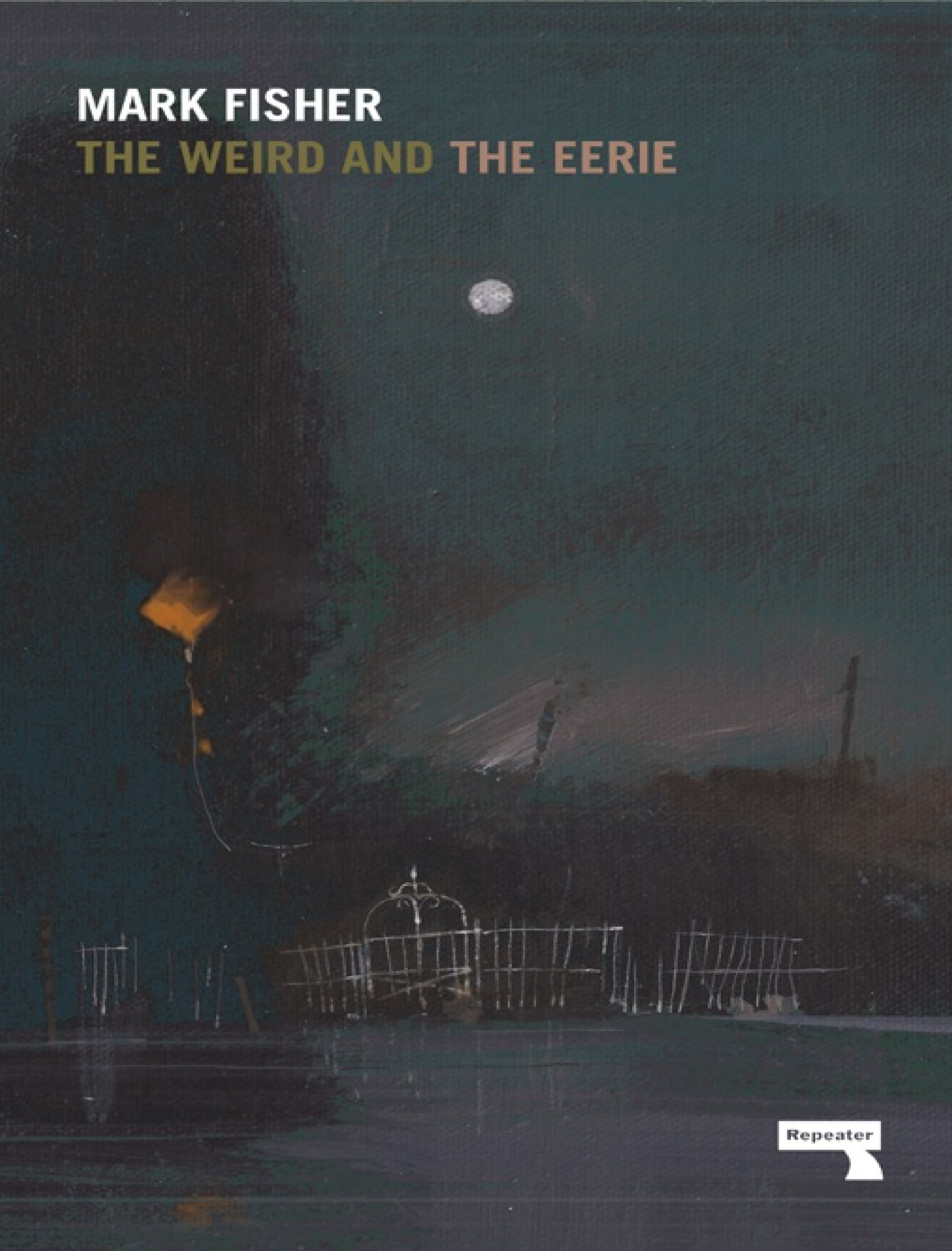
MARK FISHER
THE WEIRD AND THE EERIE



Repeater

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Repeater

To Zöe, my constant source of support, and the reason there is something here rather than nothing.

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INTRODUCTION

The Weird and the Eerie (Beyond the Unheimlich)

It is odd that it has taken me so long to really reckon with the weird and the eerie. For

although the immediate origins of this book lay in fairly recent events, I have been fascinated and haunted by examples of the weird and the eerie for as long as I can remember. Yet I had not really identified the two modes, still less specified their defining features. No doubt this is partly because the major cultural examples of the weird and the eerie are to be found at the edges of

genres such as horror and science fiction, and these genre associations have obscured what is specific to the weird and the eerie.

The weird came into focus for me around a decade ago, as the result of two symposia on the work of H.P. Lovecraft at Goldsmiths, University of London; while the eerie became the major subject of *On Vanishing Land*, the 2013 audio-essay I produced in

collaboration with Justin Barton. Appropriately, the eerie crept up on Justin and me; it had not been our original focus, but by the end of the project we found that much of the music, film and fiction that had always haunted us possessed the quality of the eerie.

What the weird and the eerie have in common is a preoccupation with the strange. The strange — not

the horrific. The allure that the weird and the eerie possess is not captured by the idea that we “enjoy what scares us”. It has, rather, to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience. This fascination usually involves a certain apprehension, perhaps even dread — but it would be wrong to say that the weird

and the eerie are necessarily terrifying. I am not here claiming that the outside is always beneficent. There are more than enough terrors to be found there; but such terrors are not all there is to the outside.

Perhaps my delay in coming round to the weird and the eerie had to do with the spell cast by Freud's concept of the *unheimlich*. As is well known, the *unheimlich*

has been inadequately translated into English as the uncanny; the word which better captures Freud's sense of the term is the "unhomely". The *unheimlich* is often equated with the weird and the eerie — Freud's own essay treats the terms as interchangeable. But the influence of Freud's great essay has meant that the *unheimlich* has crowded out the other two modes.

The essay on the *unheimlich* has been highly influential on the study of horror and science fiction — perhaps, in the end, more because of Freud's hesitations, conjectures and rejected theses than for the actual definition he provides. The examples of the *unheimlich* which Freud furnishes — doubles, mechanical entities that appear human, prostheses —

call up a certain kind of disquiet. But Freud's ultimate settling of the enigma of the *unheimlich* — his claim that it can be reduced to castration anxiety — is as disappointing as any mediocre genre detective's rote solution to a mystery. What enduringly fascinates is the cluster of concepts that circulate in Freud's essay, and the way in which they often recursively instantiate the very processes

to which they refer. *Repetition* and *doubling* — themselves an uncanny pair which double and repeat each other — seem to be at the heart of every "uncanny" phenomena which Freud identifies.

There is certainly something that the weird, the eerie and the *unheimlich* share. They are all affects, but they are also modes: modes of film and fiction, modes of

perception, ultimately, you might even say, modes of being. Even so, they are not quite genres.

Perhaps the most important difference between the *unheimlich* on the one hand and the weird and the eerie on the other is their treatment of the strange. Freud's *unheimlich* is about the strange *within* the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange — about

the way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself. All of the ambivalences of Freud's psychoanalysis are caught up in this concept. Is it about making the familiar — and the familial — strange? Or is it about returning the strange to the familiar, the familial? Here we can appreciate the double move inherent to Freudian psychoanalysis: first of all, there is estrangement

of many of the common notions about the family; but this is accompanied by a compensatory move, whereby the outside becomes legible in terms of a modernist family drama. Psychoanalysis itself is an *unheimlich* genre; it is haunted by an outside which it circles around but can never fully acknowledge or affirm. Many commentators have recognised that the essay on

the *unheimlich* itself resembles a tale, with Freud in the role of the Jamesian unreliable narrator. If Freud is an unreliable narrator, why should we accept that his own tale should be classified in terms of the category that his essay proposes? What if, instead, the whole drama of the essay consisted in Freud's attempts continually to contain the phenomena he explores within the remit of

the *unheimlich*?

The folding of the weird and the eerie into the *unheimlich* is symptomatic of a secular retreat from the outside. The wider predilection for the *unheimlich* is commensurate with a compulsion towards a certain kind of critique, which operates by always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside. The

weird and the eerie make the opposite move: they allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside. As we shall see, the weird is that *which does not belong*. The weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the "homely" (even as its negation). The form that is perhaps most appropriate to the weird is montage — the

conjoining of *two or more things which do not belong together*. Hence the predilection within surrealism for the weird, which understood the unconscious as a montage-machine, a generator of weird juxtapositions. Hence also the reason that Jacques Lacan — rising to the challenge posed by surrealism and the rest of aesthetic modernism — could move towards a *weird*

psychoanalysis, in which the death drive, dreams and the unconscious become untethered from any naturalisation or sense of homeliness.

At first glance, the eerie might seem to be closer to the *unheimlich* than to the weird. Yet, like the weird, the eerie is also fundamentally to do with the outside, and here we can understand the outside in a straightforwardly empirical

as well as a more abstract transcendental sense. A sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human. What happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance? What kind of entity was involved? What kind of thing was it that emitted such an *eerie cry*? As we can see from these

examples, the eerie is fundamentally tied up with questions of agency. What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all? These questions can be posed in a psychoanalytic register — if we are not who we think we are, what are we? — but they also apply to the forces governing capitalist society. Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless

exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity.

The metaphysical scandal of capital brings us to the broader question of the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate: the agency of minerals and landscape for authors like Nigel Kneale and Alan Garner, and the way that “we” “ourselves” are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human

forces. There is no inside except as a folding of the outside; the mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was. The shudder here is the shudder of the eerie, not of the *unheimlich*.

One extraordinary example of the displacement of the *unheimlich* by the eerie is D.M. Thomas' novel *The White Hotel*. The novel first of all seems to be about a simulated case study of a

fictional patient of Freud's, "Anna G". The poem by Anna G which begins the novel seems at first sight to be saturated with erotic hysteria, as Thomas' Freud proposes in the Case History which he writes. Freud's reading threatens to dissipate the oneiric atmosphere of Anna G's poem, and also establish to a direction of explanation: from the present to the past, from the outside

to the inside. Yet it turns out that the seeming eroticism is itself an obfuscation and a deflection from the poem's most intense referent, which is to be found not in Anna G's past, but in her future — her death at the massacre at Babi Yar in 1941. The problems of foresight and fate here bring us to the eerie in a disturbing form. Yet fate might be said to belong to the weird as well as the eerie.

The soothsaying witches in *Macbeth*, after all, are known as the Weird Sisters, and one of the archaic meanings of "weird" is "fate". The concept of fate is weird in that it implies twisted forms of time and causality that are alien to ordinary perception, but it is also eerie in that it raises questions about agency: who or what is the entity that has woven fate?

The eerie concerns the

most fundamental metaphysical questions one could pose, questions to do with existence and non-existence: *Why is there something here when there should be nothing? Why is there nothing here when there should be something?* The unseeing eyes of the dead; the bewildered eyes of an amnesiac — these provoke a sense of the eerie, just as surely as an abandoned

village or a stone circle do.

So far, we are still left with the impression that the weird and the eerie have primarily to do with what is distressing or terrifying. So let us end these preliminary remarks by pointing to examples of the weird and the eerie that produce a different set of affects. Modernist and experimental work often strikes us as weird when we first encounter it. The sense

of *wrongness* associated with the weird — the conviction that *this does not belong* — is often a sign that we are in the presence of the new. The weird here is a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete. If the encounter with the strange here is not straightforwardly pleasurable (the pleasurable would always refer to previous

forms of satisfaction), it is not simply unpleasant either: there is an enjoyment in seeing the familiar and the conventional becoming outmoded — an enjoyment which, in its mixture of pleasure and pain, has something in common with what Lacan called *jouissance*.

The eerie also entails a disengagement from our current attachments. But, with the eerie, this disengagement

does not usually have the quality of shock that is typically a feature of the weird. The serenity that is often associated with the eerie — think of the phrase *eerie calm* — has to do with detachment from the urgencies of the everyday. The perspective of the eerie can give us access to the forces which govern mundane reality but which are ordinarily obscured, just as it

can give us access to spaces beyond mundane reality altogether. It is this release from the mundane, this escape from the confines of what is ordinarily taken for reality, which goes some way to account for the peculiar appeal that the eerie possesses.

THE WEIRD

The Out of Place and the Out of Time: Lovecraft and the Weird

What is the weird? When we say something is weird, what

kind of feeling are we pointing to? I want to argue that the weird is a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of *wrongness:* a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be

valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate.

Dictionary definitions are not always much help in defining the weird. Some refer immediately to the supernatural, but it is by no means clear that supernatural entities must be weird. In many ways, a natural phenomenon such as a black hole is more weird than a

vampire. Certainly, when it comes to fiction, the very generic recognisability of creatures such as vampires and werewolves disqualifies them from provoking any sensation of weirdness. There is a pre-existing lore, a set of protocols for interpreting and placing the vampire and the werewolf. In any case, these creatures are merely empirically monstrous; their appearance recombines

elements from the natural world as we already understand it. At the same time, the very fact that they are supernatural entities means that any strangeness they possess is now attributed to a realm beyond nature. Compare this to a black hole: the bizarre ways in which it bends space and time are completely outside our common experience, and yet a black hole belongs *to* the

natural-material cosmos — a cosmos which must therefore be much stranger than our ordinary experience can comprehend.

It was this kind of intuition which inspired the weird fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. “Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmosat-large,”

Lovecraft wrote to the publisher of the magazine *Weird Tales* in 1927. “To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all.” It is this quality of “real externality” that is

crucial to the weird.

Any discussion of weird fiction must begin with Lovecraft. In stories that were published in pulp magazines, Lovecraft practically invented the weird tale, developing a formula which can be differentiated from both fantasy and horror fiction. Lovecraft's stories are obsessively fixated on the question of the outside: an outside that breaks through in

encounters with anomalous entities from the deep past, in altered states of consciousness, in bizarre twists in the structure of time. The encounter with the outside often ends in breakdown and psychosis. Lovecraft's stories frequently involve a catastrophic integration of the outside into an interior that is retrospectively revealed to be a delusive envelope, a sham.

Take “The Shadow over Innsmouth”, in which it is ultimately revealed that the lead character is himself a Deep One, an aquatic alien entity. I am It — or better, I am They.

Although he is often classified as a writer of horror, Lovecraft’s work seldom evokes a feeling of horror. When Lovecraft sets out his motives for writing in his short essay “Notes on

Writing Weird Fiction", he does not immediately mention horror. He writes instead of "vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy." The emphasis on horror, Lovecraft goes on to say, is a consequence of the stories' encounter with the unknown.

Accordingly, it is not horror but *fascination* — albeit a fascination usually

mixed with a certain trepidation — that is integral to Lovecraft's rendition of the weird. But I would say this is also integral to the concept of the weird itself — the weird cannot only repel, it must also compel our attention. So if the element of fascination were entirely absent from a story, and if the story were *merely* horrible, it would no longer be weird. Fascination is the affect shared by

Lovecraft's characters and his readers. Fear or terror are not shared in the same way; Lovecraft's characters are often terrified, but his readers seldom are.

Fascination in Lovecraft is a form of Lacanian *jouissance*: an enjoyment that entails the inextricability of pleasure and pain. Lovecraft's texts fairly froth with *jouissance*. "Frothing", "foaming" and "teeming" are

words which Lovecraft frequently uses, but they could apply equally well to the “obscene jelly” of *jouissance*. This is not to make the absurd claim that there is no negativity in Lovecraft — the loathing and abomination are hardly concealed — only that negativity does not have the last word. An excessive preoccupation with objects that are “officially” negative

always indicates the work of *jouissance* — a mode of enjoyment which does not in any sense "redeem" negativity: it sublimates it. That is to say, it transforms an ordinary object causing displeasure into a Thing which is both terrible *and* alluring, which can no longer be libidinally classified as either positive or negative. The Thing overwhelms, it cannot be contained, but it

fascinates.

It is fascination, above all else, that is the engine of fatality in Lovecraft's fictions, fascination that draws his bookish characters towards the dissolution, disintegration or degeneration that we, the readers, always foresee. Once the reader has read one or two of Lovecraft's stories, they know perfectly well what to expect in the others. In fact, it

is hard to believe that even when a reader encounters a Lovecraft story for the first time that they will be very surprised by how the tale turns out. Therefore it follows that *suspense* — as much as horror — is not a defining feature of Lovecraft's fiction.

This means that Lovecraft's work does not fit the structuralist definition of fantasy offered by Tzvetan Todorov. According to that

definition, the fantastic is constituted by a suspension between the uncanny (stories which ultimately resolve in a naturalistic way) and the marvellous (stories which resolve supernaturalistically). Although Lovecraft's stories involve what he characterised in "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" as "the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and

natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis", there is never any suggestion of the involvement of supernatural beings. Human attempts to transform the alien entities into gods are clearly regarded by Lovecraft as vain acts of anthropomorphism, perhaps noble but ultimately absurd

efforts to impose meaning and sense on to the "real externality" of a cosmos in which human concerns, perspectives and concepts have only a local reference.

In his book *Lovecraft: A Study in the Fantastic*, Maurice Lévy fitted Lovecraft into a "Fantastic tradition" which includes the Gothic novels, Poe, Hawthorne and Bierce. But Lovecraft's emphasis on the

materiality of the anomalous entities in his stories means that he is very different from the Gothic novelists and Poe. Even though what we might call ordinary naturalism — the standard, empirical world of common sense and Euclidean geometries — will be shredded by the end of each tale, it is replaced by a hypernaturalism — an expanded sense of what the material cosmos contains.

Lovecraft's materialism is one reason that I think we should distinguish his fiction — and indeed the weird in general — from fantasy and the fantastic. (It should be noted that Lovecraft himself happily equates the weird and the fantastic in "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction".) The fantastic is a rather capacious category, which can include much of science fiction and horror. It is not that this is

inappropriate for Lovecraft's work, but it does not point to what is unique in his method. Fantasy, however, denotes a more specific set of generic properties. Lord Dunsany, Lovecraft's early inspiration, and Tolkien, are exemplary fantasy writers, and the contrast with them will allow us to grasp the difference from the weird. Fantasy is set in worlds that are entirely different from ours —

Dunsany's Pegāna, or Tolkien's Middle Earth; or rather, these worlds are locationally and temporally distant from ours (too many fantasy worlds turn out to be all too similar, ontologically and politically, to ours). The weird, by contrast, is notable for the way in which it opens up an *egress* between this world and others. There are of course stories and series — such as C.S. Lewis' Narnia

books, Baum's Oz, Stephen Donaldson's Thomas Covenant trilogy — in which there is an egress between this world and another, yet there is no discernible charge of the weird. That is because the "this world" sections of these fictions serve, more or less, as prologues and epilogues to standard fantasy tales. Characters from this world go into another world, but that other world has no

impact upon this one, beyond the effect it has on the minds of the returning characters. With Lovecraft, there is an *interplay*, an exchange, a confrontation and indeed a conflict between this world and others.

This accounts for the supreme significance of Lovecraft setting so many of his stories in New England. Lovecraft's New England, Maurice Lévy writes, is a

world whose "*reality* — physical, topographical, historical — should be emphasised. It is well known that the truly fantastic exists only where the impossible can make an irruption, through time and space, into an objectively familiar locale." What I propose, then, is that in his break from the tendency to invent worlds as Dunsany had done, Lovecraft *ceased* to be a fantasy writer

and became a writer of the weird. A first characteristic of the weird, at least in Lovecraft's version of it, would be — to adapt Lévy's phrase — a fiction in which, not the impossible but the *outside* "can make an irruption, through time and space, into an objectively familiar locale". Worlds may be entirely foreign to ours, both in terms of location and even in terms of the physical

laws which govern them, without being weird. It is the irruption into *this* world of something from outside which is the marker of the weird.

Here we can see why the weird entails a certain relationship to realism. Lovecraft himself often wrote disdainfully of realism. But if Lovecraft had entirely rejected realism, he would never have emerged from the

fantasy realms of Dunsany and de la Mare. It would be closer to the mark to say that Lovecraft contained or localised realism. In the 1927 letter to the editor of *Weird Tales*, he makes this explicit:

> Only the human scenes and characters must have human qualities. *These* must be handled with unsparing *realism*, (not catch-penny *romanticism*) but when we cross the line to the

> boundless and hideous unknown — the shadow-haunted *Outside* — we must remember to leave our humanity and terrestrialism at the threshold.

Lovecraft's tales depend for their power on the *difference* between the terrestrial-empirical and the outside. That is one reason why they are so often written in the first person: if the outside gradually encroaches upon a

human subject, its alien contours can be appreciated; whereas to attempt to capture “the boundless and hideous unknown” without any reference to the human world at all is to risk banality. Lovecraft needs the human world, for much the same reason that a painter of a vast edifice might insert a standard human figure standing before it: to provide a sense of scale.

A provisional definition of the weird might therefore take its cue from the slightly odd and ambiguous phrase “out of” that Lovecraft uses in the titles of two of his stories, “The Colour Out of Space” and “The Shadow Out of Time”. On the simplest level, “out of” evidently means “from”. Yet it is not possible — especially in the case of “The Shadow Out of Time” — to avoid the second

meaning, the suggestion of something removed, cut out. The shadow is something *cut out* of time. This notion of things "cut out" of their proper place is one way in which Lovecraft has an affinity with modernist techniques of collage. Yet there is also a third meaning of "out of": the beyond. The shadow *out of* time is, in part, a shadow of that which is beyond time as we ordinarily

understand and experience it.

To possess a flavour of the beyond, to invoke the outside, Lovecraft's work cannot rely on already-existing figures or lore. It depends crucially on the production of the new. As China Miéville put it in his introduction to *At the Mountains of Madness*: "Lovecraft resides radically outside any folk tradition: this is not the modernising of the familiar vampire or werewolf

(or garuda or rusalka or any other such traditional bugbear). Lovecraft's pantheon and bestiary are absolutely sui generis." There is another, important, dimension of the newness of Lovecraft's creations however: it is disclaimed and disguised by the author. As Miéville continues: "There is […] a paradox to be found in Lovecraft's narrative. Though his concept of the monstrous

and his approach to the fantastic are utterly new, he *pretends* that it is not." When they confront the weird entities, Lovecraft's characters find parallels in mythologies and lore which he had himself invented. Lovecraft's retrospective projection of a newly minted mythos into the deep past gave rise to what Jason Colavito calls the "cult of alien gods" in writers such as

Erich von Däniken and Graham Hancock. Lovecraft's "retro-interring" of the new is also what places his weird fictions "out of" time — much as in the story "The Shadow Out of Time", in which the main character Peaslee encounters texts written in his own hand amongst architectural relics.

China Miéville argues that it was the impact of the First World War which gave rise to

Lovecraft's new: the traumatic break from the past allowed the new to emerge. But it is perhaps also useful to think of Lovecraft's work as being about trauma, in the sense that it concerns ruptures in the very fabric of experience itself. Remarks that Freud makes in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" ("as a result of certain psychoanalytic discoveries, we are today in a position to

embark on a discussion of the Kantian theorem that time and space are ‘necessary forms of thought’”) indicated that he believed that the unconscious operated beyond what Kant called the “transcendental” structures of time, space and causality which govern the perceptual-conscious system. One way of grasping the functions of the unconscious, and its break from the dominant models of

time, space and causality, was through studying the mental lives of those suffering from trauma. Trauma can therefore be thought of as a kind of transcendental shock — a suggestive phrase in relation to Lovecraft's work. The outside is not "empirically" exterior; it is transcendentally exterior, i.e. it is not just a matter of something being distant in space and time, but of something which is beyond

our ordinary experience and conception of space and time itself. Throughout his work, Freud repeatedly stressed that the unconscious knows neither negation nor time. Hence the Escheresque image in *Civilisation and its Discontents* of the unconscious as a Rome "in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development

continue to exist alongside the latest ones". Freud's weird geometries have clear parallels in Lovecraft's fictions, with their repeated invocations of non-Euclidean spaces. Witness the description of "the geometry of the dream-place" in "Call of Cthulhu": "abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours".

It is important not to

surrender Lovecraft too quickly to a notion of the unrepresentable. Lovecraft is too often taken at his word when he calls his own entities “unnameable” or “indescribable”. As China Miéville points out, typically Lovecraft no sooner calls an entity “indescribable” than he begins to describe it, in very precise technical detail. (Nor, despite his predilection for using the term “unnameable”

— mocked but also defended by Lovecraft himself in his own story “The Unnameable” — is Lovecraft shy of giving names to Things.) But this sequence has a third moment. After (1) the declaration of indescribability, and (2) the description, comes (3) the unvisualisable. For all their detail, or perhaps because of it, Lovecraft’s descriptions do not allow the reader to synthesise the logorrheic

schizophony of adjectives into a mental image, prompting Graham Harman to compare the effect of such passages with Cubism, a parallel reinforced by the invocation of “clusters of cubes and planes” in “Dreams in the Witch House”. Cubist and futurist techniques and motifs feature in a number of Lovecraft’s stories, usually as (ostensible) objects of loathing. Even if he was

hostile to it, Lovecraft recognised that modernist visual art could be repurposed as a resource for invoking the outside.

So far, my discussion of Lovecraft has concentrated on what happens *within* the stories themselves, but one of the most important weird effects Lovecraft produces happens *between* his texts. The systematisation of Lovecraft's texts into a

“mythos” might have been the work of his follower August Derleth, but the inter-relationship of the stories, the way in which they generate a consistent reality, is crucial to understanding what is singular about Lovecraft’s work. It might appear that the way that Lovecraft produces such consistency is not very different to the way in which Tolkien achieved a similar effect, but, once again, the

relationship to this world is crucial. By setting his stories in New England rather than in some inviolate, far-distant realm, Lovecraft is able to tangle the hierarchical relationship between fiction and reality.

The interpolation into the stories of simulated scholarship alongside authentic history produces ontological anomalies similar to those created in the

“postmodernist” fictions of Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon and Borges. By treating really existing phenomenon as if they had the same ontological status as his own inventions, Lovecraft de-realises the factual and real-ises the fictional. Graham Harman looks forward to a day when Lovecraft will have displaced Holderlin from his throne as philosophers’ most exalted object of literary study.

Perhaps we can also anticipate a time when the pulp modernist Lovecraft displaces the postmodernist Borges as the pre-eminent fictional explorer of ontological conundra. Lovecraft instantiates what Borges only “fabulates”; no one would ever believe that Pierre Menard’s version of *Don Quixote* exists outside Borges’ story, whereas more than a few readers have

contacted the British Library asking for a copy of the *Necronomicon*, the book of ancient lore which is frequently referred to in many of Lovecraft's stories. Lovecraft generates a "reality-effect" by only ever showing us tiny fragments of the *Necronomicon*. It is the very fragmentary quality of his references to the abominable text that induce the belief in readers that it

must be a real object. Imagine if Lovecraft had actually produced a full text of the *Necronomicon*; the book would seem far less real than it does when we only see citations. Lovecraft seemed to have understood the power of the citation, the way in which a text seems more real if it is cited than if it is encountered in the raw.

One effect of such ontological displacements is

that Lovecraft ceases to have ultimate authority over his own texts. If the texts have achieved a certain autonomy from their author, then Lovecraft's role as their ostensible creator becomes incidental. He becomes instead the inventor of entities, characters and formulae. What matters is the consistency of his fictional system — a consistency which invites collective

participation by both readers and other authors alike. As is well known, not only Derleth but also Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, Brian Lumley, Ramsey Campbell and many others have written tales of the Cthulhu mythos. By webbing his tales together, Lovecraft loses control of his creations to the emerging system, which has its own rules that acolytes can determine just as easily as he

can.

The Weird Against the Worldly: H.G. Wells

I want now to approach the weird from a different angle,

via a reading of H.G. Wells' short story "The Door in the Wall". I believe this story possesses a strong weird charge, even though it is very different from Lovecraft's work.

The narrator is Redmond, and the story concerns his friend, the politician Lionel Wallace. Wallace tells Redmond of his childhood memory of seeing a green door in a wall somewhere in

the streets of West Kensington in London. For some reason, he was attracted to opening the door. Initially, he was apprehensive, feeling it is “unwise or wrong” to go through the door, but “in a gust of emotion”, he overcomes these anxieties and runs through the Door in the Wall. The garden beyond the Door in the Wall has something of the feel of a surrealist painting by Delvaux

or Ernst — there is an atmosphere of languid joy, while a diffuse sense of kindness seems to emanate from all of the people he meets there. There are anomalous things there — he sees a pair of panthers, and some kind of book in which the images “were not pictures but realities”. Whether this book is a magical object, an example of advanced technology, or the product of

some kind of intoxicant is not clear. After a while, though, when he is looking through this book, he suddenly finds himself seeing “a long grey street in West Kensington, on that chill hour of afternoon before the lamps are lit, and I was there, a wretched little figure, weeping aloud”. However, for reasons that are not fully clear — why does he not immediately go through the Door in the Wall

again? — he cannot return straight away. Once again consigned to the mundane world, he is overcome by a sense of “ungovernable grief”.

Wallace only sees the Door in the Wall a few years later, initially by accident. He “got entangled among some rather low-class streets on the other side of Campden Hill”, until he sees the long white wall and the door that leads into

the garden. However, this time he does not go through. He feels he will be late for school, so he will return later, when he has more time. He makes the mistake of telling some school friends about the door and the garden. They force Wallace to take them there, but he cannot find it.

He sees the door again a couple of times in his youth — once when he is on the way to collect his scholarship

for Oxford — but, again consumed by the urgencies of everyday life, he passes by without going through the door. In recent years, as he enters middle age, Wallace is once again haunted by the door, and fears that he may never see it again:

> Years of hard work after that and never a sight of the door. It's only recently it has come back to me. With it there has

come a sense as though some thin tarnish had spread itself over my world. I began to think of it as a sorrowful and bitter thing that I should never see that door again. Perhaps I was suffering a little from overwork — perhaps it was what I've heard spoken of as the feeling of forty. I don't know. But certainly the keen brightness that makes effort easy has gone out of things recently…

Yet he does see the door again — three times. But each time he passes it by — because he is embroiled in important political business; because he is en route to his father's deathbed; because he is engaged in a conversation about his position. When Wallace recounts this to Redmond, he is racked with anguish about his failure to go through the door. It doesn't surprise us to learn

that the next thing Redmond hears of Wallace is that he is dead. His body is discovered “in a deep excavation near East Kensington Station”.

Why should “The Door in the Wall” be classified as a weird tale? The problem of worlds — of contact between incommensurable worlds — is clearly something that the story shares with Lovecraft, and this brings us once again to the heart of the weird. As

we began to explore in the last chapter, weird fiction always presents us with a threshold between worlds. “The Door in the Wall”, evidently, centres on just such a threshold. Much of its power derives from the opposition between the mundanity of the London setting, with its quotidian details — “he recalls a number of mean, dirty shops, and particularly that of a

plumber and decorator, with a dusty disorder of earthenware pipes, sheet lead ball taps, pattern books of wall paper, and tins of enamel" — and the world beyond the door.

Lovecraft's stories are full of thresholds between worlds: often the egress will be a book (the dreaded *Necronomicon*), sometimes, as in the case of the Randolph Carter "Silver Key" stories, it is literally a portal. Gateways

and portals routinely feature in the deeply Lovecraftian stories of the Marvel Comics character Doctor Strange. David Lynch's film and television work is similarly fixated on doorways, curtains and gateways: as we shall see later, *Inland Empire* appears to be a "holey space" constructed out of thresholds between worlds, an ontological rabbit warren. Sometimes the threshold into

another world may only be a matter of re-scaling: Richard Matheson's *The Incredible Shrinking Man* demonstrates that your own living-room can be a space of weird wonder and dread if you become sufficiently small.

The centrality of doors, thresholds and portals means that the notion of *the between* is crucial to the weird. It is clear that if Wells' story had taken place only in the garden

behind the wall, then no weird charge would have been produced. (This is why a feeling of the weird attaches to the lamppost at the edge of Narnia in C.S. Lewis' stories, but not to Narnia proper.) If the story were set entirely beyond the door, we would be in the realm of the fantasy genre. This mode of fantasy naturalises other worlds. But the weird de-naturalises all worlds, by exposing their

instability, their openness to the outside.

One obvious point of departure from the formula of the Lovecraftian tale is the lack of any inhuman entities in “The Door in the Wall”. When Wallace passes through the door, he encounters strange beings, but they appear to be human. The feeling of the weird that the story gives rise to is not primarily produced by these

languid, beneficent beings; and the weird does not require any of the "abominable monstrosities" which are so central to Lovecraft's tales.

A second difference between Lovecraft and "The Door in the Wall" concerns the question of suspense. As we have seen, Lovecraft's stories are rarely characterised by a feeling of suspense: we are not left

wondering if the outside is real or not. At the end of “The Door in the Wall”, by contrast, Redmond finds his mind “darkened with questions and riddles”. He cannot dismiss the possibility that Wallace was suffering from an “unprecedented type of hallucination”. Wallace was either a madman or a “dreamer, a man of vision and the imagination”. “We see our world fair and

common," Redmond concludes, inconclusively, "the hoarding and the pit. By our daylight standard he walked out of security into darkness, danger and death. But did he see like that?"

This brings us to a third difference between Lovecraft and this story: the question of insanity. In Lovecraft's tales, any insanity the characters experience is a *consequence* of the transcendental shock

that the encounter with the outside produces; there is no question of the insanity *causing* characters to perceive the entities (whose status would then, evidently, be degraded; they would merely be products of a delirium). “The Door in the Wall” leaves open the question of psychosis: it is possible — though Redmond doubts it, it is not his “profoundest belief” — that Wallace is mad, or is

deluded, or has confabulated the whole experience from garbled childhood memories (which, to use a distinction from Freud's essay on "Screen Memory" would then be memories *of* childhood, not memories *from* childhood). Wallace himself suspects that he may have augmented a childhood memory — re-dreamed it — to the point of completely distorting it.

But perhaps the most decisive difference between “The Door in the Wall” and Lovecraft consists in the quality of longing that is central to Wells’ story. In Lovecraft, the positive lure of the outside has to be repressed and inverted, transformed into loathing and dread. But the appeal of the world beyond the door shines through “The Door in the Wall”. The key opposition

structuring the story is not naturalism versus the supernatural — there is little to suggest that the world behind the wall is supernatural, though it is certainly “enchanted” — it is the opposition between the quotidian and the numinous. Wallace’s description of an “indescribable quality of translucent unreality, [different] from the common things of experience that

hung about it all" recalls Rudolf Otto's characterisation of the numinous in *The Idea of the Holy*. Yet, for both Wallace and Otto, an "indescribable quality of translucent unreality" accompanies encounters with that which is *more* real than "the common things of experience". The Real does not *feel* real; it involves a heightening of sensation, exceeds the

parameters of ordinary experience, but to Wallace "at least the Door in the Wall was a real door leading through a real wall to immortal realities."

Michel Houellebecq entitled his book on Lovecraft *Against the World, Against Life*, but it might be that Lovecraft's real antipathy was to the worldly, to the mean confines of the mundane, which his tales

endlessly explode. The attack on the deficiencies of the worldly is surely one of the driving imperatives of “The Door in the Wall”. “Oh! the wretchedness of that return!” Wallace complains, when he finds himself back in “this grey world again”. Wallace feels that he is depressed because he has yielded to the temptations of the worldly.

When Wallace describes his grief, he seems to be a

plaything of the psychoanalytic death drive. “The fact is — it isn’t a case of ghosts or apparitions — but — it’s an odd thing to tell of, — I am haunted. I am haunted by something — that rather takes the light out of things, that fills me with longings…” Reflecting on Wallace’s first encounter with the door, Redmond pictures “the figure of that little boy, *drawn and repelled*”

(emphasis added). Freud describes the death drive in terms of just this ambivalent attraction towards what is unpleasurable. It is Lacan and his followers who have drawn out the strange geometries of the death drive, the way in which desire perpetuates itself by always missing its official object of satisfaction — just as Wallace repeatedly fails to go through the door, even though this is apparently

his deepest desire. The pull exerted by the door and the garden deprives all of his worldly satisfactions and achievements of their flavour:

> Now that I have the clue to it, the thing seems written visibly in his face. I have a photograph in which that look of detachment has been caught and intensified. It reminds me of what a woman once said of him — a woman who had loved him

> greatly. ‘Suddenly,’ she said, ‘the interest goes out of him. He forgets you. He doesn’t care a rap for you — under his very nose…’

The door was always a threshold leading beyond the pleasure principle, and into the weird.

“Body a tentacle mess”: The Grotesque and The Weird: The Fall

The word *grotesque* derives from a type of Roman ornamental design first discovered in the fifteenth century, during the excavation of Titus's baths. Named after the 'grottoes' in which they were found, the new forms consisted of human and animal shapes intermingled with foliage, flowers, and fruits in fantastic designs which bore no relationship to the logical categories of classical art. For a contemporary account of these forms we can turn to the Latin writer Vitruvius. Vitruvius was an official charged with the

rebuilding of Rome under Augustus, to whom his treatise *On Architecture* is addressed. Not surprisingly, it bears down hard on the "improper taste" for the grotesque: "Such things neither are, nor can be, nor have been," says the author in his description of the mixed human, animal, and vegetable forms: "For how can a reed actually sustain a roof, or a candelabrum the ornament of a gable? Or a soft and slender stalk, a seated statue? Or how can flowers and half-statues rise alternately from roots and stalks?

Yet when people view these falsehoods, they approve rather than condemn, failing to consider whether any of them can really occur or not.”

— PATRICK PARRINDER, *James Joyce*

If Wells’ story is an example of a melancholic weird, then we can appreciate another dimension of the weird by thinking about the relationship between the

weird and the grotesque. Like the weird, the grotesque evokes something which is out of place. The response to the apparition of a grotesque object will involve laughter as much as revulsion, and, in his study of the grotesque, Philip Thomson argued that the grotesque was often characterised by the co-presence of the laughable and that which is not compatible with the laughable. This

capacity to excite laughter means that the grotesque is perhaps best understood as a particular form of the weird. It is difficult to conceive of a grotesque object that cannot also be apprehended as weird, but there are weird phenomena which do not induce laughter — Lovecraft's stories, for example, the only humour in which is accidental.

The confluence of the

weird and the grotesque is no better exemplified than in the work of the post-punk group The Fall. The Fall's work — particularly in their period between 1980-82 — is steeped in references to the grotesque and the weird. The group's methodology at this time is vividly captured in the cover image for the 1980 single, "City Hobgoblins", in which we see an urban scene invaded by "emigres from old

green glades”; a leering, malevolent cobold looms over a dilapidated tenement. But rather than being smoothly integrated into the photographed scene, the crudely rendered hobgoblin has been etched onto the background. This is a war of worlds, an ontological struggle, a struggle over the means of representation. From the point of view of the official bourgeois culture and

its categories, a group like The Fall — working class and experimental, popular and modernist — could not and should not exist, and The Fall are remarkable for the way in which they draw out a cultural politics of the weird and the grotesque. The Fall produced what could be called a popular modernist weird, wherein the weird shapes the form as well as the content of the work. The

weird tale enters into becoming with the weirdness of modernism — its unfamiliarity, its combination of elements previously held to be incommensurable, its compression, its challenges to standard models of legibility — and with all the difficulties and compulsions of post-punk sound.

Much of this comes together, albeit in an oblique and enigmatic way, on The

Fall's 1980 album *Grotesque (After the Gramme)*. Otherwise incomprehensible references to "huckleberry masks", "a man with butterflies on his face", "ostrich headdress" and "light blue plant-heads" begin to make sense when you recognise that, in Parrinder's description quoted above, the grotesque originally referred to "human and animal shapes intermingled with foliage,

flowers, and fruits in fantastic designs which bore no relationship to the logical categories of classical art".

The songs on *Grotesque* are tales, but tales half-told. The words are fragmentary, as if they have come to us via an unreliable transmission that keeps cutting out. Viewpoints are garbled; ontological distinctions between author, text and character are confused and

fractured. It is impossible to definitively sort out the narrator's words from direct speech. The tracks are palimpsests, badly recorded in a deliberate refusal of the "coffee table" aesthetic that the group's leader Mark E. Smith derides on the cryptic sleeve notes. The process of recording is not airbrushed out but foregrounded, surface hiss and illegible cassette noise brandished like

improvised stitching on some Hammer Frankenstein monster. The track “Impression of J Temperance” was typical, a story in the Lovecraft style in which a dog breeder’s “hideous replica”, (“brown sockets... purple eyes … fed with rubbish from disposal barges…”) stalks Manchester. This is a weird tale, but one subjected to modernist techniques of compression

and collage. The result is so elliptical that it is as if the text — part-obliterated by silt, mildew and algae — has been fished out of the Manchester ship canal which Steve Hanley's bass sounds like it is dredging.

There is certainly laughter here, a renegade form of parody and mockery that one hesitates to label satire, especially given the pallid and toothless form that satire

has assumed in British culture in recent times. With The Fall, however, it is as if satire is returned to its origins in the grotesque. The Fall's laughter does not issue from the commonsensical mainstream but from a psychotic outside. This is satire in the oneiric mode of Gillray, in which invective and lampoonery becomes delirial, a (psycho)tropological spewing of associations and

animosities, the true object of which is not any failing of probity but the delusion that human dignity is possible. It is not surprising to find Smith alluding to Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in a barely audible line in "City Hobgoblins": "Ubu le Roi is a home hobgoblin." For Jarry, as for Smith, the incoherence and incompleteness of the obscene and the absurd were to be opposed to the false symmetries of good sense.

We could go so far as to say that it is the human condition to be grotesque, since the human animal is the one that does not fit in, the freak of nature who has no place in the natural order and is capable of re-combining nature's products into hideous new forms.

The sound on *Grotesque* is a seemingly impossible combination of the shambolic and the disciplined, the

cerebral-literary and the idiotic-physical. The album is structured around the opposition between the quotidian and the weird-grotesque. It seems as if the whole record has been constructed as a response to a hypothetical conjecture. What if rock and roll had emerged from the industrial heartlands of England rather than the Mississippi Delta? The rockabilly on “Container

Drivers” or “Fiery Jack” is slowed by meat pies and gravy, its dreams of escape fatally poisoned by pints of bitter and cups of greasy-spoon tea. It is rock and roll as working men’s club cabaret, performed by a failed Gene Vincent imitator in Prestwich. The what if? speculations fail. Rock and roll needed the endless open highways; it could never have begun in England’s snarled-

up ring roads and claustrophobic conurbations. It is on the track "The N.W.R.A." ("The North Will Rise Again") that the conflict between the claustrophobic mundaneness of England and the grotesque-weird is most explicitly played out. All of the album's themes coalesce in this track, a tale of cultural political intrigue that plays like some improbable mulching of T.S. Eliot,

Wyndham Lewis, H.G. Wells, Philip K. Dick, Lovecraft and le Carré. It is the story of Roman Totale, a psychic and former cabaret performer whose body is covered in tentacles. It is often said that Roman Totale is one of Smith's "alter-egos"; in fact, Smith is in the same relationship to Totale as Lovecraft was to someone like Randolph Carter. Totale is a character rather than a

persona. Needless to say, he in no way resembles a “well-rounded” character so much as a carrier of mythos, an inter-textual linkage between Pulp fragments:

> So R. Totale dwells underground / Away from sickly grind / With ostrich head-dress / Face a mess, covered in feathers / Orange-red with blue-black lines / That draped down to his chest / Body a tentacle mess

/ And light blue plant-heads.

The form of "The N.W.R.A." is as alien to organic wholeness as is Totale's abominable tentacular body. It is a grotesque concoction, a collage of pieces that do not belong together. The model is the novella rather than the tale and the story is told episodically, from multiple points of view, using a heteroglossic riot of styles

and tones: comic, journalistic, satirical, novelistic, it is like Lovecraft's "Call of Cthulhu" re-written by the Joyce of *Ulysses* and compressed into ten minutes. From what we can glean, Totale is at the centre of a plot — infiltrated and betrayed from the start — which aims at restoring the North to glory, perhaps to its Victorian moment of economic and industrial supremacy; perhaps to some

more ancient pre-eminence, perhaps to a greatness that will eclipse anything that has come before. More than a matter of regional railing against the capital, in Smith's vision the North comes to stand for everything suppressed by urbane good taste: the esoteric, the anomalous, the vulgar sublime, that is to say, the weird and the grotesque itself. Totale, festooned in the

incongruous Grotesque costume of “ostrich head-dress”, “feathers/ orange-red with blue-black lines” and “light blue plant-heads”, is the would-be Faery King of this weird revolt who ends up its maimed Fisher King, abandoned like a pulp modernist Miss Havisham amongst the relics of a carnival that will never happen, a drooling totem of a defeated tilt at social realism,

the visionary leader reduced, as the psychotropics fade and the fervour cools, to being a washed-up cabaret artiste once again.

Smith returns to the weird tale form on The Fall's 1982 album *Hex Enduction Hour*, another record which is saturated with references to the weird. In the track "Jawbone and the Air Rifle", a poacher accidentally causes damage to a tomb, unearthing

a jawbone which “carries the germ of a curse / Of the Broken Brothers Pentacle Church”. The song is a tissue of allusions to texts such as M.R. James’ tales “A Warning to the Curious” and “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad”, to Lovecraft’s “The Shadow over Innsmouth”, to Hammer Horror, and to *The Wicker Man* — culminating in a psychedelic/psychotic

breakdown, complete with a torch-wielding mob of villagers:

> He sees jawbones on the street / advertisements become carnivores / and roadworkers turn into jawbones / and he has visions of islands, heavily covered in slime. / The villagers dance round pre-fabs / and laugh through twisted mouths.

“Jawbone and the Air Rifle” resembles nothing so much as a routine by the British comedy group the League of Gentlemen. The League of Gentlemen’s febrile carnival — with its multiple references to weird tales, and its frequent conjunctions of the laughable with that which is not laughable — is a much more worthy successor to The Fall than most of the musical groups who have attempted to

reckon with their influence.

The track “Iceland”, meanwhile, recorded in a lava-lined studio in Reykjavik, is an encounter with the fading myths of North European culture in the frozen territory from which they originated. Here, the grotesque laughter is gone. The song, hypnotic and undulating, meditative and mournful, recalls the bone-white steppes of Nico’s *The*

Marble Index in its arctic atmospherics. A keening wind (on a cassette recording made by Smith) whips through the track as Smith invites us to "cast the runes against your own soul", another M.R. James reference, this time to his story, "Casting the Runes". "Iceland" is a *Twilight of the Idols* for the retreating hobgoblins, cobolds and trolls of Europe's receding weird

culture, a lament for the monstrosities and myths whose dying breaths it captures on tape:

> Witness the last of the god men
> A Memorex for the Krakens

Caught in the Coils of Ouroboros: Tim Powers

Templeton sits immobile in his attic room, immersed in the

deceptively erratic ticking of his old nautical clock, lost in meditation upon JC Chapman's hermetic engraving. It now seems that this complex image, long accepted as a portrait of Kant, constitutes a disturbing monogram of his own chronological predicament. As if in mockery of stable framing, the picture is surrounded by strange-loop coilings of Ouroboros, the cosmic snake, who traces a figure of eight — and of moebian eternity — by endlessly swallowing itself.

— CCRU, “The Templeton Episode”

One is […] tempted to see in the ‘time paradox’ of science-fiction novels a kind of ‘apparition in the Real’ of the elementary structure of the symbolic process, the so-called internal, internally inverted eight: a circular movement, a kind of snare where we can progress only in such a manner that we ‘overtake’ ourselves in the transference, to find ourselves later at a point which we have already been. The paradox consists in the fact that

this superfluous detour, this supplementary snare of understanding ourselves (‘voyage into the future’) and then reversing the time direction (‘voyage into the past’) is not just a subjective illusion/perception of an objective process taking place in so-called reality independent of these illusions. The supplementary snare is, rather, an internal condition, an internal constituent of the so-called ‘objective’ process itself: only through this additional detour does the past itself, the ‘objective’ state of things, become retroactively

what it always was.

— SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*

Is there not an intrinsically weird dimension to the time travel story? By its very nature, the time travel story, after all, combines entities and objects that do not belong together. Here the threshold between worlds is the apparatus that allows travel between different time

periods — which may be a time machine, or which could actually be a kind of time-crossing door or gate — and the weird effect typically manifests as a sense of anachronism. But another weird effect is triggered when the time travel story involves time paradox(es). The time travel paradox plunges us into the structures that Douglas Hofstadter calls “strange loops” or “tangled

hierarchies", in which the orderly distinction between cause and effect is fatally disrupted.

The Anubis Gates by Tim Powers is a fabulously inventive take on the time travel paradox story, on the model of Robert Heinlein's "All You Zombies" and "By His Bootstraps". But perhaps the predecessor to which *The Anubis Gates* is closest is Michael Moorcock's 1969

novella *Behold the Man*, in which Karl Glogauer time-travels back two thousand years from the 1960s and ends up re-creating — or living for the first time — the life of Christ, including his crucifixion.

The Anubis Gates is in effect an extended weird tale. Although it is stuffed full of references to sorcery, bodily transformation and anomalous entities, the main

source of the novel's weird charge is the twisting of time into an infernal loop. In *The Anubis Gates*, the academic Brendan Doyle is lured into a time-travel experiment by the eccentric plutocrat Clarence Darrow. Darrow is dying, and, whilst undertaking the prodigious and apparently deranged research he has pursued in a desperate bid to prolong his life, he comes upon the story of "Dog-Face

Joe” amongst the folklore of early-nineteenth-century London. By a process of diligent scholarship and daring supposition, Darrow determines that Joe was a magician capable of transferring his consciousness from body to body, but whose body-stealing had an unfortunate side-effect: almost immediately as Joe enters it, the purloined body grows profuse, simian-like

hair, so that its new owner is forced to discard it very soon after switching into it. For obvious reasons, Darrow wants to acquire the secret of this profane transmigration, and he seems to have the means to make contact with the body-switching magician since his research has uncovered “gaps” in the river of time, gates through which it is possible to pass into the past. Doyle’s role is to act as

a kind of literary tour guide for the ultra-wealthy time travellers Darrow has assembled, attracted by the possibility of seeing a lecture by Coleridge, and whose million dollar fee will finance the trip.

Very soon after arriving in the nineteenth century, Doyle is abducted into a rhizomic under-London that is part *Oliver Twist*, part Burroughs' *The Western Lands* (if you

will permit the anachronism — *The Western Lands* was actually published after *The Anubis Gates*). Powers' phantasmagoric London — the apocalyptic vividness of whose rendering led John Clute to describe *The Anubis Gates* as "Babylon-on-Thames punk" — is the site of a war between the forces of Egyptian polytheistic sorcery and the grey positivism of British

empiricism, involving romanys, magical duplicates, poets, beggars, costermongers, male impersonators...

After a while, Doyle comes, reluctantly, to accept his Fate — which in literary-generic terms is to be propelled, by means of SF, into the nineteenth-century picaresque — and more or less gives up any hope of returning home. He resigns

himself to make the best of his nineteenth-century life and decides that his most realistic hope of an escape from beggary is to make contact with William Ashbless, the minor poet in whose works he has specialist knowledge.

Doyle goes to the Jamaica Coffee House on the morning in which, according to Ashbless' biographer, the American poet will write his

epic poem, “The Twelve Hours of the Night”. The appointed time arrives, but there is no sign of Ashbless. While he waits, at first agitated and then deflated, Doyle idly transcribes “The Twelve Hours of the Night” from memory.

He is soon caught up in more intrigue and, for a while, forgets about Ashbless. In a moment that is more eerie than weird, Doyle hears,

or fancies he hears, someone whistling The Beatles' "Yesterday". It is only after he catches the refrain being whistled again a day or so later that he is able to confirm that there are indeed a group of twentieth-century temporal emigres living in this nineteenth-century London. They turn out to be Darrow's people, given the task of helping in the search for Dog-Face Joe. Doyle meets with

one of them, his former student, Benner, who by now is a paranoid and grizzled wreck, convinced that Darrow is out to kill him. He and Doyle agree to meet again a few days later, but when they do, Doyle finds his former friend's behaviour is even odder than before. Doyle discovers the reason for this too late. Benner's body has been acquired by Dog-Face Joe. This becomes

clear to Doyle only when he finds himself in Benner's body, after it has been discarded by Joe.

Everything is now in place for the revelation that shocks Doyle but which is, by now, no surprise at all for the reader: Doyle *is* Ashbless. Or rather: there is no Ashbless (except for Doyle). Doyle only begins to process the full implications of this when he contemplates the peculiar

(a)temporal status of the “Twelve Hours of the Night” manuscript:

It hadn’t […] come to too much of a surprise to him when he’d realised, after writing down the first few lines of ‘The Twelve Hours of the Night’, that while his casual scrawl had remained recognisably his own, his new left-handedness made his formal handwriting different — though by no means unfamiliar: for it was identical to William Ashbless’.

And now that he'd written the poem out completely he was certain that if a photographic slide of the copy that in 1983 would reside in the British Museum, they would line up perfectly, with every comma and i-dot of his version perfectly covering those of the original manuscript.

Original manuscript? He thought with a mixture of awe and unease. This stack of papers here *is* the original manuscript… it's just newer now than it was when I saw it in 1976. Hah! I wouldn't have been so impressed to see it then if

I'd known I had made or would make those pen scratches. I wonder when, where and how it'll pick up the grease marks I remember seeing on the early pages.

Suddenly a thought struck him. My God, he thought, then if I stay and live out my life as Ashbless — which the universe pretty clearly means me to do — then *nobody wrote Ashbless' poems*. I'll copy out his poems from memory, having read them in the 1932 *Collected Poems*, and my copies will be set in type for the magazines, and they'll use tear

sheets from the magazines to create the *Collected Poems*! They're a closed loop, uncreated! … I'm just the… Messenger and caretaker.

Like his unhappier time-displaced fellow, Jack Torrance in *The Shining*, Doyle has *always been the caretaker*. The *mise-enabyme* here produces a charge of the weird, both because of the scandal of an uncreated thing, and because of the twisted

causality that has allowed such a thing to exist. (Perhaps all paradoxes have a touch of the weird about them?)

The Ashbless Enigma that Doyle encounters is comically deflated once he realises that — at some level — the solution is only him. “I wouldn’t have been so impressed to see it then if I’d known I had made or would make those pen scratches.” But the deflation is

immediately followed by a profound dread and awe (the poems are uncreated!) that far exceeds his original fascination with the poet.

Once Doyle realises that he is destined to be Ashbless, which is to say, that he always-already was Ashbless, he is faced with a dilemma: does he act in accordance with what he characterises as the will of the universe (it is the “universe” that “wants”

him to live in Ashbless' shoes), or not? The problem that Doyle faces is that the determinism is much more invariant than a will, even a will that belongs to "the universe". It is impossible for him to process that everything he will do as Ashbless has already happened. The barrier that means that this cannot be faced is transcendental: subjectivity as such

presupposes the illusion that things could be different. To be a subject *is* to be unable to think of oneself as anything but free — even if you know that you are not. What sustains Doyle's presupposition is the apparently spontaneously emerging hypothesis of an "alternative past": in order to hold open the possibility that things might go against the already-recorded Ashbless

biography, Doyle is forced to consider the possibility that he has somehow crossed into a “different past” to the one he has seen documented. But the full paradox is that it is only Doyle’s positing of such an “alternative past” that ensures that he acts in accordance with what has already happened. Ashbless becomes the hero he already was, the restorer of an order that was never threatened.

Everything is at it always was; only now, as Doyle and the reader know, something weird has happened.

Simulations and Unworlding: Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Philip K. Dick

There is another type of weird effect that is generated by strange loops. The strange loops here involve not just tangles in cause and effect of the type we discussed in the last chapter in reference to the time loop story, but confusions of ontological level. Brian McHale devotes much of his *Postmodernist Fiction* to analyzing these confusions. What should be at an ontologically "inferior"

level suddenly appears one level up (characters from a simulated world suddenly appear in the world generating the simulation); or what should be at an ontologically “superior” level appears one level down (authors interact with their characters). Escher’s images exemplify the paradoxical spaces of this strange loop. There is a definite weirdness in this Escher-effect, which,

after all, is fundamentally about a sense of wrongness: levels are tangled, things are not where they are supposed to be.

Although McHale does refer to Dick, to whom we shall turn in a moment, many of the texts that he discusses render this confusion of worlds in a literary-metafictional register. I want to discuss now two texts which — on the edge of the

science fiction genre — deal with the question of simulated or embedded worlds in a way that emphasises weirdness.

Let's turn first to *Welt am Draht* (*World on a Wire*), a two-part production made for the Westdeutscher Rundfunk public service television channel in 1973. It was an adaptation of Daniel F. Galouye's science fiction novel *Simulacron-3* by none

other than Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

One of the opening scenes centres on a mirror: a small hand-mirror that the obviously disturbed head of the Simulacron project, Professor Vollmer, frantically waves in the face of his colleagues, saying, “You are only the image that others have of you.” The project has created a computer-generated world, populated by “identity

units” who believe themselves to be real people. Vollmer dies, and is replaced by the programmer Stiller, who soon becomes obsessed with the enigma that drove Vollmer into madness — that their “real world” is also a simulation, engineered by a “realer” world above.

The ambient social scene in the film seems to confirm Vollmer’s idea that we are what we are perceived to be.

There is barely a scene that doesn’t feature a reflective surface, and some of the most memorable shots show reflections of reflections, infinite regresses of simulacra. The background figures in crowd scenes have a curiously agog immobility, as if they are spectators at a stageplay. One early scene is like an extrapolation from a Bryan Ferry album sleeve of the early 1970s: in an

atmosphere of louche decadence, the business and cultural elite linger like models or gawp like voyeurs as they stand around a swimming pool, its reflected light playing on the then-futuristic interiors.

Much like Tarkovsky's take on SF in *Solaris* and *Stalker* (which we shall discuss later), it is Fassbinder's deviation from certain science fictional

conventions that gives *World on a Wire* a special charge — especially in the wake of *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*. While both those films were defined by their special effects, there are no visual effects to speak of in *World on a Wire*. The most conspicuous "effect" is the startling Radiophonic Workshop-like squiggles and spurts of electronic music, which break into Fassbinder's stylised naturalism like a

crack in reality itself.

In *World on a Wire*, the strange loop is created by "Einstein", the identity unit in Simulacron that those in The Institute for Cybernetics and Future Science use to communicate directly with in the simulated world. In order to perform this liaising function, Einstein naturally has to be aware that he is a simulation. But this knowledge inevitably

produces the desire to climb up to the “real” world — a desire, it is implied, that can never be satisfied.

The ontological terror on which *World on a Wire* turns — is our own world a simulation? — is now very familiar, via the many Philip K. Dick adaptations and their imitators. But, despite not actually being an adaptation of Dick’s fiction, *World on a Wire* has more in common

with the wry mordancy of Dick's work than many official Dick adaptations, not least in the way that it shows each of its three nested worlds as being equally drab. We actually see very little of the world "below" (the world inside the Simulacron) and almost nothing of the world "above" (the world one level up from what we first took to be reality). The world below we see only in snatched

glimpses of hotel lobbies and inside a lorry-driver's cab. But it is the revelation — or non-revelation — of the world above at the climax of the film that is most startling. Instead of some Gnostic transfiguration, we find ourselves in what looks like a meeting room in some ultra-banal office block. At first, the electronic blinds are down, momentarily holding open the possibility that there

will be some marvellous — or at least strange — world to be seen once they are up. But when they do eventually rise, we see only the same grey skies and cityscape. Stiller — whose name now assumes a special significance — has attained his official goal (climbing up to the “world above”), but he has not “moved”. The Zenonian condition remains in the form of an ontological anxiety that

in a pre-echo of the torment that destroys Mal in *Inception* follows the weird topologies of drive: once Stiller's faith in his initial lifeworld is shattered, there is no possibility of fully believing in any reality.

The differences between the three worlds is not accessible at the level of experience (of either the characters or the audience), and it as if Fassbinder

produces in *World on a Wire* something that perfectly fits Darko Suvin's famous definition of science fiction as the art of "cognitive estrangement". Stiller's mounting awareness of the simulated nature of the world that everyone around him takes for reality forces a cognitive estrangement so intense that it constitutes a psychotic break. The *content* of his experience is the same

in every respect; but, because it is now classified as a simulation, it is psychotically transformed. But, as is so often in the fiction of Dick, the position of the psychotic is also the position of truth.

"Cognitive estrangement" here takes the form of an unworlding, an abyssal falling away of any sense that there is any "fundamental" level which could operate as a foundation or a touchstone,

securing and authenticating what is ultimately real. The film generates what you might call a cognitive weird, in that the weird here is not directly seen or experienced; it is a cognitive effect, produced by depriving the film's formal realism of any feeling of reality.

Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint*, published in 1959,

performs a similar estrangement of realism, as well as presenting another version of unworlding. The novel is remarkable, in fact, for the painstaking way in which Dick constructs a “realistic” small town America. Two years after the first Disneyland park opened — Dick would become a frequent visitor to the park in LA — the novel treats literary realism as a kind of

Disneyfication. In a classic moment of Dick ontological vertigo, the novel's painstakingly described small town is revealed, in the end, to be an intricate system of pasteboard frontages, hypnotic suggestions and negative hallucinations (we shall return to the question of negative hallucinations later). The pay-off can just as easily be read in terms of critical metafiction as science fiction,

for what is any setting in realist fiction if not the same kind of system? How is any "reality effect" achieved except by authors using the literary equivalent of these simulatory techniques? In *Time Out of Joint*, the machinery of realism becomes, then, re-described as a set of special effects.

In the novel, the feeling of the weird is not generated by a collision of worlds, but by

the passage out of a “realistic” world into an “unworld”. After it is downgraded to a simulation, the realistic world is not so much invaded as erased. In the novel, the whole small town scenario is constructed as a ruse, a comfortable setting in which the protagonist can undertake high pressure military work for the government while thinking that he is doing a

trivial newspaper contest. Yet it is clear that the science fictional elements were for Dick the pretext that allowed him to write successfully in a naturalistic way about Fifties America. They were the enframing devices that enabled *Time Out of Joint* to succeed where Dick's purely realist fiction failed.

In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson captures

the peculiar ache of nostalgia that *Time Out of Joint* engenders, a *nostalgia for the present*, which Dick achieves by constellating stereotypical images of the decade he was writing at the end of:

> President Eisenhower's stroke; Main Street, U.S.A.; Marilyn Monroe; a world of neighbours and PTAs; small retail stores (the produce trucked in from outside); favourite television

> programmes; mild flirtations with the housewife next door; game shows and contests; sputniks directly revolving over-head, mere blinking lights in the firmament, hard to distinguish from airliners or flying saucers.

(Monroe actually features as one of the anomalies that leads to the unraveling of the simulated small town, for she has not been incorporated

into the reconstructed 1950s world, and appears to the main character only when he discovers some rotting magazines, relics of our Fifties, in a waste ground "outside the city limits".)

What is remarkable is the way in which Dick was capable, in 1959, of already identifying those stereotypical features of the American Fifties which would come to define the

decade in retrospect. It is not Dick's skill in projecting into the future that is to be admired — the novel's 1997 is confected out of generic SF tropes, far less convincing than the ostensibly fake Fifties world it embeds — but rather his capacity to imagine how the future would see the Fifties. It is the Fifties already envisaged as a themepark: an anticipated reconstruction. Dick's simulated small town

is not en-kitsched as Disney's memories of his early twentieth century were, but precisely given what Jameson calls the "cabbage stink" of naturalism:

> The misery of happiness, […] of Marcuse's false happiness, the gratifications of the new car, the TV dinner and your favourite programme on the sofa — which are now themselves secretly a misery, an

> unhappiness that doesn't know its name, that has no way of telling itself apart from genuine satisfaction and fulfilment since it has presumably never encountered this last.

In this lukewarm world, ambient discontent hides in plain view, a hazy malaise given off by the refrigerators, television sets and other consumer durables. The vividness and plausibility of

this miserable world — with misery itself contributing to the world's plausibility — somehow becomes all the more intense when its status is downgraded to that of a constructed simulation. The world is a simulation but it still *feels* real.

Some of the most powerful passages in Dick's work are those in which there is an ontological interregnum: a traumatic unworlding is not

yet given a narrative motivation; an unresolved space that awaits reincorporation into another symbolic regime. In *Time Out of Joint*, the interregnum takes the form of an extraordinary scene in which the seemingly dull objects of quotidian naturalism — the gas station and the motel — act almost like a negative version of the lamppost at the edge of the Narnian forest.

Unlike Lewis' lamppost, these objects do not mark the threshold of a new world; they constitute instead staging posts on the way towards a desert of the Real, a void beyond any constituted world. When the edge-oftown gas stations come into focus, the background furniture of literary realism suddenly looms into the foreground, and there is a moment of object-epiphany, in which

peripheral vision-familiarity transforms into something alien:

> The houses became fewer. The truck passed gas stations, tawdry cafes, ice cream stands and motels. The dreary parade of motels ... as if, Ragle thought, we had already gone a thousand miles and were just now entering a strange town. Nothing is so alien, so bleak and unfriendly, as the strip of

> gas stations — cut-rate gas stations — and motels at the edge of your own city. You fail to recognise it. And, at the same time, you have to grasp it to your bosom. Not just for one night, but for as long as you intend to live where you live. But we don't intend to live here any more. We're leaving. For good.

It's a scene in which Edward Hopper seems to devolve into Beckett, as the natural(ist)

landscape gives way to an emptied-out monotony, a minimal, quasi-abstract space that is de-peopled but still industrialised and commercialised: “A last intersection, a minor road serving industries that had been zoned out of the city proper. The railroad tracks... he noticed an infinitely long freight train at rest. The suspended drums of chemicals on towers over

factories." It is as if Dick is slowly clearing away the fixtures and fittings of literary realism in order to prepare the way for the unworlding which he had described a few pages earlier:

> Hollow outward form
> instead of substance; the sun
> not actually shining, the day
> not actually warm at all but
> cold, grey and quietly
> raining, raining, the god-
> awful ash filtering down on

everything. No grass except charred stumps, broken off. Pools of contaminated water... The skeleton of life, white brittle scarecrow support in the shape of a cross. Grinning. Space instead of eyes. The whole world […] can be seen through. I am on the inside looking out. Peeking through a crack and seeing — emptiness. Looking into its eyes.

Curtains and Holes: David Lynch

David Lynch's two latest films — *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* — present

a kind of acute, compacted weirdness. While often perplexing, Lynch's earlier work, including the film *Blue Velvet* (1986) and the television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91, with a third series currently in production), presented what at first glance could appear to be a superficial coherence. Both the film and the TV series were — at least initially — constructed around the

opposition between an idealised-stereotypical small-town America (not dissimilar from the one depicted in Dick's *Time Out of Joint*) and various other- or under-worlds (criminal, occult). The division between worlds was often marked by one of Lynch's frequently recurring visual motifs: curtains. Curtains both conceal and reveal (and, not accidentally, one of the things that they

conceal and reveal is the cinema screen itself). They do not only mark a threshold; they constitute one: an egress to the outside.

In *Mulholland Drive*, released in 2001, the stability of the opposition which had structured *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* begins to collapse. No doubt this is partly because of the shift away from the small-town setting, and the new focus on

LA. Lynch's customary preoccupation with dreams and the oneiric is now refracted and redoubled by the mediated and manufactured dreams of the Dream Factory, Hollywood. The Hollywood setting proliferates embedded worlds — filmswithin-films (and possibly films-within-films-within-films), screen tests, performed roles, fantasies. Each embedding contains the

possibility of a dis-embedding, as something that was at a supposedly inferior ontological level threatens to climb up out of its subordinated position and claim equal status with the level above: figments from dreams cross over into waking life; screen tests appear at least as convincing as the exchanges in the supposedly real-world scenes that surround them. In

Mulholland Drive, however — rendered in the onscreen title as *Mulholland Dr*, with its suggestion of *Mulholland Dream* — the overwhelming tendency appears to move in the opposite direction: it is not so much that dreams become taken for reality, as that any apparent reality subsides into a dream. But whose dream is it anyway?

The "standard" interpretation of *Mulholland*

Drive claims that its first half is the fantasy/dream of failed two-bit actress Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts), whose actual life is allegedly depicted, in all its quotidian squalor, in the second half of the film. In the first part of the film, Betty assists an amnesiac brunette (Laura Haring) — the victim of a failed murder plot — to recover her identity. The brunette assumes the name "Rita", after Rita Hayworth, a

name she sees on a film poster, and she and Betty become lovers. In the second part of the film, “Rita” is now Camilla, a successful actress, and the object of bitter jealousy from the failed and jaded Diane, who lives in a miserable apartment in Hollywood. Diane hires a hitman to kill Camilla, before apparently committing suicide. According to the standard interpretation,

aspiring actress Betty — who arrives in Hollywood seemingly not only from a small town but from the past (she has just won a jitterbugging competition!) — is Selwyn's idealised image of herself. The opposition between the idealised place and the underworld(s) that structured *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* has now become an opposition between two

personae: naïve small-town Betty versus hard-bitten LA-resident Diane.

In an online review, “Double Dreams in Hollywood”, Timothy Takemoto pointed out that one problem with the standard interpretation is that the second part of the film is, in its own way, as dream-like and as saturated in melodramatic tropes, as the first. “What is some woman

in a run-down apartment in Hollywood doing having an affair with a movie star, that is about to get married to a famous director? Where does she get the money to pay for a hitman?" Takemoto's view is that both the first and second part of the film are dreams. Diane is not the dreamer; the "real dreamer is elsewhere", and Betty/Diane and Rita/Camilla are all fragments of this (unseen) dreamer's

disintegrated psyche.

Whether or not this view is correct, I think that Takemoto is right to argue that there are two scenes in *Mulholland Drive* which merit particular attention: the scene about dreams in the diner, and the scene in Club Silencio (perhaps the most powerful sequence in the entire film). In the diner scene, a man called Dan is talking to someone who appears to be a

psychiatrist about a dream he has had twice. The dream is set in the very diner in which they are currently sitting (Winkie's, on Sunset Boulevard). In the dream, Dan is terrified by a figure with a blackened, scarred face, who lurks in a hinterland space behind the diner. In a bid to defeat the power of the dream, the two men walk out to the back of the diner — where the scarred

figure is waiting, and Dan collapses, perhaps in a faint, perhaps dead.

The paradoxically entrancing Club Silencio scene acts as a gateway between the two sections of the film. With its red curtains, Club Silencio is evidently a threshold space. Betty and Rita enter the club, but they do not properly emerge from it; they are afterwards replaced/displaced by Diane

and Camilla. I described the scene as paradoxically entrancing because it is ostensibly demystifying. Like some cinematic equivalent of Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe*, the Club Silencio performance *tells* us that what we are witnessing is an illusion, whilst at the same time *showing* that we will be unable to treat it as such. The host of Club Silencio, a kind of magician-compere figure,

repeatedly tells the audience (those in Club Silencio, as well as those watching *Mulholland Drive*), “There is no band. It is all recorded. It is all a tape. It is an illusion.” A man emerges from behind the red curtains, appearing to play a muted trumpet; he takes the trumpet away from his mouth, but the music continues. When the singer Rebekah Del Rio appears to deliver an emotionally

wracked version of Roy Orbison's version of "Crying", we are seduced by the power of her performance. So when Del Rio collapses but the music plays on, we cannot help but be shocked. Something in us compels us to treat the performance as if it were genuine.

There is of course nothing less mendacious, less dissimulatory, in cinema's

history of illusion than the scene in Club Silencio. What we are seeing and hearing — the film itself — is indeed a recording and nothing but. On the most banal level, this is the material infrastructure which the “magic of cinema” must conceal. Yet the scene haunts for reasons other than this. It points to the automatisms at work in our subjectivity: insofar as we cannot help but be drawn into

Silencio's illusions (which are also the illusions of cinema), we are like the very recordings by which we are seduced. Yet these illusions are something more than mere deceptions. Like the scene with Dan in the diner, the Club Silencio scene reminds us that dreams and "illusions" are conduits to a Real that cannot ordinarily be confronted. Dreams are not only spaces of solipsistic

interiority: they are also a terrain in which the “red curtains” to the outside can open up.

Ultimately, *Mulholland Drive* is perhaps best read as something which cannot be made to add up. That is not to say that the film should just be considered fair game for any possible interpretation. Rather, it is to say that any attempt finally to tie up the film’s convolutions and

impasses will only dissipate its strangeness, its formal weirdness. The weirdness here is generated in part by the way that the film feels like a “wrong” version of a recognisable Hollywood film-type. Roger Ebert remarked that “there is no solution. There may not even be a mystery.” It could be that *Mulholland Drive* is the illusion of a mystery: we are compelled to treat it as a

solvable enigma, to overlook its “wrongness”, its intractability, in the same way that, in Club Silencio, we are compelled to overlook the illusory nature of the performances.

In Lynch’s 2006 film, *Inland Empire*, it is as if the kind of slippages, incoherencies and conundrums we saw in *Mulholland Drive* are pushed much further, to the point

where there is no longer even the prospect of tractability. For all its many film references, *Inland Empire* does not even *seem* to resemble any Hollywood template. If the weird is fundamentally about thresholds, then *Inland Empire* is a film that seems to be primarily composed of gateways. The best readings of *Inland Empire* have rightly stressed the film's

labyrinthine, rabbit-warren anarchitecture. Yet the space involved is ontological, rather than merely physical. Each corridor in the film — and there are many of Lynch's signature corridors in *Inland Empire* — is potentially the threshold to another world. Yet no character — the word seems absurdly inappropriate when applied to *Inland Empire*'s fleeting figures, figments and fragments —

can cross into these other worlds without themselves changing their nature. In *Inland Empire*, you are whatever world you find yourself in.

The dominant motif in the film is another kind of threshold: the hole. A hole cigarette-burned into silk; a hole in the vagina wall leading to the intestine; a hole punctured into the stomach by a screwdriver; rabbit

holes; holes in memory; holes in narrative; holes as positive nullity, gaps but also tunnels, the connectors in a hellish rhizome in which any part can potentially collapse into any other. The cigarette burn hole could serve as a metonym for the film's entire psychotic geography. The hole in silk is an image of the camera and its double the spectating eye, whose gaze in *Inland Empire* is always

voyeuristic and partial.

With *Inland Empire*, world-haemorrhaging has become so acute that we can no longer talk about tangled hierarchies but a terrain subject to chronic ontological subsidence. The film appears at first to be about an actress, Nikki Grace (Laura Dern) who is to play a character, Sue, in a film called *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. But there is no stability to these

personae, nor to the hierarchy which would treat Sue as "less real" than Nikki. By the end, Sue appears to have subsumed Nikki, and seems not to be inside in any film that would be called *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. "Reflexivity without subjectivity", that perfect description of the unconscious, is a phrase that is exceptionally apt for *Inland Empire*'s convolutions and

involutions. Nikki Grace and the gaggle of other personae which Dern plays/Grace hosts (or fragments into) are like de-psychologised avatars: holes that we cannot help treating as mysteries, even though it is clear (to us, if not to them) that there is no hope of any solution.

"Something got out from inside the story", we are told of the Polish movie which Nikki Grace's film-within-a-

film is remaking. In *Inland Empire* — which often seems like a series of dream sequences floating free of any grounding reality, a dreaming without a dreamer (as all dreams really are, since the unconscious is not a subject) — no frame is secure, all attempts at embedding fail. The temptation to resolve the film's conundrums psychologically (i.e. to attribute the anomalies to

phantasms issuing from the deranged mind of one or more of the characters) is no doubt great, but should be resisted if we are to remain true to what is singular about the film. Instead of looking inside (the characters) for some final key to the film, we must attend to the strange folds, burrows and passageways of *Inland Empire*'s weird architecture, in which no interior space is

ever secure for long, and gateways to the outside can open up practically anywhere.

THE EERIE

Approaching the Eerie

What is the eerie, exactly? And why is it important to think about it? As with the weird, the eerie is worth reckoning with in its own

right as a particular kind of aesthetic experience. Although this experience is certainly triggered by particular cultural forms, it does not originate in them. You could say rather that certain tales, certain novels, certain films, evoke the feeling of the eerie, but this sensation is not a literary or a filmic invention. As with the weird, we can and often do encounter the sensation of the

eerie “in the raw”, without the need for specific forms of cultural mediation. For instance, there is no doubt that the sensation of the eerie clings to certain kinds of physical spaces and landscapes.

The feeling of the eerie is very different from that of the weird. The simplest way to get to this difference is by thinking about the (highly metaphysically freighted)

opposition — perhaps it is the most fundamental opposition of all — between presence and absence. As we have seen, the weird is constituted by a presence — the presence of *that which does not belong*. In some cases of the weird (those with which Lovecraft was obsessed) the weird is marked by an exorbitant presence, a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it. The

eerie, by contrast, is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or is there is nothing present when there should be something.

We can grasp these two modes quickly by means of examples. The notion of an "eerie cry" — often cited in

dictionary definitions of the eerie — is an example of the first mode of the eerie (*the failure of absence*). A bird's cry is eerie if there is a feeling that there is something more in (or behind) the cry than a mere animal reflex or biological mechanism — that there is some kind of intent at work, a form of intent that we do not usually associate with a bird. Clearly, there is something in

common between this and the feeling of “something which does not belong” that we have said constitutes the weird. But the eerie necessarily involves forms of speculation and suspense that are not an essential feature of the weird. *Is* there something anomalous about this bird’s cry? What exactly is strange about it? Is, perhaps, the bird possessed — and if it is, by what kind of entity? Such speculations are

intrinsic to the eerie, and once the questions and enigmas are resolved, the eerie immediately dissipates. The eerie concerns the unknown; when knowledge is achieved, the eerie disappears. It must be stressed at this point that not all mysteries generate the eerie. There must be also be a sense of alterity, a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that

lie beyond common experience.

An example of the second mode of the eerie (*the failure of presence*) is the feeling of the eerie that pertains to ruins or to other abandoned structures. Post-apocalyptic science fiction, whilst not in itself necessarily an eerie genre, is nevertheless full of eerie scenes. Yet the sense of the eerie is limited in these cases, because we are an

offered an explanation of why these cities have been depopulated. Compare this with the case of the abandoned ship the *Marie Celeste*. Because the mystery of the ship — what happened to the crew? What made them leave? Where did they go? — has never been resolved, nor is ever likely to be, the case of the *Marie Celeste* is saturated in a sense of the eerie. The enigma here,

evidently, turns on two questions — *what happened* and *why?* But structures whose meaning and purpose we cannot parse pose a different kind of enigma. Faced with the stone circle at Stonehenge, or with the statues on Easter Island, we are confronted with a different set of questions. The problem here is not *why* the people who created these structures disappeared —

there is no mystery here — but the nature of *what* disappeared. What kinds of being created these structures? How were they similar to us, and how were they different? What kind of symbolic order did these beings belong to, and what role did the monuments they constructed play in it? For the symbolic structures which made sense of the monuments have rotted away, and in a

sense what we witness here is the unintelligibility and the inscrutability of the Real itself. Confronted with Easter Island or Stonehenge, it is hard not to speculate about what the relics of our culture will look like when the semiotic systems in which they are currently embedded have fallen away. We are compelled to imagine our own world as a set of eerie traces. Such speculations no

doubt account for the eeriness that attaches to the justly famous final image of the original 1968 version of *Planet of the Apes*: the remains of the Statue of Liberty, which are as illegible from the perspective of the film's post-apocalyptic and indeed post-human far future as Stonehenge is to us now. The examples of Stonehenge and Easter Island make us realise that there is an

irreducibly eerie dimension to certain archaeological and historical practices. Particularly when dealing with the remote past, archaeologists and historians form hypotheses, but the culture to which they refer and which would vindicate their speculations can never (again) be present.

Behind all of the manifestations of the eerie, the central enigma at its core

is the problem of agency. In the case of the failure of absence, the question concerns the existence of agency as such. Is there a deliberative agent here at all? Are we being watched by an entity that has not yet revealed itself? In the case of the failure of presence, the question concerns the particular *nature* of the agent at work. We know that Stonehenge has been erected,

so the questions of whether there was an agent behind its construction or not does not arise; what we have to reckon with are the traces of a departed agent whose purposes are unknown.

We are now in a position to answer the question of why it is important to think about the eerie. Since the eerie turns crucially on the problem of agency, it is about the forces that govern our lives and the

world. It should be especially clear to those of us in a globally tele-connected capitalist world that those forces are not fully available to our sensory apprehension. A force like capital does not exist in any substantial sense, yet it is capable of producing practically any kind of effect. At another level, had not Freud long ago shown that the forces that govern our psyche can be conceived of as

failures of presence — is not the unconscious itself not just such a failure of presence? — and failures of absence (the various drives or compulsions that intercede where our free will should be)?

Something Where There Should Be Nothing: Nothing Where There Should Be Something: Daphne du

Maurier and Christopher Priest

Let’s now test out these preliminary observations in relation to two writers who have rightly been closely associated with the eerie: Daphne du Maurier and Christopher Priest. Du

Maurier's eerie tales often revolve around the influence of entities or objects that should not possess reflective agency: animals, telepathic forces, fate itself. The eerie effect in some of Priest's novels, meanwhile, depends upon gaps in memory, gaps that fatally undermine the characters' sense of their own identity.

Du Maurier's well-known tale "The Birds" (1952) is an

almost generic case of the eerie. As I mentioned above, dictionaries frequently cite an animal's "eerie cry" when they are giving examples of the eerie. "The Birds" builds upon the feeling that is triggered when we hear such cries — the suspicion that an entity to which we do not normally ascribe it possesses a deliberative agency. In du Maurier's tale, the birds cease to be part of the natural

background and assert an agency of their own, but the nature of this agency remains mysterious. Instead of co-existing with human beings, the birds collaborate with one another to launch a murderous attack on the human population. This collaboration amongst different bird species is one of the first signs that something unprecedentedly strange is happening: “The

birds were circling still above the fields. Mostly herring gull, but the black-backed gull amongst them. Usually they kept apart. Now they were united. Some bond had brought them together.”

For those familiar with Hitchcock’s film adaptation, reading du Maurier’s original story will come as something of a surprise. (Du Maurier reputedly hated Hitchcock’s film.) Instead of a sunlit

Californian setting, we find ourselves in a grey and tempestuous Cornwall, still in the grip of postwar austerity. Instead of a flirting couple in the early days of romance, we find a family — the Hockens — defending their home against the birds' attack. In some ways, "The Birds", with its focus on a retreat into a boarded-up house besieged by anomalous entities, reads like an anticipation of George

Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The story sees the characters pitched out of a pastoral communal life into the kind of survivalist atomisation that Romero will depict.

The story's unsettling power depends on two levels of threat: the first, of course, is the brute physical terror of the birds' attack. But it is the second level that takes us into the eerie. As the story

develops, we see residual wartime certainties and authority structures disintegrate. What the birds threaten is the very structures of explanation that had previously made sense of the world. Initially, the preferred account of the birds' behaviour is the weather. As the attacks intensify, other narratives emerge: the farmer for whom Hocken works says that the idea is circulating in

town that the Russians poisoned the birds. (This turn to the readymade explanations of Cold War paranoia makes a certain sense, when we remember that the birds have set aside their differences in order to develop a kind of species consciousness, analogous to class consciousness.) BBC radio broadcasts assume a crucial role in the story. Initially, the broadcasts are

the trusted voice of authority: when the BBC announces that the birds are amassing everywhere, the anomalous situation achieves a kind of official validation. At this point, the BBC is synonymous with an authority structure that it is assumed will "do something" to repel the birds' attack. But, as the broadcasts become increasingly infrequent, it becomes clear that there is no more a

strategy to deal with the birds than there is an adequate explanation of their behaviour. By the end, the BBC is no longer broadcasting at all, and its silence means that we are definitively in the space of the eerie. There will be no explanation, for the characters or for the readers. Nor will there be any reprieve: at the end of the story, the birds' siege shows no signs of concluding.

In another of du Maurier's well-known short stories, "Don't Look Now" (1971), the "something where there should be nothing", the forces that lie beyond ordinary modes of explanation, are extrasensory perception and fate. The story is about the way in which the misrecognition and disavowal of the power of foresight ends up contributing to the very event that was foreseen

happening.

John and Laura are a married couple visiting Venice as part of their grieving process for their young daughter, who has recently died of an illness. While sitting in a restaurant, they meet a strange pair of sisters, who say that they can see the daughter sitting between the grieving couple, laughing. Laura is delighted, and becomes fixated on the

sisters; John is skeptical and hostile, certain that the sisters are exploiting his wife's grief. Soon afterwards, the couple learn that their son at school in England is ill, and it is decided that Laura will return home to be with him. When John is walking around the city, he thinks he sees Laura with the two sisters on a *vaporetto*. In a panic, he goes to the police, sure that the sisters have abducted Laura.

Yet John learns that Laura returned as planned; a humiliated John has to explain to the police that he was mistaken, and to apologise to the sisters. After he has taken the sisters home, he sees what he thinks is a young child being pursued by a man. Venice is being menaced by a serial killer, and John fears that the child will be its next victim. But what he thought was a child

turns out to be murderous dwarf — presumably the serial killer — who kills John. As he dies, John only now realises that his seeing the sisters with Laura was a case of foresight, a glimpse into the near future when the three would be together at his own funeral:

> And he saw the vaporetto with Laura and the two sisters steaming down the

> Grand Canal, not today, not tomorrow, but the day after that and he knew why they were together and for what sad purpose they had come. The creature was gibbering in its corner. The hammering and the voices and the barking dog grew fainter, and ‘Oh God,’ he thought, ‘What a bloody silly way to die…’

In some ways, the structure that emerges here is similar to

the time loop that we discussed earlier, but the loop here is less tight, and the register is eerie rather than weird, because the emphasis is on an obscured agent: fate itself. Fate here is certainly terrifying, but, as John realises in his dying moments, the patterns it weaves exhibit a certain artistry that in the end is ironic, and perhaps even macabrely comic, as well as

harrowing. One irony is that, precisely because it is not recognised as such, John's foresight does not allow fate's patterns to be foreseen. John shares the disavowal of his own powers of extrasensory perception with another male fatally defined by self-blinding, *The Shining*'s Jack Torrance, who we shall discuss in a later chapter. As with Jack Torrance, extrasensory

perception compromises John's masculine sense of self-determination; like Jack, John's underestimating of the forces that threaten this — ultimately illusory — self-possession feed into the power of those very forces, which in the end leads to his destruction.

Nic Roeg's film adaptation (1973) (of which, this time, du Maurier approved) is an exercise in the poetics of fate.

Here as in so many of his films, Roeg works with parallels, pre-figurations and echoes, inviting us to see time as a rhyming structure. The redness of the stain on a slide that John is studying rhymes with the redness of the raincoat his daughter is wearing when she dies; but his daughter's death is not so much a completed catastrophe as the opening moment in a grim poetic

pattern that will only be closed with John's death, at the hands of the dwarf wearing a near-identical red raincoat. As Roeg heightens our sensitivity to these rhymes, he suggests the eerie contours of fateful forces that will never fully come into view. Repetitions of colour are supplemented by sonic doublings. In keeping with the story, Roeg's rendering of Venice is intensely eerie, and

much of this has to do with the use of sound. Roeg took advantage of the way in which Venice acts as a sound maze, its architecture generating “schizophonic” effects by separating sounds from their sources, producing a duplicitous sonic space. John and Laura often lose their way, returning inadvertently to places they had just left, retracing their steps and doubling back,

wandering around a city that is a dubious labyrinth, and the fragmented image of a fate that can only be recognised too late.

If these two works by du Maurier are about an agency that should not be there — the collective cunning of birds; the poetic weaving of fate — then Christopher Priest's novels *The Affirmation* (1981) and *The Glamour* (1984) are

organised around absences, gaps where agency should be. The two lead characters are defined by gaps in the stories that they can tell about themselves, and one effect of Priest's work (like that of Alan Garner, to which we shall turn later) is to make us appreciate the eerie power of stories.

The Affirmation appears at first to be the story of a young man, Peter Sinclair, who has

had a breakdown after a relationship has collapsed and he has lost his job. A meeting with an older acquaintance leads to Sinclair taking up an offer to live in the older man's second home, a rundown cottage in rural Herefordshire, in exchange for decorating and renovating the property. While he is at the cottage, Sinclair starts writing what he comes to think of as an

autobiographical work, a piece of writing that will finally explain his own life to him. We do not at first see this text — perhaps we never see it — only Sinclair's alternately euphoric and tortured thoughts about it. Sinclair admits that he has begun to embellish and indeed wholly alter elements of the narrative — changing relatively trivial details such as the names of places and

characters, but also personality traits and key events, rationalizing that these amendments mean that the novel will have fidelity to a “higher truth”. This is what many novelists would claim, and Priest is no doubt having a self-mocking joke at his own expense here.

When we eventually see it, Sinclair’s “autobiographical” text appears to be nothing of the sort: it looks like a work

of extravagant fantasy (indeed it appears to belong almost to the fantasy genre). Actually, we are never certain that what we are reading is Sinclair's autobiographical manuscript; in at least one version of what happens, the treasured manuscript which Sinclair carries around with him is nothing more than a sheaf of empty papers. But in the manuscript that we read, Sinclair becomes the winner

of a special lottery, run on a place called Collago, an island that is part of a “Dream Archipelago” — a vast island group that, as its name suggests, appears to be at least as much a state of mind as a geographical location. The lottery allows winners to undergo a process called “athanasia”, which will give them a limited kind of immortality — their bodies will be cleansed of any

morbidities and will be immune from contracting any future illnesses, but they may still die as a result of accidents. However, the athanasia process involves them losing their memory entirely. Their personalities will be rebuilt on the basis of a detailed questionnaire which they complete before the athanasia operation. However, Sinclair insists that those conducting his

rehabilitation use his own autobiographical text instead (which cannot now, evidently, be quite the same text as the one we are reading: it must exist one level "down" from *this* narrative about the archipelago and the lottery).

In the remainder of *The Affirmation*, the relationship between the narrative lines set in real world locations and those which take place in the

Dream Archipelago becomes increasingly tangled. It appears that Sinclair — or some part of Sinclair — is proliferating fractured narratives in order to deflect from the trauma of his role in the suicide of his lover, Gracia.

An episode from Sinclair's childhood provides what might be the key to the whole novel. He recalls an incident where, after an accident, he

retrospectively lost any memory of the previous three days:

> During these three days, I must have been alert, conscious and self-aware, feeling the continuity of memory, sure of my identity and existence. An event that *followed* them, though, eradicated them, just as one day death would erase all memory. It was my first experience of a kind of death

> and, since then, although unconsciousness itself was not to be feared, I saw memory as the key to sentience. I existed as long as I remembered.

The irony is that the Sinclair of the Dream Archipelago undergoes the “death” of amnesia in order to achieve immortality. And if Sinclair exists “as long as he remembers”, the problem is that the different versions of

Sinclair do *not* remember: the "this-world" Sinclair because his consciousness has fragmented under pressure from Gracia's suicide; the Dream Archipelago Sinclair because he has submitted to the athanasia process.

What is eerie here is the agency of the unconscious itself. *The Affirmation* can be read as an extended reflection on the conundrum of how it is possible to conceal something

from ourselves, how a single entity can be simultaneously the one who is hiding something and the one from whom the thing is hidden. This can only happen because the unity and transparency which we ordinarily ascribe to our minds are illusory. Gaps and inconsistencies are constitutive of what we are. What covers over these lacunae are stories — which therefore possess their own

agency. Memory is already a story, and when there are gaps in memory, new stories must be confabulated to fill in the holes. But who is the author of these stories? The answer is that there is not so much an author as a confabulatory process without any “one” behind it. This process isn’t a pathological deviation from the norm, but the way in which identity ordinarily

functions. However, this functioning is usually obscured, and only comes into view when something goes wrong — when the stories fail, and the question about the machinery that produces them becomes unavoidable.

Priest's novel *The Glamour* returns to many of these preoccupations, particularly the problems of amnesia and confabulation. Richard Grey

is a cameraman who has lost his memory as a result of being caught in a terrorist bomb blast. He is recovering in a hospital in Devon, when he is visited by a woman, Susan Kewley, who claims to have been his girlfriend. Like *The Affirmation*, the novel turns on the relationship between gaps and stories, with memory understood as a particular kind of story, susceptible to manipulation

and reconstruction. For instance, one of the doctors working on Grey's rehabilitation refers to the condition of "hysterical paramnesia", in which patients confabulate a whole "remembered" world on the basis of a few fragments.

The novel offers alternate versions of how Richard and Susan met. In the first version, the one that Richard initially believes, and which

he seems to have recovered via hypnosis, the couple met while on holiday in France. Their developing relationship was overshadowed by the presence of Susan's manipulative lover, Niall, with whom she wants to break off, but who has a sinister hold over her. Yet Susan utterly rejects this account, claiming that she has never been to France, and that their affair — again with

Niall always in the background — actually took place in London. There is something intensely eerie about the retrospective downgrading of the episodes in France. To the reader — and presumably to Grey — the events in France have a vividness which makes them “feel” at least as real, if not more real, than the episodes in London narrated by Kewley. (This is something

like a reverse of the effect of what happens in *The Affirmation*: the Dream Archipelago scenes appear at first to be a fantasy or a fiction-within-a-fiction, ontologically inferior to the episodes which happen in the real-world locations, but they attain a vividness which exceeds that of the more "realistic" sections of the novel.) If the French story was not real, we are

confronted, as in *The Affirmation*, with the question of the agent that produced it. At the climax of *The Glamour*, we seem to receive an answer to this question: in a metafictional twist, Niall claims to be the narrator of the whole novel, and it is Niall who has "fed" Richard his false memories of the France trip. If the overwhelming effect of this revelation is to somewhat

dissipate the sense of the eerie that the novel has built up — we now seem to know the precise nature of the agent which has produced all these stories — we are still left with the problem of the scope of Niall's influence: how much of what we have read is Niall's contrivance, how much belongs to what Niall still calls Richard's "real life", and to what extent can Niall's fictions be separated

from this “real life”? If Richard has a “real life” beyond Niall, this implies that Niall is “only” the narrator, someone who is telling Richard’s story, not his author-creator — despite Niall’s claim that “I have made you, Grey.”

The metafictional struggle between Niall and Richard can be read as part of the novel’s core preoccupation with the question of

invisibility. If Niall is the narrator, he is a “level up” from the characters he is narrating, and therefore not fully visible to them (they can interact with Niall the character, but not with Niall the narrator). But the novel is about invisibility in a seemingly more straightforward way. Niall, Susan and to some extent Richard himself apparently have “the glamour”.

Glamour, the novel explains, is an old Scottish word, and

> [i]n the original sense a glamour was a spell, an enchantment. A young man in love would approach the wisest old woman in his village and pay her for a charm of invisibility to be placed on his beloved, so that she could no longer be coveted by the other young men. Once she had been glammered, or made glamorous, she was free

from prying eyes.

The novel is ambivalent about how this disappearance is produced — is it an induced failure to see? Do some people simply escape notice, and forever fall into the background? Or is it some form of sorcery which allows Niall and the others not be seen (but would this ultimately be any different from an induced failure to see

in any case)?

Disappearance, alongside amnesia, is a clear case of “nothing where there should be something”. But the two cases are very different. Whereas amnesia generates a gap that is perceived and felt — a gap that demands filling by a story; disappearance is a gap which conceals itself. It is an example of negative hallucination, a concept which is introduced into the

novel when, while under hypnotic suggestion, Grey is induced not to see a woman who is in the same room as him. Negative hallucination is a phenomenon that is in many ways more interesting — and more eerie — than “positive” hallucination. *Not seeing what is there* is both stranger and more commonplace than seeing what is not there. Failure to see, the involuntary process of overlooking

material which contradicts — or simply does not fit in with — the dominant stories which we tell ourselves is part of the ongoing “editing process” through which what we experience as identity is produced. In negative hallucination, objects and entities are typically registered but not seen. If, say, someone is induced into not seeing a box lying on the floor, they will nevertheless

swerve to avoid the box when they walk across the room, and what is more they will produce a rationale, a little story, explaining why they have done so. It was Freud who introduced the concept of negative hallucination, and, as with confabulation, the phenomenon illuminates the eerie qualities of the unconscious, its negative production. The unconscious, something which is itself a

gap, an invisibility, is also the producer of gaps which are not seen.

On Vanishing Land: M.R. James and Eno

As I mentioned in the introduction to this book, my thoughts on the eerie emerged

from a collaborative project that I worked on with Justin Barton, *On Vanishing Land*. The eventual form that project took was a forty-five-minute audio-essay, but its origins came in a walk that we took in Suffolk, in the east of England, going from the coastal town of Felixstowe inland to Woodbridge. We were supposed to be scouting locations for another project, but the landscape demanded

to be engaged with on its own terms. The symbolic markers of the beginning and ending of the journey were Felixstowe container port — an “unvisited vastness”, as Justin put it in the script for *On Vanishing Land* — and Sutton Hoo, the world-famous site of an Anglo-Saxon ship burial.

The port and the burial ground offer two different versions of the eerie. The

container port looms over the declining seaside town, the port's cranes towering above the Victorian resort like H.G. Wells' Martian Tripods. Approached from the countryside, from Trimley marshes, the cranes preside over the rural scene like gleaming cybernetic dinosaurs erupting out of a Constable landscape. Viewed in this way, the port appears almost as a weird

phenomenon, an alien and incommensurable eruption in the “natural” scene. Ultimately, however, it is the feeling of the eerie that is dominant. There’s an eerie sense of *silence* about the port that has nothing to do with actual noise levels. The port is full of the inorganic clangs and clanks that issue from ships as they are loaded and unloaded; what’s missing, at least for the spectator

watching the port from a vantage point outside, are any traces of language and sociability. Watching the container lorries and the ships do their work, or surveying the containers themselves, the metal boxes racked up like a materialised version of the bar charts in Gibson's cyberspace, their names ringing with a certain transnational, blank, Ballardian poetry — Maersk

Sealand, Hanjin, K-line — one seldom has any sense of human presence. The humans remain out of sight, in cabs, in cranes, in offices. I'm reminded instead of the mute alien efficiency of the pod distribution site in Philip Kaufman's 1978 version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The contrast between the container port, in which humans are invisible connectors between

automated systems, and the clamour of the old London docks, which the port of Felixstowe effectively replaced, tells us a great deal about the shifts of capital and labour in the last forty years. The port is a sign of the triumph of finance capital; it is part of the heavy material infrastructure that facilitates the illusion of a “dematerialised” capitalism. It is the eerie underside of

contemporary capital's mundane gloss.

Sutton Hoo, meanwhile, is eerie in at least two different senses. Firstly, it constitutes a gap in knowledge. The beliefs and rituals of the Anglo-Saxon society that constructed the artefacts and buried the ship are only partly understood. (The ship itself and the artefacts it contains — including some incredibly intricate jewellery — was

long ago moved to the British Museum. Replicas now stand in the Visitor Centre at Sutton Hoo.) Secondly, Sutton Hoo — a burial mound, standing above the town of Woodbridge — is an eerie site in its own right: desolate, atmospheric, solitary.

Another way of marking the beginning and ending of our journey into the eerie is by thinking about two figures: M.R. James and

Brian Eno. James set one of his most famous ghost stories, “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad” (1904), in a thinly fictionalised Felixstowe, while Eno’s 1982 album, *Ambient 4: On Land*, is in part an engagement with Suffolk coastal territory. James approached the Suffolk landscape as a holidaying antiquarian, visiting from Cambridge. Eno, meanwhile, came to the terrain as a

returning Suffolk-born native (he was born in Woodbridge), reconstructing in sound the "places, times, climates and moods" of landscapes he had walked through as a child.

"Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" concerns Parkins, a Cambridge scholar who has travelled up to East Anglia for a walking holiday. It is set in Burnstow, a transparent code for Felixstowe. Parkins

is a close double of James himself: James was a Cambridge antiquarian who was a frequent visitor to Suffolk. The contrast between the urban world which Parkin has left behind and the empty heathland over which he wanders is also a contrast between enlightenment knowledge and ancient lore, and Parkins' estrangement consists in large part in his finding the modes of

scholarly explanation which work so well in Cambridge libraries suddenly having no purchase on what he encounters in the Suffolk landscape.

In “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad” and “A Warning to the Curious” (1925), James discovers a template that later writers such as H.P. Lovecraft, Alan Garner, Nigel Kneale and David Rudkin will work

from. The two stories turn on the unearthing of old objects — a bronze whistle and an ancient crown — which carry ancient threats. But when the BBC adapted these stories, the films became as much about the East Anglian landscape — “bleak and solemn”, as James described it in “A Warning to the Curious” — as they did about the demonic creatures called up by the inorganic artefacts.

Jonathan Miller didn't use Felixstowe as a location in his 1968 adaptation of "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad", but the legendary Suffolk town of Dunwich and the tiny village of Waxham in Norfolk. The crucial scene in which Parkin (slightly renamed in the adaptation) comes upon the whistle whilst wandering among the gravestones on a crumbling cliff-side were

recognisably filmed in Dunwich — a place, which as James' namesake Henry noted while on a walking tour of Suffolk, consists now almost entirely of absence. Dunwich, once a thriving sea port, was nearly destroyed at a stroke by a storm in 1328; most of what remained was gradually claimed by the sea, so that today only a few houses and a single church are still standing, themselves

threatened by the slowly voracious ocean.

Waxham is also a place governed by absence. With its few cottages and dilapidated church, it feels like the skeleton of a village. But Miller didn’t use any of the village’s few landmarks, concentrating instead on the semi-abstract terrain of the beach. The largely featureless beach at Waxham is an excellent version of the

landscape as described by James: “a long stretch of shore-shingle edged by sand, and intersected at short intervals with black groynes running down to the water”, a “bleak stage” on which “no actor was visible”, and defined by “the absence of any landmark”.

In Miller’s version, Parkin, played by a splendid Michael Hordern, is a crumbling logical positivist, his mind

eroding as surely as the threatened East Anglian coastline, only far more quickly. Hordern, who was never better, conveys Parkin's withdrawal, his gestures and expressions suggesting conversational gambits and anecdotes that work far better when rehearsed in the theatre of his mind than they ever would in any inter-personal context. This is a man more at home

with books than people. In the manner of A.J. Ayer, Hordern's Parkin is wont to dismiss the concept of life after death as devoid of meaning. Yet the stridency of his philosophical position is belied by the unsteadiness of his mumbling exposition. At one level, the empty dunes and solitary heathland become an objective correlative for Parkin's increasingly solipsistic

mental state. Yet the beach is also the zone where Parkin encounters the outside, the alien forces that fatally disrupt his interiority.

There is a strong affinity between Miller's television adaptation of "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" and Eno's *On Land*: both in effect are meditations on the eerie as it manifested in the East Anglian terrain. With its lingering

concentration on the landscape, its brooding silences, and its long scenes devoid of much action, it was as if Miller produced something like the television equivalent of the ambient music that Eno would later invent. With *On Land*, Eno wrote in his sleevenotes for the album, “the landscape has ceased to be a backdrop for something else to happen in front of; instead, everything

that happens is a part of the landscape. There is no longer a sharp distinction between foreground and background." The eeriness of Miller's film comes from the way it treats the landscape as an agent in its own right. The film captures a seductive slowness proper to the nearly-deserted heaths and beaches, sublime in their sombre desolation. Parkin underestimates the powers of this archaic and

arcane terrain at his peril.

For James, who was both a horror writer and a conservative Christian, the fascination for the outside is always fateful, as the title of "A Warning to the Curious" made clear. But *On Land* is more open to the idea of an outside that need not be threatening or destructive. With its gentle, eddying movements, its bubblings and babblings, its susurrating

suggestions of nonorganic sentience, *On Land* calls up a dreaming landscape teeming with detail. Eno's biographer David Sheppard wrote that, for all its invocations of Eno's childhood, the atmosphere of *On Land* "was less one of sentimental yearning and more one of introverted, sensual intoxication." Certainly, *On Land* is sensually intoxicating, but "introverted"

seems an odd word for a record that seems so lacking in psychological interiority. There is no doubt a sense of solitude, a withdrawal from the hubbub of banal sociality in *On Land* but this emerges as a precondition for openness to the outside, where the outside designates, at one level, a radically depastoralised nature, and, at the outer limits, a different, heightened encounter with the

Real.

Eno recounts in those same sleevenotes that part of the inspiration for *On Land* lay in his ambition to produce an "aural counterpart" to Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973). The shift into sound opens up the eerie. There is an intrinsically eerie dimension to acousmatic sound — sound that is detached from a visible source — and one of the most unsettling tracks on *On Land*

is “Shadow”, which features a quietly distressing whimper that could be a human voice, an animal sobbing, or an aural hallucination produced by the movement of wind. This suggests the work of some hostile agent, but part of what makes *On Land* remarkable is the way that it is open to the possibility of an eerie that is not containable by the horror or ghost story genres: an outside that —

pulsing beyond the confines of the mundane — is achingly alluring even as it is disconcertingly alien. For James, the outside is always coded as hostile and demonic. When he read his ghost stories to his Cambridge audience at Christmas, the glimpses of exteriority they offered no doubt brought a thrill to his listeners, but they also came with a firm warning: venture outside this

cloistered world at your peril. Yet the world that James — a Victorian figure in the twentieth century — sought to defend had in many ways already vanished, or was on the brink of vanishing. The Bath Hotel in Felixstowe — where James habitually stayed, the model for the hotel in “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad” — was burned down by suffragettes in 1914.

Ultimately, I want to emphasise the dimensions of the eerie that James foreclosed, but for the moment, let’s consider two writers who follow James into exploring the malign version of the eerie: Nigel Kneale and Alan Garner.

Eerie Thanatos: Nigel Kneale and Alan Garner

Pulp-horror, archaic science fiction and the darker aspects of folklore share a preoccupation with exhumation of or confrontation

with ancient super-weapons categorised as Inorganic Demons or xenolithic artifacts. These relics or artifacts are generally depicted in the shape of objects made of inorganic materials (stone, metal, bones, souls, ashes, etc.). Autonomous, sentient and independent of human will, their existence is characterised by their forsaken status, their immemorial slumber and their provocatively exquisite forms. […] Inorganic demons are parasitic by nature, they […] generate their effects out of the human host, whether as an

individual, an ethnicity, a society or an entire civilisation.

— REZA NEGARESTANI, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*

Reza Negarestani could be describing here the structure that James uses in “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad” and “A Warning to the Curious”: but this pattern is also used by two of James’ successors,

Nigel Kneale and Alan Garner. In some of their most important works, Kneale and Garner show disinterred “inorganic demons”/artefacts operating as fatalistic engines, drawing characters into deadly compulsions. Both Kneale and Garner explore the contours of what you might call an eerie Thanatos — a transpersonal (and transtemporal) death drive, in which the

“psychological” emerges as the product of forces from the outside.

Quatermass’ Thanatos

The television series Nigel Kneale is most famous for writing are typically described as operating on the interstices between genres (especially horror and science fiction). But I would argue that what is most characteristic of Kneale’s best

work is its sense of the eerie. Unlike M.R. James, Kneale does not take the supernatural on its own terms. In fact, Kneale's standard move — made most obviously in *Quatermass and the Pit* — is to offer a scientific remotivation of what had previously been taken to be supernatural. What in one register can be apprehended as a "demon" appears in another register as a particular

kind of material agent. It's true, Kneale agrees, that science since the Enlightenment has maintained there is no supplementary spiritual substance, but the material world in which we live is more profoundly alien and strange than we had previously imagined; and rather than insisting upon the pre-eminence of the human subject who is alleged to be

the privileged bearer of reason, Kneale shows that an enquiry into the nature of what the world is like is also inevitably an unraveling of what human beings had taken them themselves to be.

At the heart of Kneale's work is the question of agency and intent. According to some philosophers, it is the capacity for intentionality which definitively separates human beings from the

natural world. Intentionality includes intent as we ordinarily understand it, but really refers to the capacity to feel a certain way *about* things. Rivers may possess agency — they affect changes — but they do not care about what they do; they do not have any sort of attitude towards the world. Kneale's most famous creation, the scientist Bernard Quatermass, could be said to belong to a

trajectory of Radical Enlightenment thinking which is troubled by this distinction. Radical Enlightenment thinkers such as Spinoza, Darwin, and Freud continually pose the question: to what extent can the concept of intentionality be applied to human beings, never mind to the natural world? The question is posed in part because of the thoroughgoing naturalisation

that Radical Enlightenment thought has insisted upon: if human beings fully belong to the so-called natural world, then on what grounds can a special case be made for them? The conclusions that Radical Enlightenment thinking draws are the exact opposite of the claims for which so-called new materialists such as Jane Bennett have argued. New materialists such as Bennett

accept that the distinction between human beings and the natural world is no longer tenable, but they construe this to mean that many of the features previously ascribed only to human beings are actually distributed throughout nature. Radical Enlightenment goes in the opposite direction, by questioning whether there is any such thing as intentionality at all; and if

there is, could human beings be said to possess it? The answer is complex: there may be something like intentionality at work in human beings, but it does not correspond with what human beings, in their casual phenomenal self-reflections, think of as their personality, conscious intentions or feelings.

Here is where Kneale comes in. Quatermass

discovers the mechanical-automatic-alien basis of what has been taken to be human. What emerges as the eventual object of Quatermass' research is what Freud, in "Beyond The Pleasure Principle" (1920), calls Thanatos. By striking contrast with the new materialist idea of "vibrant matter", which suggests that all matter is to some extent alive, the conjecture implied by Freud's

positing of Thanatos is that *nothing* is alive: life is a region of death. Freud's later invocation of a dualistic struggle between Thanatos and Eros can be read as a retreat from the forbidding monism of "Beyond The Pleasure Principle", which argues that all life is merely a route to death. What is called organic life is actually a kind of folding of the inorganic.

But the inorganic is not the

passive, inert counterpart to an allegedly self-propelling life; on the contrary, it possesses its own agency. There is a death drive, which in its most radical formulation is not a drive towards death, but a drive *of* death. The inorganic is the impersonal pilot of everything, including that which seems to be personal and organic. Seen from the perspective of Thanatos, we

ourselves become an exemplary case of the eerie: there is an agency at work in us (the unconscious, the death drive), but it is not where or what we expected it to be.

But this is not the whole story. The point here is not that we are the blind slaves of the death drive, but, if we are not, it is because of an equally impersonal process: science, which consists in part of discovering and

analysing the very processes that Freud calls Thanatos. The figure of the Radical Enlightenment scientist, then, is someone who understands the Thanatoidal nature of their own impulses, but who — precisely because they understand this — offers some possibility of escape from them. I will now explore this by considering two of Kneale's celebrated works — *Quatermass and the Pit*

(195859) and *The Stone Tape* (1972), and one of his lesser regarded series — the final installment of the Quatermass series, *Quatermass*, from 1979.

Quatermass and the Pit is about an excavation in the fictional London tube station of Hobbs End. Workers uncover what turns out to be a Martian spaceship filled with the corpses of repulsive quasi-insect beings. Aliens,

we think. Yet the genius of Kneale's script is that the Martians turn out not to be aliens — in the sense of being "different from us" — at all. Fleeing the destruction of their own planet, the Martians had, five million years previously, interbred with proto-human hominids in order to perpetuate their species.

So the distinction between alien and human is fatally

unsettled. As the Quatermass sequence progresses, the alien has become increasingly intimate: In the first installment, *The Quatermass Experiment* — the aliens are out in space; in the second, *Quatermass II* (a kind of British equivalent of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) — the aliens are already amongst us; and in the third, *Quatermass and the Pit* — we are the aliens.

When, at the end of the film, Quatermass makes a stand against the Martians and earnestly hopes that Earth does not become “the Martians’ second dead planet”, this could look like a retreat from the film’s pitiless message — that we ourselves are Martian. Yet even if Kneale has already deconstructed the opposition between Eros and Thanatos, human and Martian —

unravel the human, and you discover that it is only a fold within the body of an organic Thanatos — he is still entitled to place hope in the science that has discovered this.

A darker version of the origin of humanity story told in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (to which we will return in a later chapter), *Quatermass and the Pit* also shares much with J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned*

World (1962): most importantly the theme of what Greil Marcus in *Lipstick Traces* calls "phylogenetic memory". In *Quatermass and the Pit*, the memory is a "literal" memory, a deeply submerged but still accessible mental trace (triggered, in the film, by the unearthing of the spaceship); in *The Drowned World*, the "memories" are encoded in the physical form of the human being itself,

Ballard's "spinal landscapes". *Quatermass and the Pit* is archaeological; *The Drowned World* is geological. But in both human nervous systems and memory are conceived of as inorganic recordings — relics of traumatic events that humans must either decode or repeat.

Kneale foregrounded this theme of recording in *The Stone Tape*. Here, a group of scientists take up residence in

a new research facility. It quickly becomes apparent that the building is haunted: one of their number, a female computer programmer, is particularly “sensitive” to the ghost (a servant girl from the nineteenth century who died in a mysterious fall). Inevitably, the scientists go from sceptical dismissal to a manic need to explain and map the phenomenon without much of a pause for breath.

Kneale's thesis is that hauntings and ghosts are particularly intense phenomena that are literally recorded by matter, by the stone of the room. (Hence the "stone tape" of the title.) What the scientists had been looking for, apparently coincidentally, was a new, more compact and durable recording medium. But what the haunting phenomenon offers is the possibility not

only of a new recording medium, but of a new player: the human nervous system itself. In their moment of exultant bliss (before the inevitably bleak denouement), the scientists laugh and joke about the prospect of a totally wireless communication system: transmissions beamed directly into your head (like William Gibson's cyberspace, but without even the 'trodes).

But the scientists' obsessive activity ends up wiping the tape — or at least wiping away the thing last recorded onto it. Something else, something more ancient, stirs beneath, terrifying the female computer programmer into literally falling into the footsteps of the nineteenth-century girl, plunging to her death in a state of total terror. So what Kneale implies in the end is the breakdown of the

distinction between the player and what is being played. To begin with, it seems that the ghostly screams are passive and inert, as incapable of exerting agency as the dry rot that afflicts the haunted room; yet in the end, it is the human beings who are revealed to be caught in a terrible compulsion to repeat. It is as if the room — the site, it is eventually implied, of some unimaginably ancient place of

sacrifice — solicits the scientists into precipitating yet another death, into playing out the same old sequence once again. The human players are themselves part of an aeons-old pattern of senseless repetition. Eerie Thanatos, again…

Thanatos looms large in the final, under-rated, *Quatermass* serial. Kneale saw this as a requiem for the Sixties: a dark parable about

the thanatropic drives which youth messianism could nurture. In place of the hippie dream of a renewed Earth, his trance-intoxicated post-punk proto-crusties — the Planet People — long for an escape into another world, another solar system. *Quatermass*' landscape was projected directly out of the anxieties of the 1970s: the choking ecosphere, the fuel shortages, the power-cuts, the

disintegration of the social contract into a Hobbesian war of all-against-all — it was Sixties utopianism in ruins.

Those barricaded streets, the roving armed street gangs (inspired by Baader Meinhof and the Red and Angry Brigades) could equally well have walked off a Killing Joke record cover or from a Conservative party election broadcast. Such was the way in which imaginaries and

impulses — reactionary, neoarchaic, revolutionary — became collapsed into one another (collapsed like the abandoned vehicles from which the geriatric colony in the serial construct their bolthole rhizome) in 1979.

If you want to think of analogues for the 1979 *Quatermass*, look to some of the major post-punk records of that year — Tubeway Army's *Replicas*, Joy

Division's *Unknown Pleasures* — rather than to the cinematic blockbusters (*Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (both 1977)) to which it was inevitably, and unfavourably, compared at the time. That said, the early, obsessive scenes of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* could almost be Knealeian — but all of that is dissipated at the end by the Jarre-like lightshow and

the appearance ofthe rather cute aliens. What disappears is nothing less than the eerie itself, as the early automatism of the main characters, and many of the questions about the aliens (indeed, the question of whether there are aliens at all) gives way to what has since become standard in blockbuster science fiction: the compulsory spectacle of conspicuously expensive FX.

What *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* has in common with *Quatermass* is its vision of human populations entranced into unconscious complicity with the alien powers. But *Quatermass* is consummately able to resist the temptation to which Spielberg must succumb — that of anthropomorphizing the aliens. The purposes of the aliens in *Quatermass* remain

unfathomably opaque, like their physical forms. Anything we “learn” about them is conjecture, inference, speculation. They are, in every sense, lightyears away from us.

Kneale’s great themes — the intimacy of the alien; the lust for annihilation in organic beings — this time emerge in an analysis of youth millenarianism. His rendition of youth culture is,

predictably, more to do with Jeff Nuttall's *Bomb Culture* (1968) than it is Age-of-Aquarius utopian. The urge to herd together into crowds is interpreted symptomatically as the following of a programme seeded deep into the unconscious of the young.

Kneale's usual cybergothic methodology — disinterring the present in the relics of the Deep Past — this time focuses on Neolithic stone

circles. Quatermass hypothesises that the megalithic sites are trauma records, the stones arranged as commemorations of mass exterminations: the Earth's scar tissue. (The parallel between astro-apocalyptic events and stone circles had actually been made three years earlier, in ITV's memorably eerie children's programme from 1976, *Children of the Stones*.)

The stone circles were the sites of what Quatermass ominously refers to as previous “harvestings” of the human race. Who can say what the species reaping humanity is like and what their motivations are? A lust for protein? Energy vampirism? Quatermass can only guess. Here, Kneale draws upon the eerie affect which stone circles typically produce. As I noted above,

stone circles confront us with a symbolic structure that has entirely rotted away, so that the deep past of humanity is revealed to be in effect an illegible alien civilisation, its rituals and modes of subjectivity unknown to us.

Kneale was disappointed with the casting of John Mills, which was forced on him by the Euston production company that insisted on a big-name star; he preferred

André Morell and Andrew Keir (who had played the scientist in, respectively, the TV and the film versions of *Quatermass and the Pit*). He supposedly found Mills insufficiently heroic, scarcely recognisable as the same figure Morell and Keir had portrayed.

Yet Mills' quiet anger, his compassion and disgust for humanity, his slighted but enduring dignity, make him

what could be the definitive Quatermass. Mills brings a terrible authority to the cosmic Spinozism of the show's ethical payoff. When the young astronomer Joe Kapp — just thawing from the shock of losing his entire family — talks of "evil", Quatermass corrects him: "Maybe evil is always someone else's good. Perhaps it's a cosmic law."

The Mythic Time of *Red Shift*

It is said that Alan Garner's extraordinary novel *Red Shift* (1973) was triggered by the author seeing a piece of graffiti at a railway station which read "not really now not any more". There is something so eerie, so cryptic, so suggestive about that phrase, especially when written as an anonymous graffito. What did the nameless author of this

vagabond poetry mean by it, and what did it mean to them? What event — was it a personal crisis, a cultural event, a mystical revelation of some kind? — prompted them to write it? And did anyone else but Garner ever witness the phrase graffitied onto the railway station wall? Or was it only Garner who saw it? Not that I am suggesting he imagined it — but the phrase so perfectly

captures the temporal vortices in Garner's work that it seems as if it could have been a special message meant only for him. Perhaps it was, whatever the "intentions" of the graffiti writer happened to be.

If the most famous anonymous source in the world is to be believed, the words "not really now not any more" were scrawled in lipstick, beneath two lovers'

names that had been chalked onto the wall. In which case, the explanation for the phrase seems — on the face of it — to be somewhat prosaic. Someone — one of the two lovers, or one of their friends, enemies or rivals, or a stranger — was making a comment — sarcastic, melancholic, angry? — about the status of the lovers' relationship. A phrase that is not quite banal, but which is

certainly transparent, conversational — “not really now not any more” — acquires a poetic opacity by virtue of the omission of a comma. Yet, even that apparently deflationary explanation cannot conjure away the eeriness of the phrase: “not really now not any more”. To say there was something *fated* about Garner’s encounter with this graffiti is to redouble the

phrase's intrinsic, indelible eeriness. For what does the phrase point to if not a fatal temporality? No now, not any more, not really. Does this mean that the present has eroded, disappeared — no now any more? Are we in the time of the always-already, where the future has been written; in which case it is not the future, not really?

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. What, exactly,

happens in *Red Shift*? The "novel" — a label which scarcely seems adequate for a text whose cryptic density makes it resemble a prose poem — juxtaposes three time periods: Roman Britain, the English Civil War and the then-present day.

The contemporary episode centres on the tormented, asphyxiatingly intense relationship between Tom and Jan. Their entanglement

has a blocked, frustrated quality seemingly from the start. External obstacles — the hostility of Tom's parents to the relationship; the physical distance between the couple, now that Jan has moved to London — are doubled by internal obstacles, most powerfully and distressingly those generated by Tom's obsessive jealousy and possessiveness, which becomes malevolent — even

deadly — after he discovers that Jan had an affair with an older man. It is Tom's very desire to possess Jan, to claim ownership over her very being, which ultimately drives Jan away. This quickly becomes more self-destructive to Tom than it is destructive of Jan, as Jan increasingly asserts her autonomy and ultimately ends the relationship.

The Civil War episode

involves a young epileptic, Thomas Rowley, and his wife Margery, who live in the Cheshire village of Barthomley. He and the other villagers are barricaded up in the church behind defences they have improvised to repel Royalist troops, when Rowley has a fit and accidentally fires a musket, causing the Royalists to brutally attack. The women are raped, and all the men bar

Rowley are killed. But Rowley and his wife are helped to safety by one of the most savage of the Royalist soldiers, Thomas Venables, who is also Margery's former lover.

The Roman occupation episode focuses on Macey, one of a number of Roman soldiers from the destroyed Ninth Legion. The childlike Macey befriends a Celtic priestess that the soldiers

have raped and captured. Ultimately, the priestess kills the soldiers by poisoning their bread, and escapes with Macey.

The relationship amongst these periods is enigmatic, if not outright unintelligible. What all three episodes have in common — besides certain differently repeating traumatic elements — is an inorganic object: a Neolithic votive axe, which assumes

symbolic significance for all three of the couples. This axe serves many functions — it seems to mark, at one and the same "time", continuity and simultaneity, as well as operating as a kind of trigger (causing, for instance, Rowley and Macey to fit).

What *Red Shift* discloses is not, evidently, a linear temporality, in which the different historical episodes simply succeed one another.

Nor does it present the episodes in a relation of sheer juxtaposition — in which no causal connection at all is asserted amongst the different episodes, and they are offered to us as merely sharing some similarities. Nor do we have the idea — familiar from science fiction or fantasy conventions — of a causality operating “backwards” and “forwards” through time, so that past, present and future

have influence upon one another. This latter possibility is the closest to what *Red Shift* seems to be doing, but the novel's scrambling of time is so complete that we are not left with any secure sense of "past", "present" and "future" at all: *not really now any more*. Is there, then, no now because the past has consumed the present, reduced it to a series of compulsive repetitions, and

what seemed to be new, what seemed to be now, is only the playing out of some out-of-time pattern? This formulation, perhaps, is closest to the cold fatality that seems to (un)ravel in *Red Shift*: Yet if different historical moments are in some sense synchronous, would this not mean, not that there was no now, but that it is *all now*?

A whole other level of

eerie repetition comes into focus when we consider *Red Shift* in its relationship both to Garner's other novels and to the work of other writers. The novel is a kind of repetition-without-origin. It can be read as an extension and intensification of the model established by Garner's own earlier novels, *Elidor* (1965) and *The Owl Service* (1967). In his 1975 lecture "Inner Time", Garner explained that

his novels could all be seen as an “expression” of a particular myth, so that his *Elidor* was an “expression” of the ballad of “Childe Rowland and Burd Ellen”, while *The Owl Service* was an “expression” of the myth of Lleu, Blodeuedd and Gronw, from the Welsh myth-system the *Mabinogion*. For *Red Shift,* the source material was the ballad of Tam Lin. With each successive novel, the

relationship between Garner's fiction and the myth which is "expressed" becomes more oblique, to the degree that, by the time of *Red Shift*, as Charles Butler notes in an important essay on the novel, "Alan Garner's *Red Shift* and the Shifting Ballad of 'Tam Lin'", many were wont to dismiss the connection with the Tam Lin myth as fanciful or strained. Butler summarises the Tam Lin

myth — or perhaps it would be better referred to as a series or complex of myths — as follows:

The ballad of ‘Tam Lin’ exists in numerous versions. There are nine in Child’s *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* alone, and that is certainly not an exhaustive collection. Many of the differences between versions are quite significant, as we shall see, but the narrative can be broadly summarised thus: a young woman

called Janet (in some versions Margaret) goes to Carterhaugh (or Kertonha, Chaster's Wood, Chester Wood, etc.) against the injunction of her parents, who fear she will lose her virginity to Tam Lin, a fairy youth who haunts the place. There she plucks a flower and thus summons Tam Lin himself. He challenges her presence, but she replies defiantly that Carterhaugh is her own property and that she has as much right as he to be there. On her return home, it becomes apparent that she is pregnant. Her family (variously her mother,

sister, brother, or a family retainer) is shocked. She asserts that Tam Lin is the child's father and returns to Carterhaugh, either to find Tam Lin or else (in some versions) to find a herb to cause an abortion. Tam Lin appears and explains that he is not a fairy at all but a young man of human blood who was stolen away by the Fairy Queen when he was a boy. Although his life with the fairies is pleasant, every seven years on Halloween the fairies must pay a 'tithe to hell', and this year he is likely to be the victim. If Janet wishes to

save him (and therefore give her baby a father), she must execute a complex procedure that involves pulling Tam Lin from his horse as he rides past with the fairy troop, holding fast to him while he undergoes a series of frightening transformations, and finally covering his naked body with her green mantle. She achieves all this and thus wins Tam Lin from the Fairy Queen, who is bitter at her loss.

Butler convincingly argues

that, despite the lack of many explicit references to Tam Lin, there are many intricate echoes of the myth(s) in *Red Shift*. The most obvious — and most superficial — mirroring is in the names of some of the characters — Tom/Thomas and Jan/Margery as variations on Tam and Janet/Margaret — but the deeper resonances are at the level of themes: the idea of possession (which

instead of taking a supernatural form manifests itself in epileptic seizures, traumatic voidings of personal identity that are — for that very reason — also ecstasies); and the notion of "holding on" (Margery and the priestess saving Thomas/Macey). More broadly, Tom and Jan are pitched out of linear time into a mythic time; or, rather, the illusion of linearity is

shattered by the eerie repetitions and simultaneities of a mythic time. This is essentially what happens to the three central characters in *The Owl Service*, who become engaged in a kind of deadly erotic struggle, as they assume the roles of the mythic figures Lleu, Blodeuedd and Gronw. It is as if the combination of adolescent erotic energy with an inorganic artefact (in this

case a tea set decorated with an owl motifs) produces a trigger for a repeating of the ancient legend. It is not clear that “repeating” is the right word here, though. It might be better to say that the myth has been re-instantiated, with the myth being understood as a kind of structure that can be implemented whenever the conditions are right. But the myth doesn’t repeat so much as it abducts individuals out

of linear time and into its "own" time, in which each iteration of the myth is in some sense always the first time. Here the myth would be something like the fatal compulsive pattern into which the scientists in *The Stone Tape* fall.

With *Red Shift*, Garner in effect transforms what he had narrated in *The Owl Service* into something that is performed. The reader is

abducted into mythic time, as Garner's use of compression and ellipsis puts linear time and narration under so much stress that they all but disappear. The impression we form is that it is not that linear time perception or experience has been corrupted by trauma; it is that time "itself" has been traumatised — so that we come to comprehend "history" not as a random

sequence of events, but as a series of traumatic clusters. This broken time, this sense of history as a malign repetition, is “experienced” by the three major male characters (Tom/Thomas/Macey) as seizure and breakdown; I have placed “experienced” in inverted commas here because the kind of voiding interruption of subjectivity that the three characters

undergo seems to obliterate the very conditions that allows experience to happen. For this reason, I think Butler moves too quickly when he argues that the “three men become, in effect, a single supra-historical personality, all of whose experiences are contemporaneous”. You could equally well argue the reverse — that rather than the three men in some sense becoming the “same”

individual, what they all lack is any coherent or unitary sense of selfhood. Equally, you could say that rather than sharing the “same” moment, Macey, Tom and Thomas subsist in a broken time — a time from which sameness, unity and presence have been subtracted.

Like Kneale, then, Garner’s work endlessly worries away at the question of agency and intent. Free

will is missing, or at least radically compromised. Human freedom is very different to “free will”, and can only be asserted if it reckons with agencies that belong primarily instead to (unconscious, mythic) structures that draw power from the people that they abduct into themselves. Landscape — the landscapes of Cheshire in many of his novels, including *Red Shift*,

and the landscape of north Wales in *The Owl Service* — are a crucial element of these mythic structures. Repeatedly throughout his fiction, Garner points to the eerie power of landscape, reminding us of the ways in which physical spaces condition perception, and of the ways in which particular terrains are stained by traumatic events. The mythic, as Garner understands it, is something

more than the merely fictional, just as it cannot be reduced to the fantasmatic. Rather, the mythic is part of the virtual infrastructure which makes human life as such possible. It is not the case that first of all there are human beings, and the mythic arrives afterwards, as a kind of cultural carapace added to a biological core. Humans are from the start — or from *before* the start, before the

birth of the individual — enmeshed in mythic structures. Needless to say, the family itself is just such a mythic structure. Louis Althusser, emphasizing the way in which the human being is never merely a biological creature, refers to the virtual cultural infrastructure as ideology, and argues that it is not possible to live outside it. We could just as easily shift to

the register Justin Barton uses, however, and talk of dreamings and stories. Garner's fictions exceed the limitations of both naïve realism and fantasy by virtue of their complex reflections on the power — the eerie power — of dreamings and stories.

Inside Out: Outside In: Margaret Atwood and Jonathan Glazer

Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling, a trick done with mirrors, I read it in a comic book: only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a thumb; numb.

Pleasure and pain are side by side they said but most of the brain is neutral: nerveless, like fat. I

rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorised it. But the only thing there was the fear I wasn’t alive: a negative, the difference between the shadow of a pin and what it’s like when you stick it in your arm, in school caged in the desk I used to do that, with pen-nibs and compass points too, instruments of knowledge, English and Geometry; they’ve discovered rats prefer any sensation to none. The insides of

my arms were stippled with tiny wounds, like an addict's. They slipped the needle into the arm and I was falling down, it was like sinking from one level of darkness to a deeper, deepest; when I rose up through the anesthetic, pale green and then daylight, I could remember nothing.

I didn't feel awful; I realised I didn't feel much of anything. I hadn't for a long time. Perhaps I'd been like that all my life, just as some babies are born deaf or without a sense of touch; but if that

was true I wouldn’t have noticed the absence. At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into a head ...

— *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood’s 1972 novel *Surfacing* and Jonathan Glazer’s 2013 film *Under the Skin* offer complementary cases of the eerie. In *Surfacing*, we move from a position ambiguously

“inside” to one outside; in *Under the Skin* the inside is apprehended from outside. The two lead characters’ problematic relationship to what Lacan called the Symbolic order (the structure through which cultural meaning is assigned, and which, Lacan said, is secured by the name of the father) is underscored by the fact that neither is named. The narrator of *Surfacing* comes to feel as

if she is an alien who has been play-acting the role of a woman; the lead character in *Under the Skin is* an actual alien, who seeks to simulate human behaviour.

Surfacing turns on the enigma of a missing father. The narrator has returned to her childhood home in Quebec to look for her father, who has disappeared in the Canadian wilderness. The question *what happened?*

hangs over the novel, and the ultimate lack of resolution to the mystery — not only is the father never found, but the narrator herself becomes lost, unmoored, operating without co-ordinates — means that the eerie atmosphere is never dissipated. As with Garner, in *Surfacing* there is a tremendous sensitivity to the power of terrain — not now the British countryside, with its vastly overdetermined

history of civil war, atrocity and struggle, but the depopulated space of the Canadian bush, with its promises and threats, its openness and its terrifying emptiness. It is not the spectres of history which haunt *Surfacing*, but the spaces outside or at the edges of the human itself. It seems, so far as we can make out, that the father has fallen prey to a fatal fascination with the

wilderness, its animals and associated lore. When the narrator enters his cabin, she finds that her father has filled his papers with images of strange human-animal creatures: signs of madness, or preparations for a shamanic passage out of what passes for modern civilisation? As the anti-psychiatric rhetoric of the time might have had it, is there actually a difference

between these two possibilities? Does not any real rejection of civilisation not entail a move into schizophrenia — a shift into an outside that cannot be commensurated with dominant forms of subjectivity, thinking, sensation?

In some respects, *Surfacing* could be seen as registering the bitter awakening after the militant euphoria of the

Sixties; Atwood's famously cold prose freezing over the Sixties' heated loins, and drawing, from the semi-desolation of the Canadian bush, a new landscape as alluring and forbidding as any in literature. A conservative reading suggests itself — what surfaces here, it might seem, are the consequences that Sixties permissiveness imagined it had dispensed with. The repressed — which

in this sense would mean the agencies of repression themselves — returns in the spectral form of the unnamed narrator's aborted child, encountered in a dark lake space where excrement and jellyfish-like foetal scrapings float, the abjected and the aborted commingling in a sewer of the Symbolic. Far from enabling her to "regain" some "wholeness", the reintegration of this lost

object destroys the fragile collage of screen memories and fantasies the narrator's unconscious has artfully constructed, projecting her from the frozen poise of dysphoria into psychosis — which, in the conservative reading, would constitute a proper punishment for her licentiousness.

There's a great deal at stake in resisting this conservative reading, and the

concept of the eerie can help us in this task. Atwood's narrator increasingly finds that there is no place for her. She lacks the capacity to feel that is supposedly constitutive of "ordinary" subjectivity. She is outside herself; a mystery to herself, a kind of reflexive gap in the dominant structure: an eerie enigma. The point is not then to too-quickly resolve this enigma, but to keep faith with the

questions that it poses.

The narrator experiences the counterculture as little more than a sham, its libertarian rhetoric not only serving as a legitimation of familiar male privilege but offering new rationales for exploitation and subjugation. By 1972, the counterculture's dreams of overthrowing and replacing dominant structures have devolved into a series of empty gestures, a congealed

rhetoric. If *Surfacing* rejects the facile gestures of an exhausted counterculture, there is no question of its endorsing the (apparently) safe and settled world which the counterculture repudiated. That world of supposedly organic solidity — her parents' world, where people have children who grow like flowers in their back garden, the narrator imagines — is gone, Atwood's narrator

notes, with an edge of wistfulness that nevertheless stops somewhat short of nostalgic longing. The question that *Surfacing* poses, and leaves hanging, is how to *mobilise* her discontent rather than treat it as a pathology that requires a cure — either by successful reintegration into the Symbolic/civilisation or by some purifying journey out beyond the Symbolic into a pre-linguistic Nature. How,

in other words, is it possible to keep faith with, rather than remedy, the narrator's affective dyslexia?

In some respects, *Surfacing* belongs to the same moment as such texts as Luce Irigaray's *Speculum: Of the Other Woman*, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. These works attempt to rise to the challenge of treating discontent, abjection and

psychopathology as traces of an as yet unimaginable outside rather than as symptoms of maladjustment. At her moment of schizophrenic break-rapture, the narrator's vision resembles the "nonorganic life" and "becoming-animal" Deleuze and Guattari will describe in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "they think I should be filled with death, I should be in mourning. But nothing

has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive." Yet this febrile delirium is more in tune with what Ben Woodard has termed "dark vitalism" than with Deleuze, and what flows and stalks in the body-without-organs zone of animal- and water-becomings is something like Woodard's sinister "creep of life": "I hear breathing, withheld, observant, not in the house

but all around it." The place beyond the mortifications of the Symbolic is not only the space of an obscene, non-linguistic "life", but also where everything deadened and dead goes, once it has been expelled from civilisation. "This is where I threw the dead things..." Beyond the living death of the Symbolic is the kingdom of the dead: "It was below me, drifting towards me from

the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead."

Surfacing can be situated as part of another fin-de-Sixties/ early-Seventies moment: the post-psychedelic oceanic. Atwood's lake, viscous with blood and other bodily fluids, has something

in common with the “bitches brew” that Miles Davis plunges into in 1969, emerging, catatonic, only six years later; it approaches the deep sea terrains John Martyn sounds out on *Solid Air* and *One World*:

> Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, seabottom: the water seemed to have thickened, in it pinprick lights flicked and darted, red and blue, yellow

> and white, and I saw that they were fish, the chasm-dwellers, fins lined with phosphorescent sparks, teeth neon. It was wonderful that I was down so far...

But these spaces of dissolved identity are not approached from the angle of a now tortured, now lulled male on a vacation from the Symbolic, but from the perspective of someone who was never fully integrated into the Symbolic

in the first place.

Surfacing, like Atwood's later *Oryx and Crake*, is a kind of rewriting of Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* — the text with which all that early Seventies radical theory had to wrestle, and reckon. Just as at the end of *Oryx and Crake*, *Surfacing* concludes with a moment of suspension, with the narrator, like *Oryx*'s Snowman, poised between the schizophrenic

space beyond the Symbolic and some return to civilisation. Perhaps what is most prescient about *Surfacing* is its acceptance that civilisation/the big Other/language cannot in the end be overcome by means of libido, madness or mysticism alone — yet, despite all this, *Surfacing* does not recommend an acquiescence in the reality principle. “For us, it’s necessary, the

intercession of words”, the narrator concedes — but who is this “us”? It seems at first to encompass only the narrator and the lover with which she may be about to be reconciled. Then we might be tempted to read the “us” as humanity in general, and the novel would be ending with a fairly cheap reconciliation between civilisation and one who was discontented with it. Yet it’s more interesting to

think of the “us” as indicating those, like the narrator, who do not properly belong to humanity at all — what kind of language, what kind of civilisation, would these discontents make?

Under the Skin probes some of the same areas, but from a different direction. The film could be a case study in how to produce the eerie out of

unpromising resources. Its source material, the novel by Michael Faber, is effective enough, but it doesn't possess much of an eerie charge. Or, rather, the way the narrative develops progressively eliminates any trace of the eerie until it disappears entirely. The novel soon becomes recognisable as a literary-science fictional satire on meat-eating and the meat industry, with the

inconsistencies in human carnivore ethics exposed and mocked when human beings become the prey of alien meat-traders. It is a fable complete with talking animals (although of course the point of the satirical-fabular reversal is that, from the alien perspective, it is the humans who are “talking animals”, who must have their tongues removed when they are forced into captivity).

The film is a very different beast. Effectively, it is extrapolated from the early part of the novel — alone in a car, driving along the A-roads of Scotland, a young woman, or what appears to be a young woman, stalks men. In the novel, we soon learn that the "young woman" is Isserley, a surgically-altered extraterrestrial in the employ of an interplanetary luxury meat business. The men she

lures into her car and sedates have been targeted because they look like prime cuts.

The film denies us any of this information (in fact, it's far from clear that the film retains any of these narrative commitments; we never learn if the lead character is called Isserley, or if she works for a meat corporation). Crudely, we could say that the quickest way to produce a sense of the eerie is to restrict information

in this way. But, as I argued above, not any mystery whatsoever will be eerie; there must be a sense of alterity, and this sense of alterity is something that Glazer adds to Faber's source material. There is a curious quality to these additions, of course, because what is added, effectively, are *gaps* in the viewer's knowledge. The tendency in Faber's novel is to eliminate the alienness of

the extraterrestrials, to make an equivalence between them and us — under the skin, we are the same (something reinforced by Faber's having the aliens calling themselves "humans"). By contrast, the film not only emphasises the differences between the aliens and homo sapiens, it also denudes human culture of its casual familiarity, showing the taken-for-granted from an undetermined yet exterior

perspective.

In terms of its generation of a sense of the eerie, the film is at an advantage over the novel because it is not required to give the lead character (played by Scarlett Johansson) any interior life. This means that it is not only the *nature* of her interior life that is left open: so is the very question of whether she has anything like “interior life” in any recognisable sense. The

Johansson character is seen only from the outside (just as, reciprocally, her illegible behaviour and motives, her lack of “ordinary” emotional responses, give us an outsider perspective on the social world through which she moves as a predator). Her dialogue is bare, functional — perhaps limited by her competence with language and accent (as the film begins, we hear her learn to

pronounce a series of words in an English accent). In any case, she speaks only enough to draw men into her vehicle — and this, in a passing mordant commentary on a certain kind of male sexuality, does not usually entail much talking. She is never required to give any but the most minimal account of herself, and almost everything she says is in any case a deception. She never

gives voice to any feelings. When she liaises with another alien, they do not speak. Do they have their own language — or is language something that they merely acquire in order to trick humans? Do they have feelings in the same sense that we think we do? The film tells us practically nothing about what these creatures are, or what they want — or indeed, if what drives them can be construed

as “desire” at all.

Perhaps Glazer’s most significant additions are the scenes in which the human prey is captured. In the novel, the capture is a simple matter of the men being drugged in their seats. The capture in the film takes place in some undetermined interzone, a semi-abstract space, in which the men, as they approach the half-clothed Johansson character, find themselves

slowly sucked into cloying black ooze. Are these scenes — glacially oneiric, darkly psychedelic — a representation of the intoxicated men's state of mind as they slip into some state of half-death? Or is this an actual interspace, with the black ooze an example of alien technology? Or could it be, as one commentator has suggested, that this is what sex feels like to the alien?

The film provides us with no answers, and further scenes only add to the nightmare opacity. We see some of the captured men, now entirely submerged in the ooze, barely conscious and bloated (perhaps in a reference to the fattening of the human prey that happens in the novel). As they pathetically reach out for each other, one of the bodies is subjected to a horrible sucking and sluicing action.

There is a cut to an image of what looks like rushing blood, as if the body has been liquidised. It could be that this is a semi-abstract image of the meat processing described in the novel; or it could be suggestive of some other (barely imaginable) mode of energy transfer.

These fragments — so many eerie ellipses — make the extraterrestrials, if that is what they are, as alien as

anything we have seen in cinema. But the scenes of the Johansson character in her van, picking up men on lonely side-roads and in crowded clubs, or sizing up potential victims on crowded streets in Glasgow, generate something like a reverse eerie effect. Here, contemporary capitalist culture is estranged, seen through an outsider's eye. The Johansson character's tonal flatness

makes her look from the outside as the narrator of *Surfacing* describes her own inner state — numb, detached. Yet this seeming numbness may of course be a whole different affective comportment; or it could suggest a type of being that has no capacity for what we understand as emotions. It could be, after all, that these kinds of creatures have more in common with insects than

with human beings.

There is a kind of affinity between Johansson's flatness and the naturalistic style in which much of the film is shot. She is the figure through whom the film is focalised — the audience's point of identification — but since there is precious little with which we can identify, she functions as a kind of analogue of the camera itself. In the improvised scenes with

passersby and non-actors in particular, we are invited to experience human behaviours, interactions and culture without the associations that we habitually bring to them, and without the forms of mediations that usually intercede in mainstream cinema. Since the scenes are stripped of much of their standard generic, narrative and emotional furniture, the

naturalism becomes denaturalizing, as the camera effectively simulates the gaze of an alien anthropologist.

As the film goes on, the Johansson character shifts from being a predator into becoming an increasingly vulnerable figure. Not accidentally, this coincides with her becoming more immersed in human culture, as she engages in what might be an attempt to understand

human affection and relationships. There is a disturbing sex scene, in which she passively and seemingly uncomprehendingly submits to her male partner, and afterwards examines herself with a flashlight, as if she has been badly wounded. Human sex becomes estranged, the object of panicked alien attention. The unnerving qualities of this scene are retrospectively intensified

when, in another contrast with the novel, we learn that the alien's human body is a kind of prosthesis. We discover this only in the distressing climactic scene, when a passerby attempts to rape her. As he attacks her, part of the prosthetic body comes away, leaving a gaping hole in her back, like a rip in a dress. The alien then casts aside the destroyed human prosthesis, and another figure

— a smooth black humanoid form, lacking many defining features — emerges from inside the wreckage. We see the exposed alien body now studying the Scarlett Johansson face as if it is a latex mask — an echo of an earlier remarkable scene in which Johansson examines her own naked body in a mirror in a strangely dispassionate but appreciative way. It is now clear that the

mirror scene redoubles the "ordinary" self-objectification that happens when we look in the mirror: the alien is not looking at herself, but at the human body she is wearing.

But this disjuncture between alien subject and human body-object only brings to the fore the fantasmatic structures that underlie "ordinary" human subjectivity. The climactic image of this almost

featureless figure throwing aside its human form corresponds to a certain persistent fantasy of the relationship of subject to body. This fantasy was codified by Descartes into the philosophical doctrine known as substance dualism (the belief that mind and body are radically different kinds of things). According to Lacan, however, Descartes' error was more than a simple

philosophical mistake, since a certain kind of dualism is embedded in the structure of language, particularly the language of the subject. The *I which speaks* and the *I which is spoken of* are structurally different. The *I which speaks* possesses no positive predicates, it is something like the speaking position as such, while determinate features (height, age, weight, etc.) can only be attributed to

the *I which is spoken of*. The featureless figure in those final scenes of *Under the Skin*, then, is something like a physicalisation of this soul-subject, this *I which speaks*: lacking in positive physical predicates, it dwells somehow "inside" the body, but it is ultimately detachable from this body-housing. The film's final contribution, then, is to remind us of the sense of eeriness intrinsic to our

unstable accounts of subject and object, mind and body.

The eeriness of the relationship between body and mind was the subject of Andy de Emmony's 2010 BBC adaptation of M.R. James' "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad", which was discussed in an earlier chapter. In this radically reworked version of the story, Parkin is tormented by the dementia that has reduced his

wife to a catatonic shell: “a body that has outlasted the existence of the personality: more horrifying than any spook or ghoul”. “There is nothing inside us”, the Parkin in this version mordantly declares. “There are no ghosts in these machines. Man is matter, and matter rots.” Yet Parkin’s own statement establishes that there *are* ghosts in the machine, that a certain kind of spectrality is

intrinsic to the speaking subject. After all, *who* is it who can talk of having no inside, of man being rotting matter? Not any substantial subject perhaps, but the subject who speaks, the subject, that is to say, composed out of the undead, discorporate stuff of language. In the very act of announcing its own nullity, the subject does not so much engage in performative

contradiction, but points to an ineradicable dualism that results from subjectivity itself. The condition of materialists such as Parkin (*our* condition in other words) is of *knowing* that all subjectivity is reducible to matter, that no subjectivity can survive the death of the body, but of nevertheless being unable to experience oneself *as* mere matter. Once the body is recognised as the

substrate-precondition of experience, then one is immediately compelled to accept this phenomenological dualism, precisely because experience and its substrate can be separated. There are ghosts in the machine, and we are they, and they are we.

Alien Traces: Stanley Kubrick, Andrei Tarkovsky, Christopher Nolan

Under the Skin presents us with one version of an eerie encounter with the alien: the alien-among-us. (Nic Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) is another take on this kind of encounter, and David Bowie's Newton is a cinematic ancestor of sorts to Johansson's alien, even though Newton's homesick exile exudes a romantic pathos that is absent from *Under the Skin*'s more

opaque and unreadable extra-terrestrial.) I touched upon another version of the alien-eerie when I discussed the final Quatermass serial earlier. In this version, the alien is not encountered directly; its physical form, as well as its ontological and metaphysical features, is never disclosed, and the alien is perceptible only by its effects, its traces. We must now examine this kind of

encounter with the alien in its own right.

A consideration of outer space quickly engenders a sense of the eerie because of the questions about agency that contemplating it cannot but pose. Is there anything out there at all — and if there are agents, what is their nature? It is therefore surprising that the eerie is disappointingly absent from so much science fiction.

Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* is perhaps the most famous example of a science fiction film which bucks this trend, resisting the positivistic pressure to bring the aliens out into the open. The enigma of alien agency is posed by the film's totem, the monolith, which is something like the paradigm case of an eerie object. (Throughout the film, the feeling of the eerie is reinforced by the association

of the monolith with Ligeti's music, with its sense of awe and alterity.) The monolith's "unnatural" qualities — its rectilinearity, its flatness, its opaque gloss — force the inference that it must have been produced by a higher intelligence of some kind. The logic here resembles a secular version of the so-called argument from design, which maintained that the functionality, purposiveness

and systematicity of many aspects of the natural world compel us to posit a supernatural designer. There is little trace of the theological in Kubrick's handling of these themes, and no attempt to positively characterise what kind of entity might have produced the monolith. The nature of the intelligence which has intervened in human history, and the purposes of this

intervention, remain undisclosed. The film leaves us only some quite minimal resources on the basis of which we might speculate. In addition to the monoliths themselves, there is the simulated hotel room — unnerving in its very banality — in which, at the end of the film, astronaut David Bowman is prepared for his ambivalent transformation into the so-called Star Child.

The hotel room might suggest that the intelligence wants Bowman to feel at home, though even if this is the case, its ultimate motives remain obscure: is it care for this human creature, so far from anything familiar, that motivates the construction of this dwelling place, or have these inscrutable intelligences calculated that this would be a better space in which to experimentally observe him?

(The scenes involving the sentient computer HAL, which maintains the systems on the *Discovery One* spacecraft, pose questions about agency on a smaller scale. HAL does not have a body, even if it has an organ — a red light-sensor — and a voice that is preternaturally calm. It certainly has agency, however, and the nature and scope of that agency — what drives HAL to rebel against the

Discovery's crew — becomes the crucial mystery in this section of the film. In the scenes where we see Bowman slowly, remorselessly dismantle HAL, and we hear HAL begin to audibly mentally deteriorate, we are confronted with the eerie disjunction between consciousness and the material hardware that makes consciousness possible.)

Kubrick's other major contribution to the cinema of the eerie is another "meta-generic" intervention, *The Shining*. The genre here is horror or the ghost story, so we understand that the undisclosed beings here are spectres rather than aliens (although it is perfectly possible that they are in fact some kind of alien intelligence). In the shift from science fiction to horror, there

is also an implied shift from the suggestion that the eerie forces at work in the film are benign, or at least neutral — as we are likely to conclude with *2001* — to the hypothesis that the presiding entities are malign. Malignancy and benignancy are of course relative to the interests and perspectives of particular entities, as Nietzsche's parable of the eagles and the lambs reminds

us. For the lambs, Nietzsche tells us, the eagles are evil; the lambs imagine that the birds of prey hate them. In fact, there is no question of the eagles hating the lambs — actually, their attitude towards the lambs is closer to affection, even love: after all, the lambs are very tasty. What Nietzsche renders in a comic mode, *The Shining* poses as an eerie enigma, which remains unresolved, in

the film, just as it was in the novel.

The Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* is a massive version of the room in *The Stone Tape*: a kind of recording system in which the violence, atrocity and misery that has happened in the building is stored up and played back by the sensitive psychic apparatuses of those — like Jack Torrance and his son Danny — who have the

ability to telepathically "shine". Increasingly, Jack is drawn out of the present — which he shares with his wife Wendy and with Danny — into an aeonic time in which various historic moments are conflated and compressed. (This time of schizo-simultaneity is perhaps somewhat akin to the time in which Tom, in Garner's *Red Shift*, finds himself.) But the suggestion is that the

apparitions which alternately seduce and menace Jack are creatures like himself, hapless individuals who have been drawn into the Overlook's fatal influence. What remains undisclosed is the nature of the forces that actually control the hotel. Jack probes this in a scene with the spectral barman, Lloyd:

Lloyd: No charge to you, Mr Torrance.

Jack: No charge?
Lloyd: Your money is no good here. Orders from the house.
Jack: Orders from the house?
Lloyd: Drink up, Mr Torrance.
Jack: I'm the kind of man who likes to know who's buying their drinks, Lloyd.
Lloyd: It's not a matter that concerns you, Mr Torrance. At least not at this point.

Who or what is the "house", and what does it want? Jack asks no further questions, and

the film — like the novel — offers no definitive answers. We never see the Overlook's real management. In the novel, the Overlook's reveling entities keep repeating the injunction "Unmask!" (a reference to one of the novel's major intertexts, Poe's "Masque of the Red Death"). But neither in the novel, nor in the film, do the creatures that have seized hold of the hotel ever

fully reveal themselves. It is not so much that they do not show their faces as they do not seem to have faces to show. The image in the novel that seems to come closest to defining their most fundamental form is the swarming, teeming multiplicity of a wasps' nest. As Roger Luckhurst suggested in his recent book on *The Shining*, the wasps' nest image is missing from

the film, but was perhaps translated into sound via the inclusion of the micropolyphonic buzzing of Ligeti's *Lontano*.

But what do these creatures want? We can only conclude that they are beings which must feed on human misery. This would make them appear "evil" from a certain point of view — but this is essentially the perspective of Nietzsche's lambs. After all,

most human beings are hardly in a position to judge other entities on the basis of what they feed on.

Another eerie dimension of *The Shining* is opened up by the fateful powers of the Overlook Hotel. Jack is told that he “has always been the caretaker” of the hotel. In one sense, this points to the “aeonic” time of the hotel itself, the time beyond linear clock-time into which Jack

increasingly finds himself drawn. But it could also refer to the chains of influence and causation that led Jack to taking on the position of the caretaker at the Overlook: his own abuse at the hands of his father, his failure as a writer, his alcoholism, his drunken injuring of Danny… how far back does the hotel's influence go?

Andrei Tarkovsky's two great films from the 1970s — *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979) — are extended engagements with the alien-eerie. In both cases, Tarkovsky's versions went against the grain of the source material from which they were adapted: Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961) and Boris and Arkady Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic* (1971). What Tarkovsky

subtracts from the novels are their satirical, ironic and absurdist elements, in favour of his habitual focus on questions of faith and redemption. But he retains the novels' core preoccupations of encounters with the unknown.

Solaris concerns a so-called sentient ocean planet. Tarkovsky downplays the science of "Solaristics", which plays a large part in

Lem's novel: the vast range of speculations and hypotheses that have been advanced about the planet. Instead, he concentrates on the impact of the planet on psychologist Kris Kelvin. When Kelvin arrives on the space station orbiting Solaris, he finds that his friend Dr Gibarian is dead, and the two remaining onboard scientists are furtive, spending most of their time skulking in their

own quarters. He quickly learns the reason for their withdrawal, when a simulacrum of his late wife Hari, who had committed suicide a few years previously, appears, in a state of great confusion, not remembering anything and not knowing where she is. The scientists have come to call these apparitions “visitors”, and each has his own to come to reckon with

— messages of a sort sent by Solaris, their purpose and intention unknown. In panic and disgust, Kelvin forces “Hari” into a space capsule, which he sends off into the cosmos. However, Hari — or rather another version of Hari — returns. In one of the most unsettling scenes in the film, we see that “Hari” has no zip on her dress. Why not? Because the planet has constructed “Hari” on the

basis of Kelvin's memories, and the memory of that dress (hazy and incomplete in the way that memories are) did not include a zip.

What does Solaris want? Does it want anything, or are its communications better thought of as automatic emissions of some kind? What is the purpose of the visitors that it sends? You could almost see the planet as a combination of externalised

unconscious and psychoanalyst, which keeps sending the scientists undischarged traumatic material with which to deal. Or is the planet granting what it “thinks” are the wishes of the humans, grotesquely “misunderstanding” the nature of grief, almost as if it is an infant gifted with great powers? The film turns on the eerie impasse that arises when mismatching modes of

intelligence, cognition and communication confront one another — or, it would be better to say, fail to confront one another. The sublime alterity of the Solaris ocean is one of cinema's great images of the unknown.

In Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, the alien trace is the Zone, a space in which physical laws do not seem to apply in the same way as they do in the outside world. The fairy tale

theme of granting wishes, implicit in *Solaris*, becomes the major preoccupation of *Stalker*, which centres on the idea that there is a “Room” somewhere in the Zone which can make the deepest desires of those who enter it come true. The “stalker” is a kind of self-taught expert on the Zone who guides those who want to explore this treacherous and wondrous space. In the Strugatskys’

original novel, the stalkers were part of a criminal network dedicated to extracting artefacts from the Zone. In Tarkovsky's film, the stalker remains a renegade figure — some of the early scenes show him leading his charges past fences, military checkpoints and gun emplacements — but his motives now are spiritual rather than materialistic. The stalker, with his respect for

the Zone's mystery, his sensitivity to its dangers and its volatility, wants others to be transformed by contact with its marvels. However, the two generically-titled figures who join him on this trip — "Writer" and "Scientist" — prove too cynical and untrusting to explore the Zone in that spirit, to the stalker's bitter disappointment. It is not only reaching the Room that is

perilous — the Room has its own dangers. We learn that another stalker, Porcupine, had gone to the Room after leading his brother to his death. But instead of returning his brother to him, the Room gave him money. In offering to grant them their deepest wishes, the Room presents a judgement on their being.

Stalker is remarkable for the way in which it constructs

an eerie space without the use of any special effects. Tarkovsky used an extraordinarily atmospheric location in Estonia: an overgrown space, in which human detritus (abandoned factories, tank traps, pillboxes) is overcome by resurgent foliage, in which subterranean tunnels and derelict warehouses are recruited into a dream geography, an anomalous

terrain full of traps that appear to be metaphysical and existential more than they are direct physical threats. Nothing is uniform here: time, as well as space, can curve and fold in unpredictable ways. The audience comes to appreciate the quality of this terrain not so much through what it actually sees, but from what it intuits via the artistry of the stalker. Cautious, always alert

to potential dangers, drawing on his past knowledge but aware of the way in which the Zone's mutability so often renders previous experience obsolete, the stalker invokes a space bristling with unseen menace and promise. Humble in the face of the unknown, yet dedicated to exploring the outside, the stalker offers a kind of ethics of the eerie.

For Tarkovsky, the Zone is approached largely as a space

in which faith is tested. He avoids the idea, mooted in the title of the Strugatskys' novel, that the Zone could be nothing more than an accident. Instead of being a miraculous sign of some kind of providence, the Strugatskys suggest, the Zone and all its "magical" properties, could be no more than the trash unintentionally left behind after the alien equivalent of a roadside

picnic. Here, the eerie becomes an absurdist joke.

The question of providence is central to Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), a film that offers a welcome return to some of the terrain staked out by Kubrick and Tarkovsky in a twenty-first century cinema landscape that has so far had little space for the eerie. The film depends

upon the providential intervention of a group of seemingly beneficent beings — referred to as “They”— who appear to be aiding humanity in its escape from a dying planet. Initially, “They” produce a wormhole, which makes travel into another galaxy feasible. By the end of the film, we learn that “They” are not aliens as such; rather, they are future humans who have evolved to access a

“fifth dimension” which allows them to step outside the fourth dimension, time. But the alterity of “They” is not compromised by the revelation that they are future humans, because the nature of these humans is not disclosed. Inevitably, they must be vastly different from us — the future is an alien country. We apprehend this future species only by some of its traces — the construction of

the wormhole and of the mysterious five-dimensional “Tesseract”, in which time is laid out as if it were space, and which Cooper enters at the climax of the film.

The providential intervention is thus revealed as a time loop, in which future humans act on the past to produce the conditions for their own survival. Within this time loop, there are other time anomalies — most

notably, the anomaly in which Cooper, the astronaut who leads the ultimately successful space mission, “haunts” his daughter, Murph. In the five-dimensional Tesseract, Cooper desperately contacts Murph, in an attempt to get his past self to stay at home rather than beginning the mission that means he will miss most of his daughter’s life. There’s something

strangely futile about this time anomaly. If Cooper was successful in persuading his past self to stay, then the mission would not have got off the ground (or at least he could not have led it); but the very fact that he is in the Tesseract and able to communicate with Murph in the past, means that he must have failed, in that he has ended up leading the mission.

The mission that Cooper

leads is an attempt to flee an earth that is literally blighted — crops will not grow, the population is declining fast, it will not be very long before earth is no longer habitable at all for human beings. Cooper is recruited to work for a NASA that has now become an undercover organisation, operating in secrecy. NASA's leader, John Brand, has apparently come up with two plans to save the human

population: Plan A is to launch a centrifuge into space to form a space station; Plan B is to populate one of three potentially habitable planets, accessible through the wormhole near Saturn. These three planets were discovered on a mission a decade earlier. Actually, twelve ships were sent out, but only the three piloted by the astronauts Miller, Mann and Edmunds sent back a signal indicating

that they had reached a viable planet.

The film turns on the contrast between a vision of an indifferent universe and one shaped by a kind of material providence (material in the sense that it involves human-technological, rather than supernatural, agency). Some of the most powerful scenes in the film — those on “Miller’s Planet” — show the sublime bleakness of an

indifferent nature. This ocean planet, its surface entirely covered by water, is something like the insensate twin of Solaris. While Solaris prompts unanswerable speculations — what purposes and desires does the planet harbour? — Miller's Planet presents the mute determinism of a world devoid of intent. The tsunamis and stillnesses of the planet's endless oceans

are so many actions without purpose, the product of causes without reasons. The very absence of a purposive agent provokes a feeling of the eerie (how can there be nothing here?). The term “indifferent” is perhaps ultimately inadequate, since it suggests an intentional capacity that is not being used. Mute nature, you could say, is not even indifferent: it lacks even the capacity for

indifference. Even so, it is something like the degree-zero of agency, if agency is defined simply as the capacity to make things happen. Miller's Planet is full of cause and effect; what it lacks is any designing or purposive intelligence.

The desperate scenes on the planet — the crew's realisation that the planet is a kind of ocean of sterility, incapable of supporting life;

their mistaking of a tsunami for mountains; their struggle to avoid being crushed under the monstrous wave — are given added force by the fact that they are aware that — because of the distorting effects of a nearby black hole — each hour on the planet is equivalent to seven years of earth time. We know that this is especially painful for Cooper because of his desire to return to his children.

When Cooper returns to the ship, he learns there has been a miscalculation — in fact, twenty-three earth years have passed while they have been on Miller's Planet. In a wrenching scene, Cooper watches his children's lives pass into adulthood over the course of a few short minutes, as he watches the messages they have sent to the ship over the course of two decades.

Love — particularly love between parents and children — is a major theme of the film. The love between Cooper and his daughter, Murph, is what ultimately allows Brand's Plan A to work — this connection between the two of them is what enables Cooper, when he is in the Tesseract, to send Murph the data she needs to solve the equation on which the plan depends. Although

the love between the two is the central affective thread in the film, it is tragically thwarted. The two are only re-united on Murph's deathbed. Because of the effects of relativity, Cooper looks much the same as he did when he left earth; Murph is by now an elderly woman, her life over, and Cooper has missed most of it.

During a scene onboard *Endurance* earlier in the film,

Amelia Brand (John's daughter) makes a case for love as a force from a "higher dimension":

Cooper: You're a scientist, Brand.
Brand: So listen to me when I say that love isn't something that we invented. It's... observable, powerful. It has to mean something.
Cooper: Love has meaning, yes. Social utility, social bonding, child rearing...
Brand: We love people who have

died. Where’s the social utility in that?
Cooper: None.
Brand: Maybe it means something more — something we can’t yet understand. Maybe it’s some evidence, some artifact of a higher dimension that we can’t consciously perceive.
I’m drawn across the universe to someone I haven’t seen in a decade, who I know is probably dead. Love is the one thing we’re capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space.

Amelia Brand's declaration about love is far from disinterested. She makes it when the crew is about to decide whether to travel to Mann's planet or Edmunds' planet. Brand wants to go to Edmunds' planet, but her choice is driven by the fact that Edmunds was her lover. Hence her motive for believing that love is a mysterious force, with its own occult powers and

capacities. Yet it turns out, in the end, that she is correct, at least about Edmunds' planet. It is the only viable environment: as we have seen, Miller's planet is a desolate ocean, while Mann's is an icy wasteland.

The immediate temptation here is to dismiss this as nothing more than kitsch sentimentality. Part of the power of *Interstellar*, however, comes from its

readiness to risk appearing naive, as well as emotionally and conceptually excessive. And what the film opens up here is the possibility of an *eerie* love. Love moves from being on the side of the seemingly (over)familiar to the side of the unknown. On Brand's account, love is unknown but something that can be investigated and quantified: it becomes an eerie agent.

“…The Eeriness Remains”: Joan Lindsay

They see the walls of the gymnasium fading into an exquisite transparency, the ceiling opening up like a flower into the

brilliant sky above Hanging Rock. The shadow of the Rock is flowing, luminous as water, across the shimmering plains and they are at the picnic, sitting on the warm dry grass under the gum trees…

— Joan Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*

The last word must go to Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Not only because *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is practically a textbook

example of an eerie novel — it includes disappearances, amnesia, a geological anomaly, an intensely atmospheric terrain — but also because Lindsay's rendition of the eerie has a positivity, a languorous and delirious allure, that is absent or suppressed in so many other eerie texts. Lindsay is the opposite case to M.R. James. Where James, as we saw, always codes the outside

as dangerous and deadly, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* invokes an outside that certainly invokes awe and peril, but which also involves a passage beyond the petty repressions and mean confines of common experience into a heightened atmosphere of oneiric lucidity.

Picnic at Hanging Rock shows that sometimes a disappearance can be more

haunting than an apparition. You could say that, in *Picnic at Hanging Rock,* nothing happens. Nothing happens, not in the sense that there are no events — although the novel is about an unresolved enigma. No: nothing *happens*, in the sense that an absence erupts into empirical reality: the novel is about the gap that is opened up and the perturbations it produces.

The disappearance at the

heart of the novel happens on a Valentine's Day picnic at Hanging Rock, in Victoria, Australia. Hanging Rock broods over the novel like one of Oscar Dominguez or Max Ernst's decalcomania spinal landscapes; it is a geological relic from deep time, a time that preceded the arrival of human beings by many millennia. It can only be seen in fragments, its labyrinthine spaces as

intensively treacherous as those of another alien picnic site, Tarkovsky's Zone. By the end, it seems that certain of the Rock's terrains — psychic as much as physical spaces — are only navigable by the attaining of a delirium state. This calm delirium is the dominant mood in Peter Weir's faithful 1975 film adaptation, where time (and narrative) are held in an aching suspension, and a

dreamy fatalism dominates.

The picnic is a day-trip organised for the students of Apple-yard College, a private boarding school for girls. The College, an attempt to simulate a small part of Victorian England in conditions that could hardly be more different from Britain, squats in the surrounding landscape like some Magritte non-sequitur. In the contrast between the

Rock and the elegantly stifling absurdity of the College's clothes and rituals, we are made aware of the inherent surrealism of the colonial project:

> Insulated from natural contacts with earth, air and sunlight, by corsets pressing on their solar plexuses, by voluminous petticoats, cotton stockings and kid boots, the drowsy wellfed girls lounging in the shade

> were no more a part of their environment than figures in a photograph album, arbitrarily posed against a backcloth of cork rocks and cardboard trees.

During the course of the picnic, four of the students — Miranda, Edith, Marion and Irma — and the College's mathematics teacher, Greta McCraw, decide to climb the Rock. The trip up the Rock seems at first to be nothing

out of the ordinary — there is idle chatter, gossip, some discussion of the vast age of the Rock. Initially, only a curious statement by Marion breaks with the mood. “Whatever can those people be doing down there like a lot of ants? A surprising number of people are without purpose. Although it’s probable that they are performing some necessary function unknown to

themselves.” It is as if Marion is already detached from the world below, as if she has already crossed a threshold. It is after the four see a monolith — “a single outcrop of pock-marked stone, something like a monstrous egg perched above a precipitous drop the plain” — that the atmosphere decisively shifts. All four are immediately overcome by lassitude, and fall into a deep

sleep. The focus now moves to Edith's point of view. She awakes in a panic, demanding to return home. But the others seem now to all have passed over into some altered (trance) state:

> 'Miranda,' Edith said again. 'I feel perfectly awful! When are we going home?'
> Miranda was looking at her so strangely, almost as if she wasn't seeing her. When Edith repeated the question

more loudly, she simply turned her back and began walking away up the rise, the other two following a little way behind. Well, hardly walking — sliding over the stones on their bare feet as if they were walking on a drawing-room carpet.

Miranda, Marion and Irma slip away, disappearing out of sight behind the monolith. Edith flees down the rock, screaming. By the time she

returns to the picnic, “crying and laughing, and with her dress torn to ribbons”, she is unable to give any indication of where she parted company from the other students. The Rock is searched, but neither the three students nor Miss McCraw are found. (A few days later, Edith claims to remember seeing Miss McCraw on the rock, inexplicably stripped down to her underwear.) Initial

searches in subsequent days yield nothing. However, a few days later, Irma is discovered at the Rock, her clothes torn and her corset missing. Suffering from amnesia, she is unable to offer any explanation of what happened on the rock. In the rest of the novel, we learn nothing more about what happened. At the end, with the College collapsed because of the scandal associated with

the events at Hanging Rock, the disappearances remain unexplained.

Alongside — and I think contributing to — the novel's feeling of eeriness is its capacity to generate "reality-effects". Although the novel was entirely fictionalised, it was widely, though mistakenly, believed to be based on a true story. Lindsay invited this reception: she wrote the novel as if it were a

factual account, using real locations (including Hanging Rock itself, an actual geological formation). The novel's trick involved re-telling a classic Faery story — young women abducted into another world — using the conventions of realism. One of these conventions was giving the event a precise date. According to the novel, the three women disappeared on February 14th, 1900.

1900, significantly, is the year which Freud wanted *The Interpretation of Dreams* dated (this dating is, famously, fictional: Freud's text was actually published in 1899, but he wanted it to bear a more epochal date). But *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is not set in *our* 1900, in which February 14th fell on a Wednesday, not a Saturday.

Above all else, though, the illusion of factuality is

produced by the lack of any solution to the mystery. The story about the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios, referred to by Lacan, offers a parable. Zeuxius painted a bunch of grapes so convincing that birds attempted to eat them. Parrhasios, meanwhile, painted a curtain, which Zeuxius asked him to pull aside to reveal what he had painted. The lack of

explanation makes *Picnic at Hanging Rock* into an analogue of Parhassios' painting. It became a veil, an enigma whose very irresolution produced the illusion that there must be something behind the curtain.

The novel seems to justify the idea that a sense of the eerie is created and sustained simply by withholding information. In the case of *Picnic at Hanging Rock,* this

literally happened: the form in which the novel was published was the result of an act of excision. In her original manuscript, Lindsay provided a solution of sorts to the enigma, in a concluding chapter that her publishers encouraged her to remove from the published version of the novel. This “Chapter Eighteen” was published separately, as *The Secret of Hanging Rock*.

There is no doubt that the original Chapter Eighteen would have somewhat undermined the novel's "reality-effect". The excised chapter is marked by a clear change in tone. The suggestiveness that has characterised the earlier parts of the novel — the hints of an outside, of something beyond the ordinary world — gives way to what is by now quite clearly an account of an

anomalous experience. The chapter begins at more or less the point that Edith runs away. Miranda, Marion and Irma feel that they are being “pulled from the inside” by the monolith. They fall asleep, and when they awake it is with a heightened, hallucinogenic sensitivity to their surroundings. An older woman appears, in her underclothes — it seems to be Greta McCraw, but she is not

named as such in the novel, nor is she recognised by the other characters. When the older woman faints, Miranda loosens her corset. This prompts Marion to suggest that they all “get out of these absurd garments” — so the three students remove their corsets and throw them from the Rock. In what is perhaps the most arresting image in Chapter Eighteen, the corsets do not immediately fall to the

ground, but float in mid-air at the side of the Rock. Has time stopped? Certainly, we are beyond clock-time now: perhaps in dream-time. (In her essay "A Commentary on Chapter Eighteen" — included in *The Secret of Hanging Rock* — Yvonne Rousseau points to a pun — a dreamwork-compression — involved in the image of the corsets hanging in the air, arising from the fact that the

alternative name for “corset” is “stay’”) A “hole in space” appears: “About the size of a fully rounded summer moon, coming and going. She saw it as painters and sculptors saw a hole, as a thing in itself, giving shape and significance to other shapes. As a presence, not an absence …” After this hole fades, they see a snake crawl into a small hole. The older woman says that she will follow it;

somehow, she transforms into a crab and passes into the tiny space. After a signal, Marion follows (there is no mention of any animal-becoming here, nor any account of how she is able to fit her body into the hole). When it is Miranda's turn to cross over, a frightened Irma begs her not to go, but Miranda does not understand her fear and reluctance, and she too passes into the hole. Irma is left on

her own, waiting. After an indeterminate period of time, a boulder rolls over the hole. The final image in the chapter is of Irma — presumably now aware that she will not be able to make the crossing — desperately tearing at the boulder.

The published version of the novel — the one without Chapter Eighteen — not only leaves the enigma without solution; it also leaves open

the question of the novel's genre (does it belong to literary realism? To murder-mystery? To fantasy? To science fiction?). The inclusion of Chapter Eighteen would not have settled the question of genre, but it would have eliminated certain possibilities. It would not now seem possible to, say, read the novel as a murder-mystery. But Chapter Eighteen produces as many

enigmas as it solves. What is the status of the experiences on the Rock? Are they to be taken literally, such that, for example, Greta McCraw actually turns into a crab? Are they to be understood as a consequence of some state of intoxication? (If this is the case, then the events could still be recuperated for a realist reading of sorts.) The suggestion that the women have passed through a

gateway to the outside invites us to read *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as a weird tale, and the inclusion of Chapter Eighteen pushes the novel into some space between the weird and the eerie. What is certain is that Chapter Eighteen does not offer any simple kind of solution to the puzzles the novel poses. As Yvonne Rousseau put it, “Joan Lindsay’s original intention is finally disclosed — but her

intention was not to dissolve the mystery. The *Picnic* geography is clarified, but the eeriness remains."

The eeriness is partly a question of the affective atmosphere that hangs over the experiences on the Rock. Justin Barton has called this atmosphere "solar trance", and it is manifested in a kind of positive fatalism. Initially, this fatalism registers as a seeming lack (there is nothing

where there should be something). As they fall under the thrall of the Rock, the characters seem to be denuded of their passions. Yet these passions, which very much include fear, are attachments to the everyday world. It is Irma's fear, her inability to let go of these everyday attachments (Lindsay's final description of Irma refers to her skill at embroidery), which

ultimately prevents her from making the crossing. She is unable to see through what was promised in the act of the casting aside of the corsets. Marion and Miranda, however, are fully prepared to take the step into the unknown. They are possessed by the eerie calm that settles whenever familiar passions can be overcome. They have disappeared, and their disappearances will leave

haunting gaps, eerie intimations of the outside.

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