WEIRD REALISM AS A FORM OF SPECULATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY AND FICTION

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Abstract

This practice-based research focuses on weird literary fiction, and critical photographic practice in order to develop a new form of weird realism by using transdisciplinary practice, combining documentary photography, collage, and speculative fiction into a photo novel.

This study builds upon the methodologies of key critical photographic practitioners, Allan Sekula, W.G. Sebald, Laura Ford and Teju Cole, to address the lack of research around the weird in photographic theory and practice. The urgency of addressing this gap in research, arises from the recent upsurge of fascism which has formed as reaction to a capitalist crisis of productive forces. Social progress is hindered by private ownership of the means of production, causing mass inequality. This move towards fascism is grounded in the idea that an alternative to capitalism is impossible. The importance of the weird therefore, comes from its intense affectivity, in contrast to the flattened affect of the present. The weird has the capability to make another world seem possible.

My process is based on a literary analysis of H. P. Lovecraft's weird fictions, *Polaris* (1918), *The Whisper in Darkness* (1931), *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), *The Shadow Out of Time* (1936) and *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1936). My analysis also focuses on J. G. Ballard's weird fictions, *Concrete Island* (1974) and *Millennium People* (2003). These literary texts are examined alongside case studies of photographic realisms, to determine how the weird can operate in photography through the index. Also how the weird can be evoked by the use of and interplay between analogue and digital photographic forms, together with speculative fiction. Before turning to creative strategies of negation and resistance, in order to address the gap in research between photography, weird fiction and cultural criticism. My process for making photographic work is based on the methods of montage, taken from Allan Sekula's critical realism in *Fish Story* (1995). Laura Ford's employment of détournement through xerox and collage in the punk zine *Savage Messiah* (2019). W.G Sebald's use of metaphor to combine image and text, in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and Teju Cole's use of the documentary photobook as a speculative site in order to imagine a different world *Fernweh* (2020).

My final output, *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen (2025),* is a photo novel and moving image video. It is comprised of my original speculative fiction, together with photographs and

collages from the real world location of Portsmouth, England, plus collages made using estate agent advertisements and New Labour's 2024 election campaign materials. My original fiction is about a dystopic possible future under neoliberal capitalism set in the fictional place of "Port City". It deploys the weird through dreams, different unfoldings of temporality, and anthropomorphism. The photographs and collages are linked to the text through metaphor, to communicate the weird in order to make another world feel possible at a time of rising global fascism

Acknowledgments

Perhaps my first encounter with the weird, would have been through reading H.P Lovecraft's fiction in the mid 2000's, soon after entering the world of work in late 2007. A grey tax office, where managers would joke of keeping the windows closed to stop people from jumping out, the mood wouldn't improve as the crash of 2008 hit. Flash forward to 2020 as COVID began to spread, and the apathy of living only through the moment, one without a future, came back. We were all in it together so long as we promised to shop more to keep the economy alive. That same year, I would have a mentorship session at Aspex gallery where I was encouraged to consider an MA, which I would soon pursue at the University of Portsmouth. My degree was practice-based research on Object Oriented Ontology and Photography, from there I would return to the weird once more in a PhD.

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Introduction

This practice-based dissertation focuses on the intersection between weird fiction and photography. Whilst there is a plethora of research on speculative realism and weird fiction, there is a lack in research on how the weird operates within documentary photography. To assist in the development of a weird realist aesthetic and critical model, I have identified areas in which there is common ground between the weird and photography through a number of case studies of key photographic practitioners, Allan Sekula, W.G. Sebald, Laura Ford, and Teju Cole. My claim to originality, is that I have developed a methodology for weird realism in photography. This has been achieved by drawing on historical models of realism and engaging them with contemporary debates in photography, together with analysis of weird fictions. The practise output is a photo novel which combines speculative writing, montage, documentary photography and zine collages made using a xerox, in order to critically engage an alternative future. The cultural context to which my photo novel is responding, is the rise of global fascism, which is contributed to in part, by the neo-reactionary alt-right Dark Enlightenment movement, who use H.P. Lovecraft's weird fiction and racist attitudes to further white nationalism, in a view of the future which accepts that there is no alternative to the destructive effects of unmitigated capitalism (Sandifer 2017). It is my argument that the potentials of the weird can be reclaimed by the socially progressive left in a critical and aesthetic model of weird realism, which can project an alternative future. Such a form could, as Christian Wilken argues, engage the opposition of the left to the rise in the nostalgic fascism (Wilken 2025). Instead of accepting, as the Dark Enlightenment Movement does, the notion that capitalism cannot be mitigated.

In this thesis there have been a number of key findings which develop the understanding of contemporary photography in relation to the weird. In rethinking Allan Sekula's methodology of critical realism in *Fish Story* (1995) through the weird's engagement with the futural aspect of trauma, as identified by Mark Fisher (2016) and China Miéville (2009), I also found a corresponding model for thinking the structure of documentary photography as intrinsically traumatic (Morel 2018). With these understandings, it opened up the possibility for using the form of documentary photography as a way of engaging speculatively with the future. This allowed for Sekula's methods of critical realism to be developed. That is, the notion of using documentary photography to represent the surface of the

world the viewer lives in, and then using textual descriptions, essays and captions to re-contextualise the surface, to bring up to the surface hidden narratives and histories of capitalist global influences (Jang 2019, Best & Marcus 2009). Instead with the traumatic futural model of documentary photography, weird fiction can be inserted into a photo novel to re-contextualise the images. This can be used as a way of speculating on the future effects of unmitigated capitalism and attitudes of nostalgic nationalism and in so doing engage the viewer in a critical reading. Analysis of Teju Cole's contemporary documentary photobook *Fernweh* (2020), helped to further develop this understanding of how a photobook could be thought of as speculative site that engages with alternative futures, as a means of interfacing between worlds (Allen 2014), which in the context of the weird is between the worlds of the known and the unknown.

Another key finding relates to distinguishing between photographic forms that are weird, with those that are only hauntological. Whilst the weird itself is in opposition to the hauntological, there are instances in which the two are found within the same form, as with China Miéville's example of the "skulltopus" creature, that merges skull (hauntological) with octopus (weird) (Miéville 2012). Developing Mark Fisher's claim that nostalgia is evident in films whose form belongs to the past (Fisher 2006), Matt Colquhoun argues that all forms of photography are hauntological (Xenogothic 2020). In response, I propose what is needed, is to invoke, "the sting of humiliation" as found in H.P. Lovecraft's fiction (Wilken 2025, p.298). Christian Wilken argues that, the painful feeling associated with the sting, is a way of making the political left wing aware of their historical situation, to their continual failures in the 21st Century to form opposition and collective movements against capitalism and the alt right (Wilken 2025, p.298). One way of invoking this sting I argue, is to re-aurify photography. Following Michael Schoefield's observations that analogue forms of photography are seeing a revival in recent times, as a means of re-aurification against digital images thought to be lacking in aura (Schofield 2018). I argue that the xerox method used in Laura Ford's punk zine *Savage Messiah* (2019), thought of as an analogue practise is a means of returning this lost aura. Following this, I develop a methodology for the creation of my own photo novel, which deliberately employs both analogue and digital forms of photography in a montage, to invoke this sting generated

by losing and regaining aura. Whilst my photographs remain hauntological, they are also employed against the right wing politics of nostalgia.

A third key finding relates to the speculative potential of the photographic fragment. By analysing Eugène Atget's 19th century documentary photographs of Old Paris with H.P. Lovecraft's weird fiction, I argue how both the weird and photography allow different access to time and conclude that, according to Silke Helmerdig historical photographs allow us to think how the past could have changed in retrospect (Helmerdig 2016). This discussion of the fragment is developed in relation to W.G. Sebald's, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), when I argue that the fragment acts a site of agency, which holds resistant qualities (Steyerl 2012). Sebald's speculations are contextualised against a background of financial capitalism elaborated by drawing parallels to J.G. Ballard's *Millennium People* (2003). Connections are then drawn to Sebald's narrator's walk across the county of Suffolk, that led into weird experiences with broken temporalities, (Fisher 2012). I further the link between resistant strategies and the fragment, by the relaying the concept of the nomad to the notion of fate. I argue how weird twists in fate allow for a rethinking of the future (Morton, 2016). I also argue that Sebald's method of using the photographic fragment as visual metaphor for his fiction in the photo novel, grants the fragment the ability to think (Koldenda 2014). The method of using documentary photographs as visual metaphors, inserted into my speculative fiction in my own photo novel, was gained through this analysis of Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995).

My photo novel combines the methods analysed in this thesis in order to re-contextualise documentary photography through speculative fiction. I do this by invoking the sting of loss through an interplay between analogue and digital forms of photography and by using punk zine aesthetics with the xerox method to refuse nostalgic nationalism. The intended effect of the photo novel is to reveal an alternate future driven by unmitigated capitalism and backwards looking nostalgia that clings to the past perceptions of national greatness. By using the speculative site of the photobook in this way I wish to communicate that a lack of resistance leads to a dystopic future, and so spur action to be taken in the present to prevent it.

Literature Review

This study provides a theoretical exploration of the weird, photography theory, cultural theory and psychoanalysis, particularly through the works of J. G. Ballard, W.G. Sebald, Laura Oldfield Ford, and H.P. Lovecraft. Although a study solely concentrated on the connections between these authors and visual artists may yield interesting results, the particular focus of this study is to find new interrelations between the weird and photography.

The present time is one which is characterised by flattened affect and a lack of social imagination orientated to thinking the future, this coincides with the neo reactionary far right Dark Enlightenment Movement who wish to return to the past to replicate the height of what they believe is the height white greatness. More broadly nostalgic nationalism has coincided with the rise of far right movements and global fascism, from Vladimir Putin, to Giorgia Meloni, from Jair Bolsonaro, to Donald Trump. Against such a time, the weird captures an intensive affectivity of felt bodily experience that is currently being supressed. To examine the weirdness of experience, is to open up new possibilities of thought and perception, to develop new methods of critical engagement with social reality. The explicit focus of this study therefore comes from uniting theoretical and aesthetic models of the weird, in order to develop a new form of weird realism in photographic practice. The potential for weird realism is to offer a new form of critical practice which provides new methods of research, both aesthetic and theoretical, for a cultural critique of the present.

Through this study, I arrive at a set of methods that bring together critical realism, speculative fiction and collages made with a punk inspired xerox aesthetic in order to develop a new form of weird realism. Despite there being a wealth of research on the weird, speculative fiction, literary theory, photography theory, psychoanalysis and cultural theory, there has been a lack of prior research which explores the interrelations between these fields in a transdisciplinary context. This study therefore begins with a broad analysis of the weird before drawing out more specific connections to these related fields.

The Need for a Weird Aesthetic Response at a time of Rising Fascism

Eileen Joy traces the etymology of the weird to “wyrd” which in Old English relates to “weorðan” meaning “to become” (Joy 2013). In recent times, the "weird" relates to a branch of speculative philosophy, which argues that our conception of the world can be said to be lacking or wrong, (Fisher 2016). The weird also relates to the flipping of cause and effect and to strange appearances, (Morton 2016). In the 20th century, H.P. Lovecraft defines his weird literary fiction to centre around a, “cosmic “outsideness”, with a focus on capturing experiences of strange phenomena and “dream life” (Lovecraft 1933). Literary critic and Lovecraft scholar, Sunand Tryambak contends that Lovecraft’s interest in the weird was sparked by the death of his maternal grandmother in 1897. This death deeply affected Lovecraft’s family and caused Lovecraft to suffer nightmares, which he would later write about imaginatively, conjuring up strange creatures and places (Joshi, 2017). As philosopher Eugène Thacker surmises, Lovecraft's weird fiction refers to a hidden world outside our own, a world that exists beyond our ability to experience it (Thacker 2011). Graham Harman’s speculative realist theory of Object Oriented Ontology, asserts that the Lovecraftian weird points to phenomenological gaps, these are parts of reality that exist outside our ability to experience them; Lovecraft’s fiction gives us a means to go beyond the limits of human thought, to think the unthinkable, (Harman 2012).

However, as Sunand Tryambak Joshi points out, Lovecraft held fascist views, which changed over time, shifting from the belief that society should be controlled by an aristocracy of either intellect, taste and breeding, or of blood. Lovecraft's racist perspective was one in which he believed himself to be of a superior race and that black people were inferior (Joshi 1990). Sunand Joshi also speculates that Lovecraft's support of American fascists Louisiana senator Huey Pierce Long and the Reverend Charles Coughlin in the 1930's came with an unspoken yet tacit agreement of their prejudices against Jewish people, black people and communists. However before his death in 1937, Lovecraft's views shifted again, his letters expressed support for the "socialist utopia" that he perceived President Franklin D. Roosevelt was beginning to make possible with the New Deal (Lovecraft 1937, Joshi 1990).

However in drawing attention to Lovecraft's letter to the poet Elizabeth Toldridge, *Brown University Library Exhibitions Proctor Alberto Alcaraz Escarcega,* finds that Lovecraft views on race and the key to understanding his particular brand of traditionalism can be found in his concept of "cultural stream" (Lovecraft 1929) which can be summarised as "a strange amalgamation of race realism (i.e., the belief in discrete "human races") and cultural traditions, which becomes the sole basis for human meaning" (Brown University Library, 2020). The racist political implications of Lovecraft's concept of "cultural stream" can be understood further by turning to his same letter to Toldridge, where Lovecraft argues that the independence of the United States from,

> "its rightful sovereign" permitted "vast quantities" of foreigners to immigrate and that the "policy "the policy of inciting 'oppressed' races is fatal to the national welfare since these elements are almost always biologically inferior & therefore unfit to uphold the institutions established by greater stamina" (Lovecraft 1929, Brown University Library, 2020).

Escarcega summarises that, it is in Lovecraft's letter exchanges with Vernon J. Shea, where Lovecraft's discusses Nazis, and clarifies his own particular anti-Semitic and anti-black racist views,

> "Lovecraft thinks Jewish people cannot be "assimilated to the "Aryan" "cultural stream", but that the "problem" is in the presence of an intellectually powerful [Jewish] minority springing from a profoundly alien & emotionally repulsive culture stream" (Lovecraft 1933, Brown University Library, 2020).

As China Miéville argues Lovecraft's racism is also a central aspect of his creative work that should not be ignored when considering his fiction (Miéville 2016). Justin Millius speculates that the reason Lovecraft remains popular today is that the complexity of his Mythos provides "the ideal platform for world building and social critique" in addition to "a means of acting out a desired reality" (Millius 2015, p.525, p.516) Whilst Patricia MacCormack contends that when reading Lovecraft we should not only be considering what Lovecraft means but also what reading Lovecraft might do, arguing that,

> "While the content of his writing is often offensive against and oppressive of minorities, Lovecraft's larger vision, that which has lead him to be described by Michel Houellebecq as against life, opens up the very possibilities of ethical alterity and encounters premised on the

> destruction of the privileged subject of the white male that are necessary in order to lead to liberation of all lives as unique emergences. While far from being "pro-" feminist or racially diverse, what Lovecraft can offer in a cosmogenic rereading is new opportunities of thinking alterity without imposing replacement structures that would only serve to reify those formerly oppressed positions through converting positive inclusion into ontological atrophy" (MacCormack 2016, p.204).

Therefore, whilst it is important to acknowledge and discuss Lovecraft's racism and his oppressive views of minorities both within the context of his personal beliefs and his creative works, this does not preclude the significance of what can be extracted from his weird fiction and how it can be used as a tool for thinking change. As Christian Wilkens argues, Lovecraft's weird fiction draws attention to the gaps that exist between our cognition and linguistic faculties, which in turn, "prompts speculation about new forms of rapport, communion, and communication that could bridge these divides" (Wilkens 2025, p.307).

Within a contemporary context, Lovecraft's weird fiction does not only provide tools for liberalism, and social progress, it is also used by alt-right thinkers within the Dark Enlightenment movement, which medieval scholar Amy Kaufman describes as a movement which traces modern social and political problems to the end of the middle ages, arguing that "the Enlightenment's humanism, democracy, and quest for equality are responsible for the decay of Western civilization" (Kaufman 2017), In characterising the racist component of the Dark Enlightenment, Kaufman argues that,

> "like the Victorians before them, DEers fetishize the medieval West as the height of white greatness, a time when every race was in its proper geographical place, allowing white civilization to thrive in isolation" (Kaufman 2017).

Key to the Dark Enlightenment movement is the concept of "The cathedral", which is a term that philosopher Nick Land, far right blogger Curtis Yarvin and others use to describe the media/academic apparatus that was set up after World War 2, which is responsible for what they view as a form of Orwellian mind control (Matthews 2016). Employing Lovecraft's monster Cthulhu as a metaphor for describing the effects of the cathedral, Curtis Yarvin argues, "Cthulhu may swim slowly.

But he only swims left" and that, "The leftward direction is, itself, the principle of organization" (Moldbug 2009). In response to this perceived mind control apparatus, Yarvin calls for voters to return to "executive authority" (Yarvin 2024) which Christopher Collins argues is "essentially monarchical power" and that technology entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk align with the goals of the Dark Enlightenment, by attacking the administrative state in the US through initiatives such as DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency), in an effort to dismantle democratic institutions (Collins 2025)

Kevin Passmore traces the term "fascist" to Benito Mussolini's ultranationalist political movement in 1919 which opposed both left and established conservatism (p.10, 2004). Passmore elaborates that fascism can take multiple forms, the Marxist approach to fascism focus on its links to capitalism (2004 p.14), whereas in the form of totalitarian nationalism, "fascists aim to restructure society in accordance with an ideological blueprint" (2004, p.19). In the present moment, Alberto Toscano describes the particular form of fascism that we are now dealing is one, "that is not reacting to the imminent threat of revolutionary politics, but which retains the racial fantasy of national rebirth and the frantic circulation of a pseudo-class discourse" (2023, p.2). Toscano goes further arguing that in the 2016 and 2024 US Presidential elections, Donald Trump invoked the nostalgic image of the white male fordist worker during the post-second world war period of economic growth, the "trente glorieuses" (Toscano 2023). Trump's support of the fordist worker is based more on wish fulfilment than fact, used as cover for economic cuts made elsewhere, for example Trump's simultaneously expanded the coal industry whilst removing environmental regulations (Toscano 2023) and making cuts to worker healthcare (Glenza 2025).

In the UK, Joe Muhall of "Hope Not Hate", a group that focuses on exposing far-right extremism, discusses how the Union Jack and St George flags are being co-opted by the far-right group, "Operation Raise the Colours", who are attempting to conflate these symbols with their racist and extremist messages (Mulhall, 2025). In different regions of the UK, there have been protests outside hotels housing asylum seekers, the Union Jack and St George flags appear amongst the protesters, with speculation that these are signs of xenophobia and racism; Sociologist Ellis Cashmore links the display of these flags to the feeling of "being left behind or overlooked" (Mackie, 2025). Dr

Freeman, senior lecturer in political history at the University of Bristol, argues that the far right have appropriated the union jack and St George flags to legitimise their politics, “using patriotism as a cover for ethnic nationalism”; Freeman links the historical use of the union jack to the British Union of Fascists in the 1930’s, and the National Front in the 1970’s, who appropriated the flag in order to intimidate people, demarcate and claim areas, whilst the appropriation of the St George is a more recent phenomenon (Yabsley, Bodkin & Robertson 2025)

Upon reflecting on the link between aesthetics and politics in the early 20th Century, Walter Benjamin argues that fascism seeks to aestheticise politics and that communism must respond in turn by politicising art (Benjamin 1935). In responding to the rise of fascism in the early 21st Century, Alexander Billet proclaims that the left of today should build on what Benjamin was arguing for, politicising art, but in a way that is specifically designed to, “question why life is the way it is, to make it weird, unfamiliar, anarchic and atonal so that we might see just how little our present condition makes sense” (Billet, 2016). This is the significance of developing a weird aesthetic today, against the backdrop of rising fascism, the weird becomes a tool for disentangling political symbols from the far-right extremists attempting to co-opt them, instead rendering the world strange once more.

Speculative realist Timothy Morton asserts that the weird is an area that has largely been ignored within mainstream Western philosophy, arguing that, “In the term *weird* there flickers a dark pathway between causality and the aesthetic dimension, between doing and appearing” (2016, p.5). In Lacan’s psychoanalysis, the subject is constituted within the reality matrix, the inaccessible parts of reality that we are unable to directly access or experience is the real (Lacan, 1977). For the philosopher Vilém Flusser the "vampyroteuthis infernalis", vampire squid, represents a contestation to the human-centric world. This weird creature, despite inhabiting the deep sea oceans, seems to be from another world. The vampire squid appears as if arising from our unconscious nightmares, or from the utopic ideals for a “new man” that bought forth the horrors of Nazism in the 20th Century (Flusser, Bec, & Pakis, [1987] 2012). In the context of the recent 21st century, in the age of the digital smart phone, Dan Mellamphy and Nadita Mellamphy assert that the Lovecraftian weird tentacular octopus creature, “Cthulhu” stretches metaphorically around the vast capitalist network of digital

internet apps. The complex and invisible interconnections between apps exceeds our ability for comprehension, just as Lovecraft's weird Cthulhu does (Miller et; al, 2014).

Mark Fisher argues that it is at the moment when the weird bubbles up, that we become aware of its intense affectivity. To become aware of this weirdness, this imperceptible shift in perception, is not necessarily to be attentive to the possibility of its influence. This is where the potency of the weird truly lies, in its having arisen from within "unexpected" moments of everyday experience (Fisher, 2016). It bypasses not what we expected to see, or how we expected to feel, but the way in which we perceive the world. As Claire Parrish surmises, Mark Fisher's notion of the weird to be about, "carefully pointing out that it is not the thing itself that is wrong, but rather our conception of the world" (Parrish, 2021). Weird affects therefore can be interpreted as a kind of bodily felt experience, not fully expressible in language (Massumi, 2022).

Tiffany Sia and Yuri Pattison's art chapbook, *Weird Times (2021)* uses photographs and text to deconstruct time-keeping technologies such as the clock, so as to draw out its connection to coercive strategies of capitalist production and war power. They conclude that resistant counter temporalities remain hidden, stored within the body, and may become accessible if we are able to find strategies to shift the way we perceive the world (Sia & Pattison, 2021). Chapter Two of this dissertation begins, by re-evaluating Eugène Atget's photography of Old Paris at the end of the 19th Century, through a comparative discussion of the weird temporal dimension of photography in H.P Lovecraft's weird literary fiction, *The Shadow Out of Time (1936).*

Lisa Blackman points out the importance of weird scientific methods to explore phenomena, which call in to question linear constructions of time and space, as well as media and the mediation of experience. The significance of exploring such phenomena, looking for different logics of temporality, allows for the present to be rethought affectively. Different possible futures begin to open up within the context of finance capitalism and the rise of global fascism that we have seen in recent times (Blackman 2019).

Cultural theorist McKenzie Wark, describes a, "weird global media event" as something that is unplanned and unexpected, something that makes the world seem unstable. Within the context of politics, specifically the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, with the mediatisation of protest

signs displaying critical messages directed at the failures of the global financial system, resulted in the market crash of 2008. A weirdness was generated. It was a weirdness that existed in those moments before a narrative could be constructed, one in which there could be a resolution, a way to explain away what had happened, to shield the ruling class from accountability (Wark, 2012). Weird times therefore need an aesthetic to represent them, a weird realist model.

Placing the World at a Distance; Paratextual Insertion of Photography into Speculative Fiction

Political theorists Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat define political realism as an interpretive understanding of how politics is practiced, as opposed to analysing the moral ideals of, "justice, freedom, rights" (2014, p.2). Enzo Rossi connects naturalism to political realism, arguing that the human condition requires political power and authority (2009).

Within art, John Berger argues that realism is not merely a correspondence to reality as we experience it in our lives, but instead realism calls particular attention to an, "aspect of reality", so as to focus upon its truth in such a way that cannot be done in regular life. To draw attention to this particular aspect of life, creates a deeper understanding of it, in order to change the way that we see the world. Berger characterises naturalism as, "accepting our habits" of looking, which have been in turn shaped by the art we have seen in the past as well as present. In this sense Berger argues that naturalist art remains uncritical of social reality (Berger [1972] 2008)

Roland Barthes, in an effort to understand the meanings of photographs of his deceased mother, found a contradiction, which is how the photograph relies on the subject that was before the lens of the camera, that is its "photographic referent", in order to be made, which points to, "this-has-been" of the pastness of the subject, attesting that it had once been real. At the same time, the photograph is deeply affective, inducing melancholia for a past that cannot be returned too, while also knowing that it will have no future. This is for Barthes, the paradox of photography's realism (Barthes [1980] 2020). Shawn Michelle Smith goes further, arguing that Barthes interest in the affectivity of photography speaks of the medium's ability to spark a, "consciousness of feelings", that the photograph is able to provoke something "beyond itself", despite its adherence to the past subject that is no longer present (Smith 2014).

The goal of critical realism is to employ research methods that can represent social reality. Similar to realism, critical realism aims to deepen our understanding of social reality by focusing on particular aspects of life and makes use of photography's indexical relationship with reality, through the capture of the referent. However, what critical realism aspires to do in particular, is to point out the contradictions that exist within social reality, to expose them, using photography's evidential force, its direct connection, which attests to that very reality (Baetens et; al, 2006). Against the particular challenge that we face at the moment, that is the resurgence of fascism at a time of economic uncertainty, what is needed is a weird realism. Such a new form of realism, can take inspiration from methods used in critical realism, such as Allan Sekula's use of montage in *Fish Story* (1995), which pits photographs as scenes of reality against each other in order to expose contradictions. What is needed in weird realism is a set of methods that can estrange us from the world, not merely reflect its contradictions. This is where, I would argue, that speculative fiction can be employed together with photography. Linda Hutcheon refers to the inclusion of a photograph as document, into a historical text or fiction as a "paratextual insertion", contending that within a critical context, the,

> "function of this kind of paratextual insertion of historical documents into historiographic metafictions is related to the Brechtian alienation effect: like the songs in Brecht's plays, the historical documents dropped into the functions can have the effect of interrupting any illusion, of making the reader into an awareness collaborator, not a passive consumer. The potential for ideological challenge is, then perhaps present in these modes of art that incorporate history self-consciously and materially" (Hutcheon 1986, pp.308-309)

As Silvija Jestrovic points out, the role of alienation in Brecht's plays has been misunderstood, Brecht employs the devices of "*Verfremdung"* in order to show how alienation "*Entfremdung"* is created out of the social and political power structures that people have been subjected to; In order to highlight how alienation is the response to a historical situation instead of an unalterable aspect of the human condition (Silvija, 2018). Further elaborating the link between alienation and estrangement Silvija describes how,

> "alienation (Entfremdung) is the subject matter of Brecht's theatre, while *Verfremdung* (estrangement or, in Russian, *ostranenie*) is the methodological procedure of representing and distancing that subject matter" (Silvija 2018, p.4).

Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky argues how the device of art should be to make things strange *"ostranenie",* to make forms difficult "*zatrudnënnaya forma*", in order "to offer the perceptibility of things, as they are perceived, not as they are known" (Shklovsky [1917] 1969, p.14). Using art in order to place things at a distance, is a way of defamiliarising the familiar, to make the familiar strange again, in other words to make us look at the world with a new perspective, to disentangle us from the social and historical situation, so that we may see it differently.

Whilst Brecht himself did combine photographs with poetry in *War Primer* (1955) as a critique of the connection between war and capitalism, Roy Scranton argues that there is an aspect of Brecht's work that has been overlooked, that comes from its status as,

> "a historical document about a specific war in a specific time by a specifically situated observer, and it levels its criticisms against specific historical agents. It is this historical specificity that gives War Primer its richness and strangeness, because it is this specificity alone which forces us to confront a World War II which was not simple, which had no good guys, and which was not a titanic collision of ideas but rather a global scramble for real estate. It is War Primer's existence as an artifact, as embodied time, that gives it an almost magical power to bring to life the truth of a world sunk in the shadows of myth" (Scranton, 2017).

Scranton's identification of the "strangeness" of *War Primer* (1955), relays what I would contend is the yet under-utilised potential for the development of a form combining photography, and speculative fiction, to create a feeling of estrangement.

To assist in developing a form of weird realism by employing speculative fiction together with photography, Chapter Two: "Evaluating historical forms of realism to establish the need for weird realism in photography" analyses the connections between temporality, the weird, and photography. The chapter begins by discussing Eugène Atget's photographs of Old Paris at the end of the 19th Century through H.P Lovecraft's weird literary fiction. Before then addressing the limits of Lovecraft's naïve conception of photographic realism, linking this with Lovecraft's development of a

weird realism in literary fiction. Then Lewis Hine's use of recognisable Christ child and Madonna iconography in the photograph *Italian Madonna* (1905), is contrasted against Lovecraft's recognition of the weird photograph as being related to the shock of the new. Finally the chapter concludes by returning to Lovecraft's weird fiction and how it can be used to rethink the relationship between the photographic fragment and temporality; This is achieved through a discussion on the documentary practices of Martha Rosler's, *The Bowery in two inadequate description systems* (1975), and analysing Allan Sekula's employment of critical realism in, *Fish Story* [1995] (2018). Finally the photobook is considered as a speculative site for thinking different worlds. H.P. Lovecraft's concepts of known and unknown worlds are discussed in relation to Teju Cole's documentary photobook *Fernweh* (2020).

Postinternet Defamiliarisation

Considering photographic realism in the digital age, Vilém Flusser points out that the image acts as mediator, as a screen between human beings and the world. The image as screen paradoxically represents the world, whilst also obscuring it ([1984], 2000). As Damian Sutton points out, the screen of photography refers as much too contemporary digital media, such as computer screens and digital cameras, as to analogue camera slides and camera plates. Photography's realism, its capture of the referent, is therefore not lessened by the advancement of digital technologies over the analogue (Sutton 2007). Hito Steyerl argues that the image in the age of digitalisation is not representative of reality. It is instead, "a fragment of the real world": This fragment then becomes a metaphorical container of agency, a site of possibilities (Steyerl, 2012). Ian Rothwell argues that the Jpeg instead of granting greater fidelity and realism instead presents created a new era in which photographic enlargement of an object instead of revealing more detail reveals less, creates abstraction and will eventually display nothing at all (Rothwell 2024, p.130). In summarising Rachel Well's analysis of Thomas Ruff's *jpeg* series (2004), Rothewell argues that the low quality image, "might reenergise or re-cathect the digital image as an object of emotional attachment and fount of affective feeling, so that the jpeg can *make us cry*" and that low quality lossy photograph's can be thought of as belonging to the longer history of the "'poor image' which imagines the poor or low resolution image as a tool to activate the viewer as a critical agent" (Rothwell 2024 p.140, Wells 2013).

Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi defines the current era as one of communicative capitalism, referred to as semiocapitalism. This is a capitalism in which workers are continually plugged into a vast digital network through smart phones, computers and the internet, which results in an intensified competitiveness, a physical exhaustion from informational overstimulation and a deepening isolation and alienation between people, as digital contact displaces physical contact. Furthermore, the over-stimulation and the constant oppressive atmosphere of capitalist competition robs workers of an attention span. Now over-committed to an endless variety of tasks they also lose their time for affective engagement, resulting in anxiety and despair (Berardi 2009).

Kevin Coleman and Daniel James in their assessment of the relationship between capitalism and the technology of the camera, connect the circulation of images within the media consumer economy with the global warming crisis, as images drive a greater demand for consumer goods and therefore for their production and dissemination globally. Historically, they also connect corporate photography of multinational companies, such as the, “United Fruit Company” to their role in the colonialisation of tropical landscapes in the early 20th century. Where the camera was used to link the production of a single commodity plant, the banana, back to a single company, thereby exerting control over the natural world, whilst also using photography to sell more bananas (Coleman and James 2021). Ben Burbridge speculates that the future relationship between photography and capitalism may engage with collectively owned photo sharing platforms, providing alternatives to image monopolies such as Google and Facebook. The collective ownership of image platforms would then disrupt the continual cycle of commodity production through image circulation, instead creating spaces for a political imaginary to take place. Thereby, making use of the available global digital networks that are currently being controlled by semiocapitalism to further their agenda of profiteering through unequal social relations (Burbridge, 2022).

As Geert Lovink argues, power in the west has shifted from the church to the state and now rests with corporations, the gathering of knowledge of individuals that used to be the role of the state is now the role of admins, designers, marketers and tech entrepreneurs, “whose explicit task is to remain invisible and thus unaccountable” (2022, p.108). Looking back on the failure of Occupy Wall Street, John Ehrenberg argues that in the movement of state power over to the market, “politics and

the state were equated with inefficiency, bureaucratic meddling, and the unprincipled schemes of 'special interests'" (Ehrenberg 2017, p.2),

Ian Bogost describes the transition from the late 1990's and early 2000's phase of the web's smaller social networking sites such as *Six Degrees* 1997 and *Friendster* 2002, to the dominance of much bigger social media websites like *Facebook* 2004 and *Twitter* 2006, to be a "weird mutation". In the expansion and monopolisation of social networking websites, capitalist driven upscaling killed off potential alternatives whilst also increasingly user expectations such as higher engagement numbers, larger audiences and profit incentives for content creation, this stands in contrast to older social networking sites, which Bogost argues, only made "modest use of existing connections—largely for offline life". Bogost speculates that there is a slim possibility for a future in which the current social media platforms get downscaled and we return to the way social networking sites use to function (Bogost 2022).

Marisa Olson who coined the term "postinternet" in 2008, to describe her own work as that which combined art that was made both offline and online, argues that the term acts a placeholder for something that can describe; "Feeling unable to unplug (due to the forces of capital, the infrastructural reach of the grid", and "the ongoing veiling of physical, intellectual, and affective labor involved in the production and maintenance of network culture and its participants" (Olson 2017). Artie Vierkant's approach to "postinternet" aesthetics, as one of the New York artists associated with DIS Magazine, is described as "situated between physical objects and the manipulation of their online documentation" (Quiles 2013). *Image Objects* 2011- is a series of sculptural works designed to highlight the fluid boundary between physical object and mediated digital image, the work was made to respond to a moment in which audiences started to experience art exhibitions predominately through their online representation (Vierkant, 2011- ongoing).

Michael Connor surmises net artist Olia Lialina's talks and illustrated essays in, *A Vernacular Web: The Indigenous and the Barbarians* (2005), to be oriented towards critiques of the web 2.0 era, its centralisation and truncation of expression, whilst also celebrating the opportunities for self-expression that the early web provided. The series *Brand Innovations for Ubiquitous Authorship* (2012), features a number of artists such as Artie Vierkant and Annabelle Arlie, these artists were

asked to produce an object with an online custom print or fabrication service, then send these works to an art gallery without the artists or curators having been allowed to see them before they were unboxed (Mattes, & Mattes 2013). The point of *Brand Innovations for Ubiquitous Authorship* (2012) was to highlight artists' participation within digital economies and how objects themselves participate within these economies; Lialina's response to the problem of artistic creation on the internet being tied to "Brand Innovations" which puts limits on creativity, was to "set off a semi-autonomous zone defined by networks of friendship and trust" (Connor 2013).

In 2016, the post-internet art collective DIS, sought to respond to what they saw as an increasingly strange world, exemplified by Donald Trump, a former reality TV star who was running for president, on a wave of counter-factual "recriminatory hate" (Goldstein, 2016). Upon reflecting on Donald Trump winning the US presidential election in November 2016, Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman describe how weird the future had become, it was as if they had crossed over into a "grotesque alternate reality" that didn't feel real (Hageman & Canavan, 2016, p.11).

Revisiting Punk Zine Aesthetics

Turning to other forms that communicate the weird, the weirdness of zines comes through in their boiling over of affectivity, in their denial of consumer values, and in their place the assertion of a value system predicated on what you are able to make yourself in the Do It Yourself (DIY) format (Duncombe 1997). In cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's critical re-appraisal of the present, she argues that the revival of DIY practices points to a hopeful outlook towards a political future. One not characterised by the precarity of social and economic opportunity, as we are currently living through, that is more loosely defined as the "new normal" (Berlant 2011).

The significance of zines as part of this counter cultural sentiment, can be traced back to the 1930's. Teal Triggs argues that since that time they have been a vital way to spread anti-capitalist messaging through networks that are formed outside mass media culture (Triggs, 2006). The need to spread communication through alternative channels has become more urgent within the late 20th and early 21st century, because the neoliberal media economy has created a hierarchy of expensively produced images where alternative forms of media have become deliberately devalued, hidden and

obscured (Steyerl & Berardi 2012). Zines offer an alternative to the corporate advertising and consumer driven forms of media, where the proliferation of images is controlled by an emergent neoliberal media economy.

In the context of zines, the sentiment of loss and hopelessness that a revolutionary spark can be instantly co-opted and reclaimed by dominant media culture can exemplified in Vivian Vale's interview with counter cultural zine producer, Dishwasher Pete:

> "Nothing is given a chance to brew and develop anymore, before the media takes hold of it and grinds it to death. Also there is an instant commodification of everything that might develop into something "revolutionary"" (Vale 1997, p.17).

Jon Savage connects the lyric, "No future" from the British punk band the Sex Pistols 1977 song, "God save the Queen" to be a paradoxical statement of optimism for an alternative to neoliberalism. A sentiment that had to be expressed cynically, for fear of judgement of expressing true emotion that wouldn't gel with the nihilist aesthetic of the British punk movement of the late 1970's (Savage, 2005). Tracing back the roots of the expression, "No Future", cultural critic Greil Marcus ties situationism to the British punk movement of the 1970's, arguing that the punk manager and promoter Malcolm McLaren was inspired by the situationists of the late 1950's and 60's. The situationists' critique of the present posited that free time was directed away from criticisms of social control and instead towards the seeking of entertainment. This redirection created the illusion of free choice, as opposed to legitimate freedom. Arguing that we live in a leisure society which has resulted in a social pathology of boredom (Knabb [1958] 2006, Marcus 1989). However, as Guy Debord and Pierre Canjuers argue, revolutionary art forms are still subject to co-option by capitalism, thereby denying the construction of alternative ways of living (Debord, Canjuers [1960], Knabb 2006).

Within more recent times this becomes especially problematic, as seen in the case of Occupy Wall Street 2011, a protest against the failures of capitalism following the global financial crisis of 2008 that resulted in the bailing out of banks by the government. As Alexander Reid Ross identifies, in the United States, right wing fascists were able to seize upon the cultural climate of dissatisfaction with capitalism in order to push their white nationalist and misogynistic agenda, leading to Donald Trump's appeal to anti-immigration policies as a fix for socio-economic problems. Whilst elsewhere,

in the United Kingdom, this sentiment was later co-opted by right and alt-right groups to push for leaving the European Union (Ross 2017). The need arises for an aesthetic form that communicates a critique of the present under neoliberal capitalism, whilst also being resistant to recuperation.

I would argue that the punk zine aesthetic as a critical mode of détournement, belonging to a longer history of avant-garde movements, can be put to use together with the photographic mode of critical realism and speculative fiction in order to create a form weird realism that critiques the present conditions, whilst also aiming to negate them.

Chapter Three: "Regaining The Lost Affect of the Present: Laura Ford's Punk Zine *Savage Messiah* (2019) as Critical Response to J.G. Ballard's Concrete Island (1974)", analyses Ford's employment of détournement through collage and fiction as means. In doing so, this chapter evaluated how Laura Ford's zine *Savage Messiah* (2019) aims to capture the feeling that another world had once been possible, a future where the counter-cultural revolution, epitomised in the late 1970's in the British Punk movement, and later 1980's Acid House movement, had been successful. By revisiting those places where anti-capitalist resistance had once occurred, their intensive affectivities can be re-experienced in the present, providing contrast to the seemingly hopeless backdrop of neoliberal capitalism that has permeated our consciousness and foreclosed the future to the possibility of an alternative being envisioned.

In Freud's model of the unconscious, the unconscious itself is timeless, trauma is forgotten, repressed, and in some cases repeated through compulsion, which re-creates traces of original trauma. Trauma can also be delayed, the concept of Nachträglichkeit explains how a past trauma can be experienced through later recollection, as isolated signifiers re-join the chain of signification (Green 2005, Chapman 2016, 2021). Caruth Cathy argues that trauma is first experienced through forgetting, this speaks of a temporal lag of the experience of trauma itself and not due to the forgetting of a reality, as reality can never be experienced in its totality [1996] (2016). Nicholas Abraham and Maria Took define transgenerational phantoms not as trauma of the individual but through trauma experienced through direct empathy of another unconscious, for example with the father (1994). Gabriele Schwab goes further arguing that screen memories which occur when one violent history is covered by the memory of another can be both transgenerational and transhistorical (2010). As Lisa

Blackman points out a set of practices which allows for “mediated perceptions” are needed in order to allow the past experiences of ghosts and their histories to put in conversation with each other (Blackman 2015).

Jon Savage argues how unlike the aesthetics of the hippie movement, the aesthetics of the punk have not been taken over by “nostalgia hounds” (2012). The aesthetic of the punk zine uses the juxtaposition of adverts with street photographs in order to reflect how media commodification anaesthetises culture (Worley 2015). Whereas, the artistic practice of “performative walking” allows access to hidden affects within the terrain (Macleod 2022). Similarly the process of xeroxing thought of as a series of repetitions, is the ego’s attempt at a recovery of something that it has been unable to grasp (Kristeva 1984). As Merlin Coverley surmises of Laura Ford’s *Savage Messiah* (2019), the ethos is to recapture lost moments of intensity, historical rupture, and a sense of anything being possible that can be found in the social projects of the 1970’s and 1980’s in the city of London, UK (2020). The process of xeroxing photographs in *Savage Messiah* (2019), thought of as a series of repetitions, is the ego’s attempt at a recovery of something that it has been unable to grasp (Kristeva 1984).

Thinking against Dystopia

Speculative fiction acts as a way of imagining alternative futures. Speculative fiction itself, is a broader container category which includes dystopic fiction, science fiction, and weird fiction (Oziewicz, 2017). As Fredric Jameson argues the fate of Utopia in science fiction and its relationship to our future, is difficult to separate from the fate of utopia in the political program, the imaginative conception of radical alternatives in science fiction is projected outwards from the conditions in our own social moment (2007 p.316). Jameson surmises how in science fiction writer Olaf Stapledon’s conception of Utopia in *The Last and First Men* (1930), the space and time travellers in the story, slowly become aware that their receptiveness to alien cultures is limited by their own anthropomorphic principles, this draws attention to the limits of the human imagination, meaning that, “that nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses” (Jameson 2007, p.13). This leads Jameson to conclude that;

> "On the social level, this means that our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production (and perhaps to whatever remnants of past ones it has preserved). It suggests that at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment […] and that therefore the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" (Jameson 2007, p.13).

I would argue that J.G. Ballard's speculative fiction *Millennium People* (2003) can be thought of as an example as a kind of failed utopia that results from the lack of imagination. Against the political backdrop of Tony Blair's prime ministership of the Labour Party in the UK, J.G Ballard describes his novel, set in London, UK, *Millennium People* (2003) as trying to capture that time, as one denoted by an emptying of affectivity that has resulted in a meaningless world. Ballard describes his writing of *Millennium People* (2003) as trying to, "nail down a certain kind of nihilism that people may embrace, and which politicians may embrace" (Ballard & Hall, p.401 [2003] [2012]. As Alain Badiou extrapolates from Yves Bonnefoy's poem 'Out by where the Earth Ends' from *In the Shadows Light* (1987), the 20th century, "is the transit, the mobility of the threshold, but never its crossing"; Bonnefoy's poem speaks of an empty promise the century was unable to fulfil (Badiou 2007 pp.24-25). Against the failure of the 20th century to deliver the social progress that was expected, the characters of *Millennium People* (2003) struggle against stagnation, with an inability to find a way forward, some of them turn to violence to force their way through the threshold that has been closed off to them.

Harlan Wilson describes the grand idea that unifies Ballard's post-apocalyptic fictions, as the impulse for a nostalgic return to nature that frees his characters from the shackles of an affectively deadening consumer society. One that traps them in a web of empty mediatised reality. Against which, violence and the return to nature are promises of living as authentically human once more (Wilson, 2017). In an effort to embody this Ballardian ethos, Simon Sellars embarks on a series of journeys, essays and speculations, to rid himself of this inauthenticity. To no longer be the clone who is captured by an affectless neoliberal society. Thereby enacting a Ballardian practice, the exploration of the "inner space" of the psyche, through both literal and metaphorical wanderings into the outside (Sellars, 2018, Ballard, 1962). As Florian Cord highlights, the over-arching theme of *Millennium*

People (2003), is that of rejection of the dominant social order, of neoliberalism, particularly as it subjects the middle class to its systems of compliance, not by force and coercion but instead by the creation and manipulation of ambition, and social responsibility (Cord, 2017).

Jonathon Long emphasises how weirdness is generated in the text itself of Sebald's, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995). In the linear narrative of the journey, as Sebald's unnamed narrator walks around the county of Suffolk in England, he is disrupted with the invocation of different temporalities and the arrival of prehistoric beasts and sea monsters. Long equates this unexpected disruption of the text to Brian McHale's analysis of how postmodern fiction deliberately gestures towards the gap created between word and world. Whereby, the text, seemingly grounded in an established physical world, opens up to different dimensions of space and time (Long 2007, McHale 1987). Art historian James Elkins argues, that Sebald simultaneously anchors the meaning of the image to the text, whilst also using the images to act as an interruption to the narrative flow of the text itself (Kovac et; al, 2023). Ana Martínez in her semiotic analysis of W.G. Sebald's employment of photography within his fictions, argues that Sebald pairs fictional text with non-fictional photographs to replicate the authenticity of truth that belongs to documentary. Whilst the fictional text in Sebald's novels changes the semiotic status of the photograph from referent to sign, the images then act as metaphors for what the text informs. The potential ambiguity as to the meaning of images in Sebald's image texts therefore acts as a critical method to interrogate the, "representational construction of history" (Martínez, 2021).

In an interview with Christian Scholz, Sebald addresses his use of photographs in his image texts as a means by which to pull the viewer into another world, a world that although they do not understand how it is constructed, they are able to sense it though the photograph and therefore confirm that it exists. Furthermore, that the integration of photographs in Sebald's image texts is designed to capture an indescribable part of felt experience, something which arises for Sebald through his wanderings. Something which comes up through the journey that he feels he must try to capture. The written word, although it can try to express these experiences, doesn't have the authenticating power of the photograph to attest that these weird experiences truly happened (Dillbohner & Patt, 2007).

Chapter Four: “Fate and Ruin: The Art of the Future in W.G. Sebald's The *Rings of Saturn* (1995) Against the Limits of Thought in J.G. Ballard's *Millennium People* (2001)”, engages with the weirdness of the photographic fragment. Arguing how Sebald’s text-image relations can be reconsidered through the concept of fate, which create a disjunction between the futures of nomadic fisherman wandering across Suffolk, England, and the future under neoliberalism. In Sebald’s photo novel, the melancholic loss of history paradoxically makes the future seem hopeless, whilst also opening up a space of reflection through which an alternative history can be re-constituted from fragments (Owens, 1980). Drawing on Karl Marx’s “commodity-form” (1867) and Shakespeare’s “time out of joint” ([1603] 1954), Jaques Derrida argues that, “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept.” (2006, p.202). Whereas the deflation of expectations for the future is conditioned by the failures of the past under neoliberal capitalism which continue to haunt us (Fisher, 2012). The appearance of the ghost in language and media represents repressed memories and the need to confront something in the past so as to enable the creation of the future.

Sebald’s employment of photographic realism together with text, is designed to question the capacity for photographs to represent an object of memory. Repeatedly trying to confront what has been lost to the past, whilst paradoxically acknowledging the limits of photographic representation as a form of remembrance (Lorek-Jezińska & Więckowska, 2017). Merlin Coverley goes further, arguing that the present is continually disrupted by the past in Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), to the point where Sebald’s unnamed narrator begins to inhabit the past more than present as he traverses Suffolk. The narrator’s recollections of Suffolk’s past become more unreliable and instead become supplanted by memories of his own past (Coverley, 2020). Possible futures already exist within the present, but these are immanent possibilities, conflicting and diverging. Financial capital constrains the range of possibility (Berardi, 2019); However the possible is awaiting like the phantom ready to be activated by the work of art, as Henri Bergson surmises, “I believe in the end we shall consider it evident that the artist in executing his work is creating the possible as well as the real” [1920] 2002, p. 231). In Lacan’s psychoanalysis, the symbolic order is that of language, in structuralism terms this is the order of signified. Whereas, the imaginary order is that of mental constructs of things, in

structuralism terms this is of signifiers. The imaginary order and the symbolic order form the reality matrix together with the real. The real is the unpresentable part of reality, the part that cannot be directly accessed (Bailly, 2009). As Bruno Bosteels describes, for the symbolic order to become consistent, it must paradoxically foreclose on the “traumatic kernel of the real”, in order to complete the structure, this leads to there always being a gap, or excess; social formations are then constitutively incomplete, this is how the real operates in politics, “by opening the field of the political, this impossible identity is also the condition of possibility of any hegemonic identification” (Bosteels 2001, p.221-222). As gap or excess, the real is the impasse of formalisation, but as Badiou also contends, "formalization is the place of the forced pass of the real", in drawing an allegory between the movement of the real through formalisation he states; "The voyage of the real is sometimes without baggage, and according to Saint Luke, the old cask does not exclude the new wine that must be poured in" (Badiou [1975] 2014 p.22 -23). In passing through the breach into formalisation the real is "no longer what can be lacking from its place but what *passes through by force*" (Badiou [1975] 2014, p.23). Returning to Bergson then, the artist in "creating the real" is not simply mirroring it, they are also adding something new to the real, as it passes by force back into the breach of formalisation that was its original place.

Photographs in Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), do not always relate to the loss of historical memory, there are also intensified moments of possibility which the fiction expresses and the photograph attempt to capture even though the medium’s veracity is uncertain. This speaks to the limits of photographic representation, but it also relates to status of the photograph as art, for its capacity to move beyond the familiar. The photograph as a fragment holds this revolutionary potential for overcoming, in creating an “affective rupture” (O’Sullivan, 2005) that speaks of the speculative potential of the medium to express that which would otherwise be lost to memory.

Practice Methods

Returning to what is at stake at the time of writing, the rise of fascism, both globally and in England in particular, as evidenced through the co-option of the St. George flag and union jack by far-right extremists, borne in part from a feeling of resentment of being economically “left behind”, calls

for the need a new form of weird realism aesthetic that can respond. To develop a weird realist aesthetic, my own practice takes the form of a photo novel using the method of montage from critical realism to express neoliberal contradictions, how social inequalities exist in the same moment that progress is supposed to be taking place, but also adds to it my own original speculative fiction and integrates punk zine aesthetics to create collages assembled using a xerox.

As Steven Shaviro points out, it is in moments when old capitalist crises, with their unresolved contradictions, become thought a new, that the weird arises (2016) The photograph refers to the past "That-has-been" of its referent (Barthes 1980), so when photographs are included into a speculative fiction, as a "paratextual insertion" (Hutcheon 1986), my contention is that this is able to evoke the weird through a temporal tension between the past of the photograph and the possible future described in the fiction. This tension is designed to invoke in the reader, a feeling that we must begin to find ways to resist the degradation of social community and meaning by untethered free market neoliberalism now, if we are to change the fate of the future.

Integrating punk zine inspired xerox art into my photo novel using the method of paratextual insertion, I would argue aids in making weird realism into a form that is resistant to fascist and capitalist co-option and recuperation. As Ivan Gololobov describes, "paradoxically enough, punk can be seen as striving for authenticity in the relevant artistic expression of its ideological stance and resistant to authenticity in its moment of nihilism and denial of its own identity" (2014 p.132); The significance of employing the punk aesthetic comes from this contradiction, as an aesthetic that is able to reflect the feeling of nihilism and loss of meaning in the current moment, whilst at the same time striving for authentic meaning.

For an artistic form to respond to the weird times of the current moment, where we exist in both online platforms and offline, I will draw from Marisa Olson's definition of "postinternet" (2017), in order to combine images found online, together with my own offline photography and speculative fiction, through montage and collage using the punk zine style xerox method. The significance of incorporating online images will be to reflect our current weird state of things, where we remain affectively plugged into digital platforms, even when traversing through the physical world.

Chapter Two: Evaluating Historical Forms of Realism to Establish the Need for Weird Realism in Photography

This chapter analyses both Lovecraft's weird fiction and his conception of photographic realism, to make the argument that historical models of photography need to be developed to account for the weird. The significance of this discussion, is that the weird can offer a challenge to capitalist ideology which uses the repetition of identifiable forms, symbols and language, in order to suppress the shock of the new.

To achieve this, I commence by reconsidering the photograph's status as, temporal fragment, in Eugène Atget's photographs of Paris at the end of the 19th century, by re-evaluating them through the filter of H.P. Lovecraft's, *Polaris* (1918). I then compare Lovecraft's understanding of the photograph with Roland Barthes'. By discussing Lovecraft's notion from, *The Shadow Out of Time (1936),* that a photograph has a weird tension due to its status as both evidential proof of a particular moment and place and its existence as a hallucination, I compare with Barthes' idea that the photograph is both evidence of the existence of its referent and its status of "temporal hallucination" (1980).

From here the chapter moves to consider how the iconographic and symbolic aspects of the photograph have been used to historically fix capitalist ideology into the future. I achieve this through a comparison between Lewis Hine's, *Italian Madonna* and the features of the photograph that give rise to the shock of the new in Lovecraft's, *The Whisper in Darkness* (1931).

I continue to draw on Lovecraft's fiction to conclude how the weird can be used to recognise gaps in the veil of capitalist ideology and that this offers room for development in the technique of photographic montage, where the photograph as fragment is able to represent temporal occlusions left behind by capitalism in Allan Sekula in *Fish Story* (1995).

Finally through an analysis of Teju Cole's *Fernweh* (2020) and H.P. Lovecraft's themes of the known and known in *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), I argue how the form of the documentary photobook acts as speculative site for imagining alternative worlds.

"The seething vortex of time"; Fragmented Experience and Temporality in Atget's Photography

In H.P. Lovecraft's short story *Polaris (1918)*, the author's nameless protagonist imagines himself as "an all-observant uncorporeal presence" hovering over a strange city (Lovecraft [1918] 2024, p.30). As Lovecraft scholar Sunand Tryambak Joshi describes, *Polaris (1918)* was inspired by Lovecraft's own dream, in which he experiences a strange city. This short story would mark an early point in the long standing interest Lovecraft has with the relationship between reality and dreams (Joshi, 2017). This interest is stated quite pointedly by Lovecraft as he describes the nameless protagonist's experience of the dream;

> "Gradually I came to wonder what might be my place in the city on the strange plateau betwixt strange peaks. At first content to view the scene as an all-observant uncorporeal presence, I now desired to define my relation to it, and to speak my mind amongst the grave men who conversed each day in the public squares. I said to myself, "This is no dream, for by what means can I prove the greater reality of that other life in the house of stone and brick of the sinister swamp and the cemetery of the low hillock, where the Pole Star peers into my north window each night"". (Lovecraft [1918] 2024, pp.31-31).

The "greater reality" and its relationship to dreams, that is for the dreams' ability to uncover that which is usually inaccessible or indiscernible is a recurring weird motif within Lovecraft's fictions. Maurice Lévy argues that the dream is not merely artifice for Lovecraft but that it is through the dream itself that another world can be reached. It is this other world that in the "Dream restores meaning to the houses and streets reactivates the primordial anguish that in Lovecraft is always tied to the exploration of the past" (Lévy 1988, pp.47).

Ideas that are repressed belong to an unconscious state and it is dreams that help us to become aware of the existence of the unconscious. In Freud's topographical model of the mind, he argues that repression is a process that that takes place between the two systems of the unconscious and conscious. Testing takes place to determine whether a physical act passes through to conscious or is rejected by censorship, where it is repressed and remains in the unconscious (Freud 1915). Within psychoanalysis the relationship between dreams and reality can be understood through what happens to our unconscious during sleep. How we experience our thoughts and feelings is determined largely by the unconscious, which is inaccessible to us. The unconscious is mediated by the preconscious and conscious. These different areas of the mind are in conflict with each other but, through sleep these tensions are relaxed, allowing the barriers between regions to break down. (Mitchell and Black, 2016, Segal 1990).

Dreams are according to Freud a form of wish-fulfilment, he also speculates that they may be a continuation of psychic activities that occur during a waking state. The significance of dreams and in interpreting them comes from the latent content and manifest content in the dream. Latent content in the dream is considered unacceptable to the conscious mind and therefore concealed, whereas the manifest content of the dream appears as disguised, for example in the form of hieroglyphics, within the dream due to the undesirability of these thoughts (Freud [1899] 1997). Condensation of the dream is where the dream-contents are compressed when compared to the dream-thoughts that give us the meaning of the dream itself and must be uncovered through analysis. Displacement within the dream is when important elements within the dream thoughts do not find direct or central representation within the dream itself, similarly their actual meaning must be uncovered through analysis, (Freud [1899] 1997).

David Bate surmises why the surrealist's of the inter-war period of the early 20th century were interested in the tension created between the dream image and the medium of photography, which at the time was increasingly being used to portray reality,

> "it was during the period of the early twentieth century that it would it increasingly became the mass and dominant pictorial form in which reality, 'the world', was visually seen and articulated. It would be a singular failure, then, if a movement committed to an attack or

> negation of that world had ignored the means of signification through which it was daily being constituted. The reality of the world as proposed by photographs was as susceptible as any other signifying system (literature, 'poetry', paintings etc.) to positing dream and reality in the same ('surreal') image" (Bate 2004, p.55).

As Jaques Lacan argues there are conditions in which this line between the dream and reality blur such as sleep walking,

> "If the function of the dream is to prolong sleep, if the dream, after all, may come so near to the reality that causes it, can we not say that it might correspond to this reality without emerging from sleep? After all, there is such a thing as somnambulistic activity" (Lacan & Miller, [1979] 2004, p.57-58).

The dream in Lovecraft's *Polaris* (1918) regarded as wish fulfilment conveys the yearning for Lovecraft to explore this "strange" city, even if within the dream it is not a place he can bodily experience. Lovecraft's "greater reality" that the dream allows him to explore can be thought of not as an exploration of the physical space of the city but of a temporal experience, to hover over the city of the past, to experience the city's past through the dream.

As H.P. Lovecraft's story *Polaris* 1918 progress, the protagonist returns to the unknown city in his dreams, but is now able to take on a physical form, inhabiting the body of one the city's residents and in doing so learns their language, "I felt a change; and perceived that I had at last a bodily form. Nor was I a stranger in the streets of Olathoë" (Lovecraft [1918] 2024, p.3). As a local resident of the city, the protagonist now joins in a fight against an unknown alien invader,

> "That night had the news come of Daikos' fall, and of the advance of the Inutos; squat, hellish, yellow fiends who five years ago had appeared out of the unknown west to ravage the confines of our kingdom, and finally to besiege our towns. Having taken the fortified places at the foot of the mountains, their way now lay open to the plateau, unless every citizen could resist with the strength of ten men. For the squat creatures were mighty in the arts of war, and knew not the scruples of honour which held back our tall, grey-eyed men of Lomar from ruthless conquest" (Lovecraft [1918] 2024, p.31).

Joining the fight against the alien invaders, the protagonist acts a tower watchman, but

succumbs to sleep, somehow tricked by the Pole star as “its spirit whispered evil counsel” (Lovecraft (Lovecraft [1918] 2024, p.32). Upon later waking, the protagonist is confused as to what happened, but left with a certainty that he has failed to save the “land of Lomar” (Lovecraft [1918] 2024, p.33) from alien invaders who later to deride and mock him for this failure in subsequent dreams,

> “They mock me whilst I sleep, and whilst the squat yellow foe may be creeping silently upon us. I have failed in my duty and betrayed the marble city of Olathoë; I have proven false to Alos, my friend and commander. But still these shadows of my dream deride me. They say there is no land of Lomar, save in my nocturnal imaginings; that in those realms where the Pole Star shines high and red Aldebaran crawls low around the horizon, there has been naught save ice and snow for thousands of years, and never a man save squat yellow creatures, blighted by the cold, whom they call “Esquimaux”” (Lovecraft [1918] 2024, p.33-34).

In his analysis of *Polaris* 1918, Micheal Kellermeyer argues that the horrific reveal that the monstrous “Inutos” are actually modern day Innuits reflects Lovecraft’s racist prejudices and serves as an early example of a recurring theme that would appear in his stories of an “alien race hellbent on propagating their gospel of degeneration” (Kellermeyer 2024). Furthermore that the protagonist of *Polaris* (1918), like Lovecraft himself felt a sense of uselessness that stemmed from his mother sabotaging his plans to enlist during the Great War by publically denouncing him as physically unfit for service, leading to humiliation and an intensifying his already existent self-loathing, that “would be projected onto minorities, immigrants, and lower-class whites in the form of his notorious racism and elitism” (Kellermeyer 2024).

However, as philosopher César Guarde Paz argues, Lovecraft is not just concerned with his own position within society, but with that of Western society as a whole within the history of world civilisation, which was based on “a figment of his British imagination in which Britons hold a key position in the foundation and creation of laws, morals and science” (Paz 2012, p.16) Although the particularity of Lovecraft’s racist beliefs shifted over time, the “anxiety over losing an important part of the British civilization into a Dark Age of evil cult remained constant” (Paz 2012, p.31). The tower watchman’s failure to stay awake in *Polaris* (1918) haunts not just the protagonist who embodied him

in the past, allowing him only to repeat the doomed cycle, but can also be read as haunting British civilization as Kenneth Hite elaborates,

> "the story strongly implies that the "dream world" of Lomar is our own world 26,000 years (one full precession of the equinoxes) ago, and hence that time and consciousness and history are cyclic, that the soul is not individual or even time-bound, and that even today the intellectuals are nodding off on the peaks while our civilization enters its terminal state" (Hite 2022, pp.38-39).

As Joshi points out through an examination of Lovecraft's letters, Lovecraft bemoaned the rapid rate of change in the 20th century in the West that took place as a result of capitalism and mechanisation. This is exemplified in Lovecraft's agreement with the thinking of philosopher Oswald Spengler particularly the first volume of *The Decline of the West* (1918), in drawing connections between the industrial and mechanical age as one which severs both connection to the past, and the artistic capability to express the life of that past (Joshi, 1990).

> "It is my belief—and was so long before Spengler put his seal of scholarly proof on it—that our mechanical and industrial age is one of frank decadence; so far removed from normal life and ancestral conditions as to make impossible its expression in artistic media" (Lovecraft [1927] 1968, pp.103-104).

In order to understand the significance of the notion of decadence, Matei Călinescu argues we must first consider the Judeo-Christian view of time and history, in which the progression of time itself is thought to be linear and cannot be reversed and that within the Christian view specifically, those who are sinful will be tortured in hell forever, whilst the chosen will enjoy eternal felicity, "Decadence thus becomes the anguishing prelude to the end of the world" (Călinescu 1987, p.152). Technological development remains compatible with an acute sense of decadence, however as a consequence large numbers of people experience loss and alienation, in this sense, "progress *is* decadence and decadence *is* progress" (Călinescu 1987, p.155).

As Barton Levi St. Armand argues, Lovecraft's fascination with decadence manifested "in a cosmic consciousness that constantly brooded on the progressive decay of mankind and the galaxy which he inhabits" (Armand [1979] 2013, p.16). Although Lovecraft initially took inspiration

from Oscar Wilde's creation *Dorian Gray* 1890, in which the eponymous protagonist pursues physical decadence through sensual over indulgence, Lovecraft later sought to bracket his use own employment of decadence to a purely literary rather than sexual kind, confining it to the "American Genteel Tradition" a newer form of the old Puritan orthodoxy. In Lovecraft's shift to a more unusual puritanical form of decadence, he disregarded any elements he considered sexual degeneracy, which excluded Oscar Wilde due to his confessed homosexuality (Armand [1979] 2013, pp.18-20).

The significance of the dream in *Polaris (1918)* is a means for Lovecraft to expresses this melancholic feeling of a past that has been lost, the "greater reality" of the city is one that has been severed by modern life, and has become only experienceable at the limits of an unbridled unconscious (Lovecraft [1918] 2024, pp.31-31).

The inability to represent the experience of modern life is differently elaborated by Walter Benjamin in reference to the city Paris of the 19th Century as described by poet Charles Baudelaire, who argues that the experience seen through navigating the city of Paris through its traffic and crowds of people creates a series of shocks (Benjamin (1939). These shocks define experience in modernity, as in response consciousness puts up a screen against this endless onslaught of stimuli, the more efficiently the screen operates as a defence against these shocks,

> "The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it is so, the less do these impressions enter experience (Erfahrung), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life (Erlebnis). Perhaps the special achievement of shock defence may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. This would be a peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into a moment that has been lived (Erlebnis)" (Benjamin [1939] 1997, p.117).

Martin Jay elaborates on the impact of these shocks on experience, arguing that Erlebnis represents the, "immediate, passive, fragmented, isolated and unintegrated inner experience" (Jay 1998, p.48). Whereas the continuity of experience, represented by Erfahrung is broken not just by urban shocks but also by the replacement of artisanal production with the non-cumulative repetition of the assembly line. However the limitation of Benjamin's conception of Erfrahrung is that it entangles

a theological dimension, that of a religious experience which can transcend the relationship between subject and object, with a Marxist dimension, where the restoration of a genuine Erfrahrung may occur after a successful revolution (Jay 1998, pp.48-50). The camera itself gives moments a posthumous shock, fixing them for an unlimited amount of time through the photograph (Benjamin [1939] 1997, p130). I would argue that it is precisely this contradiction of the photograph, as relating to only a particular moment of fragmented, discontinuous time (Erlebnis), whilst remaining available indefinitely that gives rise to its weirdness.

Eugène Atget captured changes to the city of Paris at the end of the 19th Century. His work as a photographer was to provide documents for painters, illustrators, engravers, decorators, sculptors, architects, and a number of other professionals and amateurs, along with sometimes creating documents for the state, and library archives (Nesbit 1993). In 1898, Atget was employed by the Paris City Council, to take photographs of "Old Paris", as part of a wider goal to conserve historical monuments in the City, whilst also researching and documenting these monuments. (Krase 2008).

Eugène Atget's 1898 photographs of two separate places, *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* (fig 1.) and *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 2.) capture the loss of Old Paris. (Fig 1.) *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* Shows crumbling buildings described as "The day of its demolition", whilst (Fig 2.) *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* captures another space about to be destroyed and lost to time described as being, "Before its demolition" (Atget, & Krase, [1898] 2008, pp.56-67). The crumbling buildings in *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* (fig 1.) complete with the sign "art" as if to spell out that which is being lost of Old Paris, in the move to modernise it. A boy looks out from the frame towards us as the viewer as we bear witness to this loss. The buildings still intact but fated to be destroyed in *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 2.) heightens this sense of loss, the "that-has-been" of *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* (fig 1.) becomes that which has yet to be lost in *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 2.) (Barthes [1980] 2020). Barthes goes on to describe the strange tension of photography,

> "The Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence-as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents (quite the converse) but its very existence" […] "The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium,* a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand "it is

> not there," on the other "but it has indeed been") : a mad image, chafed by reality. (Barthes [1980] 2020, p.115).

In H.P. Lovecraft's, *The Shadow Out of Time (1936)*, the photograph holds a similar tension, as both hallucination and evidence. In Lovecraft's fiction, Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, a political philosophy professor, has his consciousness overtaken by an alien entity "The Great Race", which affects his perception and experience of time. Peaslee has strange and horrible dreams that offer fragmented memories of his traumatic encounters with alien worlds, which he experiences through past and future. At the beginning of the story Peaslee reflects on the experience of these alien encounters,

> "There is reason to hope that my experience was wholly or partly an hallucination—for which, indeed, abundant causes existed. And yet, its realism was so hideous that I sometimes find hope impossible. If the thing did happen, then man must be prepared to accept notions of the cosmos, and of his own place in the seething vortex of time, whose merest mention is paralysing." (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1381).

Throughout the course of the story it is photographs that act as a form of evidence that verify Peaslee's encounters with the alien race, as he continually doubts himself that what he experienced was just a hallucination. There are certain artistic techniques that Atget employs in *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* and *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 1 and 2) that I would argue reflect this weird tension, where the photographs are both undeniably an evidential capture of their referent, yet also have some unexplainable aspect that makes them feel not quite there. Whilst composition of the photographs appears to be quite simplistically functional at first glance, Andreas Krase through analysis of Atget's photographic techniques argues that certain artistic decisions though perhaps caught only by chance and accident aligned with Atget's aesthetic preferences over purely functional documentary photographs. The introduction of blur, the loss of detail because of light. The long exposure times Atget used in photographing buildings would result in haunting traces of figures as they moved past the camera (Krase, 2008).

In *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* (fig 1) the glow of light almost seems to burn off details in the building tops and introduce a kind of enshrouding fog. Whilst the boy close to the centre of the

picture is clearly made out, a ghostly trace of a moving figure in the middle left of the photograph seems to be getting lost in the dark shadow of the base of the building behind. In *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 2) the horse attached to the carriage whilst easily identifiable by its white outline against the dark shadows behind it, is blurred, and again the rooftops of the buildings are permeated and burnt off by the enshrouding fog caused by the light. The old way of life is disappearing, the horse will later be replaced by an automobile, in the incoming mechanisation. The ghostly trace of an unknown figure evaporating into shadow as if their way of life is being erased and forgotten.

Metaphorically it is as if time is claiming these places as I would argue that it evokes what Lovecraft describes as "the seething vortex of time, whose merest mention is paralysing." (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1381). Atget's photographs *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* and *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 1 and 2) are fragmented moments of time (Erlebnis), yet they feel as though they have caught something about the movement of time, even if the images themselves remain static. Light, distortion, and blur all leave their traces on the photographs *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* and *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 1 and 2) as if they are the very marks of time itself, co-existing or even overtaking the places that are being depicted. For Roland Barthes, it is the tension between perception and time that defines the strangeness of the medium yet for both Lovecraft and Barthes, the photograph is able to represent temporality in a way that perception usually does not allow. This for Barthes makes the photograph a "temporal hallucination", because it is out of step with perception yet still "true on the level of time" (Barthes [1980] 2020, p.115) in this way it is as if the photograph itself has preferential access to time, and it is the limits of our senses that bar us from being able to perceive it. For Lovecraft despite the photograph being able to reflect the complex "vortex of time", it is the limit of Peaslee's senses that make it difficult or impossible to perceive this time.

There is also complex temporal interplay between the two photographs *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* and *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 1 and 2), the crumbling building and the building still intact, this interplay reflects the temporal lag of historical trauma as Caruth Cathy argues,

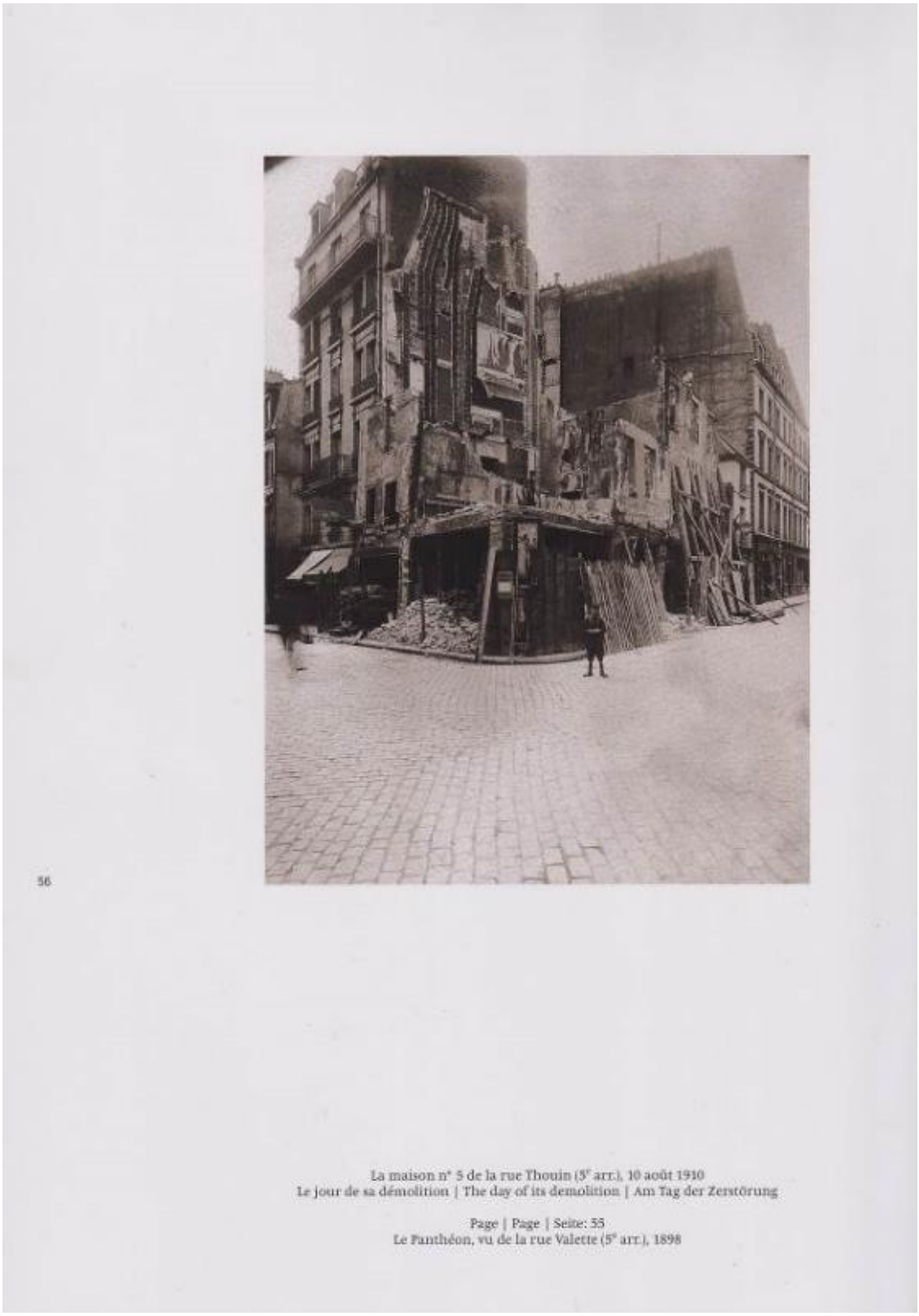
> "For history to be a history of trauma means that is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (Cathy [1996] 2016, pp.17-18).

If it is the moment of the historical shift from old to new Paris is one that Atget seeks to capture, perhaps Atget is aware that neither *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* (fig 1.) or *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 2.) can show us the exact moment, perhaps it is in, between these two temporalities, one of buildings destroyed the other of them still intact but about to be destroyed. There is an explosion, a collapse both a literal one and a metaphorical one. It is this very moment as one history is irretrievably lost and another takes its place that something else could have occurred.

Atget's photographs while easily assignable to a past that cannot be recovered still holds this feeling of possibility of what is to come, after all one of the photographs *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 2) is still on the "The day of its destruction" there is a moment in which the Old Paris could have been survived. As Clive Scott recognises in documentary photography, image captions have their own temporal status that connects with both the photographer and us as the spectator. As an act of the past, emphasis is placed on the "destruction" of the building in the photograph as something that we the spectator by proxy are viewing as having already happened, that Eugène Atget bore witness too (Scott 1999). Photography is in itself incomplete as an art form, it requires an imaginative spectator in order to complete it through the use of captions and critical writing (Benjamin, [1935] 2008, Woodfield 1999).

Reading the photograph *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 2) and its caption within its historical and social context, I would argue that was is being conveyed is Atget's melancholia for that which is about to be lost. Although the caption informs us that the "destruction" of Old Paris did in fact occur, the photograph still offer us this fragment that continues to spur on our thinking as to what could have become, and perhaps then what the present would look like as a result. As Silke Helmerdig speculates, perhaps this is the very reason why historical photographs capture our imagination so well; "Photographs offer a prospect, even if just in thinking, for the past to change in retrospect. Could that be why we like to look at historical photographs?" (2016, p.193). Just as the dream in Lovecraft's *Polaris (1918)* recognises the "greater reality" that the unconscious opens, allowing an "an all-observant uncorporeal presence" to explore the "strange city", the city that could have become. Atget's photographs of Old Paris *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin* & *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts* (fig 1

& 2) can be said to recognise the importance of preserving the fragment before it is lost, so that we may return to the site of possibility that lies hidden within it.



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La maison n° 5 de la rue Thouin (5e arr.), 10 août 1910
Le jour de sa démolition | The day of its demolition | Am Tag der Zerstörung

Page | Page | Seite: 55
Le Panthéon, vu de la rue Valette (5e arr.), 1898

Figure 1. Eugène Atget, *la maison no5 da le rue Thouin (1898) in Eugène Atget, Paris 1857-1927* (Atget and Krase 2008, p.56)

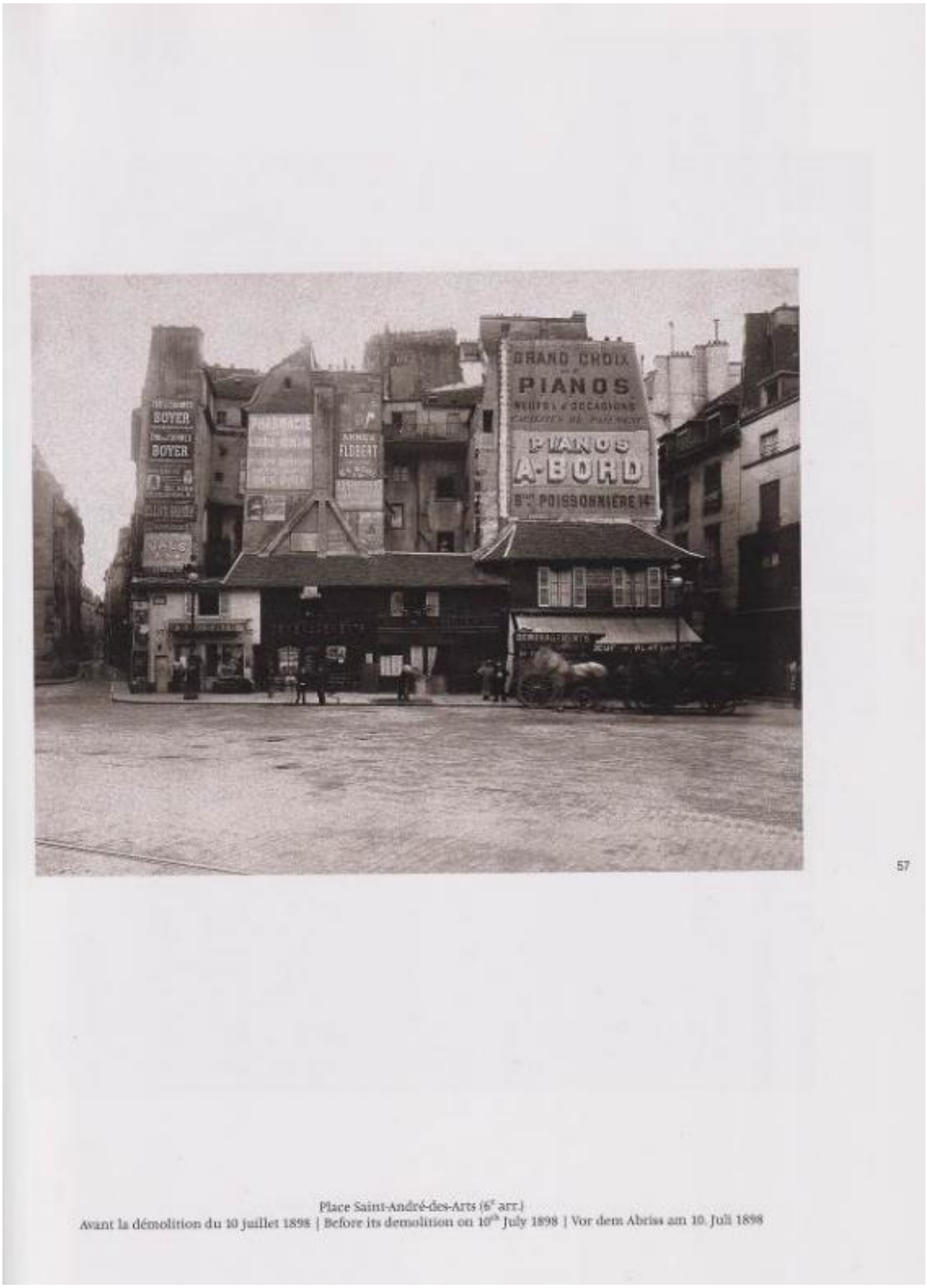


Figure 2. Eugène Atget, *Place saint-Andrè-des-Arts (1898) in Eugène Atget, Paris 1857-1927* (Atget and Krase 2008, p.57)

"Fill up a perplexing blank"; Lovecraft's Weird Photographic Realism

Returning to Lovecraft's *The Shadow Out of Time (1936),* Peaslee describes the memories of his encounters with "The Great Race" as a kind of "realism", which "was so hideous that I sometimes find hope impossible" (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1381). Lovecraft's interest in describing the "realism" of Peaslee's experiences can be better understood by turning to Eric Auerbach's definition of "modern realism" in western literature. By studying Flaubert's writing he notices something that is absent in Stendhal and Balzac's writing. Stendhal and Balzac include the writer's voice, describing their thoughts and opinions on characters and events in the story, whilst Flaubert does not. Instead Flaubert's writing relies on the idea that the truth of language can translate events without the writers need to express his own opinion (Auerbach, Said, & Trask, 2013). The realist novel also engages liberal thought through multiple perspectives, first and third person, tackling the difficulties of living political and philosophical ideals (Anderson, 2011).

As George Lukács argues realist literature writers are swimming against the anti-realist writer who provides defence of, or makes apologies for the current capitalist system (Lukács [1938] 1980, p.29) and that avant-garde literature, such as Expression and Surrealism, "denies that literature has any reference to objective reality" (Lukács [1938] 1980, p.33) The significance of a realist writer to a Marxist theory of literature Lukács argues is that,

> "If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately on the surface. If a writer strives to represent reality as it truly is, i.e. if he is an authentic realist, then the question of totality plays a decisive role, no matter how the writer actually conceives of the problem intellectually" (Lukács [1938] 1980, p.33).

Turning to the example of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (1924), George Lukács views the author as a "realist" because he knows precisely who his fictional characters such as Hans Castrop, or Leo Naphta are, therefore Thomas Mann,

> "knows how thoughts and feelings grow out of life of society and how experiences and emotions are part of the total complex of reality. As a realist he assigns these parts to their

> rightful place within the total life context. He shows what area of society they arise from and where they are going to" (Lukács [1938] 1980 p.36).

In terms of the labour, the realist, must employ both an artistic and intellectual dimension. First having to uncover the underlying laws that govern objective reality which are hidden beneath the surface. Then the realist after having discovered the hidden relationships which make up society, he must then artistically conceal them (Lukács [1938]1980, pp. 38-39).

> "This twofold labour creates a new immediacy, one that is artistically mediated; in it, even though the surface of life is sufficiently transparent to allow the underlying essence to shine thought (something which is not true of immediate experience in real life), it nevertheless manifests itself as immediacy, as life as it actually appears. Moreover in works of such writers, we observe the whole surface of life in all its essential determinants, and not just a subjectively perceived moment isolated from the totality in an abstract and over intense manner" (Lukács [1938] 1980, pp.38-39).

Bertolt Brecht in criticism of George Lukács thoughts on realism, argues that Lukács had limited himself to the novel and particularly the form of bourgeois novels of the 19th century, with the more recent examples he chose only being used in order to illustrate this same form, in regulating realism to such a narrow field, Brecht argues that Lukács does not account for realism in lyric poetry or drama (Brecht, [1938] 1980, p.70). Citing a novel that he was working on, *The Business Affairs of Herr Julius Cesar* (1957), Brecht describes that in his historical research there was nothing useful from the realist novel of the type that George Lukács was arguing in favour of, instead Brecht made Lukács use of as one of his realist techniques the diary form (Brecht, [1938] 1980, p.70). This diary form for Lukács would not be a realistic method for representing reality as it is, that it is instead would be a "subjectively perceived moment isolated from the totality" (Lukács [1938] 1980, pp.38-39).

Bertolt Brecht's also argues that George Lukács concept of realism is flawed because it brackets off and disregards avant-garde approaches as realist techniques, in response, Brecht argues that; "Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new" (Brecht [1938] 1980,

p.82). As people struggle to change reality, instead of relying on the tried and tested literary models and accepted rules of narrative, every possible means both old and new, those taken from art or from other sources must be employed in an effort to portray reality as it continues to shift and change (Brecht [1938] 1980).

As Michel Houellebecq argues in his analysis of H.P. Lovecraft's fiction, "In his entire body of work, there is not a single allusion to two of the realities to which we generally ascribe great importance: sex and money" (Houellebecq 2008, p.71), Lovecraft's decision to be blind to certain elements of life, was a deliberate conscious choice, "Lovecraft does not try to repaint the elements of reality that displease him; he resolutely ignores them" (Holloquebec 2008, p.76). Instead Lovecraft limits himself to the aim of bringing about a state of fascination to his readers, his focus is on only two human sentiments, wonderment and fear, this is this narrow focus for the construction of his universe, for example in *The Shadow out of Time* (1936), the descriptions of alien architecture are designed to focus create a sense of fascination with a new world and to make all other human sentiments fall away (Holloquebec 2008, p.73, p.79).

Lovecraft however hated realism he did not want to reflect the struggles of life as it is, he wanted to create new worlds. Summarising Lovecraft's position against realism Michel Houellebecq argues; "Life is painful and disappointing. It is useless, therefore, to write new realistic novels" (Houellebecq 2008, p.37). It is this hatred of realism that Lovecraft is referring too when he paradoxically speaks of the "realism" in *The Shadow Out of Time (1936)*. It is the "realism" not of our world, but of weird alien worlds that Lovecraft is interested in expressing. In trying to think beyond the human world, Lovecraft's writing is a form of "weird realism". A form of realism that attempts to address the limitations of correlationism, in which our understanding of objects is limited by human thought and consciousness (Harman 2012, 2018). For Lovecraft, photography has a role to play in representing this "weird realism" as can be seen in *The Shadow Out of Time (1936),* when Peaslee attempts to document his horrible and weird experiences, partly remembered through dreams, he writes articles, including sketches in an attempt to capture the strange forms of things he had seen. Peaslee sends these articles to the "*Journal of Psychological the American Psychological Society*". Eventually Peaslee receives a response from the journal, in a letter from "Robert B.F. Mackenzie"

which describe the very same strange stones and markings that Peaslee had dreamed of. These stones appeared near a gold mining area in the “Great Sandy Desert”. What shocks Peaslee is that Mackenzie accompanies this letter with photographs,

> "Enclosed were some very curious snapshots. I will reproduce the text in its entirety, and no reader can fail to understand how tremendous an effect it and the photographs had upon me. I was, for a time, almost stunned and incredulous; for although I had often thought that some basis of fact must underlie certain phases of the legends which had coloured my dreams, I was none the less unprepared for anything like a tangible survival from a lost world remote beyond all imagination. Most devastating of all were the photographs—for here, in cold, incontrovertible realism, there stood out against a background of sand certain worn-down, water-ridged, storm-weathered blocks of stone whose slightly convex tops and slightly concave bottoms told their own story. And when I studied them with a magnifying glass I could see all too plainly, amidst the batterings and pittings, the traces of those vast curvilinear designs and occasional hieroglyphs whose significance had become so hideous to me (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1424).

Lovecraft’s understanding of photography, is based on a naïve realism, where the medium’s connection to its referent is made through an unmediated capture of the object placed in front of the lens. Lovecraft’s concept of the photograph as providing “cold, incontrovertible realism” (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1424) can be read through André Bazin’s thoughts on of realism. For Bazin there are two types of realism, “true realism” which represents our materially existing world, and “pseudo realism” which offers an illusory appearance of that world (Bazin 1960). Photography is both “the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it” yet paradoxically it also “produces an image that is a reality of nature, namely an hallucination that is also a fact” (Bazin 1960, pp.8-9). Peaselee’s hope that his “experience was wholly or partly a hallucination” (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1381) reflects this contradiction, for he fears the horrible events that happened to him, yet needs to find out whether there is objective proof of their very existence. Peaslee is unable to trust that his memories of alien encounters are reliable in his dreams; “Conceivably, the efforts of the subconscious mind to fill up a perplexing blank with pseudo-memories might give rise to strange

imaginative vagaries" (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1393). The photograph to therefore acts as authenticator for Peaslee's experience of an alien world, it was not simply an unconscious dream or a hallucination. Unthinkable experiences are verified by the photograph.

As JiHae Koo points out, "for Lovecraft, photography in general was associated an unerring "objectivity" that could transfigure human consciousness" (2022, pp.467-468). I would argue therefore that Lovecraft takes a similar position to Kendall Walton, who contends that that when you are looking at a photograph, you acknowledge both the photograph itself, as well as object that is in photograph. However, this acknowledgement does not in any meaningful way detract from the photograph's capability to show you the object as it is, or to put it another way, when looking at the photograph you are able to see the object without any interference from the medium (Walton 2008, p.25).

The significance of the photograph's objectivity for Peaslee is that it can be hold onto the memories of his encounters with "The Great Race" that would otherwise be lost to him, leaving behind a "perplexing blank". This would be in line with a mid-19th Century conception of the medium, as, "the mirror with a memory" (Holmes 1859). In tracing the conception of photography in the 19th Century, Natale Davis contends that the metaphor of the photograph as mirror; "is usually invoked as evidence of photography's capacity to deceive time, memorizing on the plate's surface a vision that would appear only momentarily on a mirror" (2019, p.68). Peaslee's mind is unable to retain the memories of "The Great Race", their alien worlds remain beyond human comprehension. Yet the photograph is able to cheat the limits of the human mind, just as the "The Great Race", surpass the limits of Peaslee's conception of time, existing through both past and future, so too in its objective capture of their alien world is the photograph able to go with them beyond the human limits of memory.

“Damnably suggestive power”; Lewis Hine’s *Italian Madonna*

Whilst Lovecraft appears to understand the metaphorical potential of the photograph, to authenticate experience of weird alien worlds, to develop a weird realism, it is also important to account for the symbolic power of the photograph, as being able convey something outside of itself. In H.P. Lovecraft's *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1931) Albert Wilmarth, an instructor of literature at Miskatonic University, goes to investigate reports of strange things appearing in the rivers of rural Vermont. Wilmarth receives a letter from a local of the area, Henry Wentworth Aekley, which contains a details of strange alien creatures he has seen along with some photographs he had taken. Though it is later revealed that the alien creatures, the "Outer Ones" cannot be photographed by any regular camera slide or film, the photographs of the local area, that Aekley had taken, unnerve Wilmarth. Akeley's letters become more horrific, asking Wilmarth to visit him at his farm house, before it is finally revealed that the Outer Ones have removed Akeley's brain, taking it in a cylinder with them back into outer space,

> “In the end I answered Akeley’s letter, adopting a tone of friendly interest and soliciting further particulars. His reply came almost by return mail; and contained, true to promise, a number of kodak views of scenes and objects illustrating what he had to tell. Glancing at these pictures as I took them from the envelope, I felt a curious sense of fright and nearness to forbidden things; for in spite of the vagueness of most of them, they had a damnably suggestive power which was intensified by the fact of their being genuine photographs—actual optical links with what they portrayed, and the product of an impersonal transmitting process without prejudice, fallibility, or mendacity. The more I looked at them, the more I saw that my serious estimate of Akeley and his story had not been unjustified. Certainly, these pictures carried conclusive evidence of something in the Vermont hills which was at least vastly outside the radius of our common knowledge and belief” (Lovecraft [1931] 2024, p.1000).

John Steadman speculates that in *The Whisper in Darkness* (1931) the superiority of the extraterrestrial others in terms intellect, technology and culture makes them naturally predisposed to enslaving humans, and perhaps even justified in this action, if not excused for it; In this regard, the

white Anglo-Saxon race, who Lovecraft believes to superior to other human races “has the God-given right to make slaves out of the weaker races and dominate them” (Steadman 2024, p.199).

The significance of Lovecraft’s evocation of the “damnably suggestive power” of the photograph can be understood, by elaborating its semiotic status. As Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics illustrates; a symbol is a type of sign which refers to an object, whereas an icon is a type of sign which holds the same qualities as the object to which it refers, whilst an index both refers to an object, and is itself changed by the object that it references. In other words, the index is that which is specifically modified by an object, not just merely something that it points to. In the case of a photograph, the index incorporates a kind of icon because it comes to take on the same qualities as that it refers to (Peirce & Buchler, 1986, pp.99-106). Rosalind Krauss’s notion of indexicality argues that the object itself has directly affected the photograph, the indexing of the object by the photograph to be like the physical trace left by a footprint (1977a, 1977b). However, photography’s indexicality lies in more than its trace of the referent, that which is placed in front of the camera lens, it also holds affective associations. These associations may vary between viewers, and can be found within the “network of identifications that these photographs establish” (Morris Reich & Olin, 2020 pp.134-135). In other words the indexicality of photography has an affective dimension, referencing that which is beyond the frame of the photograph itself (Morris-Reich, A., & Olin, M. (2020).

Whereas the symbolic dimension of photography, can be understood by turning to its deployment in the state’s control of business in the early 20th century in the US. As Maren Stange describes in the early 20th century, the industrialist could position himself as socially concerned, while his true motivation would be social control and exploitation. Lewis Hine's style of documentary photographs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries acted as a symbol of the industrialist faux-social concern, Hine’s portrayed a range of subjects such as the “industrial worker” and the “immigrant”. Hine’s photographic style became synonymous with the authority of liberal reformers and their capacity to describe social reality (Stange 1989).

Pasquale Verdicchio argues that Lewis Hine exploited the bodies of immigrant workers, stating that Hine’s photographs, “paid little attention to what those bodies signified outside of their potential labour”, in this way the photograph of the immigrant was used as a as “malleable material

for the national machinery" (Verdicchio 2011, p.44). The potential use of Hine's photographs was multifaceted, they could be used aid in exclusionary practices in immigration, in the documentation of a national strategy of immigrant employment, and in the delimitation of a new historical period; That is to say the meaning of Hine's photographs could not be diluted into simply being a claim to truth (Verdicchio 2011, p.135, p.139).

Beaumont Newhall in his later recognition of Lewis Hine's work in the 1930's, grouped Hine together with "documentary" photographers, such as Dorothea Lange, Theodor Jung, and Walker Evans, claiming that Hine's photographs of child labour conditions prior to the first World War where, "poignant in their stark and direct seizure of the emotions of both photographer and subjects" (1938, p.4). Newhall went onto elaborate that; "The documentary photographer is not a mere technician. Nor is he an artist for art's sake. His results are often brilliant technically and highly artistic, but primarily they are pictorial reports" (1938, p.5). In H.P. Lovecraft's *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1931), the significance of photography for Albert Willmarth comes from its status as "the product of an impersonal transmitting process without prejudice, fallibility, or mendacity" (Lovecraft [1931] 2024, p.1000), arguing that this is what lent the photographs "a damnably suggestive power" (Lovecraft [1931] 2024, p.1000). The technical accuracy of the photograph, acts as precondition for its ability to be a recorder of the weird; This is the potential point of convergence between Lovecraft's understanding of photography, and Newhall's, in their seemingly being in agreement that the photograph acts as a "report", to verify something that has been seen by an observer.

In drawing upon Lewis Hine's photograph titled *Italian Madonna* (1905) (fig 3), depicting an Italian immigrant mother holding her child in front of a detention cell, Sarah Chinn argues that the photograph iconographically relates to Christ child and Madonna paintings of the renaissance, whilst at the same time registering the present moment (2008, pp.29-31). In *Italian Madonna* (1905) (fig 3) the photograph's conflicting status as both index and icon does not lead to icon overtaking index or vice versa, instead as Sarah Chinn argues, "Hine's Italian Madonna is simultaneously outside time, the eternal mother, and rooted in moment and locale" (2008, p.31). In Lovecraft's *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1931), whilst Henry Wentworth Aekley's "vague" photographic traces of the "Outer Ones" through footprints and other marks left in the muddy hills of Vermont are enough to fascinate and

disturb Albert Willmarth, it is the photograph of an alien "great black stone" covered in hieroglyphics that induces a shock.

> "But if the most disturbing of all the views was that of the footprint, the most curiously suggestive was that of the great black stone found in the Round Hill woods. Akeley had photographed it on what was evidently his study table, for I could see rows of books and a bust of Milton in the background. The thing, as nearly as one might guess, had faced the camera vertically with a somewhat irregularly curved surface of one by two feet; but to say anything definite about that surface, or about the general shape of the whole mass, almost defies the power of language. What outlandish geometrical principles had guided its cutting—for artificially cut it surely was—I could not even begin to guess; and never before had I seen anything which struck me as so strangely and unmistakably alien to this world. Of the hieroglyphics on the surface I could discern very few, but one or two that I did see gave me rather a shock" (Lovecraft [1931] 2024, p.1001).

The indexical status of the photograph determines that the "great black stone" did indeed exist and has been contextualised as supporting evidence for Aekley's story, yet it signifies something that which is outside human knowledge. This is the irresolvable tension of the weird photograph for Willmarth, for it to be simultaneously unrecognisable whilst also at the same representing a particular moment and place. Aekley's photograph, can be regarded as estranging the world that Willmarth thought he knew, this is arguably the opposite intended effect for Hine's photograph of *Italian Madonna* (1905), as Verdicchio summarises of Hine's photographs of immigrants, they,

> "depend on classical poses and compositions to make the foreign subjects palatable. There is no question as to the foreignness of those bodies shown in their "natural" habitats, but the rhetorical figuration of foreignness makes them both different and exploitable for the apparent lack of cultural specificity" (2011, p.143).

If anything then, the *Italian Madonna* (1905) is about erasing the cultural difference of a foreign Italian woman and child, to subsume them into the recognisable iconography of the Madonna and Christ child, so that they can become a "palatable" part of an unfolding American future, where the immigrant is accepted only as long as they remain a cheap source of labour. Contrarily the photograph

of the “great black stone” for Willmarth in Lovecraft’s *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1931) is weird precisely because of the shock of the new, its foreign hieroglyphs have no recognisable symbols they can be associated with. Alain Badiou in studying art and poetry of the 20th century argues that; “The passion for the real is always the passion for the new”, referencing a poem written by Kazmir Malevich prior to composing the abstract painting *White on White,* Badiou contents that, “thought must interrupt repetition. There must be, and there will be, a new act, a ‘new birth’ which it is the century's task to invent” (Badiou 2007, pp.56-57). Malevich’s poem starts with the lines, “Try never to repeat yourself – not in the icon, not on the canvas, not in the word”, so I would argue that the re-use of the Madonna and Christ child iconography in Lewis Hine’s *Italian Madonna* (1905), is a way of wrestling the foreign immigrant away from being associated with the shock of the new. As Badiou goes onto say by drawing upon Malevich’s poem, it is, “hearing that must be cleansed in order to find the contours. Attentiveness is realized as the invention of an outline, the seal of an advance, and not by grasping a pre-existing ideality” (Badiou 2007, p.57); in other words the employment of recognisable symbols act as blockage for the creation of something new, ensuring that the immigrant’s prospective status as exploitable labour does not change.



Figure 3. Lewis Hine, *Italian Madonna* (1905)

"These fragments were not unfolded in their rightful sequence";

Temporal Continuity as Critical Realist Method

In H.P. Lovecraft's *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1931), Akeley describes his frustration at of repeatedly trying yet being unable to photograph the alien "Outer Ones", yet film is unable to capture them,

> "You know, all those things in the rivers were seen only on the first morning after the flood. And here's the worst. I tried to photograph it for you, but when I developed the film there wasn't anything visible except the woodshed. What can the thing have been made of? I saw it and felt it, and they all leave footprints." (Lovecraft [1931] 2024, p.1019).

Akeley makes continuous attempts to document the "Outer Ones", to prove their existence, both to himself and to Wilmarth. The letters that Aekley writes of his experiences with the alien creatures is not enough. He has to photograph them and show these photographs to Wilmarth as objective, irrefutable proof that the aliens do indeed exist. Aekley's obsession with photographing the "Outer Ones" can be regarded as, "the incessant need to authenticate the "real": the photograph of witness of what was here" (Barthes 1989, p.146). The failure of both Aekley's photographs and letters to authenticate the real, the "Outer Ones", points to the limitations of documentary and realism.

It is the limitations of documentary and realism that Martha Rosler seeks to respond too, developing new forms of representations to overcome the "rhetorics of appeal" of documentary as previously discussed by John Tagg. Rosler argued that the aim for her work would therefore be to critically engage with the concept of documentary itself (2006). In one of Martha Rosler's critical documentary works, *The Bowery in two inadequate description systems* (1975), the subject matter of the work was the Bowery district in Manhattan; which Rosler directly indexed through photographs. Rosler also paired text with these photographs to complicate and deliberately subvert any kind of direct representation. The Bowery had been historically associated via media representation as being a site of poverty, disenfranchised groups, and alcoholism. Therefore, the intent of Rosler's employment of text alongside the photographs was designed to contest the ways in which historically, documentary photography had conveyed the site of the bowery itself to be a "troubled spot" (Rosler, n.d). Allan Sekula developed this by arguing that Martha Rosler's work on the Bowery offered critical

engagement with the shortcomings of not only photography, but also text, as systems of representations which fell short of being able to accurately convey what they referred to (1978, p.867, p. 869). Rosler's *The Bowery in two inadequate description systems* (1975) it can be argued is a new form of documentary photography practice; that is designed to point to the limitations of the genre, to make the argument that reality cannot be described in either photograph or text, that both forms of description are insufficient. This lead then to rupture, rupture is in other words a traumatic gap between image and text, something which slips between the two kinds of description, something which cannot be represented (Mitchell 2015, p.61). Martha Rosler's position on photography then, in *The Bowery in two inadequate description systems* (1975), that took on a kind of "radical metonymy": by this, Rosler means that whilst the photographs themselves referred to reality, to the material setting of the Bowery itself whilst also being designed to critically engage with that reality, not merely to act as a reflection of it (2006). Rosler's position was therefore, arguably in line with the goals Brechtian realism with its aim to represent reality; but at the same time critically engaged with this reality, to show that it was not fixed and therefore capable of being transformed (Brecht & Willis 1978).

Steve Edwards argues that *The Bowery in two inadequate description systems* (1975), shifts between two poles, literal and metaphorical. Neither image nor text should be regarded as literal but instead turn away from literalism. Whereas the text is metaphorical, the photographs work through a metonymy of the text. For example in *The Bowery in two inadequate description systems* (1975), the metaphor of "dead soldiers" and "dead marines" (fig 4) are depicted through empty alcohol bottles (fig 5). The phrases "dead soldiers" and "dead marines" could be read as metaphorically standing in for the people lost in the bowery, the war they have died in is a class war, their displacement and homelessness the result of an emergent professional managerial class. The "inadequate" forms that Rosler is referencing is not the image, text systems but metaphor and metonymy. Pointing out the "inadequacy" of metaphor and metonymy is therefore a comment on the saturation of consciousness by capitalist ideology. The goal of Rosler's project therefore is to call attention to and to speculate on the need for new forms of representation, to reach beyond the limitations of ideology (Edwards, 2012). To reach beyond the limitations of human thought is the goal of "weird realism" (Harman 2012). Returning to the description of the photograph in *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1931), Aekley

professes, “there wasn’t anything visible except the woodshed”, despite the lack of visual evidence of the “Outer Ones”, Akeley says that he “felt it” (Lovecraft [1931] 2024, p.1019). As metonym for the “Outer Ones” the photograph fails, the film cannot capture them, as metaphor however the photograph gives form to Aekley’s feeling of encountering the alien, that which lies beyond the known world of human consciousness.

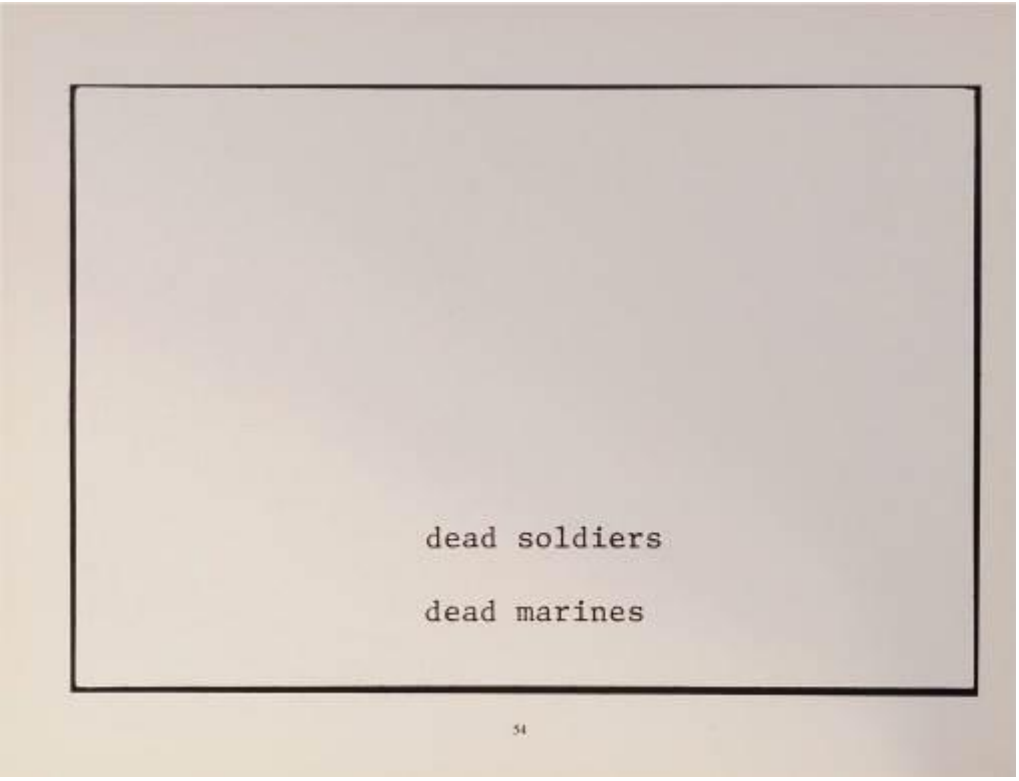


Figure 4. Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate description systems” (1975)* in *3 works* (2006, p.54)



Figure 5. Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate description systems" (1975) in 3 works* (2006, p.55)

In H.P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow Out of Time (1936),* Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee is able to make out fragmented images of his experience when possessed by the alien "The Great Race".

> "But none of the dreams ever gave me a full picture of daily life. All were the merest misty, disconnected fragments, and it is certain that these fragments were not unfolded in their rightful sequence." (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1415).

For only "fragmented images" to come back to Peaslee's after his encounter with the "The Great Race", and that "these fragments were not unfolded in their rightful sequence" speaks to the experience of trauma. Peaslee is unable to grasp the traumatic experience as it occurs, and it begins to come back to him only afterwards (Cathy [1996] 2016). Lovecraft's alien monster "The Great Race" can be defined as unknowable, their ability to move through time in a way different to humans stands outside any cultural category. The monsters threaten cognition, their existence is impossible, our culture must therefore ignore them, to do otherwise results in madness and derangement (Caroll 1990).

In Lovecraft's *The Shadow Out of Time (1936)* "The Great Race" are fearful of another species "a horrible elder race of half-polypous, utterly alien entities", who had, "dominated the earth and three other solar planets about six hundred million years ago" (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1420). The fears of "The Great Race" mirrors Lovecraft's own fears about other races as John Steadman argues,

> "Lovecraft feared that the Black race might eventually attempt to rise up against the white Anglo-Saxon race; he had seen at first hand the steady influx of Blacks and other hated races into the United States via New York and had noted a similar influx in Providence. Thus, Lovecraft and the Great Race (and, for that matter the Elder Things) fear the possibility of a racial displacement that might not only leave their races in the minority but could in fact, wipe each of them out entirely" (Steadman 2024, p.232)

Peaslee is not supposed to know about "The Great Race", they are alien, they are supposed to remain hidden, and no human can withstand the challenge to cognition they represent. No human can withstand their breach of cultural categories, for that would lay bare that our understanding of culture is not only incomplete, it is fundamentally wrong. Whilst Sekula's method of "critical realism", is not explicitly weird, it does hold this similarity to Lovecraft's weird fiction, in pointing out that our understanding of culture is both incomplete and wrong. The unveiling of the hidden "facts" of capital, much like the existence of Lovecraft's monsters have the capacity to shape and warp our conception of culture.

The impossibility of the monsters in Lovecraft's fiction are in Lacan's terms, the real, and encountering the real comes with an aspect of horror that shatters our reality system (Badiou 2007). However in Lovecraft's fiction, whilst a direct encounter with the monsters always results in madness or derangement, their very existence points to something that has to remained ignored for culture to exist as it is. For Lovecraft the fragmented images which Peaslee sees in his dreams, are what remains after his encounter with the monsters; to unfold the fragments in their rightful sequence would be to restore their meaning, this is the speculative potential of the fragment.

As David Green argues building upon Walter Benjamin's ideas of the photograph, as fragment it is a discrete and dislocated image of the world, but through the use of the written captions

and montage it could be released from its association only with the past, and be put to revolutionary use within the present (Green 2006, Benjamin 1931, 1934). Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* (1995) seizes upon this speculative potential of the photographic fragment through the use of text and photomontage. The narrative told through the montage of photographs in *Fish story* (1995) is of the contradiction between the expansive global flows of capital and entrapment of labourers under working conditions. *Fish Story* (1995) is told through photographs of ships out on the vast open sea, and of tight engine rooms where engineers toil in cramped conditions. Photographs of sea facing harbours and fishing villages, against models of ships encased behind glass. Sekula also uses "facts" in order to unveil cover-ups, of the occluded operations of capital that leave behind temporal gaps, the use of a "realistic montage" restores the temporal gaps left behind by these operations of capital. Sekula shows in photomontage the temporal sequence of these hidden events, events which usually would either not be known about at all by the public, or the lack of temporal continuity would make them unreadable (Sekula & Buchloh [1995] 2018). An example of a Sekula "fact" can be found in the chapter 'True Cross' in *Fish Story* (1995), Sekula discusses how the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés created a fortified port and town in Veracruz, Mexico in order to store his stolen Aztec gold. With a lack of timber or stone to build the fortress, white coral was taken out of the reef to be used instead, destroying the habitat of local fish. This act of desecration of the natural world to store Aztec gold is echoed in the present, as the fortress has been subsumed into a modern cargo port, with an anticipation of more goods flowing through it following the North American Free Trade Agreement. In anticipation of an increased flow of goods through the former fortress, its walls have to be shored up as they have grown weak over time, to do this synthetic coral is made (Sekula [1995] 2018, pp.149-150). Sekula compares this creation of synthetic coral to a horrific science experiment,

> "the conservators of San Juan de Ulúa are attempting to grow new synthetic coral by running high-voltage current into the seawater, hoping to precipitate out carbonate of lime: the science-fiction experiment of a team of Frankenstein periodontists. The gum disease of the future eats away at the teeth of the past." (Sekula [1995] 2018, p.150).

Sekula's colourful description of this act of drilling into the walls of the fortress, hidden beneath the surface, metaphorically exposes the horrors of capitalism that are usually obscured. Sekula's

photomontage shows the movement of equipment and engineers working at San Juan de Ulúa. In *Fish Story* (fig 6 & 7.) we can see an engineer in the process of drilling (Sekula [1995] 2018, pp.156-157).

Sekula's caption for the photographs in *Fish Story* (1995) (fig 6, & 7) reads "Drilling core samples from the coral walls of the fortress. San Juan de Ulúa" (Sekula [1995] 2018, p.164). As the first word of the caption is a verb in the present tense "Drilling", this communicates to the viewer that the photograph is taken as something is happening. Yet in the first photograph *Fish Story* (1995) (fig 6) the engineer is stood almost motionless, in the next photograph *Fish Story* (fig 7) the engineer then appears to be caught in mid-motion. After Sekula's earlier critical description of the history and present of San Juan de Ulúa as a site of hidden capitalist exploitation, the photographic captions are paradoxically very neutral, simply explaining what is happening in the photograph. Yet in exposing the act of "drilling" as it's happening through two photographs, Sekula is restoring what would be otherwise be a temporal gap. There should be no record of "the science-fiction experiment of a team of Frankenstein periodontists" (Sekula [1995] 2018, p.150). Sekula puts the evidentiary power of the photograph to aid in the exposure of the "facts" of capital, whilst removing himself as witness to history, the photograph speaks for itself without human intervention (Scott 1999). In other words Sekula is deliberately playing with the contradictions of the supposed neutrality of documentary photograph, with his own obviously critical position; The facts of capitalism should be not known to the public, these events happened and these photographs provide a coherent temporal sequence as evidence of them happening.

The conspiracy plot is central to Lovecraft's weird fiction, the protagonist usually encounters the horrors of the story alone, and the uncovering of a hidden truths is usually assisted by written and or oral evidence (Wilson 2016). As previously discussed it is not only letters but also photographs that work together in their unveiling of the hidden truths about the existence of "The Great Race" in *The Shadow Out of Time (1936)*. This is the significance of the photograph for Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, it verifies that the "The Great Race" are real, by filling in the temporal gaps of his horrific encounter with them. Whereas the photograph fills in the temporal gaps that such occlusions of leave behind, be it from capital or a Lovecraft monster.

As Slavoj Žižek argues, “the kernel of reality is horror, horror of the Real, and what constitutes reality is the minimum idealization the subject needs in order to be able to sustain the Real” (1997, p.22); Within the context of capitalism, the subject sustains reality, because they are unable to deal with the horror of their own non-existence. However the encounter with Lovecraft’s aliens “The Great Race” is accompanied not just with a feeling of horror from Peaslee, but also a recognition of a gap in his understanding of time. As Steven Shaviro argues drawing a parallel between H.P Lovecraft’s fiction and capitalism, “the “weird” can be defined as the writing that emerges at moments of incomplete recognition of capitalism’s cross hatching over time and space” (2016, p.240), in other words, weird in fiction is about recognising gaps not shrouded over by capitalist ideology.

In their discussion of critical realism Hilde Van Gelder & Jan Baetens argue that realism in contemporary art has moved away from the, “art-object to the attitude of the reader or of the spectator, for whom a work appears to be realist, if it reflects their ways of seeing and thinking reality, instead of directly reflecting reality itself” (Gelder & Baetens 2006, p.8). As Sunhee Jang describes Allan Sekula’s *Fish Story* (1995), uses the structure of the photobook, the juxtaposition of images and the different types of text, descriptive, captions and essays in order to alter the viewer’s reading, getting the viewer to take on an “active attitude” in how they re-contextualise the images and text (2019, p.354). Sunhee Jang goes on to argue that in a surface reading of *Fish Story* (1995),

> “Sekula’s critical realism is not found only in photographs or text but in the interaction between the two media. Dealing with a range of geographical locations, the photographs of *Fish Story* documents the surface of the world that we are living, while the text reveals that narratives that have been convoluted for a while beneath the surface” (Jang 2019, p.369).

By surface reading, that is to say that Sekula’s critical realism in *Fish Story* (1995) makes history perceptible and apprehensible through the surface, nothing is made absent or repressed, a surface is looked at instead of looked through, a surface reading asks us to accept or defer the text instead of using or mastering it (Best & Marcus 2009). It is therefore, as Sunhee Jang points how the structure of *Fish Story* (1995) in its sequencing of images and use of texts together that is able to give

us as viewer a critical reading, “to impel the viewer’s keen look to seek the history of global capitalist influences” (Jang 2019, p.370).

I would that a weird realism could be developed that builds upon the structural components of Sekula’s critical realism, using the photobook format, the deliberate sequencing of images combined with texts to impel from the viewer a critical reading, but instead of the descriptive texts, captions and essays that Sekula uses, weird realism could employ speculative fiction. The use of fiction in developing critical realism together with documentary photography is something that Inge Henneman had already argued for as potential method at the *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art. Around Allan Sekula’s Photography conference* in 2005. In describing Nick Hannes social documentary photography series on the figure of the immigrant, Inge Henneman argues that Hannes did not address the reality that he saw directly, but made a kind of theatre piece in which he is able to show us how absurd the relationships are between social subject of the immigrant and their environment (Gelder & Baetens, p.123, 2006). Following this example of Nick Hannes’ photography, Inge Henneman argues that “when it comes to people, which is the aim of critical realism for me, then you also need poetry, metaphors, fiction, imagination, and all kinds of frames” (Gelder & Baetens, p.123, 2006). A weird realist photobook could therefore use photography with fiction in order to show the perspective of different fictional characters, as to engage an active critical reading from the viewer.

In order to develop a weird realism that combines image and text, it is important to further articulate what exists as common ground between the weird in fiction and in photography. As China Miéville contends that H.P Lovecraft's weird fiction was responding to a period of crisis in capitalist modernity, the First World War, which created a traumatic rupture from the past,

> "In its interest in the *implacably alien* Outer Monstrosities, Old Ones and Great Cthulhu, rather than revenant ghosts, the Weird is in opposition to that category for thinking through the history-stained present that, after Derrida (1994), has become known as the "Hauntological". The Weird rather, impregnates the present with a bleak, unthinkable novum” (Miéville, 2009, p.513).

Building from China Miéville’s point, Mark Fisher argues that we should think about Lovecraft's work itself as being about trauma,

> "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" (Fisher 2016, p.21).

Susan Sontag argues that 1914 set off an "era of shock" within Europe and that during the first year of the Great War, "much that had been taken for granted came to seem fragile, even undefendable" (Sontag 2003, p.18). Three decades later during the Spanish Civil war, the photograph of the Republican solider by Robert Capa who is shot by an enemies bullet at the same moment the photograph itself is "shot", "is a shocking image, and that is the point. Conscripted as part of journalism, images were expected to arrest attention, startle, surprise", furthermore that the "hunt for more dramatic images" of this kind "drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value" (Sontag 2003, p.22). Olivier Morel contends that Susan Sontag's belief that images have no resistant potential against commodification, voyeurism, and the trivialisation of historical tragedy is based on the notion that at its very essence photography is, "a highly corrupt means always subjected to manipulation through either its pornographic violence, propaganda or, because of its gruesome character to dissimulation" (Morel 2018, p.4). Sontag's conflation of the "perversion of history" with something that exists within photography or from photographers themselves, misses what is actually shocking about the medium (Morel 2018, pp.4-5). As Walter Benjamin describes there is something inherent within photography itself which bypasses the conscious mind in order to reach the unconscious, revealing something about the structure of the unconscious itself,

> "No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by

human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious" (Benjamin 1931, p.510).

Olivier Morel argues that this searing effect of the photograph on its subject, relates to a moment in which reality itself disappears, before becoming memory or becoming constructed as history, therefore the photograph itself is "is a synonym of trauma, which would suggest there is an intrinsic "photographic" structure in any trauma" (Morel 2018, p.6). What is significant to Walter Benjamin therefore is not the making of an image, but that within every photograph there is a hole or a distortion; "This default is also where the future erupts" (Morel 2018, p.6). Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee's use of photography to capture the presence of "The Great Race" in *The Shadow Out of Time (1936)* I would argue speaks to this speculative aspect of photography, to grasp towards an encounter with the future, to the shock of the alien which exists in a moment that has yet to be registered in the mind, as Olivier Morel puts it, "This irruption of the future within the burn of the image is what shakes the viewer's body as the image's most intimate nest" (Morel 2018 p.15). If this photographic shock is not subsumed by a culture of consumption as Susan Sontag believes (Sontag 2003), then it can provide a critical tool for engaging alternative futures.

What is at stake for a weird realism, particularly one that takes influence and inspiration from H.P. Lovecraft's weird fiction, would be its ability to critically engage with a prospective future that comes from the lack of social imagination to an alternative to capitalism. In recent times the far right have been employing and co-opting Lovecraft's weird fiction, as Adam Riggio describes of the Dark Enlightenment neo reactionary figure Nick Land; Land see the impending end of humanity coming due to ecological collapse, and the destructive processes of capitalist industry over the past two centuries, Land believes that a transhumanist response to this collapse would, "change us so radically that we become Lovecraftian Others compared to our current nature" (Riggio 2016). Instead Nick Land's response to this imagined horrific future, "is the inauguration of a heavily armed tribal society operating on a brutal, racial basis" (Lindsay 2021, p.159). As Elizabeth Sandifer points out Nick Land chooses to circumvent alternative solutions, such as finding ways to try and survive longer as a human species, instead of believing only white nationalists are able capable of performing this task, or simply

recognising, “that capitalism’s inability to adequately consider ecological catastrophe renders it unfit for the purpose of bringing about a posthuman future” (Sandifer 2017, p.105).

The potential for a weird realist aesthetic which takes inspiration from H.P. Lovecraft’s fiction, is one that can act as counter to the neoreactionary movement, as Christian Wilken argues, “If the cosmos really is devoid of any hope or regard for the entire human race, everyone is on an equal footing, regardless of descent and origin” (Wilken 2025, p.298), this aligns with Patricia MacCormacks point that Lovecraft’s fiction can be used as a way to think otherness (MacCormack 2016, p.206). Furthermore, as Justin Millius identifies Lovecraft’s mythos remains open as a platform for developing a social critique (Millius 2015), so to build on Lovecraft’s ideas from a socially progressive perspective can enable a way of reclaiming their potentials for left.

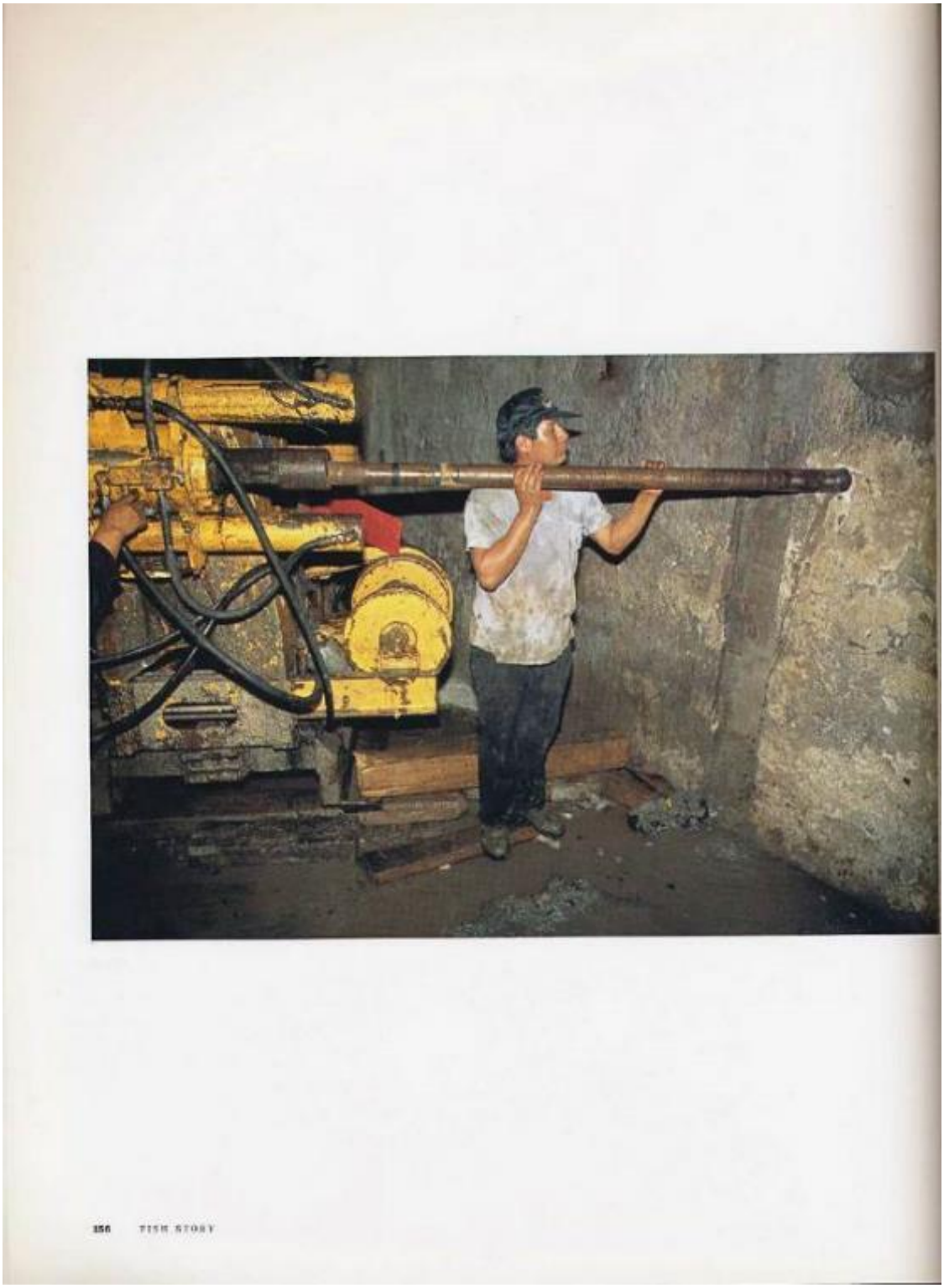


Figure 6. Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* ([1995] 2018, p.156*)*.

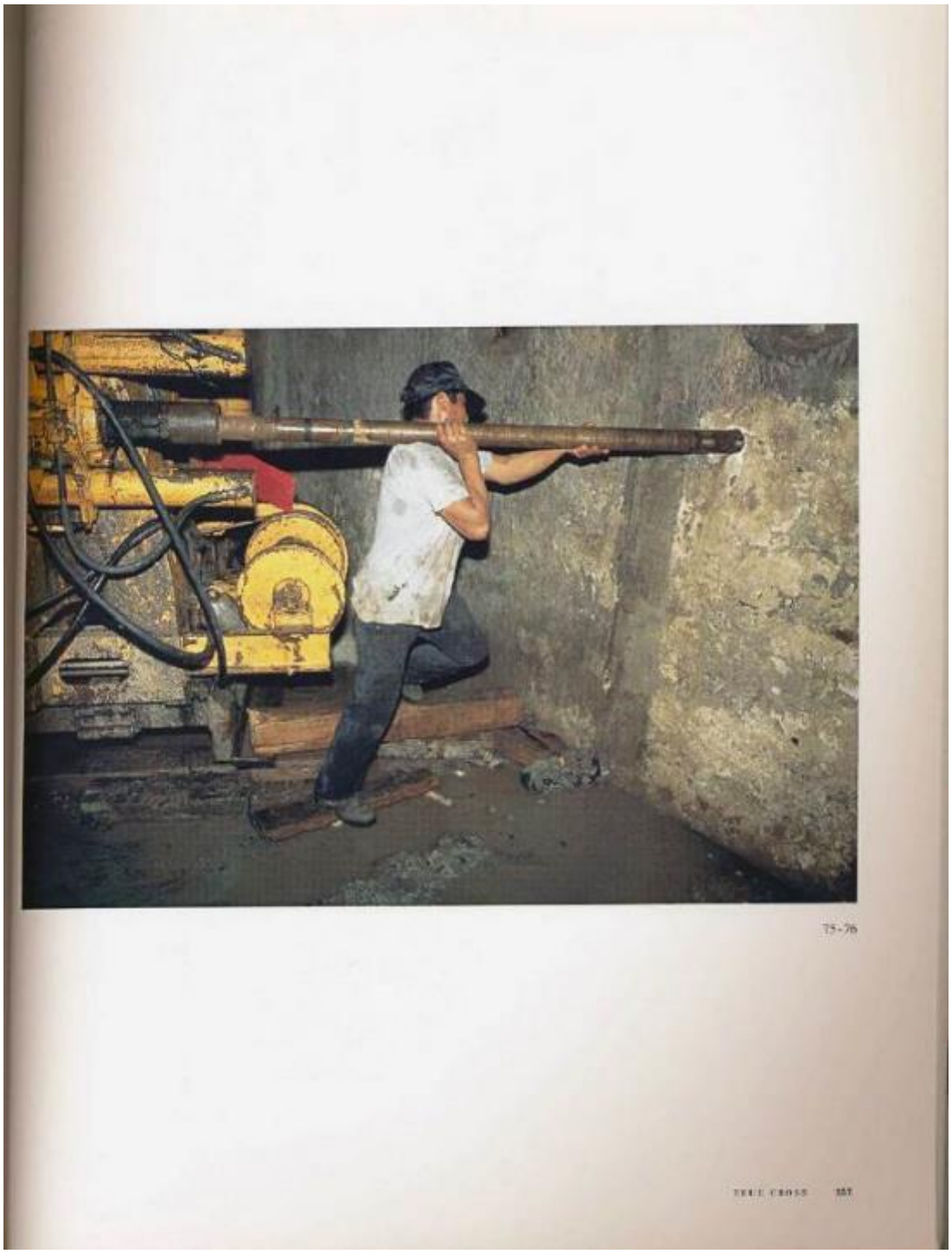


Figure 7. Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* ([1995] 2018, p.157).

"that unknown antarctic world of disordered time and alien natural law"; Known and Unknown Worlds in Teju Cole's *Fernweh* (2020)

As Teju Cole describes his photobook *Fernweh* (2020), took shape after being invited to take up a literary residency in Switzerland in 2014, this eventually morphed into a taking photographs of the country over a period of multiple years, describing the political undercurrent of the project, Cole says,

> "I think that was also significant for me – suddenly, as a travelling African, to grapple once again with this question of who has the right to make a subject of what? Switzerland becomes this place that very much represents high white privilege. So, we would have thought that that subject would be closed off to almost everyone. And so for me to determine that, not only is it not closed off to me, and not only is the material allegedly unpromising, but what happens if I stubbornly decide that that difficult space is going to be my years-long obsession?" (Cole 2020a).

The term "Fernweh" from which Cole's photobook takes its name, Cole describes as an antonym to the german word "heimweh" meaning "homesickness" whereas "Fernweh is a longing to be faraway away from home, a desire to be in faraway places" (Cole 2016, p.231). The form that *Fernweh* (2020) takes is a sequence of photographs taken of Switzerland, intermixed with fragmentary texts that have been adapted from Karl Baedeker's, *Switzerland: Handbook for Travelers* (1872) as a mediation on the concept of a "longed for estrangement and the contingent desire to be in an indeterminate faraway place" (Cran 2020, p.1).

In the afterward of *Fernweh* (2020), Teju Cole describes how to assist him in considering the choice of images to be used in the book, he reflected on a line from a poem that is often attributed to the French poet Paul Éluard, "There is another world, but it is in this one", as cultural theorist McKenzie Wark points out the provenance of this line has become confused particularly in the internet age, because it has been modified through détournement, as a found line that has been changed and used by others, so this line is actually a modification by Patrick White for an epigram to his novel *The Solid Mandala* (1966), the original line before modification was likely from a book which collected some Paul Éluard prose pieces, titled *Donner à voir, published by Gallimard in* 1939 (Wark 2014). As Teju Cole goes onto to describe Switzerland in the afterward to *Fernweh* (2020),

> "It is the familiar world of politics and history and human confusion, a world that contains well-hidden poverty and less well-hidden racism. But it is also a magical world, a world within a world, as calm as something enclosed in amber. Except amber is exactly what this isn't: this is alive and flickering with the traces of ongoing human labour. The light is clear, frank, bright and inexpressive, a paradoxically mysterious clarity" (Cole 2020c).

Teju Cole's focus on the world of the unknown that can be uncovered as hidden within the known, particularly as it concerns a history of hidden racism in Switzerland, is in contrast to H.P. Lovecraft, for whom the unknown is a source of horror **(**Lovecraft [1936] 2024). James Kneale argues that for Lovecraft,

> "The horrific can be useful in its own right: Lovecraft's thingless names and nameless things mark the limits of representation and imagination, including our geographical imaginations. Lovecraft's textual thresholds do not simply express his racist fears; they produce the narratives that dramatize his fears of contact and change" (Kneale 2006, p.120).

H.P. Lovecraft's need for fixity and the fear of social change relates directly with his concerns about race as he elaborates in a letter correspondence to a fan,

> "In my opinion the paramount things of existence are those mental & imaginative landmarks … which give to mankind the illusion of significance & direction in the cosmic drift. Race & civilization are more important, according to this point of view, than concrete political or economic status" (Lovecraft [1932] 1976).

The fear of the unknown lurking beyond the known, is exemplified in the narrative of H.P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936). The story follows a geologist, Dr. William Dyer, who leads the "Miskatonic University Expedition", also amongst the expedition group is Danforth, a young graduate student. The goal of the expedition is to secure specimens found in the Antarctic, through the course of the expedition a discovery is made of the fossils of a yet unrecognised ancient alien species, during the trip Dyer suffers from polar mirages featuring alien architecture that is unknown and unthinkable to humans. It is later discovered that the powerful aliens the "Old Ones" bred an alien slave race of "shoggoths" who constructed the ancient civilization of which Dyer's expedition finds traces and ruins of in fossils and architecture. The expedition group come to learn of

an ancient battle between the “Old Ones” and another alien race called the “Mi Go” which drove the “Old Ones” back to their original habitat in the Antarctic after they attempted to explore beyond the Earth into space. In losing war against the “Mi Go”, the “Old Ones” also lose their knowledge on how to leave Earth’s atmosphere. As the story ends Danforth is haunted by a polar mirage which is suggested to be something of the “Mi Go”, this alien horror is the “ultimate nameless thing beyond the mountains of madness” (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1111).

As Juan Luis Pérez de Luque argues, Lovecraft’s monsters can be read in terms of Slavoj Žižek’s articulation of the three modalities of the Lacanian Real (de Luque 2013), which as Žižek describes,

> “we have the “real Real” (the horrifying Thing, the primordial object, like Irma’s throat), the “symbolic Real” (the signifier reduced to a senseless formula, like the quantum physics formulae which can no longer be translated back into – or related to – the everyday experience of our life-world), AND the “imaginary Real” (the mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable “something” that introduces a self-division into an ordinary object, so that the sublime dimension shines through it)” (Žižek 2001, p.82)

Building upon this formulation of the Real, Juan Luis Pérez de Luque argues that the adjectives used to describe Lovecraft’s monsters are an example of “symbolic real” which in terms of lexical structure has to do with “irrepresentability of the Real” and that Lovecraft’s protagonists demonstrate this failure of representation when trying to describe the horror of what they are seeing (de Luque 2013 p.189, 192); The “ultimate nameless thing” in *At the Mountains of Madness (1936)* is therefore an example of the “symbolic real” (de Luque 2013 p.189, 192, Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.1111).

Lovecraft makes it clear that unknown worlds must remain undisturbed, less we risk destabilising the order and understanding of the known world, “Certain lingering influences in that unknown antarctic world of disordered time and alien natural law make it imperative that further exploration be discouraged” (Lovecraft [1936] 2024 p.1144). As Mitch Frye describes, the villain of Lovecraft’s horror is often the racial other, who has an unknowable yet clearly different genetic heritage to the fearful subject, this difference makes them “wholly alien” (Frye 2006, p.240).

Drawing on Teresa Goddu's notion that gothic fiction is informed by a historical context (Goddu 1997), Lovecraft scholar David Simmons argues that Lovecraft's fears of non-Western people and miscegenation may have been influenced by contemporary discourses which represented racial integration as a significant taboo (Simmons 2013, p.28). Furthermore that Lovecraft's fiction,

> "embodies an American tradition that has persisted into the twentieth century: One that seeks to configure alien, and unknowable, others as internal threats to national, political, and psychological stability" (Simmons 2013, p.28).

While in contrast as Gerry Allen contends, the form of the photobook itself can be employed as a way of interfacing between the two worlds of the known and the unknown (Allen 2014). Drawing on Russian artist El Lissitzky's series of abstract paintings *Prouns* made in the early 20th century Gerry Allen argues that,

> "Books offer imaginary or alternative worlds to escape into. But they can also participate in – and help to create – "real" worlds. They can function as an interface between thoughts and actions – a kind of "switching station", as El Lissitzky observed of his *Prouns*, between a two-dimensional, representational surface and that much more rich unpredictable, three-dimensional zone of people and situations, politics and relationships (Allen 2014 p.22-23, Bois 1988)

Teju Cole in an interview with the artist and curator Sunil Shah describes the political nature of his photography drawing attention to a photograph in *Fernweh* (2020) which shows a black woman on a boat against the Swiss landscape in the background (fig. 8),

> "the woman on the boat is, in that moment, as natural a part of the Swiss landscape as I am, which is to say: absolutely so. As you yourself put it, "It is nothing out of the ordinary"—though I think we both recognize the necessarily shifting and politically-charged nature of what the "ordinary" is" (Cole 2020b).

As Mark Sealy argues the medium of photography itself, "is dominated by the legacy of a colonial consciousness repressed in the present" (Sealy 2018, p.6), historically black subjects have been framed by white photographers such as Bruce Davidson during the 1960's, Eugenie Richards during the 1980's and Pieter Hugo during the 2000's (Sealy 2018, p.216). For both Teju Cole as

photographer and his subject to be "as natural a part of the Swiss landscape" (Cole 2020b), draws attention to what Paul Connerton calls "cultural amnesia" to the way in which "modern space is, as it were, space wiped clean (Connerton 2009, p.1, p.121) In other words to the way in which colonialism and its limits on consciousness have themselves been erased. Kathleen Hudson describes how within contemporary culture, adaptions of H.P. Lovecraft's work such as the animated TV show *South Park's* incorporation of the Cthulhu mythos, or the manufacture of elder god themed toys and Lovecraft themed videogames aimed at children and teenagers make use of a, "strategic erasure of Lovecraft's racist elements in adaptations, like selective ignorance of the broader impact of racism in contemporary society**"** (Hudson 2021, p.327). This strategic erasure, I would argue relays to what Paul Connerton describes as a; "A powerful source of contemporary cultural amnesia" which "has to do with the nature and the life history of the material objects with which people are customarily surrounded (Connerton 2009, p.122).

Teju Cole's photobook *Fernweh* 2020 could be thought of as aiming to regain a world that was lost due to the effects of colonialism, as Camille Barton argues,

> "Alternative worlds existed before the universalism of the West and the neoliberal logics that became bound with standard notions of time, which were imposed by the British to regulate the day around production" (Barton 2024, p.23).

Camille Barton goes on to speculate that, similar to how Mark Fisher's book *Capitalist Realism* (2009) argues that it is easier to imagine the end of the world then the end capitalism and that perhaps what is needed is a space to grieve the imagination that been stolen by colonialism? (Barton 2024, p.23). If as Gerry Allen observes the photobook offers a two-dimensional space which can connect to the more unpredictable three dimensional zone of politics (Allen 2014, pp.22-23), then Teju Cole's photobook *Fernweh* (2020) becomes a speculative site for imagining what a world not ruptured by the effects of colonialism may have been like.



Figure 8. Teju Cole, Fernweh (2020)

Chapter Three: Regaining The Lost Affect of the Present: Laura Ford's Punk Zine *Savage Messiah* (2019) as Critical Response to J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974)

Developing the understanding from the previous chapter, that the weird recognises gaps within capitalist ideology, this chapter focuses on how the artistic methods of détournement through xeroxed collages and the fictionalisation of personal experience in Laura Ford's punk zine *Savage Messiah* (2019), are able to recover lost potentials from the past. To aid in this discussion parallels are drawn with J.G. Ballard's weird fiction *Concrete Island* (1974). Ballard's exploration of the intensified condition of affectlessness under neoliberalism in a dystopic future, is compared and contrasted with Ford's artistic strategies for negation and resistance against capitalism in the present.

This discussion builds on issues about the temporal status of photography that were introduced in the previous chapter. By examining how Ford's work is considered in its relationship as a "temporal shifter", it develops ideas about photography's links to the past through its indexicality. Her fictionalised account of her experiences in London, can be regarded as a way to re-presence the past, when Acid House music and raves remapped places in the city of London and parts of England into sites of estrangement and possibility. This chapter goes on to elaborate how the weird arises at moments when the unresolved past contradictions of capitalist crises, such as wealth inequality at a time of social progress, can become thought anew, when affective ruptures are created through critical practice.

A World in Stasis

It is my contention that both J.G. Ballard's novel *Concrete Island* (1974), and Laura Ford's, punk zine *Savage Messiah* (2019) are designed to reflect a world robbed of affect that results from a neoliberal cultural stasis, and a feeling of alienation that is created during times of changes to the city of London, England. Whereas Ballard uses the method of "realism" in his weird fiction (Brigg 2007) in order to speculatively explore what the future of living in such a world would be like; Ford's zine instead responds with critical artistic methods designed to fight back, by reclaiming the lost potentials of the past. Since both *Concrete Island (1974)* and *Savage Messiah* deal with the theme of affectlessness, by analysing these works together my aim is to elaborate how artistic methods can be

used as a form a form of resistance. Both works can be thought of as “fictions of insurgency”, Ford’s adoption of the punk zine aesthetic and Ballard’s weird fiction are employed in a shared concern over the psychological impact of a culture of commodification as Robert Siegle elaborates,

> “In the mid-seventies, the time arrived for a fiction of insurgency an appropriately double genitive marking its passage beyond liberationist’s illusions of free space and unmediated time, but also its guerrilla campaign against the imminent transformation of American consciousness into a shopping mall” (Siegle 1989, p.2).

In Ballard’s *Concrete Island* (1974), the protagonist Robert Maitland, has his car fall of London’s Westway flyover which leaves him trapped in a small strip of urban space underneath, in a story that echoes *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Maitland find himself trapped on an island, isolated from civilisation. For Maitland the island becomes a space for the exteriorisation of his psyche, as exploring the island becomes a metaphor for exploring the mind (Ballard 1974). After falling off the Westway, Maitland is able to see the motorway from the concrete island, but he is unable to reach it, he is removed from the society that he used to be a part of, Ballard uses the metaphor of darkness in order to heighten this feeling of separation,

> "Maitland lay back in the darkness, his head resting against the soft slope of the embankment. His legs were hidden in the long grass. A hundred yards away, the three lanes of the feeder road were deserted. The route indicators towered above the unvarying yellow glow of the sodium lights. Involuntarily, as he thought about his wife's name, Maitland looked towards the west. Silhouetted against the evening corona of the city, the dark façades of the high-rise apartment blocks hung in the night air like rectangular planets." (Ballard [1974] 2008, p.23)

The “unvarying yellow glow of the sodium lights” metaphorically relates to the light of morning and to evolution. Whereas the line; “Silhouetted against the evening corona of the city, the dark façades of the high-rise apartment blocks hung in the night air like rectangular planets” as it references evening relates to decline, but in description of darkness also evokes night and therefore extinction (Carus 2002, p.93). That morning will inevitably turn to night, evolution to extinction, read metaphorically the technical progress of society with its artificial lights illuminating the motorway now out of reach for Maitland, stands in for his exclusion from societal progress. Yet that society is

dying as the facades of the high rise buildings themselves are darkened by the sky. As Jonathan Crary describes of the introduction of urban street lights in the late 19th century;

> "The illumination of the nighttime was a symbolic demonstration of what apologists for capitalism had promised throughout the nineteenth century: it would be the twin guarantee of security and increased possibilities for prosperity, supposedly improving the fabric of social existence for everyone" (Crary 2014, p.16)

Marooned on the concrete island, Maitland has been separated from the fabric of social life and his former career as an architect is now irrelevant. By placing the artificial sodium lights at an unreachable yet still visible distance, it as if they now stand in for the promise of capitalist modernity, one that is now unobtainable.

Drawing an analogue in *Savage Messiah* (2019), London for Ford, becomes a city that is profoundly alienating and estranging: "This decaying fabric, the unknowable terrain has become my biography, the euphoria then anguish, layers of memories colliding splintering and reconfiguring" (Ford 2019, p.ix).This feeling of melancholic loss, and the need to recover what has been lost is represented through the process of xeroxing, repeatedly printing and scanning images, losing visual detail and clarity with each new layer *Savage Messiah* (fig 1.). In psychological terms the death drive aims "to correlate that "not yet" ego with an "object" in order to establish both of them", the repetitions of the death drive seek to settle the ego, by continually returning towards it (Kristeva 1984, p.13). The use of still photographs in Ford's zine also associates with the need to recover what has been lost, in a narrative structure the death drive moves towards finality, towards an end, but that end that can also be a recovery of the past (Freud 1920, Brooks 1992, Mulvey 2006). The photograph *Savage Messiah* (fig 1) shows a London housing block in distance, in the foreground is brick wall that has graffiti on it, and some large clumps of weeds growing through the cracks in the concrete pavement. The xeroxing reflects both the loss of something irrevocable, that of the past, but also the need to try and recapture something of the lost potentials of that past. The process of xeroxing in *Savage Messiah* (fig 1.) has greyed out this scene, blown out the highlights of the sky and intensified the areas of shadow making turning them into inky black shapes. The feeling conveyed is that of a world with its sense of possibility robbed from it, its colours removed, a world of endless grey and

darkness. Similar to Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974), *Savage Messiah* (fig 1.) evokes a feeling of cold distance and separation.

As Mark Fisher describes the cultural stasis of the 21st century is reflected in how popular music become a slew of recognisable forms, unlike the music of the 1960's, 70's, and 80's, which through their differences acted a way of being able to track cultural time. This lack of innovative musical forms denies any "future shock" that might give a jolt to listeners (Fisher, 2014 p.7). Comparing the lack of new musical forms in the 21st century to the 20th century Fisher elaborates,

> "While 20th-century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn't feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn't feel as if the 21st century has started yet" (Fisher 2014, pp.7-8).

The significance of Laura Ford's adoption of punk aesthetics in *Savage Messiah* (2019) is that it acts as a refusal of the commodification of culture which exhausts the future of its latent possibilities, as Stacy Thompson argues the aesthetic of punk is still able to maintain its relevance into the 21st century since,

> "Punks' struggles establish an aesthetic sphere that is not saturated with the logic of the commodity market to the degree that the commercial music industry is, and punks keep alive—and keep collective—a desire to supplant the capitalist commodity market with a more socialized and collectivized system of production and exchange" (Thompson 2004, p.179).

Tracing the legacy of the punk aesthetic, Greil Marcus describes how it was fashion designer and punk band manager Malcolm McLaren, who inspired by the social revolution in May of 1968 in France created slogans for the revolution in London. McLaren was interested in creating a new aesthetic movement that could capitalise on social disruption, influenced by that of the situationist international before him. The Situationist International movement that had formed in 1950's, diagnosed boredom to be a symptom of leisure time, a false sense of freedom, as peoples' time and money was taken up by entertainment that ultimately left them feeling hollow, the profits from their leisure time reinvested and the cycle of boredom continued. Leisure time was backed by city planning and the welfare state, an abundance of time to waste on empty entertainment (Marcus 1989). Despite

McLaren's interest in profiteering from an aesthetic that responded to a mood of dissatisfaction with modern life, the aesthetic of punk that he helped to create and popularise took on a meaning outside these shallow intentions,

> "In a milieu shaped by the enervation of the pop scene, crushing youth unemployment, IRA terrorism spreading from Belfast to London, growing street violence between British neo-Nazis, colored English, socialists, and the police, punk became real culture" (Marcus, 1989 p.65).

Gabriel Zacarias argues how the Situationist International movement (SI) considered themselves to be within the lineage of the artistic avant-garde of Dada and the surrealists, SI sought not to innovate in their artistic methods, that is the appropriation of images and détournement, but instead to develop their practices through a Marxist theoretical framework; SI believes that art needed to put to work for revolutionary purposes and that art itself would allow for revolution to be re-thought. (2020). Détournement as a practice is defined as the 'reuse of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble" (Debord, 1959), would later be adopted from SI by punk, as an artistic method that could be employed as a form resistance against consumer culture,

> "Détournement achieved through montage, as Punk realised, was a way of manipulating "the very images that were supposed to keep you down and ignorant", revealing their pernicious and or absurd subtexts" (Savage 2012, p.148)

Ruth Adams argues that in punk music, resistance came through a kind of anarchic embodiment, as seen in the "Sex Pistols" 1977 song "God save the Queen", which acted as a contestation of jingoism enacted by the British subject. A subject who would only be interested in celebrating the past glories of world war two, the Jubilee celebrations of 1977, of serving the nation, and the Queen (Coulter 2019, pp.90-91). Jon Savage argues that the sentiment of "No Future" was a paradoxical expression of optimism about the possibility for a better alternative, which the punk movement more generally and "The Sex Pistols" specifically, hid behind nihilism, because of a fear of judgement for expressing their true feelings openly (Savage 2005).

As a punk zine, Laura Ford's *Savage Messiah* (2019) also sits within the broader history of zines. Teal Triggs argues that the history of zines, since their inception in the 1930s, have been vital to

help spread anti-capitalist information within sub-cultural networks (Triggs 2006 p.69). When analysing Ford's aesthetics, Cristina Pietropaolo places her firmly within this anti-capitalist zine tradition (2023, p 131). More specifically, the design approach that Ford takes is consistent with the codes and conventions of punk zines from the 1970's onwards. Triggs argues that punk zines made in the late 1970's such as *Ripped & Torn* (1976) and *Sniffin' Glue* (1976) were vital as a medium in which the political views of the punk movement could be expressed (2006, p.80-81). Stephen Duncombe goes further, arguing that zines help to fill the gap for what is missing in academic critiques and political discussions on the left, and that is a uniquely weird and highly charged form of resistance against capitalism (1997 p.6-8). As Teal Triggs' interview with Malcolm Garrett highlights, "punk really stood out, there was a sense of hostility on the street, and you felt a sense of energy which was aggressive in expression" (Garret 1999).

Michelle Liptrot through research into punk aesthetics argues that the DIY ethic in punk is counter-hegemonic, and that the contemporary employment of the DIY ethos is linked with autonomy, regaining control over your life, and being part of a collective of producers instead of consumers, whilst DIY zines, because they are not subject to censorship, allow for unmitigated creative power. Furthermore that DIY punk and zine production in particular act as a form of cultural resistance to a society built on capitalist consumption (Liptrot 2017).

Ford's zine *Savage Messiah* 2019 embraces this DIY ethic, creating an artistic work that aims to stand outside of sanctioned narratives of social progress which fail to account for working class people who have been displaced during times of gentrification in the city of London.

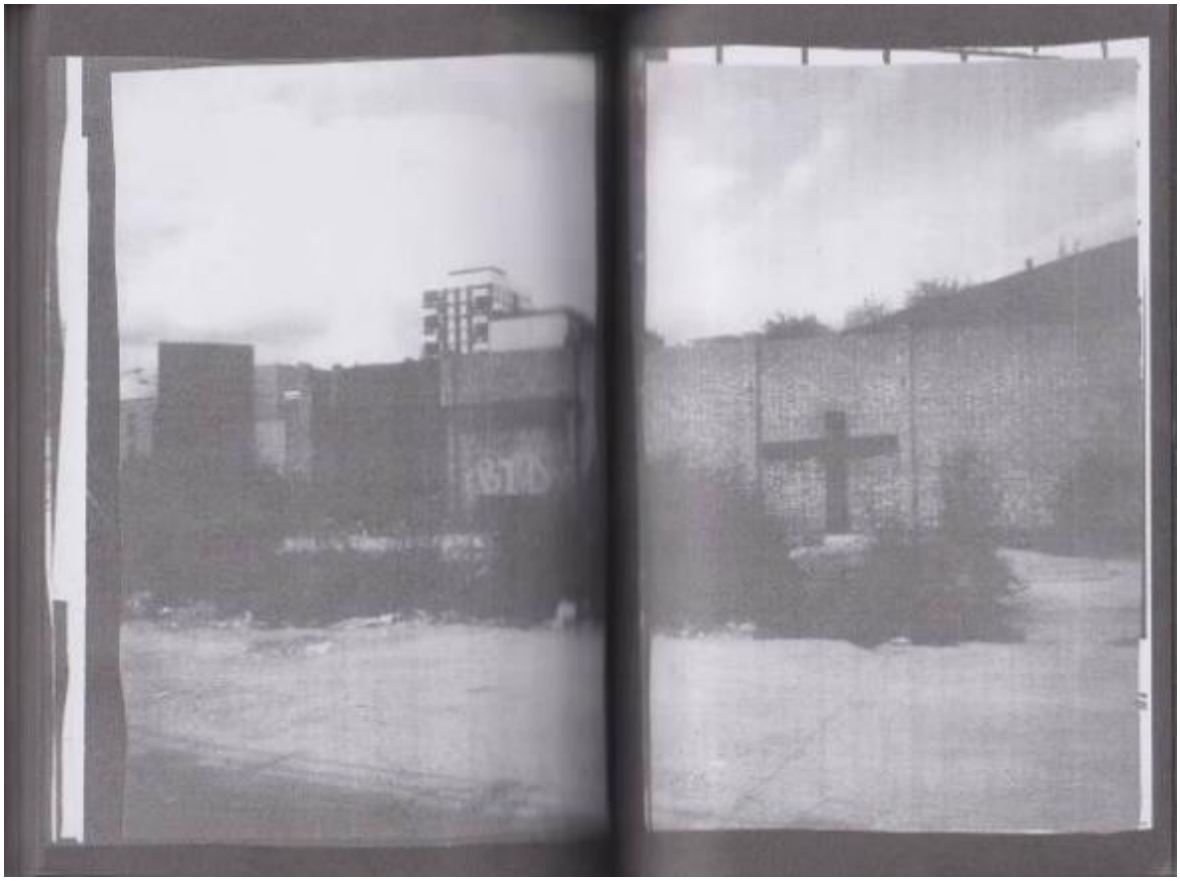


Figure 1. Laura Ford, *Savage Messiah* (2019, pp.180-181)

Reinventing the Present

In Ballard's, *Concrete Island (*1974), as Maitland walks through the terrain of the island he begins to experience his own past. Maitland's childhood memories of a local cinema, are evoked from the ruins he finds of an old cinema pay-box,

> "Around the ruin of a former pay-box, Maitland identified the ground-plan of a post-war cinema, a narrow single-storey flea-pit built from cement blocks and galvanized iron. Ten feet away, partly screened by a bank of nettles, steps ran down to a basement.
>
> "Looking at the shuttered pay-box, Maitland thought unclearly of his own childhood visits to the local cinema, with its endless programmes of vampire and horror movies. More and more, the island was becoming an exact model of his head. His movement across this forgotten terrain was a journey not merely through the island's past but through his own" (Ballard [1974] 2008, pp.69-70).

For the “pay-box” to become so evocative for Maitland, speaks of a particular kind of experience that Walter Benjamin defines as the “aura”, which comprises both a spatial and temporal dimension (Benjamin 1936). Diarmuid Costella elaborates Benjamin’s conception of aura, arguing that, “On the temporal axis it suggest a kind of reverie in which time expands, in which one is contemplatively immersed in – or absorbed by – the object of one’s perception (2005, p.173). Maitland’s absorption in his perception of the pay-box is so profound that it takes him back into own past, triggering childhood memories of the local cinema. The temporal aspect of this absorption, in its stretching of time, seems to remove Maitland’s sense of place on the island, he becomes lost in his own memories instead. That the “forgotten terrain” of the island has to be recuperated through Maitland’s childhood memory, also allegorises the lack of distinction between places, following the development of new urban forms after world war two, Ian Nairn refers to the effect of blurring categories of place; Town, country, wild, suburban and urban as making place lack unity. The lack of unity can make place feel anonymous, alien, and lacking any in any sense of individuality (Nairn 1957). Maitland’s retreat into childhood memories can be read as a response to the concrete island as an anonymous place, in order to make sense of it, he must externalise his own mental map.

Laura Ford’s *Savage Messiah* (2019) draws an analogue to *Concrete Island* (1974), as Ford walks under the Westway in London, memories of parties and raves from the past are evoked (fig 2). The narrative of *Savage Messiah* (2019) makes repeated references back to the places in London that have gone through the process of gentrification. To working class people who have been displaced from their former homes and various communal places they used to gather like pubs and clubs. These places which have either been either rebuilt for a new middle class community or abandoned. Laura Ford describes the melancholia of revisiting these places under the Westway, in an attempt to return to a London that has been lost,

> “That pub in Paddington was a catalyst, the beginning of an episode. A London I’d forgotten surging back. There were still places, like air pockets, where things survived.
>
> That abandoned cinema under the westway, I thought it was fiction, a Ballard story, but we’d found it again that night. Stepping through the threshold, the abandoned working mens club

> with its plywood hoardings, it's peeling black emulsion, into an amber capsule" (Ford 2019, p.479)

I would argue that the westway motorway which goes from Paddington in West London to North Kensington, which Laura Ford describes and shows in (fig 2) can be regarded as a "non-place", following Marc Augé's definition,

> "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé [1995] 2008, p.60).

As İsmail Serdar Altaç points out, J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974) uses the metaphor of the motorway, which separates Maitland from the society he previously inhabited to be the effect of the "non-place", severing social bonds and instead placing the emphasis on economic functionality at the expense of letting people be in communication with each other (Altaç 2024). Furthermore that in Ballard's *Concrete Island (*1974),

> "the historicity of the island and the antithetical characteristic of the surrounding environment stand for the spatial history of Western societies in which non-places obliterate the relational and historical places" (Altaç 2024, p.50)

Relaying back to Laura Ford's photograph of the working men's club in *Savage Messiah* (2019) (fig 2), read as example of "non-place" it acts as "a site ripe for projecting fears and hopes on to, for casting dreams and burying memories" (Highmore 2017, p.91). The abandonment of the working men's club, and its description as an "amber capsule" speaks to the changes in the city of London creating a sense of estrangement and isolation. London becomes an unrecognisable city, only pieces of it remain, reflected in the line, "There will still places, like air pockets, where things survived" (Ford 2019, p.479). Wendy Brown diagnoses the left as, "caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past whose spirit is ghost, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing" (1999, p.24). This resentful, defeatist, backward looking left, therefore risks betraying its own goals for political progress, through its failure to conceive of a better future, and ultimately to create an alternative to the miseries of the present. The working men's club *Savage Messiah* (fig 2.) as a ruin acts as a metaphor for the lost promise of modernity, to the promise

that there would be a better future to come (Huyssen 2006, p.8). The need to revisit these ruins is an attempt to relive the past, with the same intensity of the sensations in those original moments of experience. To a time when there was a feeling of euphoria, a fullness of possibility as to what the future could become (Hell & Schönle 2010, p.8).

Laura Ford's response to gentrification in *Savage Messiah* (2019), can be seen as one that engages with the anguish that is caused by the displacement of the working class, as represented by "punks" and other "undesirables", (Ford 2020, p.18). As Tricia Henry points out, the sub-cultural group of punk is synonymous with the avant-garde, both as forms of cultural resistance to established modes of art and to society (1984, p.30). Financial investment into this process of gentrification in the 1980's – mid 90's and onwards, began to require significant amounts of "corporate real estate capital" from multinational entities. The process of gentrification that took place up to the 1980's caused such an increase in the value of property in formerly working class areas in London, that only those investors with large amounts of existing capital could enter the market. Another barrier to taking advantage of this gentrification gold rush to smaller investors was that access to planning permission for large scale conversions from local government was also out of their reach. The gentrification process evolved into one that more suited organisations able to infuse huge amounts of capital and political influence into those neighbourhoods that remained. "By the mid-1990s, corporate real estate capital was in a much better position than individual investors to overcome these obstacles" (Hackworth 2002, p.820)

In western nations there was a shift from a welfare based economy that existed post-world war two, to a neoliberalist economy post-1970. The resulting changes means that class antagonisms between the middle class and the working class are now relegated to a "cultural arena" which is itself "mediated through institutions that include the state, the media, and the market" (Rosler 2011, p.26). Therefore the emergent middle class who had displaced those of the working class through gentrifying the city, could no longer be fought directly, and would have the state, media, and market on their side. Other visual clues for the displaced working class can be seen in *Savage Messiah* (2019) through repeated imagery of London's, in-between spaces, which are now home to debris, and the architectural ruins left behind of the old city. Allegorically these are the working classes who are

left behind, not part of the new economy that Tony Blair was trying to reshape London around (Colomb 2007, p.14)

As photograph, the abandoned club in *Savage Messiah* (fig 2.) is an object that is related only to the past which no longer exists. It is fiction that is needed in order to cross the gap between the indexing of the past into the presence of the spectator who witnesses the photograph (Mulvey 2006, pp.187-188). The function of "shifters" is expressed by linguist Roman Jackobson, arguing that,

> "Their essential characteristic is to possess a general meaning in the code that necessarily makes reference to the message in which they are use used. Since the message is part of the speech effect […] shifters are deictic" (Jackobson 1990. p.386)

The shifters in fictional text in *Savage Messiah* (fig 2.) help to bring the indexing of the past of the photograph, of the place of the "abandoned men's club" and "westway" into the presence of the spectator. Along with other shifters that bring forth the presence of the image as mentioned in the time of "April" and "that night" (Ford 2019, p.479). This sense of presence that the fictional text lends to the image, conveys to the spectator how for Ford, walking under the westway in London brings back these feelings of the past. This return to under the London westway, is made in order uncover, from inside, the affects that remain and reside in the urban places themselves. It is these hidden affects that are uncovered by performative walking. Hidden affects that are tied to the emotional experiences of those who have previously been there. Furthermore, performative walking creates metaphorical spaces in which the imagination can be brought to bear and projected back onto the physical spaces themselves, (Boonstra, Cutler-Broyles, & Rozzoni 2022). Ford references, this search for hidden affect in the urban terrain under the westway "There were still places, like air pockets, where things survived" (Ford 2019, p.479)

It is bodily knowledge, which provides a different way of connecting to space, to the past, and to our own selves. It through the process of walking that we may be able to escape the constraints of our own bodily experience of the world, to engage with feelings which do not exist within us (Ernesto 2018, p.42). In this way the performative walk is also Ford's attempt recover the intensity of feeling, the euphoria of the past. As Laura Ford's photography is created through the process of performative walking it requires moving through these spaces of change and ruin, but this process is as mental as it

is physical. Robert Tally,referencing Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the "nomad", argues that nomads in their movement through spaces, cross boundaries and engange in "conceptual demolition of the boundary lines themselves, and the state and 'state philosophy'" (2013, p.136, Deleuze, & Guattari, 1988). Developing on the concept of nomad, Robert Tally argues that,

> "Deleuze's nomads provide an apposite figure for a kind of resistance that is not exterior to relations of power, but exerts a force within their elaborate, mobile, and ever shifting web of spatial relations" (Tally 2013, p.137)

The processes of performative walking and fictionalisation are attempts to reconceptualise the urban places under the Westway, into something other than abandoned and gentrified spaces captured for the sake of capitalist profit.

In *Savage Messiah* (2019) (fig 2.) Laura Ford discusses parties held under the Westway in the past and how she can still find traces of them in the present,

> "There are messages, arabic glyphs scuttling across the concrete.
>
> Sometimes under the Westway, you still hear traces of those parties, Acid tracks pulsing in the concrete. We went deep into the foundations, concrete shells echoing with unearthly sound. You could only find them by following the reverberations, listening for the bass coming up from the ground. Those signals travelled the length of the Westway, from Paddington to North Pole Road" (Ford 2019, p.480).

To still be able to retrieve traces of music echoing and reverberating is as if their sound is able to metaphorically carry from the past, years into the future, if only you are able to attune yourself to it. If only you are to go searching for those traces, you will still be able to hear them. The ghostly presence of "those parties" and those "Acid tracks" (Ford 2019, p.480) being played is not from those who are already dead, it is about those who are still with us, to the people under that westway who have moved on but who still live (Piles 2005). This hauntological dimension, as Macleod points out, is within the process of the performative walk, when the acts of, "retracing street layouts, acknowledging events" occur (2022, p.132). This acknowledgement of events, this attempt to re-presence them through fictional metaphor, is a form of recovery against the melancholic loss of "those parties" (Ford 2019,

p.480). Parties which will not take place again under the westway that has become unrecognisable and estranging in the wider process of gentrification.

Casper Melville describes in the late 1980's rare groove music which been popular in London was waning and being overtaken by Acid House, a form that took electronic dance music from America, combined it with local talent in London and added in "modpeacockyness and punk negation" (Melville 2019, p.139). Terry Farley, DJ producer and co-founder of London *Boy's Own* Fanzine, a magazine that documented the youth music scene and the emergence of Acid House, recalls how house music broke down barriers between class, sexuality, and location, instead people where unified by an experience of a new underground culture, with its own forms of dance and music (Farley 2018). In 1989, there was growing anxiety as rave spread from inner city urban areas out into villages in the UK, Gerald Coke CBE, a local magistrate in Hampshire wrote a letter detailing the threat of rave, how it was an invasion of privacy, how its noise would keep the entire village awake, how it bought in undesirable people; within the letter there were also veiled threats of vigilante counter-action (Melville 2018, pp.152-153). In the 1990s, police would respond to the emergent threat of rave, by shutting down venues, and tearing down advertising flyers, against this a new communications network was formed, "flyers would not advertise addresses but give a telephone number to an automated message which would release venue details at an agreed time" (Melville 2018, p.154). The significance of the rave scene came from its communal reclamation of space and its negation of state imposed boundaries. As Mark Fisher argues,

> "What should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised. These spectres – the spectres of lost futures – reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world. Music culture was central to the projection of the futures which have been lost. The term music culture is crucial here, because it is the culture constellated around music (fashion, discourse, cover art) that has been as important as the music itself in conjuring seductively unfamiliar worlds" (Fisher 2014, p.27).

Mark Fisher's concept of "lost futures" is inspired by Marin Hägglund's figure of the spectre taken from Derrida's formulation of hauntology,

> "What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it, cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is no longer or not yet. And since time—the disjointure between past and future—is a condition even for the slightest moment, spectrality is at work in everything that happens. An identity or community can never escape the machinery of exclusion, can never fail to engender ghosts, since it must demarcate itself against a past that cannot be encompassed and a future that cannot be anticipated. Inversely, it will always be threatened by what it cannot integrate in itself—haunted by the negated, the neglected, and the unforeseeable (Hägglund 2008, p.82).

In the context of neoliberal capitalism, the past continues to haunt the present, causing a loop, a compulsion to repeat. Simultaneously, since a future cannot be anticipated, this paralyses us, curtailing the ability to think past the familiarity of the present, to develop new forms of music from which new cultures can form around. Paige Allen argues that music today has stagnated, specifically that music which attempts to sound futuristic now, sounds the same as music that tried to sound futuristic 30 years ago; For example Dua Lipa's album *Future Nostalgia* (2020), employs pastiche and recycles R&B and Disco sounds that existed before the artist was born, furthermore that this act of recycling and lack of innovation is representative of music in the 21st century (Allen 2023). As Merlin Coverley argues that in recent times,

> "just as nostalgia has grown exponentially, so have the objects of its longing grown curiously diminished, from motherland and a misremembered patriotism to kitsch and facial hair, as a sentiment which might have formerly be manifested itself through broader political and historical currents, now appears largely directed towards consumerism and the pop cultural artefacts of our recent past" (Coverley 2020, p.232).

Not only has the possibility of creating new artistic and related cultural forms shrunk or been rendered unthinkable, so too has the interval between their repetition, as Simon Reynolds argues in *Retromania* (2012) the first decade of the 2000's became a time of remakes, remasters and revivals; "As the 2000's proceeded, the interval between something happening its being revisited seemed to shrink insidiously" (Reynolds 2012, p.xii). What distinguishes our era from earlier eras which also had obsessions with the past, such as the Renaissance and the Gothic movements, is that our

obsession with what is retro is defined by a “fascination for fads, sounds and stars that occurred within living memory” (Reynolds 2011, pp. xiii-xiv), the focus onto which forms are to be repeated has itself been narrowed and temporally limited. Therefore, I would argue that the possibility of creating new counter-hegemonic forms has become exhausted under the limitations of neoliberal capitalism, the decision to return to punk as a form that has been historically counter-hegemonic, can be thought of as attempt at revitalising its unrealised potential, putting it to use within the 21st century.

Whilst newer photographic forms such as those created with digital technologies do of course exist, it can be argued that they lack an affective punch that comes from the weird. Mark fisher writing on his *k-punk* blog, argues that the use of special effects in Peter Jackson’s remake of the 1933 original version of *King Kong* with his 2005 version that,

> “In King Kong, FX have replaced history. Or rather, 'history' - now flattened out into a series of period signifiers - has itself become a kind of special effect. (Technology substitutes not only for history but for culture, too; in 2005, technological progress is the only faith that remains to us.) Even if the simulation were note-perfect accurate, History, in the Marxist sense of struggle, antagonism and contingency, would still be photoshopped out. The Depression is a stage-set, an inexplicable backdrop. This a museum without History, the Past as Experience, Theme Park” (Fisher 2006).

In relaying Frederic Jameson's concept of waning historical sense (Jameson 1991) to Peter Jackson’s *King Kong* 2005, Mark Fisher that contends that,

> "In his classic analysis, Jameson identified a waning of the historical sense as a defining characteristic of the postmodern. The ‘nostalgia mode’ is evident, not so much in films whose content is backward-looking, but whose form belongs to the past" (Fisher 2006).

Matt Colquhoun writing for his *Xenogothic* blog, argues that although Fisher’s point about backwards looking nostalgia is referring to genre tropes, it is also true of photography as a medium itself, that photography is both a postmodern medium and one that also prefigures postmodernity,

> “That is to say that I think the argument about the waning of photography’s historical sense (and by proxy, that of all the mediums it has given rise to) is not a recent development at all.

> Paradoxically, the history of photography itself shows us quite clearly that history became SFX at the moment of its creation" (Xenogothic 2020).

Tracing the history of the photographic medium Matt Colquhoun argues that the Lumière brothers film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1896) shocked audiences because they would have used been to seeing projections and technologically recorded images, "but it was the idea that these images could be retained, that the past could be recorded, that took some getting used to" (Xenogothic 2020). Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980) developed this understanding of photography, associating it with mourning through the unseen *Winter Garden Photograph* of Barthes' deceased mother, "his grief is manifest in the realisation that this is a moment past and not a projection. A camera lucida is what he wants a photograph is what he has" (Xenogothic 2020). Even with more recent technological developments in the photographic medium such as artificially constructed holographs used to bring back the images of dead actors in contemporary films, our reaction of grief and mourning to a past which cannot be returned too remains the same (Xenogothic 2020). Following on from Matt Colquhoun's analysis, I would argue that all photographic forms have a hauntological quality in how they retain the past into the present. In other words because this hauntological quality is baked into the very medium of photography itself, both older and newer forms of photography are not able to escape their haunting status.

As Padraig Henry points out in response to Matt Colquhoun, whilst the use of holography in recent times appears to be affectless, dehistoricised and "devoid of the uncanny, as well as one of the eerie or the weird", that it is too hasty to write off all photography and film as lacking affect (Henry 2020). In re-considering the ontology of the photographic image in the post-digital era, Peter Osborne make a distinction between the "*act of photographic capture*" that is taking a photograph using a digital camera and "the digital condition of the *production of an image* from a data file, the so-called 'digital image'", these two processes are separate as the data for an image does not have to come from a photograph (Osborne 2010, p.63), therefore;

> "It is the disjunction between these two processes that raises the possibility of the manipulation and transformation of 'photographic' data, subsequent to the taking of a picture, prior to its projection as an image – that is, computerized image processing. And it is this

> possibility that generates ontological concern – anxiety – about the 'no longer indexical' character of digital photographs" (Osbourne 2010, p.63)

Arguing against Peter Osbourne, Michael Schofield contends that the major changes in photography are to do with time and not indexicality, digitisation has allowed for the permanent access to all forms of media, which creates an illusion of permanence, conversely analogue objects are able to signify through their own decay, that of time passing and loss; We are seeing a cultural response to this in the resurrection of analogue camera movements such as Lomography and the use of faux-vintage filters on social media digital platforms like (Schofield 2018, p.185). For example as Michael Schofield points out, Barnaby Nutt's 2014 film photograph of a non-place, *a Westgate Car Park, Oxford*, made using a lomography camera acts as an example of using analogue media to regain an affecting aura (Schofield 2018 p.186). As Schofield elaborates,

> "The new "cult value" ascribed to obsolete media and technologies in these practises re-aurifies as much as their haunting material presence does, and in all these things the aura being searched for is largely imaginary, but no less affecting for it" (Schofield 2018, p.186).

I would further argue that the need to re-aurify the non-place through analogue forms of photographic mediation can to relayed to what Christian Wilken describes from Lovecraft's weird fiction as the "sting of humiliation" (Wilken 2025, p.298) That is,

> "Following Fisher's observations, that sting at least provides something by which opposition unifies us against our hauntological impermanence and can spark a dialectic response, a social sentiment that has been painfully absent in the first decades of the 21st century. Perhaps we gravitate toward weird fiction because it unifies us in this exact shared experience of ontological and ecological humiliation. In an era where opposition and collective movements have dwindled, this shared experience offers a rare spark of dialectical engagement" (Wilken 2025, p.298)

In their expression of loss through their own decay, analogue photographic forms provide the possibility of feeling this sting that can unify us, but similarly I would argue Laura Ford's employment of the punk zine aesthetic in *Savage Messiah* (2019) uses visual degradation introduced by the xerox scan not just to signify this loss but also to provide a feeling of this sting. Our own

hauntological impermanence is represented through the image degrading xeroxes of Ford's punk zine, as if to inflict the pain of this sting, the window of opportunity to reclaim the lost potentials of collective moments of the past are slipping away with the passing of time, the time to act and to re-engage these once felt potentials becomes ever more prescient now. The sting may provide pain in what has been lost, but it also acts to spur on a response, it provides a new way of engaging the past.

This potential for the sting and its importance to the socially progressive left, can be seen in opposition to the nostalgic nationalism of the political far right. As Michael Kenny argues, the far right are those who are alleged to be left behind by contemporary forms of economic and social development, which according to some accounts leads them to lend their support to nationalist and populist politics, evoking their resentment against immigrant and cultural minorities, "and to set themselves against the liberalism associated with political and economic elites" (Kenny 2017a, p.8). The populism of the contemporary right is about establishing a "temporal sovereignty" which "cannot be delegated or brushed aside, and that has propelled a given society on an irreversible path of preserving its unique properties in the face of continuous challenge" (Freeden 2017, p.4). Far Right wing populist movements and leaders themselves however typically exhibit a top-down elitism with party leaders such as Nigel Farage, former UKIP leader (UK Independence party) and more recently the Reform UK party, appropriating the voice of the people for whom they claim to be speaking for, whilst simultaneously having similar socio-economic backgrounds to those they claim to be against within the political establishment (Freeden 2017, pp.4-5).

During the Brexit referendum, the 2016 national vote for the UK to leave the European Union, the injunction to 'Take Back Control' although deliberately crafted to be a vague, was actually targeted toward regaining of national sovereignty, something that "could only be regained, it seemed when re-imagined though an older political language associated with empire, free trade and the English-speaking peoples" (Kenny 2017a, p.2, 2017b). This re-imagining of national sovereignty through the separation of the UK from other nations has historical echoes, for example Conservative MP Enoch Powell's, shifted from being "staunch imperialist" believing in the importance of the global reach of the British Empire, to believing the Commonwealth jeopardised the unity of allegiance

to the crown, following the withering away of the British Empire during the post second world war period (Kenny 2017b). Furthermore that,

> "Nostalgia for the 'real England' that predated the era of ethno-cultural diversity was baked into the normative structure of Powell's veneration of the English nation. His insistence upon the underlying durability and sense of tradition associated with a partially eclipsed Englishness stemmed from a conception of the Anglo-British nation which had its roots in ideas associated with the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Like his forebears, he believed that an English cultural background was available only to those from common ethnic stock who had been inculcated into the common habits and forms of understanding unique to this national tradition" (Kenny 2017a, p.11).

Whilst as Michael Kenny argues there has been a shift in how contemporary politicians talk about race and citizenship, racist discourses still find their way back into mainstream politics in Britain and other advanced democracies (Kenny 2017b). A parallel can be drawn to Enoch Powell's desire to return to the roots of Englishness in the 20th century by turning back to ideas from the Victorian and Edwardian eras to the more recent Dark Enlightenment movement in the 21st century. Since Dark Enlightenment members are nostalgic for the medieval West, when different ethnic races where geographically separated allowing for what they perceive to be the height of white civilisation (Kaufman 2017). Christian Wilken's notion of "the sting" (Wilken 2025), I would argue acts in contrast to these historical and contemporary forms of nostalgic nationalism. Whilst nostalgia nationalism relates to returning to a time of perceived national greatness by drawing upon ideas from earlier time periods in an effort to reimagine the past. The sting does not erase or de-recognise entire historical periods, it is about accepting painful losses of the past whilst also searching for historical moments that can be reclaimed for the socially progressive left.

That is not to say that punk itself as an aesthetic has not been subject to commodification, as Kathleen Hanna describes how the anti-capitalist expression of her band *Bikini Kill!* through mainstream media attention became co-opted and turned into just another marketable concept, unable to exist separately from a capitalist economy due to the inability to spread their message without the reach and financial investment of existing media and economic structures; The critical sentiment of

their album *Revolution Girl Style Now!* (1991) was softened up, and turned into "Girl Power", made use of by manufactured pop stars such as the *Spice Girls* (Hanna 2001). As Chris Lever argues dissent to the capitalist system itself becomes the source of commodification,

> "Rebellion inherently opposes conformity, yet as we have already noted, the idea that we live under a totalising system of imposed conformity is a myth. The system doesn't need conformity. The system will sell you anything it wants. The system will sell you individuality, the system will sell you rebellion." (Lever [2008] 2014).

In the commodification of rebellion, DIY practises also become co-opted, as seen in The example of Rupert Murdoch's acquisition of *Myspace*, a new form of corporate branding was developed, in which "influencers" where used to promote brands, mimicking the way in which music zine readers and creators recommended bands to each other or shared DIY resources (Lever [2008] 2014). The solution to this problem can be found in the process of détournement, by admitting that we are ourselves products located within the system itself, instead of trying to isolate, detach, or rebel from the system, the aim should be to turn the system which co-opts rebellion against itself, by seeking out solidarity and community (Lever [2008] 2014).

John Malkin also describes how punk's revolutionary songs and images are co-opted and used by the institutions that they are designed to revolt against,

> "Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello protested to the US government after discovering his music was being blasted to augment torture at Guantanamo Prison. And Joe Strummer cried when discovered "Rock the Casbah" had been written on US bombs being readied to drop on people in Iraq" (Malkin 2023, p.299).

Furthermore punk rock has been co-opted for use in TV commercials, films and videogames, advertising agencies take songs from punk bands like the *Ramones*, *Blondie* and *The Buzzcocks* in order to sell various branded consumer products such as, cars, videogame consoles, food and drink (Malkin 2023, pp.299-300). As Andy Gill of the punk band *Gang of Four* described their song "Naturals Not in it" was used by the videogame company Xbox in a global advert, re-appropriating the critical sentiment of the song influenced by the situationist movement with the lines "The problem of leisure /what do for pleasure", in response to this co-option, Andy Gill argues that;

"Commodification defines people in general, much more now than it did twenty-five years ago". (Gill p 306, 2023).

Clayson Benally of the band *Blackfire / Sihasin* argues that they want to have their voice heard as an Indigenous Navajo band by any means necessary, which may include having their voice be in a car commercial, arguing that at least this would give the band some kind of voice which they could use to be able to share views that may be contrary to other people's (Benally 2023, p.313). Sara Marcus author of *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (2010) describes why she does not put out her own work through DIY and non-commercial venues, arguing that something liberatory probably does not get through when a car commercial uses punk music, but in other cases, some part of liberatory message remains intact even when going through mainstream commercial networks (Marcus 2023, p.314).

As Ariella Azoullay points out photography operates like citizenship in that it is not something which can be owned by anyone (Azoullay [2008] 2021, p.71), Furthermore that;

> "Photography provides modern citizens with an instrument enabling them to develop and sustain civilian skills that are not entirely subordinate to governmental power and allows them to exercise partnership with others not under the control of this power or acting as the extension of this power's operations and goals. In other words, photography is one of the distinctive practises by means of which individuals can establish between themselves and power in order to observe its actions and to do not so as subjects" (Azoullay [2008] 2021, p.82).

Therefore photography is able to create a critical distance between individuals and the system of governmental power they are usually subordinate towards, whilst at the same time allowing a means of communal engagement instead of a becoming a form of co-optable rebellion. John Roberts goes further arguing that,

> "What capitalism dislikes about the photographic document is precisely this uncontrollable volatility of the photograph, in which even images that are supposedly secure within the very heart of the system spill out to be used and reframed by others" (Roberts 2014, p.10).

It is precisely this volatility of the photographic document which makes it vulnerable to the process of détournement, in the context of Laura Ford's *Savage Messiah* (2019) (fig 2.), the reference to "Acid tracks" (Ford 2019, p.480), therefore I would argue is not a melancholic or nostalgic reminiscence on the former community now disrupted by the proliferation of non-places in London. Instead it seeks to reframe this particular historical moment as one in which communal solidarity was temporarily reclaimed under neoliberal capitalism. The Acid House movement and raves of the late 1980's and early 90's represent glimpses into an "unfamiliar world" (Fisher 2014), Ford's zine *Savage Messiah* (2019) in attempting to restore this cultural moment of Acid House to the present, creates an affective rupture, as Steven Shaviro argues, the social tensions of the past act as residuals that can be summoned by less powerful groups,

> "if new social relations can only replace older ones before the conditions for the new have germinated, then the reverse is also true, no new relations can shrug off the past until older contradictions are fully resolved, rather than simply pushed momentarily aside and attempted to be forgotten. The "weird" is differentiable from other kinds of periodic alignments because it appears especially at times when these older crises become considered a new as the riddle for the present to solve before it can wholly transform and emancipate itself from the past" (Shaviro 2016, p.149).

The emergence of the weird shows a weakness in capitalist ideology, the "riddle" created by the contradictions of social progress, is not one that can be solved in the present by attempting to forget the displaced people of London. This draws heightened attention to the failures of existing social relations, and places emphasis on the significance of regaining the feeling of estrangement and possibility felt in those cultural moments of Acid House and rave.

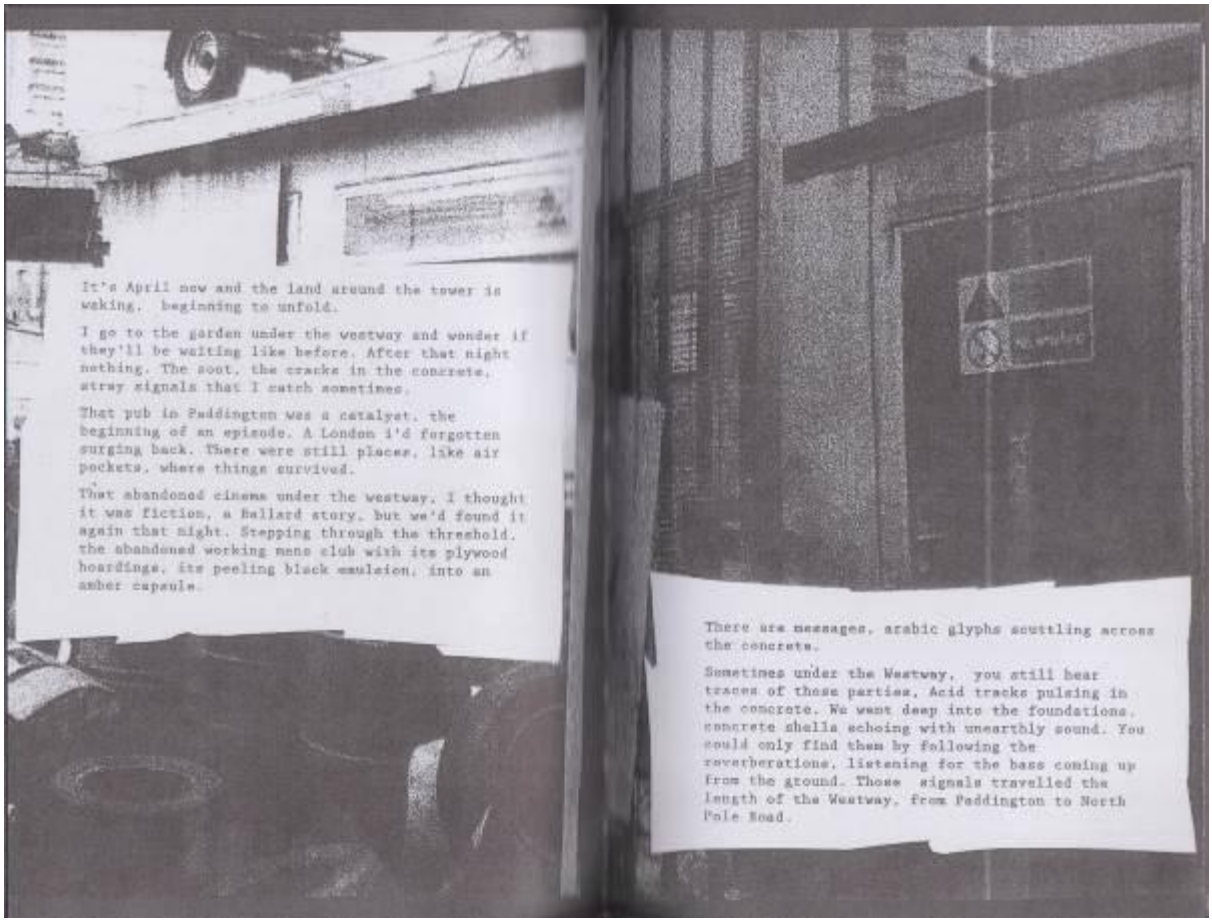


Figure 2. Laura Ford, *Savage Messiah* (2019, pp.479-480*)*

Affective Resurfacing

Laura Ford's fictionalised walk through the Westfield shopping centre in London describes an atmosphere created by the feeling of reclaiming something lost in the past. The Westfield shopping centre having been developed in 2008, as the largest shopping centre in Europe, causing a massive change to the city of London. Previously the "White City" in 1908, a Franco-British exhibition that is a large public playground for Londoners, before it was demolished in the 1990's. As Jonathan Glancey describes it the development of the of the Westfield shopping centre marks the "death of city architecture", as the playground of the past is turned into a site of mass consumption, turning Britain into a "nation of shopkeepers and avid shoppers" (Glancey 2008). Against this hollowed out former historical site, Ford narrates her experience,

> "As the terrain becomes more febrile, I think of him more, sense the restless searching. There are traces..little scratches in soft brick, chalk marks on concrete stanchions.
>
> They hadn't disappeared, not altogether. The markings are still visible if you know where to look.
>
> I retrace our steps. The cavernous Westfield with its echoey saccharine pop is the first place I go. Some of the crew had worked in here once, in kitchens and bars.
>
> The music coalesces, crystals permeating the space around me..I hear this song all the time. I recognise the voice, corralling all the forces, distilling it all into this moment. It gauges the terrain, a conduit into the collective psyche, the euphoria of the first days spring and the anguish residing beneath. The track echoes, reverberates through bright atria" (Ford 2019, p.475).

The shifter in *Savage Messiah* (fig 3.) "Westfield" fixes the photograph into a place, whereas the "first days spring" also reveals that the experience being talked about is actually in the past, the index of the photograph whilst itself always in the past is more recent then the experience conveyed in the fictional text. In this way as spectator we become aware that for Ford the Westfield shopping centre, evokes memories of the past of place, similar to how for Ballard's Maitland in *Concrete Island* (1974) the "ruin of a former pay-box" brings up childhood memories (Ballard 1974, [2008] p.69).

Germot Böhme in his discussion on architecture and it's bodily effects, argues that within Walter Benjamin notion of "aura" exists the concept of "atmospheres", and that ultimately "feelings are" […] "atmospheres that haunt people by bodily affecting them" (2017, p.17, p.70, Schmitz 1969, p.361). For Böhme therefore, atmospheres and auras provide a different of way of experiencing the world, an experience in which the body of the subject is affected by the felt presence of other bodies, their emotions, and mood (2017, p.1, p.18, 2013). For Laura Ford, the atmosphere she experiences walking through the Westfield shopping centre provokes a feeling of nervous excitement seen in the line "As the terrain becomes more febrile", this nervous excitement is the result of experiencing the presence of others as reflected in the line "It gauges the terrain, a conduit into the collective psyche" (Ford 2019, p.475). Avery Gordon argues that haunted spaces which hold atmosphere inside them are profoundly affective, and that it is the experience of being haunted which registers a different kind of

sensory knowledge that sight itself does not bring. That this other kind of knowledge the haunting imbues can be transformative, even revolutionary (Gordon 2008, pp.204-208). This profound affectivity of the haunting is reflected in the line "the euphoria of the first days spring and the anguish residing beneath" (Ford 2019, p.475). The invocation of both euphoria and anguish speaks to a lost potential, the old Westfield has been destroyed, replaced by a gigantic shopping centre. Yet in still being able to access those feelings of the old Westfield, there is the possibility of a return and a recovery of the euphoria of the past. This nervous excitement that lies within the terrain of Ford's London, stands in contrast to the Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974), as the estrangement that Maitland experiences leads him in to a state of complete disaffection, where lost potentials cannot be recovered even from within the past,

> "his need to be freed from his past, from his childhood, his wife and friends, with all their affections and demands, and to rove for ever within the empty city of his own mind" (Ballard [1974] 2008, pp.141-142).

Ford's performative walk instead works against this state of disaffection that emerges in the present, fuelled by the both "euphoria" and "anguish" of ghosts. The interpretation and representation of ghosts as Lisa Blackman argues requires a "mediated perception", that allows for experiences and histories to be linked together as to be able to speak to each other (Blackman 2015, p.41).

As Jay David Butler and Richard Grusin argue there is a difference between photographic "immediacy" and "hypermediacy", the feeling of immediacy is achieved by masking the photographic process from the viewer (Butler & Grusin 2000), as they go onto to define it,

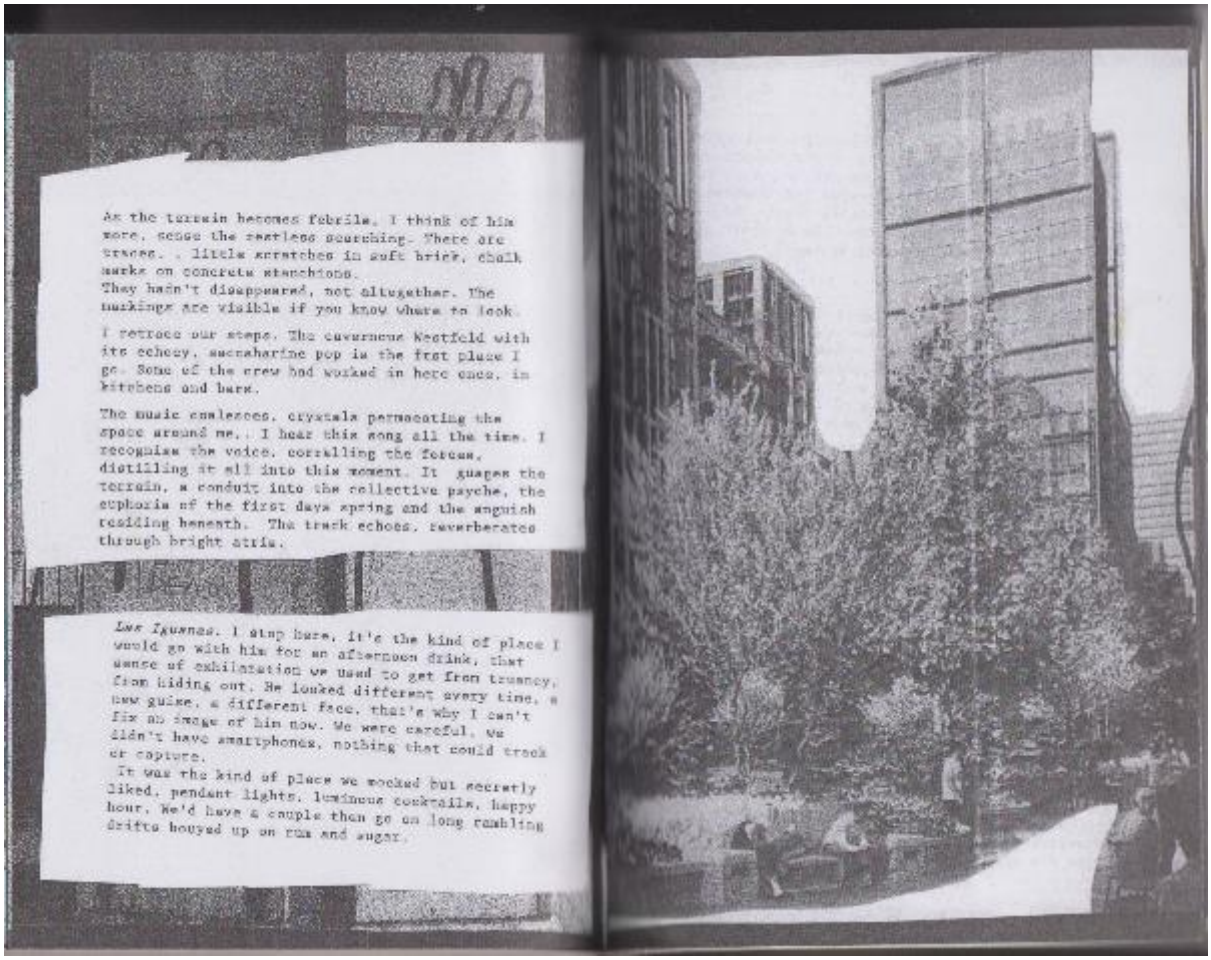
> "***Immediacy*** is our name for a family of beliefs and practices that express themselves differently at various times among various groups, and our quick survey cannot do justice to this variety. The common feature of all these forms is the belief in some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents. For those who believe in the immediacy of photography, from Talbot to Bazin to Barthes, the contact point is the light that is reflected from the objects on to the film. This light establishes an immediate relationship between the photograph and the object. (Butler & Grusin 2000, p.30)

Whilst both "immediacy" and "hypermediacy" require for there be direct relationship

between the object photographed and the photograph itself, the difference between these two forms is that “In every manifestation, hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium or media and (in sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious ways) reminds us of our desire for immediacy” (Butler & Grusin 2000, p.34). Relaying “immediacy” to ostention, Paul Manning argues that in weird fiction, “The weird is a space of ostension but also a liminal space that depends for its effects on the monster being somehow wholly other to the world in which it is encountered” (Manning 2018, p.165). Within a photographic context, for the effects of the weird to be felt, the photographic process itself must be hidden, yet paradoxically as Paul Manning goes on to argue,

> The aesthetics of the weird tale you might say, is basically all about ostention. And yet the fabrication of such images speaks instead to a hypermediacy that playfully absorbs this indexicality" (Manning 2018, p.176).

In Laura Ford’s *Savage Messiah* (2019) whilst the photograph (fig 3.) of the Westfield shopping centre itself can be thought of in terms of immediacy, it also does not mask it’s mediated process of détournement, through the use of xerox and the overlaying of typewritten text. In this regard (fig 3.) both captures the object of the shopping centre itself whilst also absorbing it. Instead of merely negating the shopping centre as a non-place, by absorbing it through hypermediation, this acts as method for using the “volatility of the photograph” (Roberts 2014, p.10) against itself, in order to reclaim it for a fractured community. The practices of speculative fiction, photography, xerox, and performative walking, therefore work in tandem in order to create this mediated perception of ghosts, the submerged histories and experiences of working class people in London is given an affective resurfacing.



As the terrain becomes febrile, I think of him more, sense the restless searching. There are traces. . little scratches in soft brick, chalk marks on concrete stanchions.
They hadn't disappeared, not altogether. The markings are visible if you know where to look.

I retrace our steps. The cavernous Westfield with its echoey, saccharine pop is the first place I go. Some of the crew had worked in here once, in kitchens and bars.

The music coalesces, crystals permeating the space around me. I hear this song all the time. I recognise the voice, corralling the forces, distilling it all into this moment. It gauges the terrain, a conduit into the collective psyche, the euphoria of the first days spring and the anguish residing beneath. The track echoes, reverberates through bright strip.

Los Iguanas. I step here, it's the kind of place I would go with him for an afternoon drink, that sense of exhilaration we used to get from truancy, from hiding out. He looked different every time, a new guise, a different face, that's why I can't fix an image of him now. We were careful. We didn't have smartphones, nothing that could track or capture.
It was the kind of place we mocked but secretly liked, pendant lights, luminous cocktails, happy hour. We'd have a couple then go on long rambling drifts buoyed up on rum and sugar.

Figure 3. Laura Ford, *Savage Messiah* (2019, pp.475-476)

Chapter Four: Fate and Ruin: The Art of the Future in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) Against the Limits of Thought in J.G. Ballard's *Millennium People* (2001)

Following on from the previous chapter, which argues that the weird arises when past moments of capitalist crises become thought anew, this chapter explores the weird as it pertains to fate, arguing how within W.G Sebald's photo novel, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), a point of divergence is found in which an alternative to a future of consumer society can be thought. To aid in this discussion, comparisons are drawn between Sebald and the weird fiction of J.G. Ballard's, *Millennium People* (2003), in which revolutionaries try to force the creation of the new through the use of violence and destruction to bring an end to the repetitions of hyper-commodification and capitalist distraction.

The discussion about photography's indexicality contained in the previous two chapters is now developed further, through an analysis of the relations between Sebald's speculative fiction and photography. By making the link through the use of metaphor, Sebald is able to evoke weirdness in a temporal tension created between past and future.

This chapter also develops the discussions in chapter two on the photographic fragment, by arguing that in Sebald's work, we can see the fragment as a metaphorical site of resistance. It has the capacity to think, not by existing as an inert object, but rather one that holds untapped potentials, which can be engaged with through the body.

J.G. Ballard's *Millennium People*, (2003) speculates how the city space of London, England enmeshes its subjects within a system of ideological complicity in a meaningless consumer society, one that robs its subjects of their creative capacity for transformation, of their ability to think outside of the confines of its structures (Colombino 2006). The novel follows the protagonist David Markham, a psychologist who acts a spy for the police. He is expected to report back on London protests and acts of violence that erupt across the city, that are led by the terrorist Richard Gould. Over the course of the novel, David Markham becomes embroiled in the ongoing revolution. Set against the backdrop of neoliberal England, *Millennium People* (2003) engages with consumer capitalism at the end of 20th Century. Allan Pred refers to this era of capitalism in Europe and North America as one of, "Hyper-commodification". Hyper-commodification permeates into all areas of everyday life. Needs and wants are generated not just through advertising, but through situated

practices of work, education, informal conversations, mass media and in the sensory observations made in the course of moving from site-to-site. This era of hyper-commodification coincides with economic decline and precarity, resulting in a state of rage (Braun & Castree, 1998).

I would argue that the significance of the role of violence and destruction in *Millennium People* (2003) is about trying to overcome the stasis of the city of London, by creating the new through force. As Alain Badiou identifies in the text by Bertolt Brecht's *The Proletariat Wasn't Born in a White Vest (1934),* the text is able to recognise the end of bourgeois culture, but in its place we do not have a new culture, causing Badiou to speculate that Brecht may only be articulating an old form of the new, one that is ancient because it is a form that is still a prisoner to destruction (Badiou 2007, p44). Badiou goes further arguing that in Brecht's text,

> "The essential thematic: the new can only come about as the seizure of ruin. Novelty will only take place in the element of a fully accomplished destruction. Brecht does not say that destruction by itself will engender the new. His dialectic is not simply Hegelian. Rather, he says that destruction is the terrain upon which novelty can seize the world. Note that this logic is not exactly that of a play of forces. We cannot predict that the new will carry the day by becoming stronger than the old. As regards the old culture, what is both required and conceivable as a space for possible novelty is not its weakening, but something like a rotting on the spot, a nourishing decomposition" (Badiou 2007, p.45).

In *Millennium People (2003)* David Markham becomes obsessed with the destruction of the city of London through revolutionary uprising, because he believes that it will help bring about a new culture, one that is limited by the ideologically trappings of consumer society,

> "The city was a vast and stationary carousel, forever boarded by millions of would-be passengers who took their seats, waited and then dismounted. I thought of the bomb cutting through another temple of enlightenment, silencing the endless murmur of cafeteria conversations. Despite myself, I felt a surge of excitement and complicity" (Ballard [2003] 2011, p.157).

Ballard's metaphor of the city as "a vast and stationary carousel" speaks to its lack of forward momentum, there is no progression, nothing unexpected will ever occur in this state. If anything is to

be changed it will need to come from force, tearing down the false "temple of enlightenment" as if consumerism is the new religion that keeps the masses subdued. If destruction is considered to be the necessary pre-condition for novelty then, for there to be a new London, it must rise from the ashes and rubble on the same spot that it was originally built.

Spaces Beyond the Map

Violence and destruction are not the only way in which Ballard's characters in *Millennial People* (2003) attempt to create the new. The new can be found through slips in the hidden spaces of the city. As cultural critic Fredric Jameson argues, historical stages of capital have created their own type of space, the current era being that of postmodernism and globalisation, where the subjects' experience of London, for example, is actually tied up with the colonial system of the British Empire as it relates to other parts of the world. The authenticity of daily experience therefore becomes dislocated from directly accessible space of London and becomes difficult to conceptualise for the subject, (Jameson, 1991). Simon Sellars points out how the need for new experiences in, *Millennium People* (2003) is borne out of a totalising consumer culture of mass tourism that leaves both the social space and the subject barren (2018). In *Millennium People* (2003), Stephen Dexter, a biker clergyman, describes in a conversation with David Markham the importance of mapping the self in order not to get lost,

> '"My faith? I'd say it was beaten out of me. Agnostics give too much weight to faith. It's not what you believe – who really knows? Far more important is the map you draw of yourself. My map was faulty, in all senses. A nasty accident derailed me for a while" (Ballard [2003], 2011, p.106).

Marxist literary theorist Raymond Williams highlights shifts in, "the structure of feeling" in literary works that direct the reader towards new kinds of experience. Experience is affectively conveyed through the text by stylistic choices of, "impulse, restraint and tone" (1977, p.132). Reading Stephen Baxter's dialogue through this affective framework, his experience is conveyed to the reader through a tonal shift. Between a sadness and a sense of loss in the line, "My faith? I'd say it was beaten out me", towards "Far more important is the map you draw of yourself", which flips to its

opposite, a feeling of optimism that comes with the construction of a new system of beliefs. Baxter's melancholia has been replaced with hope. This is reinforced in Baxter's next sentence, "My map was faulty, in all senses", conveying to the reader that Baxter has become aware that how he used to perceive the world was limited and that Baxter's own limited scope of perception is what has been holding him back, not that what the world itself could offer him was lacking (Ballard [2003], 2011, p.106).

Psychoanalysists Stephen Mitchell and Margaret Black, argue that in Freud's early mapping of the mind, different regions of the mind were in a state of psychic conflict with each other. Freud used topographic structures to spatially represent different areas of the mind. The unconscious containing unacceptable desires, feelings, ideas and that must be supressed. The preconscious contains acceptable desires, feelings and ideas that have the capability of rising to consciousness. Freud's topographical theory of the mind was later developed into a structural model, placing key elements of the self into the unconscious, which now contained id, ego and superego, as Mitchell and Black elaborate;

> "The structural model puts all the major components of the self in the unconscious, and the significant boundaries are between the id, ego, and superego. These are not topographical regions, but rather three very different kinds of agencies: The id is a "cauldron full of seething excitations" (Freud 1933, p.73) of raw, unstructured, impulsive energies; the ego is a collection of regulatory functions that keep the impulses of the id under control; the superego is a set of moral values and self-critical attitudes, largely organized around internalized parental imagoes" (Mitchell & Black 2016, p.20)

In other words, the id is the area of impulsive energies, the ego regulates the impulsive energies of the id and super ego is the area of moral values and self-criticism. In the shift between Freud's first phase that of the topographical model of the mind, to the second phase, that of the later structural model, the concept of boundaries was developed (Mitchell & Black 2016, pp.19-20),

> "The notion of defence against "incompatible ideas was put forward in the first phase, and greatly elaborated in the second. This development was intimately linked up with a view of the boundaries between the different systems as having the function of censorship as seen as

> operating to protect consciousness from the awareness of those instinctual wishes that, in direct or indirect form, would represent a threat if they were permitted surface expression. *This censoring takes place completely outside of consciousness*. (Dare et al, 1997, p.75).

It is during sleep that according to Freud the repression of the ego is reduced, this repression however is not removed completely, it appears in the form of the censorship in dreams, this is the reason for dream-distortion, which acts a way of disguising fulfilment in the form of a repressed wish (Freud 1925, pp.44-45), Freud argues for the use of the method of "free association" in order to interpret the patient's dreams, to get the patient to say whatever thoughts comes to their mind whilst not paying attention to the conscious direction of the thought; The use of this method however requires an "art of interpretation" and that the actual process of free association is not itself "free", it is under the influence of the psychoanalyst (Freud 1925, pp.40-41).

Lorna Collin in reflecting upon Deleuze and Guattari's theory and method of schizoanayltic practice, summarises how art making is used for the process of counter-actualisation, "whereby the tortured individual is encouraged to replay the event of their wounding in a way that provides catharsis and the counter-actualizing of pain" (Collin 2014, p.119). The case for art making as a form of therapy can be seen in the example of Guattari's employment of schizoanalysis in the treatment of the young schizophrenic patient Jean Baptiste, who had been in and out of psychiatric hospitals for ten years. Guattari decided to give Jean Baptiste a more independent life, suspending the possibility of a return to hospital, in a life now outside the hospital, Baptiste, made drawings as a way of interpreting his new daily his activities, and familial relationships (Collin 2014, pp.133-134). As Guattari argues, art therapy was a revelatory part of Jean Baptiste's treatment, which was able to surpass the limits of the therapy sessions he had with him,

> "In this new solitary assemblage, he began to create a mode of expression and develop it, creating a kind of cartography of his own universe, something that he couldn't develop in the family territory, nor, of course, in the territory of a psychiatric hospital, nor even in his therapeutic relation with me" (Guattari and Rolnick 2008, p.360).

The significance of making drawings as part of Baptiste's treatment is that it allowed him to overcome restrictions in the territories of family, psychiatric hospital, in order to develop new ways of expressing himself.

Manola Antonioli argues that making your own map begins the process of deterritorialisation, which is the subjects crossing and re-crossing of state boundaries to change their relationship with state boundaries to conceptually destroy them. This process of deterritorialisation is initiated by the material construction of a map, therefore it has the potential to transform the subject's unconscious map. Likening the mind to the map, the idea is that to draw out your map is a way of actively writing out your own dreams, negating censorship between the unconscious and the conscious. Taking an active role in negotiating boundaries in the mind allows for an alternative to free association which requires the subject's passivity. Free association requires the analysand to convey their dreams to a psychoanalyst who will interpret them and require the analysand to passively listen to the psychoanalyst's interpretation (Jellis, Gerlach, & Dewsbury 2019, Deleuze and Guattari 1988).

Ballard's idea of a, "map you draw yourself" (Ballard [2003] 2011, p.106) relates to this notion of taking an active role in psychic battle. To try and resolve the internal contestation between acceptable ideas within a civilised society overtaken by hyper-consumerism and tourism, and a supressed animalistic nature. To follow the map that is not of your creation, is to have your perception limited, to have another world remain closed and hidden from you, as Richard Gould later observes in the novel, "Tourists wandered past Broadcasting House, staring at maps that led nowhere" (Ballard [2003] 2011, p.157). British anthropologist Tim Ingold, argues that exploration of the environment is a felt bodily experience. To move through the environment is to perceive it. In contrast, the cartographic world of the map is characterised by a lack of movement, a stillness. The stillness of the world as experienced by the map, robs life of its unexpectedness. To follow its prescribed paths robs the world of its changes from one moment to the next. The unexpected encounters with other bodies, with changes in weather, with unplanned deviations to the journey, are aspects of life the-world-as-map denies.

The map's imaginary view, which represents the world from a bird's eye, is also one that denies the embodied experience of place (Ingold 2002). As Rebecca Solnit describes, walking can be

thought as a subversive act, a contestation of the privatised space of the city (2001). To "stare at maps" is to deny this subversive potential, to have one's attention re-directed to the map with its prescriptive routes that pull the body away from other possible movements, other possible experiences that can be attained. In *Millennium People* (2003) the map then becomes a metaphor for a totalising consumer society. To follow the map is to remain indoctrinated to the cultural values of that society and be blinded to alternatives. Later in the novel, Stephen Baxter, after committing a murder, manages to disappear into a space beyond the confines of the map.

> "The next day the police and bailiffs withdrew from Grosvenor Place. Outside the Cadogan Circle apartments a neighbour told me that Gould and Vera had driven away in the Citroën estate. I said nothing to Kay, but I assumed that Gould had seen Dexter shoot his victim. Too late to save the young woman, he followed the deranged clergyman to Fulham Palace, where Dexter had thrown the revolver into the Thames and disappeared into the infinite space of Greater London, a terrain beyond all maps" (Ballard, [2003] 2011, p.210).

As Peter Wood argues, the map reproduces the culture which creates it. The map replaces the need for the police and the military, as the map both conveys and exerts authority over people and territory (Wood, Fels, & Krygier, J 2010). The idea of a, "terrain beyond all maps" is a space in which the subject manages to escape the authority of the map and the culture which created it. Furthermore, the idea that Greater London has an "infinite space", suggests only part of reality has been overtaken by tourism and consumer culture, not its totality. Baxter has found a gap by which to escape the city of London, a way out that he has only been able to perceive by redrawing his own map, which is the "inner space" of his psyche (Ballard, 1962, [2003], 2011). As the reader, it is the sense of Baxter having done the impossible, of disappearing completely, that I would argue is what makes this sequence weird.

However the allegory of map in Ballard's *Millennium People* (2003), can be considered limited by appearing in the form of fiction, as Timmothy Morton argues, if we want to grasp the future, so that we gain access to different thought in the present, we must turn to art,

> "This future is unthinkable. Yet here we are, thinking it. Coexisting, we are thinking future coexistence. Predicting it and more: keeping the unpredictable one open. Yet such a future, the open future, has become taboo. Because it is real, yet beyond concept. Because it is weird. Art is thought from the future. Thought we cannot explicitly think at present. Thought we may not think or speak at all. If we want thought different from the present, then thought must veer toward art" (Morton 2016, p.1).

If this really is the limitation of fiction, its failure to deliver us alternate thought in the present, then we can turn to discussing the map as it represented visually through art in W.G. Sebald's photo novel, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995). In the novel, Sebald's unnamed narrator traverses the county of Suffolk, England, whilst engaging with the past as it persists through its remains. Upon reaching the coastal area of Shingle Street, in the village of Orford, Suffolk, Sebald's narrator describes the past of the area as housing, "Secret Weapons Research Establishments" during the cold war at the "Orfordness" site. The "Orfordness" site is one which Sebald's narrator describes, with an almost Lovecraftian fascination and horror, as being visible yet inaccessible, haunting yet having an, "extraterritorial quality about it" (Sebald [1995] 2020, p.233) This extraterritorial quality, is one of a deeply affecting weirdness, which similar to an encounter with Lovecraft's monsters, leaves visitors to Orfordness emotionally disturbed.

> "Even the beach fishermen, who were no strangers to solitude, had given up night-fishing out there after a few attempts, allegedly because it wasn't worth their while, but in reality because they couldn't stand the god-forsaken loneliness of that outpost in the middle of nowhere, and in some cases even became emotionally disturbed for some time" (Sebald, [1995] 2020, p.234).

The effect of coming into contact with Orfordness, mirrors Lovecraft's feeling of "outsideness" that comes with a, "monstrous intrusion on our familiar world by unknown things from the limitless abysses outside" (Lovecraft, ([1933] 2010). Whilst the encounter of this unknown outside comes with a horror reflective of Orfordness' past as part of a military site, its "extraterritorial quality" also places it outside of the history of cold war militarism. It is this quality that Sebald's narrator seeks to explore as the text describing Orford is interrupted by a map. On the map is an added

hand drawn label with an arrow labelling “Orfordness” *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) (fig 1). Jonathan Long points out how Sebald’s narrator has particular interest in the map because it excludes any direct reference to this former military site. Yet as the narrator describes his experience of “Orfordness” in the text, he adds to it by drawing onto the map. The labelling of “Orfordness” onto the map therefore becomes a metaphor for this kind of weird embodied experience of place (Long, 2007).

Baudrillard argues that instead of the map coming after the territory, the map actually has an active role in producing the territory. Geoff King builds on this idea in arguing that the drawing of a map has the power to define what is real by inclusion or exclusion. It then becomes specialised interest groups who use the power of the map in order to mask the distinction between map and territory. With the distinction blurred between map and territory, the map cloaks itself as a social construction by these special interest groups and appears to be an objective representation of reality. What remains missing from the map is what Geoff King refers to as, “local particularities” (King, 1996 & Baudrillard, 1983). In this map of Orford, the local particularity which is missing is referred to as, “Orfordness”. Since it is missing, Sebald’s narrator has to inscribe it onto the map himself, as it had been formerly denied as existing by its omission. Geographer, John Pickles argues that the power of the map comes through in the way that it over-codes the world. This over-coding requires socially reproduced understanding of map’s codes and map reading skills to interpret. As the map claims to neutrally represent the world as it is, to be invested in reading the codes of the map, allows us to know the world. The type of knowledge the map can give us however, is separate to what we can bodily experience through the senses. The map, as socially constructed by the state, represents the state’s future interests and therefore certain features of the map are deemed impermanent. They will not persist into the future and so are excluded from the map (Pickles, 2003). “Orfordness” represents a contestation to these cloaked interests, as Sebald’s narrator reminds us, “the Ministry of Defence had abandoned secret research at that site” (Sebald [1995] 2020, p.233). The persistence of abandoned secret military research sites after the end of the cold war does not serve the future interests of the state, as it would serve as a reminder of the horrors of war. To make these features of the map impermanent through erasure, is to assure that state control is retained over the future narrative of Orford.

Sebald's narrator, in placing his mark upon the map of Orford by writing "Orfordness" and underlining it, but more importantly, of drawing the arrow pointing to it, can be read as an attempt to represent the weird embodied experience that he had of this place. The map in its stillness and prescriptive paths denies this type of experience. Drawing as a tactile activity, as touch, displaces seeing, in the moment of moving the pencil across the page, through the connection between the pencil and the musculature of the fingers and the hand, to draw the arrow onto the map, is to gesture towards this felt bodily experience through the tactility of making the mark on the map with the pencil. Drawing as a tactile activity, as touch, displaces seeing (Elkins 1996). In the displacement of seeing by touch, the gesture of drawing the arrow on the map can be regarded as contestation to the over-coding of the world by the map, which attempts to erase undesirable parts of history as determined by the state.

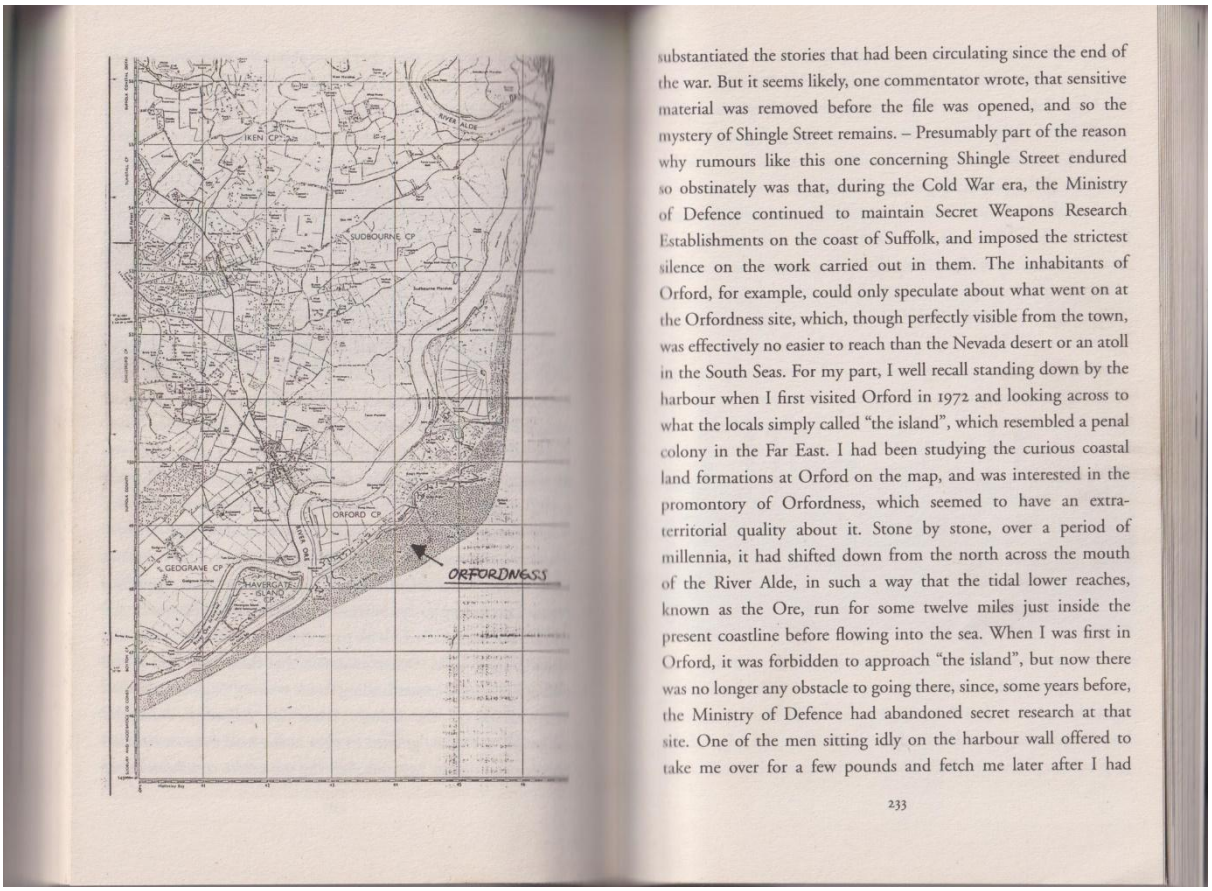


Figure 1. W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, ([1995] 2020, pp.232-233)

Weird Fragments

Just as Sebald uses the metaphor of map in order to convey weird experience, he also makes use of photography. With his exploration of "Orfordness", Sebald's narrator shows photographs of military installations that still reside on that land and pivots between seeing them as ruins left over from the past, whilst also acting metaphorically as the only human remains left on the land after a nuclear war. The remnants of these military buildings are, for the narrator, allegories of perceived future horrors of the cold war with its threat of global annihilation by nuclear weapons (fig. 2).

> "But the closer I came to these ruins, the more any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe" […] "Where and in what time I was truly was that day at Orfordness I cannot say, even as I write these words" (Sebald [1995] 2020, p.237).

As linguistic theorist Ana Laguna Martínez points out, Sebald uses photographs as metaphors, but they are metaphors which operate with fictional text and so connect with "another world". The insertion of non-fictional photographs into fictional text acts then as a way to make, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) appear as documentary (Martínez, 2021). As explicit metaphors, the photographs of military buildings shown in (fig 2.) allegorise for what Sebald's narrator imagines when traversing the space of, "these ruins" and "the remains of our civilization" (Sebald [1995] 2020, p.237).

Reading these photographs as explicit metaphors, they place something in front of our eyes that has not been seen before (Eco 1984). What has not been seen prior, is both the past and future of these military buildings as either the past ruins of history, or the future remains of a nuclear war. Sebald's photographs and text therefore form an, "open text" which allows the reader to discover new possibilities that were not recognised before, (Thellefsen & Sørensen 2017). In *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) *(*Fig. 2), those possibilities are temporal, Sebald's narrator is attempting to convey a sudden bubbling of affective intensity bought up through his traversal of "Orfordness", that allows for past and future temporal possibilities to be experienced from within the present. This is an experience of the weird. Sebald's narrator also uses the metaphor of spatial proximity to equate to time. The top photograph in Figure 2 shows military structures in the distance on the land they occupy and is referred to as, "prehistoric times" in the text. Whereas, the bottom photograph *The Rings of Saturn*

(1995) (fig 2.) references a more recent past, one marked by human presence and the horrors they bring. The bottom photograph is much closer to being directly bodily experienced by the narrator, as opposed to something far off in the distance. As the narrator describes the bottom photograph as, "these ruins" the photograph itself brings in to close view, the military buildings which are to be imagined as ruins, perhaps from the position of a more distant future (Sebald [1995] 2020, pp.236-237). The photographs *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) fig 2.) contain the pastness of their subject, the "that-has-been" of the military buildings and the land they occupy. The photograph could not exist without these referents.

Yet these photographs represent an imagined fictional world that the text describes, one wrought with melancholia, as the horrors of the past pervade the present and empty out future possibilities. This intensification of a melancholic affectivity that the photographs bring, while supposedly being transparent in their innocent capture of the referent, is the paradoxical nature of photography (Barthes [1980] 2020, Smith, 2014). The contradictions between the referential and affective nature of Sebald's photography can be further understood, using Brian Massumi's definition of affects as bodily felt experience that is not fully expressible in language (2022). Whilst Sebald's fictional text describe his weird experiences of time, it is the documentary objectivity of the photograph as explicit metaphor that Sebald wishes to leverage to authenticate these experiences. Just as the photographic referent captures a subject that really did exist, the photographs also act as a record for another world that Sebald has embodied, engaging the reader to step into that world (Dillbohner & Patt, 2007).

As the philosopher Vilém Flusser argues, the photograph as screen is not pure representation of the world. The photograph obscures as much as it tries to mirror (Flusser [1984] 2000, p.10). Flusser goes on to argue that to take photographs is not a passive recording of the world as it is, that instead,

> "photographers wish to produce states of things that have never existed before; they pursue these states, not out there in the world, since for them the world is only a pretext for the states of things that are to be produced" (Flusser [1984] 2000, p.37).

Sebald's photographs of "ruins" are not simply mirrors to the world as it is, but gestures towards what it can possibly become. Art critic Craig Owens surmises the importance for Walter Benjamin of ruins. They could be allegories for the impermanence and mutability of history. When Benjamin wrote about the Paris Arcades in the late 1920's to 1940, he saw them as something that once created a source of need within capitalist society but were later abandoned, falling into disrepair and dissolution. This allegorical impulse draws towards fragments from which history can be thought anew, re-constituted from texts, artworks, photographs etc. In *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) (fig 2.) the photograph read as fragment acts as both metaphor and metonym for these military buildings as they exist in that moment of taking the photograph and as ruins to be witnessed from the future. The photograph itself as a fragment captures the transitoriness of things. These military buildings, which stand in for the horrors of humanity, can be over-turned, alternative futures can become possible (Owens, 1984). For Sebald the transitoriness of the photograph as fragment, is not due to it capturing movement, his photographs *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) (fig 2.) are still. They are about the transitoriness of the weird. It having bubbled up in that particular moment in the journey, as he traversed "Orfordness". The photograph in its stillness and fixity acts as gesture. One that attempts to retain the weirdness of experience.

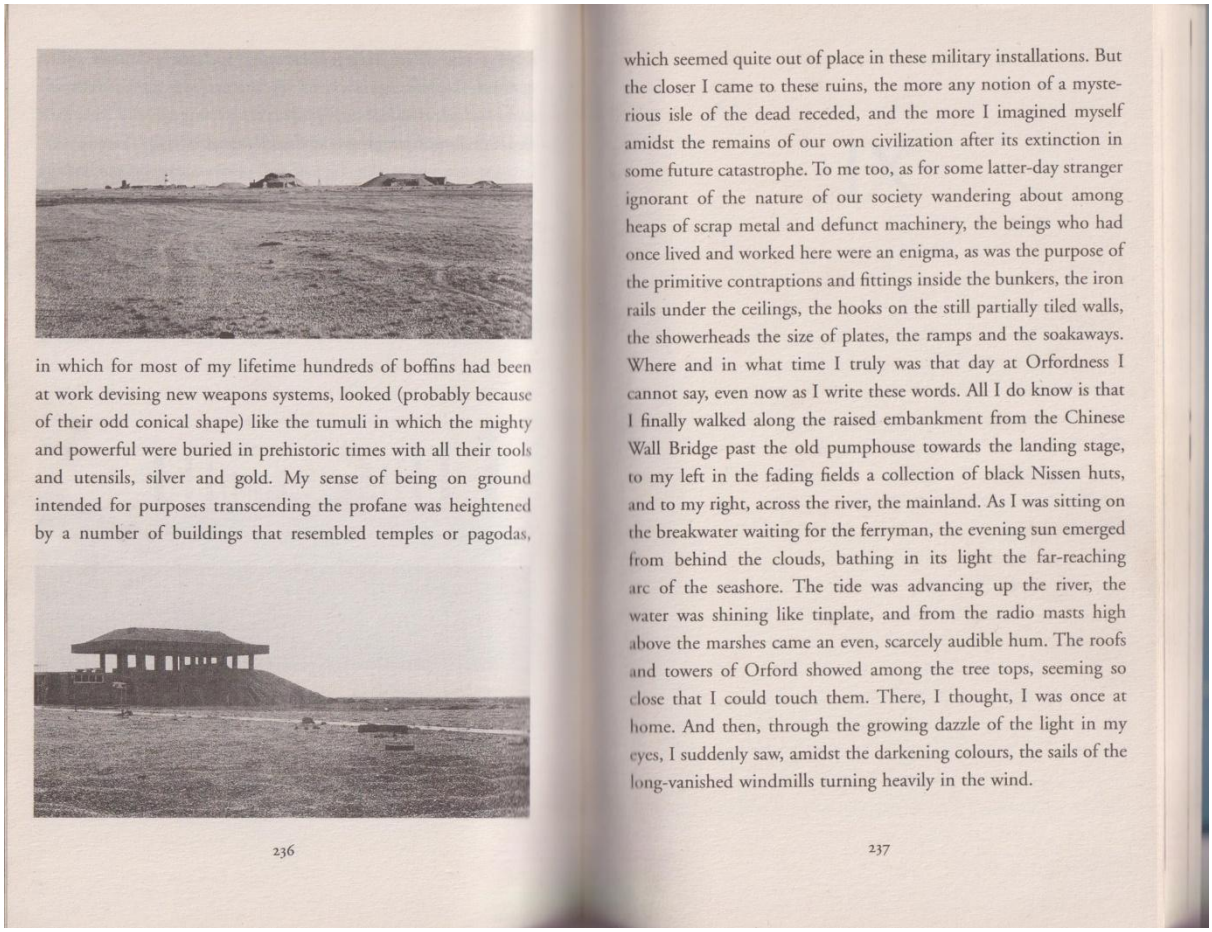
Hito Steyerl goes further, arguing that the potential of the photograph interpreted as fragment in its stillness, crystallises a moment of awareness, an intensification of affect;

> "They are understood as nodes, in which the tensions of a historical moment materialize in a flash of awareness or twist grotesquely into the commodity fetish. In this perspective, a thing is never just an object, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces are petrified. Things are never just inert objects, passive items, or lifeless shucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, all being" (Steyerl 2012, p.54).

Sebald's photographs, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) (fig 2.) read as fragments in this view, call upon their power in order to help imagine a hopeful, alternative future. This is set contradictorily, against Sebald's concern for the repetition of the horrors of history. The mediating potential of art as fragment, can be better understood by turning to Alain Badiou's discussion of the relationship between the real and semblance, through Brecht's method of theatrical "distancing",

> "What is this 'distancing' that Brecht turned into a maxim for the actor's performance? It is the display – within the play – of the gap between the play and the real. More profoundly, it is a technique that dismantles the intimate and necessary links joining the real to semblance, links resulting from the fact that semblance is the true situating principle of the real, that which localizes and renders visible the brutal effects of the real's contingency." (Badiou 2007, p.48).

As Badiou further elaborates, "the artistic gesture ultimately comes down to an intrusion into semblance – exposing, in its brute state, the gap of the real" (Badiou 2007, p50), in other words art becomes a way of expressing the gap between reality as it appears to us and the real. As summarised by weird fiction and horror writer Thomas Ligotti, horror for the Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zappfe, is the result of the evolution of consciousness which had surpassed humans' ability to suffer it. Zappfe believes there will not be a return to nature, so the evolution of consciousness guarantees a continual state of human suffering, in short, the root of all horror is consciousness. Zappfe proffered four strategies for how humans deal with this horror, one of which was distraction through multiple forms such as through media, their careers, and focusing on their place within society (Ligotti 2011, Zappfe & Tangenes 1933). If in Peter Zappfe's view, horror stems from the evolution of consciousness surpassing humans' ability to suffer it, the weird recognises something about the supressed contents of the unconscious (Zapffe, 1933). Usually supressed by an affectively deadening consumer society, some part of the unconscious remains untapped. It is part of the unconscious that Sebald considers metaphorically as, "extraterritorial" and just as Steyerl is aware of the possibility of fragments being re-claimed by consumer culture, so is Sebald.



in which for most of my lifetime hundreds of boffins had been at work devising new weapons systems, looked (probably because of their odd conical shape) like the tumuli in which the mighty and powerful were buried in prehistoric times with all their tools and utensils, silver and gold. My sense of being on ground intended for purposes transcending the profane was heightened by a number of buildings that resembled temples or pagodas,

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which seemed quite out of place in these military installations. But the closer I came to these ruins, the more any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe. To me too, as for some latter-day stranger ignorant of the nature of our society wandering about among heaps of scrap metal and defunct machinery, the beings who had once lived and worked here were an enigma, as was the purpose of the primitive contraptions and fittings inside the bunkers, the iron rails under the ceilings, the hooks on the still partially tiled walls, the showerheads the size of plates, the ramps and the soakaways. Where and in what time I truly was that day at Orfordness I cannot say, even now as I write these words. All I do know is that I finally walked along the raised embankment from the Chinese Wall Bridge past the old pumphouse towards the landing stage, to my left in the fading fields a collection of black Nissen huts, and to my right, across the river, the mainland. As I was sitting on the breakwater waiting for the ferryman, the evening sun emerged from behind the clouds, bathing in its light the far-reaching arc of the seashore. The tide was advancing up the river, the water was shining like tinplate, and from the radio masts high above the marshes came an even, scarcely audible hum. The roofs and towers of Orford showed among the tree tops, seeming so close that I could touch them. There, I thought, I was once at home. And then, through the growing dazzle of the light in my eyes, I suddenly saw, amidst the darkening colours, the sails of the long-vanished windmills turning heavily in the wind.

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Figure 2. W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* ([1995] 2020, pp.236-237)

In the narrator's traversal through the town of Southwold, in Suffolk, he describes having a weird experience as a man passes him in the doorway of an old, dilapidated building. Accompanying this text is a photograph of the building *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) (fig 3.).

> "As I was looking up at this façade, a man with a dark beard, wearing a suit jacket over a long tunic, slipped past me through a doorway, so close that our elbows touched. Through that doorway, for an unforgettable moment that seemed to exist outside time" (Sebald, [1995] 2020, p.81).

The significance of this moment that the narrator describes as existing outside of time is that it is a moment in which, through such an intense affectivity, the existing surroundings of that place seem to give way to some other world and this is brought on by bodily contact when the man in the jacket, bumps elbows with the narrator. This is a moment in which hyper-commodification does not

permeate into the unconscious through situated practices, or even through the sensory observations that the narrator makes, as he moves through the town of Southwold (Braun & Castree, 1998). This momentary feeling of existing outside time can be seen as effect of haunting,

> "Haunting can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space. It happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time" (Fisher 2012, p.19).

For time to be broken, can be thought of as an impossibility to move on, to be melancholically stuck repeating the past, the photograph *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) (fig 3) "as a visual metaphor the picture thinks the failure of modernity" (Kolenda 2014, p.99). Trading on its indexical status the "that-has been", of the photograph is always stuck in the past, (Barthes [1980] 2020]. Yet if the photograph is metaphorically connected to the text as an "unforgettable moment that seemed to exist outside time" (Sebald [1995] 2020, p.81), this breaking of time is more than an endless loop of repetitions. The photograph *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) (fig 3) acts as an explicit metaphor, verifying the authenticity of such a weird experience had by the narrator, by placing the building in that part of town in front of the readers' eyes (Eco 1984). Image and text functioning together as an "open text", the narrator is trying to get the reader to feel as though they could step into that world, to that very building shown in the photograph that the narrator describes through the text, as existing outside of time (Thellefsen & Sørensen 2017).

Sebald's narrator stands as an outsider to the local community of Suffolk, the text of *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) considered as a "minor literature" therefore, fulfils the role of announcing the possibility of a revolution to come (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This offers a paradox for the image-text, as the photograph thought of as standing in for the melancholia of failed modernity, also speaks to something else, for an untouched immanence, for that which has yet to come. For the photograph to be able to "think", and for this thinking to be metaphorically elaborated by the text speaks to its revolutionary potential as form of minor art as Simon O'Sullivan argues,

> "A minor art pushes up against the edges of representation; it bends it, forces it to the limits and often to a certain absurdity. This is not to say that a minor art cannot itself work through representation (or at least through fragments of representation). Indeed, affective ruptures –

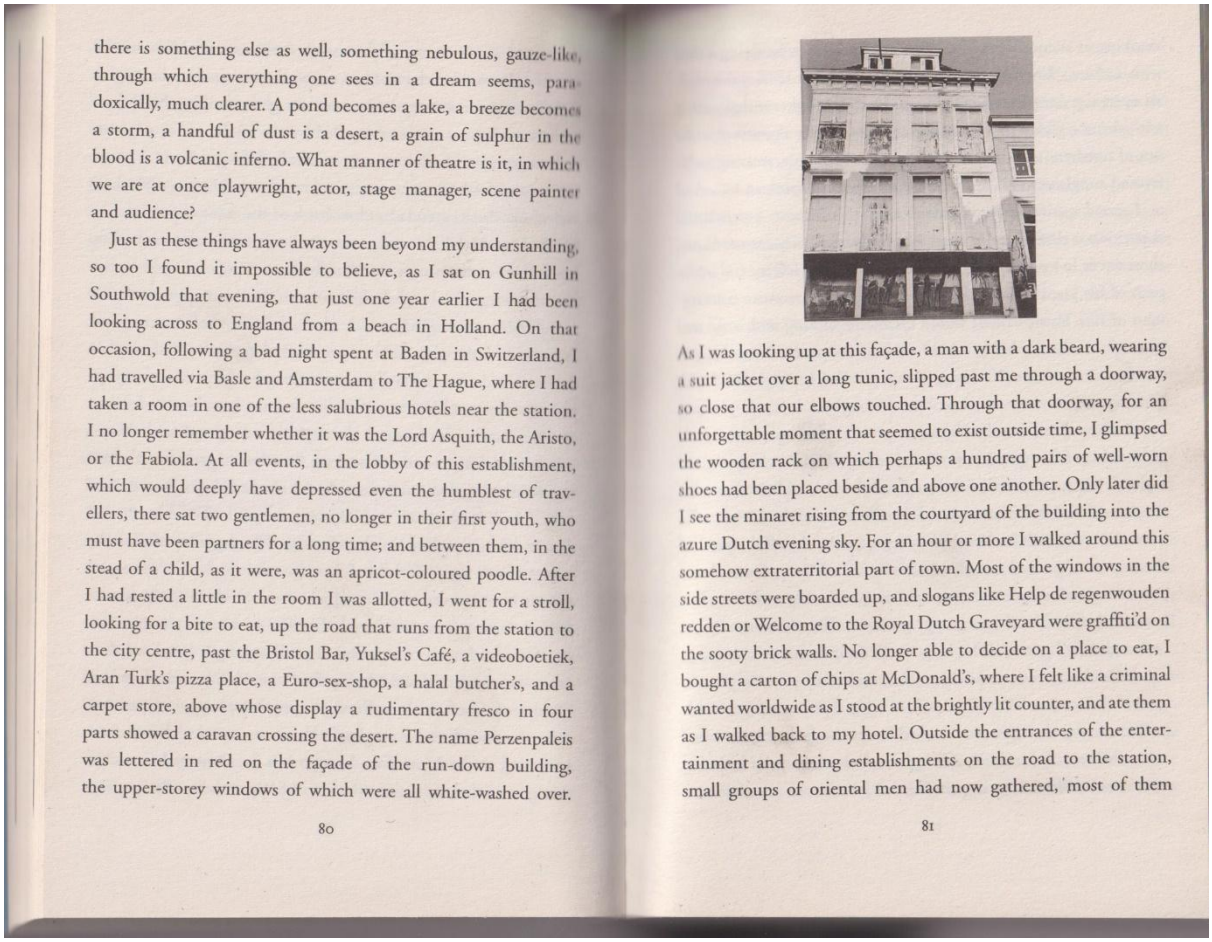
> which themselves utilise existing materials – are the fertile ground for new forms of representation, new signifying regimes. Deterritorialisation is always accompanied by reterritorialisation in this sense. A minor practice must then be understood as always in process, as always becoming – as generating new forms through a break with, but also a utilisation of, the old" (O'Sullivan 2005, p.73).

Brian Dillon posits that Sebald's photographs should be considered for their atmosphere instead of for what the image represents, they should also be regarded as the "narrator's abstracted mind, adrift in history" (Dillon, 2024). Yet in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) (fig 3) the photograph stands in for a mind that has stepped "outside time". For the photograph to represent the mind whether abstractly wandering through history, or somehow doing the impossible, stepping outside of time itself, pushes at the limits and beyond of what the image is able to represent, whilst still relying on the photograph as metaphor for what the text attempts to describe. For the picture itself "think" is not simply a passive response, Sebald's narrator's traversal around Suffolk is what leads to this unpredictable encounter with another body. As Ian Buchanan argues following Deleuze and Guattari's notion of mind body parallelism, "What happens to our body also happens to our mind, thus we can come to know our mind via our body, and our body through our mind." (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, Buchanan 1997, p.76). If the picture has the capacity to "think", it is somehow connected with the action of walking. Almost as if the narrator is trying to make something happen, whether he is conscious of this or not. For the picture to connect with something in the body, relates to its revolutionary speculative potential as fragment.

> "How about acknowledging that this image is not some ideological misconception, but a thing couched in affect and availability, a fetish made of crystals and electricity, animated by its own wishes and fears - a perfect embodiment of its own conditions of existence"[...] "It doesn't represent reality. It is a fragment of the real world. It is a thing just like any other - a thing like you and me" (Steyerl 2012, p.52)

Sebald's image-text relationship, can therefore be considered as speculative form, it aims to give voice to the fragment, as we connect to it, it shifts our perspective as to what we believe the world to be, and

to what it can become. The bubbling up of the weird, even in its transitoriness, manages to affect a moment of resistance.



there is something else as well, something nebulous, gauze-like, through which everything one sees in a dream seems, paradoxically, much clearer. A pond becomes a lake, a breeze becomes a storm, a handful of dust is a desert, a grain of sulphur in the blood is a volcanic inferno. What manner of theatre is it, in which we are at once playwright, actor, stage manager, scene painter and audience?

Just as these things have always been beyond my understanding, so too I found it impossible to believe, as I sat on Gunhill in Southwold that evening, that just one year earlier I had been looking across to England from a beach in Holland. On that occasion, following a bad night spent at Baden in Switzerland, I had travelled via Basle and Amsterdam to The Hague, where I had taken a room in one of the less salubrious hotels near the station. I no longer remember whether it was the Lord Asquith, the Aristo, or the Fabiola. At all events, in the lobby of this establishment, which would deeply have depressed even the humblest of travellers, there sat two gentlemen, no longer in their first youth, who must have been partners for a long time; and between them, in the stead of a child, as it were, was an apricot-coloured poodle. After I had rested a little in the room I was allotted, I went for a stroll, looking for a bite to eat, up the road that runs from the station to the city centre, past the Bristol Bar, Yuksel's Café, a videoboetiek, Aran Turk's pizza place, a Euro-sex-shop, a halal butcher's, and a carpet store, above whose display a rudimentary fresco in four parts showed a caravan crossing the desert. The name Perzenpaleis was lettered in red on the façade of the run-down building, the upper-storey windows of which were all white-washed over.

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As I was looking up at this façade, a man with a dark beard, wearing a suit jacket over a long tunic, slipped past me through a doorway, so close that our elbows touched. Through that doorway, for an unforgettable moment that seemed to exist outside time, I glimpsed the wooden rack on which perhaps a hundred pairs of well-worn shoes had been placed beside and above one another. Only later did I see the minaret rising from the courtyard of the building into the azure Dutch evening sky. For an hour or more I walked around this somehow extraterritorial part of town. Most of the windows in the side streets were boarded up, and slogans like Help de regenwouden redden or Welcome to the Royal Dutch Graveyard were graffiti'd on the sooty brick walls. No longer able to decide on a place to eat, I bought a carton of chips at McDonald's, where I felt like a criminal wanted worldwide as I stood at the brightly lit counter, and ate them as I walked back to my hotel. Outside the entrances of the entertainment and dining establishments on the road to the station, small groups of oriental men had now gathered, most of them

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Figure 3. W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, ([1995] 2020, pp.80-81)

A Twist in Fate

In Ballard's *Millennium People* (2003), it is the metaphor of consumer society as a prison for the mind that sparks the possibility of resistance, as the terrorist Richard Gould explains to David Markham, "'we're in soft-regime prison built by an earlier generation of inmates. Somehow we have to break free'" ([2003] 2011, p.138). By pointing out their perpetual imprisonment from generation to generation, this offers two Markham two choices, one of melancholic resignation to a future that cannot be changed, and one in which he attempts to escape from this prison. Yet there is a tension that prevents Markham from leaving the prison, as it exists as much in his mind as it does outside of it, this speaks to the concept "molding", to believe that are the who has been in charge of molding

yourself only to find the opposite is true, that capitalist society has been doing this to you (Morton 2016, p.134). However if consumer society is the cause of a mental imprisonment, there may be the opportunity for a twist in fate, as Morton argues, "The term weird can mean causal: the winding of the spool of fate", the weird is “a turn or twist or loop, a turn of events" (Morton 2016, p.5). Gould's solution of violence and destruction as a means by which to twist fate is one that falls prey to replicating an ancient form of the new, yet it points the possibility of overcoming the limits of thought that can determine one’s fate.

It is my contention that an analogue can be drawn between the relationship of thought and fate in Ballard’s *Millennium People* (2003) and Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1995). Kristina Ten recognises that nomadic fisherman in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), are able are detach themselves from their surroundings, which continue to change around them (Ten, 2011). In the novel, Sebald’s narrator describes how the fisherman camp out on a strand of beach near the sea,

> “They are strung out in a long line on the margin of the sea, at regular intervals. It is as if the last stragglers of some nomadic people had settled there, at the outermost limit of the earth, in expectation of the miracle longed for since time immemorial, the miracle which would justify all their erstwhile privations and wanderings. In reality, however, these men camping out under the heavens have not traversed faraway lands and deserts to reach this strand. Rather, they are from the immediate neighbourhood, and have long been in the habit of fishing there and gazing out to the sea as it changes before their eyes” (Sebald [1995] 2020, pp.51-52).

The “miracle” that the nomadic fisherman await, is not a source of melancholia, it still lies ahead, they do not see their fate as tied to the surroundings, even though “fishing no longer affords a living” (Sebald [1995] 2020, p.52-53), instead they continue to wander around the beach, lost in reverie. I would argue that it is because the fisherman decide to wander as nomads that they are to twist the spool of fate, at least as they conceptualise it in their own minds.

Returning to Kolenda’s description of the picture as a visual metaphor that has the capacity to “think” (Kolenda 2014 p.99), Sebald in showing at the beginning of the chapter in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), the strand of beach in which the nomadic fisherman wander *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) (fig 4.), I would argues acts as another example of photography as form of “minor art”

(O'Sulivan 2005, p.73). As a fragment the photograph (fig. 4) both represents a piece of the real world and an affective fragment (Steyerl 2012, p.52), showing the beach which Sebald's narrator describes in the text, whilst also standing in for the feeling of separation the fisherman have from their surroundings. This is the unexpected twist that the photograph as fragment is able to capture, the moment in which the possibility of the new can be felt. Something lies within the photograph as fragment, that captures this moment of disjunction, where the individual is able to re-conceptualise their own fate, no longer caught in the ideologically trappings of a consumer society that itself moves toward decline and possibly to an end.

Three or four miles south of Lowestoft the coastline curves gently into the land. From the footpath that runs along the grassy dunes and low cliffs one can see, at any time of the day or night and at any time of the year, as I have often found, all manner of tent-like shelters made of poles and cordage, sailcloth and oilskin, along the pebble beach. They are strung out in a long line on the margin of the sea, at regular intervals. It is as if the last stragglers of some nomadic people had settled there,



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Figure 4. W.G. Sebald, *"The Rings of Saturn"*, ([1995] 2020, p.51)

Chapter Five: Weird Fiction

In order to evoke the weird, I believe it is necessary not just too simply discuss it through theory but to also integrate it into my artistic practice, to write it as fiction. Mark Fisher summarises that the weird relates to, “a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience” (Fisher 2016, p.8): Going further he argues that fascination is an affect which is integral to the weird itself, both within weird fiction and for its readers of (Fisher 2016, p.16). In order to engage a sense of fascination with the outside, I have written a short story, *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (Dodd 2025), set in a speculative future, the fiction conveys challenges to ordinary perception and experience through dreams, anthropomorphism, and breaks with temporal linearity.

Patricia Leavy argues that fiction allows the reader to empathise with the characters of a story because of the unique access into the interiority of their minds that it grants us, in other words fiction is able to represent to the reader what the characters are thinking (Leavy 2020, p.60). Elizabeth de Freitas goes further describing how,

> “Fiction is uniquely suited to engender empathy on behalf of the reader. The many interpretive gaps that are frequently deliberately inserted in fictional narratives, and the specific reading practices associated with fiction, allow the reader to construct a highly intimate relationship with the imagined other” (Freitas 2003).

To create an intimate relationship between the characters of my fiction and the reader, my story is written from the first person perspective: with the aim being to empathetically invoke in the reader, the affect of fascination that my characters experience when they encounter the weird.

Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen (2025)

Prepare for the trip, no need for the suit for this one, it wouldn't be that kind of affair. This was just a matter of record, so protein cubes, outdoor clothes and the Mark Three qualifier that was what would be most needed. It was a case of contingent necessity, nothing more or less. The Higher Executive Officer had brought up Otis's name and Otis would just have to toe the line. He was half-way to a time-share, pre-fab, luxury-shack in the borderlands, available to him on opposite weekends, he wasn't about to blow that. Even though he and the rest of the Value Assessing department, would soon have the cushy end of year rankings to prepare. Everyone knew the workload for that would be minimal. Artificial intelligence dealt with the majority of what was needed.

Otis's epidermis decided it was time to speak up. Otis could already sense it wasn't happy before it began speaking.

"This wind chill won't be contained to the shore. It'll be inland as well. We can still turn back. Make this someone else's problem."

He had thought about this already. A last minute change to routine that nobody else wanted to be stuck with, cataloguing and all that entailed. And so close to the end of the financial year too. It would be a real rush job. Port city wasn't a pleasant excursion. Rumours are it hadn't been doing so well, even before the great ranking system had been in place, the start of speculating on its final remaining value would only make things worse. Those sorts of places usually had a bad feel about them, or at least that's what Otis had heard. But Otis had heard a lot of things.

Even though eyes were meant to be on the plas-screen at all times, checking the veracity of the artificial intelligence's work, there was always time for gossip and rumour in the office. It wasn't cold back in the office either. It would be better to ignore the epidermis for now and take the initial reading of the shoreline. Once he started, Otis thought, maybe it would be easier to tune himself out. He brought up the Mark Three unit that was velcroed onto his right hip. Its screen automatically unfurled from the top of the unit once he pointed it forwards. Otis depressed the trigger to make the initial reading from the shore. The device made some start-up beeps and whirrs, as it extracted its first set up of data points. He still had no idea how it actually worked. Its internal machinations were closed to him. It was an expensive device, he knew that, too expensive to be

attached to a drone, it needed an operative. He waited for it to stop making noise to signal it was finished, then replaced the device on his hip. The screen neatly folded into itself and returned to the shell of the device as it did so. Otis breathed out heavily and started moving up the beach. The sand started to harden as he got further away from the water's edge.

As Otis continued moving up the beach, his epidermis' warning seemed to be coming true. There was a chill in the air. Even as he put more distance between himself and the sea behind him, the clouds seemed to thicken. Otis was used to the constant illumination of plas-screens, and it felt darker than it was. At least the beach was surer of itself. The sand beneath his feet felt harder still as he moved towards the city's outskirts.

Discrete moments in time disappeared and the only truth of it was the continual walk forward. Bites of the journey had been taken out. Otis paused for a moment. He could see the shore was further behind him. Then his cardiovascular system decided to pipe up.

"Press on. We need to get into the city. Sooner is better".

Otis did continue. Although time dilation felt off in the journey, at least it was in his favour. He had no need to remember every footstep. It would just make the excursion feel longer anyway. As time continued to pass, Otis spotted a mass shifting. In the distance, ahead and slightly off to the right. As he got closer, Otis swore he could just make out a figure moving around.

"I said this should be someone else's job." The epidermis said.

He had felt a little unnerved to see movement and wasn't sure if he had imagined it. He didn't feel like greeting anyone. Not here. He could have started towards another spot, but he felt pulled to this one. The epidermis would have to put up with it. If it was going to complain the whole way, what use was it for Otis to listen? Even if it was right.

As Otis reached the first structure he could feel a slight incline. He moved from sand underfoot to something harder, concrete. He was on a raised platform. The structure was a shambles, ruined. There was a bottom level, partially intact and the suggestion there had been more above it, at some point. It was surrounded by mesh fences. Contained. Isolated.

"The air feels lost here. Perhaps this used to be something once? It's gone now." The cardiovascular system said.

As Otis considered this, he also pondered about where that movement could have come from. Perhaps he had just imagined it. Even so, it was time for another reading. Otis brought out the Mark Three again. Pointed it vaguely in the direction of the structure and its surrounding mesh container and depressed the trigger. Waiting for the unfurling, then the beeps and the whirrs, and the re-folding. Into the city. Otis thought, I have to keep going. Turning left and away from where he had come upon the structure, he moved towards a path. Brickwork surrounded the path, short walls, coated in a strange, illegible scrawling of some kind. The path itself was smoother, easier underfoot, except for the odd crack, splits into older layers of asphalt. Somewhere beneath these layers would have been earth. It was too deep for any of the cracks to reach, yet he still felt its presence.

He paused for a moment leaning on the nearby wall and rummaged through his left trouser pocket, pulled out a tube full of protein cubes. He unscrewed the cap and poured two into the palm of his left hand, then gobbled them up, like hungry chicken. Funnily enough, he hadn't checked the time once since he'd arrived. Usually he always knew what time to eat, when he was in the office, digital clocks were on every plas-screen, it was impossible to miss. The epidermis shouted something, breaking his chain of thought. "Ahead, look!"

Otis did look up, there was a figure moving towards him. This was bad timing. Otis had stopped and if he started walking now it would be obvious that he was avoiding this person. The figure came closer. It appeared to be a man in his fifties? If not or otherwise, he was older than Otis.

He was shambling like his shoes were worn down and his feet were hurting. Otis twisted the cap tightly onto his protein cube tube and put it back into his left pocket. Not looking down as he did so, eyes fixed ahead.

"He's headed our way. Say something...Hello maybe?" The cardiovascular system said.

"...hello." Said Otis.

Grunt. Replied the man.

The man glanced towards Otis as he passed. There was a stench of sweat coming off him. His brow was furrowed and his fleeting gaze registered Otis, but seemed to look through him rather than at him. As the man moved toward the direction that Otis had come from, Otis noticed the man was wearing a green jacket with leather arm patches. The cloth seemed to be frayed and distressed near the

neck. He had a pair of navy jeans on, of some older style and very dirty boots. Otis found it difficult to make out what brand they were, layers of earth, and sand caked them all the way up to the ankles, where they met with the jeans.

"He said something, an utterance of some kind?" The epidermis said.

"That seemed more like a vague grunt than an utterance." The cardiovascular system responded.

"That was definitely a grunt, albeit lacking in ardency." The ossicles said.

"Yes...well you know best I suppose." The epidermis responded.

What had that man been doing walking around, Otis wondered. Some kind of work? Was there even any left in Port City? He had seemed so aimless, yet didn't want to be interrupted, like he was looking for something maybe. Yes, perhaps he had lost something. Whatever the case, the way the man had ignored him like that had been to Otis's fortune, a near miss. Why should Otis have to feign interest, investment, he had something to do, he had already been tasked. There would be nothing in it for him.

Clouds overhead darkened further. Rain was coming. It must have been later than Otis thought, his desire to keep time had left him since arriving. The Mark Three was waterproof, but he didn't want to get wet. There was an old railway bridge up ahead. He could stand underneath it and it use it as shelter. For a while, until the rain passed. The raining began. It came down heavy and stung as it hit. The chill in the air made it worse. Otis didn't quite make it underneath the old railway bridge in time to avoid it, but was thankful to be so close to shelter as the rain continued coming down, heavy. Otis wiped the rainwater off his brow and the top of his head. His hair now partially slicked. He shook his hand off and wiped the remaining water from onto his trouser legs. It could have been worse, he could have been completely soaked.

Now, underneath the railway bridge, he could see that it was an ancient construction. It must have been at least 150 years old, with some rust on the iron. The brickwork looked sodden and sorry from years of wet weather.

"The sounds of passenger full trains still carries here. Many voices, once so loud, I can still hear them, but it is faint." The ossicles said.

There were never so many voices all at once in the office, Otis thought. Hushed tones passing gossip between moments away from the plas-screen. By now the gossip would probably be about Otis. How unfortunate to have to do an in-person value assessment, so close to the end of the financial year, and in Port city of all places.

The poor bastard probably wouldn't even be back for the scheduled office party. No clunking of zinc alloy cups brimming with bean paste ale. No bean paste ale for Otis. Rain continued coming down, but Otis could see that it was beginning to thin. The air around it was cooler, by the time it stopped he would probably be warm again.

"I'm going to have to work harder to stave off a cold now". The immune system said. It would be warm back in the office. They might even be unlocking the cabinet where they kept the decorations for the scheduled office party. An inventory of decorations would be underway soon after. Then a health and safety assessment of potential locations for each decoration. All these festive proceedings would be underway without Otis.

The rain abated further now. It was just a sprinkle. It would be over soon. They will forget me, Otis thought. At first, they will notice that I am gone, but eventually, they will forget I was ever there. A chair will be empty and they will wonder why. A chair will be empty and soon they won't know why. The rain stopped completely. A cold breeze could be felt in its place. Otis stood up. He brushed his right hand through his hair again. It had dried, and his hair had frizzed at the top and sides. He tried to flatten it, but with little success.

Otis left the underpass. The air was fresh but also carried a slight stench. The odd smell of the inland. An old sports court was up on the right, the chain-link fences that surrounded it were rusting. Not safe to touch, Otis thought, you would probably get tetanus if you did. The grass inside was artificial so it seemed to be alive and fresh when everything around it was decaying.

The cloth on the nets had frayed in places and had been left slack. The winding mechanism would no doubt be stiff in any case. Otis got out his Mark Three and took a reading. They will forget I was ever there, he thought.

Otis continued ahead. Large tower blocks were around him on both sides. Panes of glass missing, old windows boarded. Scrawlings all over the base of the structures. Though he found these

scrawlings everywhere, he still couldn't make out what they meant. Otis took another reading, his pace quickened. Passing by more tower blocks, more boarded up buildings, taking more readings.

"Slow down you are stressing me too much". The immune system said.

He continued, walking down more streets, taking more readings, now barely acknowledging his surroundings. I will be completely forgotten, he thought.

"Otis, listen to the immune system. We won't be finished today anyway". The epidermis said. He did not stop. His surroundings became more immaterial. He continued as if automatically. Otis thought, it'll be like I was never there. Another reading, then another. He was learning to drown out the whirrs, and beeps of the machine. He had always hated waiting for it to work each time, now he could think about it less and less. Rather than replacing it onto his hip each time, he left it out in his hand. Its heaviness be damned. He could just keep going, no pausing, no waiting. He would work at the pace he wanted and for a while he did.

"Do not be so hasty Otis. We need to recover". The immune system said.

"Otis we can't keep up this pace". The epidermis said.

"I have to agree with these two. Otis you are taxing me too much". The cardiovascular system said.

Otis continued. Ignoring everything, focusing on working the way he wanted. His immune system was not happy with this decision. It fizzed and bought up a sudden heat inside his body, shocking him momentarily. Otis stopped.

The sun had started to set. Otis had been at this for a long time, longer than he'd realised. As he had been forced to stop, he began to feel the aches and pains in his body. It would be dark soon and his body was exhausted. It would not be a good idea to continue scanning in the dark. There was an old bus stop nearby. It would provide enough shelter for Otis to sleep awhile. He could continue his work in the morning. Entering the bus stop he could see coffee cups littering the far corner. Coffee cups jammed between the seat and the rear panel. Coffee cups littered on the ground also. Otis did not want to fall asleep next to this trash, but was too reticent to touch it. They had clearly been there a long time, sun baked, dried, certainly no liquid would be left in them, Otis took comfort in that. The seats had no dividers to separate individuals, but unlike some other bus stops Otis had seen, the seats

were not slanted up at a strange angle, though they were still too narrow to lay down on. Clearly they were not designed for someone to gain respite, only for a service to be provided, to wait for the bus, when the buses still ran. It did not matter, Otis was exhausted, he would sleep sitting upright. It would have to do for now.

Seated and resting, his back against the wall of the bus stop, Otis closed his eyes. Darkness, a void, but not a hollow one, there were still faint noises, pops of colour in the corners, like sun spots on a blackened windscreen.

Fragmented images slowly flickered in, things he had seen in the day, or perhaps some other time. Always incomplete pictures, details. The dirt on the man's boots, the boots themselves, but no path, no surroundings. Otis still could not tell what kind of boots they were. That image flickered out slowly. A new image took over. A section of brickwork, with its chipped mortar, growing moss, taking on a luminescent green hue as if hit by more light then there could possibly be, as if lit from the inside. Otis thought, why do I choose these pictures?

"Memories, things witnessed but not finished with, not complete in your mind. I do not know. But do not worry. I sense that there is plenty of melatonin, you will sleep for a long time." The pineal gland said.

Another picture flickered in, a figure somehow moving as if toward Otis, as if Otis were standing. But somehow, at the same time, the figure felt still. It was a young woman. Where was this memory from? The image of the young woman narrowed, as if seen through a close lens. Around her the sunspots continued to leak into the corners of the surrounding darkness.

"Who are you?" Otis said.

The camera zoomed to the woman's teeth, moving along them as she spoke, out of synch' with her words. Molars and incisors became a single layer of white bricks extending beyond sight. The sound of her voice came out with a delay, echoing from somewhere else.

"I am Aria and you are Otis. Why do you think you are here Otis?" Aria said.

"I was selected. I have this job to do. No one else was tasked with it. I have to take scans of the city, for the report. For its final assessment. To determine where it is, how it ranks against the others." Otis replied.

The camera panned to Aria's eyes. Sunspots reflected off their surface, colours absorbing and mixing with the green iris of her eyes like the blending of a watercolour painting.

"They left you alone" Aria said.

"Yes and it'll go on without me." Otis replied

"What will go on without you? Aria said.

"The end of the year. The final assessment, the rankings, the toasting, the celebrations." Otis responded. The camera pulled back, showing Aria standing, but now her head was turned away, only her eyes were still fixed on Otis. The image detail was losing and regaining clarity, distorting, swimming out of focus, then returning like frames dropped in a video playback.

"They don't care about you Otis." Aria said.

"I have a job to finish. I have to catalogue this city, its ruins, even if there is no value in them. Otherwise it'll go on without me, the end of the year". Otis said.

The camera pushed in, showing Aria's fingers extend. Dirt and earth caked underneath her fingernails. The field of view continued to constrict, stretching the fingers further. As they reached the top of the frame, like plants seeking the light, the frame itself shifted, zoomed out, creating new space. Aria spoke again, her voice slowed and deepened, louder.

"These ruins are not the end. They exist in between. They were something else before, they will be again". Aria said.

The camera pulled focus to reveal the image of the standing woman, dimly illuminated. The shot racked to her head, her face filled the frame. Her eyes, no longer fixed directly on Otis, looked elsewhere, into the corners of the surrounding darkness. This final image dissipated into vertical strips, until no part remained.

"Drift now". The pineal gland said. As the final image left, the sunspots returned. Otis awoke. His neck and shoulders felt stiff from his awkward sleeping position. Tilting his head side-to-side he attempted to undo the cricks in his neck, with limited success. Arms outstretched, palms splayed, Otis slowly leaned his upper body forward, attempting to release some of the tension that had built up in his shoulders over the night. He then rubbed his neck muscles, wincing slightly from the pain, before finally standing up. Despite the discomfort he felt rested.

"You have slept for a very long time Otis". The pineal gland said.

"I am starving, what do you think you're playing at? We've had no dinner and no breakfast." The digestive system said.

This was true. Otis felt a little weak. He had not eaten in too long. Feeling in his pocket, Otis pulled out the tube of protein cubes, poured three into his left hand and quickly gobbled them up. He felt a little queasy from eating so much at once, so he sat back down at the bus stop and waited for the feeling to pass. As it did, he began to feel better. Strange dreams, he thought, I had strange dreams. Since he had arisen late, he decided it would probably be best to begin scanning. He saw an old building up ahead, he could begin there. He followed the road down toward it. More cracks could be seen on the asphalt surface of the road, it was more beaten and weather worn than the others. Weeds had sprouted all over it, rising from underground, taking over the surface. Otis approached the old building and carefully removed the Mark Three. This time he would remember to replace it on his hip after he took the scan.

Otis inspected the walls and the blocked up entrance to the old building. Like the others he could feel its pained message. Though he still couldn't decode the scrawlings that coated the surface. All that's left to do now, he thought is to catalogue this one for the archive. Ready for its fourteen digital rubber stamps, so that it can be put with the others and algorithmically ranked. No one would actually read the final report he knew. The HEO will see the 168 character summary once it's loaded on the Plas-Screen and the artificial intelligence will deal with everything else.

The clouds were not so dark today. Otis continued on, able to see further ahead. As he continued, he came across billboards. Some were empty, frames barren. Others had lost their original message, only layers of torn paper remained. He stared at them for a while, wondering where the torn pieces of paper were now. They had probably been wind scattered across the city long ago. Since arriving, he could have seen pieces of this paper all over the city and not known where they had come from. Not knowing what they had once been.

Staring ahead with the day's improved visibility, Otis once again spotted a figure moving toward him. He knew, even from a distance, that it would be the man from before. He would not be so easily spooked this time. Otis was deep inside the city now and it would make no sense to turn away.

The man continued to approach. Although he was still too far away to be certain, Otis believed the man's gaze had met his, this time. As he grew nearer, this became clear, the man was now looking directly at Otis, not through him. The distance between them continued to close.

The man spoke in a confident yet measured tone, as if making a proclamation.

"Why are you still here?" The man said.

Otis sensed that the man already knew why he was still there and perhaps had since their first encounter.

"I have a task. To gather data for the valuation, of this city, of Port city…To see if there is anything left."

Otis replied.

"There is nothing left. What there was has been moved somewhere else. It's already gone, the city is dead." The man said.

"There is still work for me to do". Otis said.

The man's hardened expression gave way a little, his head turned as if looking nowhere in particular but away.

"That's all Port city is now is it?" The man said.

Otis gave a pause but he was not thinking, he had said everything worth saying. The man knew why he was there, he had probably known the moment he had spotted Otis on the outskirts. Otis replied, looking at the man, trying to catch his gaze again, but not connecting. Coldly he replied.

"I still have work to do."

The man became suddenly animated, launching himself toward Otis as if fury had bubbled up and taken over, grabbing onto Otis's shoulders, digging his fingers into muscle and sinew. Otis jerked backward reactively. His shoulders, still stiff from before, now subjected to sudden pain, made Otis cry out. His arms flailing uselessly, unable to break the man's grip, not able to remove the Mark Three from his hip and cave his skull in, like he pictured in in a sudden violent flash. Instead, Otis attempted to kick the man in the shins, but failed miserably.

Unable to steady himself properly, without the motor skills to pull it off, Otis's boot barely grazed the man's shins. His kicking was limp swipes. He barely made contact with his toes, no force

behind it. The man, perhaps further angered by this lame gesture, or perhaps not, head-butted Otis. A sound, the thud, reverberated through Otis's head and the sunspots reappeared in the corners of his vision, before it darkened.

The void came again. This time sunspots streaked across it as if creating a new layer. Through the sunspots, Otis saw the Mark Three, slowly spinning, turning without hands, the metallic chassis of the device catching light in its crevices. It continued to rotate as it travelled up and down, then side to side. There was a small dent on its underside, below the area where the screen unfolded. Had it been damaged in the fall? This image flickered out and the root of a weed appeared, growing, moving upward, the picture frame moving with it, extended by it as it did so. Leaves sprouting, it grew larger. The camera panned backward, showing its totality. The leaves swayed slightly, but its roots remained firm. This image flickered out and shreds of torn paper appeared in its place, moving without the wind. There was a silence. The torn paper was not replaced with a new picture. Aria did not appear. Expected but now absent, she had arrived from out of time and left no trace. The paper continued to move, caught by a wind that was not there, missing parts of a whole. Otis was alone. He lingered there, in that space, continuing to watch the paper swirl and the sunspots streak. There was no pattern to their movement, no synchronisation.

Eventually, Otis woke once more. There was a sharp pain in his head and a dull pain in his shoulders. He touched his forehead, it was sticky, and blood had coagulated there. Before looking down, he could still feel the Mark Three on his hip, it had not dropped from the fall, but was it dented? Otis was sore, the desire to find out left him. The Mark Three remained on his hip. The readings he had taken since arriving, would have been uploaded automatically, even accounting for a lag in connection, they would have all the data so far. The man was gone and with him so was his rage. That sudden flash of violence, had left. Not wanting to press his weight onto his shoulders, Otis wriggled onto his side and sat up. His head woozy, he remained sat up for a while. Port City looked different from this position, it seemed to not stretch out as far, somehow. Otis touched his forehead again. The blood was dry. It was quiet. Nothing could be heard but the faint sound of the wind carrying its chill. His body was silent.

Sat up Otis felt the wind pass by his ear and ahead to the North, he was not yet ready to stand. Reaching his right arm down he fumbled around with the buckle around his waist that kept the Mark Three attached to him. Without looking down he managed to undo the buckle, taking his time as he did so, he could leave it here for now. It would be easier to get up without the additional weight of the Mark Three anchoring him. With no voices for Otis to listen too, the faint sound of the Mark Three hitting the ground was clearly audible.

He craned his head down and twisted his body slightly so that he could look at the device, it laid there uselessly without an operator. It was nothing. Otis remained there for a while the wind continuing to pass by him, eventually he stood up. Rising again, he stretched his back out and let his shoulder remain sunken, his hands empty and limp by his sides.

Otis followed the wind north and as he did so he came upon more shattered pieces of a whole, glass that had once been bottles, torn cardboard that had once carried something, buckled chain-link fences, and rusted door locks that had once protected something perceived as valuable. Ruined structures that had lost windows, doors, entire sections, even interior columns and stabilising walls where not immune. Otis continued through the city, finding small strands of green land, grass, some of it had been burnt away by the sun or become waterlogged from wet weather, but some still remained. Otis could see small hills in the distance, they had endured, not been trampled, or eroded. He headed towards them, there would be another view of the city from up there, and perhaps he could see it before nightfall.

He did not turn around to pick up the Mark Three again, his body was too sore, it could lay there and decay with the rest of Port city. Its metallic chassis was strong but it couldn’t protect it from the wet weather and solar rays, it would break first. Otis imagined the electronic board that must be inside, he had never seen it, nor any of the boards housed inside the plas-screens. But they must be there he thought, underneath the sleek, hardened shell. Eventually they would all become exposed and degrade, their boards would warp and even the silicon would become damaged and unstable.

Jacob was exhausted. He sat down on the pavement and outstretched his legs. His calves were cramping and his socks were wet. He rolled up his trousers to below the knee and kneaded his calves with his fingers to remove the cramps, wincing as he did so. He opened the knapsack that was slung over his left shoulder and removed a partially squashed two litre plastic bottle. The label had been worn off a while ago. There was just some hardened globules of glue left in its place.

He sipped the water and contemplated rinsing his brow, but decided against it, not knowing when the next rainfall was going to be. He screwed the cap back and replaced the bottle in the knapsack. He removed his trainers, and socks. Turning the socks inside out giving them the chance to dry out a little. The pavement felt cold and hard on his feet. Remaining there with his feet getting colder and starting to feel stiff he looked up and down the street. Rows of similar looking houses were on either side of him.

Jacob returned to the knapsack, carefully pulling out a short wave radio and placing it onto the pavement by his feet. He extended the antenna toward the sky. He twiddled the dial a little moving between frequencies. Looking for a signal. Searching. Nothing. Crackle. Then he paused on one frequency, there was some noise, a faint buzzing sound. Obscured by heavy interference, the buzzing stopped. Only crackle, then it would start again. It didn't loop or repeat clearly, it came in at random. Jacob listened for a while, no pattern emerged to the buzzing, but no other sound came in either.

He fiddled with the dial. Short wave radio frequencies were used for emergency broadcasts, but there wasn't much need that now. Of the few regular stations that were left most of them were international, they came in with a crackle, their sound was faint and distorted. Jacob wasn't interested in any of those. He twiddled the dial a little, moving between frequencies.

Listening for a signal. Searching. Nothing. Crackle. Then he paused on one frequency, some noise, a faint buzzing sound. Obscured by heavy interference, the buzzing stopped. Only crackle, then it would start again. It didn't loop or repeat clearly, coming in at random. Jacob listened for a while, no pattern emerged to the buzzing, but no other sound came in either.

He held onto the radio's antenna, barely moving it. Trying instead to connect to it. To channel through it. The signal had got through once before, Jacob was certain of that. He didn't know much about how radio waves worked, especially not short waves. It had something to do with them

bouncing off the ground. Or maybe they pointed up towards the ionosphere? Either way he was pretty sure that being higher would help.

Jacob stood up holding the radio while still twiddling the dial and placing his ear next to it. He tried twiddling faster than slower. Then he tried reaching his arms up towards the sky. Towards the ionosphere. His arms were all the way out. The weight of the radio became more obvious now. Jacob looked up to the sky as if to ask, why? Finally, he bent his arms. Still holding the radio above his head, he allowed his head to sink forward to his chest. Gently shaking the radio now, like in some bizarre ancient ritual. He had no idea how this would help. Assuredly it wouldn't. The batteries hadn't gone flat at least. Feeling resigned and beginning to doubt himself, he wondered how long do those last? As Jacob stood there, radio held out as if displaying it to the street, he noticed a burning light up in the sky, illuminating street lamps and roads off in the distance, before disappearing out of sight.

Listening carefully he didn't notice any sound of impact or any other sound as the object had fell. Perhaps it was a controlled landing? His first instinct was not to investigate, but to flee. Like an animal running on instinct, he packed up the radio and quickly put on the now slightly less sodden socks which he had turned inside out. Before hastily re-lacing his old, worn boots.

He scrambled across roads and over uneven pavement. Feeling the hardness of the concrete beneath the balls of his feet. The strap of the knapsack flailing against his chest, the sharp corners of the radio stabbing his thigh as he ran. He gripped the strap over his chest with one hand and down below his hip with the other. Trying to tuck the knapsack closer to his body as he ran. Make it secure. It wasn't brittle, but he doubted it would fare well from a fall. Especially the antenna, which could snap easily even in its distended state housed at a notch behind the radio. He kept going, perhaps trying to wear away that feeling of dread. Then Jacob decided he hadn't been seen. If it was looking for him, there wasn't much he could it about it anyway. To put it out of his mind would be easy for a while. But that sinking feeling he had would return. Maybe at night. Maybe in a day or two. There was something cold in that feeling. Like there was a certainty about it. Maybe he just had to accept it.

The adrenaline that had so quickly taken hold started to dissipate. He became aware of his own heavy breathing and slowed himself down. But slowing down too quickly threw off his balance. He had to pick up the pace again. Alternating between a slow crawl and a jogging pace, in total he

was moving no faster than walking pace, but it felt different. Uneven as he was, Jacob took some comfort in being able to manifest his internal state with that of his body.

No one would be able to get in or out once the pod sealed itself. That was Naomi's fear to be trapped inside. She pulled the lever and waited for the internal and external locks to open. Those few moments waiting for the door to open, sent a tightness into her hands and she clenched them. There was a tightness in her chest too. Hearing the metallic bolts automatically unlock and reverberate inside the pod didn't assuage the panic that was building up inside her. Anticipating a single bolt failing to unlock. One simple faulty mechanism would be the difference between being entombed and stepping outside. Naomi moved a hand over the release that was strapping her into the pod. There was a clanging noise, then a pause and finally, a single beep. The white LED light above her head flickered on. A compartment opened next to her. Thin metal plates concertinaed, in order to reveal the Mark Three. Naomi unbuckled the strap around her torso and reached for the Mark Three. On retrieving the device from its compartment, the thin metal plates closed again and the LED light turned from white to green. At last, the pod door swung open.

She stepped out. Eyes adjusting from the dark, artificially light pod to the glare of sunlight. Reflexively shielding her brow. Taking a few steps forward, she heard the pod door automatically close itself as the internal sensors picked up the change in weight. Taking a few more steps forward, she heard the rocket fire. The pod now completely resealed took off again. She depressed the trigger on the Mark Three.

It was a new unit, on first boot it displayed a firmware check screen projection. "V.1.000767 checking...sensors working...battery optimal...scan range optimal". Each check was accompanied by a whirr, as communication took place between the operating software and the individual hardware components housed inside the shell of the device. After the check screen indicated a successful boot, a simple logo of the Mark Three was projected.

The street was dirty and grit began sticking into the treads of Naomi's boots. The ruins felt as if they had lost their sense of purpose and an aura of misery permeated through the air. As sunlight hit them it bought with it no warmth, instead only exposing their degraded state. Scanning this sector

would be the first of many but Naomi suspected the others would feel no different. The heavy feeling in the air would linger in every inch of Port City. Leaving only when she did.

As the first scan was completed the sector was converted into data. Virtualised, stored temporally on the scanner before being automatically encoded. Once the internal storage reached above a certain percentage the data would be sent back to the office and fed into an algorithm. That data would then be wiped from the scanner. In that time between the scan and the upload was it real anymore Naomi wondered. Was it caught between two systems or slipping through both. Would time continue to move for it or would it be frozen.

Thinking of the office Naomi momentarily transposed the grit and dirt of the street for the heated floor. Moving from one road to another was like moving down the corridors between cubicle blocks, they both stretched out beyond sight. Plas-screens could be windows. Tiles and bricks shared the uniformity of holographic keyboards. Pipes could be sealed power coils, electricity running between floors like water. The noise was different though. Here Naomi could only here her own movements. In the office the voices where audible. Hushed tones usually. The work was supposed to take priority. But details of the day still made it through the cubicles. In between keystrokes and the quiet whirring of machinery compiling and decoding algorithms. There were moments where it was not busy, machines could work fast but only so fast.

Alone except for the gulls settling on rooftops, Naomi continued to walk and scan. As she moved from sector to sector the sky became grey. There didn't seem to be anything left for the gulls to scavenge. They must be stopping here on their way to somewhere else, thought Naomi. The city had been picked over and emptied out already. What was left was falling apart. Maybe from their perch the gulls could see something she couldn't.

Unlike the gulls Naomi couldn't simply choose to leave. Someone would have to come back for her. The pods were checked and refuelled immediately after each journey. Usually sequenced so as to be serviced all together from within great multileveled cargo bays, with teams of operatives required to inspect them all. The refuelling and docking could all be done automatically using sensors to detect changes in weight and proximity. To pick her up though, they would need to send a ship that someone had to pilot. There were not many of those kinds of ship left and even fewer were those who

still had the skills needed to fly them. She had never even seen one. Ranks were segregated. Even engineers and office workers were housed on entirely different levels. The connecting bridge between the two was one way, a tube leading down into the pod bay. There was no way back up from there. Not one she had ever seen. Naomi wondered, how they would decide if her performance was good? There were constant efficiency checks in the office. Keystrokes and eye movements could be cross referenced. Systems were built to track everything. But here there was only the Mark Three to monitor her progress. It registered no measure of speed or efficiency, only data in discrete units from each scan.

Looking much like the last, Naomi scanned the next sector. More gulls overhead. Perched as if watching. Were they confused as to what she was doing? Perhaps they thought of this as their territory now? Did they think of her as some invader, standing there pointing some strange thing that beeped and whirred. The gulls continued to watch Naomi as she worked at ground level. Pacing around taking her readings. Pausing to do so, looking up at the gulls. The machine continuously making those beeping and whirring noises that communicated nothing, just sound. The gulls squawked to each other, as if talking about the invader. Naomi stopped again to look up at them. The gulls noticed this and stopped squawking. They shuffled around the rooftop. Their little heads bobbing up and down as they moved around the roof. They didn't seem to be alarmed, more curious than anything else. Asking each other what she was, they couldn't tell. Ultimately determining that it didn't matter. What mattered, was that if she was an invader she was a strange, useless one. Unable to reach the bird's perch. Unable to respond in their language.

The gulls returned to their preferred spot on the edge of the roof, no longer moving. Overhead, a sickly grey light shrouded the sector. It felt as though the sky was eating the light of the day. Like a desaturated image, life was being sucked out. Any sense of progress in her movement between sectors now seemed hollow, as the colours of the landscape paled out against the grey of a consuming sky. The greyness permeated her. Inside her body, a rising feeling of gloom built. It was leeching into her bones where it would stay. That emptying feeling. Naomi winced, looking up at the gulls who returned her with a cold gaze.

Jacob took shelter in the old commercial district, in order to sleep. As he slept, strange images came to him. He saw an image of the radio illuminated in the darkness. He heard the crackle of the radio. A camera panned frenetically, fixing on the radio's dials as they spun automatically, tuning into a new station. One hidden from him. On this new station he heard a voice. The voice came through warped and faded, through layers of audio degradation, but Jacob was still able to make out the words.

A dream from elsewhere
That grainy place inside the waves
From another time

Don't leave me yet
The time that never came
I'll be here waiting

The veil that falls
Between waking dreams and night
To see you again

Waiting for your return
What once was here
Will come again

The radio static returned. Still tuned to that new station, but with nothing else to come through. The image of the radio lingered for a moment, only crackles popped through the static. Another picture formed, it was from that light he had seen in the sky earlier. There was something inside it, something that was trapped and trying to get out. Jacob saw a metallic shell illuminated in the darkness that surrounded it. Something was moving frantically inside. At the same time, the

metallic shell began to buckle inward, as if it was collapsing in on itself, trapping the thing inside. He could hear clanging from within the shell. It was trying desperately to get out. The shell crunched in further like a soda can, a tear burst from its top. From the tear sprouted a limb. A twisted, long limb, at the end of which were skeletal fingers. Through the tear in the metal, the fingers scratched at the exterior of the shell. The skeletal fingers pried at it as the shell crunched in further creating a new split in the middle. The limb reached down pulling at this new tear, widening it, splitting open the shell from the inside. Another skeletal hand could be seen through this tear trying to pull it open.

The camera racked focus, closing in on the tear as it widened. Blurred, behind the skeletal fingers, was the shadowed outline of a head. As the tear widened and more light got in, Jacob could make out the eyes, bulbous and dark with no irises. Like those of a shark. Long, dark, brittle hair covered the ears. Where the mouth should be was covered with flesh. Focus racked back to the shell as the limbs ripped it open. Cuts forming along and across the metal, making a door. As the creature stepped out into the black void, it's perverted, twisted arms and legs stretching, the shell continued to collapse in on itself. The buckled and torn form of the shell became more like a cube being compressed from all sides. The compression continued as if it was inside a car crusher. Jacob could hear the crunching noise louder as the shell finished it transformation to heavy metallic cube. As Jacob finished watching this, the escaped creature turned to meet his gaze. Jacob began to run into the black void.

The darkness gave way to streets and bridges. The creature pursued him. He could hear it getting closer, its' twisted limbs gathering speed. Jacob's running became a mad dash. His body swerved wildly, trying in vain to outpace the thing that chased him. As Jacob turned his head, he could see the world behind him behind being sucked towards the creature. Small pieces of plaster, gravel and concrete ripped from all surfaces, swirling toward it. Jacob continued running. He could hear things being torn away behind him. They were no longer small pieces being ripped out, it was entire chunks now. Jacob began to feel a pull on his own body, as if he was magnetised. He struggled to resist this force. It didn't work, his body was pulled so forcefully that he was now flat on the ground. He scrambled desperately, trying to reach something to hang onto. Clawing at gravel. The creature reached him. The magnetic pull on Jacob abated. Above him, pieces of debris floated and

swirled. Jacob turned over onto his back, as the creature craned it head down towards him, extending its jaw with its mouth hidden behind a layer of flesh. Its' bulbous, black eyes looked at him coldly, as the magnetic force resumed, but stronger now, pinning Jacob to the ground. The creature loomed over Jacob, its shadow enveloping him. Slowly, he felt its dreadful head grow closer. Unable to resist, Jacob felt himself being pulled towards the creature's toothless, fleshy mouth. The creature began absorbing him. Taking in first his legs and torso. Jacob struggled uselessly. Sinking as if into quicksand. His shoulders slunk into the creature too. His neck and head barely able to move now. Sinking further.

Jacob shook awake. His adrenaline spiked. He took a sharp breath. Leaning over, he reached into his knapsack. He took a swig of water. He lay back for a while, before slowly sitting up. As he did so, the images of his dream melted against the daylight. He waited a while longer, until he was sure their remnants had gone. Then he headed out again.

After two more days of walking past the city's empty buildings along the barren roads that connected them, Jacob reached the coast. He had not dreamed again and for two whole days he had not so much as touched the short wave radio. It was not that he was afraid to, as much as he was now unsure of it. It had been left at the bottom of the knapsack. A lot of extra weight to be carrying for no reason, but he did not want to be rid of it. Yet he could not face hearing the static again. Not after he had heard something else. Every time he wanted to get to his water bottle, he used a new system. One where he would first fumble around inside the bag without looking, until he could grasp the bottle. Then still without looking inside the bag, he would withdraw it. Only using his free hand to twist the cap open when the bag was fully closed. It took longer, but he did not want to look at the radio again. Not for a while.

He was thirsty again. It had rained the previous day, for a little while, just as the sun was going down, so the water bottle was still largely full. Using his new drinking system, he rummaged through the knapsack with one hand, not fully opening the bag until he had until he had a grip on the bottle. He took a small swig and then a few larger ones. Before carefully re-screwing the cap and placing it back into the bag.

There was sand and pebbles on the shore. Harder to walk on but a welcome difference to gravel and concrete. He sunk into the beach as he moved. As he continued further the density of pebbles lessened. He decided to continue barefoot, the sand warming him as he walked. Sand gathered between his toes and caked the balls of his feet.

He looked back from the shoreline into the city, to its hard concrete walls and dying structures. Behind him waves audibly began lapping at his bare feet, the tide was coming in. Amongst the grains of sand, Jacob noticed a small brown shell. It was an ammonite. A trace of the marine life that had once been here. The sea full of tiny sea creatures, an entire eco-system, he tried to imagine it.

Jacob moved to the edge of the water, watching the waves push towards him, foaming as they came in and dragged out again. Carefully hoisting his knapsack up with one hand he leaned down toward the water and placed his other hand into the sea. Feeling the water move against his fingers, he cupped his hand, gathering the sea water and watching it drain out again. He did this repeatedly. Sometimes opening his hand to speed it up, other times closing it, letting the water drain out slowly.

He imagined the ammonite he had found, still alive, moving through the water using its tentacles. It's elaborately patterned shell still vivid with the colours, yellow and orange. The sea would have been full of them, the ammonites, gliding silently beneath the surface of the sea. Simple organisms, brainless, perhaps quite literally, their biology was so alien to ours, ancient. Yet they could create their own shell, they could move through their environment. What would they be thinking? Was it all just reaction to external stimuli? Living off ancient codes. The knowledge of how to move and live in the ocean.

Continuing up the coast, looking down into the water through the occluded sky, he kept thinking about things moving around under the water that he could not see. Crabs along the sea bed, small fish swimming between the seaweed. The reds and oranges and yellows of their shells and fins. All their colours cloaked under the water, giving way to his grey world.

Jacob thought about the radio again, wanting there to be an interruption, something to come through. A voice, a noise, an echo. Anything but the static. There would be no such luck. He didn't feel what he had felt before. That intense feeling. The radio was just a lump. A weight that he would

keep carrying, whether there was any need to or not. It was best not to turn it on. Not to hear that static again. The chance of something else coming through would not come. Not today.

He kept moving up the coast, staying just close enough to the sea to hear the waves pulling in and dragging out again. There was a flock of gulls over the water cawing at each other as they flew. They seemed to be moving away. Away from the beach and deeper out over the sea. There must have been nothing here for them. He would see a few lone gulls squat on roofs and lampposts. Their heads tucked into their bodies. That's how they slept, the gulls. Were they stragglers from that same flock that had gone out to sea, he wondered. Perhaps they were not all ready to leave. Or maybe some were too exhausted to leave now.

Naomi continued into the next sector, it was rusted and decaying. She was eager to finish before night fell. Scanning in the dark was possible but it was much slower, and there still needed to be some light left to make it practicable. The internal algorithms sorted visual noise and distortion from the rest of the image, and without sufficient light, the storage required for each scan would be greater and the time to send the data would be longer. As Naomi scanned, she noticed more gulls, quiet unlike those from before. Heads tucked into their wings. She was careful not to disturb the gulls. She was still afraid they might become animated again and swoop down on her. Able to scratch at her with their talons and fly off again. If one of them did this, other gulls might follow, circling her and attacking, scratching her face and eyes. So she was careful not to disturb them. Keeping her distance whenever she saw one. Awkwardly zig-zagging around them.

She thought back to the office and what they would be up to while she was out here dodging gulls. At this time in the office, they would probably be switching to an amber light. Signifying that the sun was about to set. Not that the sun could be seen from within the rows of cubicles that lined the office rooms. No pods would be sent out in the evening, though the maintenance department were likely to still be working on them. Checking that each component was calibrated within tolerances. Maintenance workers might be working in shifts for increased efficiency. New crews might be just starting their work now as old ones rotated out.

She was losing the light and still had so much to do. Continuing on the work of scanning felt as though it was taking longer than it should. Probably because she was so aware of the time passing

now. The amber light would definitely be on at the office. It was bittersweet when that light came on. Knowing that the day was ending soon. But knowing that you would have another soon, to start over. There was a moment of anticipation just before the light came on. In that moment she didn't think about the next day of work. The next day that would be the same as the last and little different to the next.

In Port City there were differences. Worrying about the gulls had given her something else to think about. In a strange way she welcomed it. Something to look out for. In the city she also she had to keep moving. Twelve hours in the office, with only the mandatory warmup group exercises to help with typing fatigue, was not the same. She was due to lead the exercises next month. It was her turn, according to the shared activity document. She took another scan. It was definitely taking a little longer now. She hadn't been looking forward to leading those typing exercises. Someone always found fault with her shared activities, some inefficiency or other wasn't quite up to the standard. The assessment graphs always barely reached the acceptable line. Last year she was part of the health and safety assessment team for decorations, a role she neither wanted nor for which had she been previously selected. Of the four chosen to decide on locations she was ranked third most efficient.

She was losing even more of the light as she walked, continuing with the work. Being second last in the health and safety decoration assessment team, that was almost worse than being last, she thought. There was some potential turnaround expected for those who came last. But to be below the average, that was unfavourable. You could feel their contempt for you then. She didn't even like bean paste ale, it was too fizzy, too creamy. She just drank it because it was the celebration, it was expected. She made it last when she drank it, to avoid having to have another. No one seemed to keep count of that. They had a mandatory day of reflection following the end of the year, so to not celebrate made it seem like you didn't try hard enough that year. Reflecting on your flaws wasn't to be done until the next day. If you skipped the celebration, you must be starting early. Starting early, because there were many failings, too many inefficiencies.

The value assessing department wouldn't want her if she became too inefficient, the maintenance department was likely full too, that wouldn't leave her anywhere to go. She continued on through the streets, taking more scans. How much data had already been transmitted to the office?

Naomi wondered how much value they would be able to determine already. Probably not much she thought. So when would they come back for her? She continued with the work because there was much left to do. She had scanned so much of the city, but it had sector upon sector left. Would it even be worth coming back for her? The city continued to stretch on.

The light was fading, it was the last of the day. After that it would be too difficult to keep working. Too inefficient. Even though she still had much left to do, she would have to stop. She wondered how many of the scans would have been transmitted to the office by now. What would they see in those scans, the past or the future? Port City's decayed remains held the traces of another time, a time no one alive had lived through. A time no one had seen. A time no one had felt. A time that had no place anymore, but a time that continued to linger on with no one to remember it. It's meaning emptied and hollow. Or would they see only the future? What could be done with the remains of the city? What could still be extracted from the city now?

Naomi did not see any ship coming. They wouldn't send one in the dark. If it was coming, it would be during the day and she had much more work to do. She would start again tomorrow. She was still useful. She did not want to be trapped there. Alone with the gulls. They will come back, she thought. The city would continue to stretch out, but she would comb every corner of it. The places that had not seen anyone for a long time. All its ruins, and decaying streets. All its edges and hidden spaces. All the pieces of it that had been forgotten. They will come back for me.

Chapter 6: Practice Review

This chapter focuses on my speculative fiction and photo novel *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen (2025)*, in order to point out how the weird is evoked in the text, photographs and through the methods of xeroxing and collage. This chapter begins with a discussion on how these methods have been employed using an understanding of the weird in photography gained through this thesis. Then through literary analysis, this chapter discusses how weird anthropomorphism is communicated through J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974), and how this has been developed in my own creative fiction and photography. By drawing upon H.P. Lovecraft's employment of weird dreams in *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1936), I examine how these ideas have been explored in my work through creative fiction, poetry, and collage, whilst also delineating between the weird and horror. In an analysis of W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), I explore how methods of xerox have been used in my own work through a discussion on media displacements. Before finally arguing how the combination of xerox and collage in my own work builds upon ideas of media displacement and Erfahrung in order to represent the weird temporality of the present.

My photo novel is set in a dystopian future under neoliberal capitalism, the fictionalised place of "Port City", acts analogue for the real world location of the novel's photographs, Portsmouth, England. Throughout the story the mission of the characters Otis, and later Naomi is to scan and virtualise the remains of the city to find any remaining value. This mission is largely meaningless as "Port City" has already been hollowed out, and those sent to value it are as disposable as the city itself. My speculative fiction draws on J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974), with the theme that the separation between the self and the city slowly dissolves and breaks down over the course of the story.

Drawing on Wolf Meyer's modes of speculative thought (2020), the media research group syntheticzero argues that,

> "Intensification begins with real phenomena [...] and dials them up to highlight their effects when unmitigated. Rather than imagining new systems, it envisions current dynamics becoming more extreme. This is a speculative strategy rooted in exaggeration, useful for dramatizing the stakes of inaction or denial" (syntheticzero, 2025).

My fiction can be regarded as a type of intensification, asking the question of what would happen if the wild speculations of financial capitalism continued without opposition?
The effects of this are seen in the extreme fragmentation of the first character we meet, Otis. His body is separated into multiple parts, his ossicles, digestive system, epidermis and pineal gland, some of which appear to be in conflict with Otis himself. This acts as an intensified metaphor, for Fredric Jameson's argument that under late capitalism, the "fragmentation of the subject" is correlative of "the lack of unity in the outside world" (1991, p.136).

Following Teju Cole, who used the form of the documentary photobook in *Fernweh* (2020) to speculate on what an alternate world might have looked like had it not been for the effects of colonialism, I would argue that the photobook still has potential use as a speculative site. Camille Barton contends that a space is needed to grieve the loss of alternative worlds which existed before they were destroyed by the effects of colonialism (Barton 2024). I would also argue that a photobook can act as a space not just to grieve the historical loss of alternative worlds, but to make the viewer aware of what is yet to be lost. By taking the form of a photo novel, my practise is designed to act not simply as a way of representing a dystopic speculative future, but also to encourage viewers to engage in action now. As Gerry Allen points out, the photobook itself is a two dimensional representational surface that acts as a switching station between thoughts and action in the three dimensional space of people and politics (Allen, 2014). What my photo novel is responding to is the Dark Enlightenment movement, who project the future to be inevitably doomed, perhaps due to climate change, or rogue artificial intelligence and that our doom is the result of capitalism which cannot be mitigated in any way (Sandifer 2017). Against such a fate our only option, as painted by Nick Land and others in the Dark Enlightenment movement, is to cling to white nationalism (Sandifier 2017).

The intended viewing of my photo novel is via a surface reading. Which means to be looked at, not through, for the text not be mastered by the viewer, but accepted or deferred (Best & Marcus 2009). The insertion of photographs and zine style xeroxed images of UK national flags throughout my photo novel, is designed to be re-contextualised by the viewer through my speculative fiction to show how nostalgic nationalism together with unmitigated capitalism, has done nothing to improve the lives of the book's characters Otis, Naomi and Jacob. It may even be the cause of such a dystopic

future. The use of the zine aesthetic, particularly when it comes to representing UK national flags is designed to be a refusal of nostalgic nationalism. This combined use of speculative fiction and images takes influence from Allan Sekula's critical realism in the way that photographs and text interact, to reveal what is usually hidden under the surface by the history of global capitalist influences (Jang 2019). The conceptual stakes of working with documentary photography as Allan Sekula argues, is that it grants the ability to pose ethical debates around social alternatives to neoliberalism, Sekula points to Agnès Varda's documentary film *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000) as an example of this. In Agnès Varda's film, she interrogates the rule of law pertaining to "gleaners", people who pick up food left after a harvest in a field, or discarded objects which they repurpose for art projects (Anderson [2001] 2014, Sekula [2006] 2020, p.276). Hilde Van Gelder and Jan Baetens argue that Allan Sekula's employment of documentary photography through his methodology of critical realism grants a new way of understanding social reality, claiming that Sekula's photographs, "encourage, yes, even force reflection and through that, slow changes can probably become a reality, certainly at the level of the individual" (Gelder & Baetens 2006, p.10). Whilst my practise does aim to force reflection from the viewer, how it differs, is that I am not aiming to reveal historical narratives that are usually hidden underneath the surface, but instead aiming to reveal the potential future effect of nostalgic nationalism. Whilst critical realism, as Inge Henneman points out, can employ fiction together with images to make a theatre piece to reveal the absurdity of the relationship between a social subject and their environment (Gelder & Baetens, p.123, 2006). My own practise develops theatrics into a form of speculation, by combining Allan Sekula's critical realist method of montage with speculative fiction. Through montage, my photo novel shows repeated imagery of economic deprivation through photographs of boarded up flats, crumbling factory buildings, dilapidated former commercial sites, damaged and abandoned objects such as buses. These photographs are interspersed with images of UK national flags. In a surface reading, the speculative fiction re-contextualises for the viewer, the relationship between images of nostalgic nationalism and economic deprivation, suggesting that this is a cause and effect, a cycle that will continue to repeat into the future if no action is taken now.

In Mark Fisher's analysis of the special effects in Peter Jackson's 2005 remake of the 1933 original film *King Kong,* Fisher points out that the "nostalgia mode" (Jameson 1991), exists in films whose form belong in the past, (2006). In response Matt Colquhoun argues that the medium of photography itself is inherently hauntological (Xenogothic 2020), in other words, baked into all forms of photography is a quality, in which the past continues to haunt the present. Christian Wilken argues that the feeling of "hauntological impermanence", can be a way of uniting the left (Wilken 2025, p.298). By evoking the same "sting of humiliation" that H.P. Lovecraft's weird fiction provides, the left can become painfully aware of their historical situation, to their failing in the 21st century to form opposition and collective movements against capitalism (Wilken 2025, p.298), and as I would also argue to the left's failure to counter the nostalgia of the right. In my photo novel I used the method of montage, in order to deliberately invoke this sting of humiliation, through the use of different forms of photography, analogue and digital. Following Michael Schofield's analysis that digital photography can be thought of as lacking in aura, whereas analogue photography practises are used as a mediating form for re-aurification (Schofield 2018). My intention between the interplay of these forms of photography is to deliberately oscillate between regaining aura and losing aura. Whilst both forms can be thought of as hauntological, juxtaposing the two different forms through repetition of the same photographed subject, i.e. a polaroid and a digital photograph and alternating between these two forms throughout the photo novel, aims to invoke this feeling of the sting. I employed restraint in sequencing digital images against older forms of analogue photography in order to emphasise this sting. Whilst my photographs remain hauntological, they are positioned against the nostalgic politics of the right.

Through analysis of W.G. Sebald's photo novel *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) I was able to find a method for how documentary photographs act as visual metaphors that connect with another world the text describes. In my own photo novel, I also took influence from H.P. Lovecraft's concept of known and unknown worlds. I inserted photographs as visual metaphors for my speculative fiction in order draw a connection between these known and unknown worlds. Also drawing upon Sebald's photo novel, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) I was able to connect how my own practise of walking can be thought of as a way of accessing the speculative potential of the photographic fragment. Following

Hito Steyerl's observations that the fragment is both a real piece of the world and also a container of affects (Steyerl, 2012), I employed a recurring theme in my speculation fiction that my characters in walking through the various non-places of "Port City", are trying to connect with something that has been lost, a feeling of possibility.

Anthropomorphism: A Rising Feeling of Gloom

In Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974), the barrier between mind, body and the island breaks down as the protagonist, architect J. T. Maitland is forced to explore the island looking for a way out after being marooned there. An exploration of the island throughout the story then becomes an exploration of the protagonist's own mind, as the two become conflated. Literary scholar Harlan Wilson goes further arguing that in *Concrete Island (*1974), it is the urban architecture of the island that "inscribes us". (Wilson, 2018, p.57). This can be seen in a section where Maitland, is affected by the island's past as he feels the pain that still resides within its urban spaces.

> "Identifying the island with himself, he gazed at the cars in the breaker's yard, at the wire-mesh fence, and the concrete caisson behind him. These places of pain and ordeal were now confused with pieces of his body. He gestured towards them trying to make a circuit of the island so that he could leave these sections of himself where they belonged" (Ballard [1974] 2008, p.80).

The "pain" is not a feeling that Maitland projects onto the island, to mirror his own state of mind, it is the island that is able to communicate its own feeling through Maitland, as if his body is a conduit, not something that is separated. This collapsing of the separation between boundaries of mind, body, and the island opens up new ways of being affected. The urban places Maitland traverses are alive not because he imagines them to be, but because there is a world outside of his control, able to influence him.

The idea that urban places can inscribe their own feelings onto Maitland in *Concrete Island* (1974), becomes further complicated through their relationship with nature. Traversing the island in order to find a way out, Maitland walks through tall grass, which tempts him, directing him to continue exploring deeper into the island.

"The grass seethed around him in the light wind, speaking its agreement.

'Explore the island now - drink the wine later'

The grass rustled excitedly, parting in circular waves, beckoning him into its spirals" (Ballard [1974] 2008, p.69).

The grass transfers it's feeling of excitation to Maitland in order to motivate him to go where it wants him too. It is as if it is the grass is complicit with the Island in trying to stop Maitland from leaving. Ballard's use of anthropomorphism in giving the grass the voice is weird because it is acting in accordance to what the Island wants, and Maitland is unaware of this. As philosopher Tim Morton argues, the view of nature as something which is inscribed with human meanings and values is false. Nature is not only is independent of us but also holds its own meanings which are capable of affecting us (Morton 2016).

In my own speculative fiction *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025), it is animals who are complicit with the city, not in trying to stop Naomi from leaving, but in communicating the city's feeling of disdain and judgement for Naomi she as takes scans looking for anything that could be valuable. As Naomi is walking through industrial sector of the city, gulls watch her from overhead. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025) (Fig 1), this is preceded by polaroids of industrial sectors and streets (Fig 2 & 3).

"The gulls returned to their preferred spot on the edge of the roof, no longer moving. Overhead, a sickly grey light shrouded the sector. It felt as though the sky was eating the light of the day. Like a desaturated image, life was being sucked out. Any sense of progress in her movement between sectors now seemed hollow, as the colours of the landscape paled out against the grey of a consuming sky. The greyness permeated her. Inside her body, a rising feeling of gloom built. It was leeching into her bones where it would stay. That emptying feeling. Naomi winced, looking up at the gulls who returned her with a cold gaze" (Dodd, p.95)

In this sequence, the weather conveys a sinister mood, at first this could be conflated to be a projection of Naomi's state of mind in the sentence, "Like a desaturated image, life was being sucked out". However this shifts in the following sentence, "The greyness permeated her. Inside her body, a

rising feeling of gloom built. It was leeching into her bones where it would stay". The feelings that Naomi is experiencing are no longer "Like" something else, they have "permeated" her. She is experiencing directly how the city feels. Similarly there is this un-easing escalation as the gulls initially appear to only be passive observers watching Naomi from afar: "The gulls returned to their preferred spot on the edge of the roof, no longer moving." This shifts at the end of the paragraph to "Naomi winced, looking up at the gulls who returned her with a cold gaze." Reading this sentence anthropomorphically we could say that the gulls are judging Naomi, looking at her disapprovingly. However, since it's been established that the mood of the city has "permeated" Naomi, the gulls can be interpreted as playing an active role. The gulls are a part of Port city, they embody and invoke its mood, a mood that Naomi cannot control. It is as if "Port City" itself is able to create a mood which envelopes everything in it, including Naomi. As psychiatrists Giovanni Sranghellini and René Rosfort elaborate, there is a distinction between affect and mood, an affect is directed toward a particular object, whereas a mood encompasses the world (2014). In considering the notion of world mood, Gerhard Thonhauser elaborates Martin Heidegger's concept of "Stimmung",

> "living in the sense of being-in-the-world means to live in a meaningful world which one encounters as relevant or mattering. Being affected by things mattering to me is what Heidegger calls the Stimmung of being-in-the-world" (Thonhauser 2020, p1261, Heidegger [1927]1996).

The potential for the rise of fascism is one is associated with a mood of indifference, which itself masks a possible shift between, xenophillia that is solidarity with the foreign other and xenophobia, fear of the foreign other (Borneman & Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017). The world that Naomi finds herself is one that is itself emptied of meaning, social communities have been decimated, leaving behind only anguish and loss. The allegory of the "consuming sky" can be considered by turning to Christina Sharpe concept of weather as a blanket of white supremacy encompassing of the globe, "the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack" (2016, p.104). Naomi is caught up in this climate, the "greyness" and "gloom" of the world that manages to break through into her body affecting her. Naomi is not separated from the world outside, her body is "permeated" by it. The framing of the polaroids of streets and industrial areas *Sunspots*

Through a Blackened Windscreen (2025) (Fig 1 & 2) are titled to convey Naomi's feelings of estrangement and unease that emanate from the city itself as she walks through it. This mood is reflected in the "sickly" green and yellow colours of the polaroids and reinforced in the deliberate repetition of forms, rectangular and square shapes and diagonal and horizontal lines; Suggesting that this mood is enveloping all the spaces of the city. As art critics Jan Baetens Hilde van Gelder and argue “realism is never simply reproductive (mimesis), but productive: it is the invention of new ways of representing the real” (Baetens et; al 2006, p.8). Therefore my choice to use green and yellow coloured polaroids to reflect Naomi’s feeling of estrangement is an attempt to make use of the paradoxes of photography. The photograph because of its relationship to reality through its indexicality, its “privileged

relationship to reality” (Baetens et; al 2006, p, 8). However the photograph is also more than simply regarded a neutral mirror to reality, is also as a container of affects (Brown, & Phu, 2014). It is this irresolvable tension between the photograph as able to communicate affect, but also to point to a real place, as a fragment of reality, that I am attempting to utilise to convey this weird feeling that Naomi experiences.

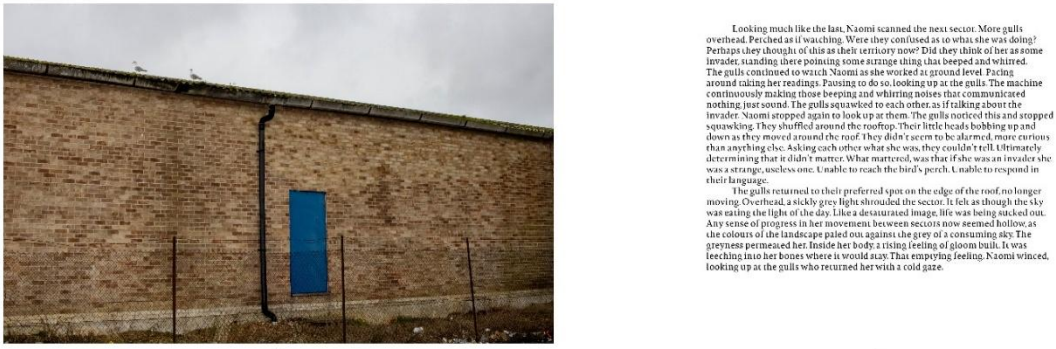


Figure 1. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen,* Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.90-91



92 93

Figure 2. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen, Ryan Dodd (2025, pp.92-93)*



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Looking much like the last, Naomi scanned the next sector. More gulls overhead. Perched as if watching. Were they confused as to what she was doing? Perhaps they thought of this as their territory now? Did they think of her as some invader, standing there poining some strange thing that beeped and whirred. The gulls continued to watch. Naomi as she worked at ground level. Pacing around taking her readings. Pausing to do so, looking up at the gulls. The machine continuously making those beeping and whirring noises that communicated nothing just sound. The gulls squawked to each other, as if talking about the invader. Naomi stopped again to look up at them. The gulls noticed this and stopped squawking. They shuffled around the rooftop. Their little heads bobbing up and down as they moved around the roof. They didn't seem to be alarmed, more curious than anything else. Asking each other what she was, they couldn't tell. Ultimately determining that it didn't matter. What mattered, was that if she was an invader she was a strange, useless one. Unable to reach the bird's perch. Unable to respond in their language.

The gulls returned to their preferred spot on the edge of the roof, no longer moving. Overhead, a sickly grey light shrouded the sector. It felt as though the sky was eating the light of the day. Like a desaturated image, life was being sucked out. Any sense of progress in her movement between sectors now seemed hollow, as the colours of the landscape paled out against the grey of a consuming sky. The greyness permeated her. Inside her body, a rising feeling of gloom built. It was leeching into her bones where it would stay. That enspiring feeling. Naomi winced, looking up at the gulls who returned her with a cold gaze.

95

Figure 3. "Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen", Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.94-95

Dreams: That Grainy Place between the Waves

In H.P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1936), dreams and reality swap positions, as the protagonist of the story Robert Olmstead succumbs to elder gods who invade his mind through sleep. In the story Robert Olmstead goes to Innsmouth, a seaport in Massachusetts, in order to investigate a number of strange and mysterious news reports. Olmstead eventually uncovers a conspiracy of an alien cult, the "Esoteric Order of Dragon" worshipping the elder gods, which includes "Cthulhu". Residents of Innsmouth take on a fish like appearance, which Olmstead believes is a disease that is distinct to the local area, before finding out that its part of a transformation into "the deep ones", fish creatures who worship the elder gods. Through dreams, Olmstead imagines himself as one of "the deep ones", worshipping in strange alien temples under the sea.

> "In the winter of 1930–31, however, the dreams began. They were very sparse and insidious at first, but increased in frequency and vividness as the weeks went by. Great watery spaces opened out before me, and I seemed to wander through titanic sunken porticos and labyrinths of weedy Cyclopean walls with grotesque fishes as my companions. Then the other shapes began to appear, filling me with nameless horror the moment I awoke. But during the dreams they did not horrify me at all — I was one with them; wearing their unhuman trappings, treading their aqueous ways, and praying monstrously at their evil sea-bottom temples" (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.79)

The weirdness comes in the ambiguity as to whether what Olmstead is experiencing was real, or just part of a dream. This opens up the bigger question as to what is the relationship between dreams and reality. How we experience our thoughts and feelings is determined largely by the unconscious, which is inaccessible to us. The unconscious is mediated by the preconscious and conscious. These different areas of the mind are in conflict with each other but, through sleep these tensions are relaxed, allowing the barriers between regions to break down. (Mitchell and Black, 2016, Segal 1990). However as Jaques Lacan argues there are conditions in which this line between the dream and reality blur, sleep walking, as a form "somnambulistic activity" is an example of this (Lacan [1979] 2004, p.57-58)

Olmstead in a later dream is scared awake after directly encountering a hideous "shoggoth"

monster. Following this encounter his first thought is to commit suicide, this unbearable trauma, is an aspect of horror that has accompanied a direct encounter with the real (Badiou, 2007) As Olmstead's grasp of his former reality as a man has been shattered. He becomes part of a new reality in which he is no a longer a man but a "deep one".

> "This was the dream in which I saw a shoggoth for the first time, and the sight set me awake in a frenzy of screaming. That morning the mirror definitely told me I had acquired the Innsmouth look" (Lovecraft [1936] 2024, p.80).

Olmstead's earlier imagining through the dream of being a "deep one", is something that could have actually happened in his sleep as part of his "somnambulistic activity". It is only through the dream that he is able to experience this transition to a new reality following his encounter with the real, which traumatically ruptured the reality he had previously been part of.

In my speculative fiction, *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025), weirdness comes through in dreams during a sequence in which Jacob, whose presence is "Port City" is a mystery, falls asleep inside an old commercial district building. Jacob had been trying to get a signal from his short wave radio during the day, but nothing had come through except the empty crackles and static of the radio, no voices had gotten through. In his dream the radio manages to turn itself on and tune into a station and hears a poem being read *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025) (fig 4).

> "A dream from elsewhere
> That grainy place inside the waves
> From another time
>
> Don't leave me yet
> The time that never came
> I'll be here waiting
>
> The veil that falls
> Between waking dreams and night

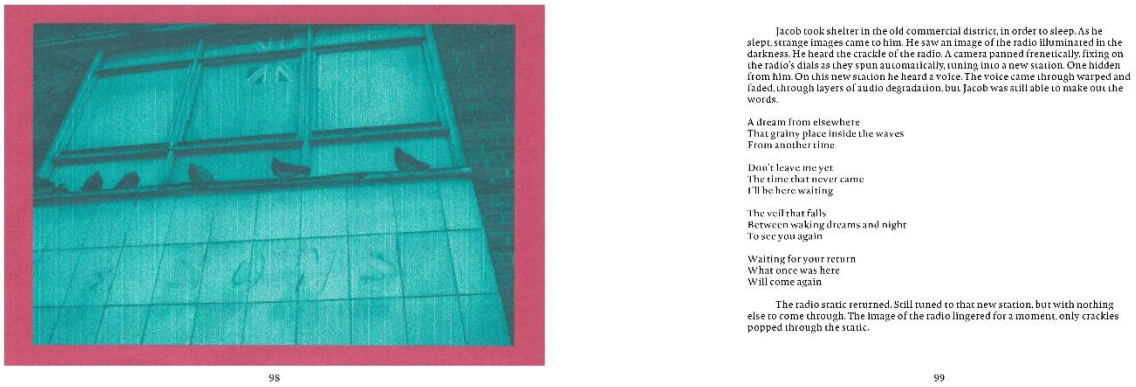
To see you again

Waiting for your return

What once was here

Will come again”

(Dodd 2025, p.99).



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Jacob took shelter in the old commercial district, in order to sleep. As he slept, strange images came to him. He saw an image of the radio illuminated in the darkness. He heard the crackle of the radio. A camera panned frenetically, fixing on the radio's dials as they spun automatically, tuning into a new station. One hidden from him. On this new station he heard a voice. The voice came through warped and faded, through layers of audio degradation, but Jacob was still able to make out the words.

A dream from elsewhere
That grainy place inside the waves
From another time

Don't leave me yet
The time that never came
I'll be here waiting

The veil that falls
Between waking dreams and night
To see you again

Waiting for your return
What once was here
Will come again

The radio static returned. Still tuned to that new station, but with nothing else to come through. The image of the radio lingered for a moment, only crackles popped through the static.

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Figure 4. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen*, Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.98-99

In what could be considered wish fulfilment of the dream, Jacob is able to connect with this voice from the outside, which was inaccessible to him during his waking hours. The line, “The time that never came” speaks to a feeling of melancholia, perhaps this is Jacob’s feeling which is able to be expressed through the dream as the barriers between the unconscious and conscious break down. However the lines “Between waking dreams and night” and “A dream from elsewhere” suggest that more is happening within the dream then wish fulfilment. Jacob had been trying and repeatedly failing to get a radio signal during the day. Having reached the radio signal through the dream, there is still something which alludes Jacob, something “between” and “elsewhere”. In Lacan’s terms this is the real that the dream hides from us.

> “How can we fail to see that awakening works in two directions- and that the awakening that re-situates us in a constituted and represented reality carries out two tasks? The real has to be sought beyond the dream-in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack

> of representation of which there is only one representative. This is the real that governs our activities more than any other and it is psychoanalysis that designates it for us". (Lacan & Miller [1979] 2004, p.60)

It is in missing the real in the dream that makes Jacob aware that there is a gap in his experience, that there is something hidden which he cannot see but that he has been made aware of. As the dream progresses, it turns to horror as Jacob unwittingly is able to perceive a monstrous form. During the day time Jacob had seen a pod arrive from the sky, and assumed there was something inside it that made him fearful. Having seen neither the pod, nor what was inside, Jacob had no way of knowing it was Naomi. In his dream Jacob perceives a creature breaking free of the pod, and chasing him, sucking in pieces of the city's urban architecture like a vacuum as it chases him before finally catching and consuming him *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen (2025)* (Fig.5)

> "The creature reached him. The magnetic pull on Jacob abated. Above him, pieces of debris floated and swirled. Jacob turned over onto his back, as the creature craned it head down towards him, extending its jaw with its mouth hidden behind a layer of flesh. Its' bulbous, black eyes looked at him coldly, as the magnetic force resumed, but stronger now, pinning Jacob to the ground. The creature loomed over Jacob, its shadow enveloping him. Slowly, he felt its' dreadful head grow closer. Unable to resist, Jacob felt himself being pulled towards the creature's toothless, fleshy mouth. The creature began absorbing him. Taking in first his legs and torso. Jacob struggled uselessly. Sinking as if into quicksand. His shoulders slunk into the creature too. His neck and head barely able to move now. Sinking further" (Dodd, 2025, p103.)



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The darkness gave way to streets and bridges. The creature pursued him. He could hear it getting closer, its' twisted limbs gathering speed. Jacob's running became a mad dash. His body swerved wildly, trying in vain to outpace the thing that chased him. As Jacob turned his head, he could see the world behind him behind being sucked towards the creature. Small pieces of plaster, gravel and concrete ripped from all surfaces, swirling toward it. Jacob continued running. He could hear things being torn away behind him. They were no longer small pieces being ripped out, it was entire chunks now. Jacob began to feel a pull on his own body, as if he was magnetised. He struggled to resist this force. It didn't work, his body was pulled so forcefully that he was now flat on the ground. He scrambled desperately, trying to reach something to hang onto. Clawing at gravel. The creature reached him. The magnetic pull on Jacob abated. Above him, pieces of debris floated and swirled. Jacob turned over onto his back, as the creature craned it head down towards him, extending its jaw with its mouth hidden behind a layer of flesh. Its' bulbous, black eyes looked at him coldly, as the magnetic force resumed, but stronger now, pinning Jacob to the ground. The creature loomed over Jacob, its shadow enveloping him. Slowly, he felt its dreadful head grow closer. Unable to resist, Jacob felt himself being pulled towards the creature's toothless, fleshy mouth. The creature began absorbing him. Taking in first his legs and torso. Jacob struggled uselessly. Sinking as if into quicksand. His shoulders slunk into the creature too. His neck and head barely able to move now. Sinking further.

Jacob shook awake. His adrenaline spiked. He took a sharp breath. Leaning over, he reached into his knapsack. He took a swig of water. He lay back for a while, before slowly sitting up. As he did so, the images of his dream melted against the daylight. He waited a while longer, until he was sure their remnants had gone. Then he headed out again.

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Figure 5. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen*, Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.102-103

Following this encounter with the monster in his dream, Jacob is reticent to touch the radio again, not out of fear, but from the stultifying horror that an encounter with the real brings (Badiou, 2007). This horrific experience leaves Jacob wandering around the coast of "Port City" imagining the ancient past of the ocean's marine life, "The reds and oranges and yellows of their shells and fins. All their colours cloaked under the water, giving way to his grey world" (Dodd, 2025, p.113). Jacob cannot imagine a future for himself within the city, turning instead to a past that existed before him. After his encounter with the real, wandering through the City for now feels aimless and leaves him depressed, as reflected in the phrase "his grey world".

Following the dream there are collages of New Labour 2024 campaign idents with their colour removed turning them monochromatic, against urban spaces and ruins *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025) (fig.6. and 7). The decision I made to make the New Labour idents monochromatic is to communicate a melancholic loss, a feeling of affectlessness in the present, associating this feeling with the failure of New Labour, to deliver a future that addresses social inequalities. As cultural critic and artist Martha Rosler argues collage is a medium for "creative productive fictions", in her own work, she hopes that readers will "consider how elements got together" (Flood, Gioni, & Hoptman, 2007, p.96). Within my work the intended reading is to associate the juxtaposed elements; New Labour hollowed out the possibility of a better future, their monochromatic idents, and the photographs of the urban spaces and ruins representing the present are

the result. Those without, those who have slipped through the cracks in the name of social progress, continue to be left behind. Complicating the relationship between images is the preceding text In which in Jacob's dream he sees a monster, a figure representing Naomi, sucking away pieces of the urban and natural environment as it chases him, just as Naomi's Mark Three scanner associates these places only through their potential remaining value, and disregarding everything else. As Jamie Peck speculated after the bailout by the US government of financial intuitions in 2008-2009, neoliberalism may still be guided by the unattainable false utopia, of the "free market" argued for by Frederich Hayek; This is despite the fact that it was the poor and middle classes who were then expected to bear the risk of this market failure (Peck 2009. The response instead was to "insulate the financial regime from future blowbacks (perhaps *especially* from 'below')", at this point, neoliberalism entered a "zombie phase" the logic of the free market, is one that carries on without brain activity to direct it, lurching endlessly forward, becoming more erratic with every resurrection (Peck 2009, p.109). Naomi in a monstrous form, stands in for this violent shambling corpse of neoliberalism, ripping apart everything in her path without any discernible intention, without the ability to think anymore she absorbs Jacob out of habit.

As a creative fiction *Sunspots through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025), is however not simply critical, in poem in the dream speaks of an alternate time, of what could have been, "The time that never came". This feeling of melancholic loss finally gives way to a reversal, to a feeling of possibility for an alternate future, in the last line, "Will come again" (Dodd 2025, p.99). As Wendy Brown elaborates the melancholia of the left, comes from disintegration of socialist regimes, the loss of a possible alternative to the political economy of capitalism, and that the stacking of these losses rest on the back of many others, ultimately the left becomes "not only a lost movement but a lost historical moment; not only a lost theoretical and empirical coherence but a lost way of life and a lost course of pursuits" (Brown 1999, p.22). As Tony Cliff argues fascism is a movement borne of despair, to fight against fascisms necessities fighting against the conditions of capitalism that have created their despair (2000). Umberto Eco describes the fascist cult of death, the "Ur-Fascist hero craves heroic death, advertised as the best reward for a heroic life. The Ur-Fascist hero is impatient to die. In his impatience, he more frequently sends other people to death" (1995). The loss of the future,

undergirds in these different ways, both left wing melancholia and right wing fascism. Returning to the juxtaposition of images in *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025) (fig 6), the New Labour "Win '24" badge, as for Esther Leslie contemporary politics acts without proper democracy, as a vehicle for the careers of politicians who will only briefly take on a stance. Politics becomes a "publicity regime" in which doubt cannot exist, someone must to be blamed for the mess that has been created, and will attacked on that ground, for example claiming this is entirely the fault of the conservative party, not the fact that career politicians on the left and right both serve the interest of "enriched elites" (Leslie 2019).



Figure 6. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen,* Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.104-105

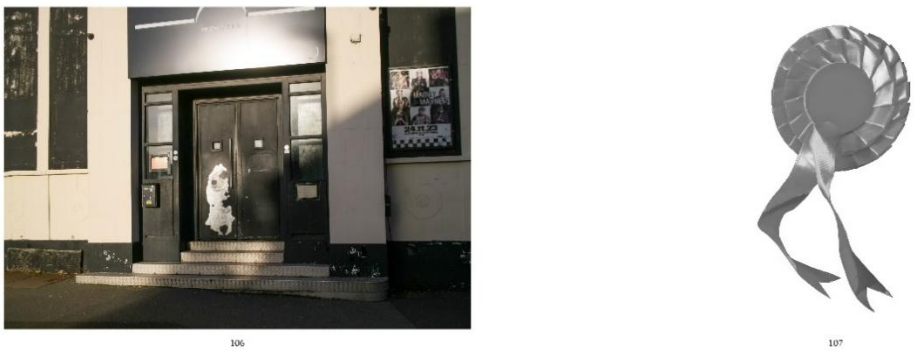


Figure 7. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen,* Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.106-107

Temporality: A Time No One Had Felt

At the end of my speculative fiction, Naomi has begun to fear that she will left in "Port City", just like the remains she has been scanning in *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025) (fig. 8, 9, & 10),

> "What would they see in those scans, the past or the future? Port City's decayed remains held the traces of another time, a time no one alive had lived through. A time no one had seen. A time no one had felt. A time that had no place anymore, but a time that continued to linger on with no one to remember it. It's meaning emptied and hollow. Or would they see only the future? What could be done with the remains of the city? What could still be extracted from the city now?" (Dodd 2025, p.125).

Accompanying the text are photographs of lights, in an encroaching darkness. With the final image having the last light of day as the sun sets. Pairing this fictional text with photographs of fading light, the photographs serve as metaphor for Port City's lost future. Semiotic researchers Torkild Thellefsen and Bent Sørensen argue by draw on Umberto Eco's analysis of metaphor and the encyclopaedia arguing that metaphor allows us to "rearrange how we think about the world, or it can create parts of our reality" (Thellefsen, Sørensen 2017, p.107, Eco 1984). Drawing from W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn (*1995), I am using photographs as metaphors that operate with a fictional text in an attempt to trade off the authenticity of the documentary qualities of photography (Martínez, 2021). To make "Port City" feel as a real navigable space. The photographs *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025) (fig.8, 9, & 10) represent the City as a melancholic space, a site of possibility that capitalist extraction has emptied out, reflected in the line "A time no one had felt." The contents of the photographs slip us by, only remaining as an indicator of a moment of time that had once been experienced by the photographer. Yet however inaccessible to experience it may be, the photograph holds something, the "traces of another time". An experience of "another time" locked within the photograph, yet to reach us, to be felt by us, but there still there nonetheless. The conscious experience of time in modernity is one fraught with dislocation and disjointedness, Walter Benjamin in reference to the city Paris of the 19th Century as described by poet Charles Baudelaire, argues that the experience seen through navigating the city of Paris through its traffic and crowds of people

creates a series of shocks. These shocks define experience in modernity, in response consciousness puts up a screen against this endless onslaught of stimuli, severing the connection between history and memory to experience resulting in “Erlebnis”, time is simply lived through. The authenticity of experience where history and memory remain connected which modernity has robbed us is described as “Erfahrung”. To take a photograph therefore is to capture a particular time whilst remaining unable to process its contents into consciousness (Benjamin & Zohn [1939] 1997). Benjamin as a philosopher positioned himself as anti-fascist, he was concerned with how art can be interpreted either as accepting the conditions of the time, reacting against them, or overthrowing them (Benjamin, 1934). The present conditions in which fascism are rising in the 21st century, during a time of Donald Trump and fake news, I would argue is what Cécile B. Evans video *What the Heart Wants* (2016) responds to with a form of weird anti-fascism. As one of the artists exhibiting in the DIS Berlin Biennale, Evans’ video narrated visions of a post-apocalyptic future constructed from paranoid fantasies, designed to seize on the pervasive mood of apathy and fatalism of the current moment. Looking at the future through the lens of a weird present, these bizarre “future shocks” seem not only inevitable but predictable. (Goldstein 2016).



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She was losing the light and still had so much to do. Continuing on the work of scanning felt as though it was taking longer than it should. Probably because she was so aware of the time passing now. The amber light would definitely be on at the office. It was bittersweet when that light came on. Knowing that the day was ending soon. But knowing that you would have another soon, to start over. There was a moment of anticipation just before the light came on. In that moment, she didn't think about the next day of work. The next day that would be the same as the last and little different to the next.

In Port City there were differences. Worrying about the gulls had given her something else to think about. In a strange way she welcomed it. Something to look out for. In the city she also she had to keep moving. Twelve hours in the office, with only the mandatory warmup group exercises to help with typing fatigue, was not the same. She was due to lead the exercises next month. It was her turn, according to the shared activity document. She took another scan. It was definitely taking a little longer now. She hadn't been looking forward to leading those typing exercises. Someone always found fault with her shared activities, some inefficiency or other wasn't quite up to the standard. The assessment graphs always barely reached the acceptable line. Last year she was part of the health and safety assessment team for decorations, a role she neither wanted nor for which had she been previously selected. Of the four chosen to decide on locations she was ranked third most efficient.

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Figure 8. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen*, Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.120-121



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She was losing even more of the light as she walked, continuing with the work. Being second last in the health and safety decoration assessment team, that was almost worse than being last, she thought. There was some potential turnaround expected for those who came last. But to be below the average, that was unfavourable. You could feel their contempt for you then. She didn't even like bean paste ale, it was too fizzy, too creamy. She just drank it because it was the celebration, it was expected. She made it last when she drank it, to avoid having to have another. No one seemed to keep count of that. They had a mandatory day of reflection following the end of the year, so to not celebrate made it seem like you didn't try hard enough that year. Reflecting on your flaws wasn't to be done until the next day. If you skipped the celebration, you must be starting early. Starting early because there were many failings, too many inefficiencies.

The value assessing department wouldn't want her if she became too inefficient, the maintenance department was likely full too, that wouldn't leave her anywhere to go. She continued on through the streets, taking more scans. How much data had already been transmitted to the office? Naomi wondered how much value they would be able to determine already. Probably not much she thought. So when would they come back for her? She continued with the work because there was much left to do. She had scanned so much of the city, but it had sector upon sector left. Would it even be worth coming back for her? The city continued to stretch on.

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Figure 9. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen*, Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.122-123



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The light was fading, it was the last of the day. After that it would be too difficult to keep working. Too inefficient. Even though she still had much left to do, she would have to stop. She wondered how many of the scans would have been transmitted to the office by now. What would they see in those scans, the past or the future? Pure. City's decayed remains held the traces of another time, a time no one alive had lived through. A time no one had seen. A time no one had felt. A time that had no place anymore, but a time that continued to linger on with no one to remember it. It's meaning emptied and hollow. Or would they see only the future? What could be done with the remains of the city? What could still be extracted from the city now?

Naomi did not see any ship coming. They wouldn't send one in the dark. If it was coming, it would be during the day and she had much more work to do. She would start again tomorrow. She was still useful. She did not want to be trapped there. Alone with the gulls. They will come back, she thought. The city would continue to stretch out, but she would comb every corner of it. The places that had not seen anyone for a long time. All is ruins, and decaying streets. All is edges and hidden spaces. All the pieces of it that had been forgotten. They will come back for me.

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Figure 10. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen*, Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.124-125

This disjointedness of experience within modernity is reflected in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) process of xeroxing his photographs, while his fictional text describes the feeling of melancholia. As Sebald's unnamed protagonist wanders across the county of Suffolk, he passes through the town of Lowesoft, commenting upon its economic decline and resulting social displacement.

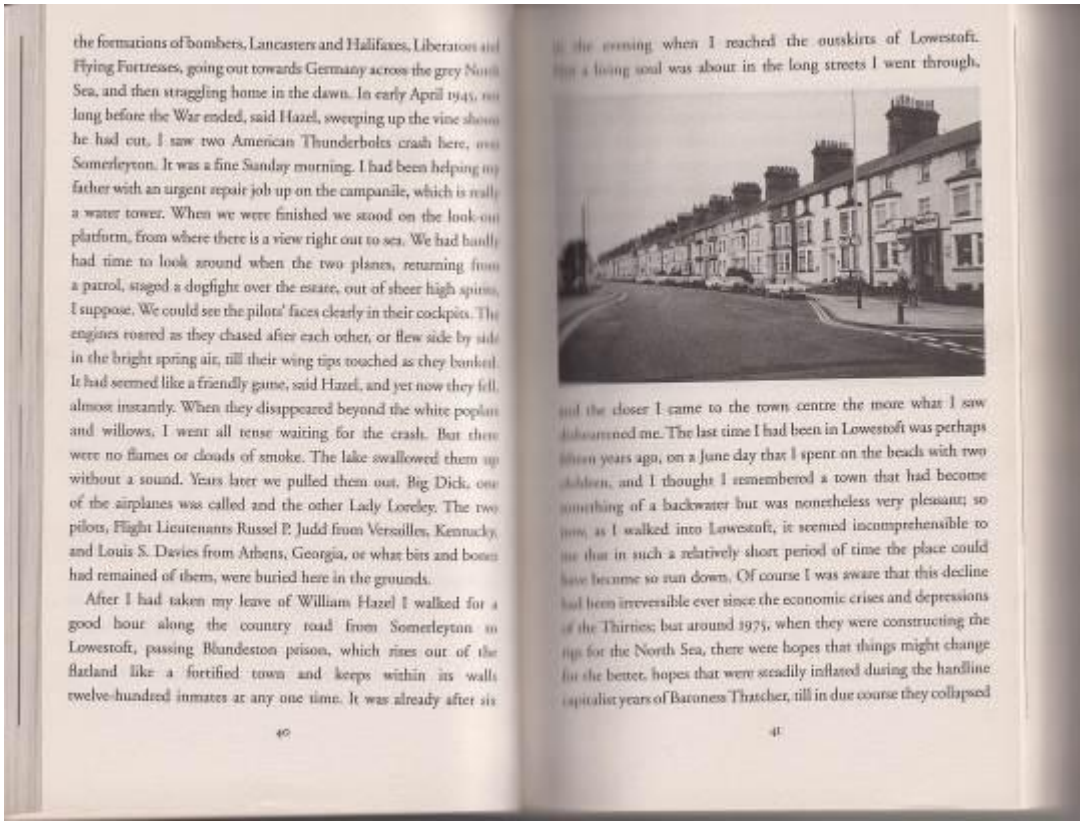
> "there were hopes thing might change for the better, hopes, that where steadily inflated during the hardline capitalist years of Baroness Thatcher, till in due course they collapsed in a fever of speculation […] Nowadays, in some of the streets almost every other house is up for sale; factory owners, shopkeepers and private individuals are sliding ever deeper into debt; week in, week out, some bankrupt or unemployed person hangs himself; nearly a quarter of the

> population is now practically illiterate; and there is no sign of an end to the encroaching misery. (Sebald, [1995] 2020, pp.41-42).

This text is accompanied by a xeroxed photograph of rows of houses on a street in Lowesoft, a town in Suffolk (Fig 11.), in order to communicate the overarching theme of capitalist extraction, the hollowing out of formerly profitable industries and towns and the displacement. As media critic Joe Milutis argued transmission is a process by which a machine or human mediate meaning. The Xeroxing of a photograph is the repetition of mediation, degrading the photograph, itself already a copy, between every Xerox, the grain of the photograph is intensified. Whereas the detail of what has been photographed, that is its referent, however is lost more between each Xerox. Sebald's process of xeroxing his photographs therefore deliberately emphasises the mechanic mediation by transmission, enhancing its grain. This creates an image that feels lost to time, its details obscured behind layers of mediation, standing in for "a reality lost to time" (Milutis, 2018). In xeroxing his photograph (fig 11) in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) Sebald is gesturing towards the melancholic loss of a future, particularly in the line “week in, week out, some bankrupt or unemployed person hangs himself”. However as poet Kenneth Goldsmith argues the process of translation is "polite and reasonable", whereas the process of displacement does not cooperate it instead has its own meaning and agenda (Goldsmith, 2014). Sebald's xeroxed photograph of the houses and street in Lowestoft, *The Rings of Saturn (1995)* (fig 11) is not a passive act of translation. Instead Sebald is gesturing toward the displacements that the slow and inevitable march of progress brings with it. As layers of grit and grain, and murk begin to overtake the image, its clarity is lost. With more repetitions of the false promise of progress in the “fever of speculation”, come more deteriorations, until we are left with nothing but the by-product of its repetition. The image will become illegible and unreadable eventually. Completely lost behind layers of mechanical displacement until only the displacement itself remains.

As philosopher Isabelle Stengers point out, we reached the end of an episode of history, that of Thatcher's economic speculation, only for it to be repeated in the global financial crisis and for this endless repetition to loom over us still in the present. Guided by the principle of economic growth which has been conflated with social progress, conflation that ignores the contradictions it creates,

social inequality and displacements. The feeling of inevitability that history will repeat itself, creates a feeling of melancholia, it is already too late to address the problem. We failed before, the echoes of our failure will continue to haunt us (Goffey & Stengers, 2015). In my own photo novel the theme of displacements and melancholic repetitions is referenced through xeroxing and collage. As Otis walks through "Port City" valuing its contents through the use of the Mark Three scanner, we are shown a constructed design of an estate agent window containing advertisements for properties to buy *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen (2025)* (Fig 12). To assemble this design, I used the xeroxing method, to print out and re-scan my own photograph of the estate agent window, cropped it to place emphasis on the advertisements in the window and placed the photograph inside a coloured frame of New Labour's campaign colour red, tinting the image green. Before printing and re-scanning again, warping both the photograph and the colours further, introducing another layer of displacement. The original property advertisements, and symbols of King Charles Coronation, that where originally clear and, high resolution become murky and grainy, areas of shadow become darker, highlights are blown out, and the image becomes marked with traces of printer lines. These mechanical displacements point towards the shrinking possibilities of the present, as each print and re-scan introduces another layer, another melancholic repetition.



the formations of bombers, Lancasters and Halifaxes, Liberators and Flying Fortresses, going out towards Germany across the grey North Sea, and then straggling home in the dawn. In early April 1945, not long before the War ended, said Hazel, sweeping up the vine shoots he had cut, I saw two American Thunderbolts crash here, over Somerleyton. It was a fine Sunday morning. I had been helping my father with an urgent repair job up on the campanile, which is really a water tower. When we were finished we stood on the look-out platform, from where there is a view right out to sea. We had hardly had time to look around when the two planes, returning from a patrol, staged a dogfight over the estate, out of sheer high spirits, I suppose. We could see the pilots' faces clearly in their cockpits. The engines roared as they chased after each other, or flew side by side in the bright spring air, till their wing tips touched as they banked. It had seemed like a friendly game, said Hazel, and yet now they fell, almost instantly. When they disappeared beyond the white poplars and willows, I went all tense waiting for the crash. But there were no flames or clouds of smoke. The lake swallowed them up without a sound. Years later we pulled them out. Big Dick, one of the airplanes was called and the other Lady Loreley. The two pilots, Flight Lieutenants Russel P. Judd from Versailles, Kentucky, and Louis S. Davies from Athens, Georgia, or what bits and bones had remained of them, were buried here in the grounds.

After I had taken my leave of William Hazel I walked for a good hour along the country road from Somerleyton to Lowestoft, passing Blundeston prison, which rises out of the flatland like a fortified town and keeps within its walls twelve-hundred inmates at any one time. It was already after six

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it the evening when I reached the outskirts of Lowestoft. Not a living soul was about in the long streets I went through,

and the closer I came to the town centre the more what I saw disheartened me. The last time I had been in Lowestoft was perhaps fifteen years ago, on a June day that I spent on the beach with two children, and I thought I remembered a town that had become something of a backwater but was nonetheless very pleasant; so now, as I walked into Lowestoft, it seemed incomprehensible to me that in such a relatively short period of time the place could have become so run down. Of course I was aware that this decline had been irreversible ever since the economic crises and depressions of the Thirties; but around 1975, when they were constructing the rigs for the North Sea, there were hopes that things might change for the better, hopes that were steadily inflated during the hardline capitalist years of Baroness Thatcher, till in due course they collapsed

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Figure 11. W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, ([1995] 2020, pp.40-41)

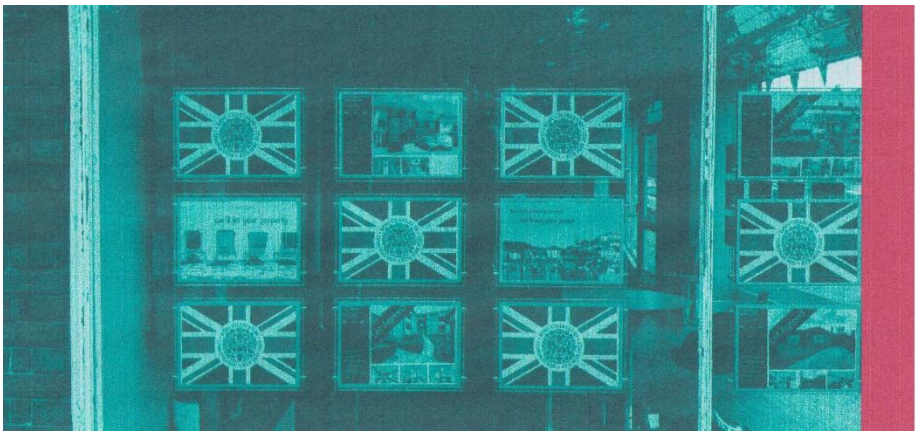


Figure 12. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen*, Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.28-29

In my speculative fiction, Jacob wanders around in a depressed state along the coast of "Port City", *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025) (Fig. 13 & 14) following his dream. In the text Jacob imagines the prehistoric past, whilst the collages show coastal ruins in Eastney beach, Portsmouth, with estate agent advertisements of properties available in that same area. These are using the same scanning and printing method as described for (Fig 12), with one key difference. The estate agent advertisement is placed as a top layer, shown to be floating on top of the ruins layer. Ruins are a returning motif in my fiction, drawing upon Walter Benjamin's allegory for the ruin as art critic Craig Owens surmises, "the works of man are reabsorbed into the landscape; ruins thus stand for history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay" (Owens, 1980, p.70). The machnic displacements of the xeroxing process heighten this sense of dissolution and decay, adding in grain, printer lines, and degrading image clarity.

As Benjamin Buchloh surmises that within montage "allegorical procedures are executed simultaneously: appropriation and depletion of meaning" (1982, p.29).The ruins as thought of as representing for lost time, stand in paradoxically for a feeling of melancholia but also for a moment in which there was a possibility for the future. With the ruins decaying into the "landscape", there was the opportunity for something else to be built. Something could have been built that was not designed for the highest profit, a space could have been created that was not subject to the ideology of capital accumulation and reinvestment. Instead the floating layer, the estate agent advertisement, the last to be Xeroxed onto the collage, the least degraded and lost to time, the most present, overriding the previous layers show this to not be the case. Ruins become beach front properties. All the layers of the collage have been placed onto one surface, flattened by the process of xeroxing, yet each layer represents a time, a temporal possibility, overwritten. The appropriation of the estate agent advertisement depletes its own meaning, it becomes part of an empty cycle of private property ownership and inevitable decay.

The connection between the unconscious and temporality however is not subject to this same screening of the conscious mind which tries to protect itself from shock. Cathy Caruth argues trauma is an "overwhelming experience" which delays our ability to respond ([1996] 2016, p.10). In other words trauma is experienced after it's occurs, this is reflected in the xeroxed layers overwriting each

other. Bringing with each xeroxed layer a traumatic displacement of the last as the trauma of the past is experienced in the present *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025) (fig 13 & 14). This is the mystery of the operations of the unconscious to always be temporally behind, what is experienced consciously in the present. Our perception of the present is therefore never accurate, something is always missed which will only be experienced as having been forgotten first. With this temporal lag, there remains an unknown possibility for the present. To feel this unknown hiding between temporal layers is to experience the weird. To render visible through montage and xeroxing *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen* (2025) (fig. 13 & 14) then is to communicate the possibility of a time experienced through an affected screen that blocks off the authenticity of history and memory.



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After two more days of walking past the city's empty buildings along the barren roads that connected them, Jacob reached the coast. He had not dreamed again and for two whole days he had not so much as touched the short wave radio. It was not that he was afraid to, as much as he was now unsure of it. It had been left at the bottom of the knapsack. A lot of extra weight to be carrying for no reason, but he did not want to be rid of it. Yet he could not face hearing the static again. Not after he had heard something else. Every time he wanted to get to his water bottle, he used a new system. One where he would first fumble around inside the bag without looking, until he could grasp the bottle. Then still without looking inside the bag, he would withdraw it. Only using his free hand to twist the cap open when the bag was fully closed. It took longer, but he did not want to look at the radio again. Not for a while.

He was thirsty again. It had rained the previous day, for a little while. Just as the sun was going down, so the water bottle was still largely full. Using his new drinking system, he rummaged through the knapsack with one hand, not fully opening the bag until he had until he had a grip on the boule. He took a small swig and then a few larger ones. Before carefully re-screwing the cap and placing it back into the bag.

There was sand and pebbles on the shore. Harder to walk on but a welcome difference to gravel and concrete. He sunk into the beach as he moved. As he continued further the density of pebbles lessened. He decided to continue barefoot, the sand warming him as he walked. Sand gathered between his toes and caked the balls of his feet.

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Figure 13. *Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen,* Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.108-109



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He looked back from the shoreline into the city, to its hard concrete walls and dying structures. Behind him waves audibly began lapping at his bare feet, the tide was coming in. Amongst the grains of sand, Jacob noticed a small brown shell. It was an ammonite. A trace of the marine life that had once been here. The sea full of tiny sea creatures, an entire eco-system, he tried to imagine it.

Jacob moved to the edge of the water, watching the waves push towards him, foaming as they came in and dragged out again. Carefully hoisting his knapsack up with one hand he leaned down toward the water and placed his other hand into the sea. Feeling the water move against his fingers, he cupped his hand, gathering the sea water and watching it drain out again. He did this repeatedly. Sometimes opening his hand to speed it up, other times closing it, letting the water drain out slowly.

He imagined the ammonite he had found, still alive, moving through the water using its tentacles. It's elaborately patterned shell still vivid with the colours, yellow and orange. The sea would have been full of them, the ammonites, gliding silently beneath the surface of the sea. Simple organisms, brainless, perhaps quite literally, their biology was so alien to ours, ancient. Yet they could create their own shell, they could move through their environment. What would they be thinking? Was it all just reaction to external stimuli? Living off ancient codes. The knowledge of how to move and live in the ocean.

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Figure 14. "Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen", Ryan Dodd (2025), pp.110-111

Conclusion

This practice-based dissertation identified and addressed a gap in research between the weird and photography. The outcome of this dissertation has been the creation of my own photo novel, *Sunspots through a Blackened Windscreen*, both this thesis and my artistic practice has been about finding new points of contact between the themes of weird fiction, photographic realism, and cultural criticism.

What emerged in tracing the possible connections between the weird fiction of H.P. Lovecraft and historical photographic realisms in chapter two, is how the weird relates to the shock of the new, and how this is a weak point for capitalist ideology, which is predicated on the repetition of the familiar. This opened up the possibility for the weird to be considered as mode of resistance, which in turn helped to find ways for it cross the boundaries between photography and cultural theory.

Critical realism, as I have argued is able to reflect the irresolvable contradictions of capitalism, but it does not offer its own methods for rejection or negation. This is where my research took an unexpected turn, chapter three argued how the method of performative walking in Laura Ford's punk zine *Savage Messiah* (2019) as a form of hauntological embodiment, together with fiction, was able to re-presence the forgotten working class of people of London who were left behind in the contradictions of social progress, creating an affective rupture, one that is weird as it pushes the past back up into present awareness.

Chapter four sought to consider the resistant potential of the body further, seeing if it could offer find an artistic response to Ballard's "soft-regime prison" in *Millennium People* 2003, where nothing can be thought beyond the limits of consumer society. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of nomad, and Timmothy Morton's notion of the weird as relating to fate, pointed to ways in which the photographs acting as metaphor for the text in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) where able to show how the nomadic fisherman untwists himself from the fate of a consumer society in decline, creating his own future.

My own practice then revisited critical realism, not as defunct form lacking in the weird, but as a framework to be built upon, one that could exploit the photograph's evidentiary power, it's realism, its attestement to a particular place and moment in time. Combining the method of montage in critical realism, together with speculative fiction, and punk zine inspired détournement as collage

into a new form. This wider approach can also be regarded as the limitations of this study, which have come from its specific focus on the intersection between speculative fiction and photography. A methodology that focuses only on the effects of mediation as a means by which to gain greater access to reality, could help to develop a new speculative aesthetic. The difficulty of such an approach however, would be in finding a way to give the photographs a critical context. The focus of this study has therefore been to orientate speculative methods towards a critique of financial capitalism and the possible futures that it may lead to.

Returning to some of the speculations made in chapter four, which focused on W.G. Sebald's image text, The *Ring of Saturn* (1995), by discussing the photograph's ability to "think" and how this connects with the parallelism of mind and body, where each is able to affect the other, there may be room for further development. As Eve Forrest argues, photography is connected with a form of, "heightened noticing" and it is not uncommon for photographers to wear down their bodies, as they walk around carrying a camera and taking photographs (2013). This is where I wish to propose another fork in the road, to argue that there are possible links between bodily exhaustion and Marxist discussions of exhaustionism, As Berardi highlights exhaustion is associated with a lack of economic growth and that, "Western culture is frightened by the very idea of "exhaustion" because it has been linked to the expectation of failure", (2017, p.236.) In the opening of my speculative fiction, Otis leaves the familiarity of his office work, he is tasked with assessing "Port City", arriving at a beach which he then proceeds to wander along for an indeterminate period of time, following no pre-determined path. In a narrated video I made of this part of the story, a view of my boots walking along a beach can be seen, to represent the movement of Otis's body. It is during this time of undirected wandering, a shift from his usual routine stuck in an office surrounded by screens, that Otis is able to briefly experience a break in time; "Discrete moments in time disappeared and the only truth of it was the continual walk forward. Bites of the journey had been taken out" (Dodd, 2025). This is an allegory for the untapped speculative power of the body, recognising some aspect of reality that cannot be patched over by capitalist ideology. If the western culture of neoliberalism fears exhaustion, perhaps it is because at the very limits of fatigue, cracks are opened up, which intensify that faint glimmer of light, the promise of social democracy, which a culture of capitalist accumulation has overshadowed.

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Website
https://www.ryandodd.co.uk/

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Sunspots Through a Blackened Windscreen hardback photo novel flick through
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