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 Stone-

henge 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 post-war 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-figura-

tions 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 common-

place 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 with-

drawal 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* (1958-59) 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, neo-archaic, 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 of the 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 familiar-

ity, 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

ble 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 Appleyard 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 well-fed 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 mathe-

matics 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 dream-work-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.