



Angelaki

Journal of the Theoretical Humanities

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cang20>

Eerie

de-formations and fascinations

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To cite this article: Jana Cattien & Richard Stopford (2022) Eerie, Angelaki, 27:5, 113-131, DOI: [10.1080/0969725X.2022.2110399](https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2022.2110399)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2022.2110399>



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Published online: 20 Sep 2022.



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Lac blanc by Mohamed Berkane.

In 2012, Dark Horse Comics launched a revival of *Eerie*, an American magazine of horror comics first introduced in 1966. Their first issue promised the reader a “terrifying treasury of sinister sci-fi and fearsome fantasy.” They are right: the *Eerie* is definitely terrifying, but how? It’s that moment when you see something that brings the whole world to a halt; you feel suspended in time and space, frozen to the spot. Something is “there” – but eerily so.

The comic says the *Eerie* is “sent to terrify across time and space.” In this paper, we want to explore what it might mean for the *Eerie* not only to terrify *across* time and space, but to disturb our sense of time and space itself. We suggest that experiences of the *Eerie* emerge as the spatio-temporal locatedness of an object becomes indistinct. As phenomenology tells us, we only find the world “homely” to the extent that it is legible for us. More than that, we are only legible to ourselves insofar as the world is homely. As such, the *Eerie* harbours a profound existential threat. When objects

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EERIE ***de-formations and*** ***fascinations***

appear ill-formed in their spatio-temporal location, both the object, and the subjects correlated to those objects, convulse.

But rather than remaining solely within the framework of phenomenology, we suggest that the *Eerie* is an index of phenomenology’s limits: it is a complex, contradictory moment in the dialectics of subject/object formation. If the familiar story of phenomenology correlates the contours of objects along transcendental vectors of subjective experience, the de-formations of eeriness emerge as the object’s resistance to our assimilation of it. An object’s

ISSN 0969-725X print/ISSN 1469-2899 online/22/050113-19 © 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2022.2110399>

eeriness is its pulling away from the pall of familiarity the subject throws over the object-world; even as the eerie object recedes *from us*, that very recession re-establishes it as part of a material, object field, no longer fully correlated to the subject. This disruption of the object-world as a homely place is a decentring of the subject as the primary index of objects. Thus, the Eerie emerges as a limit case of phenomenology: it is undoubtedly a phenomenological episode, but one in which the subject senses the object-world withdrawing from them, and thereby reasserting itself as something apart from the subject. Yet as disturbing as eerie objects undoubtedly are, we also seek them out; they are *compelling* in their strangeness. Both fascinating and threatening, the Eerie draws us to itself; we seek out the existential tremor it incites. As such, we develop a view of the Eerie which involves conflicted polarities of experience: repulsion and attraction.

situating the eerie

To begin detailing the view, some theoretical and conceptual lineage is useful. This exploration of the Eerie is part of a historical enquiry into “strange” experiences which goes back to Freud at least. With his discussion of the Uncanny [*Unheimlich*], Freud set out a distinct conceptual and phenomenological space within horror. Working with his psychoanalytical account of subjectivity, he argued that certain phenomena have qualitatively distinctive ways in which they disturb us. Roughly, in some way or other, the familiar sometimes appears unfamiliar (Freud 223–26). Kristeva’s analysis of the Abject adds further distinctions within the concept of horror: we are disturbed, repulsed even, by that which reminds us of our own material and psychological formation as subjects (*Powers of Horror* 1).¹ Mark Fisher makes a significant contribution to this tradition of thinking about the complexities of horror with *The Weird and the Eerie*.

Fisher argues that the Uncanny does not exhaust the modes of horror concerned with strangeness. “The Weird” and “the Eerie” delimit distinctive kinds of (disturbing)

experience, catalysed by particular kinds of phenomena. For Fisher, the Weird is that which does not belong. This is different to something’s being Uncanny. The Weird object may be completely familiar, and its context may also be familiar; however, taken together, the object appears Weird because *it should not be in that context* (Fisher 15). We found his account of the Weird interesting, yet it is his account of the Eerie which stayed with us – perhaps because it is more obscure. He provides a number of different glosses of the notion. Various, the Eerie is: “fundamentally tied up with questions of agency [...] What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all?” (11); “[involved with] questions to do with existence and non-existence” (12); a sense of alterity (104); and “between presence and absence” (61). Furthermore, the Eerie “entails disengagement from our current attachments” (13).

These are intriguing theoretical passes at a bespoke theory of the “Eerie.” Yet it feels as though Fisher himself is circling around an idea: grasping at it as it retreats. Nevertheless, it feels right that the Eerie is somehow distinct from other modalities of strangeness, and that it involves alterity and a dialectics of presence and absence. As Roger Luckhurst suggests in his review of the book, Fisher’s ruminations on the Eerie stand out amongst a well-established enquiry of “strange” experiences that ranges from those already mentioned – Freud’s and Kristeva’s – alongside Graham Harman’s “Weird realism,” Eugene Thacker’s horror of philosophy anthology; to Robert Macfarlane’s evocative portrait of the eerie English countryside. As these authors have rightly noted, eeriness has been explored through diverse idioms and media, further extending the phenomenon’s range, scope, and complexity. We find the Eerie “in nature” as well as in artefactual phenomena: from the gothic distortions of reality in James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, Lovecraft’s inter-dimensional horror, the dreamy, pop-nihilism of the Shangri-Las’ “Past, Present and Future,” to the folds of shadows in Wiene’s expressionist cinema.

In their understanding of Fisher’s “Eerie,” both Luckhurst and Thacker emphasise that

erie experiences are distinctive in their subversion of the fantasy of “metaphysical mastery.” The human fantasy of mastering both itself and the object-world is just that: fantasy. This understanding of the Eerie is reminiscent of aspects of Kristeva’s feminine Abject as threatening the subject’s fantasy of having (mastery over) a “clean and proper” body (*Powers of Horror* 53): “the fading, instability or even disappearance of the subject” (Grosz 72).² The Eerie marks the instability of subjectivity, as objects before it vacillate between manifestation and de-formation. It subverts the masculinist fantasy of entitlement to the object-world, not by confronting the subject with objects that it finds to be disgusting, as in Kristeva’s Abject, but by constituting an ontological indeterminacy about objecthood as such: “The eerie is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. There is something where there should be nothing, or there is nothing where there should be something” (Fisher 61). Fisher illustrates this ontological indeterminacy by pointing to the ways in which human agency is undercut and interrupted by the relentless, yet invisible flows of capital: “Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity” (11). Describing capital as Eerie, writes Thacker, urges us to consider “not only presumptions concerning human agency, intentionality, and control, but also inviting a darker, more disturbing reflection on the strange agency of the inanimate and impersonal materiality of the world around us and within us” (“Weird, Eerie and Monstrous” np).

Luckhurst, too, understands Fisher to be attributing eeriness to the material world as such: “places are eerie; empty landscapes are eerie; abandoned structures and ruins are eerie. Something moves in these apparently empty or vacated sites that exists independently of the human subject, an agency that is cloaked or obscure” (np). This, he continues, is Fisher’s most crucial insight: “the eerie as the trace of an impenetrable agency without, or some unnerving non-subjective drive that compels our

behaviors incomprehensibly from within” (np). We think that the agency we intuit in eerie objects is nothing more than the sense of an object’s being apart from us: our sense of the object-world having an existence independent from our own. So, whilst capital might well be a paradigmatic case of such an “impenetrable agency,” it is not “Eerie” in the sense of a “swarming in the stomach’s pit, the tell-tale prickle of the skin” (Macfarlane np). Rather than an eerie object with elusive yet imposing materiality, it is an impenetrable agency indexed to human affairs. As such, whatever the strangeness of capital, it is not clear that capital is Eerie or ought to instigate a revisionary notion of eeriness.

Furthermore, the problematics of such obscure agency do not fully cohere with other aspects of Fisher’s more familiar, less revisionary examples of the Eerie. He considers the following cliché: the “Eerie” cry of some unknown creature in a forest (Fisher 11). Fisher contends that it is Eerie because we do not know what the animal is. But, as he himself notes later in the piece, a lack of knowledge by itself is not Eerie (104). Maybe then the experience’s being qualitatively disturbing relies on something about the cry itself. It might be disturbing if I don’t know what made that cry, and it sounds dangerous. But perhaps that is frightening rather than *Eerie*? Say we know what animal it is: the cry of a bird in a forest. We may not fear the bird, nor be in any doubt that it is the bird that made the cry. And yet such epistemic clarity does not attenuate the dread sense of eeriness: this strange cry is nevertheless somehow disturbing. Indeed, in this and the other examples, “eeriness” remains enigmatic.

We do not think that Fisher “defines” the Eerie – nor does he intend to. Such a demand would seem to miss something very important about the Eerie: that it is as conceptually elusive as it is materially ephemeral. Using Merleau-Ponty’s somewhat standard phenomenological accounts of subject/object schemata, we argue that the Eerie becomes a limit case of phenomenology. We suggest that in eerie experiences, objecthood, and the subject itself as object, slide away from us; a clearly structured

subjective sense of space and time comes apart instigating a sense of material drift in subjects and objects alike. The Eerie instigates an existential shift away from the hegemony of the subject, in favour of a preponderance of objects that lie beyond our existential grip.³

To appreciate the contours of our phenomenological approach, consider again the animal cry in the forest. As suggested, it may be Eerie without either being the cry of some dangerous animal, or of something completely unknown. So what else might be Eerie about it? Instead, let us focus on the locatedness of the cry. It is *strangely dislocated*. Whilst being “in the forest” it is also lost: a sound drifting about the landscape; seemingly embodied by the forest yet not a part of it. It seems to us that this issue of locatedness implicates the nature of objecthood itself – both spatially and temporally. As the cry comes apart from the animal, there is a moment of fragmentation in the object of perception, implicating our own embodiment as correlated to those objects. Consequently, eeriness is existential: it implicates what it is, and what it means, to “be in the world,” displacing the subject as the well-formed object about which the object-world of experience is coordinated. As we find the world which we inhabit Eerie, it looms back at us at the very moment in which we experience its de-formation: the material world as always already *material* slipping away from the grip and ambitions of a well-formed subjective perception. Moreover, the de-formation of an object’s spatio-temporality is prior to our cognitive apprehension of an object *as* some particular thing or other. The cry in the forest is not Eerie for being that of an *eagle*, say, but for being an object that is not clearly spatio-temporally located, yet still somehow manifest. As such, we explore the idea that eeriness might attend objects of experience prior to knowledge claims about those objects. In that way the Eerie seems to emerge, as Thacker speculates, at the “limits of human knowledge in a rapidly-changing world” (“Weird, Eerie and Monstrous” np).

So, the visceral, skin-crawl of eeriness is our response to the suspended, slow creep of material dissemblance in the object-world felt by the

subject-as-also-“object.” It is in this sense that we think that the Eerie is psychical kin of Kristeva’s *Abject*: both modalities of strange horror instigate a sense of dissolution in the subject. The *Abject* object disrupts a sense of psychical cleanliness, a queasy disgust at the melding of interiority and exteriority; a rupture in the system and order of the subject as such (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 4). In other words, the subject experiences the revolting prospect of its own dissolution, its precarious psychical suspension above the swamp of its own internal materiality (53). In the Eerie, the subject also experiences a sense of its own dissolution, but as it hangs onto the material, object-world. If the phenomenological fairy tale is that the object-world hangs onto us, eeriness suggests that it may well be the other way around.

Our thesis, like Fisher’s, is a speculative account of eeriness. Like him we draw upon various theoretical domains and resources to explicate our idea. We use Merleau-Ponty as the phenomenologist of the bodily subject par excellence; we mobilise Lacan’s portrait of narcissistic subjectivity as a point of erotic departure for actually luxuriating in de-formation. What is most interesting here is how the Eerie puts pressure on both theorists: the possibility of a transcendental phenomenology in the case of Merleau-Ponty and on the structure of Lacan’s erotics. Indeed, our view is that the Eerie points beyond subject-centred phenomenology and desire towards formations of materiality unmoored from their subjective indices.

In the first part of the paper, we develop a critical, dialectical account of eeriness – distinguishing it from and clarifying Fisher’s account. If subjective experience is grounded in well-formed spatio-temporal schema aimed at guaranteeing the legibility of objects, the spatio-temporal ambiguity of Eerie objects disrupts that legibility. This is just part of the grounds of the dread we feel: Merleau-Ponty’s lived-body as the grounds of the object-world is called into question. However, as the object retreats from us, thereby undermining itself as an object *for us*, it also instigates a sense of its own objective reality apart from us. As such, it is an object in contradiction: as

object-for-subject it dissolves; as object-for-object, as it were, it looms back at the subject, intimidating it.

In the second part we explore the fact that the Eerie is also compelling. As much as fear, we suggest that the Eerie becomes a site of erotic fascination for the subject: it explores its own de-formations within the de-formations of the object. Throughout the paper, and at its close, we consider numerous examples. We have chosen these examples from a diverse range of cultural genres, as well as the “natural” environment, to show that eerie experiences are an enduring phenomenon in our engagement with objects – that eeriness is threaded into the object-world, largely as a moment of phenomenological fissure between ourselves and objects. Whilst we acknowledge that the materiality and representational mediations of eeriness will differ between, say, a film, a painting, and a bird cry in the forest, we are attending to them to understand what an eerie object as such might be – rather than as an eerie painting, an eerie bird, or an eerie film. This is because our account aims at gaining clarity about eeriness as such before attempting the complex problems of eeriness as it is then mediated through different media, material, cultural forms, and representations. Of course, this is not to say that these mediations do not matter; hopefully our account would ground bespoke analyses of eeriness as it is reconfigured under artefactual and non-artefactual forms.⁴

the eerie gets *under the skin*

In his discussion of Jonathan Glazer’s 2014 film *Under the Skin*, Fisher offers an analysis of the Eerie. The film is centred around an alien character, who appears, at least initially, as a young woman played by Scarlett Johansson. We see her mostly alone in a car, driving along the B-roads in Scotland, picking up men she encounters. One by one, she lures them into an undetermined space, unrepresentable but for an oozing darkness that comes to swallow the men as they attempt to approach her for sex. Other than that, there is little that we know

about the lead character; her interior life is left completely obscure.

For Fisher, it is this “nightmare opacity” that largely accounts for the film’s eeriness (106). Although Johansson’s character is the audience’s main point of identification, this identification happens without her having a recognisable inner life. As a result of this alien interiority, Fisher suggests, what would otherwise seem like a familiar Scottish landscape comes to appear to the audience as Eerie because we perceive it through the eyes of a perceiver whose structures of perception are not intelligible to us. On this reading, the Eerie is what results when the audience’s gaze is, as it were, dispossessed by “the gaze of an alien anthropologist” (107). Thus, what renders the Eerie a disturbing, unsettling experience is that it produces a defamiliarisation of the familiar due to a perspective which is alien to our own agency.

One scene in particular seems to confirm Fisher’s reading. Johansson is depicted examining her human body in the mirror; her detached and dispassionate expression suggests that this body is merely a shell for her alien subjectivity: “the alien is not looking at herself, but at the human body she is wearing” (Fisher 108). At this point in his analysis, Fisher explicitly connects the Eerie to structures of human subjectivity – to the relationship between subject, body, and perception. For him, “[t]he film’s final contribution [...] is to remind us of the sense of eeriness intrinsic to our unstable accounts of subject and object, mind and body” (108). Unfortunately, the substantive parts of his analysis end here. What Fisher leaves us with is an interesting, yet incomplete, gloss of the Eerie as that which comes to unsettle an already unstable human subject. What we take from his analysis is that the Eerie is, at one and the same time, a feature of the world as we perceive it *and* a danger for the subject in its coming to be with and through the object-world.

We will reconsider *Under the Skin* again below as we think Fisher is right that the film definitely evokes the Eerie. To see what we have in mind, we offer an experience that

motivated the approach of this paper. We were in Edinburgh, and on a particularly grey, misty day, one of the historic buildings was disappearing at the edges in fog. Independently we both thought it was Eerie. We were reading Fisher's book on that trip and discussed his analysis as an explanation of the scene. It did not seem to quite fit. As we discussed why we wanted to call the scene Eerie, we agreed that it was something about the way the building loomed in the mist. We could not quite make out where it met the ground, or where its edges were, or its relationship to its surroundings. In short, it appeared as though its presence as a clearly discernible object was disrupted. It was manifest, certainly, but the envelopments of the mist spirited away its determinacy. What was left was a soft smudge of brickwork, washed out colours, and a sense of broken, unreal presence. Moreover, this was a contradictory presence: a presence that was attenuated by its misty underdetermination on the one hand, but which also gave the sense that it might be much larger on the other. Indeed, beyond the folds of mist perhaps it was a behemoth structure of unimaginable size. So, even in this moment the Eerie felt dialectical: both a disappearance of the object (from subjective grip), as well as a reassertion of the object over the subject.

At heart this is clearly a distinctive phenomenological episode. There is something-that-it-is-like to experience the Eerie. For us it was a spookiness that was at once compelling whilst at the same time queasy. This spookiness turns out, we think, to be both a dissembling of everyday perception, and thereby also a limit case of phenomenology. To understand how, we can reflect on familiar accounts of perception and the relationship between subjects and objects within such phenomenological episodes. For example, in Merleau-Ponty's orthogonal account of perception, we are not just concerned with the mechanics of vision, but with how it is that we are coherent subjects in the world, and how that world itself is consistent and coherent for us. As is well known, his idea is that our "lived-body" is the key to understanding both subjectivity and

objectivity – as these are, in a sense, existentially and phenomenologically paired. The "lived-body" is the "body" with which we move through and interact in the world.⁵ He says:

The relations between things or aspects of things having always our body as their vehicle, the whole of nature is the setting of our own life, or our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue [...] To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention or, on the other hand, the complete expression outside ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak, of our body with things. (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 373)

Indeed, this relationality is as much a temporal as a spatial (483). The broad point of the phenomenology is that the experience of our own bodily coherence, and the affordances of that lived-body for engaging with the world, is the condition of what we call (objective) reality (349, 352f.).

Here is not the place to argue over Merleau-Ponty, or how best to do phenomenology. We think that something like Merleau-Ponty's idea that our experience of the world *standardly* correlates objects to (embodied) subjects is right to a point. The details, however, are moot when it comes to the Eerie because what the subject feels in such moments is precisely a *rupture* in their "dialogue" with the world. To the extent that phenomenology is built on the dominance of subjectivity as such, the very project of phenomenology must run aground on the Eerie. Indeed, phenomenology coordinates the limits of objectivity as wholly enclosed by the transcendental contours of the subject as a kind of Ur-object. What we think the Eerie does, by way of the material plasticity of its objects, is draw into question the hegemonic power that subjects exert over objects; it disrupts the correlation of subjects and objects. Of course Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that perception need not always run smoothly.⁶ But the Eerie is not a glitch, or an optical illusion;

it is not a performance error, but an ontological feature of the object-world. Moreover, if that building in foggy Edinburgh was Eerie it was because it was an object in de-formation. The intimacy of the subject and object as Merleau-Ponty envisions it is precisely what falls apart in the experience of the Eerie. Indeed, if Merleau-Ponty is *the* phenomenologist of the object as it *accords* with the subject, the Eerie is the reassertion of the object *qua* object apart from the subject.

strange creatures, eerie islands

Eerie objects haunt the subject rather than consolidating its sense of “homeliness” in the world. If it really is the case that the everyday coherence of objects is a function of the spatio-temporal coherence of our own subjectivity, objects that slip in and out of manifest spatio-temporal presence cannot help but instigate a reality-creep for the subject. A tree looms in the mist; it is recognisable as a tree but as the mist moves about it, its contours pitch and shift; it is neither clearly distinct from the mist, but not the mist either; its object boundaries become permeable. So whilst cognition (the conceptual determination of the tree as a “tree”) does not falter, the *form* of the object does. On a clear day, the tree is clear and distinct, and this clarity even recuperates those parts of the object which we cannot see, as well as the “natural” distortions of perception that arise out of the particularities of perspective (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 353). The horizon of perception coheres in what is present and what is absent, what is a part of the object and what is not. The Eerie is the moment when reality begins to dissolve, to come apart; when form suggests formlessness.

What is disturbing about the Eerie is that it is well within our perceptual field, and hence not sublime, but it is not clearly defined.⁷ The object’s ill-formed presence returns in a subtle sense of menace: where does this object begin; where does it end; how far back does it go? Our own bodies, indices of the well-formedness of the objects about it, sense their own failure, their own objective

vulnerability. Indeed, this objective vulnerability is a kind of being-with-objects that transcendental phenomenology seems to be an attempt to legislate against: a being with objects that does not revolve around the subject *qua* subject. The disturbance of the Eerie draws the subject away from the security of its own domain, back towards the world of the object as it is indifferent to the subject, as it retreats from the subject. In other words, the Eerie is a convulsion in which objects reassert themselves in their very alterity to subjects.⁸

Lucile Hadžihalilović’s film *Évolution* (2015) offers ample material to explore our understanding of the Eerie. Like *Under the Skin*, it evokes a world of post-human alterity, full of unspoken and unrepresentable horrors. Most of its characters are sirens: with their pale faces, inscrutable eyes, and deadpan expressions, they make for an unbearably alien presence in the film. Described as an “eerie body horror” (Hoffman np), *Évolution* derives much of its otherworldliness from later scenes; the second half of the movie shows the sirens take young boys to a dingy, nightmarish hospital facility, where they conduct disturbing medical procedures on them (Figure 1).

But eeriness is evoked even before that. Set in a remote, barren landscape, barely inhabited but for the sirens and the boys in their care, the film’s spatial dimension is disturbingly elusive. White stone houses against a backdrop of black sand and volcanic rock; an unforgiving ocean, fiercely protective of its secrets; a doomy hospital building with grease- and algae-covered walls. The living quarters for the boys and the sirens are depressing and sinister, unfurnished but for the basic necessities. They represent an attempt at habitation, at fulfilling basic human needs for shelter and food, but without recalling the familiar infrastructures of human livelihoods. Although the film features many wide landscape shots, both underwater and above ground, we remain unable to form a coherent sense of its spatial setting. Indeed, the island itself, lonely and marooned, without a clear sense of position or border,

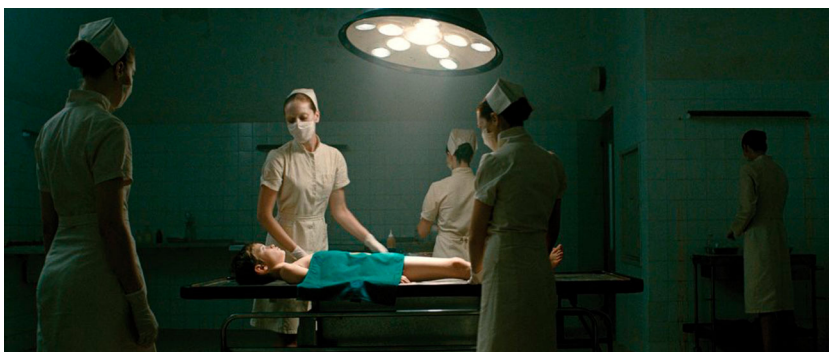


Fig. 1. *Évolution*, surgery scene.

situates the very space of the movie as an Eerie one (Figure 2).

The whole island is both profoundly out of place – it might be in another world, another planet even – and at the same time strangely present. In order to make sense of this, viewers of the film try to apprehend the land, and seascapes, as recognisable features of an island – a concept with intelligible spatiality. However, this cognitive leap fails to satisfy our desire for homeliness. Our attempt at making sense of the seascapes and buildings as part of an island community does not alleviate the eeriness that pervades the film because, as we argue below, the form of both the island and its geography are underdetermined. In other words, our ability to grasp the world conceptually cannot assuage the existential shudder of the Eerie. Indeed, this indeterminacy *for us* results in a sense of the island as

alien to us: an object blasted out of spatio-temporal geographies not correlated to our own (Figure 3).⁹

We now have the material to explore how *Évolution*'s spatial eeriness operates: there are no external reference points to make sense of its location – there is no clear horizon of objective reality grounding the movie's sense of space, a horizon which would be standardly underwritten by our own lived, bodily coherence. As we feel the failure of our own bodies to recuperate the de-deformation of the object, we feel vulnerable and destabilised before it. What is Eerie is not so much that the place seems uninhabitable, but rather, that its objecthood *for us*, appears unclear. The dialogue between subject and object breaks down; the communion and shared, material understanding of subject and object becomes, instead, a site of alienation and menace.

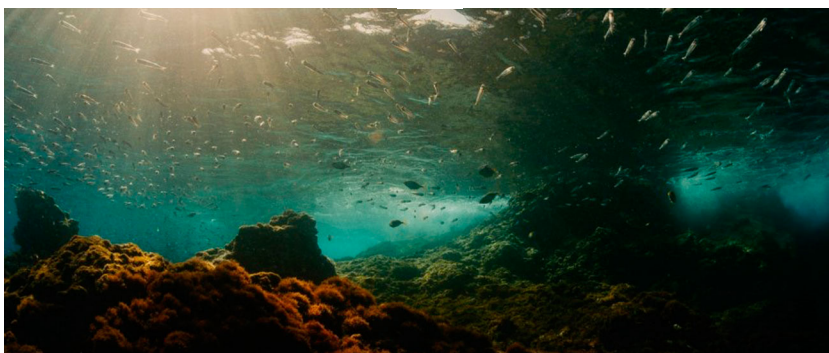


Fig. 2. *Évolution*, underwater scene.



Fig. 3. *Évolution*, landscape.

Just as we are unable to make spatial sense of the film, we are also unable to situate it in time. Its temporal references are oblique, often contradictory: housing, clothes, and facilities seem archaic; the medical technology used on the boys vaguely recalls a dystopian future of unspeakable reproductive horrors. The film invokes our sense of past and future, without allowing us to connect its temporal references to anything like *our* past and future. This sense of being temporally afloat is only reinforced by the title: it suggests a familiar temporality, or rhythm, only to immediately abandon us into temporal alterity. Against Merleau-Ponty's attempt at phenomenological mastery of the object-world by way of the subject's body, we could say that the absence of an intelligible temporal horizon disturbs not just our immediate perception, but also our sense of how this perception is situated within the world's flow of time. *Évolution*'s spatio-temporal location has not been "lived," and the objective contours of its reality warp, bend, and disappear in ambiguous presence. All this serves to implicate our own bodies as the guarantors of reality. As frightening as this is, the fundamental menace of the film's eeriness revolves around the reality of these objects apart from us. Despite inhabiting a time and space that is unlived/unliveable *for us*, these eerie objects endure in such time and space – their time and space. If, as Kristeva argues, abjection is a quake within the very possibility of bodily integrity (*Powers of Horror* 53f.), the Eerie drags the subject's

body into a drift of space and time far removed from the contours of the lived-body. The final insult, as it were, to the subject is that objects do not care. But if all this is so, what then draws us to the film? What makes us seek out the shudder of the Eerie? We address these questions in the following section.

desiring the eerie

We have suggested that Eerie phenomena involve objects which appear disturbed in their objecthood. Whilst we have emphasised the ways that the Eerie emerges as a limit case of phenomenology, it is still a phenomenological episode; we now turn to a further nuance in the phenomenology. The Eerie is strange. Everything stops but the Eerie. The Eerie object suspends time and space, and we hold our breath. Our body tightens. Our existence flutters; our heartbeat beats that bit harder. The strangeness of the Eerie is a kind of existential threat. But it draws us to itself. As the eerie object wavers, our focus upon it is avid; we are compelled by it, not just out of fear, but fascination.

Fisher introduces Lacan in his discussion of *Under the Skin*. However, he uses Lacan by way of the latter's theory of the symbolic order: how the subject represents, and is represented by itself (Fisher 108). As we have already acknowledged, Fisher's view that the alien *represents* an instability in the subject/object structure of subjectivity is right insofar

as it concerns some kind of *instability*. However, given our discussion so far, a *well-formed representation of an idea* – “the subject within the body” – is not itself Eerie. Perhaps the perceptually tidy image of the featureless alien is “creepy”; but we do not want to say that it is Eerie. Hence we do not think that Lacanian representation at the symbolic level is at issue.

Indeed, as with Kristeva’s Abject, it is the associative reaching out of semiosis that holds promise for unfolding the complex psychical and somatic responses to strangeness (*Powers of Horror* 71f.). If the phallogocentric economy of the Lacanian symbolic is of import for thinking about subjective estrangement in the face of the Eerie, it is only to make the same point as above in a psychoanalytic register: subjective (read: male) entitlement to represent the object-world returns as impotence and anxiety as the object-world retreats from the subject. Whilst Kristeva remobilises the semiotic as a plenipotentiary of meaningfulness beyond the ambit of the symbolic, we mine Lacan’s view of the narcissistic ego and desire for its possibilities in helping us to understand further tensions in the phenomenology of the Eerie sketched above.

To understand how, we need to engage with Lacan’s view of the relationship between subject and object. During the mirror stage, the contours of the Lacanian subject – a subjectivity amenable to socialisation within the symbolic order – are formed.¹⁰ The (narcissistic) ego, which underwrites symbolic subjectivity, is a function of an inherently unstable, primal subject/object formation. One of Lacan’s guiding thoughts is that *the subject forms itself as a subject by taking the image of itself as its first object* (*Écrits* 1). The form of the subject as such is a function therefore, of its own subject/object relation to itself. Moreover, this narcissistic model of subject/object becomes the basis by which the subject will understand, and relate to, the objecthood of those objects which are not itself.

Only the basics of this process are needed here. The proto-subject is extended in the world but only through its confused,

aggregated “body”; a “body” which is in fact not yet a body but an assemblage of parts, zones, and dispersions (Grosz 34f.). This confused physicality is neither self-coordinated, nor does it afford the subject control in the world (Lacan, *Écrits* 4). Alienated from the mother, and thereby distinct, but not yet itself a well-formed being-in-the-world, the ego is in liminal flux, flailing after something by which it can anchor itself as a self/body (2). Objects cannot yet provide that role precisely because the subject hasn’t yet developed a working structure of objecthood: that requires a working model of *object as opposed to subject*.¹¹ The existential irony is that the subject finds its anchor in the image of that very “object” which is already in flux: the image of itself (“body”) in the mirror. Through the mirror image, the ego is able to take itself as a coordinated whole – a unified body. Whilst its own body is still experienced as an uncoordinated aggregate, in the mirror that same assemblage appears replete, distinct, coordinated, and whole – as a well-formed object (1).

The subject comes to desire this mirror image of itself because it is in the image of the (self) object that the subject appears healed to itself (whole). This semblance of healing offers the hope of overcoming its earliest experiences of itself: experiences of the self as a *lack* of wholeness. After all, existence is a wounding: a tearing into being through the experience of being distinct – if not yet whole – from the mother (Lacan, *Écrits* 19). In the Abject, Kristeva re-opens this psychical wound as a problematic of material dissolution of the subject.¹² For the purposes of exploring the Eerie, however, we want to pursue this anxiety as it pertains to the appearance of objects. Only in the experience of the image of the (self) object does the subject *appear* to itself as healed (Grosz 40). Indeed the attempt to *know* itself – *connaissance* – through its image returns to the subject as a persistent *méconnaissance*: that is to say it systematically *misrecognises* itself in identification of itself with the image in the mirror. Subjects are doomed to desire (images of) objects through

which they can re-experience the semblance of their own subject formation and self-mastery – a formation and mastery which never actually fulfils the subject, and is only ever imago.

It is this relationship between the subject, and itself as object, which forms the basis for the relationship of the subject to those objects which are not itself. On the one hand, the subject re-enacts the image of its own self-completion before the object. Yet before the presence of the object it is reminded of its lack, and its non-identity with the object. As suggested, therefore, the subject desires objects insofar as objects always promise existential and psychical reconciliation of the self to (the image of) itself. Yet that promise can never be fulfilled, although desire requires the subject to endlessly repeat the process (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 154).

We have argued that the Eerie is the shudder experienced by the subject in the face of the partial undoing of the object. Indeed, it is a shudder within the object as it appears to the subject; hence it is also the tremor of objectivity beyond subjectivity. We can now bring these Lacanian ideas about the psychical-somatic structures of subject/object formation into dialogue with the analysis so far. Again, this is not to index eeriness to Lacan's work. The Eerie, as an erotic site of de-formation, reads against Lacan in some respects: the subject is fascinated by the failure of subject/object formation; the narcissistic subject suspends its erotic desire for completion, instead giving itself over to queasy fascination, luxuriating in the supple, plastic slippages in the form of Eerie objects. As argued in the previous section, the perceptual experience of the Eerie consists in the failure of presence of objects; it is the recession of the object away from the hegemony of subjectivity. Reading Lacan, both for and against himself, can help us to explore the depths of the phenomenology of the Eerie by extending the psychical-somatic import of objecthood for the subject.

In Lacanian terms, desire motivates us towards objects due to the promise of psychical-somatic self-fulfilment afforded by the

seemingly perfected imaginary of objects; an imaginary that is in turn predicated on our own self-image. Given the Lacanian account of the narcissistic ego, our experience of objects may be a repeated site of *méconnaissance*. Nevertheless, there is the semblance of happiness to be gained from their image no matter how much they are also a site of misrecognition. Against this backdrop of *méconnaissance* and compulsive happiness, the de-formations of eerie objects loom; the subject is confronted with the failure of the image. Much like Kristeva's Abject, the Eerie poses a problem for the subject in its own formation (*Powers of Horror* 2). However, the Abject object is a proxy, of sorts, for subjective de-formation. The Abject is an existential terror echoing back to us from schismatic fissures in the semiotic chora (14f.).¹³ It is an aftershock from a much earlier moment in psychical formation. In the Eerie, the subject is disturbed by its relation to objects that are themselves sites of de-formation. As desire propels us towards Eerie phenomena, the subject finds in them a "true" image of itself: incomplete, deformed, and wounded.

Yet desire is malleable, always curious, and likes to touch whatever it does not know. Besides desire has little use for "knowledge." Desire can overcome the threat of the Abject, and its own self-disgust, in scatological fascination. Likewise, our desire may recuperate the Eerie, despite its fissuring of the subject and object. As our gaze probes at the Eerie, feeling for that which is elusive in the de-formations of an object's presence, we relinquish the narcissistic image of ourselves – indexed to a present and perfect objecthood – for a deformed imago. In that way, the subject experiences the texture of its own plasticity in the Eerie slippages of the object imaginary. It seems plausible that in the Eerie, we may take ourselves as de-formed objects of erotic interest once again, albeit by way of the strange, suspended reality of the Eerie.

Mobilising our use of Lacan's theory we are able to re-read the eeriness of *Under the Skin*, exemplifying the theoretical features we have developed above. As noted, Fisher's view

revolves around Scarlett Johansson's character not being an intelligible agency to us. We want to propose an alternative reading utilising the theoretical account developed thus far. As Fisher notes, the film re-presents the Scottish landscape through the eyes of an "alien" (106). However, it seems more accurate to say that the landscapes are *Uncanny* due to their defamiliarisation under the gaze of the (alien) camera. On the other hand, the dusky light, the undulating roads, and the blown-out hillsides, create smudges of darkness, of opacity and obscurity, *such that there is not enough stable objectivity*

in the scenery to recuperate a well-defined sense of objectivity (Figures 4–6).

The result are landscapes, both rural and urban, that are vague and ambiguous, ill-defined in their contours and edges, with either mist or gloom washing out a clear sense of form.

This complexity is amply demonstrated in other key moments in the film. The "sex scenes" of *Under the Skin* are a theatre of Eerie desire. Determinate spatiality comes apart in these voids: undistinguishable, unlivd darkness in which the "ground" gives



Fig. 4. *Under the Skin*, rural scene.

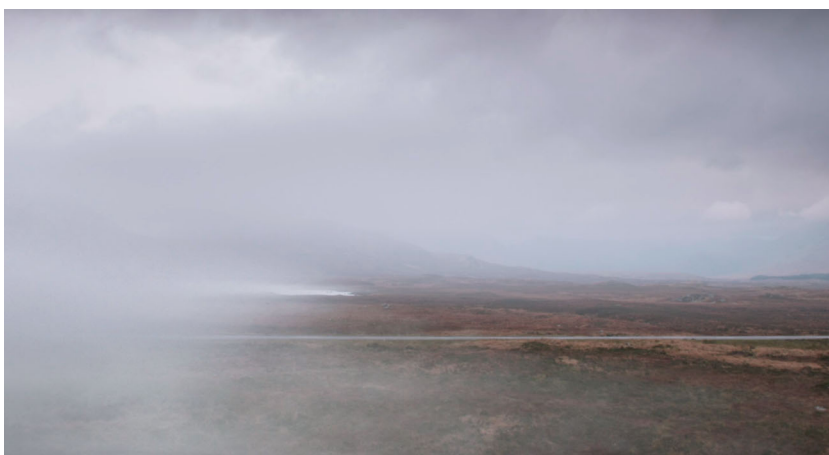


Fig. 5. *Under the Skin*, rural scene.



Fig. 6. *Under the Skin*, urban scene.

way to an infinite lagoon of black water, all set against a space of pitch blackness. Stark, pale men are drawn towards Johansson over an indeterminate distance, until they sink into a nothingness below them, never to reach her – “her,” their object of desire. In the scene, the desire for Johansson is formally replicated in our eroticised fascination with the eeriness of the space itself. On the one hand these voids are disturbing. Yet, the very in-determinability of the space is an invitation to the eye: to explore; to seek out its shape. The motivation for this is not epistemic, but *sensuous* – as indexed to material form. Moreover, it is a sensuous

enquiry borne out of desire for the taboo of the imaginary: for the incomplete, the lacking, or the “deformed” (Figures 7 and 8).

It is in these overlapping modalities of strangeness that the film excels – and in which the desire for the Eerie is at the forefront. As Johansson’s alien examines herself in the mirror, exploring a body which is alien to herself, we find *Uncanny* the image of *her finding herself, as object-image, Eerie*. Whilst her body is familiar to us, seeing our familiar human body as the site of the alien is *Uncanny*. However, the uncanniness considers the scene from just our point of view. It

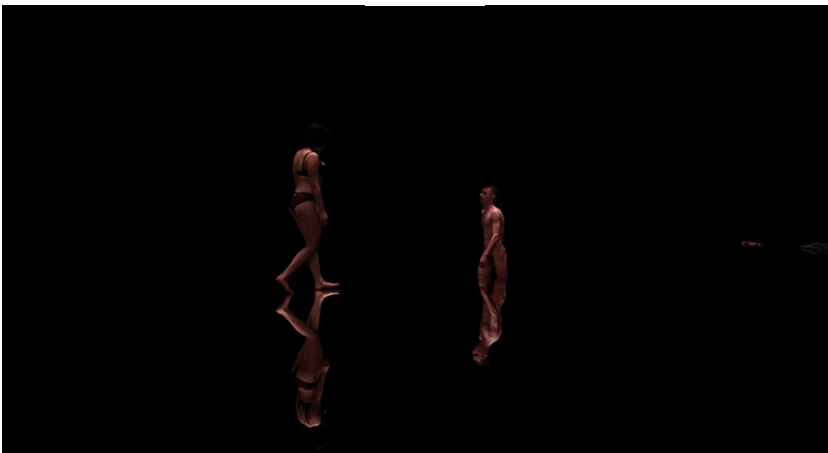


Fig. 7. *Under the Skin*, “sex” scene.

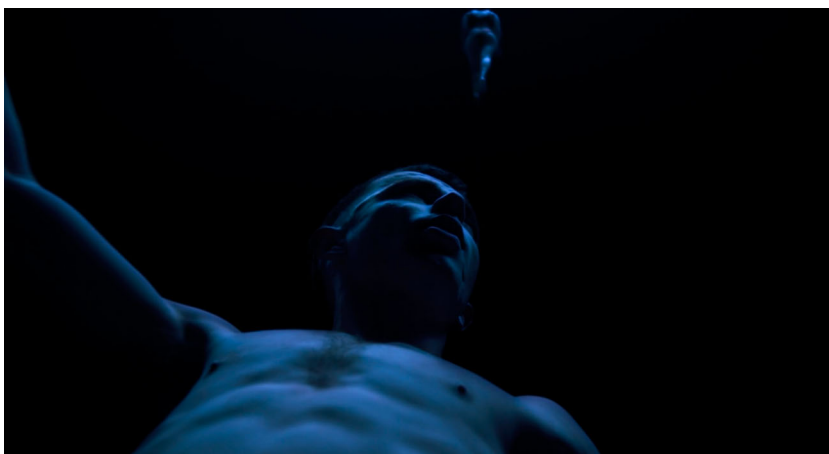


Fig. 8. *Under the Skin*, “sex” scene.

leaves unexplained the strangeness which makes possible the defamiliarisation of her familiar body.

To understand that we need to further mediate our gaze through that of Johansson’s alien. The scene is established from the point of view of “our gaze” which is formally speaking a textbook example of the “male gaze.” The camera glides up her naked body with her back turned, in a cinematic gesture taken directly from Mulvey’s Lacanian-inflected theory. However, the camera subverts this position as it adopts the alien’s POV: she explores herself through the image of “her body” in the

mirror (the narcissistic gesture we know so well from our own egoism) (Figure 9).

But far from finding an image with which she can identify, she sees something alien to herself. Whatever the psychical attachments an alien has to their own body-image, what *we see* in her awkward, curious behaviour, is a recognisable response to a body-image which is non-identical to her own imaginary self-image. This deformation is presented formally: moving away from the framed, fetishism of the male gaze, we are presented with her body from an unfamiliar position without markers of what part of her body we/she are even viewing. The way

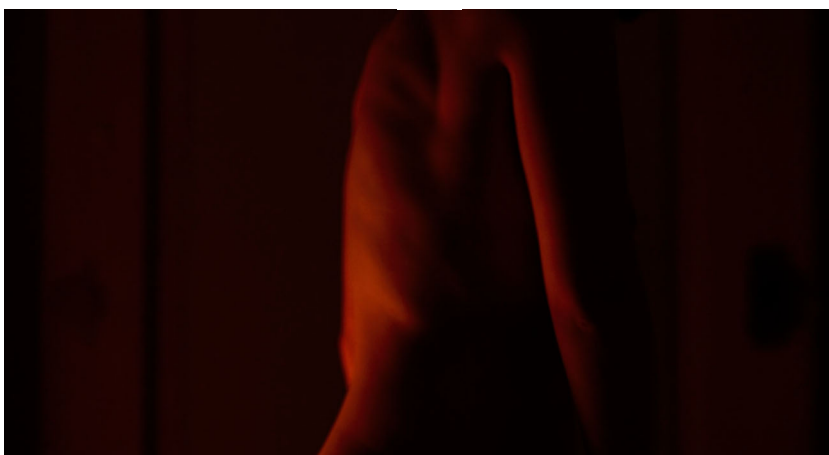


Fig. 9. *Under the Skin*, mirror scene.

the light and shadows fall on her body, it turns somewhat formless and ambiguous.

But perhaps, like us, she finds the unexplored possibilities that hide in the recesses of her own unlivd flesh, of the irreducible hiddenness of herself to herself, a point of departure for desire. Her body, supple, bathed in shadows and creases of darkness, appears to her an indeterminate object: strange, ill-formed, and available for (erotic) enquiry. Under her gaze, both curious and disturbed, we recognise our own experience of the Eerie, albeit second-hand.

cathedrals of the strange

In this final section, we want to draw together all our resources from Merleau-Ponty and Lacan to show how our view can be used to analyse one of Zdzisław Beksiński's paintings, and a representation of eeriness. As mentioned, we cannot, for example, provide an exploration of the transformations of the Eerie across different media here, no matter how interesting

and important. That said, it is worth noting that whilst there is a difference in movement and stasis between film and painting, in the example of film the Eerie may be experienced by proxy – through the experience of a character – whilst in the case of painting, *it is us who* experiences the Eerie. Such mediated experiences may be different again to the experience of the Eerie as a “natural” phenomenon, unmediated by the materiality and formal contours of media representation. All this said, turning to a painting here allows us to show how Eerie objects are represented in both contemporary and more traditional art forms, such as painting, whilst retaining their distinctive eeriness. Furthermore, in this particular case, we can situate the Eerie directly alongside other modalities of the strange as Beksiński's work is masterful in bringing together the gamut of strange and horrifying (Figure 10).

Many words can be used to describe Beksiński's art: surreal, horrifying, Gothic, nightmarish, are just a few. But whatever one could say about them, they are *strange* horrors in all its



Fig. 10. Zdzisław Beksiński, *Untitled*, 1984.

forms: Abject, Eerie, Weird, and Uncanny, all rubbing against the Sublime in a perfect storm of existential threat. The focus of this painting is, it seems, some kind of cathedral. Firstly, the image is clearly Sublime. Working with a fairly standard Kantian schema of the mathematically Sublime, this image of a huge, desolated cathedral (contrasted for reference against the tiny gravestones) reminds us of when our imaginative capacities are stretched to breaking point and aesthetic apprehension crumbles (Kant, *Critique of Judgment* 26). Although Kant did not have these words, in the Sublime we are subjected to *existential* violence. Perhaps we recuperate our cognitive failure in reason as Kant suggests; perhaps not. But the sheer size of the building accounts for its sublimity in something like his account.

Yet it is in the details, and in other formal techniques of the painting, where the strange resides. The cathedral slips very quickly from the Uncanny to the Weird. At first glance, the image maintains the semblance of familiarity. It is a large cathedral with recognisable motifs of sacred architecture: a belltower; it is surrounded by a graveyard, etc. However, the details that constitute the building put pressure on this familiarity. Upon further inspection, the uncanniness of something being “not quite right” gives way to a deeper malaise. Suggesting Fisher’s Chthonic Weird, the distorted expressions of occult aesthetics, and unintelligible practices, place the alterity of an alien civilisation alongside our own.¹⁴ Is this a cathedral of our making, ravaged by the influence of an otherworldly force? Or, an alternate horror of Christianity lurking in another possible world? Whatever the case, the primacy of our experience is decentred, and an invading force of weirdness presses in on human planes of meaning.

The Weird and the Uncanny do not exhaust the strangeness, however. The cathedral also appears necrotic. The ossified walls are wind-blasted bone; the nave area reveals itself in ribs, partially draped in shroud-like stone, the colour of drowned skin. The tower, with its ruined walls, gapes into orifices of webbing – a material texture somewhere between insect

carapace and bone. A hole yawns in the side, ambiguous between mouth and uvula, and vulva. It is difficult to digest the details without registering the queasiness of the Abject.¹⁵ Not only do we find something weirdly alien in the structure, we are reminded of our own material formation – our sheer “matter-ness” – in the cathedral’s gross organic moments.

What is then left for the Eerie? Arguably, all of these elements of the strange are nested in an overall instance of the Eerie. The cathedral looms, *but only partially*. Its edges are often lost in a blue-grey mist into which it appears to dissolve. There is little environment situating the building. It doesn’t float in the air, but there is no clear sense of place either. As we try to situate both it, and ourselves, in a well-formed horizon of objectivity, with a clear sense of what is present and what is absent, what we experience instead is ambiguity. Hence the eeriness of the single, slab-like object, fading in and out of an environment: a situation that presents the object to us, and yet fails to provide a proper object-horizon. We feel that failure as a tremor; an elusive *loss of objective clarity* that implicates our own body’s being in the world. However, its eeriness is really a moment of existential intimidation. The object is ill-formed for us, it slips away from us as something within our object horizon. But it has not disappeared; it has not dissolved as a result. It is nevertheless very much “there,” and even appears to *come back at us* out of the mist. Even though it does not make sense in our spatial object horizon, it is not therefore annulled; it has its own space apart from us, and in that the Eerie object is also defiant.

In addition to the spatial eeriness, the building appears in temporal suspension. Not only is there a lack of spatial reference points, the building’s sense of past and future is entirely enigmatic. Is it disused? Is it wreckage, or just being built? Or is this simply where devotees of Lovecraft’s Elder Gods go to pray? We cannot answer these questions. Without familiar objects to act as temporal reference points, its narrative unintelligibility disrupts the sense of a lived temporal presence. As argued, spatially,

it is “here.” But *when* is here? The building appears adrift in a desolated time frame: lost to a quiet, unchanging stasis in which our own presence, as temporal beings, is impossible.

Hence, this painting is a paradigmatic case of the Eerie. And moreover, despite its strangeness, or better, *because of it*, it draws us to it. Even as we recoil from it as a site of existential threat, its elusiveness as an object sets our curiosity in motion. This desire to explore, to probe the object’s wounded appearance, is borne of a fascination deeper than epistemic inquiry. It is a dark desire to explore the very taboo that our imaginary is tasked to overcome: our “true” self-image is a site of ambiguity and lack. And that in the unseen, unformed recesses of our own ambiguity, we are secrets to ourselves. This is what the Eerie is to us: phenomena whose strangeness is both at odds with the ideal object-images of the imaginary; and yet enticing and accessible to us precisely because we identify with its indeterminacy. This does not recall the Kantian hero of the dynamic sublime, empowered by reason before a nature that threatens to obliterate it. Rather, it is the part of the story involved in abandoning such Romantic “heroism.” There is no recuperation of power in the erotics of eeriness, but there might be a wounded desire to be with objects as they lurk beyond the horizon of the subject.



disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

notes

1 In her *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva adds to her work on the Abject by noting a curious omission in Freud’s writings on the Uncanny: “Strangely enough, there is no mention of *foreigners* in the *Unheimliche*” (191). The kind of strangeness that she is concerned with in this work is the strangeness of a foreign Other; for the purposes of this paper, we focus on strangeness as it pertains to objects that are strange in the sense of “eerie” rather than strange in the sense of “foreign.”

2 Kristeva indexes the Abject to the “feminine” and thereby also to the semiotic configurations that the maternal body consists in (*Powers of Horror* 20, 59, 65); we do not wish to make this move about the Eerie. For reasons beyond the scope of the paper, we worry about this division of the subject along “masculine” and “feminine” kinds, as it were. That said, we are happy to see the Eerie as intervention into the phallogentric and patriarchal economies of representation.

3 To an extent the Eerie gestures towards Meillassoux’s attack on correlationism (7). The idea that we can “reduce” objects to their appearance to subject and subjective forms of consciousness is precisely what the Eerie appears to rupture. Whilst we do not want to suggest that one has to be a speculative realist to accept our account, our account of the Eerie, as a limit case in subjective phenomenology, echoes Meillassoux’s own desire to think the object apart from the subject (128).

4 Through the concept of *Parergon* (“frame”), Derrida probes the problematics of the integrity of various kinds of objects, e.g., from Kant’s philosophy through to the interior and exterior of colonnaded buildings. The frame is literally a problem of artworks – and so appropriate for thinking through the problematics of the Eerie as differentially mediated according to various representational formats – but it is a problem of any notion of inside and outside. Derrida already notes the dialectics of material ambiguity about objects that the very presence of a frame introduces (59); in some sense the Eerie is the presence of the absence of a stable object frame. Indeed, if painting can open up the truth of the object-world (Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track* 19), the Eerie as we find it mediated in art is the undoing of this very possibility.

5 It has been suggested to us that mood might be an alternative trajectory for an account of the phenomenology. Whilst it is not the purpose here to argue against such a view, there are *prima facie* reasons why this might be unpromising – at least taking “mood” in some Heideggerian sense. If mood is a transcendental condition of emotional states, i.e., a condition for the possibility of “fearing that [...]” (cf. Ratcliffe 354f.) one’s mood seems phenomenologically prior to the constitutive fearing that attends the Eerie (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 176). That said, we suspect that Eerie experiences, and other modalities of

strangeness, could well contribute to the sort of existential anxiety that is mood-revealing for Heidegger.

6 Note, for example, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the aesthetic effects of Cezanne's impressionism ("Cezanne's Doubt" 14). By contrast, Eerie objects are a rupture in the well-formed presence of an object which renders them vague and ambiguous.

7 For contrast the Eerie sits close to, but is distinct from, both Kantian beauty and mathematical sublimity. For Kant, beauty does not depend on a concept of the object, and the subject plays with the form of the object. The Eerie, we suggest, is phenomenologically prior to judgement rather than its temporary suspension; eeriness is not an opportunity for subjective play. Rather, eeriness is an indictment of the pure forms of sensible intuition and their spatio-temporal insufficiency for rendering objects. Furthermore, our claim about form and formlessness is not to run together eeriness and mathematical sublimity. The mathematical sublime is the problem of cohering, in the transcendental faculty of the imagination, all the discrete spatio-temporal parts of the object as it is available to us – contrast Kant: (*Critique of Pure Reason*) §§102–03 with (*Critique of Judgment*) §26. Psychical duress is experienced under the demands of reason that both demands totality whilst the imagination fails. In short, mathematical sublimity is a quantitative problem for aesthetic comprehension. Eeriness is not simply a problem of size but of actual indeterminacy in the appearance of the object as such.

8 Trigg talks about the Uncanny effects of an "anonymous materiality" – the indifference of the places through which we construct our identities: "All along, however, there exists the anonymous space that fails to look back at us, despite our attempts to imbue that world with value and memory" (218). By contrast, we have suggested that eeriness occurs not at the level of recognition but at the level of objecthood as such.

9 The point here echoes Morton's hyper-objects: the island is in one sense present and available, but the lack of sense of its contours, its frame, makes its objecthood yawn open in space and time in ways that slip away from our attempts to control it as a "natural" object for us (60).

10 We are sceptical of the transcendental sufficiency of Merleau-Ponty's lived-body; we are also

deeply sceptical of the structuralist, and gendered, desiderata in Lacan's view. Just as the schematic contours of eeriness which we provide here need rethinking through specific media, it is a larger, more pressing question how eeriness is mediated by gender, queer, and racialised particularities. This is crucial, but for further study.

11 Noted by Merleau-Ponty also (*The Visible and the Invisible* 128–29).

12 It is also worth noting that Kristeva's Oedipal analyses offer ways to think beyond existence as just a rending of self from the (mo-)other (*Hatred and Forgiveness* 90). In the maternal the mother has an opportunity to re-explore semiosis beyond the exhaustion of the masculine symbolic (121).

13 It is worth noting as well that Kristeva explores the idea of strangeness, not just through the Abject, but in terms of "the Other." Moreover, she indexes the Uncanny to the experience of the other's strangeness – something which is not just foreign but semiotically feminine (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 185). She even suggests that an internalised strangeness is a condition of being with others (192).

14 For Fisher's treatment of Lovecraft and "the Weird," see chapter 1. Also, see Lovecraft's classic story "Call of Cthulhu" (201). Lovecraft was a writer of so-called "Weird fiction," creating a fictional mythos of Elder Gods. What distinguishes Lovecraft's horror is that these beings are alien, not just in morphology, but in purpose and the way they occupy time and space. The consequence of "meeting" these beings results in mental collapse: they are maddeningly unintelligible; and their complete disregard for the value of human affairs effects a complete existential trauma. As such, any contact with Chthonic artefacts, amongst the denizens and phenomena of our world, is an instance of the Weird.

15 Of course, these kinds of aesthetic gestures constitute much of the strange/horror palate of H.R. Geiger's art. As has been pointed out to us, the alien spacecraft in *Alien* (1979) is a distinct moment of the Eerie.

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