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The Weird and the Eerie (Beyond the Unheimlich)

It is odd that it has taken me so long to really reckon with the weird and the eerie. For although the immediate origins of this book lay in fairly recent events, I have been fascinated and haunted by examples of the weird and the eerie for as long as I can remember. Yet I had not really identified the two modes, still less specified their defining features. No doubt this is partly because the major cultural examples of the weird and the eerie are to be found at the edges of genres such as horror and science fiction, and these genre associations have obscured what is specific to the weird and the eerie.

The weird came into focus for me around a decade ago, as the result of two symposia on the work of H.P. Lovecraft at Goldsmiths, University of London; while the eerie became the major subject of On Vanishing Land, the 2013 audio-essay I produced in collaboration with Justin Barton. Appropriately, the eerie crept up on Justin and me; it had not been our original focus, but by the end of the project we found that much of the music, film and fiction that had always haunted us possessed the quality of the eerie.

What the weird and the eerie have in common is a preoccupation with the strange. The strange — not the horrific. The allure that the weird and the eerie possess is not captured by the idea that we "enjoy what scares us". It has, rather, to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience. This fascination usually involves a certain apprehension, perhaps even dread — but it would be wrong to say that the weird and the eerie are necessarily terrifying. I am not here claiming that the outside is always beneficent. There are more than enough terrors to be found there; but such terrors are not all there is to the outside.

Perhaps my delay in coming round to the weird and the eerie had to do with the spell cast by Freud’s concept of the unheimlich. As is well known, the unheimlich has been inadequately translated into English as the uncanny; the word which better captures Freud’s sense of the term is the "unhomely". The unheimlich is often equated with the weird and the eerie — Freud’s own essay treats the terms as interchangeable. But the influence of Freud’s great essay has meant that the unheimlich has crowded out the other two modes.

The essay on the unheimlich has been highly influential on the study of horror and science fiction — perhaps, in the end, more because of Freud’s hesitations, conjectures and rejected theses than for the actual definition he provides. The examples of the unheimlich which Freud furnishes — doubles, mechanical entities that appear human, prostheses — call up a certain kind of disquiet. But Freud’s ultimate settling of the enigma of the unheimlich — his claim that it can be reduced to castration anxiety — is as disappointing as any mediocre genre detective’s rote solution to a mystery. What endurably fascinates is the cluster of concepts that circulate in Freud’s essay, and the way in which they often recursively instantiate the very processes to which they refer. Repetition and doubling — themselves an uncanny pair which double and repeat each other — seem to be at the heart of every "uncanny" phenomena which Freud identifies.

There is certainly something that the weird, the eerie and the unheimlich share. They are all affects, but they are also modes: modes of film and fiction, modes of perception, ultimately, you might even say, modes of being. Even so, they are not quite genres.
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Perhaps the most important difference between the unheimlich on the one hand and the weird and the eerie on the other is their treatment of the strange. Freud's unheimlich is about the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange — about the way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself. All of the ambivalences of Freud's psychoanalysis are caught up in this concept. Is it about making the familiar — and the familial — strange? Or is it about returning the strange to the familiar, the familial? Here we can appreciate the double move inherent to Freudian psychoanalysis: first of all, there is estrangement of many of the common notions about the family; but this is accompanied by a compensatory move, whereby the outside becomes legible in terms of a modernist family drama. Psychoanalysis itself is an unheimlich genre; it is haunted by an outside which it circles around but can never fully acknowledge or affirm.

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

The folding of the weird and the eerie into the unheimlich is symptomatic of a secular retreat from the outside. The wider predilection for the unheimlich is commensurate with a compulsion towards a certain kind of critique, which operates by always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside. The weird and the eerie make the opposite move: they allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside. As we shall see, the weird is that which does not belong. The weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the "homely" (even as its negation). The form that is perhaps most appropriate to the weird is montage — the conjoining of two or more things which do not belong together. Hence the predilection within surrealism for the weird, which understood the unconscious as a montage-machine, a generator of weird juxtapositions. Hence also the reason that Jacques Lacan — rising to the challenge posed by surrealism and the rest of aesthetic modernism — could move towards a weird psychoanalysis, in which the death drive, dreams and the unconscious become untethered from any naturalisation or sense of homesickness.

At first glance, the eerie might seem to be closer to the unheimlich than to the weird. Yet, like the weird, the eerie is also fundamentally to do with the outside, and here we can understand the outside in a straightforwardly empirical as well as a more abstract transcendental sense. A sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human. What happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance? What kind of entity was involved? What kind of thing was it that emitted such an eerie cry? As we can see from these examples, the eerie is fundamentally tied up with questions of agency. What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all? These questions can be posed in a psychoanalytic register — if we are not who we think we are, what are we? — but they also apply to the forces governing capitalist society. Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity.

The metaphysical scandal of capital brings us to the broader question of the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate: the agency of minerals and landscape for authors like Nigel Kneale and Alan Garner, and the way that "we" "ourselves" are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces. There is no inside except as a folding of
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the outside; the mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was. The shudder here is the shudder of the eerie, not of the unheimlich.

One extraordinary example of the displacement of the unheimlich by the eerie is D.M. Thomas’ novel The White Hotel. The novel first of all seems to be about a simulated case study of a fictional patient of Freud’s, “Anna G.” The poem by Anna G which begins the novel seems at first sight to be saturated with erotic hysteria, as Thomas’ Freud proposes in the Case History which he writes. Freud’s reading threatens to dissipate the oneiric atmosphere of Anna G’s poem, and also establish a direction of explanation: from the present to the past, from the outside to the inside. Yet it turns out that the seeming eroticism is itself an obfuscation and a deflection from the poem’s most intense referent, which is to be found not in Anna G’s past, but in her future — her death at the massacre at Babi Yar in 1941. The problems of foresight and fate here bring us to the eerie in a disturbing form. Yet fate might be said to belong to the weird as well as the eerie. The soothsaying witches in Macbeth, after all, are known as the Weird Sisters, and one of the archaic meanings of “weird” is “fate”. The concept of fate is weird in that it implies twisted forms of time and causality that are alien to ordinary perception, but it is also eerie in that it raises questions about agency: who or what is the entity that has woven fate?

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

So far, we are still left with the impression that the weird and the eerie have primarily to do with what is distressing or terrifying. So let us end these preliminary remarks by pointing to examples of the weird and the eerie that produce a different set of affects. Modernist and experimental work often strikes us as weird when we first encounter it. The sense of wrongness associated with the weird — the conviction that this does not belong — is often a sign that we are in the presence of the new. The weird here is a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete. If the encounter with the strange here is not straightforwardly pleasurable (the pleasurable would always refer to previous, forms of satisfaction), it is not simply unpleasant either: there is an enjoyment in seeing the familiar and the conventional becoming outmoded — an enjoyment which, in its mixture of pleasure and pain, has something in common with what Lacan called jouissance.

The eerie also entails a disengagement from our current attachments. But, with the eerie, this disengagement does not usually have the quality of shock that is typically a feature of the weird. The serenity that is often associated with the eerie — think of the phrase eerie calm — has to do with detachment from the urgencies of the everyday. The perspective of the eerie can give us access to the forces which govern mundane reality but which are ordinarily obscured, just as it can give us access to spaces beyond mundane reality altogether. It is this release from the mundane, this escape from the confines of what is ordinarily taken for reality, which goes some way to account for the peculiar appeal that the eerie possesses.
What is the weird? When we say something is weird, what kind of feeling are we pointing to? I want to argue that the weird is a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate.

Dictionary definitions are not always much help in defining the weird. Some refer immediately to the supernatural, but it is by no means clear that supernatural entities must be weird. In many ways, a natural phenomenon such as a black hole is more weird than a vampire. Certainly, when it comes to fiction, the very generic recognisability of creatures such as vampires and werewolves disqualifies them from provoking any sensation of weirdness. There is a pre-existing lore, a set of protocols for interpreting and placing the vampire and the werewolf. In any case, these creatures are merely empirically monstrous; their appearance recombines elements from the natural world as we already understand it. At the same time, the very fact that they are supernatural entities means that any strangeness they possess is now attributed to a realm beyond nature. Compare this to a black hole: the bizarre ways in which it bends space and time are completely outside our common experience, and yet a black hole belongs to the natural-material cosmos — a cosmos which must therefore be much stranger than our ordinary experience can comprehend.
It was this kind of intuition which inspired the weird fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. "Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large," Lovecraft wrote to the publisher of the magazine *Weird Tales* in 1927. "To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all." It is this quality of "real externality" that is crucial to the weird.

Any discussion of weird fiction must begin with Lovecraft. In stories that were published in pulp magazines, Lovecraft practically invented the weird tale, developing a formula which can be differentiated from both fantasy and horror fiction. Lovecraft's stories are obsessively fixated on the question of the outside: an outside that breaks through in encounters with anomalous entities from the deep past, in altered states of consciousness, in bizarre twists in the structure of time. The encounter with the outside often ends in breakdown and psychosis. Lovecraft's stories frequently involve a catastrophic integration of the outside into an interior that is retrospectively revealed to be a delusive envelope, a sham. Take "The Shadow over Innsmouth", in which it is ultimately revealed that the lead character is himself a Deep One, an aquatic alien entity. I am It— or better, I am They.

Although he is often classified as a writer of horror, Lovecraft's work seldom evokes a feeling of horror. When Lovecraft sets out his motives for writing in his short essay "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction", he does not immediately mention horror. He writes instead of "vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy." The emphasis on horror, Lovecraft goes on to say, is a consequence of the stories' encounter with the unknown.

Accordingly, it is not horror but *fascination*— albeit a fascination usually mixed with a certain trepidation — that is integral to Lovecraft's rendition of the weird. But I would say this is also integral to the concept of the weird itself — the weird cannot only repel, it must also compel our attention. So if the element of fascination were entirely absent from a story, and if the story were merely horrible, it would no longer be weird. Fascination is the affect shared by Lovecraft's characters and his readers. Fear or terror are not shared in the same way; Lovecraft's characters are often terrified, but his readers seldom are.

Fascination in Lovecraft is a form of Lacanian *jouissance*: an enjoyment that entails the inextricability of pleasure and pain. Lovecraft's texts fairly froth with *jouissance*. "Frothing", "foaming" and "teeming" are words which Lovecraft frequently uses, but they could apply equally well to the "obscene jelly" of *jouissance*. This is not to make the absurd claim that there is no negativity in Lovecraft — the loathing and abomination are hardly concealed — only that negativity does not have the last word. An excessive preoccupation with objects that are "officially" negative always indicates the work of *jouissance*— a mode of enjoyment which does not in any sense "redeem" negativity: it sublimates it. That is to say, it transforms an ordinary object causing displeasure into a Thing which is both terrible and alluring, which can no longer be libidinally classified as either positive or negative. The Thing overwhelms, it cannot be contained, but it fascinates.

It is fascination, above all else, that is the engine of fatality in Lovecraft's fictions, fascination that draws his bookish characters towards the dissolution, disintegration or degeneration that we, the readers, always foresee. Once the reader has read one or two of Lovecraft's stories, they know perfectly well what to expect in the others. In fact, it is hard to believe that even when a reader encounters a Lovecraft story for the
first time that they will be very surprised by how the tale turns out. Therefore it follows that suspense — as much as horror — is not a defining feature of Lovecraft’s fiction.

This means that Lovecraft’s work does not fit the structuralist definition of fantasy offered by Tzvetan Todorov. According to that definition, the fantastic is constituted by a suspension between the uncanny (stories which ultimately resolve in a naturalistic way) and the marvellous (stories which resolve supernaturally). Although Lovecraft’s stories involve what he characterised in “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction” as “the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis”, there is never any suggestion of the involvement of supernatural beings. Human attempts to transform the alien entities into gods are dearly regarded by Lovecraft as vain acts of anthropomorphism, perhaps noble but ultimately absurd efforts to impose meaning and sense on to the “real externality” of a cosmos in which human concerns, perspectives and concepts have only a local reference.

In his book Lovecraft: A Study in the Fantastic, Maurice Lévy fitted Lovecraft into a “Fantastic tradition” which includes the Gothic novels, Poe, Hawthorne and Bierce. But Lovecraft’s emphasis on the materiality of the anomalous entities in his stories means that he is very different from the Gothic novelists and Poe. Even though what we might call ordinary naturalism — the standard, empirical world of common sense and Euclidean geometries — will be shredded by the end of each tale, it is replaced by a hypernaturalism — an expanded sense of what the material cosmos contains.

Lovecraft’s materialism is one reason that I think we should distinguish his fiction — and indeed the weird in general — from fantasy and the fantastic. (It should be noted that Lovecraft himself happily equates the weird and the fantastic in “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction”). The fantastic is a rather capacious category, which can include much of science fiction and horror. It is not that this is inappropriate for Lovecraft’s work, but it does not point to what is unique in his method. Fantasy, however, denotes a more specific set of generic properties. Lord Dunsany, Lovecraft’s early inspiration, and Tolkien, are exemplary fantasy writers, and the contrast with them will allow us to grasp the difference from the weird. Fantasy is set in worlds that are entirely different from ours — Dunsany’s Pégane, or Tolkien’s Middle Earth; or rather, these worlds are locationally and temporally distant from ours (too many fantasy worlds turn out to be all too similar, ontologically and politically, to ours). The weird, by contrast, is notable for the way in which it opens up an egress between this world and others. There are of course stories and series — such as C.S. Lewis’ Narnia books, Baum’s Oz, Stephen Donaldson’s Thomas Covenant trilogy — in which there is an egress between this world and another, yet there is no discernible charge of the weird. That is because the “this world” sections of these fictions serve, more or less, as prologues and epilogues to standard fantasy tales. Characters from this world go into another world, but that other world has no impact upon this one, beyond the effect it has on the minds of the returning characters. With Lovecraft, there is an interplay, an exchange, a confrontation and indeed a conflict between this world and others.

This accounts for the supreme significance of Lovecraft setting so many of his stories in New England. Lovecraft’s New England, Maurice Lévy writes, is a world whose “reality — physical, topographical, historical — should be emphasised. It is well known that the truly fantastic exists only where the impossible can make an irruption, through time and space, into an objectively familiar locale.” What I propose, then, is
that in his break from the tendency to invent worlds as Dun­
sany had done, Lovecraft ceased to be a fantasy writer and
became a writer of the weird. A first characteristic of the
weird, at least in Lovecraft’s version of it, would be — to adapt
Lévy’s phrase — a fiction in which, not the impossible but the
outside “can make an irruption, through time and space, into
an objectively familiar locale”. Worlds may be entirely foreign
to ours, both in terms of location and even in terms of the
physical laws which govern them, without being weird. It is
the irruption into this world of something from outside which
is the marker of the weird.

Here we can see why the weird entails a certain relationship
to realism. Lovecraft himself often wrote disdainfully of real­
ism. But if Lovecraft had entirely rejected realism, he would
never have emerged from the fantasy realms of Dunsany and
de la Mare. It would be closer to the mark to say that Lovecraft
contained or localised realism. In the 1927 letter to the editor
of Weird Tales, he makes this explicit:

Only the human scenes and characters must have human
qualities. These must be handled with unsparing realism,
(not catch-penny romanticism) but when we cross the line to
the boundless and hideous unknown — the shadow-haunted
Outside — we must remember to leave our humanity and
terrestrialism at the threshold.

Lovecraft’s tales depend for their power on the difference
between the terrestrial-empirical and the outside. That is one
reason why they are so often written in the first person: if the
outside gradually encroaches upon a human subject, its alien
contours can be appreciated; whereas to attempt to capture
“the boundless and hideous unknown” without any reference
to the human world at all is to risk banality. Lovecraft needs
the human world, for much the same reason that a painter of

a vast edifice might insert a standard human figure standing
before it: to provide a sense of scale.

A provisional definition of the weird might therefore take
its cue from the slightly odd and ambiguous phrase “out of”
that Lovecraft uses in the titles of two of his stories, “The
Colour Out of Space” and “The Shadow Out of Time”. On the
simplest level, “out of” evidently means “from”. Yet it is not
possible — especially in the case of “The Shadow Out of Time”
— to avoid the second meaning, the suggestion of something
removed, cut out. The shadow is something cut out of time.
This notion of things “cut out” of their proper place is one
way in which Lovecraft has an affinity with modernist tech­
niques of collage. Yet there is also a third meaning of “out of”:
the beyond. The shadow out of time is, in part, a shadow of
that which is beyond time as we ordinarily understand and
experience it.

To possess a flavour of the beyond, to invoke the outside,
Lovecraft’s work cannot rely on already-existing figures or
lore. It depends crucially on the production of the new. As
China Miéville put it in his introduction to At the Mountains
of Madness: “Lovecraft resides radically outside any folk tra­
dition: this is not the modernising of the familiar vampire or
werewolf (or garuda or rusalka or any other such traditional
bugbear). Lovecraft’s pantheon and bestiary are absolutely
sui generis.” There is another, important, dimension of the
newness of Lovecraft’s creations however: it is disclaimed
and disguised by the author. As Miéville continues: “There is
[...] a paradox to be found in Lovecraft’s narrative. Though his
concept of the monstrous and his approach to the fantastic
are utterly new, he pretends that it is not.” When they con­
front the weird entities, Lovecraft’s characters find parallels
in mythologies and lore which he had himself invented. Love­
craft’s retrospective projection of a newly minted mythos into
the deep past gave rise to what Jason Colavito calls the “cult of
alien gods” in writers such as Erich von Däniken and Graham Hancock. Lovecraft’s “retro-interring” of the new is also what places his weird fictions “out of” time — much as in the story “The Shadow Out of Time”, in which the main character Peaslee encounters texts written in his own hand amongst architectural relics.

China Miéville argues that it was the impact of the First World War which gave rise to Lovecraft’s new: the traumatic break from the past allowed the new to emerge. But it is perhaps also useful to think of Lovecraft’s work as being about trauma, in the sense that it concerns ruptures in the very fabric of experience itself. Remarks that Freud makes in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (“as a result of certain psychoanalytic discoveries, we are today in a position to embark on a discussion of the Kantian theorem that time and space are ‘necessary forms of thought’”) indicated that he believed that the unconscious operated beyond what Kant called the “transcendental” structures of time, space and causality which govern the perceptual-conscious system. One way of grasping the functions of the unconscious, and its break from the dominant models of time, space and causality, was through studying the mental lives of those suffering from trauma. Trauma can therefore be thought of as a kind of transcendental shock — a suggestive phrase in relation to Lovecraft’s work. The outside is not “empirically” exterior; it is transcendently exterior, i.e. it is not just a matter of something being distant in space and time, but of something which is beyond our ordinary experience and conception of space and time itself. Throughout his work, Freud repeatedly stressed that the unconscious knows neither negation nor time. Hence the Escheresque image in Civilisation and its Discontents of the unconscious as a Rome “in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest ones”. Freud’s weird geometries have clear parallels in Lovecraft’s fictions, with their repeated invocations of non-Euclidean spaces. Witness the description of “the geometry of the dream-place” in “Call of Cthulhu”: “abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomey redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours”.

It is important not to surrender Lovecraft too quickly to a notion of the unrepresentable. Lovecraft is too often taken at his word when he calls his own entities “unnameable” or “indescribable”. As China Miéville points out, typically Lovecraft no sooner calls an entity “indescribable” than he begins to describe it, in very precise technical detail. (Nor, despite his predilection for using the term “unnameable” — mocked but also defended by Lovecraft himself in his own story “The Unnameable” — is Lovecraft shy of giving names to Things.) But this sequence has a third moment. After (1) the declaration of indescribability, and (2) the description, comes (3) the unvisualisable. For all their detail, or perhaps because of it, Lovecraft’s descriptions do not allow the reader to synthesise the logorrheic schizophony of adjectives into a mental image, prompting Graham Harman to compare the effect of such passages with Cubism, a parallel reinforced by the invocation of “clusters of cubes and planes” in “Dreams in the Witch House”. Cubist and futurist techniques and motifs feature in a number of Lovecraft’s stories, usually as (ostensible) objects of loathing. Even if he was hostile to it, Lovecraft recognised that modernist visual art could be repurposed as a resource for invoking the outside.

So far, my discussion of Lovecraft has concentrated on what happens within the stories themselves, but one of the most important weird effects Lovecraft produces happens between his texts. The systematisation of Lovecraft’s texts into a “mythos” might have been the work of his follower August Derleth, but the inter-relationship of the stories, the way in
which they generate a consistent reality, is crucial to understanding what is singular about Lovecraft’s work. It might appear that the way that Lovecraft produces such consistency is not very different to the way in which Tolkien achieved a similar effect, but, once again, the relationship to this world is crucial. By setting his stories in New England rather than in some inviolate, far-distant realm, Lovecraft is able to tangle the hierarchical relationship between fiction and reality.

The interpolation into the stories of simulated scholarship alongside authentic history produces ontological anomalies similar to those created in the “postmodernist” fictions of Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon and Borges. By treating really existing phenomenon as if they had the same ontological status as his own inventions, Lovecraft de-realises the factual and real-ises the fictional. Graham Harman looks forward to a day when Lovecraft will have displaced Holderlin from his throne as philosophers’ most exalted object of literary study. Perhaps we can also anticipate a time when the pulp modernist Lovecraft displaces the postmodernist Borges as the pre-eminent fictional explorer of ontological conundra. Lovecraft instantiates what Borges only “fabulates”; no one would ever believe that Pierre Menard’s version of Don Quixote exists outside Borges’ story, whereas more than a few readers have contacted the British Library asking for a copy of the Necronomicon, the book of ancient lore which is frequently referred to in many of Lovecraft’s stories. Lovecraft generates a “reality-effect” by only ever showing us tiny fragments of the Necronomicon. It is the very fragmentary quality of his references to the abominable text that induce the belief in readers that it must be a real object. Imagine if Lovecraft had actually produced a full text of the Necronomicon; the book would seem far less real than it does when we only see citations. Lovecraft seemed to have understood the power of the citation, the way in which a text seems more real if it is cited than if it is encountered in the raw.

One effect of such ontological displacements is that Lovecraft ceases to have ultimate authority over his own texts. If the texts have achieved a certain authority from their author, then Lovecraft’s role as their ostensible creator becomes incidental. He becomes instead the inventor of entities, characters and formulae. What matters is the consistency of his fictional system—a consistency which invites collective participation by both readers and other authors alike. As is well known, not only Derleth but also Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, Brian Lumley, Ramsey Campbell and many others have written tales of the Cthulhu mythos. By webbing his tales together, Lovecraft loses control of his creations to the emerging system, which has its own rules that acolytes can determine just as easily as he can.
The Weird Against the Worldly: H.G. Wells

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

The narrator is Redmond, and the story concerns his friend, the politician Lionel Wallace. Wallace tells Redmond of his childhood memory of seeing a green door in a wall somewhere in the streets of West Kensington in London. For some reason, he was attracted to opening the door. Initially, he was apprehensive, feeling it is "unwise or wrong" to go through the door, but "in a gust of emotion", he overcomes these anxieties and runs through the Door in the Wall. The garden beyond the Door in the Wall has something of the feel of a surrealist painting by DeCavaux or Ernst — there is an atmosphere of languid joy, while a diffuse sense of kindness seems to emanate from all of the people he meets there. There are anomalous things there — he sees a pair of panthers, and some kind of book in which the images "were not pictures but realities". Whether this book is a magical object, an example of advanced technology, or the product of some kind of intoxicant is not clear. After a while, though, when he is looking through this book, he suddenly finds himself seeing "a long grey street in West Kensington, on that chill hour of afternoon before the lamps are lit, and I was there, a wretched little figure, weeping aloud". However, for reasons that are not fully clear — why does he not immediately go through the Door in the Wall again? — he cannot return straight away. Once again consigned to the mundane world, he is overcome by a sense of "ungovernable grief".

Wallace only sees the Door in the Wall a few years later, initially by accident. He "got entangled among some rather low-class streets on the other side of Campden Hill", until he sees the long white wall and the door that leads into the garden. However, this time he does not go through. He feels he will be late for school, so he will return later, when he has more time. He makes the mistake of telling some school friends about the door and the garden. They force Wallace to take them there, but he cannot find it.

He sees the door again a couple of times in his youth — once when he is on the way to collect his scholarship for Oxford — but, again consumed by the urgencies of everyday life, he passes by without going through the door. In recent years, as he enters middle age, Wallace is once again haunted by the door, and fears that he may never see it again:

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

Yet he does see the door again — three times. But each time he passes it by — because he is embroiled in important political business; because he is en route to his father's deathbed; because he is engaged in a conversation about his position. When Wallace recounts this to Redmond, he is racked with anguish about his failure to go through the door. It doesn't surprise us to learn that the next thing Redmond hears of Wallace is that he is dead. His body is discovered "in a deep excavation near East Kensington Station".
Why should "The Door in the Wall" be classified as a weird tale? The problem of worlds — of contact between incommensurable worlds — is clearly something that the story shares with Lovecraft, and this brings us once again to the heart of the weird. As we began to explore in the last chapter, weird fiction always presents us with a threshold between worlds. "The Door in the Wall", evidently, centres on just such a threshold. Much of its power derives from the opposition between the mundanity of the London setting, with its quotidian details — "he recalls a number of mean, dirty shops, and particularly that of a plumber and decorator, with a dusty disorder of earthenware pipes, sheet lead ball taps, pattern books of wallpaper, and tins of enamel" — and the world beyond the door.

Lovecraft’s stories are full of thresholds between worlds: often the egress will be a book (the dreaded Necronomicon), sometimes, as in the case of the Randolph Carter "Silver Key" stories, it is literally a portal. Gateways and portals routinely feature in the deeply Lovecraftian stories of the Marvel Comics character Doctor Strange. David Lynch’s film and television work is similarly fixated on doorways, curtains and gateways: as we shall see later, Inland Empire appears to be a "holey space" constructed out of thresholds between worlds, an ontological rabbit warren. Sometimes the threshold into another world may only be a matter of re-scaling: Richard Matheson’s The Incredible Shrinking Man demonstrates that your own living-room can be a space of weird wonder and dread if you become sufficiently small.

The centrality of doors, thresholds and portals means that the notion of the between is crucial to the weird. It is clear that if Wells’ story had taken place only in the garden behind the wall, then no weird charge would have been produced. (This is why a feeling of the weird attaches to the lamppost at the edge of Narnia in C.S. Lewis’ stories, but not to Narnia proper.) If the story were set entirely beyond the door, we would be in the realm of the fantasy genre. This mode of fantasy naturalises other worlds. But the weird de-naturalises all worlds, by exposing their instability, their openness to the outside.

One obvious point of departure from the formula of the Lovecraftian tale is the lack of any inhuman entities in "The Door in the Wall". When Wallace passes through the door, he encounters strange beings, but they appear to be human. The feeling of the weird that the story gives rise to is not primarily produced by these languid, beneficent beings; and the weird does not require any of the "abominable monstrosities" which are so central to Lovecraft’s tales.

A second difference between Lovecraft and "The Door in the Wall" concerns the question of suspense. As we have seen, Lovecraft’s stories are rarely characterised by a feeling of suspense: we are not left wondering if the outside is real or not. At the end of "The Door in the Wall", by contrast, Redmond finds his mind “darkened with questions and riddles”. He cannot dismiss the possibility that Wallace was suffering from an “unprecedented type of hallucination”. Wallace was either a madman or a “dreamer, a man of vision and the imagination”. “We see our world fair and common,” Redmond concludes, inconclusively, “the hoarding and the pit. By our daylight standard he walked out of security into darkness, danger and death. But did he see like that?”

This brings us to a third difference between Lovecraft and this story: the question of insanity. In Lovecraft’s tales, any insanity the characters experience is a consequence of the transcendent shock that the encounter with the outside produces; there is no question of the insanity causing characters to perceive the entities (whose status would then, evidently, be degraded; they would merely be products of a delirium). "The Door in the Wall" leaves open the question of psychosis: it is possible — though Redmond doubts it, it is not his "profoundest belief" — that Wallace is mad, or is deluded, or has
confabulated the whole experience from garbled childhood memories (which, to use a distinction from Freud's essay on “Screen Memory” would then be memories of childhood, not memories from childhood). Wallace himself suspects that he may have augmented a childhood memory — re-dreamed it — to the point of completely distorting it.

But perhaps the most decisive difference between “The Door in the Wall” and Lovecraft consists in the quality of longing that is central to Wells’ story. In Lovecraft, the positive lure of the outside has to be repressed and inverted, transformed into loathing and dread. But the appeal of the world beyond the door shines through “The Door in the Wall”. The key opposition structuring the story is not naturalism versus the supernatural — there is little to suggest that the world behind the wall is supernatural, though it is certainly “enchanted” — it is the opposition between the quotidian and the numinous. Wallace’s description of an “indescribable quality of translucent unreality, different from the common things of experience that hung about it all” recalls Rudolf Otto’s characterisation of the numinous in *The Idea of the Holy*. Yet, for both Wallace and Otto, an “indescribable quality of translucent unreality” accompanies encounters with that which is more real than “the common things of experience”. The Real does not feel real; it involves a heightening of sensation, exceeds the parameters of ordinary experience, but to Wallace “at least the Door in the Wall was a real door leading through a real wall to immortal realities.”

Michel Houellebecq entitled his book on Lovecraft *Against the World, Against Life*, but it might be that Lovecraft’s real antipathy was to the worldly, to the mean confines of the mundane, which his tales endlessly explode. The attack on the deficiencies of the worldly is surely one of the driving imperatives of “The Door in the Wall”. “Oh! the wretchedness of that return!” Wallace complains, when he finds himself back in “this grey world again”. Wallace feels that he is depressed because he has yielded to the temptations of the worldly.

When Wallace describes his grief, he seems to be a plaything of the psychoanalytic death drive. “The fact is — it isn’t a case of ghosts or apparitions — but — it’s an odd thing to tell of, — I am haunted. I am haunted by something — that rather takes the light out of things, that fills me with longings...” Reflecting on Wallace’s first encounter with the door, Redmond pictures “the figure of that little boy, drawn and repelled” (emphasis added). Freud describes the death drive in terms of just this ambivalent attraction towards what is unpleasurable. It is Lacan and his followers who have drawn out the strange geometries of the death drive, the way in which desire perpetuates itself by always missing its official object of satisfaction — just as Wallace repeatedly fails to go through the door, even though this is apparently his deepest desire. The pull exerted by the door and the garden deprives all of his worldly satisfactions and achievements of their flavour:

Now that I have the clue to it, the thing seems written visibly in his face. I have a photograph in which that look of detachment has been caught and intensified. It reminds me of what a woman once said of him — a woman who had loved him greatly. ‘Suddenly,’ she said, ‘the interest goes out of him. He forgets you. He doesn’t care a rap for you — under his very nose...’

The door was always a threshold leading beyond the pleasure principle, and into the weird.
The word *grotesque* derives from a type of Roman ornamental design first discovered in the fifteenth century, during the excavation of Titus's baths. Named after the 'grottoes' in which they were found, the new forms consisted of human and animal shapes intermingled with foliage, flowers, and fruits in fantastic designs which bore no relationship to the logical categories of classical art. For a contemporary account of these forms we can turn to the Latin writer Vitruvius. Vitruvius was an official charged with the rebuilding of Rome under Augustus, to whom his treatise *On Architecture* is addressed. Not surprisingly, it bears down hard on the "improper taste" for the grotesque: "Such things neither are, nor can be, nor have been," says the author in his description of the mixed human, animal, and vegetable forms: "For how can a reed actually sustain a roof, or a candelabrum the ornament of a gable? Or a soft and slender stalk, a seated statue? Or how can flowers and half-statues rise alternately from roots and stalks? Yet when people view these falsehoods, they approve rather than condemn, failing to consider whether any of them can really occur or not."

— Patrick Parrinder, *James Joyce*

If Wells' story is an example of a melancholic weird, then we can appreciate another dimension of the weird by thinking about the relationship between the weird and the grotesque. Like the weird, the grotesque evokes something which is out of place. The response to the apparition of a grotesque object will involve laughter as much as revulsion, and, in his study of the grotesque, Philip Thomson argued that the grotesque was often characterised by the co-presence of the laughable and that which is not compatible with the laughable. This capacity to excite laughter means that the grotesque is perhaps best understood as a particular form of the weird. It is difficult to conceive of a grotesque object that cannot also be apprehended as weird, but there are weird phenomena which do not induce laughter — Lovecraft's stories, for example, the only humour in which is accidental.

The confluence of the weird and the grotesque is no better exemplified than in the work of the post-punk group The Fall. The Fall's work — particularly in their period between 1980–82 — is steeped in references to the grotesque and the weird. The group's methodology at this time is vividly captured in the cover image for the 1980 single, "City Hobgoblins", in which we see an urban scene invaded by "emigres from old green glades"; a leering, malevolent cobold looms over a dilapidated tenement. But rather than being smoothly integrated into the photographed scene, the crudely rendered hobgoblin has been etched onto the background. This is a war of worlds, an ontological struggle, a struggle over the means of representation. From the point of view of the official bourgeois culture and its categories, a group like The Fall — working class and experimental, popular and modernist — could not and should not exist, and The Fall are remarkable for the way in which they draw out a cultural politics of the weird and the grotesque. The Fall produced what could be called a popular modernist weird, wherein the weird shapes the form as well as the content of the work. The weird tale enters into becoming with the weirdness of modernism — its unfamiliarity, its combination of elements previously held to be incommensurable, its compression, its challenges to standard models of legibility — and with all the difficulties and compulsions of post-punk sound.
Much of this comes together, albeit in an oblique and enigmatic way, on The Fall’s 1980 album *Grotesque (After the Gramme)*. Otherwise incomprehensible references to “huckleberry masks”, “a man with butterflies on his face”, “ostrich headdress” and “light blue plant-heads” begin to make sense when you recognise that, in Parrinder’s description quoted above, the grotesque originally referred to “human and animal shapes intermingled with foliage, flowers, and fruits in fantastic designs which bore no relationship to the logical categories of classical art”.

The songs on *Grotesque* are tales, but tales half-told. The words are fragmentary, as if they have come to us via an unreliable transmission that keeps cutting out. Viewpoints are garbled; ontological distinctions between author, text and character are confused and fractured. It is impossible to definitively sort out the narrator’s words from direct speech. The tracks are palimpsests, badly recorded in a deliberate refusal of the “coffee table” aesthetic that the group’s leader Mark E. Smith derides on the cryptic sleeve notes. The process of recording is not airbrushed out but foregrounded, surface hiss and illegible cassette noise brandished like improvised stitching on some Hammer Frankenstein monster. The track “Impression of Temperance” was typical, a story in the Lovecraft style in which a dog breeder’s “hideous replica”, (“brown sockets ... purple eyes ... fed with rubbish from disposal barges...”) stalks Manchester. This is a weird tale, but one subjected to modernist techniques of compression and collage. The result is so elliptical that it is as if the text — part-obiterated by silt, mildew and algae — has been fished out of the Manchester ship canal which Steve Hanley’s bass sounds like it is dredging.

There is certainly laughter here, a renegade form of parody and mockery that one hesitates to label satire, especially given the pallid and toothless form that satire has assumed in British culture in recent times. With The Fall, however, it is as if satire is returned to its origins in the grotesque. The Fall’s laughter does not issue from the commonsensical mainstream but from a psychotic outside. This is satire in the onerific mode of Gillray, in which invective and lampoonery becomes delirial, a (psycho)tropological spewing of associations and animosities, the true object of which is not any falling of probity but the delusion that human dignity is possible. It is not surprising to find Smith alluding to Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* in a barely audible line in “City Hobgoblins”: “Ubu le ‘Roi is a home hobgoblin.” For Jarry, as for Smith, the incoherence and incompleteness of the obscene and the absurd were to be opposed to the false symmetries of good sense. We could go so far as to say that it is the human condition to be grotesque, since the human animal is the one that does not fit in, the freak of nature who has no place in the natural order and is capable of re-combining nature’s products into hideous new forms.

The sound on *Grotesque* is a seemingly impossible combination of the shambolic and the disciplined, the cerebral-literary and the idiotic-physical. The album is structured around the opposition between the quotidian and the weird-grotesque. It seems as if the whole record has been constructed as a response to a hypothetical conjecture. What if rock and roll had emerged from the industrial heartlands of England rather than the Mississippi Delta? The rockabilly on “Container Drivers” or “Fiery Jack” is slowed by meat pies and gravy, its dreams of escape fatally poisoned by pints of bitter and cups of greasy-spoon tea. It is rock and roll as working men’s club cabaret, performed by a failed Gene Vincent imitator in Prestwich. The what if? speculations fail. Rock and roll needed the endless open highways; it could never have begun in England’s snarled-up ring roads and claustrophobic conurbations.
THE WEIRD

It is on the track “The N.W.R.A.” (“The North Will Rise Again”) that the conflict between the claustrophobic mundaneness of England and the grotesque-weird is most explicitly played out. All of the album’s themes coalesce in this track, a tale of cultural political intrigue that plays like some improbable mulching of T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, H.G. Wells, Philip K. Dick, Lovecraft and le Carré. It is the story of Roman Totale, a psychic and former cabaret performer whose body is covered in tentacles. It is often said that Roman Totale is one of Smith’s “alter-egos”; in fact, Smith is in the same relationship to Totale as Lovecraft was to someone like Randolph Carter. Totale is a character rather than a persona. Needless to say, he in no way resembles a “well-rounded” character so much as a carrier of mythes, an inter-textual linkage between Pulp fragments:

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

The form of “The N.W.R.A.” is as alien to organic wholeness as is Totale’s abominable tentacular body. It is a grotesque concoction, a collage of pieces that do not belong together. The model is the novella rather than the tale and the story is told episodically, from multiple points of view, using a heteroglossic riot of styles and tones: comic, journalistic, satirical, novelistic, it is like Lovecraft’s “Call of Cthulhu” re-written by the Joyce of Ulysses and compressed into ten minutes. From what we can glean, Totale is at the centre of a plot — infiltrated and betrayed from the start — which aims at restoring the North to glory, perhaps to its Victorian moment of economic and industrial supremacy; perhaps to some more ancient pre-eminence, perhaps to a greatness that will eclipse anything that has come before. More than a matter of regional railing against the capital, in Smith’s vision the North comes to stand for everything suppressed by urbane good taste: the esoteric, the anomalous, the vulgar sublime, that is to say, the weird and the grotesque itself. Totale, festooned in the incongruous Grotesque costume of “ostrich head-dress”, “feathers/orange-red with blue-black lines” and “light blue plant-heads”, is the would-be Faery King of this weird revolt who ends up its maimed Fisher King, abandoned like a pulp modernist Miss Havisham amongst the relics of a carnival that will never happen, a drooling totem of a defeated tilt at social realism, the visionary leader reduced, as the psychotropics fade and the fervour cools, to being a washed-up cabaret artiste once again.

Smith returns to the weird tale form on The Fall’s 1982 album Hex Enduction Hour, another record which is saturated with references to the weird. In the track “Jawbone and the Air Rifle”, a poacher accidentally causes damage to a tomb, unearthing a jawbone which “carries the germ of a curse / Of the Broken Brothers Pentacle Church”. The song is a tissue of allusions to texts such as M.R. James’ tales “A Warning to the Curious” and “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad”, to Lovecraft’s “The Shadow over Innsmouth”, to Hammer Horror, and to The Wicker Man — culminating in a psychedelic/psychotic breakdown, complete with a torch-wielding mob of villagers:

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

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

The track "Iceland", meanwhile, recorded in a lava-lined studio in Reykjavik, is an encounter with the fading myths of North European culture in the frozen territory from which they originated. Here, the grotesque laughter is gone. The song, hypnotic and undulating, meditative and mournful, recalls the bone-white steppes of Nico's The Marble Index in its arctic atmospherics. A keening wind (on a cassette recording made by Smith) whips through the track as Smith invites us to "cast the runes against your own soul", another M.R. James reference, this time to his story, "Casting the Runes". "Iceland" is a Twilight of the Idols for the retreating bogoblins, kobolds and trolls of Europe's receding weird culture, a lament for the monstrosities and myths whose dying breaths it captures on tape:

Witnessthe last of the god men
A Memorex for the Krakens

Caught in the Coils of Ouroboros: Tim Powers

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

— CCRU, "The Templeton Episode"

One is [...] tempted to see in the ‘time paradox’ of science-fiction novels a kind of ‘apparition in the Real’ of the elementary structure of the symbolic process, the so-called internal, internally inverted eight: a circular movement, a kind of snare where we can progress only in such a manner that we ‘overtake’ ourselves in the transference, to find ourselves later at a point which we have already been. The paradox consists in the fact that this superfluous detour, this supplementary snare of understanding ourselves (‘voyage into the future’) and then reversing the time direction (‘voyage into the past’) is not just a subjective illusion/perception of an objective process taking place in so-called reality independent of these illusions. The supplementary snare is, rather, an internal condition, an internal constituent of the so-called ‘objective’ process itself: only through this additional detour does the past itself, the ‘objective’ state of things, become retroactively what it always was.

— SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, The Sublime Object of Ideology
THE WEIRD

Is there not an intrinsically weird dimension to the time travel story? By its very nature, the time travel story, after all, combines entities and objects that do not belong together. Here the threshold between worlds is the apparatus that allows travel between different time periods — which may be a time machine, or which could actually be a kind of time-crossing door or gate — and the weird effect typically manifests as a sense of anachronism. But another weird effect is triggered when the time travel story involves time paradox(es). The time travel paradox plunges us into the structures that Douglas Hofstadter calls “strange loops” or “tangled hierarchies”, in which the orderly distinction between cause and effect is fatally disrupted.

*The Anubis Gates* by Tim Powers is a fabulously inventive take on the time travel paradox story, on the model of Robert Heinlein’s “All You Zombies” and “By His Bootstraps”. But perhaps the predecessor to which *The Anubis Gates* is closest is Michael Moorcock’s 1969 novella *Behold the Man*, in which Karl Glogauer time-travels back two thousand years from the 1960s and ends up re-creating — or living for the first time — the life of Christ, including his crucifixion.

*The Anubis Gates* is in effect an extended weird tale. Although it is stuffed full of references to sorcery, bodily transformation and anomalous entities, the main source of the novel’s weird charge is the twisting of time into an infernal loop. In *The Anubis Gates*, the academic Brendan Doyle is lured into a time-travel experiment by the eccentric plutocrat Clarence Darrow. Darrow is dying, and, whilst undertaking the prodigious and apparently deranged research he has pursued in a desperate bid to prolong his life, he comes upon the story of “Dog-Face Joe” amongst the folklore of early-nineteenth-century London. By a process of diligent scholarship and daring supposition, Darrow determines that Joe was a magician capable of transferring his consciousness from body to body, but whose body-stealing had an unfortunate side-effect: almost immediately as Joe enters it, the purloined body grows profuse, simian-like hair, so that its new owner is forced to discard it very soon after switching into it. For obvious reasons, Darrow wants to acquire the secret of this profane transmigration, and he seems to have the means to make contact with the body-switching magician since his research has uncovered “gaps” in the river of time, gates through which it is possible to pass into the past. Doyle’s role is to act as a kind of literary tour guide for the ultra-wealthy time travellers Darrow has assembled, attracted by the possibility of seeing a lecture by Coleridge, and whose million dollar fee will finance the trip.

Very soon after arriving in the nineteenth century, Doyle is abducted into a rhapsomic under-London that is part *Oliver Twist*, part Burroughs’ *The Western Lands* (if you will permit the anachronism — *The Western Lands* was actually published after *The Anubis Gates*). Powers’ phantasmagoric London — the apocalyptic vividness of whose rendering led John Clute to describe *The Anubis Gates* as “Babylon-on-Thames punk” — is the site of a war between the forces of Egyptian polytheistic sorcery and the grey positivism of British empiricism, involving romanys, magical duplicates, poets, beggars, costermongers, male impersonators...

After a while, Doyle comes, reluctantly, to accept his Fate — which in literary-generic terms is to be propelled, by means of SF, into the nineteenth-century picaresque — and more or less gives up any hope of returning home. He resigns himself to make the best of his nineteenth-century life and decides that his most realistic hope of an escape from beggary is to make contact with William Ashbless, the minor poet in whose works he has specialist knowledge.

Doyle goes to the Jamaica Coffee House on the morning in which, according to Ashbless’ biographer, the American poet
will write his epic poem, “The Twelve Hours of the Night”. The appointed time arrives, but there is no sign of Ashbless. While he waits, at first agitated and then deflated, Doyle idly transcribes “The Twelve Hours of the Night” from memory.

He is soon caught up in more intrigue and, for a while, forgets about Ashbless. In a moment that is more eerie than weird, Doyle hears, or fancies he hears, someone whistling The Beatles’ “Yesterday”. It is only after he catches the refrain being whistled again a day or so later that he is able to confirm that there are indeed a group of twentieth-century temporal emigres living in this nineteenth-century London. They turn out to be Darrow’s people, given the task of helping in the search for Dog-Face Joe. Doyle meets with one of them, his former student, Benner, who by now is a paranoid and grizzled wreck, convinced that Darrow is out to kill him. He and Doyle agree to meet again a few days later, but when they do, Doyle finds his former friend’s behaviour is even odder than before. Doyle discovers the reason for this too late. Benner’s body has been acquired by Dog-Face Joe. This becomes clear to Doyle only when he finds himself in Benner’s body, after it has been discarded by Joe.

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

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

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

Original manuscript? He thought with a mixture of awe and unease. This stack of papers here is the original manuscript... it’s just newer now than it was when I saw it in 1976. Hah! I wouldn’t have been so impressed to see it then if I’d known I had made or would make those pen scratches. I wonder when, where and how it’ll pick up the grease marks I remember seeing on the early pages.

Suddenly a thought struck him. My God, he thought, then if I stay and live out my life as Ashbless — which the universe pretty clearly means me to do — then nobody wrote Ashbless’ poems. I’ll copy out his poems from memory, having read them in the 1932 Collected Poems, and my copies will be set in type for the magazines, and they’ll use tear sheets from the magazines to create the Collected Poems! They’re a closed loop, uncreated! ... I’m just the... Messenger and caretaker.

Like his unhappier time-displaced fellow, Jack Torrance in The Shining, Doyle has always been the caretaker. The mise-en-abyme here produces a charge of the weird, both because of the scandal of an uncreated thing, and because of the twisted causality that has allowed such a thing to exist. (Perhaps all paradoxes have a touch of the weird about them?)

The Ashbless Enigma that Doyle encounters is comically deflated once he realises that — at some level — the solution is only him. “I wouldn’t have been so impressed to see it then if I’d known I had made or would make those pen scratches.” But the deflation is immediately followed by a profound dread and awe (the poems are uncreated!) that far exceeds his original fascination with the poet.
Once Doyle realises that he is destined to be Ashbless, which is to say, that he always-already was Ashbless, he is faced with a dilemma: does he act in accordance with what he characterises as the "will" of the universe (it is the "universe" that "wants" him to live in Ashbless' shoes), or not? The problem that Doyle faces is that the determinism is much more invariant than a will, even a will that belongs to "the universe". It is impossible for him to process that everything he will do as Ashbless has already happened. The barrier that means that this cannot be faced is transcendental: subjectivity as such presupposes the illusion that things could be different. To be a subject is to be unable to think of oneself as anything but free — even if you know that you are not. What sustains Doyle's presupposition is the apparently spontaneously emerging hypothesis of an "alternative past": in order to hold open the possibility that things might go against the already-recorded Ashbless biography, Doyle is forced to consider the possibility that he has somehow crossed into a "different past" to the one he has seen documented. But the full paradox is that it is only Doyle's positing of such an "alternative past" that ensures that he acts in accordance with what has already happened. Ashbless becomes the hero he already was, the restorer of an order that was never threatened. Everything is at it always was; only now, as Doyle and the reader know, something weird has happened.

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

There is another type of weird effect that is generated by strange loops. The strange loops here involve not just tangles in cause and effect of the type we discussed in the last chapter in reference to the time loop story, but confusions of ontological level. Brian McHale devotes much of his Postmodernist Fiction to analyzing these confusions. What should be at an ontologically "inferior" level suddenly appears one level up (characters from a simulated world suddenly appear in the world generating the simulation); or what should be at an ontologically "superior" level appears one level down (authors interact with their characters). Escher's images exemplify the paradoxical spaces of this strange loop. There is a definite weirdness in this Escher-effect, which, after all, is fundamentally about a sense of wrongness: levels are tangled, things are not where they are supposed to be.

Although McHale does refer to Dick, to whom we shall turn in a moment, many of the texts that he discusses render this confusion of worlds in a literary-metafictional register. I want to discuss now two texts which — on the edge of the science fiction genre — deal with the question of simulated or embedded worlds in a way that emphasises weirdness.

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

One of the opening scenes centres on a mirror: a small hand-mirror that the obviously disturbed head of the Simu-
lacron project, Professor Vollmer, frantically waves in the face of his colleagues, saying, "You are only the image that others have of you." The project has created a computer-generated world, populated by "identity units" who believe themselves to be real people. Vollmer dies, and is replaced by the programmer Stiller, who soon becomes obsessed with the enigma that drove Vollmer into madness — that their "real world" is also a simulation, engineered by a "realer" world above.

The ambient social scene in the film seems to confirm Vollmer's idea that we are what we are perceived to be. There is barely a scene that doesn't feature a reflective surface, and some of the most memorable shots show reflections of reflections, infinite regresses of simulacra. The background figures in crowd scenes have a curiously agog immobility, as if they are spectators at a stageplay. One early scene is like an extrapolation from a Bryan Ferry album sleeve of the early 1970s: in an atmosphere of louche decadence, the business and cultural elite linger like models or gawp like voyeurs as they stand around a swimming pool, its reflected light playing on the then-futuristic interiors.

Much like Tarkovsky's take on SF in Solaris and Stalker (which we shall discuss later), it is Fassbinder's deviation from certain science fictional conventions that gives World on a Wire a special charge — especially in the wake of Star Wars and The Matrix. While both those films were defined by their special effects, there are no visual effects to speak of in World on a Wire. The most conspicuous "effect" is the startling Radiophonics Workshop-like squiggles and spurts of electronic music, which break into Fassbinder's stylised naturalism like a crack in reality itself.

In World on a Wire, the strange loop is created by "Einstein", the identity unit in Simulacron that those in The Institute for Cybernetics and Future Science use to communicate directly with in the simulated world. In order to perform this liaising function, Einstein naturally has to be aware that he is a simulation. But this knowledge inevitably produces the desire to climb up to the "real" world — a desire, it is implied, that can never be satisfied.

The ontological terror on which World on a Wire turns — is our own world a simulation? — is now very familiar, via the many Philip K. Dick adaptations and their imitators. But, despite not actually being an adaptation of Dick's fiction, World on a Wire has more in common with the wry mordancy of Dick's work than many official Dick adaptations, not least in the way that it shows each of its three nested worlds as being equally drab. We actually see very little of the world "below" (the world inside the Simulacron) and almost nothing of the world "above" (the world one level up from what we first took to be reality). The world below we see only in snatched glimpses of hotel lobbies and inside a lorry-driver's cab. But it is the revelation — or non-revelation — of the world above at the climax of the film that is most startling.

Instead of some Gnostic transfiguration, we find ourselves in what looks like a meeting room in some ultra-banal office block. At first, the electronic blinds are down, momentarily holding open the possibility that there will be some marvellous — or at least strange — world to be seen once they are up. But when they do eventually rise, we see only the same grey skies and cityscape. Stiller — whose name now assumes a special significance — has attained his official goal (climbing up to the "world above"), but he has not "moved". The Zenonian condition remains in the form of an ontological anxiety that — in a pre-echo of the torment that destroys Mal in Inception — follows the weird topologies of drive: once Stiller's faith in his initial lifeworld is shattered, there is no possibility of fully believing in any reality.

The differences between the three worlds is not accessible at the level of experience (of either the characters or the
audience), and it as if Fassbinder produces in *World on a Wire* something that perfectly fits Darko Suvin’s famous definition of science fiction as the art of “cognitive estrangement”. Still-er’s mounting awareness of the simulated nature of the world that everyone around him takes for reality forces a cognitive estrangement so intense that it constitutes a psychotic break. The content of his experience is the same in every respect; but, because it is now classified as a simulation, it is psychotically transformed. But, as is so often in the fiction of Dick, the position of the psychotic is also the position of truth.

“Cognitive estrangement” here takes the form of an unworlding, an abyssal falling away of any sense that there is any “fundamental” level which could operate as a foundation or a touchstone, securing and authenticating what is ultimately real. The film generates what you might call a cognitive weird, in that the weird here is not directly seen or experienced; it is a cognitive effect, produced by depriving the film’s formal realism of any feeling of reality.

Philip K. Dick’s *Time Out of Joint*, published in 1959, performs a similar estrangement of realism, as well as presenting another version of unworlding. The novel is remarkable, in fact, for the painstaking way in which Dick constructs a “realistic” small town America. Two years after the first Disneyland park opened — Dick would become a frequent visitor to the park in LA — the novel treats literary realism as a kind of Disneyfication. In a classic moment of Dick ontological vertigo, the novel’s painstakingly described small town is revealed, in the end, to be an intricate system of pasteboard frontages, hypnotic suggestions and negative hallucinations (we shall return to the question of negative hallucinations later). The pay-off can just as easily be read in terms of critical metafiction as science fiction, for what is any setting in realist fiction if not the same kind of system? How is any “reality effect” achieved except by authors using the literary equivalent of these simulatory techniques? In *Time Out of Joint*, the machinery of realism becomes, then, re-described as a set of special effects.

In the novel, the feeling of the weird is not generated by a collision of worlds, but by the passage out of a “realistic” world into an “unworld”. After it is downgraded to a simulation, the realistic world is not so much invaded as erased. In the novel, the whole small town scenario is constructed as a ruse, a comfortable setting in which the protagonist can undertake high pressure military work for the government while thinking that he is doing a trivial newspaper contest. Yet it is clear that the science fictional elements were for Dick the pretext that allowed him to write successfully in a naturalistic way about Fifties America. They were the enframing devices that enabled *Time Out of Joint* to succeed where Dick’s purely realist fiction failed.

In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson captures the peculiar ache of nostalgia that *Time Out of Joint* engenders, a nostalgia for the present, which Dick achieves by constellating stereotypical images of the decade he was writing at the end of:

President Eisenhower’s stroke; Main Street, U.S.A.; Marilyn Monroe; a world of neighbours and PTAs; small retail stores (the produce trucked in from outside); favourite television programmes; mild flirtations with the housewife next door; game shows and contests; sputniks directly revolving overhead, mere blinking lights in the firmament, hard to distinguish from airliners or flying saucers.

(Monroe actually features as one of the anomalies that lead to the unraveling of the simulated small town, for she has not been incorporated into the reconstructed 1950s world, and appears to the main character only when he discovers some
rotting magazines, relics of our Fifties, in a waste ground “outside the city limits”.

What is remarkable is the way in which Dick was capable, in 1959, of already identifying those stereotypical features of the American Fifties which would come to define the decade in retrospect. It is not Dick’s skill in projecting into the future that is to be admired — the novel’s 1997 is confected out of generic SF tropes, far less convincing than the ostensibly fake Fifties world it embeds — but rather his capacity to imagine how the future would see the Fifties. It is the Fifties already envisaged as a themepark: an anticipated reconstruction. Dick’s simulated small town is not en-kitsched as Disney’s memories of his early twentieth century were, but precisely given what Jameson calls the “cabbage stink” of naturalism:

The misery of happiness, [...] of Marcuse’s false happiness, the gratifications of the new car, the TV dinner and your favourite programme on the sofa — which are now themselves secretly a misery, an unhappiness that doesn’t know its name, that has no way of telling itself apart from genuine satisfaction and fulfilment since it has presumably never encountered this last.

In this lukewarm world, ambient discontent hides in plain view, a hazy malaise given off by the refrigerators, television sets and other consumer durables. The vividness and plausibility of this miserable world — with misery itself contributing to the world’s plausibility — somehow becomes all the more intense when its status is downgraded to that of a constructed simulation. The world is a simulation but it still feels real.

Some of the most powerful passages in Dick’s work are those in which there is an ontological interregnum: a traumatic unworlding is not yet given a narrative motivation; an unresolved space that awaits reincorporation into another symbolic regime. In *Time Out of Joint*, the interregnum takes the form of an extraordinary scene in which the seemingly dull objects of quotidian naturalism — the gas station and the motel — act almost like a negative version of the lamppost at the edge of the Narnian forest. Unlike Lewis’ lamppost, these objects do not mark the threshold of a new world; they constitute instead staging posts on the way towards a desert of the Real, a void beyond any constituted world. When the edge-of-town gas stations come into focus, the background furniture of literary realism suddenly looms into the foreground, and there is a moment of object-epiphany, in which peripheral vision-familiarity transforms into something alien:

The houses became fewer. The truck passed gas stations, tawdry cafes, ice cream stands and motels. The dreary parade of motels ... as if, Ragle thought, we had already gone a thousand miles and were just now entering a strange town. Nothing is so alien, so bleak and unfriendly, as the strip of gas stations — cut-rate gas stations — and motels at the edge of your own city. You fail to recognise it. And, at the same time, you have to grasp it to your bosom. Not just for one night, but for as long as you intend to live where you live. But we don’t intend to live here any more. We’re leaving. For good.

It’s a scene in which Edward Hopper seems to devolve into Beckett, as the natural(ist) landscape gives way to an emptied-out monotony, a minimal, quasi-abstract space that is de-peopled but still industrialised and commercialised: “A last intersection, a minor road serving industries that had been zoned out of the city proper. The railroad tracks... he noticed an infinitely long freight train at rest. The suspended drums of chemicals on towers over factories.” It is as if Dick is slowly clearing away the fixtures and fittings of literary realism in order to prepare the way for the unworlding which he had described a few pages earlier.
THE WEIRD

Hollow outward form instead of substance; the sun not actually shining, the day not actually warm at all but cold, grey and quietly raining, raining, the god-awful ash filtering down on everything. No grass except charred stumps, broken off. Pools of contaminated water... The skeleton of life, white brittle scarecrow support in the shape of a cross. Grinning. Space instead of eyes. The whole world [...] can be seen through. I am on the inside looking out. Peeking through a crack and seeing — emptiness. Looking into its eyes.