

Stirbitch - An Imaginary: On Cultural Memory and the Vanished Polis



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'Know your own small patch,' writes Iain Sinclair in *London Orbital* (2002) 'and the rest of the world becomes readable.' But readability is only possible when localised, empirical knowledge of a landscape is underscored by a shared cultural memory or, as the Sufi scholar Henri Corbin suggests, is rendered 'imaginal' by a set of established mythopoeic resources.

One such terrain that remains unread in such terms is Stourbridge Common, situated at the Eastern boundary of Cambridge on pasture between Newmarket Road and the River Granta. For more than 700 years this hidden and marginal space hosted a fair - known originally as Steresbregge, from a cattle crossing over Coldham's Brook, and latterly Sturbridge or Stirbitch – that was awarded a Royal Charter in 1199.

Originally founded to support the inhabitants of the local Leper Hospital, the Fair rapidly outgrew its host to become a pressure event of Northern European significance and an epicentre for many forms of cultural and biological transaction (hops brought to the Fair from Kent in 1624 today grow feral on the Common). The bulk of the internal trade of Britain flowed to this site; currents of people and information accompanied the goods. Stirbitch was an entrepôt to Europe via the Wash, the mid-Anglian pivot of the four quarters, and a radiating node of the medieval and early-modern mental map. ‘Stourbridge Fair, is not only the greatest in the whole nation, but in the world,’ declared Daniel Defoe in *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724), recognising, even at its nascent ebb, ‘a well-fortified city [with] the least disorder and confusion . . . that can be seen anywhere with so great a concourse of people.’

The Fair was the inspiration for John Bunyan’s ‘Vanity Fair’ in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (“all that is there sold, or that comes thither is vanity . . . This fair is no new erected business; but a thing of ancient standing”) and the source for Newton’s optical instruments and for Byron’s bear. Ned Ward of Grub Street (‘The London Spy’) supplies a more profane commentary in *A Step to Stirbitch Fair* (1700) which anticipates the stance of Baudelaire’s *flaneur* and is earthed in the ‘vice, merchandize, and amusements [that] draw the Cambridge youth, London traders, Lynn whores and abundance of ubiquitous strollers, all [of whom contribute] something to either the pleasure or profit of one another.’

In addition to mirroring the town’s binary tensions with Corporation and University proclaiming separate opening ceremonies, the Fair’s historical development suggests an analogue of the movement from an economy of subsistence to that of surplus and, by the nineteenth century, the formalised business of pleasure. The stress on trade is subsumed by that of spectacle in Henry Gunning’s 1854 account, which records freak shows parading dwarves, giants, faeries, animal menageries, fortune-telling pigs, dogs solving arithmetical problems, waxworks (including a life-sized nude woman), rope dancers, puppet shows, tumbling and slack-wire performances and

astronomical clocks, all of which were subject to fines and attempts at prohibition by the University.

Today the site yields neither presence nor knowledge of this temporary polis, other than in the Norman husk of the Leper Chapel of St Mary Magdalene in Barnwell and a small annual commemoration by Cambridge Past, Present and Future. Patchily documented in local newspapers beyond reports of prosecutions for mis-selling or inexplicable violence, and all but unrepresented visually--as is often the case with rural rituals--the Fair comprises an acute instance of culture without archive. The space yields no apophenia; no cumulative signs of sediment or ruin that might allow the mind to locate itself against a referential field; and no historiographic privilege of word or artefact for interpreting urban subjectivity.

The signifying potential of this liminal zone is therefore frustrated with little to grip beyond survivals of the Fair's ephemeral avenues in the names of local streets (Garlic, Oyster and Mercers Row). This is consistent with an event which annually performed its own erasure. "In less than a week," notes Defoe, 'there is scarce any sign left that there has been such a thing there, except by the heaps of dung and straw and other rubbish which is left behind, trod into the earth, and which is good as a summer's fallow for dunging the land.' The decline of the Fair also marked the permanent end of community experience afforded by the 'grotesque body' of carnival which, to Mikhail Bakhtin, signals a zone of declassification: a theatre for shifted shapes, confounded categories and counterfeited roles, where gaps in identity proliferate away from sanctioned urban rhythms of labour and leisure.

Stirbitch could not be further from the staged 'heritage' sets of cities that encode memory within a space as a means of legitimising the identities imposed upon individuals and groups. Poised between orders both official and countercultural, the question of vanishing necessarily informs any attempt to represent the deletion of a seven-century continuity of experience, a practice ironically consistent with the medieval refusal to memorialise the burial sites of lepers. We are left with superimpositions within material space of layers of nothing: of an absence of presence,

or presence of absence.

The site thus presents itself as a mnemonic to reflect more widely upon the relationship between habitat, performance and cultural memory. As the subject itself expressly concerns performance—an act taking place inside the constraints of temporal and temporary space—any ensuing encounter demands a complementary methodology. To perform the Fair is an act of haunting, where the reinscription of the past upon the terrain of the present goes beyond representation into enactment, and beyond mirroring into witnessing; where signs spectrally emerge and instantly dissolve. Totalising description is impossible—and perhaps undesirable. To remember is to perform and to make. A palimpsest must follow: a succession of contingent and fragmentary glimpses; a freed association of reflective and interpretative field notes. Any claim to historical authenticity is disavowed. We are left instead with a performance record that is foreign to the category of completion.

This principle underscores my 68-minute film, *Stirbitch: An Imaginary* (2019), which confronts the spatial performance of social life and the affective ties between people and the physical contours of the land. To conjure the great Fair is to incite the experience of a fully participatory habitat that throws into relief a consumerist culture of passive spectatorism, where the encoding of labour and ecological damage in production is beyond view or detection. As such perceptions are woven into our topographies and framed by the cultural values into which we are born, *Stirbitch* affords a portal for imagining alternative forms of sociability and encounter. For the continuities and ruptures inscribed within a restless landscape create a world that its inhabitants know and are shaped by--and in the textures of which they dwell.
