

Fiona Banner aka The Vanity Press (born 1966) England

Phantom 2015

High-definition digital film
Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London

If Gustave Doré gave us one vision of London, as a dilapidated geometry of perpendicular 'future' ruins, then Fiona Banner provides us with an altogether different one. Detailed, collaged and collected, it is a contemporary London of commerce, trade, politics and encounters that projects its own jungle of activity – one described in clandestine fragments and glimpses.

A camera drone – the Phantom – relentlessly chases down a book that is hurled and buffeted along city streets by the down draft of rotation blades. Its pages flip, it settles momentarily revealing images of men in suits going about business in the columns and edifices of commerce. The wind ruffles the pages once more, they turn erratically to produce an active collage – a hectic flip-book film that becomes surreal and unstable.

The book – a product of The Vanity Press (aka Fiona Banner) – is glossy, like a High Street magazine – a *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* or *GQ*. In it Banner has reprinted Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – the controversial 1899 novella both celebrated and condemned for its commentary on the African people and the imperialism which sought to dominate and exploit them. Central to the story is Conrad's proposition that there is little difference between the evils of the city and the dark heart of the Congo, where his narrator-protagonist takes the reader to encounter 'the horror'. He begins his story on the Thames River, the flow that has carried all manner of history and travellers – 'What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of the unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.'

Banner brings Conrad's words together with images she has commissioned from Magnum photographer, Paolo Pellegrin, known for his contemporary conflict documentations about the Congo. Banner asked Pellegrin to hunt down and capture images of the city of London as if it were a danger zone. The text and images together produce a document that zooms in on the 'monstrous town' which 'marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars' as Conrad described it. Banner/Pellegrin's London is another heart of darkness – one dressed in a polite pin-striped suit, but deadly all the same in its control of trade, money and lives.

The Phantom drone, whirring above, its incessant sound akin to a battle helicopter or police surveillance apparatus, makes its business to scatter and render the city hectic and eventually ruined. The book, tumbled, flicked and battered collapses under stress – rips, tears, disassembles. It is a metaphor for the chaos of the financial heart of a city that is tenuously stitched together like a tailored suit – one whose business is still to exploit and brutalise the Other.

London is now evacuated, windswept and vacant, small shreds of its finance life flit about its emptied streets, scurrying like rats in a plague-torn place. While *Phantom* was made in 2015, its ripped, trashed glossy life, in the form of Banner's book, seems right now all too prescient.