



---

Article: 'Accidental Archaeology': The Resurrected Texts of Iain Sinclair and Derek Jarman

Author[s]: Jess Chandler

Source: *MoveableType*, Vol. 8, 'Dissidence' (2016)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.069

---

*MoveableType* is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

© 2016 Jess Chandler. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



---

 **UCLPRESS**

‘Accidental Archaeology’:  
the resurrected texts of Iain Sinclair  
and Derek Jarman

By Jess Chandler

*RED EYE* is accidental archaeology (it shouldn't be here in this form,  
a perky ghost sleepwalking through streets first witnessed many years ago,  
tired veins shot with yellow and red inks).  
– Iain Sinclair, 'A NOTE ON THE WHY & WHEN OF IT',  
*RED EYE* (Test Centre, 2013) –

The meanings of texts evolve over time, partly determined by the form in which they exist. Publishers, as curators, are responsible for overseeing the process of a text's transformation into something permanent. First edition texts are free from history, while rediscovered or reissued texts must contend with the mythology of their past.

Test Centre, an independent publishing house and record label, was established by Will Shutes and myself in 2011. We are interested in bringing lost forms back to life, and believe in the importance of the physical form of a book and its influence on interpretations of its content. Our catalogue to date is both archival and contemporary; we have published old and new material, spoken word vinyl LPs, magazines and books, by a mixture of unknown and well-established writers.

Two publications in our catalogue exist simultaneously in two periods of time, and are almost contemporaneous in both: Derek Jarman's *A Finger in the Fishes Mouth* (1972/2014) and Iain Sinclair's *RED EYE* (1973/2013). Jarman's text unexpectedly found its way to us, while Sinclair's was searched for over a number of years before finally being excavated and handed to us. *A Finger in the Fishes Mouth* was first published by the small, Dorset-based Bettiscombe Press. Only a few copies of this edition are still in existence, the rest thought to have been destroyed by Jarman, who was embarrassed by his youthful attempts at poetry. The only publicly accessible copy in the UK, available at the British Library, feels as though it will disintegrate in your hands, delicate and fragile, its cover flaking and peeling, its binding unstuck, its pages drained of colour and stained with age. *RED EYE*, on the other hand, had only a partial existence in the past – if book form is what constitutes formal existence for a work of literature. The typescript of *RED EYE* existed somewhere, and we knew about it from references in Sinclair's other books, but it was only known in fragments, part of the Sinclair mythology: another semi-fictional character.

We published the two books back-to-back: *RED EYE* in October 2013, after many months of scrupulous work and discussion, and *A Finger in the Fishes Mouth* in January 2014, designed and printed in a matter of weeks. The processes involved in bringing them back to life raised interesting questions: about the value of reissuing lost texts (were they lost because they lacked value?); the conflict between staying true to the original form and possibilities of that time, and resisting the impulse to be merely archival; the responsibilities to the authors and their relationship with their younger selves and, in the case of Jarman, the absence of posthumous consent.

The texts could not be more different stylistically yet there are strange similarities between them, and surprising overlaps between the writers' lives and artistic approaches. Both texts are cinematic projects, the early works of two aspiring filmmakers experimenting with ways of combining and juxtaposing image and text. Jarman wrote *A Finger in the Fishes Mouth* during his formative years as a filmmaker, and the visual quality of the book – each poem accompanied by a postcard image on the facing page – is very revealing about the development of his cinematic methods. The poems are presented like works in an artist's catalogue, and the book forms an interesting investigation into how to construct the interplay between text and image. *RED EYE* developed from a similar interest in experimenting with writing that reflects and builds upon filmic techniques. Sinclair's first years in London were spent at film school in Brixton and *RED EYE* is the most cinematic of all of his books. It was to mark a transition in his career, after which filmmaking would exist primarily as a sensibility in his work rather than an ongoing practice.

*RED EYE* was written in 1973 and planned for publication by Sinclair's own Albion Village Press in 1974. In his note in the 2013 text, Sinclair observed that the typescript was 'an extension of the compulsive 8mm diary-filming that informed communal life in Hackney after 1969'. A collection of titled sequences, *RED EYE* imitates this compulsive form, capturing everyday life with all its surreal qualities. It was 'an attempt to record the particulars of domestic life ... by testing the limits of the tight circle of locality'. As a prologue to the more mythical structures of the books which would follow, local, everyday life provided the material for Sinclair's early poetic experimentation.

The story of *RED EYE*, its composition, failed original publication and resurrection 40 years later, reveals a lot about Sinclair's methods as a writer, and about the responsibility and influence of the publishing process in defining the legacy of a text. Before its eventual publication in 2013, *RED EYE* existed in different versions, pushed aside yet in a constant state of transition. It eluded definition and finality; the form it needed to take was not yet clear, and not yet achievable. At the time of initial composition, small presses were flourishing and numerous journals and magazines made possible, indeed encouraged, the publication of works-in-progress. Segments from what became *RED EYE*

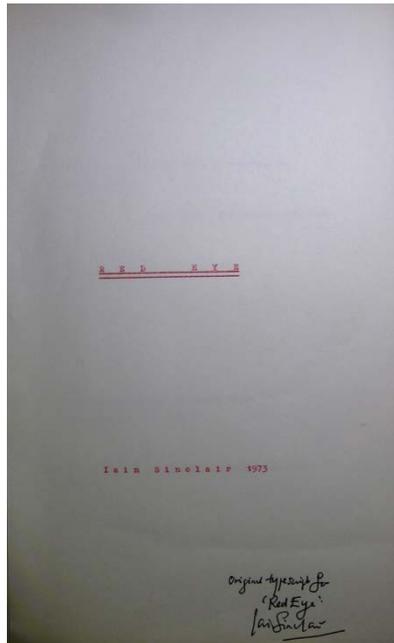
appeared in various places, including the magazine *Turpin* and Tim Longville and John Riley's *Grosseteste Review*. To understand *RED EYE*'s previous existence, 'you would have to understand the world of that time', Sinclair told me; 'there were lots of magazines ... material was being sent out fairly raw, and whether they would have a secondary life and become books was not clear. They were just works-in-progress; overlapping works-in-progress all the time'. *RED EYE* came very close to having a secondary life, but 'it never resolved, it never came to fruition'.

One reason a book never materialised was purely practical; financial constraints limited the possibilities, and Sinclair felt he would not be able to do it justice. He wanted it to have colour images, to represent its inseparability from the 8mm diary films. He envisaged silkscreens – an artist's book more than a poetry book – and just couldn't afford to materialise his vision. At the same time, J.H. Prynne, who Sinclair was in close correspondence with, said that he had issues with the text. Gradually these obstacles slowed the momentum, and 'by that stage the materials of *Lud Heat* [Sinclair's next book, published in 1975] had emerged which very much formed a book that was fresher and hotter in my mind', he explains.

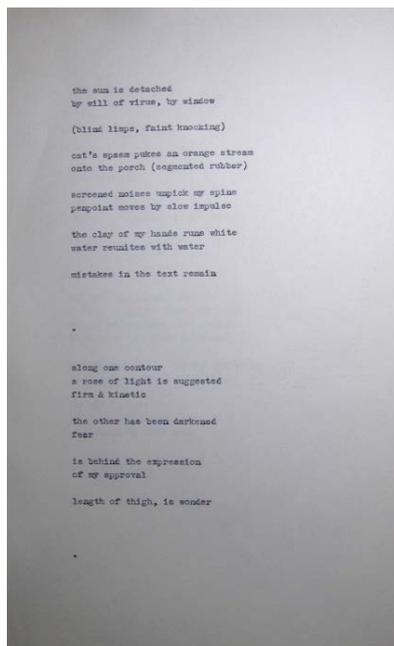
So *RED EYE* vanished into boxes, and over time its existence faded from memory. '*RED EYE* never was there in the past', Sinclair says. 'It was really like a strange ghost, because although it existed in my mind, and was moving towards the point of becoming real, it didn't become real. So it floated away in the amniotic fluids until, miraculously, this other grouping occurred, all these years later' and it finally emerged 'as a new book of old ghostly material'. In his note at the end of the 2013 book, he acknowledges the accidental circumstances of its eventual publication in book form, 'entirely due to the energies of Test Centre who have returned Hackney to a state of readiness and experimental action, both ways in time'. This experimental interaction between past and present texts and formats is now a continuing practice for us, fortuitously initiated by the process behind *RED EYE*'s publication.

What is perhaps most significant about the story of *RED EYE* for anyone interested in Sinclair's work is what it reveals about his methods of composition: the overlap of different texts, the blurring of distinctions between them, and the ostensible randomness of their eventual grouping into published works. Sinclair had written and self-published a few poetry books when he wrote *RED EYE* and had begun work on *Lud Heat* and *Suicide Bridge* (1979), his two great Blakean London texts. *RED EYE* is revealed now as the transitional project which brought a more visionary sensibility to the earlier domestic works, and sections of *RED EYE* appeared in magazines with titles that later became part of *Suicide Bridge*. Sinclair's books emerge from fragments which may not instantly cohere but are later assembled and connected as the output of a particular time and its preoccupations.

The rediscovery of the manuscript of *RED EYE* was partly thanks to the emergence of Jeff Johnson, now Sinclair's bibliographer, whose research led Sinclair to search through every closed box for hidden treasures. One day, almost by accident, he came across *RED EYE*, a 'long thin typescript, comfortably lost among the detritus of the period'. The lost, mythologised text



The covers of the original *RED EYE* typescript and the 2013 book.



sun detached  
by will of virus, by window

*blind limbs, faint knocking*

cat's spasm pukes an orange stream  
on to the porch (segmented rubber)

screened noises unpick my spine  
penpoint moves by slow impulse

clay of my hands runs white  
water reunites with water

*mistakes in the text inviolate*

.

along one contour  
a rose of light is suggested  
radiant & kinetic

the other has been occulted  
*fear*

is behind the expression  
of approval

length of thigh / is wonder

.

8

The first pages of the 1973 *RED EYE* typescript and the 2013 book.

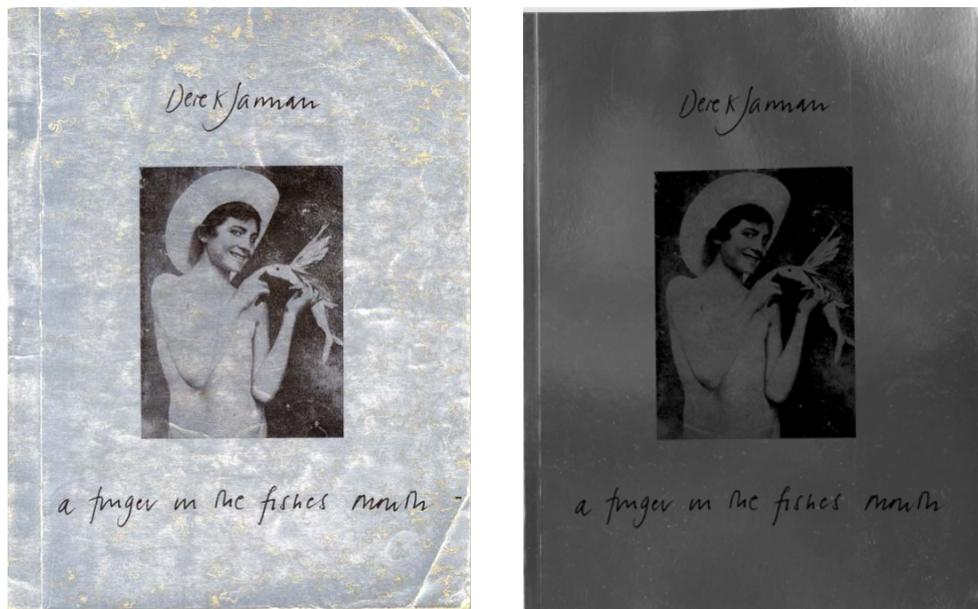
was suddenly real again. I asked Sinclair what the process of editing an old text had been like, and whether he'd had to resist an urge to rewrite and improve: 'I think the process is to respect the mind-set of the period ... rather than saying "well what would I now do"... I was trying to do the original book but to slightly refine it and sharpen it in relation to now', he said. This is the approach we tried to mirror and what *RED EYE*, hopefully, materialises.

During our conversation about *RED EYE*, Sinclair and I discussed Jarman's book, partly as a point of comparison but also due to his connection with Jarman and my interest in their London encounters. In Sinclair's bookdealing days Jarman was a regular customer, often visiting his stall in Camden Passage, Islington. Visiting markets was part of Jarman's London routine and he collected antiques, old bits of junk, books and postcards, some of which found their way into *A Finger in the Fishes Mouth*. When I asked about the similar processes involved in the resurrection of the texts, Sinclair highlighted the crucial difference: '[Jarman's] book was published but equally disappeared. So you've reinvented a published book, given it another life', but with *RED EYE* we were 'inventing an unpublished book ... and I was forced to confront that it does exist, which was quite a difficult thing. In my mind, its status was that it didn't exist'.

The republication of Derek Jarman's book was a more intentional than accidental process, timed to coincide with the anniversary of his death, and with the year-long programme of events planned for 'Jarman2014'. Less than two weeks after the publication of *RED EYE* we were approached by the writer and film curator Gareth Evans, who asked if we would be interested in publishing a facsimile edition of *A Finger in the Fishes Mouth*. We knew nothing about the text – few people did – and were handed a typescript of the poems, with no sense of the striking visual quality of the original book. Our curiosity triggered, the typescript was followed by a Dropbox link to a folder full of jpeg scans of a faded original copy belonging to Keith Collins, Jarman's partner during the final years of his life. The purely digital nature of these first encounters with the book only served to convince us of the value of its reproduction. It was these scans which would be edited to form the facsimile edition, put together entirely from photoshopped images accurately assembled after a few research trips to the British Library. It was a strange process of destruction and reproduction, old forms processed via new technologies in order to be reconstructed in the same old, but materially improved, form.

Jarman's book cannot be understood without a sense of its striking format; the cover is printed on shiny, silver mirror paper, with a Wilhelm von Gloeden photograph of a boy holding a fish with his finger in its mouth in the centre. Above the image Jarman has written his name, and below it the book's title, while on the back cover, also in his handwriting, is a phrase from one of the poems that he would reuse later in different contexts: 'thru the billboard promised land'. Inside are 32 poems, indexed at the back; each has its own

numbered title page which when turned over reveals a bright green postcard image with the poem on the facing page. The book is full of blank spaces, blocks of text treated and positioned like images, an exhibition catalogue of visual frames. The poems show Jarman's immersion in a wide range of historical, geographical, cultural and literary references, from Rembrandt to Rothko, Blake to Coleridge and Cocteau. The arrangement of poems is random, breaking out of their own apparent sequence to see what juxtapositions emerge. It is a playful, youthful book, experimental but unpretentious – a scrapbook of imagery and ideas.



The covers of the 1972 and 2014 editions of *A Finger in the Fishes Mouth*

While *RED EYE* refused to remain forgotten, *A Finger in the Fishes Mouth* seemed intended to decompose and disappear, as though to protect the reader, and perhaps Jarman, from the passing of time, as the disintegrating mirror reflects back an increasingly obscured image of whoever looks at it. It is a form appropriate to its adolescent content, a form that would rather disappear than allow the effects of age to be visible. In reissuing the book, were we interfering with its natural lifespan or, by replicating its original format, bringing it authentically back to life and allowing a new generation of readers to experience it and watch it age alongside them? Of course we don't know how this book will age, its legacy or its physical condition. The process of replication was also one of transformation: a new time, new readers, new materials, but the same idea.

*Jess Chandler, December 2014*

### A note on Test Centre

Test Centre is run by Jess Chandler and Will Shutes, both BA and MA graduates of the UCL English Department. Their publications include: *Stone Tape Shuffle* (LP); ‘Austerlitz and After: Tracking Sebald’, *RED EYE* and *Westering* by Iain Sinclair; *Museum of Loneliness* (LP) and *GOOGLEmeGOD* by Chris Petit; *Proletarian Post-Modernism* (LP) and *The 9 Lives of Ray The Cat Jones* by Stewart Home; Derek Jarman’s *A Finger in the Fishes Mouth*; the poetry anthology *I Love Roses When They’re Past Their Best; Within Habit* by Oli Hazzard; *Pedigree Mongrel* (LP) by Jonathan Meades; *To End It All* by Paul Buck; *Dark Islands* by Tom Chivers; *{Enthusiasm}* by SJ Fowler, *Pangs!* by Robert Herbert McClean, *Serious Justice* by Jen Calleja, *Republic Of Dogs/Republic of Birds* by Stephen Watts; *microaggressions* by American poet Erik Stinson, and 6 editions of its fiction and poetry magazine. In 2015 they were nominated as ‘Most Innovative Publisher’ at the Saboteur Awards. Forthcoming in 2016/17 is an anthology of experimental translations edited by Sophie Collins, a multimedia publication with Holly Pester, an LP with Tom McCarthy and books by Sam Riviere and Rachael Allen.