

TERMINALIA FESTIVAL: A REVIEW ON CALVINO'S WALK

by Tere Chad

Walking in London is never straightforward. In a city with more than 2000 years of history, streets constantly overlap themselves with tons of bricks and stones which carry stories and memories from one generation to another. As bricks fall apart from wonky walls which seemed to be glued, sticky dust, mould, pigeons' dropping and rubbish, modern skyscrapers contrast the way. Corners are never predictable and every time you feel you have seen it all, the unexpected happens just to conquer your sight. It is a city where you feel you are in a constant discovery, not a quest for anything specific, but the mere pleasure of experiencing a turmoil of the hybridisation of centuries of inconsistent cultural expressions that may come together as a whole, probably driven by an unportrayable common force. A motor or a force, more likely defined by the countless diverse inhabitants who gather on its land for a societal exchange.

When organising 'Calvino's Walk' for the later Terminalia Festival on the Tuesday 20th of February (2024), even though I counted on with a prepared itinerary, the outcome felt as if nothing was ever possibly planned. We started on the doorsteps of Bermondsey Project Space, near 6 noon. A group of around 10 people gathered, between curious members of the audience and exhibiting artists of 'Transparent As A Dragonfly' ArtCan and Arte Borgo exhibition. We headed south through Bermondsey Street and then turned to the left in Saint Mary Magdalene Churchyard. As someone who grew up in South America with a strong Catholic influence, it always surprises me how open and accessible graveyards are in the Anglo-Saxon world.

As I guided the walk, I invited the group for a pause in different angles that called up our attention. As we stopped, I read fragments of 'Transparent As A Dragonfly's' catalogue, which included quotes from Invisible Cities book by Italo Calvino (1923 - 1985) Italian writer. I would read it both on Italian and the English translation, as each of the guests decided to respond to the moment in different ways. Hedy Parry-Davies brought some paper and crayon to document different textures of the sites, Elly Platt was embroidering, and the rest would listen, comment upon the fragment and views or take pictures. What amused us the most was that the quotes seemed to match and describe each angle we were standing on. We couldn't figure out whether Calvino's abstract writing responds to any site and any imaginable city, or if it was just a coincidence and we were following the right path to continue the walk...

After crossing Saint Mary Magdalene Churchyard, we began to head north through Tower Bridge Road. There is always something special of nights lighting in large cities, because the more you merge into it, the more your dilated pupils commence seeing things you have not noticed before. Terminalia Festival is being hosted as a Festival of Psychogeography, referencing the ancient Roman Terminalia Festival. Terminalia, used to be held on the last day of the Roman calendar, the 23rd of February honouring Terminus god, the protector of boundaries. Therefore, felt pertinent to cross London's greatest boundary the Thames river through Tower Bridge. The view over Tower Bridge, somehow summarises the relationships between boundaries of time. As you cross Tower Bridge (1894), a Neo-Gothic bridge from Victorian times, you contemplate The Shard (2013), not only characteristic by its pyramidal elegant figure but by being the tallest building in the United Kingdom. At the right you face the The Tower Hotel (1973), a typical brutalist architecture building, which was voted as the second most hated building in London (BBC poll, 2006), followed by St Katherine Docks (1828). But as you turn to your left, you face the UNESCO world heritage site, the Tower of London (1078) Medieval Castle housing the Crown Jewels, protected by London Wall's (AD 200) remains standing by since Roman times.

We then continued walking west until reaching London Bridge to cross the Thames river backwards and get the opposite view from Tower Bridge, to reach our final destination at London Bridge station. For a walk which was hosted in the middle of the winter, we were quite lucky with the weather as we did not catch any drop of rain of London's capricious forecast... But more than pointing out how lucky we were with the weather (which is always worth highlighting), what stays with me from this walk, is how the act of walking collectively with a group which makes pauses to experience different spots and views, opens up scenarios of light through the mist to unveil the unimaginable, in the same way Italo Calvino's verses take you into invisible cities that maybe live within us, but we never give them a space to enlighten our everyday routines.