessness of the street’s turbid knowledges: “the true child, strapped in his buggy, is much more ancient, intent. He is open to it all, it still flows through him and around him, no barriers, nothing to keep out: he is contained.”¹¹

At this point, it is helpful to underline the affinities of the Vorticist visionary programme with Kasimir Malevich’s Suprematist project, as understood by T. J. Clark in his *Farewell to an Idea* (1999). Andrew Brighton, adopting Wölfflin’s terms, has contrasted a “linear” Lewis with a “painterly” Malevich: “the linear speaks of both tactile and visual experience, the painterly of the exclusively visual.” Brighton took Malevich’s Suprematist art, and not Lewis’s Vorticist art, to be conceived as “a way of re-seeing the world [...] to lead to the overthrow of

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 14; *Collected*, p. 154; *Saddling*, p. 58; *White*, p. 195.

the fundamental organizing categories of perception, that is, time and space.” Brighton could thus ally Malevich’s pictorial method to an Hegelian idea of perception; that “mind and its construction of reality is historical”, transformable. Linear Lewis, Brighton argues, falls in with a Kantian idea that we “see through fixed categories of mind.” Clark’s account of what he calls “the Malevich paradox”, I want to suggest, offers a more helpful view of Suprematism, which enables us to argue that *both* Malevich’s Suprematist and Lewis’s Vorticist aesthetic programmes aimed to change the world, to challenge and redefine matter: through the development of scientific, immersive practice. Clark saw the animating tension in Malevich’s Suprematism to be the combination of his “extraordinary physicality and concreteness as a painter”—a particularizing, energizing immersion comparable to Lewis’s and Sinclair’s activity of being “open to it all”—with “the deployment of those qualities in pursuit of an ending, maybe a self-cancelling.” For Malevich wanted to “show”, precisely by invoking form (totalization), the formlessness (ineffability) of material reality. Clark defines Malevich’s project as the attempt to crystallize—in paint—thesis five from his *God Is Not Cast Down* (1920): “Reason cannot reason, and judgement cannot judge, for nothing exists in Nature that can be judged, reasoned, or examined; she is lacking that unity which could be taken for the whole.” Quoting Malevich’s rogue theses again, Clark notes that precisely the physicality of his painting, its very invocation of form, shows itself to be irreducible to the dictates of organized religion or organized production, because it only ever sets out to be a capturing of the material environment’s formlessness—of its “motiveless excitation”.

You would have the makings of a life’s work. Your painting would be fired by the task of always again constructing a new myth, or new figure, of painting’s ending. Because here was how you could actually materialize the dream of totality coming to nothing. Look at the picture ironizing its own existence as all one thing. Look at its physical stuff opening, in spite of everything we believe to be its God—or Factory-given character, onto “the motiveless excitation of the universe.”¹²

We can see the affinity with a Vorticist form-making which, precisely as a scientific immersive practice, sets out to achieve an enriched abstraction by claiming at a recognition of visionary formlessness. Suprematist art, Clark saw, was “haunted by an eighteenth-century dream of science”. Malevich’s “metaphysics of unstoppable, unknowable energy-states [...] can often sound

¹² Andrew Brighton, “Post-War Establishment Distaste for Wyndham Lewis: Some Origins,” in ed. Edwards, pp. 169-83 (pp. 173, 174, 176); *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 269, 270.

uncannily like Diderot in *Pensées sur l'Interprétation de la nature*." Diderot is a thinker not typically referred to by either Lewis or his commentators, but the haunting of Diderot's conception of natural science by metaphysics seems to preview the Vorticist development of an immersive scientific practice through the recognition of visionary formlessness. *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature* (1999) was punctuated by the suspicion that the inexplicable transformability of natural energy implied that there could be "no philosophy": no wholly rationalist cognition ordained by a principle of natural immutability. In Diderot's account motiveless excitation destabilizes not just nature, but also the fixed narratives of natural history:

[...] if each living being is in a perpetual state of change, even as a result of the workings of nature, then despite the chain which links phenomena together, there is still no philosophy. All our natural sciences become as transitory as the words we utter. What we take for natural history is merely the far-from-complete history of a single instant.

In David Adams's words, Diderot was uncertain whether a current phenomenon is "merely a moment of apparent stasis in the infinite chaos of nature, from which we can draw no conclusions", or instead represents "what nature has always been, and will always be, as a result of the operation of its laws." Responding to Buffon's matrix theory of species forms, Diderot asked: "Are forms produced according to a matrix? What is a matrix? is it a real, pre-existing entity? or does it merely designate the intelligible limits of a living molecule's energy."¹³ Diderot questioned the idea of a science defining natural forms according to a principle of normalizing invariance, suggesting that instead we could crystallize a cognition of forms according to a principle of frenzied calm. For a science admitting the ineffable formlessness of material—its energetic "perpetual state of change", its motiveless excitation—would then be able to conceptualize a natural form as "a moment of apparent stasis in the infinite chaos of nature."

Such a formalizing, yet also visionary, mode of scientific cognition seems to characterize the Vorticist, revolutionary model of cultural production. We have seen how Sinclair's poetry of the 1970s, in *Red Eye*, renovates Lewis's project "to ENRICH abstraction", which would cut open the abstract forms of the physical world only so as to identify and nurture them as the shapes of visionary "vibrations", or of precisely the ineffable formlessness of material. "We must constantly strive to ENRICH abstraction till it is almost plain life, or rather to

¹³ Clark, p. 270; Denis Diderot, *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature and Other Philosophical Works*, trans. Lorna Sandler et al. (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 1999), pp. 75, 89 n. 139, 76-77.