

An Arcades Project: Brixton

Judith Rugg

Walter Benjamin, philosopher, cultural theorist, writer and critic wrote about the city through a series of ‘city-scapes’ and ‘urban pen pictures’ – experiments in the representation of the city and a way to represent the momentary, fleeting and contingent. His was a kind of archaeology of the city – its structures of social life, buildings, objects, spaces and configurations of myth. Benjamin’s ‘thought images’ consider the city-as-text: a way of mapping personal history and the objects and traces of the past that modern society threatens to destroy. The memorial he said, must oppose the propensity for amnesia: to remember those whose struggles and sufferings would otherwise be forgotten.

For Benjamin, living means leaving traces and his accounts of the city – Paris, Berlin, Marseilles, Moscow, Naples – have experience embedded within them. To write of cities involves the writer as part archaeologist, part collector and part detective: to mine the underworld of the urban experience in an excavation project of the discarded debris of space. The city he saw as a continuous ruin, a salvage project through which to reveal the hidden; a space to consider the discarded and marginalized and through which to create a counter-history, unmasking the city as a site of myth where the marginal are empowered.

I too have an ambivalent relationship to the city – as space of overwhelming stimuli and continual source of inspiration, memory and anchor of identity, yet also a site of anxiety. I was born in north London and grew up in south London. The place where my mother was born in Southwark still stands, now a stone’s throw from Tate Modern and across the road from the Holiday Inn. She was amazed at the cafés, the tourists and the sanitized river walkway where she remembers an urban landscape which now only exists in her memory of a riverside busy with barges at furriers and papermakers’ warehouses and ships

crowding the Pool of London and trams crossed London Bridge to Dulwich Park.

Benjamin's fascination with the communal character of the city accompanied me when I found myself almost suddenly here, in Brixton 2 years ago, emerging from the tube at street level in brilliant sunshine, embraced by the crowd. My previous home, in the Barbican had become a struggle to live in, in its separation from the city and its emanation of unbelonging. Grade 2 listed, like Brixton Market, yet void of tension, and like the Market's arcades – Grenville, Reliance and Market Row – labyrinthine in its maze of walkways. The Barbican, unlike the Market where the past is continually re-encountered, was built as part of the modernist strategy of living through architecture, bland and unvisceral, yet where, unlike the Market with its streets of vivacity, colour and sound, Benjamin's figure of the *flâneur* seems destitute and ineffectual. The Barbican has Cromwell House, Brixton has Marcus Harvey Gardens. Milton Court, a former fire-station and part of the Barbican's complex and possibly one of the ugliest buildings in London, was the subject of a long, drawn-out battle for its conservation in 2007.

In my plan to leave the Barbican's heterotopic order and machinic living, my search took me from Herne Hill to Pinner, from Crouch End to Kennington, looking in Greenwich, New Cross and Tufnell Park; Swiss Cottage, West Hampstead and Whitstable – a convoluted, tangled and intricate journey networking across London from east to west and north to south, which became on reflection, a rite of passage to that June day in 2011.

However, then Brixton was not yet on my map, only as a memory of my childhood where my mother worked in the wages department on Saturdays at Bon Marché, then a bustling department store. 'The Bon' was woven into the narratives of my childhood. Once, all of us (my father and two brothers) went to meet her as a surprise in my brother's car, a Morris 8 with a wind-down windscreen. But my memory of that afternoon is vague – slightly gloomy...Brixton Road in the rain. The

tube wasn't there then, but the Market was - its lights, its crowds and bustling intensity.

Since then, I had only occasion to visit Brixton a few times in my twenties, whilst I was a student at the Slade, to go to the Fridge or the Ritzy or to visit fellow squatters in Villa Road as part of an international movement for alternative living and politics in the early 1980s. Villa Road and Railton Road have their place in the history of radicalism: part of a movement of housing activism and experimental living alongside other streets across London such as Prince of Wales Crescent, Tolmers Square, Hornsey Rise and Cornwall Terrace. Not mere street names, but words which conjure images of collective utopia for those who were there, developing urban self-managed communities and skill-sharing through sculpture workshops, communal gardens, bakeries and vegan restaurants: challenging the nature of housing and the quality of (community) life. (see Steve Platt, *A Decade of Squatting*).

But somehow my path did not cross again with those of Brixton Road, Coldharbour Lane or Electric Avenue until that June day in 2011. I had become a North London Person and had lived in the US, New Zealand and the Devon countryside. The only time I crossed the River was to go to the Hayward Gallery. Until one evening I glanced down from the train on its way from Kent as it crossed the railway bridge over Brixton Road capturing fleeting views from above of the Victorian architecture and the crowd with its ambient warmth drifting upwards and thinking: 'Where's that! – Brixton?!

This was the kind of retort made inwardly, that I was to discover, invariably came from without, from a person enquiring if I had moved yet, and where to? On replying that, yes I had moved – finally – to Brixton, 'Brixton!' was to become so repeatedly the response that I came to call it 'The Brixton Echo'. That is, apart from those friends and colleagues who, I slowly discovered seemed to know it well and came out as frequenters of my soon-to-be-local-pub, yet had never mentioned

this previously: a friend now in Brussels who works for the EU, a lawyer friend in the City, artists since encountered – all seemed to have spent considerable time in my local. No ‘exile on Coldharbour Lane’ here.

Recently a student discussed an idea for a project about leaving and arriving. The project was about her hair. “Black women’s hair is really important to them; part of how we see ourselves. It’s a way of connecting with other black women – we all have our hair in common, and a search for authenticity – what makes us feel ‘real’”. She quotes from Stuart Hall, that matter of ‘becoming’ which belongs to the future as well as the past. ‘Identity’ is a thing which undergoes constant transformation and is subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in the recovery of the past, our identities are positioned by the narratives we give them.

Amma explained to me the difficulties in finding hairdressers who understood her hair and what a relief it was to come to London. In Brixton there do seem to be quite a few hairdressers – illuminated spaces full of people – women – and I was suddenly seeing them everywhere – not only at street level but in other unlikely places – through top floor windows above solicitors’ firms; in a hospital reception area which only seemed open at night. These places were animated with women getting their hair done, no matter, it seemed, what time of day, the weather or circumstances - absorbed, engrossed, oblivious to the outside world, the rain, the dark, the suffering. They seem to radiate warmth and energy, chatter and music, embodying Benjamin’s nature of the everyday: spaces of spontaneity and exuberance. It’s the *social architecture* of such places, their brilliant light spilling out onto the street, the movement and internal intensity evoked and immersed engagement – the *immanence*.

Brixton had seemed resistant to change, yet in constant flux; separate from the rest of London with its bland drive to modernity, spreading concrete and erecting towers, establishing new infrastructures of roads,

tube and railway networks and ideologies of value. Benjamin denounced such mythic, smug complacency of ‘progress’, seeing it as a mask to hide catastrophe and failed emancipation, where continuous improvement is a signal for the mystifications of capitalism. Ironically, in its Grade 2 listed status, Brixton Market is a constellation of the ‘now’ and the lived: not resistant to newness, but existing in a different kind of order outside chronological time, in the cyclical. *Julie mangoes, Tolly Boy, plantain, Home ‘N’ Fashion, The Wig Bazaar, Candy Fingers, Beauty Africa, Music Temple, dried fish, Golden Penny, Haircraft Body Line, Senovita’s, Amilambi’s, okra, Agik Cash n Carry, Kumasti, Atlantic Silk* – compete for your attention, and the comings and goings...the comings and goings. In the covered arcades; in the streets transformed into an interior, in the repetition of goods, there’s a strange anarchic ennui.

‘Mapping’ the city, was for Benjamin, a way to create an ‘interior cartography of subjectivity’. In Brixton, history overlaps with a palpable humanity in its seething streets: it’s a sense that you are at the heart of things which spool out around you, unpredictable, impassioned, tense. Like Benjamin, we allow ourselves to be enfolded by disorientation through the Market, Atlantic Avenue and the Village, marveling at everyday life as dramatic performance; immersed in a porosity of chance and the use of the senses; losing ourselves within the transience of the improvised – until the next time.