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Forgetting London's Future: Urban Memory, Critique and the threat of Nostalgic Entropy in Michael Moorcock's *King of the City*

Cultural changes during the latter half of the twentieth century have contributed to a fundamental shift in the way we engage with cities, and in particular the way in which we represent these relationships. Michael Moorcock's *King of the City* (2000) investigates how these wider cultural changes have impacted upon the lives of the citizens of London. Through the figure of Dennis Dover, Moorcock explores the individual subject's reaction to these changes, highlighting the limiting and retrogressive modes of response that he perceives as dominating our experience of the city. Moorcock emphasises the need for alternative forms of subjectivity, suggesting that the development of a critical urban subjectivity has the potential to inform significant changes within contemporary London. An essential element is the necessity for self-reflection and self-criticism. In what follows I will examine Moorcock's critique of contemporary London and Britain's relationship to the past in the nostalgic return to working-class forms of community and the collective nostalgic remembrance for the 1960s. I will investigate the emergence of a retrogressive vision of the future that Moorcock suggests has resulted from both cultural and political developments in Britain during the 1980s and 90s, arguing that the novel demands a

need for an alternative form of cultural engagement that can simultaneously write and critique the contemporary urban subject and experience.

Michael Moorcock is known primarily as a writer of science fiction and fantasy, yet he is also a writer who is concerned with the social and cultural conditions of contemporary England, in particularly London. Moorcock's 1988 novel *Mother London* was a savage attack on what he perceived as the failure of the postwar settlement. Moorcock's novel depicted London as a city that was struggling to retain its own identity in the wake of the Thatcherite attempt to create a hegemonic national identity. In that novel Moorcock celebrated a mythical London as a challenge to Thatcher's nationalism of the Falklands war and Victorian values. *King of the City*, together with the collection of short stories, *London Bone*, follow *Mother London* as "sequels" of sorts, investigating the same possibility of London as a site of counter-histories and identities.¹ Yet, I would argue that each text is responding to very different contexts, and needs to be engaged separately. If *Mother London* is a critique of Thatcherism and jingoistic nationalism, *King of the City* is a critique of the mediatised world of globalised multinational corporatism. It is then within this context, and the exploration of London as both the site of this shift in global culture—and the possibility for it being subverted—that I will explore *King of the City*.

For those familiar with the life and career of Moorcock, Dennis Dover is at times a thin fictionalisation of Moorcock, with his experiences in the band Hawkwind, and his friends and associates within the sixties counter-culture. The novel was written in self-imposed exile in Texas during the late nineties, as Moorcock attempted to reconstitute his experiences of the city in a complex fictional engagement that raises many pertinent questions about how the city can be written, about the relationship between fiction and experience, and about the problematical nature of

writing autobiographical fiction as critique. As Iain Sinclair, Moorcock's friend and fellow London fiction writer, states in a review of the novel: "the primary storyline of *King of the City*, the Candide-like fable of good-hearted Denny Dover, 'goozer' and loser, swerves away as the teller of the tale, the pretend author is elbowed aside by the exiled Moorcock—who has to whisper in his ear, correct him, put flesh on his spindly, fictional bones."² This process of fleshing out fiction through the conflation of biography and fiction is not uncommon in London-based fiction. Writers such as Dickens, Wilde, Stevenson and Blake have all arguably written elements of themselves and their experiences of the city into their texts, yet in Moorcock there is not only a need to reconstruct the city, and its culture, from memory, but at the same time to institute a complex mode of cultural, social and political critique, and it is that process that will be the focus of this present discussion of the novel.

The character, or fictional proxy, of Dennis Dover, is a perspicacious and scathing critic of the city, whose mode of cultural engagement looks beyond the, at times, superficial nature of contemporary London culture. One of the primary elements of the social critique of the novel comes through Dover's role within the paparazzi, allowing for an analysis of the nature of celebrity and of the ambiguity of morality and privacy that contemporary culture has created. Dover considers the industry in which he works corrupt, yet he abuses and exploits that corruption for his own ends. Ironically it is the nature of the industry that turns upon him, having captured the scoop of a lifetime at precisely the same moment Princess Diana is killed. His attempts to sell his photograph of the apparently deceased Lord Barbican and the Duchess of Essex copulating in the Caymans are met with disdain under the media's new moral imperatives following Diana's death. Dover is, however, philosophical regarding his professional death at the hands of the industry: "Some

people claimed that they had actually seen me baying. In the tunnel. With the blood of their angel on my hands. Myths, miracles, gossip and the fuck process. Any journalist knows they're all more powerful than mere fact. Especially these days. We're entering a period of unrelenting hypocrisy, mind-numbing relativism, perpetual self-invention, liberal cop-outs, the new bigotry, VR backdrops, feelgoodism, abstraction and distraction, the virtual theocracy, the quest for the greatest common denominator" (9).³ The relativistic nature of contemporary culture is endlessly highlighted by Dover: "modern times. Malleable truth. There's no such thing as objectivity. All stories are subjective. Everything is relative. There's only self-interest. Right? The link man on CNN summed it up the other night. Morality, he said, is a matter of personal choice"(16). The tone of the novel towards such relativism remains somewhat ambiguous. While the lack of morality and ethics in the media and in business is repeatedly highlighted, Dover revels in the relativism of personal morality, justifying his continual abuse of privacy in his role as photographic journalist: "have you ever listened to the abnormally rich whining how life's so tough for them? Try living your entire life on a timeshared paving-stone in Calcutta and you'll know what privacy means" (7).

Such comments establish Dover as a perspicacious and informed critic of contemporary culture. His critique of the present suggests a mode of awareness that has the potential to institute significant changes within the city by observing the ideological and economic foundations of contemporary culture. Yet as Moorcock writes his city through the character of Dover we become aware of the contentious nature of any attempt to write the city, while instituting both subjective memory and cultural critique, much of which addresses the question of, and relationship to, memory and nostalgia within the novel. For Sinclair, the memory processes employed

within the novel are fundamental to its construction: “what Moorcock is doing, under the permission of a work of fiction, is contriving a comprehensive encyclopaedia of lost lives, uncelebrated loci, trashed cultural memory.”⁴ This mode of writing the past is necessarily, perhaps deliberately, nostalgic, and in its construction raises many questions about the nature of nostalgic recollection, and the gulf between what I will term entropic nostalgia, and the “festering tyranny of nostalgia”⁵ that Sinclair suggests characterises the novel.

The prevalence of nostalgia in broader contemporary British culture has been addressed in depth by such critics as Robert Hewison and Patrick Wright. Wright’s *On Living in an Old Country*, highlights through an analysis of the political construction of a national history the regressive and conservative nature of history in contemporary England. As Wright asserts, “National heritage has its sites, but like amulets to believers these sites exist only to provide that momentary experience of utopian gratification in which the grey torpor of everyday life in contemporary Britain lifts and the simpler more radiant measures of Albion declare themselves again.”⁶ The anaesthesia model of experiencing the past that Wright presents leads to an inability to move forward to develop any tangible model for the future of contemporary Britain. Robert Hewison also argues savagely that Britain’s nostalgic turn was leading to cultural stagnation. As he suggests heritage is not simply cultural, but has both causes and impacts that are far more systemic: “we have a heritage politics as well as a heritage culture; their mutual influence on our economic situation is such that all three can be seen as the products of the same deep social convulsion caused by the twin disruptions of modernisation and recession.”⁷ It is this use of history as a form of forgetting that underscores what I have referred to as nostalgic entropy. In this form of cultural production, history not only works to develop a longing for an Arcadian

image of the past, as Wright suggests, but also denies the possibility of social change, leaving the country as the site of a stagnant and dead culture in which, according to Derek Jarman, “tomorrow’s been cancelled owing to a lack of interest.”⁸

While Moorcock’s novel is a holistic critique of contemporary culture, a focus on the relationship between past and present in contemporary London can help to tease out some specific examples in which contemporary London culture struggles to engage critically with the relationship between memory and nostalgic entropy.

Nostalgia, identity and the destruction of working-class communities

in the East End

In order to investigate the way in which *King of the City* seeks to challenge the present entropic condition of the city, it is necessary to plot some of these alterations, and in particular how they relate to our perception of the city. Moorcock’s novel, through the critique that it offers, highlights a paradigm with which we can view these changes. The globalisation that has come to alter drastically contemporary culture since the second world war has had far reaching effects upon the way in which the local, national and global function and interact. These changing relationships are one of the dominant focuses of Moorcock’s novel, in particular the way in which local community has been eroded by the spread of global media, shifts in global economics and the migrational and diasporic nature of the contemporary city. Yet paradoxically for Moorcock, our perception of these communities has altered as they become destroyed, moving from urban other to potent cultural symbol of nostalgia. In this movement the potential for these communities to challenge the nature of contemporary culture has been obliterated, and the need for a new urban critical perspicacity becomes more insistent.

One of the most dominant features in contemporary theoretical investigations of globalisation is the role of the nation-states, and the attempt to assert national identity and state control in the maelstrom of globalised media and trans-national capitalism. The nation is a surprisingly absent feature in Moorcock's novel. For Moorcock the nation was in many ways a myth to begin with, and one that needed exposing, yet that exposure has had both liberating and repressive effects. In *King of the City* Moorcock plots the mythological nature of the nation through absence. As many writers have recently suggested, the nation-state is in itself an "imagined community," a series of localities onto which are imposed a sense of national identity, a homogenising unity. As Appadurai argues,

the nation-state relies for its legitimacy on the intensity of its meaningful presence in a continuous body of bounded territory. It works by policing its borders, producing its people, constructing its citizens, defining its capitals, monuments, cities, waters, and soils, and by constructing its locales of memory and commemoration such as graveyards and cenotaphs, mausoleums and museums.⁹

As this definition suggests, the modern nation-state has had a rather brief yet complex history, with a country such as England, and in particular the United Kingdom, often struggling to assert a sense of identity.

The inability to maintain a heterogeneous sense of national identity within the city of London also has a long and complex history. The Victorian period was one of the most fundamental in the construction of British national identity, with the growth of colonial power, communication and transportation networks and celebrations of national progress, such as the Great Exhibition of 1851, attempting actively to consolidate the imagined community of the nation.¹⁰ Paradoxically, the Victorian period also witnessed the ossification of the division of London, namely between the affluent West End of empire and the poverty-stricken East End of racial, social and

cultural “otherness.” As Schwarz suggests, the otherness of East London was manifest in “a highly fantasized and eroticised system of images.”¹¹ This series of images was used to posit East London as a frontier, an area of darkness, barbarity, addiction and vice, encapsulated in the opium dens of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, along with the gin palaces of Guy Boothby’s *A Bid for Fortune*. These fictionalised images of the urban “other,” “a reservoir of constant fantasy,”¹² underline concerns over national identity in the city, in which the milieu of language and culture within the city threatens the fragile image of unity projected through nationalism.

While the fragility of the nation-state was threatened in the Victorian period by the heterogeneity of London locale, in Moorcock’s contemporary London the dynamic has altered. The nation-state for Moorcock has become a non-influential symbolic body, negated by the nexus between the local and the global. The notion of national unity is problematised by Moorcock in his investigation of the localised spatial politics of London. For Dennis Dover, the central character of Moorcock’s novel, London is a series of small communities, each with its own internal culture and logic, epitomised by Dover’s mythological East-London community of Brookgate, which is posited as antithetical and in opposition to the hegemonic figure of the nation. The construction of the nation-state is often attributed to the emergence of a mono-linguistic culture that is aligned with the development of printing technology and capitalism.¹³ Moorcock highlights the way in which the public language of the nation-state is in constant battle with the private language of smaller communities and individuals, and how the unofficial vernacular protects identity and tradition: “All parts of London have their special twists, of course, to tell their own particular stories. Combined they create the greatest common voice in history. The true voice of our

group unconscious, protecting and extending our deepest freedoms” (28). This language can never become official, or be appropriated in any way because it has infinite meanings and is in a constant state of evolution. Moorcock’s investigation of the Brookgate “twist” or vernacular invites parallels with de Certeau’s analysis of the uses of enunciation and speech acts within language systems. His discussion of the subversive uses of established systems of discourse suggests that while there is no potential for a return to individuality, the way in which we perform many everyday practices such as walking, cooking and shopping involves certain “tactics” that use the imposed spaces and structures within the city in such a way as to challenge the scientific and rational modes of imputation. In the study of language de Certeau suggests that our understanding must “pass from a linguistic frame of reference to a polemological one.”¹⁴ This polemological approach, when viewed within the contexts of Moorcock’s assertions surrounding the nature of language in London, highlights the resistant nature of locality to the rational imposition of official language that helps to define the nation-state.

As we have seen from the example of disappearing modes of local vernacular, traditional models of community-based resistance have become redundant. The alterations in language and inner London community have been reflected in the physical nature of the urban environment, as noted in relation to the emergence of a postmodern urbanism. As we shall see below, the traditional modes of localised community are disappearing. In their place is the emergence of constructed communities in urban planning and a celebration of the domestic and the private in architecture. The retreat into privatism and localism is epitomised by the narrator of Moorcock’s novel, *Dennis Dover*. His celebration of localism is established in the novel as antithetical to the globalised world around him: “We can forget the complex

world outside and pretend everyone's as good as their word and every virtue we claim for ourselves is real" (88). This notion of community as a form of escapism from an increasingly uncertain social reality is witnessed in the "privatism" that Nan Ellin sees as such a dominant feature of postmodern urbanism. Privatism is regarded as symptomatic of a culture in which the dominance of the automobile and domestic entertainment media has led to a retreat from the public sphere and the emergence of a hyperreality in which these new concomitant developments combine to produce a retreat from the wider public sphere. We can see many examples of the privatism that Ellin outlines in *Postmodern Urbanism* throughout contemporary London, both in architectural design and city planning. *Elektra House* in Whitechapel, built in 1999, is a classic example of the architectural manifestation of the privatism that informs the contemporary response to urban space. The façade of the house has been constructed entirely from black resin-coated plywood panels, with a discreet entry from a side lane, operating as an affront to the traditional streetscape and securing the privacy and security of its residents. This style of development marks a distinct break from the notion of communal space and participation that informed so much modern-movement architecture, and has not gone without criticism, as Powell suggests: "not the least of the charges laid against it was that its response to the street was hostile, defensive and anti-social."¹⁵

We can see in the emergence of the gated "cities" and private estates that have been developed with increasing frequency on the outskirts of London a collective form of this retreat into the private.¹⁶ These cities, classic examples of what Dear considers the "privatopia"¹⁷ of the postmodern urban condition can be seen as emblematic of a desire to return to the forms of community that Dover valorises in *King of the City*. These Common Interest Developments are an attempt to rediscover

forms of community such as that of Brookgate, yet have no logical referent, becoming “the real without origin or reality”¹⁸ that for Baudrillard constitutes the hyperreality of the present. The communities of East London were born out of a social and economic system that desired physically to segregate the wealthy aristocracy of the city from the working-class. The communities that developed within the East End were thus born out of an imposed segregation, and their development was an organic and often turbulent process that is impossible to simulate in the construction of these gated cities. Such gated cities are also constructed in vastly different circumstances to the working-class communities valorised by Moorcock. These forms of neo-traditional urbanism attempt to engage with the traditional urban models of working-class communities through “architectural components that allude to the past or to the local vernacular”¹⁹ Any attempt to derive meaning from applying previous models of community is undermined by the gulf between those communities and the models on which they are based. The new gated communities arise from the grouping of middle-class families who desire the security that they believe is denied in the traditional urban settings, plagued by violence and crime. One such example is Princess Park Manor in Barnet, North London. Formerly the Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum and Friern Hospital, the new development is marketed as “an oasis of tranquillity from the bustle and frustrations of life.”²⁰ The desire to return to forms of community associated with the past highlights the inability of contemporary culture to conceive of alternative visions of the future that don’t nostalgically return to the past.

While there is a growing attempt to invent the forms of community that Dover values as part of a postmodern urbanism, the role of the position of these original working-class communities is under threat from wider economic and social developments, many of them explicitly related in the text to the rise of globalisation

and dominant multinational corporations. In *The King of the City* this movement is symbolised in the character of Lord Barbican Begg, Dover's cousin, and his destruction of Dover's beloved Brookside. The development of Barbican's personal power is a dominant feature of the narrative, with his rise from wet middle-class adolescent to the most powerful man in the world paralleling the failure of the social project of the 1960s, to be discussed at length later. Barbican's power is also symbolic of the absence of the nation-state's power in the contemporary world, in particular that of Britain. As suggested earlier the globalising power of the new media-driven imperialism has given far more economic power to corporations and individuals than countries. Just five hundred multinational companies control eighty per cent of world trade,²¹ with figures such as Bill Gates, Rupert Murdoch and Donald Trump wielding such immense power that Dover's apparently hyperbolic assertions appear not to be so farfetched. Of the fictional Barbican he states, "Whatever he wished to control, he did control. If the city and Wall Street acknowledged a Holy Trinity then it was God, Washington and Barbican Begg.... Barbican's will was almost unchecked. The only power greater, and that was disputable, given the circumstances, was the USA. It was disputable because so many politicians were in BBIC's pay" (241).

Barbican's power threatens the very existence of the local community of Brookgate. The redevelopment of Brookgate following Barbican's purchase of the areas' Huguenot leases is posited in the novel as the destruction of not simply the buildings and spaces of the suburb, but of its memory, tradition and community values. The destruction of traditional East London working-class communities has been occurring consistently since the first wave of post-war gentrification in the 1950s. This movement of middle-class residents into areas traditionally inhabited by the working-class has accelerated worldwide since the 1970s, shifting from a

vanguard practice to: “a tide of inner urban developments based on a more overtly aspirational kind of ‘lifestyle.’”²² In the process of gentrification we can see the traditional frontier between the east and west ends of the city become inverted, as Schwarz suggests, with working-class communities fearing the destruction of their culture from the marauding hordes of middle-class immigrants.²³ As Jerry White has observed, gentrification has saved a great deal of historic housing from destruction, yet the costs have been far greater: “at best tenants were paid substantial premiums to leave which might put a deposit on a house in outer London or beyond ... but always there was a cost in disruption, in cutting family and neighbourhood ties, and in the fear that this was an offer that could not be refused less something far worse should happen.”²⁴ The cost that White discusses here is presented in the novel as an invasion of the city, a Trojan horse whose “belly had already burst and the bastards were fanning out through the streets, burning, looting, raping. Trampling our memories, stealing our treasures, destroying our history. Stripping our assets” (240).

While it is often easier to acquiesce with traditional Cockney, Anglo-Saxon working-class images of the East End, it is important to acknowledge the history of migration to both the city and the East End that has occurred consistently since the Roman invasion. The area has received successive waves of migrants, from the Huguenot political refugees of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the Chinese and Jewish migrants that became such a vital part of East End culture throughout the nineteenth century. The emergence of a strong Jewish community in Whitechapel can be interpreted as the perpetuation of the “native” forms of community valorised by Moorcock. The strength of the institutions, such as local synagogues and cafes, that bound the community together created a sense of identity that has suffered just as much from the gentrification of the area as have Anglo-Saxon communities.²⁵ In the

twentieth century the area was drastically altered by Caribbean migration (although this had a greater impact in South London, in particular Brixton) and the influx of Asian migrants, in particular Bengali and Pakistani. This twentieth-century migration underlines the diasporic nature of contemporary London, yet its effect upon the traditional nature of the London community is harder to gauge.

There are two competing models of the way that the global movement of migrant workers affects working-class communities: “the dialectical tension between traditional and translated communities”²⁶ centres around issues of cultural assimilation and resistance. While theorists of globalisation such as Appadurai present models of globalisation that suggest new models of localized identity emerging from the effects of a globalised community, John Eade suggests that the evidence from the London borough of Tower Hamlets, and in particular Spitalfields, highlights a very different model of identity. For Eade this model flies in the face of those who attempt to see the effect of globalisation as creating a new form of community and politics: “the globalization of locality in Docklands and Spitalfields has not produced a new politics of place where social and cultural differences can be accommodated within a strategy of local working-class resistance.”²⁷ In this community there is active evidence that the Bangladeshi community, who make up twenty-three per cent of the local population, are defying assimilation and maintaining strong ties based upon ethnicity rather than a localised identity. This is supported by Jerry White who, in commenting upon the separate identities of migrant communities, asserts: “the private spheres of London’s diverse communities were marked more by this separate development than by ‘assimilation’ to an English—or even London—way of life.”²⁸ While this resistance to assimilation might challenge convenient and idealistic pictures of the melting-pot image of the contemporary cosmopolis, what effects does

it have on the way in which we are to view the communities of East London in relation to their destruction by gentrification and development, and where does it place Moorcock's projected image of the East End communities?

The lack of assimilation among immigrant communities can be interpreted as similar to the fiercely independent and loyal nature of traditional East London communities. The loyalty and morality among the community of Brookgate is for Dover in stark contrast to the fake platitudes of the wider community: "by and large that community knew a lot more about equity and common justice than Toney Blurr and his Sultans of Spin. Mostly it was the sense of unconditional acceptance that you went for" (88). This unconditional acceptance and loyalty is reflected in the responses that John Eade received in his survey of twenty second-generation Bengali residents of the East End. Most of these residents identified themselves more strongly as Bengali, and as part of a Bengali community, than as East Enders or Londoners. Their identification within a particularly strong ethnically and culturally based group suggests that emerging identities carry many similar traits to the communities that Moorcock attempts to valorise, yet are not part of that community. The emergence of strong forms of community largely resistant to assimilation that have become such a dominant presence in the East End suggests that Moorcock's representation of the destruction of traditional East End communities is somewhat flawed. The elegiac note that Moorcock sounds through Dover for those communities is in many ways a caricature of their dominant presentation, and is, I would argue, purposefully flawed in order to investigate the role of nostalgia in contemporary culture. Eade, in his interviews with East London property developers, highlights the ways in which, like Dover, it is easier to idealise the "native" East End identities to promote to potential middle-class residents, rather than the migrant communities who in many cases make

up the majority of residents: “they (the estate agents) appear to know more about white working-class residents, regarding them as the ‘real’ East Enders and having more sympathy for their interests.”²⁹ Dover’s valorisation of the white working-class residents is reflective of the dominant responses to issues of identity in East London, and reflects changes in memory processes, rather than in the reality of contemporary East End social conditions.

This destruction of the East End is, however, couched in the novel in the nostalgic narrative of Dover. We can interpret his narrative as symptomatic of the growing memorialisation of popular culture and its retrogressive tendencies that Moorcock suggests are reductive and lead towards anachronism and a complacent form of historical engagement. Moorcock’s use of a first person narration is of vital importance in the construction of a nostalgic form of uncritical memory, and in turn of his critique of those memory processes. Dover’s narrative is a largely chronological recollection of events from his birth in 1952 to a utopian present. This form of narration results in one of personal memory, and one that Moorcock suggests is problematic as it becomes tainted by the nostalgia that is a common response to cultural displacement. Any recourse to processes of memory raises issues over the fallibility of human memory. As Freud observed, memory is a set of processes that are predicated on certain information having been forgotten, or, perhaps more importantly, never having been consciously present to the subject. The remembering of information is problematised by a range of functions, such as screen memories, repetition, the role of infantile sexuality and transference.³⁰ This notion of memory as a set of processes, and not an organic practice, has created a wealth of academic investigations into those processes by which memory functions. If we view Dover’s personal memory as a series of processes, all triggered by a response to present

conditions, we can explore the way in which Moorcock posits memory and nostalgia as reactions to personal crises and, on a broader scale, to contemporary political and social conditions.

Andreas Huyssen suggests that this failure of belief in narratives of progress has altered the orientation of contemporary society, in particular its use of memory: “modernist culture was energized by what one might call ‘present futures.’ Since the 1980s, it seems, the focus has shifted from present futures to present pasts.”³¹ One of the most dominant features of this turn is the sudden interest in what Huyssen terms “Musealization,” or the archiving obsession of contemporary culture. While this movement is often explained as symptomatic of the need for nostalgic escapism in a displaced present, it can also be linked to changes in the way that memory functions within contemporary society. Memory was perceived as being, up until the modern period, a natural, organic and inviolate process, functioning unselfconsciously and maintained by the institutions of community, church and family. Pierre Nora’s influential study *Realms of Memory* suggests that the destruction of this form of memory has led to the development of memory-history, a form of remembering and memorialising our past as it is no longer maintained naturally, as memory used to be, but is a self-conscious attempt to preserve both national and personal pasts. For Nora we now preserve memory in sites and rituals, which he terms *lieux de mémoire* which are “fundamentally vestiges, the ultimate embodiments of a commemorative consciousness that survives in a history which, having renounced memory, cries out for it. The notion has emerged because the society has banished ritual.”³² Our forms of memory are now transformed through their relationship with history. Nora suggests that we have begun to look at the pre-industrial past with a sense of longing for the way in which memory, and the community that maintained it, functioned as an

organic entity, and we can see that same desire in the way we now view the industrial forms of community that dominate Dover's recollection of the London past.

If we are to look at the novel in terms of memory discourses, and the way in which memory is now embodied in certain sites rather than in the actual institutions of community, certain questions are raised about the ossification of memory in relation to place, as well as about the ways in which it is preserved in time. One of the most common manifestations of the *lieux de mémoire* in contemporary British culture is their use by both government and private enterprise for ideological and financial purposes. The appropriation of the past by a culture bent on identifying with a safe and inviolate past is epitomised in the novel in the figure of The Jolly Corinthians Boys Sporting Club. The club is a traditional East London sporting club, specialising in bare-knuckle boxing and dog-fighting. It is posited in the novel as a symbol of East London identity and belonging, a site in which the past is preserved through the informal processes of community memory that are associated with it. The Corinthians Club, as the embodiment of community and therefore of memory, is symbolically the bright light in the potentially dark reality of urban life, as Dover's description highlights:

In minutes we'd reached the Corinthians' vivid red brick and glinting stone. Towers, battlements and columns, gargoyles, caryatids and fabulous beasts were spotlighted, festooned, illuminated, murmuring and winking with crystalline electrics that made deep shadows of the surrounding railway and motorway arches, challenging the outer darkness, the silhouetted towers. And she really was our citadel. She always had been (87).

This passage contains a vivid description of the way in which working-class community has functioned in modernity. In the secularised modern world, in which religious faith has been replaced by rationalism, the myth of progress and the unending pursuit of capital, there is little solidity. As Marx asserted, and Berman

reiterated, it is a world in which “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.”³³ While for Marx this unending progress would increase alienation, in many working-class areas it was replaced by a community that functioned as a stabilising entity. It did indeed “challenge the outer darkness” brought by progress and embodied for Moorcock in “the silhouetted towers” of the housing estates. While the memory processes that deliver images such as this are always problematic, as highlighted above in the discussion of local vernacular, Moorcock does suggest that such a world existed, and its destruction has produced a challenge to reassert modes of engagement with the urban environment which can lead to a potential regeneration of urban subjectivity.³⁴

As Moorcock notes, for figures such as Barbican, the past that they have appropriated never really belonged to them. It is a cultural trend, part of the latest middle-class fad. As Dover says of Barbican after discovering him eating pork pies in New York, “so Johnny was in his man-of-the-people rootsy mood, desperate for authenticity that was never his in the first place ... now the East End has an image. It stood for honesty. Old value. Real life. Coherence. Ripe for colonization” (176). The colonisation of the East End is now evident in tourist guides that, as Eade states, direct the “most adventurous tourists, especially those who were excited by the ‘authentic’ working-class atmosphere of its street markets such as Petticoat Lane.”³⁵ The movement in contemporary culture of the East End from urban other to a marketable image of a past to which we can only dream of returning, marks a fundamental shift in London culture and an example of the failed relationship between the present and past in contemporary culture. Moorcock highlights that our modes of historical engagement, whether they be the gentrification and appropriation of the East End past, or the non-critical nostalgia of Dover’s recollection, fail to deliver any

tangible future, a notion that is prevalent in the novel's commentary on the relationship between contemporary culture and the 1960s.

Remembering the sixties and forgetting the future

While the recollection of the east-end communities is an important element of the essentially flawed memory processes that Moorcock critiques in his novel, Dover's recollection of the counterculture of the 1960s is perhaps the dominant feature of the narrative. London was of course the centre of the countercultural pseudo-revolution of the 1960s with the "swinging" city emerging as the centre of a "new consciousness" that was to reject decisively the stagnant conservatism of the 1950s. It is essential to outline initially the ways in which the counterculture of the 1960s, in particular its image of London, helped to establish the climate in which postmodernism could flourish. Lipovetsky asserts that the 1960s represent "the beginning of a postmodern culture, without innovation and real audacity, which contents itself with democratising the logic of hedonism."³⁶ This democratisation of the logic of hedonism can be perceived quite clearly in both Moorcock's novel and the collective perception of the period, yet it is this unproductive hedonism that critics such as Lipovetsky suggest has led to the emergence of the postmodern. Moorcock's novel, through its critique of our perception both of the period and of postmodernism, outlines a paradigm for developing a far more critical mode of remembrance that can shatter what he perceives as the impotence of postmodernism that emerged out of the failure of the social project of the sixties.

The original counterculture revolution of the mid to late 1960s marked for Moorcock the beginning of the possibility of social reform that would reach its apotheosis in the events of May 1968, before a steady decline. Its failure was not

distinctly realised until 1979 when that counter-culture awoke to Thatcherism, and nothing would ever be quite the same again. As Jonathan Green puts it, “on 3 May the party came so abruptly to its end and the last diehard, desperate celebrants, puffing on the last roaches, downing the very dregs of long-emptied bottles, were finally turfed out into the unwelcoming dawn of a very different day.”³⁷ Moorcock also highlights 1979 as the end of the halcyon period: “1979, the year the world changed. The Tories were elected and Mrs T used the language of liberal humanism to reinstall feudalism. We were now in a world of permanent conflict”(78). Thatcher’s diagnosis in 1982 of the devastating effect that the 1960s had had was tantamount to a conservative counter-revolution: “We are reaping what was sown in the sixties ... fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old values of discipline and restraint were degenerated.”³⁸ While 1979 marked the beginning of the morning-after, it also signalled the start of a period of nostalgic recollection that affects culture to this very day. In what was to follow there would be little assessment of the myriad changes that the sixties brought. As Marwick asserts, “what happened between the late fifties and early seventies has been subject to political polemic, nostalgic mythologizing, and downright misrepresentation,”³⁹ and it is the nature of this mythologising and misrepresentation that I wish to investigate through Moorcock’s novel, to highlight how the perception of the sixties, and the modes of non-critical nostalgic reflection that produce it, can have a potentially destructive effect.

For Dennis Dover, the recollection of the 1960s is a constant reminder of what could have been, and for Moorcock it is that recollection that has denied the possibility of what could be. In what follows I wish to look at Dover’s recollection of the 1960s as reflective of the memory of an entire generation, and symbolic of the

collective cultural remembrance of the period, one that repeatedly fails to critique the flaws of the period, that posits it as being the one great opportunity for change, and in doing so jeopardises the possibility of change in the future. Dover's narrative, as a form of personalised memory, centres around the celebration and commemoration of certain "spots of time." Dover, recollecting one of many hedonistic moments, says, "check it out. 10 October 1972. I was almost twenty. Maybe you weren't even here then. A golden age" (69). The nostalgia with which Dover, narrating in the present, recalls the period has been a dominant response even as early as 1972, when Angela Carter wrote:

In the sixties, London, for the first time, became aware of itself as—in the jargon of those dear, dead days—a centre of consciousness, a city with a certain characteristic style expressive of a radically changing mode of life. For a brief season, it seemed the old barriers of class and privilege were, if not actually down, at least crumbling.⁴⁰

London, as the centre of both cultural rebellion and the political consciousness of The Dialectics of Liberation Conference was the centre of what many people believed would be a new form of social organisation. It is this insistence on the potential of the sixties, and the culture's subsequent failure, that Moorcock seeks to explode by highlighting the regressive function of an uncritical mode of historical engagement.

Moorcock presents Dover as failing to produce a critical interrogation of the past, his narrative voice littered with anachronistic 1960s vernacular, that combined with an extreme irony and cynicism symbolises the failure of 1960s utopianism along with a historical eclecticism. This tone is used by Moorcock to highlight the imperative of a new form of political, social and cultural engagement with the past that can look forward to a tangible form of regeneration. Dover's recollection of the 1960s is simultaneously an attempt to resurrect the period, and this is symbolised by Moorcock giving him period vernacular. The recollection is not an attempt to engage

critically with that past, but nostalgically returns to the past. Reflecting on the first meeting with his wife, Dover ebulliently asserts: “Any time I looked forward I stared directly into her huge blue eyes. And got a Godzilla power jolt. She was a Russian Earth Goddess. Epic Hero v. the Beast! I turned into a spastic maniac. I was helpless. In the grip of a rock-and-roll orgasm, a holistic fit, I was flung back and forward like a Jack Russell’s rat” (67). This tone of anachronism, reflective of contemporary nostalgia, imbues the novel, positing Dover as a pathetic relic of the past. Moorcock uses this tone to criticise what he perceives as the dangerous “retro” tendencies of postmodern culture. Instead of attempting to engage we now appropriate, and, as Jameson highlights, “the history of aesthetic styles replaces ‘real’ history.”⁴¹

Dover’s memory of the 1960s, composed of myriad spots of time, is reflective of the way in which many of the generation who constituted the counterculture recall the period, as well as its unintentional celebration by members of the Left’s intelligentsia, as the experiences they recall constitute their personal growth and development. On a wider cultural level the 1960s have been remembered by contemporary culture in a similar way. The opening lines of Jonathan Green’s account of the period, *All Dressed Up*, encapsulates its effect:

We live in the shadow of the Sixties. Of all the artificial constructs by which we delineate our immediate past, ‘the Sixties’ have the greatest purchase on the mass imagination. They stand, rightly or not, as the dominant myth of the modern era. That one might have been too old or too young to enjoy them, indeed that one might not have been born, is of marginal importance. Rightly or wrongly again, the great edifice casts its shadow and everything must seek its own light within it.⁴²

The need to identify with the 1960s is highlighted in *King of the City* as one of the dominant means by which the period has been immortalised. Barbican’s attempt to reunite Hawkwind, and the massive open-air concert, are his attempt to rediscover a past that was never his, the “invented tradition” of the postmodern. His slide into drug

addiction and purchase of classic guitars is representative of such a shift. As Dover's uncle Norrie argues, "They want to have lived. They're still trying to find out what feeling is ... in America, every banker is suddenly a Viet-vet. They want their words to be real ... they want our authority for their words, they want our experience" (321). The need to grasp an experience that is now a form of cultural capital is embodied for Moorcock in the guitar replacing the painting as the great artwork: "everybody of my generation ... wanted to be a rock legend ... Holy relics, full of power, full of meaning, full of life. They had real authority those expensive Gibsons and Fenders and Rickenbackers. Usually winding up hanging on the wall" (312). The need to possess symbols of an experience that was never theirs highlights the role of the simulacrum, experiences that never really existed, as a fundamental element of the way in which the period is recalled. A construction of the *zeitgeist* of the period has dominated the recollection of those who lived through it, yet never experienced it, and the ideal of that spirit is one that has come to intoxicate our understanding of it.

A black and white future: blindness and myopia in contemporary culture

Moorcock's investigation of the ways in which the political, social and cultural conditions of the present embody many worrying concerns reaches its zenith in the novel's finale. Following a horrific accident while working as a photojournalist in Bosnia, Dover loses his eyesight, and after spending months fading in and out of a coma, awakens to find himself in a utopian present in which the vision of the sixties has been realised. Following a nuclear attack by the USA on the Caymans, the world had been woken from its consumerist nightmare. With the support of Barbican Begg International Corporation, with Rosie now at the helm, the world had taken up a Socialist democracy. As Rosie asserts:

we made so many of our companies responsive rather than aggressive in their trading techniques. We take reasonable profits from quality goods and services. But the economy isn't driven by consumerism and there's less discrepancy in salaries, for instance, a greater number of people sharing similar experiences and ambitions. Money has the effect of dividing people, Den. Monetarism is a philosophy of division (418).

This utopian vision leaves Dover feeling "better than I'd felt in ten years" (406), as if the nightmare of the 1990s, and possibly the 1980s as well, had been wiped away by a return to the ideals of the 1960s. Dover's initial happiness is coupled with disbelief, thinking that this vision would be an inevitable failure, like the communist and socialist utopias that preceded it: "Everything had proven a betrayal. It had been a century of betrayals. We'd betrayed every promise we'd made to ourselves" (408). His disbelief is alleviated after his eyesight returns, yet importantly it is only partially recovered: "something flickered, then shifted into focus. Black and white. Two-dimensional. Like an old movie" (413-4).

The fact that Dover can only see this vision in black and white as a result of the accident is of course vital to Moorcock's novel. Dover, as a product of the cultural manifestations of the epistemological and political tenets of postmodernism, has only ever been able to view the present in relation to a retrogressive and non-critical notion of the past: not as an attempt to grasp the complexities of historical progress and development, but in an attempt to return to that past. The sixties were, for Dover, the period in which the potential of social revolution had been glimpsed, and it was the remembrance of that potential that dominates his narrative, along with contemporary culture more broadly. The notion that this future can only be glimpsed in black and white is striking in relationship to the hyper-visual nature of the present, and the vivid colour which movies such as *Velvet Goldmine* use to depict the past. For the city of London the pain and suffering caused by Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite

redevelopment begins to be reversed: “Brookgate’s a lot better. It’ll never really be home, but it doesn’t look at all bad, these days. Not in black and white... the rest of London has a tangled, organic feel again, as if the roots have restored themselves. I’ll swear some buildings are beginning to regenerate” (419). The physical city is being returned; the future is what contemporary culture has made it, a distorted vision of the past.

In order to highlight the importance of vision in the novel it is important to look briefly at concepts of perspicacity and vision in contemporary culture and theory. The notion of visuality in postmodern thought has been addressed by Martin Jay in his study of French twentieth-century thought, entitled *Downcast Eyes*. The popular image of visuality in the postmodern is one of the hyper-visual. This passage from cultural critic Iain Chambers highlights the nature of the visual in the contemporary metropolis: “it is no longer the actual city but an image of it that has taken over ... the media and the images of the metropolis they offer, provide us with a city that is immaterial and transparent: a cinematic city.”⁴³ Jay, however, presents an alternative idea of blindness in postmodern thought and perspective, primarily through an analysis of the development of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s thought in relation to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. He suggests that the foreclosure of the figure, and hence anti-ocular nature of Lyotard’s thought, counteracted the hyper-visual nature of a writer such as Baudrillard. For Jay, Lyotard’s anti-ocular turn was intrinsically related to his rejection of the grand narratives of authority that have dominated modernity. Perspicacity, for Lyotard, would inevitably lead to the reinstatement of single perspectives, and universal truths. For Jay, what both Lyotard and Baudrillard were attempting was a denial of the traditional nature of the visual since the enlightenment: “In both cases, what was lost was any hope for clarity of meaning and

transparency of understanding. In both, the modernist faith that visuality and rationality can be reconciled was decisively rejected.”⁴⁴ This fracturing of the relationship between visuality and rationality can be glimpsed in Moorcock’s notion of a black and white future. In Moorcock’s vision the inability to view the present as progressive is manifest in visuality. Here visuality, as in Lyotard, is a manifestation of the epistemological: our insistence upon a non-critical view of the past has denied us any plausible future. The myopic mode of culture in which the universal is unable to be seen with any clarity constitutes the failure of the present.

The fundamental failure of contemporary culture that Moorcock details throughout the course of *King of the City* suggests the direction that an alternative model of urban subjectivity can take. For contemporary London fiction, the nature of writing must be an attempt to employ practicable social, political and cultural criticism. That criticism has the potential to lead to forms of praxis, to an alteration in the present conditions of the city. As Moorcock suggests throughout *King of the City*, along with his other London-based fiction, including *Mother London*, what is required is the implementation of critique into our vision of the metropolis, a critical perspicacity that can create the conditions in which we may be able to arrive at a future beyond the retrogression of nostalgia.

¹ I have written at length on “London Bone” as a critique of the heritage industry. See “Reading London Stone: The Paradox of Material History in Representations of Contemporary London” (*Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* 2.1, 2004 www.literarylondon.org)

² Iain Sinclair, “Crowning Glory: Michael Moorcock’s London” (*Guardian Unlimited Books*: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/lrb/articles/0,6109,401938,00.html>, site accessed, 25/03/2003. First published in *The London Review of Books*, 25/11/2000).

³ This, and all following parenthetical quotations, from Michael Moorcock, *King of the City* (London: Scribner, 2000).

⁴ Iain Sinclair, “Crowning Glory: Michael Moorcock’s London.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), 76.

- ⁷ Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987), 10.
- ⁸ Derek Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1987).
- ⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 189.
- ¹⁰ For a succinct account of the use of Victorian imagery of progress, in particular as a foil to national insecurities and xenophobia, see James Buzzard, "'Then on the Shore of the Wide World: The Victorian Nation and its Others'" in Herbert Tucker, ed., *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 438-453.
- ¹¹ Bill Schwarz, "Where horses shit a hundred sparrows feed: Docklands and East London during the Thatcher years" in John Corner and Sylvia Harvey, eds., *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 76.
- ¹² Fishman, quoted in John Eade, *Placing London: From Imperial Capital to Global City* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 124.
- ¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1993), 42-7.
- ¹⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 34.
- ¹⁵ Kenneth Powell, *New London Architecture* (London: Merrel, 2001), 157.
- ¹⁶ For an extended discussion of the roles such communities play in contemporary American society see "Divided we fall: gated and walled communities in the United States" in Nan Ellin, ed., *Architecture of Fear* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 85-99.
- ¹⁷ Michael Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (London: Blackwell, 2000), 144.
- ¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.
- ¹⁹ Ellin, "Divided we fall: gated and walled communities in the United States" in *Architecture of Fear*, 91.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Eve Blake, "Diary" (*London Review of Books* 25.9, 2003), 38-9.
- ²¹ See Sheriff Hatata, "Dollarization, Fragmentation, and God" in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *The Cultures of Globalisation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
- ²² Fran Tonkiss, "Inner city living" in Jennifer Barrett and Caroline Butler-Bowdon, eds., *Debating the City: An Anthology* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust, 2001), 6.
- ²³ For an exploration of this change in frontiers see Schwarz, "Where horses shit a hundred sparrows feed," 77-92.
- ²⁴ Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and its People* (London: Penguin, 2001), 66.
- ²⁵ For an account of the demise of Whitechapel's Jewish community see Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair, *Rodinsky's Room* (London: Granta, 1997).
- ²⁶ John Eade, "Reconstructing Places: Changing Images of Locality in Docklands and Spitalfields" in *Living The Global City: Globalization as a Local Process* (London: Routledge, 1997), 129.
- ²⁷ Eade, "Reconstructing Places," 144.
- ²⁸ White, *London in the Twentieth Century*, 166.
- ²⁹ Eade, "Reconstructing Places," 134.
- ³⁰ See Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 145-56.
- ³¹ Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia" (*Public Culture* 12 (I), 2000), 21.
- ³² Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, vol. 1, *Conflicts and Divisions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 6.
- ³³ While the quotation was originally taken from Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*, its utilisation by Marshall Berman as the title and central image for his study of modernity has widely circulated it in recent years, see Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*.
- ³⁴ The destruction of the Corinthians Club that occurs later in the novel is again symbolic, and is indicative of the passage from organic to artificial forms of memory that Nora considers fundamental to contemporary memory processes. The Corinthians is not destroyed in any literal sense, yet the community for which it functioned as a citadel has been destroyed, and any function as a vestige of community and communal memory lost. It has not been demolished, but vulgarly reappropriated as a *lieu de mémoire* in which the need to preserve the past has been married with the pursuit of capital: "Barbi's done up The Corinthians Boys and now it's got a restaurant called the Aboretum and even more gigantic copper buckets of those big Australian ferns. A stage for entertainments and a sporting motif throughout, in green and brass, with some nice pictures of former prizefighters and a few long-

lived mastiffs, with toilets marked DOGS and BITCHES and spittoons to dump your fag-ends in” (287). The appropriation of the original sporting imagery of the club into its redevelopment is symptomatic of an appropriation of East End heritage as the cosmopolitan shift in recent gentrification valorises working-class history. This appropriation can be seen in the use of previous industrial sites for warehouse residential conversions. As Ellin asserts of such projects, “while postmodern urbanism has largely chosen to overlook changes set in motion by the factory system, it has at the same time ascribed new meanings to the industrial era by displacing its artefacts from their original contexts” (Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism*, 141). This displacement of original artefacts through reconstruction is encapsulated within the Corinthians redevelopment through the symbol of the shant pot: “the Corinthians was the only place you could still get those quart shants that used to be all over London” (89). As a symbol of the old world that was disappearing the quart shant glasses embody the Corinthians’ function as repository of a community memory that was fast dissolving. In the redeveloped Corinthians, much to Dover’s chagrin, the shants are “grouted in rows behind us, part of the interior decoration” (288). The true symbols of the community that had made the Corinthians such an attractive sight to Barbican in the first place have been added to the gaudy pictures and theme restaurants, losing any significance they once had.

³⁵ Eade, “Reconstructing Places,” 144.

³⁶ Gilles Lipovetsky, as quoted in Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 166.

³⁷ Jonathan Green, *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture* (London: Pimlico, 1999), xii-xiii.

³⁸ Margaret Thatcher, as quoted in Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c. 1958-1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

³⁹ Marwick, *The Sixties*, 3.

⁴⁰ Angela Carter, “Fin de Siecle” in *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), 154.

⁴¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 20.

⁴² Green, *All Dressed Up*, ix.

⁴³ Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), 54.

⁴⁴ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Degeneration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 585.