

**The Archaeological Weird:
Excavating the Non-human**



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Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated. Many of the ideas in this thesis were the product of discussion with my supervisor, Dr. Brian Baker.

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Abstract

The interaction between human and non-human can be visualised through archaeology, the excavation of material culture, which provides a unique insight into frameworks of ontological encounter. Indeed, it is the realisation of how the human subject *perceives* the non-human that is utilised by both exhibitionary institutions and adventure fiction to elicit a recognition of material ‘identity’ within a viewing subject. Both the visual framings of film and the representative reductionism of prose therefore project narratives about materiality but simultaneously imply that such an identification reflects an emergent ‘object ontology’. Encounters with ‘wonderful things’ or xeno-artefacts may thus appear extraordinary, but become tacitly ‘knowable’ through the way they are framed to the subject.

This thesis focuses on the cultural production of the artefact encounter to demonstrate how notions of ‘object identity’ reflect on human perception rather than any realisation of non-human ontology. Analysing the subjective labelling involved within the differentiation of rubbish and relic, the thesis investigates how encounter is fundamental to prescriptions of material value or worth. Literary representation draws upon such a materialist paradigm to evoke a recognition of ‘objects’ and thus provides a platform where such preconceptions can be both identified and confronted. Weird Fiction’s inclination to notions of exteriority is therefore perfectly suited to depictions of contact that eludes a distillation of macro ontologies to micro representations and rather resides within the process of encounter. Yet while Speculative Realist or Object-Oriented thought utilises the Weird to re-conceptualise ontological definitions, this thesis argues that such formations return to a recognition of non-human alterity as lying beyond anthropocentric depiction, rather than confronting the biases within the framework itself. Through artefacts, ruins, zones and xenoarchaeology, this thesis

analyses the very processes of encounter to consider how imaginative modes can help underscore the urgency of re-negotiating ontological contact points.

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Introduction

Humanity's existence is continually defined in proximity to the non-human. Our very lives are an entangled and often subconscious encounter with various non-human manifestations. Whether this is tools to be utilised, the materials they are constructed from, landscapes traversed, or the wide variety of other entities with which we share the planet (and indeed cosmos), each human subject engages with the non-human every day of their life in a multitude of diverse and vibrant ways. It becomes increasingly challenging to think of a moment where human existence does not intersect in some manner with the non-human, although such contact sites are often revealed in their absence – when objects are 'missing', tools do not work as expected, or more pressingly the planet becomes less hospitable to our existence. Increasingly signs are emerging of an impending crisis or apocalyptic turn, in which nonchalant anthropocentric thought will culminate in an irreparable and irrevocable cleft, not only a cognitive paradigm shift but one which enforces alternate methods of being. Indeed, for many this process has not only begun but is now beyond reversal. Despite our integral dependence upon wider non-human existences, the failure to realise how this lasting impact will be reciprocally felt by humanity gestures towards a specific subset of arrogant and avaricious behaviour. I argue that it is now more important than ever to analyse, challenge and reconfigure humanity's approach to the non-human, to understand and engage with the strategies which are subconsciously at play within the very *process* of encounter. By bringing such actions into conscious interrogation, this inquiry offers the possibility of comprehending the anthropocentrism ingrained within the prescription of value and worth. Archaeology is a prime medium to structure such an investigation, a discipline whose very foundations are based on material interaction and thus by extension, I argue, humanity's relationship with the non-human. This thesis proposes

that literature uniquely offers a medium in which to *imagine* and extrapolate upon the processes involved within non-human encounters to urgently re-negotiate the subconscious paradigms that lie beneath these entanglements.

Archaeology is the perfect medium for such an inquiry as it primarily deals with the vestiges of material culture. Even before the first tool was fashioned, the passage of humanity (and our evolutionary ancestors) left traces upon the non-human world – the terrain crossed, the food eaten and even the atmosphere cycled. Yet it is the birth of material culture that offers a unique insight into the various substrates of how the human subject *perceives* the non-human world around them, indeed the labels that are projected upon these apparent malleable ‘canvases’. Exhibitions, museums and other taxonomical collections thus represent the categorisation of humanity’s sustained interaction with the non-human, one which continually elicits the suggestion that each object may ‘speak’ or narrate its own history, as if this is something they emanate rather than being a function projected upon them. Each object, or indeed any non-human entity, would not consider itself in the same manner that the human subject does. Even our prescriptions are malleable – an object on exhibitionary display may have been filtered through a number of prospective labels such as clay, resource, pot, tool, offering, loot, artefact or revealed to be ersatz. Crucially, each definition depends upon the viewer’s perception; can we therefore consider that the object itself may contain an ontological reserve beyond any such projected categories?

The very language used to challenge such concepts is fundamentally entrapped within an anthropocentric framing. However, such a medium should not be disregarded for this outlook alone but rather provides a platform to understand and thus critique the materialist biases that support such perspectives. Literature is well disposed for such an undertaking as the aforementioned anthropocentric structure is utilised to represent or

elicit a recognition of material ‘identity’ within its subject. For it is the subliminal visual framings of film, or the representative reductionism of description in prose, that reveals the human phenomenological encounter with the non-human through an imaginary context. Weird Fiction pushes such a structure to its extreme by conceptualising existential definitions *outside* our interpretive frameworks, those beyond definition, visibility or human comprehension. Although there is a certain impossibility in conceiving the fundamental ‘otherness’ of non-human ontology – to think the unthinkable – this does not preclude a re-negotiation and paradigm shift in the *process* of meeting these entities. To better contextualise such an approach, this Introduction will first turn to object and ‘thing’ theory to outline the linguistic and methodological framework utilised to confront such a lacunary operation. This foundation will then be situated alongside archaeological schemas to investigate the cogency of this field in challenging prescriptions of non-human ‘identity’. Lastly, I will provide a brief synopsis of the Weird, its critical history and contextual relevance. Indeed, as archaeology diegetically surfaces in a range of Weird Fiction, alongside the emergence of ‘inexplicable’ articulations within contemporaneous factual accounts, I argue that the fusion of the Weird and archaeological resonates between cultural response and empirical investigation as a manner to consider human engagement with the non-human. Through artefacts, ruins, zones and xenoarchaeology, this thesis analyses the very processes of encounter to consider how speculative modes can help underscore the vital urgency of appreciating the re-negotiation of ontological contact points.

Confronting the ‘Thing’: Object-Oriented Ontology, New Materialism and Defining the Non-Human

Any discussion of the non-human in linguistic terms is always going to struggle against its anthropocentric foundations. Recent philosophical positions have, however, tried to consider a formation of these entities outside of such language constraints to reframe our relationship with external actors. Primarily, this thesis is interested in objects and materialism; although other extensions of the non-human exist and will be mentioned, my approach is largely concerned with the shifting perspective and changing labels attributed to ‘things’ that arise more within this medium than in relation to animals, plants, microbes and so on. In the very moment of encounter, the values embedded within the human subject are refracted in their *utilisation* of the object, which reflects upon the systemic paradigms that support such praxis. To appreciate the entity in-of-itself, however, requires a conception that exists outside such comparative and relational networks. Confronting the ontology of objects approaches the lacunary impossibility of describing the indescribable, but as Martin Heidegger suggests in *Being and Time* (1927) such inferences have become tacitly knowable:

It is said that ‘Being’ is the most universal and the emptiest of concepts. As such it resists every attempt at definition. Nor does this most universal and hence indefinable concept require any definition, for everyone uses it constantly and already understands what he means by it. (21)

Certainly, this is a circumnavigation rather than confrontation of the issue, where ‘it’ or ‘thing’ only compounds such linguistic trappings rather than confronting the nebulousness of ontology. This is not a paradox to retreat from but, as Heidegger suggests, one to meet head-on, for: “The indefinability of Being does not eliminate the question of its meaning; it demands that we look that question in the face” (23).

It is following this very suggestion that Graham Harman in *Tool Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002) conceives of an “Object-Oriented Ontology”, which is by far the most well-known undertaking that “gives birth to an ontology of *objects themselves*” (1, original emphasis). Harman’s approach seeks to consider the object itself beyond any form of relational network, to conceptualise an ontological ‘reserve’ that exists beyond interactable definition. These very notions seek to galvanise a schematic reconfiguration within philosophy and ontology, as: “The true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between *objects and relations*” (2, original emphasis). Object-Oriented Ontology builds from Heidegger’s conception of items being “ready-to-hand” or “present-at-hand”, where objects are tools at rest until a change in their interaction forces a re-negotiation of their properties. For example, a human subject often does not immediately engage with a commonly-used door handle as it is ‘ready-to-hand’ and slips into subconscious depths of awareness. However, if the handle were to break, it becomes ‘present-at-hand’ by disrupting assumed notions of intractability and consequently its presence is ‘felt’ by the subject. This external change in material properties engenders a cognitive shift which reveals the ephemeral malleability of designated labels, as the door handle may transition to ‘rubbish’, ‘broken’ or other more emotional definitions. For these objects to be at ‘hand’ also denotes a haptic mode of encounter, a phenomenological contact where ‘presence’ is defined through human utility rather than a recognition that while the label has shifted, the ‘thing’ itself has never been absent. This topic will feature more extensively in relation to artefacts in Chapter One, yet its core message implies that there must be a more fundamental ‘identity’ beyond comparative labelling, and “if this reserve cannot be *located* in any of these relations, then it must exist somewhere else” (Harman, 230,

original emphasis).¹ Although this approach attempts to broaden ontological horizons and consider definitions of ‘being’ outside anthropocentrism, it frequently fails to appreciate how the very relational network that it dismisses is an essential aspect through which materialist values can be negotiated and engaged. While philosophy may only gesture towards such ontological unknowns, literary speculation about non-human encounter provides a medium to confront such a relationship; one which begins by considering the terminology of ‘thing’ itself.

For Harman, objects are not necessarily defined as physical manifestations but rather can be termed as “real” – entities which exist beyond their interaction with another body – or “sensual” – which exist in relation to a real object. The term can be applied to not only nouns such as table, door or stone but equally to more conceptual compounds like debt, a company or the internet, so that: “All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional” (*Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, 9). Further, one object cannot exhaustively comprehend another. The human consumption of a strawberry elicits a number of real and sensual relations that fails to comprehensively define the item in-of-itself, i.e. in its own terms. Timothy Morton, who also belongs to the loose school of Object-Oriented thought, does not relegate objects to the material plane alone, but considers that the subject is also surrounded by hyperobjects – non-local and trans-temporal entities that humans struggle to engage with and often reduce to their relational effects. Taking global warming as his prime example, Morton argues that this phenomenon is so topographically and temporally distributed that human cognition

¹ Harman’s approach has been criticised for its disregard of critical work already undertaken to dismantle processes of objectification. For example, consider Rebekah Sheldon’s cogent critique in *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015) of the tension between Object-Oriented Ontology and Feminist criticism.

fails to grasp its magnitude and will often interpret it through representative examples, for instance weather pattern shifts. The internet is another cogent example, particularly as for many of its users this concept is reducible to the logo of Internet Explorer (itself a virtual ‘object’) in a hyper-reduction that obfuscates the plethora of servers, cabling, signals, users and the very historicity of data itself. Morton argues that hyperobjects are objects themselves that manifest between such mediations as: “they exhibit their effects *interobjectively*; that is, they can be detected in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects” (*Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, 1, original emphasis). Although a useful elucidation of the challenges of conceptualising non-local events, I argue that Morton’s hyperobject comes no closer to actually engaging with the phenomena it discusses but rather, like Object-Oriented Ontology, curates another inaccessible reserve. While philosophy struggles to implicitly engage with thinking outside a human perspective, I argue that is through the speculation of alternate Weird ontologies, in proximity to archaeology, that the nuances of materialist tendencies can be untangled. Consequently this thesis refers to objects as a physically encounterable entity, rather than building off the more abstract definitions from such theorists as Harman or Morton, to focus on how material culture has influenced a particular encounter with and perception of the non-human.

The engagement with holistic mediations of micro and macro perspectives will frequently arise in the upcoming analysis, particularly as the concept of hyperobjects moves analogously with the motion of the taxonomical institutions to be discussed in Chapter One. The vibrancy of such assemblages will also resonate with artefacts that ‘push’ against their representative boundaries, Weird relics whose supernaturalism defies empirical labelling. The very notion of an ‘assemblage’, taken from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s interest in the bifurcating and networked rhizomatic

structure in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), forms the foundation of much New Materialist thought.² For Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2009), assemblages become a paradigm through which to comprehend the agency of the non-human and the “vitalism” of interconnected systems: “Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23-24). Evoking Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “the body without organs”, Bennett’s “vital materialism” not only seeks to consider the distributed motions of networks but also conceptualise an emergent identity beyond the constituent parts, akin to hyperobjects. Such formations return to the relationship between the micro and macro, a dynamic which will be drawn upon throughout this thesis. Each of the aforementioned formations consider the presence and emergence of non-human ontology outside of anthropocentric constraints, yet the proposed ‘vibrancy’ that Bennett implies cannot quite step outside the human subject who *projects* notions of agency. The very language involved threatens to invest anthropomorphic qualities in these systems; while such networks as the internet may have a conceptual flow, the misattribution of this system as a transactional exchange fails to grasp the synchronous nature of data transmission. Indeed, this is a particularly salient example as the notion of ‘Object-Oriented’ originally arose from computing to refer to a system constituted from assembled blocks of code. Networks elucidate upon the integral balance of micro and macro, as the comprehension of constituent parts are often foregone in favour of an emergent function that can be utilised.

² Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise the ‘assemblage’ in relation to “exteriority”, a phrase which reflects upon a mediation of micro and macro perspectives that aligns with the upcoming discussion of the Weir’s incommensurable ontologies.

To reiterate, then, any response that attempts to confront the very anthropocentric nature of our linguistic system will, by its very designation, equally be constrained by anthropocentrism. To articulate otherwise would require a fundamental re-writing of our representative systems. While this thesis takes every effort to avoid such traps, at times this very impossibility shall be unavoidable but will, however, form the foundation of deconstructing such terms as object ‘identity’. For as Bennett argues: “It seems necessary and impossible to rewrite the default grammar of agency, a grammar that assigns activity to people and passivity to things” (119). Certainly, such notions will be confronted within the designations of waste/artefact or dead/alive which are frequently attributed to material formations. Bennett’s conception of object ‘vitality’ is undeniably indebted to Bruno Latour’s work on Actor-Network-Theory, that seeks to understand non-human relation through the role of actants and distributive agency.³ My focus will seek to avoid the potential pitfalls of implying that the human subject can ever truly attribute such radically-other ontologies with agency, to instead focus on the perception and cognitive response involved within the encounter itself. Indeed, Harman critiques the flattening process of Actor-Network-Theory, particularly as it fails to encompass the notion of *entanglement* – defined by archaeologist Ian Hodder as the mutual entrapment and dependency between humans and things – whereas: “[Object-Oriented Ontology] also allows for *non-reciprocal* relations, meaning that one object can relate to another without the other relating back to it in turn, which [Actor-Network-Theory] does not permit” (*Object-Oriented Ontology*, 134-135, original emphasis).⁴ Although Harman is more interested in

³ As suggested in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005).

⁴ Hodder defines ‘entanglement’ in *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (2012) as the interrelation and co-dependency of things and humans in a similar manner to

pursuing the imbalance within inter-object relations, I argue that non-reciprocity is also a compelling approach towards the hegemonic nature of materialist thought, one which can reflect upon the ingrained beliefs that the human subject brings to such meetings.

The human encounter with objects irrefutably draws upon internalised biases, yet by focusing on and extrapolating from these values, a critique of materialist thought emerges. Designations of ‘material’ and ‘resource’ highlight the ingrained anthropocentrism beneath the language deployed in an ongoing voracious physical and conceptual consumption of the non-human world. Bill Brown proposes a theory of ‘Things’ to step outside such ingrained materialist valuations, as these terms collapse individuality in favour of taxonomical groups where a stone is not unique, but rather representative of the whole. Brown in *A Sense of Things* (2003) notes:

The experience or history of specific objects, though, depends on a generalizable experience of the very thingness of both natural and man-made objects, which itself depends on our ideas—about thingness—no less than it depends on our senses (and our understanding of them). (2)

The encounter is thus not only an immediate navigation of material properties but simultaneously draws upon embedded beliefs. The human mind could not cognitively differentiate between every item it meets, and therefore must fall back on taxonomical groupings, a system that is perpetuated by the pedagogical institutions that force our own material culture to perform its ‘history’. Weird archaeology disrupts such conventional mediations through objects that undermine the subject’s perception of material labelling, forcing an immediate engagement with the Real. Crucially, it is

Morton’s concept of the ‘mesh’ in *The Ecological Thought* (2010). While each focuses on the interconnections of non-human and human, my approach is rather to analyse and challenge the framings of the former by the latter through moments of encounter.

human framing that has been challenged and not the object itself. Thinking otherwise implies a static materiality, as proposed by Brown that: “things are as they are because they have settled into a particular mode of being, achieved through a long history of becoming” (60). Rather it is our collective, and instantiated, assumption of taxonomical rigidity that has concretised notions of object ‘identity’ as a discrete, totalising and exhaustive attribute, one challenged by the paradigm shift of a commonly-used tool breaking. The designation of ‘Things’, therefore, risks falling into the same totalising schemas that it seeks to avoid. As Heidegger argues: “addressing these entities as ‘Things’ (*res*), we have tacitly anticipated their ontological character” (96). Even shifting in language use, the human subject still cannot escape this manner of projection, for any designation that we conceive will be translated through ourselves and never, to echo Harman, reach the heart of object ontology.

There will always, therefore, be faults with the terminology within the human and non-human encounter, yet this does not mean that we should avoid challenging it. Other critical inquiries have likewise focused on decentring the human and, while they are outside the scope of this thesis, they are worth a momentary aside. The inhuman is often considered within the Weird to refer to taxonomies of other teratological or monstrous incarnations that destabilise the human witness. Scott Brewster, John J. Joughin, David Owen and Richard Walker in their Introduction to *Inhuman Reflections: Thinking the Limits of the Human* (2000), for example, propose that “it is in this very excess of the human and the matter of its finitude that we locate ever new grounds for its non-guaranteeability: the post-human, the transhuman, the inhuman” (2). Crucially, each of these notions is defined in relation and does not decentre, but rather remixes, the relationship. My approach is more concerned with the disruption of projected material labels; the moment at which our perception of an object shifts, and the

fallibility of our taxonomy emerges, galvanising immediate moments of encounter. Neither is the term abhuman adequate in discussing the decentralising of human ontology. Originally used by William Hope Hodgson in *The Night Land* (1912) for mutated or adapted humans, Kelly Hurley argues that: “The abhuman subject is a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other. The prefix ‘ab-’ signals a movement away from a site or condition, and thus a loss” (*The Gothic Body*, 3-4). Recalling ‘aberration’, the abhuman may deviate from traditional definitions but is recognisably human at its core. To gesture beyond anthropocentric limits requires an alternate direction, one which can simultaneously discuss what I consider as a ‘Weird materiality’ (objects acting in ‘unconventional’ ways to a human view) and the fundamental ontology of the non-human. Certainly, the very notion of ‘non’ requires an opposition for its basis, yet by critiquing materialist notions in relation to proposed ideas of an Object-Oriented Ontology, I wish to engage with the *process* of encounter, to reflect upon the moment and medium of such ontological confrontations.

This methodology resonates more widely with other developments in speculative philosophy which have called for a non-human variation of the ‘post-human turn’. The collection of essays within *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015) is a particularly compelling resource that is, as Richard Grusin suggests, “engaged in decentring the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies” (vii). While this thesis does align with “theoretical movements that argue (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism”, I seek to engage with and challenge these anthropocentric notions to demonstrate how it is the shift in material labelling that causes cognitive dissonance (x). The animation of artefacts may

also appear to operate analogously to animism or Panpsychism – the belief that every object contains an aspect of individual consciousness. Despite being widely criticised for its lack of empirical basis, Steven Shaviro in “Consequences of Panpsychism” points out that: “The problem with panpsychism, for most people, is evidently one of *extension*” (*The Nonhuman Turn*, 20, original emphasis). Fundamentally, this is a conceptual defeat by which humanity is identified as the seat of ontological meaning, which cannot be ‘extended’ to other non-human entities. Rudy Rucker crosses this divide in their short story “Panpsychism Proved” (2006) in which a mind-reading tool is, unknowingly to its operator, linked up to a stone, which she perceives as “inhuman: dense, taciturn, crystalline, serene, beautiful” (*Nature*, no pagination). These interpretive qualities reinforce the belief that the human subject can ‘unlock’ the ontological secret of the non-human, to condense this unknowability into discrete categories. Artefact animation may, therefore, seem to suggest a non-human consciousness, yet invariably this is an extension of the institutional paradigms that elicit the object’s compliance in *narrating* its historicity, or more aptly humanity’s relational proximity.

The re-definition of the Real beyond humanity has also influenced the Speculative Realist movement, founded primarily by Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Smith, Quentin Meillassoux (who later moved away from this formation) and Harman – as evidenced by his companion guide *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (2018).⁵ Within this doctrine, the ‘unthinkable’ becomes a paradigm to confront the limits of

⁵ Meillassoux in *After Finitude: An Essay On The Necessity Of Contingency* (2006) rather focuses on a deconstruction of the correlationism between ‘Thought’ and ‘Being’ and argues for the “principle of factuality” to propose a “speculative materialism” where the universe, and entities within it, can exist beyond human encounter in a manner that we can imagine without ever knowing.

human understanding, to challenge the methods of interacting and perceiving the material world. Eugene Thacker's "Horror of Philosophy" series highlights how this epistemological destabilisation can provide an alternate avenue to engage with wider environmental issues, as: 'The world is increasingly unthinkable – a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction' (*In the Dust of this Planet*, 1). Recalling the aforementioned concept of a crisis point, these ecological transformations gesture more towards an underlying shift in cognitive perception, the disruption of conventional labelling. While Speculative Realism may confront the 'impossibility' or think the 'unthinkable' through the Weird, which itself resonates with both Harman and Morton, I argue it is necessary to challenge the paradigms in which we both historically and contemporaneously continue to encounter materiality. Archaeology not only studies past instantiations of material culture but mediates these relics in the present. Within these temporal interstices prescriptive labels are confronted; while objects may shift between 'rubbish' or 'artefact' is it this very malleability that opens the potential to challenge materialist notions. Object-Oriented Ontology, Thing Theory and hyperobjects may offer the possibility of thinking about alternate modes of 'being' but they falter in actually offering schemas through which such alterity may be conceptualised. Thus, while this thesis draws on a range of New Materialist or Object-Oriented theories, my approach rather highlights the salience of encounter to the formation of anthropocentric labels and how speculative imagination offers a process to reflect on a more nuanced non-human engagement.

Unearthing an Excavational Methodology: Archaeology and the Non-Human

Archaeology is an ideal medium to focus upon the encounter with the non-human, particularly objects, due to its fundamental orientation around material culture and posthumous traces. Excavational practice is not only pertinent to my methodological approach, but also resonates with object theory in its scrutiny of what constitutes an 'artefact'. Archaeology as a discipline developed as a means to 'verify' historical claims through remains, a point at which 'the past' was not dictated by narratives or doctrinal texts but rather through empirical study. Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn in *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice* (1991) outline a theoretical framework of the field itself and consider archaeology to involve "the study of the human past through its material remains" (485). For Renfrew and Bahn the notion of a 'past' would, therefore, seem to be an ephemeral concept that cannot be constituted outside the objects which are forced to act as textual reliquaries of human existence. Gavin Lucas, meanwhile, in "Modern Disturbances: On the Ambiguities of Archaeology" (2004) contends: "Archaeology is a materializing activity—it does not simply work with material things, it *materializes*. It brings new things into the world; it reconfigures the world" (117, original emphasis). Excavational practice does not solely engage or project upon non-human 'things' but itself instantiates new entities. Although there is an embedded anthropocentrism in this very terming of materialisation, as discussed in relation to object theory, such an approach considers that human interaction may bring new things into the world. While Lucas on a larger scale considers that it is the emergence of these 'past' items into the present that materialises them, for they become equally complicit within current paradigms of perception, such a terminology fails to recognise that no new 'materials' have actually been produced, but rather human cognition has shifted – no longer rubbish, materials or junk, they are 'artefacts'. Yannis Hamilakis in "The

Fragments of Modernity and the Archaeologies of the Future” (2004) considers that “[a]rchaeologists do not just save and re-construct: they select and valorize, but also ignore and destroy; they produce material realities, but they also tell stories; they too, like poets, are cultural producers working in the field of representation” (56). This very process, which I term artefactualisation, is the valorising of certain objects above others, a re-encounter that illuminates the shifting perception of physical ‘identity’ held within the subject’s gaze. Every meeting exacerbates this process by adding another layer of labelling rather than approaching an Object-Oriented Ontology, but this is a distinction which much archaeological theory has been quick to dismiss, as Lucas outlines: “the issue was making material culture the equal of text—and more than its equal: independent of it” (111). While contemporary excavational practice may idolise material culture – quite literally – as an objective and empirical paradigm to deduce the ‘past’, I argue that this too is complicit with textual production. I contend that the relationship between both is far more entangled and indeed will be a central conceptualisation of this thesis: material identity *as* text.

Artefacts themselves represent a textual projection upon materiality, both through the desire for these objects to ‘narrate’ their own experience and literary framings which imply an inherent taxonomy of material differentiation within the universe, which will form the foundation of Chapter One. Matthew Johnson in *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction* (1999) outlines how this valorisation of artefacts, as a portal to ‘recover’ the past, is more orientated towards process: “This love of artefacts, in itself, has nothing to do with archaeology in the strict sense as the study of the past. Artefacts *tell us nothing about the past* in themselves” (12, original emphasis). Although taxonomical institutions, such as the museum, exhibition or gallery, may imply that objects can tell a story about their past, crucially this is a re-

framing of encounter. Indeed, Bjørnar Olsen suggests that it is rather the presence ‘behind’ the object which is desired as “[t]hings were studied primarily as a means to reveal something else, something more important—the societies and cultures, women and men, *behind* the artefact” (*In Defense of Things*, 25, original emphasis). Thus, material culture becomes a textual representation for how objects were encountered or framed rather than reflecting upon the item itself.⁶ While traces upon an item may suggest how an object was interacted with, these framings reflect more on human perception than an authenticated history, or as Johnson argues: “*the past exists only in the things we say about it*” (12, original emphasis). The very notion of history then is a constructed narrative, even if excavation tends towards an empirical methodology to verify its claims. The presence of hallucinations, dreams or other fantasies seeks to conjure a past through these narratives, an ‘archaeological imagination’ that is haunted by cultural utilisation rather than engaging with the item itself. As Alexandra Warwick argues in “The Dreams of Archaeology” (2012) the objects that emerge through excavation are translated through the paradigms of the present in an attempt to deduce previous modes of interaction as: “In this sense, archaeology is not the simple recovery and understanding of the past, but the negotiation of objects into the present and the simultaneous negotiation of that present itself” (94). As archaeology develops as an empirical discipline, the ‘texts’ produced about the past become a form of legitimisation in which cultural, social and national formations of ‘identity’ are produced as a verifiable notion of historical claim to hegemonic rule. Excavational empiricism may

⁶ Olsen also pertinently notes that this process depends on specific cultural framings. For example, a horse effigy found in a tomb may be interpreted as being interred to provide a form of transportation in the afterlife, but could also be a sentimental memento (for either the object or reference ‘behind’ it) depending on the social frame it is situated within.

seek a distinction from apocryphal authorship but must realise that it too is entangled within the processes of textual formation.⁷

The language and terminology of excavation is a key factor within this framing, particularly as site reports were originally articulated through a more poetic and subjective manner than factual accounts. Hodder in “Writing Site Reports in Context” (1989) highlights how early archaeological documentation would often foreground a sense of narrative, compared to the overt empiricism of contemporary practice, and it is this very articulation that will surface repeatedly throughout this thesis in relation to the opening of the tomb of Tutankhamen, Nineveh and Geoff Dyer’s analysis of *Stalker* (1979) in *Zona* (2012). Post-enlightenment archaeology sought to provide a verifying method to historic claims despite this being an imaginative process. The transition to a more factual approach is emblematic of the New Archaeology movement of the 1960s, which Julian Thomas in “Archaeology’s Place in Modernity” (2004) outlines as an initiative that: “set out to create a new foundation for the discipline, separating the discovery of archaeological remains from their evaluation, and in the process removing subjectivity from archaeological reasoning” (21-22).⁸ Archaeological practice struggles with this implication of human involvement, suggesting that objectivity can only be reached through the erasure of subjectivity from the equation. Indeed, Warwick in “Ruined Paradise: Geology and the Emergence of Archaeology” (2017) argues that this

⁷ It is worth noting that this thesis is primarily exploring a Western view of materiality while other, particularly theological, notions of matter exist. As my research seeks to investigate and challenge the exhibitionary paradigms that sought to collect and document, in an overtly colonial manner, materiality post-Enlightenment, I am largely restricting my analysis to the emergence of these institutions within the West.

⁸ Thomas elucidates on this argument further in *Archaeology and Modernity* (2004).

process follows “a pattern found in geology, whereby the difficult negotiation of the presence of people and the implications of their politics leads to the attempt to erase the human figure” (49). Yet such an approach fails to appreciate the nuance of any designation of material identity being inherently a ‘text’. As object theory has outlined, any label, function or history is a subjective projection that seeks to situate the item in relation to humanity, and none of these qualities are emergent. Even if all interactants agree that a material is soft, this is a collective interpretation and not necessarily a feature of the object itself. A distinction between archaeology as an object and process emerges, one which Thomas summarises as: “it is important to distinguish between *addressing the archaeological*, in the sense of recovering ancient artifacts for use as treasure or raw materials, and *practicing archaeology*” (18, original emphasis). Is this very ‘practice’ outside of textual production however?

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to comprehensively analyse every theoretical approach to archaeology; a compelling compendium can, however, be found in *Thinking through Material Culture* (2005) by Carl Knappett. Rather, my approach is more interested in the distinction of *doing* and *referencing* archaeology and how both, I argue, return to the performativity of artefacts. Michael Shanks and Mike Pearson demonstrate the overt theatrical implications of archaeology in their book *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001) and offer a framework of “interpretative archaeology” in which they contend: “society is inconceivable without artefacts” (90). While perhaps irrevocably entangled, defining human ontology through its materialist attitudes risks a perception of the non-human as an extension of human praxis; such an outline fails to appreciate that ‘things’ will subsist in some manner long after humanity. I contend that a re-mediation of non-human encounter requires a simultaneous engagement with both the performance of archaeology and archaeology *as* performance. This

conceptualisation will form the crux of my analysis and refers not only to the valorisation of objects on pedestals in exhibitions or poetic site reports, but also the textual framings of such items as the golden skull in the opening of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) that *designate* artefactual labelling.

This perspective resonates with a recent movement in archaeology theory towards a post-processualist approach, which Shawn Malley in *Excavating the Future* (2018) defines as follows: “Abandoning the notion of an archaeological ‘record’ and its implication of a direct imprint of the past on objects, post-processualists study artefacts like texts, wherein material signifiers ‘play’ in and between the present and the imagined past” (7-8). Object encounter is always mediated through an *interface*, the paradigms through which the item is translated into anthropocentric terms. Thus, when the museal artefacts of Chapter One are forced to ‘narrate’ their experience, this is rather the text acting as an interpretive intermediary. The subjectivity of the encounter gives rise to a distinction between the ‘worth’ (the associated signification) and ‘value’ (its marketized exchangeability) of an object, where a reproduction may be held in higher regard depending on its correlated relations. Taxonomic institutions, such as the museum, however depend upon exclusivity and their spatial framing encourages the subject’s recognition of individuality and the differentiation of mimicry; as Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935) suggests, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (*Illuminations*, 223). ‘Aura’ is central to anthropocentric projections of material ‘identity’, yet I argue that a reproduction may still have ‘worth’ constituted from both the immediate contact with the object and the historic encounters that it has prospectively experienced. For as Shanks and Pearson suggest, we meet objects – especially artefacts – in an entangled network of references: “We come to an object in

relationships with it, through using, perceiving it, referring to it, talking of it, feeling it *as something*” (99, original emphasis); an entanglement which reveals the non-human, but reflects more upon human phenomenology and the semantics associated with materiality.

The process of encountering these objects, specifically the paradigms at play within material signification, provides a compelling re-conceptualisation of non-human interaction. The repletion of archaeological motifs across Science Fiction highlights the performative textuality of the artefact: dominating the skyline of *Blade Runner* (1982) or influencing architectural design in *The Difference Engine* (1990). These presences within popular culture are a particularly divisive topic for academic and theoretical practitioners, namely that this is not ‘real’ archaeology. Certainly, the tomb raiding of Lara Croft or exploits of Indiana Jones are a far cry from the trowels or excavational methodologies traditionally deployed at digs. Within archaeological discourse there has, however, been a movement to embrace such representation and to demonstrate its potential for public engagement. Cornelius Holtorf in *Archaeology is a Brand!* (2009) outlines how the presence of archaeology within popular media can help galvanise interest towards the field: : “For archaeology may be an academic discipline but even more so it is a widely recognized, positively valued and well underpinned brand” (15). This very ‘branded’ terminology is not entirely rhetorical either, particularly as the encounter with objects has become so intrinsically entangled with media, especially visual, framings that depend upon and *simultaneously* extend the subject’s perception of artefactuality. Likewise, *Key Concepts in Public Archaeology* (2017) – edited by Gabriel Moshenska – outlines not only the popular depiction of archaeologists but also the vital significance of public engagement, which resonates with Holtorf’s suggestion that: “Few disciplines are lucky enough to be similarly widely and similarly positively

represented in popular culture as archaeology is” (133). Archaeology is, as such, simultaneously influential and dependent upon perceptions of object ontology, a realisation that underscores the importance of public engagement.

This re-appraisal is implicit within the very designation of artefact status as opposed to the rubbish from which they emerge. Principally, archaeology is a discourse that engages with the *remains* of previous cultures or societies; it is from the waste or detritus that these historical secrets ‘emerge’. William Rathje pioneered the study of garbology – the archaeology of garbage – that not only permits a re-focusing of how artefacts are conceptualised, but equally outlines how excavational practice can be trained upon the material remnants of the present. Indeed, Rathje, Shanks and David Platt offer an introduction to this project in relation to these apparently diametrically opposed theoretical approaches in “The Perfume of Garbage: Modernity and the Archaeological” (2004) and argue: “In spite of garbage being the basis of archaeology, archaeologists have consistently denied or ignored the resulting implications in favor of other understandings of their project” (64). The very terminology of rubbish, waste and artefact will be recurrent throughout this thesis, but within these framings lies an embedded subjective response to the prescription of ‘life’ and ‘death’ to non-human spheres. The spaces of excavation, whether intentionally framed or ‘naturally’ occurring, are equally ripe sites of interrogation by reflecting upon the historic, current and prospective modes of object encounter; for as Rathje and Cullen Murphy in *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (1992) contend: “To an archaeologist, ancient garbage pits or garbage mounds [...] are always among the happiest of finds, for they contain in concentrated form the artifacts and comestibles and remnants of behavior of the people who used them” (10). The garbology project seeks to re-contextualise human relationships to waste and how their own interactional ‘text’ can offer alternative modes

of confronting rising ecological concerns. This contemporary urgency is also manifest within ‘exo-archaeology’ – the archaeology of space – as human wastefulness threatens to pollute an interstellar stage comparable to Earth itself. Understanding the texts produced about objects and archaeology, as well as the ‘textual identity’ projected upon them, can help humanity appreciate the significance of comprehending processes of encounter, as the calamitous detritus-storm of *Gravity* (2013) becomes increasingly less a work of Science Fiction but rather a lived reality. Alternate approaches to archaeological practice can thus afford new platforms, frameworks or interfaces to better understand material entanglements. Indeed, as Andrew Reinhard has pointed out in *Archaeogaming* (2018), within virtual spaces all matter is a digital ‘object’ that is composited by code, a horizontalizing of ontology that could catalyse further productive research.

The practice of actually *doing* archaeology, however, would seem to lend itself to a vertical approach, from which arises a more metaphorical application of excavational terminology. Sigmund Freud had a keen personal interest in archaeology which coloured his articulation of stratified psyches and influenced a wider cultural association of depth metaphors with psychoanalysis. Excavational articulation is inherently entangled in textual formation and will thus re-surface throughout this thesis, with a particular study of Freud’s ruin analogy in Chapter Two, but has largely engendered a one-way reading – as Warwick argues – “in which psychoanalysis is persistently used to read archaeology, but archaeology very infrequently used to read psychoanalysis” (“‘The City of Resurrections’: Arthur Machen and the Archaeological Imagination”, 131). Adhering to a psychoanalytic reading of object interaction risks perpetuating the very materialist discourse that this thesis seeks to avoid and, as such, I am rather focusing more on the re-mediation of encounter. Likewise, excavation offers

Michel Foucault a compelling framework to discuss the separation and relation of discourse groupings in *The Archaeologies of Knowledge* (1969). Indeed, his discussion of excavation and history evokes the very nature of ‘textual’ discourse:

There was a time when archaeology, as a discipline devoted to silent monuments, inert traces, objects without context, and things left by the past, aspired to the condition of history, and attained meaning only through the reconstitution of a historical discourse; it might be said, to play on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument. (111)

Outlining the differentiation between description and text, Foucault implies that these “silent monuments” stand in true objectivity through the immutability of their past, the absence of a narrativized history. Yet this very identification necessitates scrutiny: for while archaeology may aspire to be an empirical doctrine, in so doing this very taxonomy must and indeed does *depend* upon the production of a ‘text’, otherwise perceived as material identity.

To summarise, while archaeology looks for the person ‘behind’ the object and Object-Oriented theory seeks the ‘thing’ beneath the text, this thesis investigates an overlooked dimension: the cultural production of the artefact encounter. By examining the materialist differentiation inherent between the framing of rubbish and relic, I demonstrate how the process of encounter is fundamental to mediations of object ontology. Therefore, while approaches such as hyperobjects or entanglement offer new perceptions of the non-human, I argue that these come no closer to engaging with the ‘matter’ they refer to but risk adding another layer of representative abstraction. Rather it is by examining and challenging the processes that encourage notions of material ‘identity’ that more nuanced engagements may be conceptualised.

The Weird Turn: Taxonomy, Exteriority and Critical Reflection

The Weird, often argued to be as nebulous as its ‘indefinable’ monsters, broadly concerns the recognition of something *beyond*. Whether this is beyond definition, beyond visibility or beyond understanding, fundamentally it represents the re-negotiation of discrete boundaries. This challenge to pre-conceived notions of hierarchy instead proposes a cosmos in which humanity is, in fact, not the central component or actor and questions the validity of ontological experiences that are grounded in anthropocentric terms. The cosmic horror of a vast and uncaring universe, in which the human race is but an infinitesimal aspect, lies at the core of the most extreme examples of the Weird, resonating with the outlined micro and macro relationship that will run throughout this thesis. The destabilising or fluid boundaries of the Weird are reflected equally in the definition of the field itself. Receiving increased attention since the turn of the millennium, Weird criticism is more often steadfast in its definition of what it is not, rather than what it actually is. Drawing on Fantasy, Science Fiction and Horror, the field’s borders intertwine and draw upon a variety of influences in its presentation of a strange beyondness that may seem to be preternatural, but in fact interrogates the subject’s own claim to understanding what ‘natural’ even constitutes.

Despite this, the Weird itself has attracted a variety of attempts to canonise, taxonomize and define its allure; or alternatively, to otherwise resist such movements. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer’s anthology *The Weird: A Compendium of Dark and Strange Stories* (2011) testifies not only to the expansive history of this fiction but also attests to the attempts to catalogue, collate and marketize this aesthetic. Michael Moorcock’s “Foreweird” to the collection, however, would appear antithetical to such centripetal paradigms and instead points toward a more subjective response as: “There are no established rules for the weird tale, which is at least part of the attraction if the story an

author wants to tell can't readily be told in an established form" (Kindle version). This style, according to Moorcock, represents a freedom *beyond* the trappings of more rigid taxonomies. This lack of prescribed rules for the Weird is, perhaps, a little naive; for while indeed there may not be any steadfast 'structure', there must be a certain pervasive quality to these tales that makes them instantly recognisable. It is, however, this desire for it to remain unshackled by descriptive, or prescriptive, labelling that will resonate with the upcoming discussion of disrupted taxonomical networks. Although many Weird advocates, both critics and writers, have confronted the very 'unknowability' of the field, there is a simultaneous commercial drive which has culminated in such anthologies as *The Weird* and later *The New Weird* (2008) being produced. Interestingly, this latter collection was published before its accompanying compendium, suggesting a contemporary re-vitalisation of the Weird which looks back to such neglected authors as William Hope Hodgson, Algernon Blackwood and Clark Ashton Smith and galvanises their inclusion in 'Penguin Classic' or otherwise anthologised status. The Weird itself then runs perhaps antithetical to its supposed core tenets, in which contemporary interest in such sub-designations as the 'Lovecraftian' have become formulaic, and provides the core foundation of such philosophical movements as Speculative Realism.

In their introduction to *The Weird*, the VanderMeers argue that: "Because The Weird often exists in the interstices, because it can occupy different territories simultaneously, an impulse exists among the more rigid taxonomists to find The Weird suspect, to argue it should not, cannot be, separated out from other traditions" (Kindle version). This thesis is not concerned with producing a taxonomy of the Weird or interrogating the definition of 'weirdness', but is more interested in its applicability to critiquing materialist thought. My aim, therefore, is not to elevate or champion the

Weird, but to demonstrate how it is a useful tool with which to analyse and expose how these aforementioned concerns are encoded through a sense of the *beyond*, of re-negotiating and surveying outside the limits of human perception. This Introduction shall now, however, provide a brief overview of the Weird and why it is so suitable to this venture, particularly in connection to non-generic or mainstream literary texts. For it is the “pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddingly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane”, that will re-surface as a framework to confront and open up new dialogues within the language or framing of encounter (VanderMeers, *The Weird*, Kindle version).

The Weird tale itself has undergone much development since its initial emergence. Indeed, the field often contains a certain sense of self-reflexivity, where critics are frequently practising writers, or enmeshed in delineating their own version of what the Weird ‘truly’ constitutes. Certainly, the current state of the field owes much to the work of S. T. Joshi, whose editing and championing of H. P. Lovecraft’s fiction was instrumental to the reception of the weird tale and has influenced much of his own critical demarcation.⁹ *The Weird Tale* (1990) is a landmark text for Weird criticism and one of the first extended author studies since Lovecraft’s own “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927). Following Lovecraft’s definition of what he saw as the “Modern Masters” – Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Blackwood, M. R. James and Ambrose Bierce – alongside the iconic author himself, Joshi is a prominent force in the prospective canonisation of the Weird. Yet, from its very outset, he gestures to the Weird being as indefinable as its monsters and claims that: “I am not, as a result,

⁹ Much biographical work has been undertaken to document Lovecraft’s life and how it influenced both his writing and world view – including Michel Houellebecq’s *H. P. Lovecraft: Against World, Against Life* (1991) and Paul Roland’s *The Curious Case of H. P. Lovecraft* (2014).

prepared to define the weird tale, and venture to assert that any definition of it may be impossible” (2). Evidently Joshi feels the expectation to both introduce and dismiss questions of identification, while demonstrating how questions of classification haunt much of the field’s critical responses. Joshi equally may situate himself outside of the need to define the Weird but does not preclude himself from judging, particularly through degrees of ‘value’ or ‘worth’, those who are associated with it. Indeed his overt literary gatekeeping is evidenced by his call for “critical judgement” to supersede “the mass of casual readers” (“Establishing the Canon of Weird Fiction”, 335). My approach is not to extenuate or challenge these internal debates, but rather seeks to read the Weird beyond such critical demarcations and demonstrate its applicability in nuancing material encounter through ontologies that lie beyond the human.

Lovecraft’s “Supernatural Horror in Literature” outlines the emergence of the Weird from eighteenth and nineteenth-century Gothic. He was, however, keen to emphasise a distinction between the two, defining the Weird through a sense of inexplicability or rather a horror that disrupts anthropocentric conceptions of realism, materiality or ontology when encountered. For Lovecraft, “[t]he true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains”, which he associated with the Gothic. Rather he defines the Weird affect as such:

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or *defeat of those fixed laws of Nature* which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of *unplumbed space*. (*At the Mountains of Madness*, 107, my emphasis)

The weird tale is thus seen by Lovecraft as being “something more”, set apart from other forms of supernatural fiction by its innate drive to go further or beyond the conventional. It is hardly surprising then that Weird criticism has so resisted taxonomical scrutiny, as its practitioners identify this inexplicability as operating on a formal, rather than just narrative, level. Concrete details are absent in Weird narratives, producing a fundamental atmosphere of indeterminacy, emphasising a feeling of unease or particularly visceral reaction. Vitally, Lovecraft consolidates this interrogation as an inquisitive confrontation with the unknown, a topic which is illustrated by his Cosmic Horror tales that, at their core, explore the limitation of human epistemology. The Weird thus operates more as a *style* or mode rather than rigid or canonised genre.

Irrefutably, contemporary criticism and anthologising has catapulted the Weird into more mainstream attention, even if its valorisation is somewhat evocative of being placed on a pedestal. The work of August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, who in 1939 established Arkham House Publications to preserve Lovecraft’s fiction after his death, certainly assisted in the Weird’s legacy. Indeed, their own work would seek to further develop the proposed Cthulhu Mythos – although arguably this culminated in a more traditional and moralistic conception, signifying the expansive Lovecraftian oeuvre that other writers would come to work within. Taxonomical approaches to the field have also given rise to a host of labels that attempt to grapple with the nuances of recent or historical trends. Joshi – drawing from Philip Van Doren – considers there to be a “Golden” and “Silver” age, whereas Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy’s special issue of *Genre* (2016) proffers a classification of “old” and “new” Weird. Such approaches often represent a persistent struggle or need to classify and document such designations, which have particularly haunted the suggestion of the New Weird from its very tentative inception.

Contemporary interest in the Weird has equally been galvanised by the aforementioned Speculative Realist movement which highlights the potential of Lovecraft's fiction for disrupting notions of a quotidian Real, a representational shift that Noys terms as "The Lovecraft Event" (2007). The proposition of the New Weird, meanwhile, has received an abundant amount of critical discussion and commercial interest since China Miéville's seminal *Perdido Street Station* (2000). Equally, VanderMeer's own *Annihilation* (2014), which won the Nebula Award for Best Novel in 2015, not only received critical attention but received a mainstream filmic adaptation. Despite its controversial distribution, *Annihilation* (2018) represents a wider interest in not only staging, but simultaneously encountering, the inexplicable or indefinable in visual terms.¹⁰ The term 'New Weird' was first proposed by M. John Harrison during an online forum discussion that included participation from many influential writers in the field.¹¹ Authors, such as Miéville, have cautioned against the term's genre marketization – arguably encouraging the very rigidity of the field's elusive and indefinable nature – despite the evident wider public interest and other popularisation of a Weird turn or aesthetic. *The New Weird*, again edited by the VanderMeers, seeks to create a loose guide or springboard for this contemporary designation as a form of "urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy" but one which utilises "realistic, complex real-world models as

¹⁰ Despite being initially scheduled for a world-wide theatrical release, Alex Garland's *Annihilation* was only shown in cinemas within the United States, Canada and China after a poor test screening lead to concerns from the film's Executive Producer, David Ellison, that it was "too intellectual" and "too complicated" (Wakeman, *Metro*, 2018). The international distribution rights were meanwhile sold by Paramount to Netflix.

¹¹ An archived version may be found in *The New Weird* anthology.

the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy” (xvi). This “cross-pollination – of genres, of boundaries” epitomises the voracity of the Weird and its potential to invest or interpolate a certain strangeness – a sense of the beyond – within the formulaic or quotidian (xiii).

It is this very proliferation that makes the Weird so suitable for this project, as its general focus on decentring human exceptionalism provides a perspective that can be applied within broader archaeological examples. This “cross-pollination” – to borrow VanderMeer’s term – represents a hybridity or porousness that is endemic to much post-millennial fantastic criticism. Roger Luckhurst, for example, analyses zones as representative of the “post-genre fantastic” and accurately reflects that “[w]riting on genre has been obsessed with borders, the risk of invasion and protocols for de-contamination” (*Gothic Science Fiction*, 22). Although Weird zones will be discussed further in Chapter Three, the destabilisation of taxonomical boundaries has overt connections to an interpolated exteriority that itself challenges such anthropocentric formal perspectives. Miéville himself is drawn to the synthesis or intermingling of boundaries, arguing in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (2009) that:

If considered at all, Weird Fiction is usually, roughly, conceived of as a rather breathless and generically slippery macabre fiction, a dark fantastic (“horror” plus “fantasy”) often featuring nontraditional alien monsters (thus plus “science fiction”). (513)

The hesitation over whether the Weird should be “considered at all” highlights its intrinsic nebulousness, while offering a playful negotiation of its fraught critical debates. Miéville is acutely aware of genre border crossing, particularly as a chief figurehead of contemporary or New Weird. Although he may distance himself from the latter, Miéville’s critical success is an evident movement away from the original pulp

remit. Indeed, the popularisation of the Weird or Lovecraftian itself is evident within the video game *Bloodborne* (2015) being named ‘Game of the Year’ in 2015, advertised as “the first essential of its generation” (*Edge* review on *Bloodborne: Game of the Year* front-cover). Evidently, then, there is a contemporary attraction towards the articulation of the Weird and its sense of exteriority as a frame to consider fragmented notions of an anthropocentric Real.

For Miéville however, the “Weird does not so much articulate the crisis as that the crisis cannot be articulated” (514). Although I engage with multiple interpretations of ‘crisis’, Miéville’s definition invariably touches upon a certain glorification of the Weird – its apparent indefinability arguably attempting to replicate a constant ‘beyondness’ itself. The Weird has been progressively incorporated as a paradigm to expose such crises, the increasing ‘unthinkability’ of the current temporal moment – as termed by Thacker – or the potential of reading a “Dark Ecology”, by Morton. The very terming of the Anthropocene overtly references its anthropocentric foundations, one which Speculative Realist approaches seek to decentre as inexplicability becomes a method to narrate an epistemological turning point. Yet this runs the risk of such concepts as hyperobjects and Object-Oriented Ontology recognising this conceptual incongruity without any apparent proposal on their re-negotiation. This is an approach which Donna Haraway is keen to avoid in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), in which “Chthulucene” refers not to the popular eldritch terror but the merging of *kainos* and *khthon* – or chthonic – to refer to new, subterranean beginnings or emergences. Haraway promotes the importance of making kin, of the moment of encounter, and compellingly argues: “There is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference” (4).

Likewise, this thesis proposes the significance of engagement, that it is not enough to glorify conceptual defeat as a pedestalled alterity, but rather it is crucial to examine the processes entangled within materialist attitudes to galvanise new paradigms of contact.

Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) has become a companion to discussing notions of exteriority. For Fisher the Weird represents the "interruption into *this* world of something from outside", whereas the Eerie "is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*" (20, 61, original emphasis). The very designations of outside, presence and absence are encoded with an anthropocentric framing and thus expose such materialist, or realist, assumptions within a host of archaeological settings, whether this is: tombs and museums (Chapter One); ruins (Chapter Two); zones (Chapter Three); or xenoarchaeology (Chapter Four). Thus, while the Weird proposes ontologies which introduce an exteriority into anthropocentric framing, such an identification requires an 'inside' or 'interiority' to be situated against. It is the tension between the two that reveals the gaps or 'absences' in representation systems, one that transforms an 'object' into a 'thing'. As Fisher suggests:

That is to say, it transforms an ordinary object causing displeasure into a Thing which is both terrible *and* alluring, which can no longer be libidinally classified as either positive or negative. The Thing overwhelms, it cannot be contained, but it fascinates. (17, original emphasis)

Such a prospect is "terrifying and alluring" by invoking the epistemological curiosity of encounters that linger on the paradoxical limit of indefinability. For example, the Shoggoth in *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) epitomises how vivid immediacy can only be figured through halting expression as, in a very self-referential manner, "[t]he words reaching the reader can never ever suggest the awfulness of the sight itself" (96). Harman in *Weird Realism* (2012) argues that this failing is central to Lovecraft's

articulation as “[n]o other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess” (7). This conceptual ‘beyondness’ implies that it is the failure of representational systems to process the Shoggoth, rather than this entity necessarily destabilising notions of the Real; thus while Lovecraft may describe the creature as “vaster than any subway train”, its “shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming”, gestures to the fundamental paradox of describing the indescribable: of reducing macrocosmic ontologies to microcosmic representations (97). The fault must, therefore, lie within the representational system, yet this very ‘irrepresentability’ should act as a paradigm to critique materialist thought rather than obfuscate the whole operation.

Miéville almost provocatively suggests that “one can argue that the frenzied succession of adjectives in Lovecraft [...] is, in its *hesitation*, its obsessive qualification and stalling of the noun, an aesthetic deferral according to which the world is always-already unrepresentable” (*Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, 511-2, original emphasis). Miéville’s assessment recalls Fisher’s rupture between ‘object’ and ‘thing’, pointing towards the inadequacy of such structures where absence may stand in for presence. Although Lovecraft is well-known for his iconic ‘purple prose’ that presents such paradoxical contradictions, I argue Miéville overlooks that the world is not so much ‘unrepresentable’ as the representational system is flawed. Suggesting otherwise returns to Haraway’s separation between the challenges of approaching irrepresentability and retreating from engagement through a sublime despair. Certainly, there is potential for the Weird to challenge quotidian notions of existence – or as Miéville otherwise suggests to “en-Weird ontology”— and it is utilised by critics such as Anthony Christopher Camara to ‘darken’ matter or by Morton to ‘darken’ ecology

in response to the Anthropocene (“M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire”, 113). Such designations of ‘darkening’, however, run the risk of perpetuating the very anthropocentric framework they seek to subvert. Ben Woodard has likewise proposed the potential of the Weird to alternate materialities – evident in both *Slime Dynamics* (2012) and *On an Ungrounded Earth: Towards a New Geophilosophy* (2013) – but, like Miéville, he gestures to the ‘crisis’ without any potential framework to engage it. Finally, Benjamin Robertson in *None of this is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (2018) proposes that VanderMeer’s milieu can be approached through a notion of “fantastic materiality”, yet offers little engagement with the representative systems from which such a perception arises.

The aim of this thesis is to challenge the dominance of materialist paradigms, to re-focus the encounter with the non-human and offer a process that stimulates new thinking about ontological alterity. I contend it is not enough to recognise that projections of material ‘identity’ are forever relegated from representing the nuance of an object-focused ontology. Acknowledging such an impossibility risks retreating from the potential of radically challenging anthropocentric thought. Examining processes of artefact formation in relation to the human may reveal the entrenchment of materialist perspectives, but it is through the very alterity of the Weird itself that representational frameworks are critiqued. This thesis thus argues that the confluence of the Weird and archaeology – which I term as the archaeological Weird – utilises literary imagination to focus upon the subliminal processes that project artefactual identities and, in so doing, extrapolates upon the potential of subjective encounter as a rupture that re-frames human and non-human entanglement.

Chapter One focuses on the cultural production of the artefact and how this label is formed and challenged in a range of archaeological and Weird Fiction. Opening with

a study of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, I demonstrate the subliminal visual framing that implies artefactual status and how this interplay extends upon an instantiation of material differentiation that is perpetuated by exhibitions. Tracing the journey of artefacts from the tomb to the museum, I contend that the spatial framings in which the subject encounters objects influences modes of perception, before finally demonstrating how mummies and Weird entities are co-opted to exhibit their ‘subjectivity’ in open defiance of these institutional boundaries.

Chapter Two explores how ruins act as sites in which the flow of architectural navigation offers new frames of encounter. Opening with the mythologising of the metropolis as a form of artefact, I demonstrate how expeditionary quests for mythical or ruined cities seek a form of chthonic validation, where it is the ‘depths’ of the non-human that is activated by and thus confirms human materialist interaction. I highlight how ruins encourage non-discursive modes of navigation, where the subject cannot fall back upon routinised movement but must actively negotiate their engagement with non-human surroundings. Thus, I argue that these vestige spaces – topographies associated with a remnant of ontological, often human, engagement – capitalise on a Weird exteriority to instigate a reflection upon the consequences of encounter.

Chapter Three is orientated around the ‘zone’, an interpolated or ‘alien’ space that overruns conventional materiality and challenges preconceived notions of topographical navigation. Beginning with a brief contextualisation, I demonstrate how the zone is not only a theoretical concept but has urgent real-life applications through the termed ‘Exclusion Zone’ around Pripjat following the Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident. The zone’s irregularity unseats human exceptionalism, but still becomes a source of curiosity for those drawn to its almost archaeological mystery. Within such a frame, it is *process* that becomes crucial to reflect upon, whether it is the navigation of

‘detritus’, the landscape or existential questioning. To conclude I coin the phrase ‘glitch doppelgänger’ to demonstrate how it is the prospect of process without result that threatens to unseat the taxonomical system and thus incites a form of ontological terror.

Chapter Four approaches the prospect of xenoarchaeology and how the excavation of alien artefacts, space junk and interstellar ruins offers new frames to consider the ramifications of current materialist tendencies. The excavation of alien relics attempts to engage not only with different notions of ontology, but equally how these entities too would shape the non-human world they meet. The encounter with such artefacts thus becomes a reflection upon our own tool-utilisation and queries whether a truly alien system would be so unrecognisable that it would rather seem to represent non-human incommensurability or extraneity. Situated in relation to garbology – the archaeology of garbage – I argue that anxieties of astro-waste are very much a current concern that emanates from the defeat of thinking outside of materialism, reflected in the designations of value, worth or ‘death’ of the object. The hypothetical encounters of xenoarchaeology then are not only contemporarily relevant, but also an imaginative format to consider how the meeting with such radically ‘other’ ontologies can be processed.

Chapter One

Tombs, Mummies and Museums – Charting the Artefact from Excavation to Exhibition

The archaeological treasure is irrefutably an *extraordinary* object, something so simultaneously recognisable and different that this perceived exceptionality causes its elevation within the subject's gaze. Indeed, the danger, wonder and awe surrounding both factual and fictional excavations invest a sense of spectacle and exclusivity with these reclaimed relics. Set apart from the mundane items of the everyday, they are presented as enigmatic 'keys' to the past, inscribed with pedagogical and economic worth due to their inherently unique nature – their 'pricelessness' suggesting they are beyond imitation or reproduction. The attraction towards these objects is located within their perceived ability to stand apart from the commonplace, even though such collections may be formed out of ancient mundane items such as pots, coins or arrowheads. As such, whether for private or public collections, these relics are put on display, their exhibition suggesting to the observer, often through subliminal structures, that this spectacle is something disparate, something visually set apart and distinct from the other surrounding items: something to desire. Each of these aspects, however, emerges from the subject's perception, these qualities are not 'held' within the artefact but rather conjured through the utilisation and staging of the object that produces a specific mode of encounter. Examining the paradigms that constitute such a framing permits a greater comprehension of how artefacts are inscribed, or indeed re-inscribed, with a projected identity whose definition and foundation owe much to the processes involved within the very performativity of archaeology.

Within fantastical narratives objects which resist reclamation, often by exhibiting their own sense of agency, propose an alternate perspective of being – an

ontology located outside of the human. Such animations imply an ontology of objects themselves, as suggested by Graham Harman, in which these relics defy their very objectification and posit a claim to subjectivity. Yet, are such designations really emerging from materiality or rather a perpetuation of an exhibitionary practice that elicits an object's compliance in narrating its own history? Figures such as the mummy and its associated 'curse', for example, contest the often exploitative and dubious methods of their appropriation. Yet, frequently these archaeological horrors are utilised due to their apparent historicity, the very threat of 'time' itself, re-deploying the object with little attention to its actual past. Such designations are mediated through their textual encounter, as even the exhibition or museum evoke a form of literary imagination to help the observer conjure an associated past for the viewed item. The presence of inarticulate or indescribable horrors that push against these representative systems exposes the impermanence of such anthropocentric labels and locates them within the subject's perception – one which is consequently undermined – rather than emerging from the non-human entity itself. Consequently, this chapter will establish that the Weird artefact interrogates anthropocentric perceptions of ontology, utilising the *inexplicable* to deconstruct empirical paradigms inherent in excavation and exhibition.

Excavating Sepulchres, Tombs and Crypts: In Pursuit of Artefactual Treasure

The excavation, or 'dig', site is the typical location of archaeological discoveries, the place in which artefacts are notionally reclaimed from the obscured past and brought into the light of the present. In fiction, however, these unearthings are often more metaphorical – trading the controlled empirical environment for the dangerous and thrilling hidden chamber. Whether this is a tomb, grave or sepulchre, the reclamation

of the prized item is entwined with a sense of adventure, exploration and excitement. Despite the evident separation between fantastical and empirical representations of archaeology, both emphasise the demarcation of an enclosed space and its constituent effect upon the re-claimed object. For the excavation site this is identified by the construction of boundaries that attempt to impose a rigid objectivity and remove subjective external factors, such as cultural or political intervention. This separation is identified by Elliott Colla in *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (2008), who charts changing attitudes and practices within archaeology specifically regarding Ancient Egypt:

While they are in the field, Egyptologists seek as much as they can to create laboratory conditions. To do this, they cordon off their site as much as possible from the social, political, and cultural contexts around it, effectively creating an interior (“the dig,” where scientists work to create conditions of objective research) separated from what is around it, which becomes a place of “externalities”. (15)

Colla’s excavation ‘zone’ aligns archaeology with empirical method, but also identifies a certain topography in which such realisations can take place – one which will be echoed in the zone texts of Chapter Three. In adventure narratives, the solo explorer often breaches the sanctity of hidden spaces, transgressing such containment. The artefacts which emerge from these locations are themselves implicated in the cultural and political contexts surrounding the site or secluded chamber. As Alexandra Warwick comments in “The Dreams of Archaeology” (2012), “[t]he disturbance produced by archaeological objects is not the horror of the past, but of the recognition of the conditions of the present”; object excavation is thus the negotiation of an inferred – and also interred – past while simultaneously representing the immediate mediation of a

material present (94). For both Colla and Warwick there is a particular framework in which artefacts prospectively ‘emerge’, one which only appreciates the anthropocentric designation of labels and allows no recognition of object ontologies outside of this framing.

The contention of the excavation site as a secluded space was a concern for Howard Carter who, in *The Tomb of Tutankhamun* (1923), recounts the frustration he encountered while mediating public expectation. The opening of the tomb in 1922 was situated against a peak in Egyptology. The expectation and anticipation of such a discovery evidently informed a pursuit for an ‘exclusive’ encounter with such relics, but rather became a burden for Carter who notes that: “[t]he desire to visit the tomb became an obsession with the tourist, and in the Luxor hotels the question of ways and means became a regular topic of conversation” (64-65). The very performativity that inspired the tourist interest thus threatened the ‘exclusivity’ of its core spectacle. The necessity of this sealed-off and hermetic separation is in fact mirrored in the adventure quest – as only the protagonist, and sometimes their select companions, may reach the final chamber and witness the wonder of the artefact. Fundamentally different in their presentation, both emphasise the restricted access to the tomb; thus, in fiction, the archaeologist must progressively quest to the unknown and exclusive spaces on, and more often off, the map.

The archaeological quest moves outside of the conventional empirical methods of the excavation site into the dangerous but exciting adventure, from the static to the mobile. Frequently in these narratives the reward is a singular artefact, rather than the multitude of objects that would be expected from a traditional dig-site. These tales emphasise the importance or uniqueness of a desired relic that distances it from the collective. Although these items can be identified in a range of adventure fiction,

particularly in H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1886) through the pot-shard that instigates the curiosity of the protagonists and the treasure map in *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), I am chiefly interested in the archaeological expedition due to its repeated exaltation of a *specific* artefact, often marked as supernatural. The archetypal portrayal of this narrative is epitomised by *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), in which the archaeological academic and adventurer Indiana (Indy) Jones is enlisted by the United States army to find the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the Ten Commandments, before the Nazi antagonists. The opening section of the film, however, is essentially its own self-contained archaeological quest. Having little consequence for the rest of the narrative other than to introduce the protagonist and his rival, this segment is a microcosmic example of the quintessential artefact tale.

The film opens in Peru, as Indy (Harrison Ford) races against his rival René Belloq (Paul Freeman) to obtain a golden idol, the nature or identity of which the audience is never informed of. Following a map, Indy locates an overgrown temple full of booby traps and pit falls that must be carefully navigated to reach its central chamber. Even though the audience have yet to be informed about the golden idol, its central placement and the slow camera zoom confirms that this is the desired object, one with quite evident economic value.

Figure 1.1: Golden idol on pedestal, elevated to emphasise its status – *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)

By being placed on such an overt pedestal the idol is suggested to be something unique, or different. Singled out as the only artefact in the room, its intentional separation – both diegetically and non-diegetically – conveys a sense of value upon this object even

without context. Although there are evidently other *objects* in the room, the cinematic presentation of the idol emphasises that it is the *artefact* that both Indy and the audience are seeking, demonstrated by the latter viewing the idol through the archaeologist's gaze. As both Indy and audience must penetrate this hermetic space, this is the prospective reward for their perseverance. Within this presentation however is an overt artificiality, the idol seems almost *too* perfectly located (and guarded by traps) as if it has been intentionally placed for Indy to find. Such an elaborate theatrical exhibition seems more suited to signal to both audience and explorer that '*this is the treasure*' than any practical use, or indeed to provide an alibi to Indy's methods of cultural appropriation. Eugenio Donato in "The Museum's Furnace" (1979) observes that "[a]rchaeological origins are important in two ways: each archaeological artifact has to be an original artifact, and these original artifacts must in turn explain the "meaning" of a subsequent larger history" (220). The uniqueness of the relic is thus foregrounded to distance it from the multitude, to set it apart as something other, designated here by the pedestal. As Donato suggests, such a presentation implies that this object may educate the viewer about a far more expansive history or culture, namely that the fragment may stand in for and represent the whole. The designation of artefactual status is clearly involved in the human perception of object ontology therefore, yet curiously the idol is given no further explanation or identity: its essence is unknown and indiscernible.

Figure 1.2: Reverse shot of the idol, its golden hue is the brightest object in the room – *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)

Navigating a puzzle based on pressure-plated traps, Indy reaches the centre of the room and grapples with the final challenge of the weight sensitive pedestal. To overcome this obstacle, the archaeologist attempts to replace the idol with a bag of sand, his reasoning arguably being that, by replicating the artefact's weight, the two can be exchanged.

Figure 1.3: Indy attempting to switch the golden idol with a bag of sand – *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)

Although this seems a convincing solution, crucially this equates the two objects. An interchangeability interrogates the value of both items, and specifically that while the golden idol is perceived to hold significant worth, its position on the pedestal can be taken by the commonplace bag of sand. The designation of value is thus demonstrated as a subjective human perception, in which the object *becomes* an artefact. Yet unfortunately for Indy, this exchange does not hold, as the trap is activated. Despite the apparent logic underpinning the swap, evidently the two are not equitable, as the idol holds some intrinsic property that sets it apart from the bag of sand. In many regards this is a necessary conclusion. The idol must be distanced from the banal to preserve its unique aura, as otherwise the demarcation of object identities would become contestable: the extraordinary cannot be replaced by the mundane. Although from an objective perspective such a replacement could prospectively occur, the exchange cannot be maintained within anthropocentric framing as its introduction would disrupt economic, materialist and cultural modes of circulation based on designations of value. Invariably the fate of the artefact by the end of the film is unknown to maintain its 'exclusive' nature. As Indy runs back through the previous traps, the final common trait

of these quests is demonstrated by the destruction which ensues – there is always a repercussion for discovering or removing these artefacts from their human-defined ‘appropriate’ resting place.

Although the purpose of the archaeological quest emphasises uncovering the forgotten past and its secrets, often this is represented by reclaiming a ‘lost’ treasure for a variety of reasons. Archetypal examples range between Indy who wishes for the object to be exhibited in a museum, Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (1996-2018) who “only plays for sport”, and Nathan Drake from *Uncharted* (2007-2017) who seeks fame and riches. Each example asserts a specific, frequently economic, exchange system with the artefact, in which the object essentially represents some form of reward. Further, the ‘lost’ artefact suggests that human subjectivity unlocks the item’s purpose, indeed that its discovery re-animates the object through the gaze of the spectator as it is (re)introduced into circulatory networks. Although Indy here represents the *conservational* pursuit of these relics, even its prospective exhibition is based on its perceived value and would invariably return the object to another pedestal. This in turn would increase public interest in the museum and bestow fame upon the archaeologist, as such Indy’s intent is not as objective as it first appears. Further, at the film’s conclusion Indy refuses to destroy the titular Ark, even knowing the potential destruction it could cause; for, indeed, he too is curious to witness the ‘heart’ of the object.

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984), set canonically before *Raiders*, stands as a pedagogical experience where Indy initially searches for the Sankara stones for “fortune and glory” but by the conclusion realises that the villagers appreciate the object’s apparent uniqueness. The stones are evidently another archaeological reward, one which again has a specific ‘glow’ to signify its inherent value. Indy, however,

returns the stones to the village who revere the objects as magical symbols of fertility, as otherwise “they’d have just put it in a museum. It would have been another rock collecting dust” (1:46:05). *Temple of Doom* thus serves as an educational encounter for Indy, who notionally ‘learns’ to respect individualised and cultural value. Crucially for the village the objects are invested with a specific meaning and cannot be replaced within an exchange system; meanwhile within the archive of the museum the stones would become lost in the multitude, they would gather ‘dust’ from not being exhibited due to a perceived lack of differentiation. To the village, however, the stones have an apparent function that suggests a sense of ‘belonging’ to the object – echoing the failure to exchange sand for idol in *Raiders* – as a validation of anthropocentric discourses that transposes such values from a human to non-human frame. Thus, while both identify the stones as an artefact, the latter reflects upon wider archaeological narratives that imply a materialist confirmation of such projected purposes.

Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade (1989) further returns to many of the tropes within *Raiders* as the concluding scene forces the antagonist and Indy to locate the Holy Grail within a multitude of chalices. This challenge requires specific historical knowledge, as the incorrect choice leads to the bodily deterioration of the antagonist. Although status is once again bestowed upon the individual artefact from the object multitude, the Grail inverts the trope by in fact being the least assuming item, a “carpenter’s cup”. Similar to the golden idol, the designation of material identity rather emerges from the *perception* of the artefact – the frame of encounter – and not the object itself. The guardian’s warning that the relic cannot be removed from the sacred chamber once again implies a sense of belonging for the artefact; its removal is thus an attempted acquisition into human modes of circulation and consequently necessitates not only the shrine’s destruction but also causes the Grail, quite literally, to fall between the cracks

– it is now forever beyond the reach of humanity and appropriately ‘lost’ to them once again.

The status of the artefact requires a deeper interrogation to decipher how and why certain archaeological objects are elevated above others. As previously outlined, Donato identifies the necessary uniqueness of the artefact, the preoccupation with not only its originality, but equally its origin. For Colla the term artefact implies “on the one hand, the human rather than natural origin of an object; and on the other, its status as the product of an act of making” (9). Essentially, each item is constructed of natural resources but shaped by human hands. Both pay specific attention to the provenance of the item whose value can only be comprehended by understanding how it interconnects with wider historical narratives. The artefact must then be an object of wonder but also one which is crafted with recognisable intent, one both familiar and extraordinary. The terror of the Weird artefact, then, is the elision of such simple taxonomical categories, the rupturing of identity labels reveals a system that can only produce meaning through similarity and fails to assess the ‘heart’ of such non-human incommensurability.

Roger Luckhurst in *The Mummy’s Curse* (2012) focuses on *location* rather than *production* to define an artefact. Commenting also on Egyptian archaeology he states that “[t]he materials dug out of the ground of Egypt become artefacts only within the frame of the museum”; by exhibiting these objects within the relevant taxonomical demarcation they are recognised by and for their visual spectacle, compared to the scientific labelling of the excavation site (145). I argue, however, that both Colla and Luckhurst essentially define the artefact *through the human*. Whether it be production or display, the objects only gain status when they encounter humanity. As such, this questions whether these items are ‘artefacts’ before they are uncovered; and if not, what are they? Are they *pre-artefacts*? Each shaped object or tool would have had an original

function. As Colla identifies it would have been manufactured with specific intent. However, during excavation the item gains a second identity, it becomes an artefact. In this way, archaeological relics are a palimpsest where a new ontology is imposed upon the object during its unearthing. This blending of the past and present is a core component of archaeology, as previously mentioned by Warwick. The artefact is thus brought into modern infrastructures and circulation of economy, pedagogy and culture even as it retains and refers to its original function. Again, this returns to the human perspective, in which an object is inscribed with purpose and value and then re-inscribed once it is excavated. Yet each of these labels is merely a layer projected upon the object and does not approach a deeper understanding of the object itself but rather humanity's utilisation of and relationship with it. Such designations reside within a human perspective and have no lasting permanence beyond this frame, indeed they fail to consider the possibility of an *Object-Oriented* ontology.

The concept of locating ontology outside of the human and considering what would constitute an Object-Oriented Ontology is explored by Graham Harman in *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002). Harman draws on Heidegger's theory of objects being tools at rest, in which items are generally in stasis until employed through human contact; indeed, he suggests that humans only recognise a frequently used object, such as a door handle, when it is broken, otherwise it fades into subterranean depths of awareness. Fundamentally, "Heidegger's account of equipment gives birth to an ontology of *objects themselves*"; the concept of tool-being permits an exploration of ontology outside of the human, one which exists beyond the frames of human contact or perspective (1, original emphasis). Central to this is the awareness that objects are inscribed with human standards: each item is defined by its value and semiotic relation to a network of other objects without ever being able to

distinguish an item's core identity, as will later also be identified in the taxonomical system of the museum. Harman comments that "[i]f an entity always holds something in reserve beyond any of its relations, and if this reserve cannot be *located* in any of these relations, then it must exist somewhere else" (230, original emphasis). If the fundamental aspect of an object cannot be distilled by these relations, this requires an Object-Oriented Ontology to comprehend its uniqueness. The idol from *Raiders*, for example, is identifiable by the protagonist due to its surroundings, quite literally its proximity to other objects; yet its core identity is withheld from the audience, it holds something in reserve: something unknown. For the archaeological Weird, this manifests as the desire to define and appraise the discovered artefact, the ability *to understand* what the object was used for and why. By withholding their core essence, these objects resist interrogation and whilst they may be incorporated into human power and knowledge infrastructures, such as the museum, there remains a trace of something indefinite. The Weird particularly resonates with objects that 'sit' uneasily within exhibitions and this will form the core component of later examples. It becomes pertinent, however, to question whether the exclusivity of such inexplicable entities – one that elevates a lack of similarity or relation – rather perpetuates the very system it intends to subvert. Indeed, do these Weird artefacts merely re-inscribe the narrative of object 'identity'?

To further demonstrate the presence of Object-Oriented Ontology within archaeological Weird tales, M. R. James' "A Warning to the Curious" (1925) offers an example of the artefact uncovered by the 'curious' excavator which resists being dug up and indeed is better left alone. The object at the centre of the tale is one of three Anglo-Saxon crowns buried on the British coastline in Seaburgh as protective wards to deter invaders. Unearthed by Paxton, who follows cryptic passages and local folklore

legends, the crown is something to fear rather than marvel at. The contrast between the narrator and Paxton demonstrates the traditional expectation and the excavator's anxiety: "No one has ever seen an Anglo-Saxon crown – at least no one had. But our man gazed at us with a rueful eye. 'Yes,' he said, 'and the worst of it is I don't know how to put it back'" (*Collected Ghost Stories*, 311). Although the former replicates the typical astonishment at such a find, the evident conclusion is that the crown must be returned. The fear of retribution is conjoined with the archaeological horror, represented in the tale by a figure seen on the horizon when Paxton digs up the artefact and who will later kill the excavator despite the item being returned. For Paxton the shade "spoilt all my pleasure in my find"; appropriately, unlike other archaeological adventures there is no excitement or thrill, only the suggestion that such an item should remain interred (313). The crown therefore has a sense of unknowability; its true nature or how it functions is never revealed – recalling Harman, it holds something in 'reserve'. Threatened and eventually killed by the figure, Paxton is a victim of the archaeological horror; evidently this is an object that resists being dug up as its purpose is elsewhere, outside of human hands.

The concept of object agency and retribution is often addressed in archaeological tales, frequently tied to the idea that these objects exhibit some form of exceptionalism. Similar to the golden idol in *Raiders*, artefacts are inscribed with an inherent differentiation which prospectively emerges from within materiality, rather than the human gaze. Such a motion aims to provide an alibi to taxonomical networks, suggesting that these exhibitionary systems imply a universal 'order of things' instead of presenting a classification system to a public audience – to suggest a hierarchy in which a golden idol cannot be replaced by sand. *Raiders*'s conclusion provides a perfect example of a Weird artefact whose agency resists its human utilisers, but in so doing

proposes a divine provenance to material exceptionalism. Akin to the opening, Indy manages to find the Ark, but it is stolen by the antagonists as it is “a source of *unspeakable* power” (01:45:07, my emphasis). At the climax, the Nazis take the Ark to an unnamed island, essentially ‘off’ the map, place it on an altar and invoke a ritual to receive its blessing. Opening the Ark, the only ‘reward’ the Nazis find is sand, a parallel to the opening of the film, and are subsequently beset by inexplicable spectres that reduce those who view its interior to material viscosity. Indy, perceiving the threat of the archaeological horror, instructs his companion to keep her eyes closed – their averted gaze perpetuates an inherent unknowability, or rather divinity, which cements the object’s exceptional status. However, the Ark’s final resting place is particularly crucial. After the events on the island, the United States army take custody of the artefact and rather than placing it in the promised museum, it is hidden away from the public in Area 51: another uncharted secret space.

Figure 1.4: The Ark is contained in a wooden box, lost again amongst the masses
– *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)

Sealed up in a number-designated wooden box, the Ark is buried once again. Hidden in the collection of other mysterious boxes, it loses its artefact status by no longer being unique and individual, but part of the collective – constructing a form of ‘anti-museum’. As the last shot of the film retreats with an expanding view of the warehouse, it is unclear if each box contains relics of similarly ‘unspeakable power’ or whether the Ark is simply an object within the multitude. The film’s resolution must retain order by keeping the Ark outside of notions of value or exchange.

The artefact is therefore a very specific object: it is one set apart due to its individuality and is treated with reverence. This fascination is pushed to the extreme within the archaeological Weird by positing items that push against representational reduction through their articulation being ‘inexplicable’ or ‘indescribable’. Yet, this exceptionalism challenges whether there is a particular extraneity to the encounter that cannot be captured, or whether this inarticulateness seeks to mystify the nature of object ontology itself. The exaltation of the artefact depends upon the instantiation of a subliminal signifying system: fundamentally that the subject does not need to be told that an item is unique, but rather recognises this through encounter and thus believes that such individuality emerges from materiality. The inability to represent such contact through language, however, implies that there is something always held at reserve, a non-human otherness that cannot quite be encapsulated but rather requires subjective mediation. I argue that this exteriority is a prime medium to challenge materialist thought, one that does not naturalise anthropocentric formations but rather illuminates the centrality of encounter to material perception.

The ‘Bewildering’ Spectacle: The Articulation of Indescribable Excavations

As he broke through into the antechamber of Tutankhamun’s tomb, Howard Carter was asked what he could see, to which he famously replied “wonderful things” (84). This sense of wonder repeatedly resurfaces in archaeological fiction, the suggestion that such sights cannot be explained or contained by empirical description but must adopt a poetic, rather than prosaic, register. The opening of Tutankhamun’s tomb is an example of how factual and factitious accounts of archaeology blur together as the language of excavation is invested with the fantastical. As previously mentioned, Carter resisted the presence of archaeological tourism, yet the opening itself is infused with a theatricality

that capitalises on the spectacle of such a monumental discovery. Although Carter initially found and excavated the site, it was blocked up and retained for a ceremonial opening with his patron Lord Carnarvon and selected guests. Luckhurst describes how “[w]ith self-conscious theatricality, they arranged two arc lamps, one either side of the door, and a wooden stage to stand on, the invited handful of dignitaries sitting in rows of chairs to witness the opening” (7). Hardly an empirical process, this performativity frames ‘the reveal’ with a sense of artificial suspense and wondrous fascination. Invariably the fantastical discovery attracts the explorer by offering a private insight into untrodden lands or untapped power, often for personal gain compared to the distanced, collective observation in museums. Within this illusion lies the aspiration for exclusivity, the spectator wishes to behold something which no other eyes have seen, namely outside of the conventional. The theatricality of opening Tutankhamun’s tomb speaks to a desire for a unique private discovery, the cordoning off and delimiting of space to preserve an ‘authentic’ and exclusive opening while still possible.

The performativity of archaeological excavations was a well-established tradition by the opening of Tutankhamun’s tomb. Indeed, the desire to understand Egypt and the very projection of its ‘mysterious’ past is typified by Napoleon Bonaparte’s French campaign between 1798 and 1801 which sought to protect French trade, interfere with British access to India and produce a scientific survey of the region. Accompanying the armed forces, a team of artists were charged with commencing an empirical study of the landscape, the findings of which were published as *Description de l’Égypt* from 1809 to 1822. The Western interest in Ancient Egypt in the nineteenth century consolidates a precedent for attempting to systematise and discern the past from material evidence, rather than textual history, despite its simultaneous colonial

invocation as a source of wonder and horror. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), comments upon the performativity of Bonaparte's empirical survey:

Napoleon's military expedition to Egypt was motivated by a desire to capture Egypt, to threaten the British, to demonstrate French power; but Napoleon and his scholarly experts were there also to put Egypt before Europe, in a sense to stage its antiquity, its wealth of associations, cultural importance, and unique aura *for* a European audience. (142, original emphasis)

Said illustrates that Napoleon's campaign was not just for military advantage but to showcase the Orient to the rest of Europe – an attempt to condense its perceived inexplicability to interpretive and descriptive labels. The emphasis placed on staging its antiquity invests a certain theatrical or perceived spectacular nature within the ancient past, one also reflected in the artificial performance of opening Tutankhamun's tomb. Further, Said and Carter's accounts emphasise the colonial narratives inscribed upon these excavations, for in both the imperial explorer is the 'hero' figure who discovers the ostensibly 'lost' artefacts to preserve and relocate them into Western public or private collections.

The cultural perception of archaeology, in essence the desire to witness a grand opening, has become entwined with its representation in fantastical narratives. This is a connection that Luckhurst outlines in response to the popularisation of 'the mummy's curse' stating: "[i]ndeed, it is impossible to tell the story of Tutankhamun without noting how the press framed the story by repeatedly turning to Gothic romancers like Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard or Algernon Blackwood" (20). The cultural awareness of archaeology thus became so influenced by textual representation that this articulation would blend into the factual. In opposition to later movements, such as New Archaeology, the language of excavation strays into the extraordinary as a means to

represent the irreducible extraneity of the encounter. This synchronicity, in which fiction affects reality and in turn inspires fantastical narratives, forms the central component of the archaeological Weird, a combination best explored through one of the Weird's most famous authors: H. P. Lovecraft.

Within the Weird the fusion of exhumed archaeological horrors and the inexplicable results in tales which, rather than showing the explorer pillaging the artefacts of the past, stage a horrific realisation. "Under the Pyramids" (1924) is a prominent example, in which the narrator's encounter with the monstrous horrors of Ancient Egypt are hinted to be the inspiration to the visage of the Giza Sphinx. Ghost-written for Harry Houdini, Lovecraft's style is particularly apparent through the focus on the inarticulate. In the tale, the narrator is abducted by their Egyptian guide and finds themselves unwillingly, for unknown reasons, descending through the depths of the Giza pyramid. Their descent is not self-controlled, enforced rather than fuelled by curiosity, an experience which assaults their psychological stability: "Then the mental cataclysm came. It was horrible – hideous *beyond all articulate description* because it was all of the soul, with nothing of detail to describe" (*Necronomicon*, 115, my emphasis). Evidently this descent challenges the capacity of language to articulate such an immaterial experience, emphasising the visceral fear induced by this descent rather than archaeological curiosity or even empirical description. Although this draws on the staging or performativity of excavations, the inarticulation interrupts the typical empirical process of systematisation inherent from reclamation to exhibition.

Lovecraft's inexplicability is also reflected in factual descriptions of Egypt. Colla, in "The Measure of Egypt" (2006), discusses the attempts to define its wonders through empirical data, particularly concrete measurements, alongside the perceived incalculability of the pyramids:

In this tradition there is no object so often described as the Great Pyramid of Giza. At the same time, *there is no object so often described as indescribable*. Just as all travel accounts about Egypt depict the pyramid, most also discuss the problems the object posed for understanding, experience and writing. (272, my emphasis)

Egypt is persistently associated with being challenging to define and describe, a trait which is apt for a Weird text concerned with the radically unknowable. The lingering suggestion of an inexplicability within these monuments, despite their evident geometric shape, represents a colonial appropriation in which cultural history becomes horrifyingly ‘other’. Depicting Egypt as beyond articulation evidently rejects empirical reduction, as Said comments upon, but risks implying that there is an extraneity ‘behind’ such monuments that constantly holds them at a distance. While pushing the boundaries of linguistic representation offers a compelling resistance to such hegemonic imposition, it is crucial to remain aware of the dangers of elevating an inexplicability from which the human must forever retreat – particularly when associated with cultural history. This attention to the indescribable is also located in Carter’s description of opening Tutankhamun’s tomb:

Each [viewer] had a dazed, *bewildered* look in his eyes, and each in turn, as he came out, threw up his hands before him, an unconscious gesture of impotence to describe in words the wonders that he had seen. *They were indeed indescribable*, and the emotions they had aroused in our minds were of too intimate a nature to communicate, even though we had words at our command. (86, my emphasis)

In a strikingly similar manner to Lovecraft, Carter focuses on the “bewildered” aspect of the surveyors’ responses, their “impotence to describe” and crucially even refers to

the visual as “indescribable”. The perceived inability of language to express the situation is an invitation for the Weird, a setting which authors such as Lovecraft would populate with inexplicable horrors. Significantly the archaeological Weird resists the institutional paradigms that attempt to contain and accurately define the past through empirical research. The expression of history as too numinous to condense points towards an appreciation that celebrates a complex multiplicity rather than a systematic and totalised world view.

Although Carter’s account subsequently lists the vast hoard of artefacts that is documented and reclaimed from the tomb, there is still a hint that this somehow escapes a comprehensive understanding. Following his extensive list of discovered items, Carter comments “[s]uch were some of the objects that lay before us. Whether we noted them all at the time I cannot say for certain, as our minds were in much too excited and confused a state to register accurately” (39). The vast collection overpowers the subject, as it is too extensive for one perspective to comprehend in its entirety. Although each individual artefact can be labelled and processed, Carter’s account suggests there is a ‘bewildering’ aspect to the collective. The overwhelming materiality of the excavation recalls Gavin Lucas’ statement that “[a]rchaeology is a materializing activity—it does not simply work with material things, it *materializes*. It brings new things into the world; it reconfigures the world” (“Modern Disturbances”, 117 original emphasis). Lucas’ emphasis on the configuration of ‘new things’ highlights a materialist perspective in which these artefacts are only prescribed, or indeed superimposed, with an identity within the recognition of the human gaze – despite such a definition being dependent on an awareness of previous utilisations. The ephemerality of such terms thus cannot be avoided, indeed that these designations reside within frames of perception and do not reflect a perennial object ontology. Harman, meanwhile, argues

that “[inanimate objects] are more like undiscovered planets, stony or gaseous worlds which ontology is now obliged to colonize with a full array of probes and seismic instruments—most of them not yet invented” (19). Human perception thus projects a host of interpretive labels upon these material canvases while simultaneously inferring that such designations emerge from the object itself. Harman’s colonial language resonates with such a mode of appropriation, as its definition is dictated by the manner in which it is encountered rather than assessing its inherent properties.

While Harman draws a compelling comparison between both colonial and materialist perspectives, it is essential to recognise that it is within these frames of encounter that such attitudes can be confronted. The Weird artefact is a perfect example for such an endeavour chiefly because its apparent familiarity is warped by an incommensurable exteriority, one which forces the subject to not only reconsider what they are viewing but equally challenges their perception of what constitutes ‘reality’. The indescribable or inarticulate represents the straining of representational systems to the limit of their ability to fully reproduce the sensory experience of the encounter.

The mediation of object identity reflects not only upon artefacts but can equally be located in the ancient monuments that are ‘read’ as historical signifiers. Lovecraft’s articulation of unearthed terrors reinforces the conceptualisation of Egypt as beyond scientific survey. The Giza Sphinx, recalling Colla’s previous identification, is described as “mute, sardonic, and wise beyond mankind and memory”, suggesting that this construction existed before the ‘known’ past and, according to the tale, is connected “to depths none might dare hint at – depths connected with mysteries older than the dynastic Egypt we excavate” (109, 111). The prospect of a stratum of existence even deeper, beyond the Ancient Egypt already unearthed, reinforces the depth metaphor underpinning the conceptualisation of greater horrors to be discovered – forming a

palimpsest where scratching away the top stratum reveals the ontological secrets that lie beneath. For Warwick, however, these visual signifiers represent “a secret hidden in plain sight, just as the monuments of Egypt stood for centuries, human-made and visible, yet unreadable. There is nothing ‘behind’ it, it is present, immanent” (89). The very visibility of such relics, therefore, would seem to rather be a testament to their construction, rather than any deeper or supernatural meaning – a signifier of both past and present.

For archaeologists, such artefacts are often read as a way to engage with the human presence behind the material. Yet, I would argue that the frequent projection of something ‘behind’ the monuments exhibits a compelling parallel to Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology, that “[i]f an entity always holds something in reserve beyond any of its relations, and if this reserve cannot be *located* in any of these relations, then it must exist somewhere else” (230, original emphasis). The concept of something ‘behind’, which cannot be defined, thus suggests a sense of fundamental unknowability. The repeated recursion to a register concerned with the unspeakable bestows an independence upon these artefacts, the hint that they contain something indefinable. Within the archaeological Weird this coalesces to form the objects that cannot be understood, ones which often sit outside of human processes of circulation and linger uneasily at the periphery, resisting integration. The projection of a ‘reserve’ or something being ‘behind’ such objects, however, represents a persistent human desire to attribute an ontological meaning, that their history or identity can be ‘read’ from their material signifiers.

Incomprehensibility is a common Cosmic Horror trope and one which concludes Lovecraft’s story. Reaching the depths of the pyramid, the narrator encounters a ceremonious ritual to ‘the Unknown One’ which is suggested as being the

inspiration for the Sphinx (another reference to something ‘behind’ the visual). The reveal of the monster as it draws itself out of an abyssal portal, however, is too shocking to articulate:

Then it *did emerge* ... it *did* emerge, and at the sight I turned and fled into the darkness up the higher staircase that rose behind me; fled unknowingly up incredible steps and ladders and inclined planes to which no human sight or logic guided me, and which I must ever relegate to the world of dreams for want of any confirmation. (126, original emphasis)

Lovecraft’s lack of description rejects any handle to grapple with this threat, refusing any empirical understanding and negating any deep interrogation of Egyptian deities. The emphasis placed on “*did*” and the ellipsis indicates hesitation, where the lack of concrete signifiers suggests that the entity evades materialist or linguistic reduction and can only be experienced fragmentally within the frame of encounter. The narrator flees back to the surface, the excavator is forced to return to the highest stratum for fear of what lies beneath in the depths: the physical, ontological and epistemological Other.

The language of excavation is thus complicit with the formation of artefactual identity, as it is the frame through which the object is encountered. Despite the persistent attempt to retain an empirically delineated methodology, archaeology is simultaneously revealed to depend and draw upon the very performativity that it seeks to exorcise. Within *Raiders*, for example, it is the subliminal clues that influence artefactual designations, dependent both on exhibitionary practice and materialist differentiations. The artefact itself then is a concept that is produced through encounter, whether this is the re-encoding of rubbish as relics in dig-sites or the intentional prop placement in visual media to symbolise the non-quotidian. Artefact identity is constituted through a complicit and collective belief in the ‘aura’ of the object – that

this is an emergent quality rather than one which is projected by the subject or, more aptly, encouraged by its framing. The notion of indescribability returns to this moment of encounter to disrupt notions of representational reduction and propose an experience that cascades beyond the capacity of language. Carter and Lovecraft are conjoined through their explicit dependence on theatricality as a gesture to something ‘beyond’, ineffable, or inexplicable – the hierarchisation of the subjective over the objective. Yet, this persistent desire to hold representation at a degree removed engenders – in an echo of Object-Oriented Ontology – the concept of a fundamental ‘other’ from which the human subject must persistently retreat. It is impossible for humanity to conceptualise its complete antithesis, and only a simulacrum of this existence may be represented. Certainly, then, material articulation has the capacity to challenge totalising paradigms, but in so doing must carefully negotiate the very assumptions that it projects upon. The inexplicability so often associated with Ancient Egypt risks the elision of a culture’s historicity, to suggest an unreliability within notions of a verified past. Such a confrontation arises precisely within the ‘mummy’ which straddles object and subject boundaries. The uneasy location of mummies within exhibitionary structures thus affords a prime investigation of materialist projections and it is the emphasis on *inarticulation* that may re-instate a more immediate encounter to propose ethical and moral queries about the ‘artefacts’ animated through various permutations of textual ‘imagination’.

Mummy Mayhem: Artefactual Subjectivity and the Sacred Object

Archaeological Weird narratives confront the entanglement of history with objects, that while past traces of interaction can be deduced through physical examination these items cannot articulate the reality they have experienced. Rather, the descriptive labels

so often associated with objects become a process through which narratives are *constructed* about the past. In so doing, artefacts become containers of historical truths that the subject ‘reads’, a material presence of an otherwise intangible notion of an absent past. Excavation attempts not only to deduce the use of artefacts but, as noted by Warwick and Lucas, is simultaneously influenced by and complicit with contemporary paradigms of exchange. For the artefact to retain its unique aura, however, it cannot be allowed to fully enter this system within the subject’s gaze, and rather must be situated both at proximity and at a stage removed, comprehensible but *beyond* the ordinary. Weird narratives propose artefacts that resist such categorisation, in which supernatural agency becomes an autonomous destabilisation of their static placement upon the pedestal. Eliciting artefacts to ‘explain’, speak to or stand in for a wider concept forces the object to narrate its own associative past, a performativity reflected within the textual motif of excavation that implies such accounts are held within the object itself and emerge through contact.

The animation of objects, however, is not just a site of resistance but at times rather compounds the very boundaries seemingly being undermined. The association of materiality with agency, particularly through a supernatural focus, is itself another form of projection that imbues a vitalism to the artefact. Although many relics actively push against their very elevation and seem to rebel against their curators or excavators, such narratives cannot help but invest a lingering sense of animation in the exhibits situated within taxonomical institutions. Certainly, such tales reflect an anxiety towards the dubious ethics of exhibitionary acquisition and arrangement, but equally they project a sense of exotic supernaturalism that further perpetuates public interest in archaeological artefacts – the desire to witness a spectacle and *imagine* the potential disruption of the museum acting as a reaffirmation of its core tenets. Agent artefacts are

thus a careful interplay between resistance and recapitulation, in which an object's ontology is seemingly present but once again cannot quite escape being defined through the human spectator.

The figure of the mummy is a particularly appropriate example of this identification; its representation in a range of Gothic tales from the nineteenth century onwards emphasises both a caution towards exhibitionary practice and a lingering sense of agency that projects subjectivity upon the display. The very process of embalming bodies demarcates the mummy as a sacramental object, notionally something to be kept private and sanctified. The uneasy location of these items within archaeological exhibitions thus questions the prescription of artefact, object and subject status, alongside the ethics of public access to such items. The dehumanisation of the mummy, in which it transforms from subject to artefact, evokes a sense of spectacle and exclusivity – similar to Carter's opening – in which this prescriptive labelling strips the body of any rights or recognition as human remains. Unsurprisingly, then, the presence of the mummy as archaeological horror is tied to a form of colonial retribution, to resist the staging of remains, but equally perpetuates the spectacle of this object/subject divide. The confrontation of exhibitionary performance and ethical display will be discussed again later in the chapter; first, it is important to negotiate how the mummy not only challenges the designation of artefact status but simultaneously exposes the materialist foundations of such ontological assumptions. Mummification features within a range of ancient civilisations and evidently not all mummy narratives are interchangeable. The mummy, however, retains a certain resonance with Egyptian history and as Colla points out “the mummy became something of a national hero in Egyptian literature, vanquishing the colonizers from beyond the grave” (*Conflicted Antiquities*, 222). This figure evidently has a multitude of contrasting associations

which interact with anxieties about colonial appropriation. However, does this elevation of the mummy as colonial avenger merely reinforce the very exploitation of these cultural rites? By the twentieth century the archetypal Western mummy narrative was well established and recognised. Indeed, the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb and the subsequent death of Lord Carnarvon propagated rumours of 'the mummy's curse' and would only exacerbate exhibitionary narrative structures. Even when displayed as a form of colonial terror, there is a particular mystique associated with the mummy, the persistent threat that it may re-assert its subjectivity.

The mummy is an especially prominent figure in Egyptology and fictional depictions of Ancient Egypt; one often associated with the Osiris Ritual which arguably constitutes one of the earliest mummy tales. The god Osiris, with his sister-wife Isis, ruled over Ancient Egypt and brought prosperity to the country by revolutionising agricultural processes. However, their brother Set desired the throne for himself and murders Osiris, cutting his body up into fourteen pieces and scattering them throughout the land. Struck with grief, Isis begins a quest to bring her husband back from the dead. She travels throughout the country to reclaim these pieces and binds them together, effectively making Osiris the first mummy. Osiris is returned to life and in the process Isis conceives their child, Horus, who would later become the ruler of Egypt and return stability following Set's reign. The dismemberment and re-collection of an artefact is a common trope within archaeological fiction, as Isis' journey presupposes a particular 'arrangement' for these otherwise scattered materials. The objectification of the body in fact fuelled worship, as James George Frazer outlines in *The Golden Bough* (1890): "A long inscription in the temple at Denderah has preserved a list of the god's graves, and other texts mention the parts of [Osiris'] body which were treasured as holy relics in each of the sanctuaries" (366). The body is emphatically seen as an object of worship

and although it is placed on an alternate type of pedestal, evidently its subjectivity is interrogated. The Osiris Ritual became a process in which the land was fertilised, the dismembered body buried to promote growth in the soil. Frazer further states that Osiris is traditionally represented “as a dead king, swathed in the wrappings of a mummy”, thus also straddling the subject and object divide (367). I argue that the Osiris myth is not only an object-driven resurrection narrative but equally epitomises the liminality of the mummy – a figure which is constantly under threat of become something other, whether this is artefactual objectivity, material disintegration or the lingering potential for reclaimed subjectivity.

Mummies within fiction are not always associated with an identity, indeed these items operate more as a tool of archaeological horror than to question prescriptions of identity. Similar to the zombie, these object-mummies are stripped of subjectivity and reduced to functional definitions, whether this be to defend, patrol or attack, often at the command of another. The object-mummy is, however, not one without value; its perceived artefactual worth elides the boundary between terror and awe. Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “Lot. 249” (1892) portrays the classic horror in which several murders on the streets of Oxford are enacted by a rampaging mummy under the direction of an Egyptology student, Edward Bellingham. The tale starts with the medical student narrator, Abercrombie Smith, discovering an unconscious Bellingham in his chambers which are filled with Egyptian relics. The emphasis placed on Smith’s awe as “[i]t was such a chamber as he had never seen before—a museum rather than a study”, recalls the archaeological wonder of an exclusive encounter (*Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, 114). The comparison to a museum implies a pedagogical function, yet the room acts more as a curiosity cabinet and it is thus the artefact that influences this response from the viewer.

In the tale, the mummy is something to both marvel at and fear. Its placement in the chamber marks it as having evident value, particularly as Smith draws attention to its disruptive impact upon the wider arrangement:

In *the centre* of this singular chamber was a large, square table, littered with papers, bottles, and the dried leaves of some graceful, palm-like plant. These varied objects *had all been heaped together in order to make room for a mummy case*, which had been conveyed from the wall, as was evident from the gap there, and laid across the front of the table. (114-115, my emphasis)

Doyle foregrounds the literal centrality of the mummy to the tale: the rest of the room is arranged around the case which draws the attention of the narrator. Precisely the rest of the objects “had all been heaped together”, the collective objects are outside taxonomical framing and dismissed as having no evident value while the case is prioritised – sitting on a pedestal not too dissimilar to *Raiders*. The mummy’s body is, however, illustrated as horrifying rather than alluring, which Smith describes as “[t]he mummy itself, a horrid, black, withered thing like a charred head in a gnarled bush was lying half out of the case, with its clawlike hand and bony forearm resting upon the table” (115). The very grotesqueness of the mummy emphasises its separation from the more aesthetic artefactual container, a tool of dread rather than awe. The mummy itself is even partially out of its case. From the very beginning this is evidently an object that reaches beyond the confines of the display and will not remain inert. The lack of any apparent identity emphasises the erasure of its subjectivity, particularly compared to the elevation of the container as an evident ‘treasure’.

Indeed, even at the end of the tale, the mummy is seemingly disposable, simply an object to be controlled. As Smith discerns the source of the murders and that Bellingham is the puppet master, he takes the fight to the original chamber to destroy

the threat. At gun-point he forces Bellingham to burn the corpse of the mummy, exorcising whatever animates the body. The Egyptologist, however, pleads with Smith to spare the papyrus that contains the resurrection rite. Bellingham argues that the papyrus “is unique; it contains wisdom which is nowhere else to be found”; revealingly this object is treated as a priceless artefact as there is no replication or imitation, whereas the mummy is (on a surface level) reproducible – for there is no deeper, more discerning object appreciation present (139). The distinction between the two is emphatically that the papyrus is given a sense of identity, its uniqueness and thus separation designates it is not simply an *object* but an *artefact*, whereas the mummy is devoid of any defining traits, a commodified tool with no individuality beyond its auction number – Lot. 249. Essentially, this mummy is an object lacking any subjectivity. The erasure of an individual identity means that it cannot be differentiated from the multitude and rather becomes an interchangeable facsimile for any and all mummies. Yet, mummification was an expensive process; although not wholly reserved for nobility and the higher echelons of society, or indeed just humans, these bodies would receive the most lavish preparations to assist the passage into the afterlife. The very preservation of embodied presence for Egyptian mummies implies a sense of economic input (quality of embalming ingredients or burial gifts) that sets them apart from the multitude. The obfuscation of the mummy’s name in “Lot. 249” crucially strips it of subjectivity, transforming it into an archaeological object, where its contemporary utilisation is prioritised over its past. Vitally its value is derived from its *historicity*, the spectacle of this archaeological horror requiring an authentic visual to inspire terror. “Lot. 249” thus overlooks the expensive preparation that was invested to preserve a *specific* person rather than manufacturing a replaceable object.

The Mummy (1999), a loose re-make of the 1932 original, is a useful further example as the importance of the mummy's identity is emphasised throughout – especially as the narrative charts Imhotep's (Arnold Vosloo) active reclamation of subjectivity. Although the film is ostensibly based around the protagonists defeating the mummy, it is Imhotep's journey and identity that drives the narrative by opening with the origin of his mummification. Imhotep is a high priest in Ancient Egypt who begins an affair with Anck-su-Namun (Patricia Velásquez), the mistress of the Pharaoh, which when discovered catalyses their murder of the monarch. To escape the retribution of the Pharaoh's guards Anck-su-Namun kills herself, entrusting her lover to flee and later resurrect her.

Figure 1.5: The canopic jars are centred in the shot, emphasising them as artefacts – *The Mummy* (1999)

Imhotep travels to Hamunaptra, the city of the dead, to perform the resurrection – a ritual foregrounded through the presentation of both body and object. The central arrangement of the canopic jars suggests that these are artefacts of prominent value. Although objects, their placement within the resurrection rite suggests that they will bestow Anck-su-Namun with subjectivity once more, a transformation mirrored in Imhotep's later hunting of his own canopic jars. This plan is, however, foiled by the Pharaoh's bodyguards who mummify Imhotep alive, bury him with scarab beetles and place the Hom Dai curse on his body. Confined under the sands, Imhotep is inflicted with a form of half-life where he cannot quite die, but neither is he alive – he can only be awakened by an incantation from the Book of the Dead.

In many ways, *The Mummy* follows an archetypal archaeological quest narrative: its successive plot devices of a map to a hidden city, traps, puzzles, artefacts and an awakened archaeological horror bringing destruction to the unsuspecting explorer(s). Although the main character, Evelyn (Rachel Weisz), appears to be searching for Hamunaptra with ‘good’ intentions, the pursuit of scholarly research rather than profit, her motives are more complex than they first appear. Similar to Indy, Evie requires more field work in order to obtain academic respect and be recognised as a scholar of Egyptology. Although demonstrated to have a passionate interest in Ancient Egypt, her ulterior motive is not too dissimilar to explorers who quest for recognition. Evie mentions that she is searching for “a certain artefact”, the Book of Amun-Ra, but in Hamunaptra she fails to recognise that she is rather reading from the Book of the Dead and re-animates Imhotep. Evie’s inability to differentiate between the artefacts reinforces that the identity of the object cannot be inferred from the physical immediacy of the contact itself but rather depends upon her awareness of the item’s situation in a wider taxonomical network. Recalling the Weird, it is rather appropriate that a lack of knowledge and understanding would lead to an accidental awakening of the archaeological horror, whose malleable materiality permits his dissolution and reconstitution from sand. The film itself subverts the stereotypical archaeological reward; while the mummy is not the prime objective of the expedition, for Imhotep the recovery of the canopic jars becomes a quest of reclaimed subjectivity.

The mummy is often utilised for its grotesque visuality, the preserved flesh slowly deteriorating within its bandaged confines – a transformation which foregrounds the straddling of the object and subject divide. The first encounter with Imhotep is before his awakening, effectively whilst he is still an artefact.

Figure 1.6: The decaying and fleshy mummy body used as a jump scare – *The Mummy* (1999)

Similar to the mummy in “Lot. 249”, Imhotep’s rotting body is something to fear, utilised as a jump scare when he falls out of the sarcophagus. At this point Imhotep has no agency, his remains are subject to the scrutiny of the protagonists and even his name has been defaced from the coffin – crucially it is only when Imhotep begins to look human again that his name is re-introduced. Imhotep must return his physical body to being notionally ‘complete’ before he can reclaim subjectivity – despite his evident animation and identity while being a mummy. This transformation once again returns to a sense of liminality, yet I argue that this designation can afford further nuance to materialist interrogations. Indeed, elevating the body as a form of spectacle arguably prioritises the perspective of the viewing subject with little affordance to the mummy as artefact (object), person (subject) or the materiality that constitutes both. Imhotep is ostensibly neither human or object (although at different points in the film he is arguably both) and this very transgression would seem to reflect upon a human exceptionalism in which the mummy is only recognised as subject when it is visually ‘human’, and is otherwise a tool to utilise. Certainly, such fraught distinctions challenge the prescription of ‘transgressive’ status by foregrounding the uneasy situation of such relics within a wider taxonomical system – in effect the validity of forcing remains to act as narrative vestiges – but can more widely represent how it is the moment of encounter that influences prescriptive differentiations of objectivity and subjectivity. Thus, the mummy is a prime figure to confront projections of material ‘identity’ by opening the chasm between the viewer and artefact, forcing the former to ask: what am I viewing?

After being awakened Imhotep seeks to reclaim his power and become fully immortal, a desire achieved by reclaiming his canopic jars and assimilating the flesh of those who stole them. This quest is explicitly based around identity, as Imhotep obtains the jars he begins to return to his previous bodily form. Although he may seem omnipotent, the mummy is preoccupied with being viewed *as* human, rather than archaeological horror. Imhotep takes flesh from each of the Americans who stole the jars, reducing each person to a subsumable object whilst he progressively returns to representing a more recognisable ‘human’ subject. The first victim is stripped of his eyes; even though the mummified body did not need such an organ to originally ‘see’, evidently Imhotep wishes to reclaim and prioritise his human, rather than non-human, ontology.



Figures 1.7 and 1.8: Imhotep's first victim losing his eyes which form part of the ritual to regain his subjectivity – *The Mummy* (1999)

Evie approaches the victim, who initially has his back to the camera, before he turns to expose that he too is now both abject horror and an object plundered for its materiality. This subversion of flesh is a recurrent motif throughout the film; located also in the fear of the scarab beetle whose hard shell is deemed a valuable artefact until it awakens, burrowing under the thief's skin and killing them from within. *The Mummy* has a preoccupation with flesh as a signifier of identity, emphasised particularly by Imhotep's transformation.

Figure 1.9: Imhotep reclaims the penultimate jar and begins to look more recognisably human – *The Mummy* (1999)

Compared to the previous screenshot where the mummy was slightly off-centre, Imhotep now defiantly takes the centre, similar to such artefacts as the idol from *Raiders*, as his transformation back into a subject is nearly complete. The canopic jar in fact recedes into the background and subsequently in the film seems to be largely ambivalent to the narrative – indeed, at the climax, the jars are destroyed with little recognition as they have lost their unique identity through Imhotep's transformation. By subsuming other objects, particularly as the victims are treated as materials to appropriate rather than being individuals, the mummy itself moves away from its artefact status. Arguably Imhotep feels that he must reclaim his human incarnation to be considered a being, his assimilation of flesh is a literal reclamation of ontology.

Later in the film, Imhotep even uses the ash from his canopic jars, part of his remains and identity, to animate additional mummies. Yet these mummies are more akin to the mindless zombie as they have no agency, no name and most importantly are visually grotesque.

Figure 1.10: The animated ‘classical’ figure of the mummy – an object of terror

– *The Mummy* (1999)

These mummies are not recognised as subjects but are merely *objects* of terror to be utilised as an archaeological horror. Imhotep’s curious lack of respect for his brethren, who are his mummified priests, demonstrates that he treats these bodies as mindless peons enslaved to his will, recalling Bellingham from “Lot. 249”. Harman argues that in a Heideggerian sense “[f]or the most part, objects are implements taken for granted, a vast environmental backdrop supporting the thin and volatile layer of our explicit activities”, the human subject’s tools are paid little attention towards and thus blur into the background (18). In *The Mummy* Imhotep treats these fellow mummies as ‘implements’, merely a tool to enact his desires while instilling terror in the protagonists. As such this utilisation of ‘tools’ is recognisably a ‘human’ trait. Imhotep ironically allows the mummies’ identity to recede into subterranean depths of awareness. It is this erasure of either artefact or subject status that highlights the contentious utilisation of the mummy as performative spectacle. Throughout the film, Imhotep seeks to reclaim subjectivity, but cannot appreciate his current non-human ontology and must transform by subsuming a host of materials – including flesh – to self-identify (or be recognised as) a subject: he must present his tool utilisation. However, it is the contention of such descriptive labels that highlights the dangers of

culturally appropriating remains to act as a signifier for terror, as identity is stripped from subjects so that they are perceived as utilisable objects. As such, on the surface, the mummy challenges the prescription and elevation of artefactual status. Below this, however, lies a deeper interrogation into the way humanity encounters the non-human world, and how such a perspective can wilfully subsume subjective remains as another material canvas to project upon. The mummy's animation may thus be invoked as colonial spectacle, but within its contestation of categorial limits there is the potential to focus further on how the rupturing of taxonomical delineation seeks new mediations of object encounter.

Private to Public: The Acquisition, Arrangement and Disruption of the Exhibition

Artefactual identity is intuited not only through material properties but equally the spaces in which objects are unearthed and later exhibited. Indeed, while the study of materiality may help the subject understand the composition and later utilisation of an item, it is the spatial framing that ultimately designates perceptions of worth – rubbish, tool, material, artefact. The acquisition and arrangement of these objects is thus central to the suggestion that their structuring constitutes and reflects upon a wider 'order of things', that such a concept emerges from materiality and not the gaze of the viewing subject. Exhibitionary frameworks attempt to perpetuate such a discourse. Although primarily intended as a pedagogical institution, locations such as the museum depend upon textual formation not only to elicit a sense of spectacle but also to relate the object to the subject. Such theatricality requires a careful balance of presence and absence, processional flow and spatial arrangement – a taxonomical system that guides its visitors in the belief of a superimposable and illusionary narrative transposed upon the non-human. The disruption of the museal setting, principally by artefacts that push

against their representational constraints, thus exposes these underpinning structures and acts as a paradigm to contest the collapsing of the macrocosmic universe to microcosmic fragments.

Exhibitions seek to present objects with a specific value to its audience; intended to have a pedagogical function, these spaces direct a crowd through a succession of rooms with the intent of conjuring a chronological or ‘progressive’ movement – that each item is a piece that helps speak to a wider narrative whole. Their arrangement is influenced by and upholds the construction of a unique ‘aura’ that surrounds artefacts, often withholding the iconic central piece until the final chamber so that each previous item is forced into a subservient and constituent role. Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935) discusses this notion of ‘aura’ as dependent upon the projected ‘past’ that an item has accumulated as “[t]he authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (*Illuminations*, 223). Encounter thus becomes the foundation for prescriptions of artefact identity, as an object’s experience of time and the traces upon it are presented as a narrativized history to the viewing subject. The ‘worth’ of an object is distanced from its economic value, thus a reproduction may accumulate semantic weight for its owner that outstrips the original due to its unique temporal accumulation. Aura and authenticity are vital aspects to the interpretation of material identity, yet even these aspects are dependent upon the very subjective medium of encounter. It is precisely this performative interpretability that the exhibition depends upon, the production of an associated ‘text’ that is presented as emerging from the item rather than its situational framing. Exhibitions and museums try to carefully shape the subject’s contact with the artefact to influence prescriptions of material value. The

acquisition and arrangement of such objects is thus integral to their presentation and must be first considered to illuminate the importance of their disruption.

The Ark at the end of *Raiders* is a perfect representation of access and visibility of the artefact. Although the Ark is buried amongst many other objects in an exclusive access warehouse, this careful arrangement is disputed within *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), where a chase scene leads to the partial destruction of one of the wooden boxes, revealing the golden artefact within (Figure 1.11). This unacknowledged uncovering, the Ark's second, is only given a brief amount of screen time – a self-referential nod to the previous film.

**Figure 1.11: Camera zooming in for a close-up of the seemingly forgotten Ark –
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull (2008)**

Evidently the Ark has been hoarded in a form of anti-museum; although catalogued, it is intentionally kept out of public sight. Yet the small amount of screen time dedicated to its reveal highlights its obscurity, it is deemed valuable enough to be protected but is intentionally re-buried amidst the myriad of other wooden boxes and their unknown contents. Luckhurst suggests that “[t]he materials dug out of the ground of Egypt become artefacts only within the frame of the museum”; if location thus dictates object identity, the Ark is no longer an artefact by the conclusion of *Raiders* (145). The Ark is made visible to the camera to elicit a recognition of its artefactual status, yet such a response depends upon the viewer's awareness of *Raiders* and thus what the object is. The artefact, to extend Luckhurst's point, is not constructed by the exhibitionary framing but rather emerges from the encounter – the moment it is seen and collectively agreed to be as such, a paradigm which museums consciously utilise. The Ark depends

upon a recognition of its acquisition (or origin in *Raiders*), its arrangement (seclusion in Area 51) and the disruption of structured order to allow its artefactual status to be recognised. Focusing upon the mummy highlighted the impermanence of prescribed material labels and the projection of identity upon the artefact. The disruption of the exhibition thus opens an interrogation of prescriptions of object 'value' and 'worth' by exposing the underlying taxonomical system and the prospect of a non-quotidian extraneity that it cannot contain.

Acquisition: The Procurement of Artefacts and Curios

Although the methods involved in acquiring an artefact for exhibition are often deliberately hidden, indeed the upholding of a 'priceless' aura must obfuscate such elements, it is a crucial part of the exhibiting process. The provenance of a relic is central to the formation of its interpreted identity; its value derived from being a 'part' that can speak to a larger collective 'whole' historical narrative. The processes involved in acquiring these items may often be concealed, yet they reflect the political and power structures inherent in the organisation of, particularly archaeological, artefacts. The British Museum is appropriate for this interrogation, as although its title designates ownership, or the emergence of a national claim, its displays are rather constituent of an imperial encounter with the wider world. The centripetal movement of objects to a designated hegemonic centre constructs a space in which macro-historicity is translated into micro representations. Invariably, such contentious exhibition is underwritten by colonial paradigms of appropriation and often returns to the debate of where – if indeed anywhere – do these objects belong. The importance of aura and encounter are thus represented by the human interaction and positioning of objects, of which the British

Museum's practice in the nineteenth century is a prominent example of how acquisition shapes perceptions of artefact ontology.

Napoleon's campaign in Egypt was not primarily aimed at empirically studying the landscape, but rather intended for military conquest and preserving the stability of French trade routes. Unsurprisingly, this endeavour equally spurred the appropriation of many Egyptian relics by the army, essentially taken from the country as a form of colonial 'loot'. The British defeat of Napoleon in Egypt would see these artefacts transition in ownership, effectively moving from one empire to another. Often these treasures were traded by the French military in exchange for free passage, which led to such historic pieces as the Rosetta Stone, an item which would be central to the deciphering of hieroglyphics, passing into British control.¹² However, this was not the only contentious procurement of Egyptian artefacts in the period; in fact, this acquisition formed part of a larger initiative to expand the museum's collections. Obscuring and adapting object identity as required, the British Museum's representative in Egypt, Wallis Budge, during the twentieth century used several covert methods to ship items back to Britain. As Luckhurst points out, "[a]s ancient artefacts, export was banned, but when they were reclassified as 'bone manure' Wallis Budge was able to transport them legally" (138). The historical appropriation of items into the museum's collections demonstrably reflects how imperial desire shapes colonial legality. The manipulation of object ontology is apparent. The ease with which Budge imposes a new identity upon these items to pass them through export laws represents the malleability of artefact status. Furthermore, the British Museum received an influx of relics from private collections following popular fear of the mummy's curse, propagated by media

¹² An extensive discussion of Napoleon's defeat and its consequences for the British Museum can be found in Luckhurst's *The Mummy's Curse*.

reports after the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb and Lord Carnarvon's death. The publicising of Tutankhamun's excavation would, therefore, influence a movement of artefacts even further from the private to the public sphere, as certain proprietors seek to divest themselves of ownership and entrust these items to an institutional hierarchy, parallel to the move from the curiosity cabinet to the museum.

The curiosity cabinet acts as private predecessor to the museum, particularly in its acquisition of artefacts. Michel Foucault in "Different Spaces" (1984) compares the museum to a heterotopia, a place with a multitude of non-hegemonic metaphoric layers connected to external spheres of influence:

Museums and libraries are heterotopias in which time never ceases to pile up and perch on its own summit, whereas in the seventeenth century, and up to the end of the seventeenth century still, museums and libraries were the expression of individual choice. (*Aesthetics*, 182)

Within the museum multiple disparate topographies and temporalities overlap, a centripetal movement in which the macro (world) is distilled into the micro (exhibition). Foucault's emphasis on seventeenth-century museums being dictated by "individual choice" evidently refers to curiosity cabinets, collections which were populated and arranged by a personal system of values rather than an institutional structure. Such arrangements contained curios, items which were deemed to be special due to their departure from the norm: the bizarre, the aberrant, the spectacular. Unlike the empirical methodology of museums, these collections could range between natural phenomenon to exoticized trinkets – in which economic value is obfuscated in favour of subjectively interpreted cultural worth. The cabinet and museum are strikingly similar in their questionable acquisition and the weighted pedagogical concerns of putting such an item on display, in effect forcing it to perform a specific function and identity. Ruth

Hoberman's article "In Quest of a Museal Aura" (2003) highlights how this process is intrinsically linked to desire on a multitude of levels:

The museum, in a sense, puts desire under glass: the turbulent emotions involved in the initial creation and use of the object, the often exploitative circumstances under which it was acquired by the museum, and the desirous responses of visitors are alike frozen and refracted by the conventions of museum display. (469)

The display case, although transparent, still functions as a form of boundary between the observer and the item; whether for preservation or security, the public are separated from the item. Refracted within this transparency is however a far opaquer history. The glass mirrors a particularly colonial appropriation with the observer's gaze – both the initial and subsequent viewings are fuelled by a desire to behold the spectacle, to have immediate intimate access to its wonder. However, the staging of these items frequently occludes the processes involved in their acquisition. The exchange of objects, often the artefact for its economic value, is crucially hidden to maintain the 'priceless' mystique. As such these relics are seen to be outside – or even transcending – transactional networks, further emphasising their unobtainable status to the public viewer.

The fascination within the cabinet emphasises the performance of the aberrant compared to the museum's taxonomical system, in which an item must be associated with significant worth – whether this be political, cultural, economic or pedagogical. Recurrent through the cabinet is the personal dimension of the collection, the curator essentially policing what is permitted within its boundaries. The increase of archaeological, particularly Western, fiction in the mid-to-late nineteenth century rests between this general transition from private to public collections, a contention that is implicit in Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903) staging a house that is part

museum, part cabinet. Written at the turn of the twentieth century, the novel is almost an anticipation of the popular excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb as the abode is filled with Egyptian curios and the vengeful spirit, or 'ka', of a mummy. The novel opens with a form of locked room mystery through which the narrator, Malcom Ross, is called by Margaret Trelawney to her residence following a mysterious attack on her father. The narrative is constituted of two halves, a 'whodunnit' attempted murder mystery that gradually slides into an archaeological adventure quest as the spirit of the Egyptian Queen Tera is insinuated to be behind the crime. Although Ross is akin to an invader into this private space, throughout the novel the house remains largely shut; London is often heard but never seen, a claustrophobic atmosphere that dissociates the public from the collection inside.

The house itself exists on a thin line between museum and curiosity cabinet. Filled with Egyptian artefacts and relics, Mr Trelawney is indicative of the affluent collector who appropriates exotic artefacts for his own personal display. The bedroom is particularly central to the collection, reflecting its idiosyncratic arrangement, noted by Ross as "truly there were enough things in the room to evoke the curiosity of any man" (17). Appropriately, the narrator's *curiosity* is raised, the cabinet's allure lies within the spectacle even if its components are only recognised as 'things'. Yet this collection appears almost haphazard, tied to the idiosyncrasies of its owner. Its arrangement can either be ordered or chaotic, and the power to classify and organise is bestowed upon the subjective individual, rather than the public museum. The room acts as a heterotopia, as "[t]here were so many ancient relics that unconsciously one was taken back to strange lands and strange times" (23). These artefacts become a textual gateway for the viewer that conjures imaginations of the external, the elsewhere. Succinctly, the cabinet, and by extension the museum, seeks to bring the edges of the

world to a centre, it reduces the infinite to the finite by functioning as a conduit between viewer and place. These spaces are often ‘invisible’ in the collection, and the observer may experience the associated history but cannot *observe* its origin. This acts as a form of erasure in which the provenance of the item is vital, but the wider cultural narrative surrounding it is partially obscured – the fragment cannot comprehensively represent the complete whole.

The exhibition is orientated for the viewer. Although this space serves a cataloguing or archival process, they are primarily governed in relation to the observer’s gaze. Thus it is the cabinet’s arrangement that catalyses Margaret’s remark that: “I sometimes don’t know whether I am in a private house or the British Museum” (22). Yet her statement overlooks the private nature of this display, that these items have been removed from public methods of circulation and exchange. The ethically dubious acquisition of artefacts early in the British Museum’s history is mirrored in Mr Trelawney’s appropriation of artefacts. His source is in fact an Egyptologist who remarks “[m]any of [Mr Trelawney’s] treasures—and he has some rare ones, I tell you—he has procured through me, either by my exploration or by purchase— or—or— otherwise”, the contestable nature of this appropriation being inherent in the elusive and unknown “otherwise” (60).

Crucially, it takes a trained Egyptologist to inform Margaret and Ross of the collection’s value, as before this moment their curiosity has been raised but they have yet to be informed of its worth. Subsequently, the two navigate around the halls of the house to view the artefacts contained throughout, presenting clear similarities to the museum tour. Ross states “[a]s I went on, the interest grew; any lingering doubts which I might have had changed to wonder and admiration”, his time in the house acts as a transformation from curiosity to wonder: the instructional translation of inquisitiveness

to admiration (67). Indeed, this recalls once again Carter's description of Tutankhamun's tomb, particularly through the further description of Margaret and Ross's tour: "[t]ogether we went round the various rooms and passages, examining and admiring the magnificent curios. There was such a *bewildering* amount and variety of objects that we could only glance at most of them" (68, my emphasis). Moving through the labyrinthine collection, Ross's comment on the "bewildering" amount suggests an inability to process and articulate the visual, in essence calling back to the inarticulate. Particularly, the emphasis placed on the number of objects culminating in each only receiving a glance represents the oppressiveness of the collective, the multitude being too vast to behold each object and its intrinsic identity. In this cabinet, then, there are *too many* objects, no item demonstrably having more value than the others; a guide is required to navigate. The movement of the observer is inherently tied to the organisation of the cabinet, necessitating the instruction of the (absent) curator. Transitioning to museums, these spaces are constructed to be autonomous, as the observer can experience their spectacle for pedagogical value without human assistance, although this requires (often written) narrative accompaniment. Equally, the museum's exhibits are carefully governed, duplicates are assigned to the storehouse to emphasise the singularity of the spectacle. The acquisition of objects into the collection is crucial to understand how projections of their identity are shaped, yet equally important is the next set: their arrangement.

Arrangement: The Schemas of the Exhibition

The curiosity cabinet was constructed and organised around the individual choice of its curator, who acted as a gatekeeper to its contents. Navigation thus often required the guidance of its creator. As museums progressively opened to the public in the

eighteenth century (the British Museum opening to the public in 1753), a more rigorous schema was required to create an autonomous zone of self-learning. Post-enlightenment, these institutions would seek to emphasise an objective ‘order of things’, one which attempts to re-locate the arrangement of the display away from its subjective curator and suggest that its structure is representative of the wider world. New paradigms were thus required to translate the eclectic and idiosyncratic cabinet into the pedagogical institution of the museum. This transition from the chaotic to the ordered represented a movement towards a more empirically based system. As Lewis Pyenson and Susan Sheets-Pyenson in *Servants of Nature* (1999) argue, after the Scientific Revolution: “human curiosity began directing itself away from the mystical, hidden world of the microcosm and toward the empirically knowable macrocosm” (127). The museum, therefore, represents a ‘knowable’ microcosm, as it reduces the complexities of the vast world to an accessibly navigated collection. The introduction of standardised taxonomical schemas based on empirical labelling, such as the Linnaean system in the eighteenth century, sought to provide a classification process to translate the incomprehensible whole into discrete categories. This movement would re-classify object identities, yet to be exhibited they first had to be organised as a coherent collection.

For Tony Bennett the arrangement of the museum epitomises “the exhibitionary complex”:

The institutions comprising ‘the exhibitionary complex’, by contrast, were involved in the transfer of objects and bodies from the enclosed and private domains in which they had previously been displayed (but to a restricted public) into progressively more open and public arenas where, through the representations to which they were subjected, they formed vehicles for

inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power (but of a different type) throughout society. (“The Exhibitionary Complex”, 333)

The complex outlined here is the system that must appraise, catalogue and present these items which move from the private and into the public sphere. This transition sought to move away from subjective notions of worth to imply a more objective and collective arrangement of value. By situating the items within a taxonomical structure of similarity and difference, a net of relations is produced to represent a wider, more inherent, resonance between displays than the personal distribution of the cabinet. Such an approach sought to suggest that the basis of a taxonomical system – of a widely accepted ‘order’ to things – lay within the non-human world itself, obscuring the anthropocentrism at its very foundation. As Bennett declares, “[p]ublic museums instituted an order of things that was meant to last” (352). This institution aimed to establish human organisation of objects as an emergent quality rather than being interpretative, despite the very subjective nature of artefactual identity at its very core. Recalling Foucault’s prescribed ‘order of things’ in which he argues “it was necessary that a certain knowledge of madness be opposed to nonmadness, of order to disorder”, the museum represents a desire to empirically impose an architecture of ‘things’ (“The Order of Things”, *Aesthetics*, 262). Thus, certain items must necessarily be kept out of view, as multiplicity suggests a lack of uniqueness whereas the singular artefact is inherently valuable. While such systems evoke an empirical foundation, they too are complicit with the performativity of the artefact that obfuscates acquisition and duplication to maintain a sense of aura.

Emerging from the more disordered arrangement of the cabinet, the museum’s pedagogical function seeks to present each item with an accompanying description, to explain what (and why) the observer is viewing. This identification situates each

artefact in a network of relations, designating how it is both similar and different to the objects in its proximity, and effectively creating a grand narrative when viewed in totality. Colla argues that this system removes the individuality of the artefact as it must necessarily reside as part of a collective: “As a consequence, an artifact was not considered as a unique piece, but rather as part of a class of objects arranged within an emerging taxonomical grid” (*Conflicted Antiquities*, 8). The importance of structure and the suggestion of a grid is also mapped upon the mobility while visiting these institutions. For while many contemporary museums will permit an unregulated flow of movement, specific exhibitions foreground a particular route that attempts to present a developing narrative thread. Just as presence and absence guides the implication of artefactual exclusivity, the location and withholding of a prominent relic – often one hierarchised as the named ‘central’ piece – equally withholds ‘the reveal’ as a deferred and culminating performance. For instance, a visitor to *China’s First Emperor and the Terracotta Warriors* (2018) – an exhibition of the Terracotta Army held at the World Museum, Liverpool – would have first been guided through historical context, peripheral evidence and narrative foundation that funnelled them through a careful selection of objects so that they finally witnessed the spectacle of an actual terracotta soldier.

Although outside the scope of this thesis, other studies have been conducted on embodiment within museums – such as Hoberman’s *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism* (2011) – which emphasises how these schemas of navigation are entwined with a progressional narrative. For example, walking against the suggested ‘narrative’ flow of an exhibition, to view the items outside of the prescribed order, requires the physical struggle against an audience or crowd. Indeed, as Helen Rees Leahy suggests in *Museum Bodies* (2012), modes of

navigation are dependent on inter-object reading which consolidates the exhibitionary text so that: “Different modalities of display produced different norms of object–body relations, but knowing where to position your body in space has always depended on knowing how to read the exhibition ‘script’” (5). It is within the dissonance or disruption of such carefully regulated movement that the gaps in the relational network emerge, and it is within this aperture that Harman argues “the true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between *objects and relations*” (2, original emphasis). The failure exists, Harman contends, in the network of connections and representations which can only circumnavigate the ‘object’ itself. This is a system that is inevitably propagated through taxonomical structures, which emphasise this network as emerging from ‘things’ rather than reflecting upon our encounter with them. Yet, at its very heart, this is a representational structure which Donato outlines as:

The set of objects the Museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe. The fiction is that a repeated metonymic displacement of fragment for totality, object to label, series of objects to series of labels, can still produce a representation which is somehow adequate to a nonlinguistic universe. (223)

The museum’s schemas function by allowing presence to stand in for absence, by not emphasising the gaps in the collection (artefacts which are not present) the single item is displayed to represent the whole. Donato points out that this depends on a system of representation, a synecdoche where the micro can stand in and speak for the macro. The imposition of this system upon a non-linguistic universe extends to a Weird perspective, as both hieroglyphs and the ‘indescribable’ terror share similarities in their negation of, or resistance towards, prescribed semiotic systems. The core paradigms within this institution construct an empirical, and often imperial, defined historical timeline, a

superimposition of meaning and value upon items to situate them within the arrangement.

The inherently reductive nature of this process is challenged by items which are not so easily situated within the network – objects or specimens such as mummies, which are difficult to classify (straddling the artefact/remains conceptual boundary) and thus expose the impermanence of material labels. This is equally emphasised in *Raiders* when Indy attempts to switch the artefact with a bag of sand: the perception is that these items are non-exchangeable, and one may not sit in place of, or represent, the other. Instead of presenting a coherent universal narrative, one based around the progression of civilisation, these relics suggest an extraneity that cannot be easily reduced and contained. Although the spectacle of such disruption has the danger of reinforcing exploitative use of cultural artefacts, the very indescribability employed in their presentation also points towards the malleability of object labels, as an eldritch terror resists such prescriptive approaches and reveals the presence of a far more alien Real.

Disruption: The Reversal of Artefactual Labels

The museum's careful arrangement and presentation of artefact identity has many similarities to representation in archaeological fiction, especially as both seek to mould a certain type or frame of encounter for the subject. The palimpsestic nature of artefactual history and labels discussed thus far suggests, however, that these are not the concrete signifiers that the museum suggests them to be, but rather emphasises an aspect of subjective interaction. It is the very prospect of an *absent presence* that the taxonomical system seeks to obscure, an imposition in which the 'order of things' is transposed to be emergent from the non-human itself. The indescribability of the animate artefact thus negates the efficacy of prescriptive labelling to force its viewer to

re-mediate the encounter, to catalyse immediate negotiation. Indeed, by opening a gap between textual description and visual confrontation, materialist reductionism can be confronted in favour of a more conscious mediation of human and non-human engagement.

The disruption of exhibitionary assumptions is central to the short story “The Horror in the Museum” (1933), ghost-written by Lovecraft for Hazel Heald. Published originally in *Weird Tales* after many of Lovecraft’s defining mythos stories, the narrative is full of references to Elder beings which are ‘represented’ in the title’s wax-work museum. Hoberman terms such tales as “museum gothic” in which objects are inscribed with a supernatural agency that lingers even beyond the conclusion:

These stories wind up returning the object safely to its display case, the museum’s control reaffirmed, but they also leave the object with a residue of supernatural potential. These stories leave us with the sense that displayed objects – whether aesthetic or anthropological – offer transcendent experiences to those who can control their desire to possess or act on them. (“In Quest of a Museal Aura”, 469)

Although these objects resist their confinement, Hoberman emphasises that they eventually return to the display case; boundaries are breached momentarily but are inevitably restored. The “residue” of supernatural propensities invests an aura of uniqueness and spectacle within the artefact, effectively encouraging further public viewing to witness its wonder. This trend is particularly noticeable in archaeological fiction: the *Tomb Raider*, *Uncharted* and Indiana Jones franchises culminate in the discovery and confirmation of supernatural artefacts, yet these often have little overarching consequence. I argue that Hoberman overlooks a certain sub-set of this narrative where these items fall in-between the cracks, either lost to an uncertain future

in the wider world (*Last Crusade*) or refuse to return to their glass container. The consideration of what lies outside the exhibition is also driven by the need for exclusivity, necessitating that these material presences are situated alongside immaterial absences as certain objects are not present or do not neatly fit into the display. The museum cannot possibly include every item within its exhibits, those not deemed unique enough are resigned to the storehouse. The disruption of the museum is, therefore, a crucial concluding investigation into objects that lie outside of the borders, precisely the artefact that refutes such enforced performativity.

Museums are traditionally orientated around the projection and preservation of artefact 'identity', yet they are equally complicit in wider materialist tendencies. The waxwork exhibition at the heart of "The Horror in the Museum" is thus a pertinent example to conclude with, precisely due to the inversion of authenticity and representation, a switch which is revealed by the agent artefact that is no mere replication. The tale follows the narration of Steven Jones, who becomes originally allured and later perturbed by the wax-works and skill of their curator – George Rogers. The exhibits themselves range from traditional criminal imitations to the more terrifying monstrosities, including those kept within "the Adult alcove" which unsurprisingly was "crowded with nameless horrors" (303). Jones is originally deceived by the apparent authenticity of the wax-works, their taxonomical proximity and the museum setting itself contributing to the shared belief in their designated object status. Yet there is something unnerving about these apparent artefacts that cannot quite be encapsulated in language, a return to and echo of the previous staging of inexplicability where "[n]othing could suggest the effect of poignant, loathsome terror created by their great size and fiendishly cunning workmanship, and by the diabolically clever lighting conditions under which they were exhibited" (281). Lovecraft's language overtly draws

attention to the exhibitionary paradigms at play, namely that the framing of the exhibit subconsciously curates a certain expectation with the viewer. The examples clearly sit uneasily within such a setting, exuding an extraneity that cannot be sufficiently represented as: “To describe it with any ordinary vocabulary would be impossible, for nothing even roughly corresponding to it has ever come within the imagination of sane mankind” (289). The narrator’s original misrecognition here emerges from their complicit indoctrination by exhibitionary paradigms, one which presents curated narratives about its artefacts in favour of the subject’s own unbiased encounter.

Humanity’s contact with objects is constantly mediated through the context within which they are framed. As Donato suggests: “If the *Museum* fails at reaching the nature and essence of the objects it displays, it is because it tries to understand them in relation to the spectator rather than in relation to the objects themselves” (225, original emphasis). The curation and suggestion of artefact identity reflects more upon the values of the performing subject rather than accessing the fundamentals of the item itself, one reinforced by Benjamin’s assertion in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939) that: “To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return” (*Illuminations*, 188). Both critics highlight that the anthropocentric meeting with such materials upholds differentiation, rather than any inherently inferred qualities. Such an approach compellingly resonates with Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology; yet rather than disregard such projections, I argue that examining their formation is a crucial process in which materialist attitudes can be confronted. The animation of artefacts within Weird Fiction, in which exhibits break free of their glass cases and defy scripted narratives, invests a sense of extraneity within each object: that within human perception each may be more than it seems. Steven’s failing within “The Horror in the Museum” is his inability to think beyond ingrained paradigms, to even

consider that – in a very subtle inversion – these fakes are indeed real. The concluding realisation that the exhibition actually does contain a monstrosity, therefore, evokes inarticulation as the only medium in which to consider that which lies outside of conventional boundaries: “Fully ten feet high despite a shambling, crouching attitude expressive of infinite cosmic malignancy, a monstrosity of unbelievable horror was shown starting forward from a Cyclopean ivory throne covered with grotesque carvings” (304). While this passage is certainly more explicit than “Under the Pyramids”, the description offers little detailed or concrete affirmation in favour of the very capacious “infinite cosmic malignancy” and “unbelievable horror”. Steven is therefore forced to re-experience the process of encounter as his projection of a material identity upon the object is undermined by his immediate perceptive experience.

Weird Artefacts – Confronting where Objects Belong

Artefacts emerge from the subjective differentiation of the object multitude; from excavation to exhibition, the situational framing of these items resonates with subliminal clues that encourage the viewing subject to believe in an apparent form of differentiation encoded through spectacle. Both archaeological fiction and practice foreground the presentation of a material ‘identity’, a projection which is suggested to reside ‘within’ the item itself rather than being inferred from how the subject encounters – and thus materialistically perceives – an object. The museum itself is complicit with this process, presenting a continuity of object descriptions that provide a form of textual ontology for the exhibition, a condensed representation of its history, composition and ultimately relation to the subject. Vitality, such designations have a lasting impact upon interpretation. The disparate categorisation of the mummy – whether it is object, subject, artefact or a mixture of the three – emphasises the mutability and

impermanence of such labels, that its existence is dependent upon a certain frame of recognition, rather than encoded into materiality itself. The Weird artefact thus challenges such modes of encounter, as representational description cannot comprehensively condense the extraneity of the visual. Luckhurst states: “Literature animates these museum stories, because literary narrative is one of the privileged discourses that provide imaginative coherence to objects, often at a tangent to, or in open defiance of, the processes of scientific artefaction” (151). Certainly, narrative and textual description is utilised in the formation of artefacts from their excavation to exhibition and, as such, literature is a prime format to engage with designations of material identity or ontology. Yet, within such a proposition lies the issue of whether this writing is *for* objects or rather *about* materiality. Museum Gothic or archaeological Horror animates artefacts as a manner to extend their spectacle, to provide a narrative alibi to their associated history or, indeed, reaffirm an anthropocentric foundation in which the non-human is complicit with the formation of these projected identities.

China Miéville’s *Kraken* (2010) offers a perfect summary of my argument thus far. The narrative is orientated around the theft of a preserved giant squid from the Natural History Museum in London, a creature which is believed by many underground cults and religious sects to be the instigating force for an upcoming apocalypse. Ascribed a very alternative sense of value, the kraken becomes *priceless* by being invested with another layer of ontology – it is now squid, specimen and apocalyptic herald. Bestowed with artefactual status, this non-human subject/object disrupts the microcosmic reductionism of the exhibitionary space by embodying an extraneity that cannot be condensed as “[w]hat was squiddity but otherness, incomprehensibility” (417). Appropriately the protagonist, Billy, discovers the theft as part of a museum tour through the apparent absence (and thus inferred presence) that it leaves, as “[t]he centre

of the room was empty” (10). Removed from its new ‘home’ and identity, the kraken becomes something else again, the indication that its museal presentation is only another ephemeral material label. Miéville, however, suggests that the kraken wishes to remain in its specimen tank as: “[i]t was not trying to get out – *that was where it belonged*” (461, original emphasis). Such a conclusion is a flagrant alibi for exhibitionary practice, indeed that this literary text animates an artefact so that it may confirm an anthropocentric outlook that dictates where the squid indeed ‘belongs’. For authors such as Miéville are invested in the tentacular nature of the cephalopod as a form of Weird avatar – a projection akin to the artefact that aims to circumnavigate anthropocentrism, but in so doing elevates the very notion of ‘otherness’ as a pedestaled alterity. To approach a more nuanced engagement with the non-human, literature can offer an imaginative platform to analyse the subliminal associations that conjure subjective perceptions of artefactual status, yet such a process offers the risk of perpetuating the very system it seeks to negotiate if such dangers are not taken into consideration.

Chapter Two

Chthonic Emergence – Lost Cities, Vestige Spaces and Ruin Navigation

The designation of artefactual identity or labelling reflects upon the subjective dimension of the encounters discussed so far, where subliminal and often obscured paradigms encourage the viewer to perceive the place of micro fragments within certain macro or totalising structures. I have argued that the conception of such artefactuality resides within the frame of contact and is not emergent from materiality itself, a process by which to challenge the textual narratives that objects are often situated within. This production of differentiated meaning, however, represents a desire to comprehend – a manner in which human cognition may transform the capacious world into understandable fragments – a curiosity and attraction towards codifying the unknown. Lewis Pyenson and Susan Sheets-Pyenson argue in *Servants of Nature* (1999) that after the Scientific Revolution: “human curiosity began directing itself away from the mystical, hidden world of the microcosm and toward the empirically knowable macrocosm” (127). This distillation was previously demonstrated through the museum, a space whose taxonomical arrangement seeks to imply and reveal a sense of ‘order’ within the wider world through which the Earth becomes something charted, understood and controlled. The persistent textual animation and narrativization of the museum’s artefacts, in both the accompanying descriptions and fiction, asks the observer to imagine an associated past, to encourage a curiosity and translate the unknown into the known. Despite their pedagogical intent, these institutions are thus inadvertently complicit with the mythic fantasies that fuel the perennial pursuit of such exclusive items both on, and often off, the map.

Quests into the ‘unknown’ are frequently centred around ruins, architectural remains that are projected with a textual and narrative ontology, akin to the artefact, and become a micro fragment to elucidate macro concepts. Mobility is central to this mediation, echoing the museum, where the initial journey and eventual navigation curate a form of encounter. Indeed, ruins become a locus of ontological reflection, which Brian Dillon in *Ruin Lust* (2014) summarises: “The authentic ruin exists in a real landscape, but it is also an abbey of the mind, the symbol of a way of looking and feeling, more than a mere tourist attraction” (10). As Dillon contends, ruins catalyse a reflection upon forms of phenomenological experience – the manner in which we encounter. The rise of archaeological tourism reinforced the performativity of material contact but in so doing – like the mythic-based expeditions to ‘lost worlds’ – sought a topographical extraneity that preserves the exclusivity of such meetings. This process has overt colonial and imperial inferences, designations of ‘lost’ worlds or ‘dark’ corners not only representing a hegemonic arrogance but also a wilful ignorance of non-human participants – for these ‘corners’ are hardly lost to the animals, vegetation or microbes that exist there.¹³

This very terminology is emblematic of a post-Enlightenment instantiation of materialist attitudes which are framed through a Western gaze of institutionalised power, echoing Michel Foucault’s description of the Panopticon as a structure to dispel “the fear of darkened spaces, of the pall of gloom which prevents the full visibility of things, men and truths” (“The Eye of Power”, 153). Institutional notions of ‘order’ thus became a hegemonic tool in which the unknown and ‘dark’ past is no longer abstracted

¹³ This perspective can equally be identified within the relegation of indigenous human inhabitants to a form of animal life as a colonial process to justify the appropriation of the ‘blank’ spaces on the map. As David Punter in *Postcolonial Imaginings* (2000) argues, “That is one of the goals of the colonial desiring machine, namely to pretend that the land that is so obviously and ubiquitously populated is in fact empty of human life” (146).

from human contact, but something that can be ‘known’ through material encounter. Despite the persistent centripetal motion of totalising perspectives, there retains a pursuit of imagined ‘lost’ worlds or unexplored topographies that complicates such movement. Indeed, ruins offer the potential avoidance of society’s observation and, as will be discussed later, industrial remnants often stage unlawful behaviour outside of the panoptic gaze. For both the archaeological and industrial ruin, then, there is the potential to challenge, deconstruct and re-mediate conventional modes of contact, to usurp the quotidian. The ‘invasion’ or re-habitation of non-human life within these spaces is equally a form of ontological re-inscription, again like the artefact, in which new functions are moulded. The ruin thus provides a particular attraction, or curiosity, towards an alternate mode of encounter.

Interest towards ruins, particularly within the West, arose in a similar manner to that of the archaeological site, where these spaces act as material legitimisation for an otherwise intangible history. The fascination towards cultural heritage, however, began as a more subjective pursuit, as antiquarian studies in the eighteenth century emphasised personal preference and above all a sense of curiosity. As Rosemary Sweet in her chapter “Antiquaries and Ruins” in *Writing Britain’s Ruins* (2017) proposes, the fascination with ruins “drew first and foremost upon the practice of antiquarianism and the efforts of antiquaries to describe, record and preserve the monuments of the past” (43). Increasing attention towards ruins was focused around an act of engagement and preservation, not only to maintain such physical remnants but to emphasise the *experience* of encountering them. This process resonates with artefactual studies and, as Sweet suggests, “Antiquaries were intrigued by the mystery inherent in ruins and recognised them as puzzles which, if unlocked, could provide information about an earlier age” (45). In this manner, ruins are archaeological signifiers to elucidate the

social, political and cultural factors behind the shaping of the material remnant. Ruin tourism thus encourages a public perception of these structures as mediums to engage with, or encounter, the presences that stand ‘behind’ their creation and utilisation – a format explored in such studies as Emma McEvoy’s *Gothic Tourism* (2015). Yet, these approaches fail to appreciate non-human participants. Indeed, once again, these presences are only recognised when they arise from subconscious viewing and considered an artefact – a material testament to an ‘order of things’. Ruin tourism fosters an appreciation of an aesthetic of dereliction, to preserve monuments that instigate a sense of wistful wonder. Indeed, industrial remnants may equally be sites of touristic curiosity, as explored in Chapter Three in regard to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, where an attraction towards the metropolitan remnant offers an alternate form of lost city mythologisation. Ruin tourism is, therefore, akin to the artefactual process in Chapter One, where the subject only develops an awareness of the non-human when mediated through a subjective frame – the ‘person’ behind the artefact, mummy or derelict; the macro behind the micro.

Figure 2.1: *Tintern Abbey: The Crossing and Chancel, Looking towards the East Window* (1794) by J. M. W. Turner

Ruins provide a further framing of materialist attitudes and can thus challenge the process of encounter. The attraction towards an aesthetics of dereliction is a conflicted engagement, where the apparent ‘order of things’ is disrupted and infused with a wistful mysteriousness – an absent presence – that pervades Romantic paintings of Gothic architecture in particular. J. M. W. Turner’s *Tintern Abbey* (Figure 2.1), conveys a sublime experience of inarticulate remains that are a testament to the

longevity of material presence but offer no narrative for the entities projected to be ‘behind’ such formations. Dillon suggests that: “It is the tradition of this excitable projection of ruin into the future that we have to place the seeming proliferation of visions of destruction – especially urban destruction – that arose in British art and literature in the nineteenth century” (16). Certainly, a rumination on these structures evokes a melancholic reflection upon the inevitability of entropic decay; yet I argue that they are equally sites to ‘imagine’ the associated past, an encounter which forms its own textual contact. John Martin’s *Ruins of an Ancient City* (Figure 2.2) similarly foregrounds entropic processes, but within such a projection also lies the mythologising of ancient or lost cities, the consistent conjuring of fantastical civilisations that potentially lie at the periphery of human existence. Artistic representation is analogous to the immutability of the ruin, where the subject’s response is mediated through interpreted signs rather than narrativized ‘meaning’. Expeditionary tales seek to imagine such locations, to describe a sense of what I term *narrative motion* that guides the viewing subject’s curiosity through navigation.

Figure 2.2: *Ruins of an Ancient City* (1810-20) by John Martin

Fantasies of ‘lost’ worlds and hidden ancient cities have often fuelled the perception that there are still historical mysteries to uncover. As the Earth has increasingly become explored or even surveyed with satellite technology, such locales are now, more than ever, transposed to mythical foundations and indeed considered to be ‘off’ the map. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, however, there was still a persistent Western and colonial pursuit of ‘lost’ civilisations, one driven more by personal fame than to trace indigenous heritage. Henry Percy Fawcett and his search

for the suggested ‘lost city of Z’ is a particularly salient example, not only as a mythologising of expeditions but equally their dangerous allure. Fawcett was a particularly well-known explorer, appointed by the Royal Geographical Society, and had dedicated much of his life to exploring South America; indeed, his ventures would help establish national borders within this region. Towards the end of his life, Fawcett became obsessed with the prospect of there being a lost city within the Amazon Rainforest, which he enigmatically termed ‘Z’. Fuelled perhaps by Hiram Bingham’s discovery of the Machu Picchu ruins in 1911, Fawcett adamantly believed that he had found archaeological traces which corroborated tales told by local tribes about a huge settlement that had yet to be found. Accompanied by Jack – his son – and Raleigh Rimell – Jack’s closest friend – the trio set off from Cuiaba in 1925 to find ‘Z’; they were never seen again.

The legend of ‘Z’ has produced its own mythology, as several rescue parties and expeditions of ‘Fawcett Fanatics’ have attempted to find the party’s remains. In essence, the story about discovering ‘Z’ has only added to its mystery. Indeed, Fawcett’s exploration served as a core influence on Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912) and also inspired the character Indiana Jones – the two would even aptly ‘meet’ in the spin-off novel *Indiana Jones and the Seven Veils* (1991) where Indy rescues Fawcett from ‘Z’. Fawcett’s story was catalogued by his surviving son, Brian, as *Exploration Fawcett* (1953) and was adapted into David Gann’s own metatextual journey through both journals and physical re-enchantment in *The Lost City of Z* (2009), which itself received a loose filmic adaptation in 2016. Despite the scarcity of authentic archaeological evidence for ‘Z’, evidently Fawcett’s legacy has created its own interpretive mythic text for this lost city, which is only compounded by future expeditions. Each individual quest also reflects upon the fantasy of the lost city, the

desire for exclusive excavation that drives toward an archaeological objective. Indeed, Gann's tracing of Fawcett's fanaticism represents another form of encounter, a personal journey through landscape and myth which will be discussed further in relation to Geoff Dyer's *Zona* in Chapter Three.

Gann, meanwhile, evidently felt compelled to provide some sense of narrative closure for his own expedition. From the outset he embellishes the masculine stereotype of the explorer, describing Fawcett as: "the last of the great Victorian explorers who ventured into uncharted realms with little more than a machete, a compass, and an almost divine sense of purpose" (6).¹⁴ Fawcett's story represents the mythologising of the lost city, one inscribed with a "divine sense of purpose" to validate a chthonic revelation where combating the wilderness will uncover historical secrets – that, once again, these qualities are emergent from non-human sources and not located within a human framing. Gann at the end of *The Lost City of Z* visits Michael Heckenberge – an archaeologist working in the Amazon Xingu region – who reveals "that we were standing in the middle of a vast ancient settlement" (269). The surprise lies in the realisation that such archaeological markers would materialise as ruined foundations rather than the totalised identity (the city) often imagined. Fawcett's belief in 'Z' may arguably have been a colonial legitimisation to map the 'unknown' world, but within this fantasy lies the persistent mythologising of the lost city as a hermetic artefact – a discrete marker and destination for an expedition. Gann cannot help but buy into such imaginative paradigms: "For a moment, I could see this vanished world as if it were right in front of me. Z" (275). This turn to the poetic is endemic to such narratives that

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the hyper-masculine explorer repeatedly resurfaces within this strand of fiction and is perhaps reflected by the dominance of male writers in this thesis. A compelling further study could thus be made into the gendering of such archaeological encounters.

feel the pressure to foreground a sense of closure, or linear certainty, where none exists. Fawcett's mythologising of 'Z', subsequent expeditions and Gann's novel thus all conjure these archaeological encounters through text – description becomes vectors of navigation to link the human with the immutable non-human, a bridge to cross such an ontological divide.

The mythologising of the city is akin to artefactual elevation, where an individual site is emphasised simultaneously in opposition to and conjunction with a variety of rural experiences. Such discourses endanger the conflation of the city with a civilisation, until it becomes its own form of textual object to be taxonomized. Yet, as demonstrated with *Ruins of an Ancient City*, the pervasiveness of vestige spaces – a term I use to denote topographies associated with a remnant of ontological, often human, engagement – suggests a fragility to such formations. Alexandra Warwick in "The City of Resurrections" (2006) comments on the popularity of this image in Victorian fiction as representative of an anxiety where "[t]he city is always potentially a city of ruins" (132). The mythologies of these lost cities – both as metro-centric hubs and archaeological signifiers – are even emblematic of such myths as Atlantis and El Dorado which act as micro signifiers for a macro culture. This trope, despite contemporary cartographical methods, shows no sign of abating: *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (2018) evokes Fawcett's legacy but finds Paititi rather than 'Z', whilst China Miéville's *The City & the City* (2009) searches for the mythical 'in-between' third city of Orciny. There is a pervasiveness to these mythologies that, I argue, offers alternate modes of negotiating materiality through physical navigation. For often these expeditions seek meaning to emerge from the chthonic – the underground or subterranean depths – where the non-human validates or verifies human exceptionalism by entering into some form of exchange encounter. Derelicts are equally another vestige

of material culture, a lingering presence that is transformed and adapted through new contact paradigms. Ruin mythologies build on the taxonomic institutions that imply such remnants may be read as a text to bridge the micro and macro. Yet it is the phenomenological experience – the actual processes involved within such encounters – that offers a movement away from representational reductionism; an aperture that the Weird capitalises upon to further destabilise anthropocentrism by underscoring the resonance between movement and meaning.

Walking the Ruin: Demarcating the ‘Here’ and ‘There’ of Expeditionary Curiosity

Expeditions that seek the unknown, both topologically and epistemologically, themselves act as a demarcation of space: the separation of ‘here’ and ‘there’ encoded through the designation of origin and destination. Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) proposes “In the framework of enunciation, the walker constitutes, in relation to his position, both a near and a far, a *here* and a *there*”; thus, it is through mobility that geographic and cognitive approaches are combined (99, original emphasis). Indeed, a *neural network* is established, one produced through the routinised pathways of a commute or repeated journey. On a global scale the expedition connects the periphery to the centre, the linear movement of people, narratives and, as previously explored, objects. Architectural remnants, however, complicate this process; indeed, they incite circular navigation, through labyrinthine spaces or the mediation of routes that provide new schemas of mobility. The uncovering of archaeological remains acts as a material representation of a civilisation’s legacy, its accomplishments, manufacturing and, most evidently, its decline. Opposed to the quarantined dig-site, the ruin permits greater mobility, as an explorer may navigate its crumbling, or destroyed,

infrastructure. Charting the faint traces of foundations and walls, the visitor may cross pre-existing physical boundaries through their movement between previously private and public spaces.

Ruins therefore represent a form of frontier, an unregulated landscape in which traditional metropolitan conventions of mobility, surveillance and authority are challenged. De Certeau argues that these aspects are central to such divisions:

From the distinction that separates a subject from its exteriority to the distinctions that localize objects, from the home (constituted on the basis of the wall) to the journey (*constituted on the basis of a geographical “elsewhere” or a cosmological “beyond”*), from the functioning of the urban network to that of the rural landscape, there is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of frontiers. (123, my emphasis)

The journey represents the movement towards an “elsewhere” or “cosmological beyond”, terminology which has an overt resonance with the Weird. The designation of ‘frontier’ is evidently rooted in colonial perspectives, one which not only demarcates space but often inscribes an inherent judgement of value. Such separations, meanwhile, are not upheld beyond the anthropocentric gaze and it is within this aperture that ruins complicate conventional contact. These sites become, then, not only archaeological markers for the past but also a form of destination, the possibility of new journeys. Ruins adopt a palimpsestic re-inscription of ontology, as their previously designated function and current utilisation overlap. Indeed, Tim Edensor’s *Industrial Ruins* (2005) highlights that abandoned factories are popular sites for both non-human re-emergence and unlawful behaviour – vandalism, for example – spaces that allow praxis outside of authoritarian control. Ruins permit and incentivise new, discursive strategies of

unregulated mobility; they represent the stage on which encounters occur as an autonomous traversal of physical and ontological borders.

The ruin is a space replete with diverse spatial functions; its derelict or entropic status, however, is more inclined to heuristic learning in opposition to the structured navigation of the exhibitionary institution. These spaces encourage proactive and discursive navigation, where movement become synonymous with the imagining of prospective histories. The ruin and institution thus differ in their interaction with the curious subject and yet both require navigation to incite understanding. Edensor argues that “Just as visiting ruins is a kind of anti-tourism, the ruin itself stands as a sort of anti-heritage” (139). Unlike the museum, abandoned ruins are not presented with an accompanying narrative, rather it is up to the subject to engage in a manner of their own choosing. Navigation is thus guided by previous structures of organised movement that may have persisted into the present, opening or closing new pathways that are dependent on the subject’s own mobility. Evidently not all ruins are designated as being archaeological, still as a grouping they are ripe sites for excavational inquiry – the allure of these being ‘lost’ spaces implying that there is something to be ‘found’. ‘Popular’ archaeological fiction frequently connects the institution with the ruin, fostering the belief that clues to lost worlds may emerge from understanding the textual ‘order’ being presented. The exhibition is thus often the starting point for the archaeological quest, inevitably encoded as the ‘here’ that creates the curiosity to find the ‘there’ that de Certeau outlined. Not only does such a narrative encourage the observer to imagine the possibility of adventure within the institution, it also depends upon a material connection or collaboration between displays and the outer world; indeed that the micro can speak and extend to the macro.

These discoveries draw upon the apparent theatricality of the archaeological and thus happen outside of conventional public interaction – or ‘after hours’ – to preserve the exclusivity of the encounter. The opening of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) acts as a perfect representation of such a process, particularly as the Louvre museum adopts an appropriate tomb-like description. The protagonist, Robert Langdon, observes that “the lobby was barren and dark, giving the entire space a cold and crypt-like atmosphere”; the museum is encoded more as a mausoleum than exhibition (36). Movement is an especially vital component to this unique encounter and synonymised with a chthonic descent to uncover secrets, where delving “into the subterranean foyer, the yawning space slowly emerged from the shadows” (36). Similar to the artefact, such a presentation encourages the perspective that human history can be narrated through the non-human aspects it touches, that the ground – or chthonic – ‘holds’ these mysteries to be uncovered.

Visiting the museum outside traditional hours offers the promise of unconventional experience, a trope used in texts such as *Night at the Museum* (2006) or Doyle’s “The Ring of Thoth” (1890) to suggest that the night time explorer witnesses the animation of the artefacts – as explored in Chapter One – which will actively narrate their own history. Akin to the ruin, such a practice permits new frames of encounter – the observer is not controlled by the crowd and even the placement of the object upon the pedestal is disrupted. Within *The Da Vinci Code* this is utilised to almost comedic effect when Langdon uses *Madonna on the Rocks* (1483-1486) as a hostage for safe passage, knowing that a security guard would not damage such an artefact. This proposition, however, depends upon both guard and Langdon acknowledging the item as an artefact outside of its exhibitionary framing, again returning to an emergent material narrative. Importantly, each of these disruptions seemingly undermines the

museum as a place to ‘order’ the known, but rather where a ‘dark’ unknown emerges: “He was lost in another place now. A place where ancient secrets rose to the surface” (156). By not only inviting the imagined disruption of the display – through which the exhibition is brought into ruin – but also the overlapping of peripheries and hub, the museum becomes a catalytic gateway that encourages exploration fantasies.

The superimposition of the archaeological secret upon the pedagogical institution is also present in *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade* (1989). The first clue to the location of the central artefact – the Holy Grail – is discovered within a tomb that lies beneath a Venetian library. To find this secret, Indy follows the clues left in his father’s journal – which itself acts as a narrativized and material legitimisation for the Grail quest. The low angle shot (Figure 2.3) of the stained-glass window acts a further visual validation, one that evokes artefactual framing. Crucially both objects are presented as texts – material signifiers for an immaterial pursuit.

Figure 2.3: Low angle shot of the prominent cryptic stained glass – *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989)

Adopting the framing from *Raiders*, a sense of exclusivity is interpolated within the metropolitan centre rather than the designated periphery. The group search for the roman numerals depicted within the stained glass, a process which requires the navigation of the institutional space in unconventional ways – guided by archaeological clues rather than categorisation methods. In a significant visual metaphor, Indy must traverse to an elevated position to discover the secret ‘hidden’ in plain sight.

Figure 2.4: High angle shot of the ‘X’ - *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989)

Conforming to the self-referential trope of ‘X marks the spot’, the institution becomes the home of the unknown. However, while this may be a fantastical or imaginative adventure space for the tourist, evidently this discovery required the ‘knowledge’ of an experienced archaeological adventurer. Indy’s elevation to another level permits him an alternative perspective, which is later matched by the group’s appropriate descent into the tomb. Both processes emphasise the importance of navigation to the archaeological quest, that such apparent ‘secrets’ can be uncovered through movement.

The superimposition of the institution upon the ruin represents not only a topographical connection but equally an encounter between spatial functions. Taxonomical systems invite the designation of different forms of place, as Edensor suggests: “Processes of ordering lead to the demarcation of zones, routes and areas for specific activities, producing connected single-purpose spaces and a geography of centres, terminals and unidirectional flows” (55). As demonstrated, the ‘after-hours’ visitor to the museum and the archaeologist within the library utilise these spaces in different manners, often challenging the established flow. Indeed, these locations are now more akin to the ruin in which the explorer may re-route conventional pathways and challenge previous boundaries – a core aspect of vestige spaces that this chapter will explore. Indeed, this invites the interrogation of what happens to the Knight’s crypt after the archaeologists have left: does it become another tourist destination? There must, therefore, be a degree of separation, a boundary to cross. Expeditions require a demarcation of secluded or unknown spaces, the ‘here’ of the institution matched with the ‘there’ of the mythological, ruined destination. The imagination of such journeys springs into action to help the observer to extrapolate from an artefact, to picture its

previously designated ‘home’. It is within these fantastical projections and the actual mediation of ruins, then, that a connection back to the catalogue, warehouse or exhibition is suggested.

Collapsing Boundaries: Reconfiguring Metropolitan Navigation

Cities within lost world narratives are often demarcated by their limits, although the sprawling nature of contemporary metropolises absorb smaller towns or villages, these ancient sites are static: they have a suggested beginning and end. Yet, these very projections imagine an inertia in which time halts, where borders can be maintained and are not destabilised by non-human interaction. Cities are orientated around regulated systems of movement, traditional avenues and processes in which its networked structure of interconnections may be traversed. The explorer re-charts and impeaches these schemas; their movement is not restricted by conventional navigational structures, but rather governed by their own curiosity. The ruined city is therefore composed of limits, districts and boundaries which are crossed, negated and deconstructed. As Edensor suggests, “[r]uins confound the normative spacings of things, practices and people” (18). They represent a contestation of taxonomical infrastructures, such as the museum, by introducing original and adaptive proximities. Although these locales represented demarcated space, their degraded state permits alternative movement and agency to the individual in new uncharted methods. New routes are opened and ‘secret’ spaces can be invaded. The reconfiguration of a conventional metropolitan flow offers new modes of engagement. The ruined city thus offers a site in which physical and cognitive limits can be crossed to re-think paradigms of ontological contact.

Franco Moretti in *Atlas of the European Novel* (1999) suggests that “the border is the site of *adventure*: one crosses the line, and is face to face with the unknown, often

the enemy; the story enters a space of danger, surprises, suspense” (35, original emphasis). Crossing physical and metaphysical boundaries is encoded with a sense of curiosity, the excitement of confronting the unknown. The Weird, however, inverts the heuristic potential of this proposition through an inexplicable exteriority, undermining the assumption that pedagogical truths emerge from such contact. Moretti encapsulates the fantastical associations aligned with crossing topographical boundaries, the sense of adventure imbued in discovering hidden ruins, archaeological sites and abandoned buildings. These explorations themselves take on a narrative edge; while navigating the vestige, stories are imagined, deduced and suggested from the remnants that are uncovered: the debris, murals, pictures or writing. Edensor demonstrates how these tales are a necessary function to process such a discovery as: “The objects, spaces and traces found in ruins highlight the radical undecidability of the past, its mystery, but they simultaneously invoke a need to tell stories about it” (164). These objects are synthesised and emblematic of previous existences, one which the explorer is free to fantasise about. The crossing of the ruin’s border is entwined with the creation of narratives or stories of its navigation, where description is not only a process of physical or cognitive orientation but also an engagement with ghostly remains of the past.

Essentially these narratives are a process to ‘read’ history, yet equally they represent the narratological aspects in which such discoveries have been encoded. This is expressed in archaeological accounts; for instance, Austen Henry Layard’s phantasmal vision of Nineveh is overtly poetic:

Visions of palaces under-ground, of gigantic monsters, of sculptured figures, and endless inscriptions floated before me. After forming plan after plan for removing the earth, and extricating these treasures, I fancied myself wandering

in a maze of chambers from which I could find no outlet. (*Nineveh and its Remains*, 14)

Although evidently Layard did not encounter “gigantic monsters” underground, the persistence of fantastical or indescribable visions employed within these accounts demonstrates their entwinement with narrative production. Parallel to the aforementioned eighteenth and nineteenth century fascination with ruins, this location becomes a cultural wellspring for an archaeological imagination. Sigmund Freud was a keen archaeology enthusiast and thus, in a similar manner, excavational fantasies emerge within his psychoanalytic language. In “The Aetiology of Hysteria” (1896) Freud analogises stratigraphic depth with the psyche by evoking the image of vestige spaces: “Imagine that an explorer comes in his travels to a region of which little is known and that there his interest is aroused by ruins showing remains of erated [sic] and illegible inscriptions” (*Collected Papers Vol. 1*, 184). The pursuit to “bring to light what is buried” for Freud represents a synonymising of meaning with chthonic emergence, where vertical descent imagines an immutable depth from which epistemological secrets may arise (185). Such metaphors imply that verifiable truths lie beneath the surface, where the non-human provides an objective authentication for human exceptionalism. The interpolation of ruins within such a framing emphasises their attraction to the human subject as a vestige in which notions of presence, absence, and belonging can be both imagined and encountered.

The physical and projected navigation of ruins is a central component to the narratives produced both *of* and *for* these spaces. Yet such imaginings return once again to a human frame of contact, one that populates the silence of ruins with Weird terrors that evoke and reinforce a form of exoticized curiosity. Warwick comments upon the archaeology of such sites and their resistance to interpretative methodologies: “The

archaeology of remains that preceded writing presented a greater challenge, as those remains were obviously not going to yield textual evidence or be susceptible to textual interpretation, thus necessitating the reading of earth and inexplicable objects” (“The City of Resurrections”, 127). Once again, these identifications fall into the process of ‘reading’ the human from the non-human without quite negotiating the very textuality involved within the productions of material culture and its signifiers. In lieu of such an apparent contact medium, new processes of chthonic engagement must be formed where previous borders may be transgressed. The ruin’s spatial boundaries are based upon difference, the contrast between inside and outside, permitted and restricted. These limits not only control access but also chart movement, shaping public circulation into certain monitored avenues. The structure of the city and its buildings emphasise a suggested mode of navigation, one that – akin to Martin Heidegger’s ‘present-to-hand’ – is felt more notionally through disruption. Indeed, subjective mediation is enforced when a routinised pathway is blocked: when active movement becomes necessary, new frames of contact emerge. These networks are thus a matrix of flow, mobility and textual reading that requires the subject to understand underlying immaterial, behavioural structures to metropolitan navigation. Such designations compare the motions of the crowd to a regulated machine, a networked assemblage rather than a multitude of constituent parts. Such a perspective endangers a horizontalizing which conflates the individualism of separate micro experiences in favour of a totalising, superimposable mega ‘identity’ or structure.

A synecdoche, or personification, of the city, overlooks the idiosyncrasies contained within this area. The embodiment of a totalised city is fundamental to Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Man of the Crowd” (1840). In the tale, the narrator observes the world from a café where such a distanced perspective catalyses a feeling

of alienated isolation, as they feel separated from a more implicit connection with the apparent flow of the metropolis. An old man catches the narrator's attention, their external appearance proving an interpretive enigma for the narrator who cannot deduce or guess an 'identity' for this subject. The story's opening that "[t]here are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told", suggests a sense of inexplicability, instigated by the narrator's apparent failure to read both the city or man's identity (*The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 357). Curiosity drives the narrator to pursue his subject through the streets of London – who remains just within sight, yet frustratingly out of reach. Traversing the metropolis' intersections and streets, the narrator must navigate through the city's crowd, often challenging established routes of mobility in an attempt to discover the 'secret'. The narrator eventually confronts the man but fails to receive a response as: "[h]e refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd*" (363, original emphasis). The narrator attempts to separate the individual from the collective, the man from the crowd. Drawing on a dialectics of inside and outside, the man rather refuses to be separated and elevated into an 'artefactual' identity. The narrator projects that the micro (man) may stand in for the macro (city) but cannot synthesise an identity or method to read either. Poe's story crucially challenges a sense of belonging within the city that often mythologises or, indeed, personifies a totalised metropolitan identity. Similar to Fawcett and other expeditions, he elevates the pursuit of a singular *fragment* through the belief that it may holistically speak for the macro and thus fails to appreciate the nuances of individualised encounter.

The vestige space – represented by the ruined city – challenges the homogenisation of holistic groupings, in which such signifiers as 'Z' fail to replicate the experience of personal navigation or encounter. Such a process is replicated by the archaeological explorer transcending the internal boundaries of the city. Although they

must first discover its external limits, once inside they are not constrained by the historical, physical or associated mimetic distinctions between different topographies. The ruined city may still preserve certain delineations. However, its dilapidated state has constructed new methods of movement, some existing routes are now closed whereas original paths have opened: disordered mobility reminiscent of the labyrinth. The protagonist is left to experience, learn or even chart this space with a palimpsestic network of pathways and routes. Donald Burleson in *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe* (1990) argues that: “mention of a city usually puts one in mind of containment, enclosure: the city limits, the medieval city walls, the separating of inside from outside, the defining and delimitation of what constitutes insideness” (54). The explorer breaks this containment; they erase the differentiation of inside and outside not only through their new trajectories but by unearthing the secrets within the depths – for often these locations are a physical and metaphoric uncovering of what lies beneath. Edensor comments that the presence of contemporary industrial ruins “reveal that the city is not constituted out of an organised web of interconnected, discrete spaces. Instead it includes spaces incommensurable with such containment” (168). Edensor challenges the totalising process of the city – the production of such metropolitan myths as ‘Z’ or Atlantis that engage more with a homogenous grouping than nuanced differentiation. For it is within industrial ruins that the conventional mechanics of movement can be challenged, a home to carnivalesque behaviour which Edensor argues are outside institutional surveillance and thus promote autonomous freedom. Ruins are representative of encounters pushed to the *edges* of regulated space in which the subject’s crossing of borders thus become emblematic of a contestation of metropolitan limits.

H. P. Lovecraft's "The Nameless City" (1921) is a particularly striking example of an archaeological explorer questing to an uncharted desert territory to find the ruins of an advanced, but fallen, civilisation. The title refers to the 'lost' nature of the city, to the extent that even its name has been forgotten – although "nameless" paradoxically becomes its designated marker. The narrator recounts how "[r]emote in the desert of Araby lies the nameless city, crumbling and inarticulate, its low walls nearly hidden by the sands of uncounted ages" (*The New Annotated H. P. Lovecraft*, 80). Lovecraft's terming of the city as "inarticulate" recalls the previous discussion of the indescribable, yet it is used unusually to describe a city rather than object or entity. The inarticulate nature of the space suggests it is beyond definition, that the narrator cannot succinctly condense a representation of the macro into a micro explanation – an identity of the city cannot be constituted. Equally, the lack of articulation recalls the connection between space and narrative, evidently the city is void of textual or mimetic reference; its history is mysterious, its identity unknown. Edensor comments that "[r]uins are disarticulated spaces and language can only capture their characteristics through halting speech ... the telling of the ruin's tale from beginning to end is impossible, for such a story must be open-ended" (162). Although archaeological study may interpret facts from ruined remains, Edensor notes that these are fragmentary pieces and it is within the human frame that the suggestion of a linear narrative emerges. Certainly, there must be caution towards mythologising the ruin itself; while these topographies may offer new contact points between human and non-human, there are equally ethical and moral implications held within the preservation or elision of such sites.

For the narrator of "The Nameless City", however, this structure is rather a text to read akin to an artefact; as such, their anxiety stems from the lack of any apparent human traces of production. Vitally this recalls the importance of understanding the

materiality of an object, the narrator's fears are located in an alienation from technical process. The architecture is infused with an oppressive ancientness, reinforced through the contrast between material presence and seemingly ontological *absence*. Stating that "[t]he antiquity of the spot was unwholesome, and I longed to encounter some sign or device to prove that the city was indeed fashioned by mankind", the narrator's uneasiness is again predicated on both the historical qualities of the ruin and its perplexing construction (82). Namely, his fear precipitates a re-evaluation of historical knows, challenging the certainty of a documented past instantiated by the material spectacle of exhibitory institutions. The museum seeks to emphasise presence over absence, to suggest that the part may speak for the whole; for the narrator, therefore, absence is truly terrifying as it returns to the unknowable macro rather than the comprehensible micro. Certainly, this is also predicated on a usurpation of physical laws, the narrator's exclamation that "[t]here were certain *proportions* and *dimensions* in the ruins which I did not like", is a disorientating assault both on materialism and archaeological studies: these objects remain outside of representative reduction (82, original emphasis). Importantly, while the narrator may have free access to the city and can transcend its conventional limits, evidently its own perplexing structure shapes the explorer's movement, a resistance towards his curiosity-driven scrutiny. The absence of objects, which are representative evidence of a civilisation's production, in favour of architectural abnormalities ('things' which impeach material law) obscures any understanding of individual experiences within the city; the explorer must quest further, deeper, if he wishes to uncover its secrets.

"The Nameless City" is a perfect example of the uncharted space in which the explorer may impose their own autonomous mobility schemas: "In and out amongst the shapeless foundations of houses and palaces I wandered, finding never a carving or

inscription to tell of those men, if men they were, who built the city and dwelt therein so long ago” (82). Starting with a typical Lovecraftian oxymoron, the vestige is constituted of “shapeless foundations”. Evidently there are architectural structures, but to the narrator these follow no discernible system. His wandering demonstrates the free access permitted, he can invade previously secret spaces in the search for an artistic representation to interpret its past. Later this propels the narrator deeper into the city’s heart, descending stairs to a derelict chamber. Staircases are a central motif for movement in archaeological or adventure fiction precisely because the topographical penetration is mirrored by a deeper introspection of ontological purpose, one which echoes Freud’s influential metaphor. Here the narrator’s journey is shaped by the architecture; although he may be considered autonomous, the city shapes his trajectory, personified into carrying him further to the ‘central’ horror. Curiously, the archaeology of architecture is dismissed: a specific spectacle or artefact is desired rather than the fragmented debris. The narrator is fuelled by the desire of a revolutionary discovery; similar to Indy and Evie, he is looking for fame and recognition: “But as always in my strange and roving existence, wonder soon drove out fear; for the luminous abyss and what it might contain presented a problem worthy of the greatest explorer” (90). Again, the emphasis placed on his “roving” movement suggests a fluid state, a continuous form of mobility inspired by curiosity. Within such a framing, the navigation of ruins and movement towards a ‘central’ point would seem rather to be an anthropocentric designation. For it is the viewing subject who infers that authenticating meaning should exist at the centre, one perpetuated by artefactual framing that consistently seeks the micro to elucidate the macro.

Between *The City & the City*: Navigating Mythology as Artefactual Disruption

Navigating metropolitan limits lies at the core of China Miéville's *The City & the City* (2009) through its doppelgänger twin cities and even more pertinently, its mythical and haunting third 'in-between' space, Orciny. The novel foregrounds the importance of urban movement and sight, a dynamic epitomised by the Bol Ye'an archaeological dig-site which challenges the construction of metropolitan myths. Miéville's novel is set in the two "topolganger" cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma which occupy the same physical space but are kept separate through an enforced cognitive differentiation, a divide policed by the mysterious Breach. Inhabitants from both locations are taught to 'unsee' the alternate space, a process which requires an active overlooking of certain visuals until this very action becomes subconscious, falling into subterranean depths of awareness. Miéville's conception of 'unseeing' offers a particular critique towards real-life metropolitan movement, in which a pedestrian avoids making eye contact and thus attempts to avoid the encounter with parts of the city that they wish to cognitively obscure, especially behaviour conceived as being socially divergent. Evidently this process requires navigation, to 'unsee' necessitates alternate methods of mobility and experience. Primarily, the archaeological significance of the novel rests on the blurring of city boundaries, where ownership is disputed and such artificial formations are both reified and challenged. This separation lacks uniformity, a contestation of topographical limits encapsulated by the dig-site itself: "Bol Ye'an crosshatches *here, here*, and the park it's in *here* and *here*. And yeah, over at the edges in this direction, it even creeps into Beszel total" (187, original emphasis). Bol Ye'an not only complicates the demarcation of the archaeological excavation but also indirectly proposes concern for how national or cultural legitimising claims are built upon material culture. Existing

between both cities, the dig-site disrupts conventional notions of mobility and ancestry, further interrogating notions of ownership and its topographical association.

Miéville's neologisms may conceive of alternate perceptive modes, but ultimately they reflect contemporary metropolitan identity. The novel focuses on the investigation by Inspector Tyador Borlú of the Besz Extreme Crime Squad into the homicide of an archaeology student, whose body is found in Beszel but is thought to have been murdered in Ul Qoma. To solve the crime, Tyador must cross between the two cities, haunted by the mythology of a third 'hidden' city – Orciny. The procedural nature of the narrative requires an extensive amount of walking, one which progressively challenges the protagonist's ability to separate the two locations: "It was, not surprisingly that day perhaps, hard to observe borders, to see and unsee only what I should, on my way home. I was hemmed in by people not in my city, walking slowly through areas crowded but not crowded in Beszel" (36). For Tyador, the crime begins to embody the meeting of the two cities, which in turn leads to an interrogation of what lies between these spaces, what exists in the disputed *dissensi* zones that neither can wholly claim. Miéville's novel explores the multi-faceted dimension of borders, their ability to control and delimit while also confronting their utilisation as a tool of national legitimisation – indeed, to query the connection that a civilisation has with past material culture. The conception of an in-between space deconstructs the rigidity of these definitions and indeed, as I will argue, embodies a mythologising of city spaces.

The very act of walking itself contributes to textual formation – motion encoded through description – which de Certeau compares to the pedestrian: "They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it" (93). Navigation for de Certeau constructs an immutable narrative of

movement, decisions and pathways. Importantly, each participant cannot view the ‘text’ they are producing due to their immediacy; indeed, it requires a distanced perspective. Tyador’s investigation requires that he walks the streets of both cities and it is through this process that his own text – through the re-affirmation of socially determining vectors of movement – contributes to a larger homogenised identity of the city. The presence of Orciny is a potential disruption to these routine pathways, a mythological ‘there’ as opposed to the familiar ‘here’. Even by the conclusion, its existence is dismissed yet not categorically disproven, retaining the mythic possibilities of an other, non-quotidian space of freedom.

This imaginative process recalls the legacy of ‘Z’ and the expeditions which continue to compound its pedestalled status – an attempt, arguably, for the human to retain a sense of mystery, of curiosity. Alistair Bonnett describes such an ideal in *Off the Map* (2014) as: “[w]hen the world has been fully codified and collated, when ambivalences and ambiguities have been so sponged away that we know exactly and objectively where everything is and what it is called, a sense of loss arises” (4). Loss is a particularly important concept here, primarily as the archaeological Weird challenges the anthropocentrism of such an approach, in which the ‘loss’ of the unknown is both the questioned accumulation of knowledge and denotive of an implied belonging. This re-enchantment of space implies a partial alienation, to preserve certain borders so that they may be crossed later. Such a process, to follow Bonnett’s argument, reflects the allure of vestige spaces – that hold the remnant of an ephemeral presence. Indeed, such sites retain an immanence within the contemporary moment and Bonnett’s *Off the Map* documents a collection of fascinating real-world ‘lost’ spaces of ‘No Man’s Lands’, dead cities, enclaves and floating islands. The prospect of decoy towns abandoned after wars, underground cities and the aptly named Archaeological Park of Sicilian

Incompletion (an intentional unfinished city) highlights that the Earth is full of abandoned ruins which speak to this desire for a re-enchantment of ‘corner’ spaces. Their presence and situation with mythologised lost cities reflects upon a cultural interest in vestige spaces as intimate connections to historical, cultural or national truths – a site in which to authentically encounter the notion of a textual ‘past’ as implied by the museum.

Miéville’s conceptualisation of a mythical city has different priorities however. As a writer, he is heavily invested in the city’s ontology, particularly as a centre point of political and social paradigms. Miéville’s novels predominantly take place within a city (and those that do not often factor one in eventually) and align this re-enchantment with a mythologising of the metropolis – for example, the occult underground and ‘knacking’ in *Kraken*. Rather than emphasising rural archaeology, Miéville focuses on the urban centre due to his interest in schemas of social interstices or encounter. The ‘lost city’ is thus a merging of the metropolitan and rural, the centre and the periphery. Orciny is no different – its phantasmal presence becoming a form of folklore, a place:

Between the other two. It’s in the *dissensi*, disputed zones, places that Beszel thinks are Ul Qoma’s and Ul Qoma Beszel’s. When the old commune split, it didn’t split into two, it split into three. Orciny’s the secret city. It runs things.
(50)

The focus on a controlling secret city, in relation to the sight motifs throughout the novel, evokes surveillance anxieties as Miéville experiments with urban transparency. The projection of an immutable existence ‘behind’ such structures echoes archaeological projection and this enchantment, therefore, bestows a mystique to navigating both cities. The search for Orciny is labelled as not being ‘real’ archaeology, as the only academic to publish on the topic is discredited: “he believed in it! He

collated all these references, found new ones, put them together into a kind of ur-myth, then reinterpreted it as a secret and a cover-up” (89-90). This prototypical myth becomes the basis of later anxieties, to the extent that even towards the end of the narrative, Orciny still lingers at the edge, never quite exorcised. The myth has bestowed a life upon itself, regardless of empirical data, and the suggestion of some exteriority between the cities will have a lingering remnant, the desire for the enchantment of space. The excavational site may be established as a location that will provide a material legitimisation to Orciny, yet crucially such an understanding may only emerge from within a human perspective.

A number of aberrant examples are elevated within the novel as being alibis for Orciny, where the inexplicable but irrefutable material reality of such items becomes a basis to simultaneously include and exclude them from the taxonomical structure. Such objects are considered to be “pre-cleavage” – before the split of the cities – and projected as an authenticating source for a history that cannot be verified. These relics are housed within the gateway between the two cities, Copula Hall. Their very presence critiques a sense of cultural belonging, one matched by their immutability: “The few Precursor artefacts in alarmed and guarded bell jars that punctuate the passages are different. They are specific, but opaque” (68). Despite the inability to deduce a past from these items, they are still incorporated as a mythical spectacle that offers the promise of expeditionary curiosity. Indeed, their very specificity suggests that while they can be appraised through this framing, there forever lies something exterior to it. An archaeological perspective is even diegetically introduced to attribute an authenticating voice to the products of the Bol Ye’an dig, from which emerges a myriad of “*root* stuff” that is “pretty incomprehensible” and produces notions where the “material culture makes no sense at all” (87, 87, 91, original emphasis). Essentially the

objects instigate a feeling of ontological alienation, where the successors of the Precursors fail to align themselves with the objects and thus cannot verify historical or national claims. Effectively, they believe that humanity should be able to connect immediately with its material heritage. The infusion of a Weird ‘incomprehensibility’ reflects upon the ontological chasm of such an encounter, where an ‘identity’ or past for the items cannot be intuited from physical contact alone. Rather, it is the absence of any authenticating text for the artefacts that fuels the mythologising of an external, hidden source – the lost city Orciny. Given the extensive attempts within the novel to discredit any serious suggestion of a third city, the presence of Breach – who act as the arbiters of the topolgangster unseeing – seems to irrefutably confound this process. Breach throughout the narrative is a complicated term, referring both to the unlawful traversal between the two cities and the entities who police this divide. Described as “an alien power”, their presence embodies another mythologisation, as inhabitants seem to fear the unknown fate of those who ‘breach’ the boundary (64). The amorphousness of the Breach avatars is mirrored by their ability to freely contest the city’s structures and laws – indeed they frequently transgress boundaries to walk between both cities, offering an alternate form of movement. When Tyador later breaches, he is taken by these avatars as punishment; yet the place he wakes in is not a mythical city, but rather more mundane: “Grey floor in scuffed rubber, a window admitting light at me, tall grey walls, stained in places and cracked. A desk and two chairs. Like a shabby office” (241). The reality inverts the mythical and mundane, as while there are secret spaces (the *dissensi* unregulated zones), they fall short of any fantastical revelation – where the ordinary is instead behind the extraordinary. Miéville conceives of these in-between arbiters as further representations of institutionally governed power, but requires the non-quotidian space to do so.

By the conclusion, Tyador accepts his place as an avatar of Breach, he becomes part of the select group who may walk between the two cities, who constantly challenge conventional systems of mobility. He becomes an agent who both walks and polices the border, maintaining the rigid differentiation of metropolitan identities. The closing sentence of the novel itself refers to this transitional ontology:

We are all philosophers here where I am, and we debate among many other things the question of where it is that we live. On that issue I am a liberal. I live in the interstice yes, but I live in both the city and the city. (312)

Living at the crossroads reflects upon the possibility of choice, the hesitation and decision making of which path to follow, of reading the lines within the network. *The City & the City* quite usefully demonstrates both the real and imagined boundaries of the city, those created by its inhabitants either to distance or construct a sense of adventure. Crucially, the novel represents the mythologising of the city, the embedding of narrative within space. Although Miéville may diverge from confirming the presence of any secret city, he utilises this setting in order to re-conceptualise metropolitan navigation, demonstrating its pervasiveness – indeed, by the end of the narrative, the myth of Orciny has gained a unique aura of its own. The archaeological dig at its centre is not used to dispel myths of Orciny but rather to perpetuate its haunting presence, adapting the textuality of artefacts to posit the possible inferences of such a heritage. In so doing, Miéville's narrative trades off both the mythologising of the city identity and the curiosity towards vestige spaces, one that offers new paradigms to re-encounter the very materiality of the metropolis while walking between *The City & the City*.

Narrative Motion – Presence, Absence and Chthonic Emergence

As technological advancement permitted a wider scope and functionality of global mapping, the apparent ‘dark’ corners of the Earth shrank until new concepts of the geographical periphery emerged. These sites are now transposed beyond cartography: either they are hidden in ingenious ways or separated in their own zone that requires a specific access route. For the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when Lovecraft was writing, unmapped topographies were still apparent – particularly locations such as Antarctica or oceanic depths. These topographies are fundamentally utilised as the topographical and epistemological limits, the edges of the ‘known’ world. Lovecraft’s iconic “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928) features the eternal cosmic certainty that the sunken city R’lyeh and its occupant, Cthulhu, will one day return. Inhabiting both the distant past, far-future and potentially the immediate present, this metropolis is something paradoxically ancient and yet eternal.

Despite these technological developments, then, there is a persistent projection of mythologised cities which demonstrates that advancing cartographical processes do not necessarily dispel the mystique of such sites, but rather encourages new projections of topographical peripheries. The journeys to such locations are not purely empirical but often reflect a phenomenological or ontological pursuit. The quest for knowledge is thus framed through such navigational metaphors, as evidenced in the opening of “The Call of Cthulhu”: “We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far” (*H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 3*, 61). Appropriately Lovecraft’s metaphor of scientific curiosity as a journey into the unknown is reflected in the expeditions at the heart of these archaeological narratives. Crucially the movement towards the periphery seeks to dispel the dark topographical and epistemological corners of the planet. Yet the repeated recursion to

“wonderful things”, ‘inarticulate ruins’ or “visions of palaces under-ground, of gigantic monsters” evokes a chthonic reality framed through a Weird register that gestures to a persistent and haunting exteriority. Ironically, although the quests for ‘Z’, Orciny or the “nameless” city are fuelled by the empirical – and often imperial – pursuit of pushing back the borders of the unknown, there is a certain extraneity that elides representational reduction. Certainly, these persistent projections offer a form of legitimisation to continually stage the scientific expedition with a sense of unified and global purpose.

The desire to find something extraordinary and subsume it within the realms of the ordinary implies that such a discovery will offer a transformative or revelatory experience for the subject, the crossing and expansion of borders. The dissonance of the Weird decentres such a human process of encounter, foregrounding a dynamic of absence and presence which undermines the taxonomical tools deployed within material engagement. A discontinuity is introduced, in which the chthonic emerges to suggest the inadequacy of representational paradigms to consider not just what lies inside or outside, but that which is beyond such a framing – to present evidently naturalistic structures that destabilise conventional thought about materiality. Archaeology is a prime medium to understand the chthonic, as that which emerges from the ‘natural’ or earth itself, due to its innate relationship with material and textual formation; the vestige space, in particular, provides a vital site in which to consider the dynamism of such an encounter.

The importance of contact articulation is represented by R’lyeh, a city which provokes a response similar to the aesthetic horror of a bas-relief of Cthulhu where “it was the *general outline* of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful” (63-64, original emphasis). Such a Weird artefact evidently holds some form of amorphous otherness that refuses to be reduced to static representation, presenting an aura that

undermines the viewer's perception of how materiality conventionally manifests. Crucially, the city and Cthulhu are mediated through a series of frame narratives, where description is always experienced through layers. As such, its bizarreness is articulated through a subjective position, attempting to paradoxically capture its inexplicability. The narrator recalls how "[t]he great stone city R'lyeh, with its monoliths and sepulchres, had sunk beneath the waves" (81). The discovery of the city must occur within interpolated space, one which literally rises from the chthonic depths and skirts the dynamic of presence and absence. The narrator mediates the dreams of a sculptor who witnesses this spectacle: "He talked of his dreams in a strangely poetic fashion; making me see with terrible vividness the damp Cyclopean city of slimy green stone – whose *geometry*, he oddly said, was *all wrong*" (84, original emphasis). Lovecraft repeatedly refers to the poeticism of the articulation, the elusive aesthetic that is yet terribly vivid. Although Lovecraft's architecture often borrows heavily from non-Euclidean geometry, Graham Harman points out that this is not as non-human as it once may have appeared: "In similar fashion, the architecture found in Lovecraft's stories cannot strictly be described as non-Euclidean, but only as 'all wrong'" (*Weird Realism*, 46). To Lovecraft non-Euclidean architecture represented a break from traditional geometrical constructions, its curves and bends suggesting a contestation of linearity. The suggestion that it is "wrong" reflects equally upon anthropocentrism, for this is a city governed seemingly by non-human laws and structures. Movement thus becomes an integral process to engage with such an experience.

The disorientation of R'lyeh is founded within a tension between form and formlessness: precisely that while there is an evident concrete structure, its shape, outline and qualities are amorphous. This contradiction rejects any comprehensive handle by which the spectacle may be processed, thus it cannot be charted. The narrator

recounts: “Johansen and his men landed at a sloping mud-bank on this monstrous acropolis, and clambered slipperily up over titan oozy blocks which could have been no mortal staircase” (93-94). The slime-like qualities of this city resist mobility, refusing any foundation for human orientation. Again, the emphasis placed upon staircases is apparent, perceived as a process to access the heart of the metropolis. Stairs permit the subject to transition to different *levels* – to gain an alternate perspective or angle – they change the way we view a given location. The lack of staircases fashioned for human utilisation emphatically demonstrates that this space is governed by alien schemas of navigation; the characters are forced to invent new, challenging routes as they clamber over the slimy blocks. The city remains an enigma, and the explorers are perplexed by its incalculable complexity at such a grand scale, to the extent that the macro spills beyond micro representation as no fragmental aspect of the space is described. The relationship between mobility and sight is a key connection that Edensor outlines about the industrial ruin: “The channelling and containment of human flows across the city, then, reproduces a sense of what space is *for*” (56, original emphasis). Recalling the dialectics of ‘here’ and ‘there’ produced by mobility, human notions of spatiality only emerge through the inscription of meaning. Throughout the description of R’lyeh, however, there is no designation of *purpose*, each stairway and level becomes part of a colossal labyrinth seemingly intended to confuse, rather than being the desired destination.

Conclusively, the explorers challenge the regulated pathways of the city, they infringe upon its systematic network of movement and access routes to fulfil their curiosity as to what lies within this obscure geometrical form. Burleson encapsulates the nature of the story which “stands as an allegorical exploration of the paradoxical nature of borders, of distances, of insides and outsides, of the simultaneous necessity

and impossibility of centres, of the tendency of textuality to deal in absences that are more powerful than presences” (85). Cthulhu throughout the story is largely absent, even his final revelation is a mediation rather than immediate confrontation, suggesting that such a meeting requires a degree of separation. Yet, Burleson’s emphasis on centres is important given the navigation of the city’s limits. The characters must find something (Cthulhu) as they successively invade further reaches of the city, yet there is never a demarcated centre. Such a grounding principle would permit perspective and orientation, but the lack of staircases suggest that the explorers are forging their own paths and are, in fact, lost within the perplexing geometry of such a labyrinthine space. The sprawling nature of the lost metropolis interrogates not only how the centre of a city is defined, but how it may be located without cartographical aid: emphatically this is the prime unmappable space as it lacks quantifiable vectors of direction.

Ruin navigation is an integral aspect of the negotiation of materiality, archaeological study and conception of non-human ontology when mediating both chthonic ‘remains’ and emergence. However, vestige spaces also contain the traces that persist due to human action, the presence that subsists after our absence – a notion which I will return to in Chapter Four through garbology. This prospect is integral to Lovecraft’s novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), which depicts a city discovered atop the mountains of Antarctica that usurps any conventional dynamics of presence and absence. The majority of the narrative is constructed around the exploration of this ruined space, utilising described movement as a representative paradigm. Harman, however, perceives this process as a failing:

The final sixty pages of city exploration undermine the city’s innate architectural horror by bringing it too close, and they also spiral into an overly

detailed historical account of the creatures that sounds too much like the backstory for someone's role-playing game campaign. (*Weird Realism*, 89)

For Harman, the exploration of the city brings its bizarre architecture too close, the detail effectively being excessive. Yet for the expedition this is a necessity, if language helps to process and convey the visual, the description of the city becomes a paradigm for both reader and subject to navigate. Further, Lovecraft's extensive background history for the city's inhabitants is an evident attempt to attribute a narrative to the ruins, the desire for the remains to 'speak' about their past – even if this is an imperfect interpretation. Harman's earlier quoted assertion, that "[n]o other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess", thus identifies a desire to continually retain a sense of removal, to recognise and observe such an ontological chasm (7). Certainly, the narrator's projection of a 'past' upon the ruins – with little material evidence – evokes colonial and anthropocentric paradigms of textual formation. This process, however, is deployed as a manner to approach non-human incommensurability, where archaeological imagination attempts to frame a chthonic emergence that threatens the rigidity of taxonomical borders.

Scientific expeditions are a common trope within Weird Fiction to stage the revelation of a horrifying and incalculable Real. Within such a frame lies the desire to reduce the experience to discrete facts, yet the Weird intervention interpolates an exteriority in this process. Travelling to a frontier region, at the edge of regulated space, the scientific survey aims to comprehend the past through geological samples. Rather than discerning facts from the earth, the scientists instead discover a seemingly abandoned vestige. For Lovecraft, Antarctica represented one of the last 'blank' topographical spaces, a site to align with imperial anxieties of destabilised control. The

expedition itself begins as a scientific survey that adopts a mythic register when unearthed alien remains incite a form of artefactual curiosity, as: “[c]omplete specimens have such uncanny resemblance to certain creatures of primal myth that suggestion of ancient existence outside Antarctic becomes inevitable” (*At the Mountains of Madness*, 21). The repeated references to primal myth represent a preoccupation with ontological origins. Within the narrative framing, however, the specimens become artefacts and instigate the uncovering of the city, a textual gateway which foregrounds an eerie balance of material presence and subjective absence. The expedition itself is encoded as a journey into the metaphorical ‘unknown’ but this movement will rather return and reverberate until human exceptionalism is decentred.

Motion is a recurrent theme throughout the novella, emphasised by the narrator, William Dyer, who remarks that the topography is “[l]ike land of mystery in a dream or gateway to forbidden world of untrodden wonder” (13). The allusion to a gateway suggests that a boundary must be crossed, not only physically but mentally, to experience the unknown. Although later contested, the perception of the space as ‘untrodden’ highlights a certain autonomous dimension to their movement, guided by material structures but freed from cognitive association. For the expedition, however, the enigma of the city both sits within and outside of conventional frames, their descent into the depths fuelled by the perception that ‘meaning’ can be found in the chthonic. Crucially, the group recognise the ruins as a city – and thus treat it as an artefact – but are precluded from any more nuanced comprehension. The crossing into such a non-human space is recognised as a reversal of ontological belonging: “And then, having gained those last few feet, we did indeed stare across the momentous divide and over the unsampled secrets of an elder and utterly alien earth” (42). Lovecraft reiterates the exclusivity of the site, one which both horrifies and allures. The lack of pre-existing

pathways consolidates the alienation of this sphere, as this corner of the Earth becomes something non-quotidian.

That such a revelation should be fuelled by an infinite sprawling metropolis only consolidates the arrogance of anthropocentrism: “We must have had some such normal notions to fall back upon as our eyes swept that limitless, tempest-scarred plateau and grasped the almost endless labyrinth of colossal, regular, and geometrically eurhythmic stone masses” (42). The incomprehensibility of the city lies in its impressive grandeur. Its contestation of topographical limits is so unconventional that some sense of human normality is required to produce a sense of taxonomic stability. Further, the lack of definite edges complicates the designation of a centre, the sprawl of the city thus becomes oppressive because it cannot be accurately charted, the explorer may only experience a part of the whole. Appropriately, Lovecraft has recourse to his archetypal method of description, the inarticulate: “The effect of the monstrous sight was indescribable, for some fiendish violation of known natural law seemed certain at the outset” (42). Akin to Carter’s ‘bewildering’ response, the sheer materiality of the spectacle confounds conventional thinking. Lovecraft’s writing, however, retains a sense of comprehension, evoking mythologies of lost cities as a relational frame to situate such non-commensurability. The invocation of ‘inarticulation’ surrounding ruins paradoxically negotiates the absence of textual representation but uses the presence of narrative motion to denote meaning.

The scientific nature of the expedition is reflected in the attempt to grapple with the incomprehensible qualities of the city, focusing on materiality. Although the city as a totality is seen to be beyond comprehension, Dyer attempts to replicate an image of fragmentation: “It was composed mostly of prodigious blocks of dark primordial slate, schist, and sandstone—blocks in many cases as large as 4 x 6 x 8 feet” (44). Similar to

archaeological artefacts, the provenance of the city's composition becomes a chief identifying characteristic, the precise measurements reflecting the explorers' empirical methodology. Following Harman's argument, Lovecraft's narrative examines the relationship between objects and their material properties. S. T. Joshi supports this suggestion in *The Weird Tale* (1990):

No reader of Lovecraft can have failed to note the remarkable *specificity* of Lovecraft's work. It is something that goes beyond mere realism, although realism is at its foundation. Realism is not an end but a function in Lovecraft: it heightens the weird by contrast. (193, original emphasis)

This argument speaks to the presence of extensive description in Lovecraft's writing; specificity conveying properties over projections of subjectivity. I contend, however, that Lovecraft's emphasis on the material nature of the city appeals to a form of *narrative motion*: to direct such a bizarre journey and meeting, an encapsulating structure is required. Yet the contradiction of the physical and amorphous qualities refuses any concrete centre. Disorientation is predicated on an initial preconception of a beginning and end. *Mountains of Madness* complicates such traditional journeys; its resistance to discrete movement is the pursuit of nebulous and unregulated trajectories.

Unlike conventional archaeological quests, which seek a specific archaeological object, the expedition is guided by material curiosity; their movement is rather traced through the items they encounter. Not only are architectural dimensions mentioned, but the two explorers take samples of the city's composition to better understand it. Emphatically, the two characters are representative of the empirical inquisitiveness and arrangement of the exhibitionary institution, as they seek to collect material examples to study and synthesise relational meaning. Their scientific curiosity is fuelled by the desire to reach further depths, arguably prescribed to narrative stereotypes that the

centre holds the 'reward'. Their movement, as such, changes from horizontal to vertical as they descend to further recesses and horrors:

The Cyclopean massiveness and giganticism of everything about us became curiously oppressive; and there was something vaguely but deeply unhuman in all the contours, dimensions, proportions, decorations, and constructional nuances of the blasphemously archaic stonework. (53-54)

As the explorers progress, the incalculable extensiveness of the city becomes oppressive. Without any regulated pathways, they are forced to experience the space unconventionally. The emphasis placed on the 'contours' again returns to the negotiation of limits. Rather than containing definitive edges, *Mountains of Madness* imagines that such a non-human city is indicative of the deconstruction of discrete categories and the illusion of architectural formlessness: that materiality itself may disorientate to the extent that it appears immaterial.

Indeed, throughout the narrative the edges of objects and entities are described without ever reaching a totalising image. Non-Euclidean architecture thus becomes an indecipherable cipher for the creators of this location. Rather than acting as a textual interface its apparent 'fluidity' resists reduction and an 'identity' for the city cannot be constituted. This labyrinthine space thus becomes reminiscent of non-orientable objects, such as the mobius strip or Klein bottle, in which no beginning or end may be deduced; without boundaries, the journey in-between is all that can be identified. This eternal process reveals the demarcation of 'here' and 'there' associated with movement as being arbitrary signifiers. With no start or finish there is only a process of eternal contact. De Certeau considers that empirical calculation constructs space, which "exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables" (117). Certainly, such designations emphasise the subjective encounter with space, that

negotiations of ruins are enacted through the time spent at rest or journeying between its limits. Both non-orientable surfaces and non-Euclidean geometry imply that their material description cannot quite encapsulate the experiences of their encounter, that there remains some exteriority that can only be subjectively processed.

Curiously, the metropolis is largely devoid of traditional archaeological objects. The two explorers encounter no apparent treasures or relics, but rather homogenised detritus. An air of absence fills the topography, its hollowness refusing any artefactual interpretation: “As I have said, all furniture and other moveables were absent; but the sculptures gave a clear idea of the strange devices which had once filled these tomb-like, echoing rooms” (56). Sculptures and murals stand in for ‘presence’, only a synecdoche of the previous existence remains. Although Lovecraft contests the non-human nature of his own city by having the protagonists ‘read’ the history of the city’s inhabitants, importantly there is no corroboration to the narratives they produce. Indeed, within the city there appears to be very little tangible evidence; unlike other archaeological sites, this space is not orientated around the expected discovery. The taxonomy of objects equally haunts their methodology as the debris is not elevated to artefactual status through its apparent lack of value; ‘madness’ is seemingly the only ‘reward’ or alibi for the experience. Without conventional modes of navigation the two explorers instead encounter the Shoggoth, inverting expectations of adventure narratives concluding with an elevated object or entity – indeed, this is a subject which refuses to be transformed into an object.

Lovecraft’s archaeological spaces become encoded with a sense of inexplicability, the suggestion that something unconventional resides within the territory that cannot be accurately defined. As de Certeau notes, narrative spatiality is filled with disparate components:

Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed with the world's debris ... These heterogenous and even contrary elements fill the homogeneous form of the story. Things *extra* and *other* (details and excesses coming from elsewhere) insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order. (107, original emphasis)

The incalculable grandeur of the city within *Mountains of Madness* is beyond such a homogenising process. Akin to “The Call of Cthulhu”, the explorers never particularly define the function of each space they pass through. De Certeau's suggestion that such stories are ‘makeshift’ emphasises the centrality of encounter to textual formation. The very designation of ‘other’ and ‘extra’ are also evocative of artefact ontology. The Weird city in *Mountains of Madness* resists such totalisation, its non-orientable ontology continually resisting reduction. Indeed, Dillon suggests that “When we think of ruins, we picture a discrete object – no matter how fractured or dissolved at its edges – in a landscape, or perhaps a cityscape” (36). Taxonomical institutions encourage the perception of such discrete categories, an attribute which ruins cannot quite inhabit. For while these spaces may be preserved, their very dereliction becomes a part of their continual existence and encourages new models of non-human contact. Approaching the ruin as vestige space offers a site to examine such ontological orientation through a deeper study of how presences and absences are constituted.

At the conclusion to *Mountains of Madness* the narrator explains that “[i]t is absolutely necessary, for the peace and safety of mankind that some of earth's dark, dead corners and unplumbed depths be let alone” (101). Such an inference cannot help but betray a distrust towards that which is pushed to the periphery while also attempting to retain the sanctity of ‘lost’ spaces. The metropolis has a fraught relationship with the ruins it produces, a contention often foregrounded when a site of archaeological interest

halts modernisation and processes of preservation become time sensitive. As Edensor has argued, industrial ruins provide discursive sites for alternative behaviour, one which many inhabitants would rather ‘unsee’ in a manner akin to *The City & the City*. Heritage sites, meanwhile, offer the possibility of autonomous behaviour, for the subject to organically encounter their own mediation of the ‘past’ outside the confining routes of the exhibitionary narrative. For both, mobility is an integral factor to the visitor’s negotiation of the ruin, the dominant structures they contest and the new cognitive pathways they etch. Crucially, these journeys invite the importance of *reflection* on after-effects, dynamics of presence/absence, and ontological re-population. Ruins thus are not just apparent portals to the ‘past’ but, by being re-framed outside of artefactuality, represent new present and possible futurities. Indeed, such a paradigm folds back upon the very anthropocentrism at its core and acts as a rumination on the lasting impacts, effects and ephemerality of producing human ‘meaning’ through material formations.

Chthonic Depths – Navigating the Metro/Polis

Archaeological ruins are frequently perceived as a temporal interstice between fantastical imaginations of the past and anxieties of entropic decay. Historical vestiges are not only confined to adventure or exploration quests; they also feature prominently in a range of post-apocalyptic fiction, which frequently depict the once vibrant metropolis as a place of salvage, scavenging and trepidation. Fears of structural, social and ecological collapse offer a particular response to the effects of the Anthropocene age and present a myriad of reflective and prospective ruins. Science Fiction has a long history of exploring such post-apocalyptic vestiges. H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895), for instance, explores the disruption of a museum where its taxonomy has

become ruptured. Other apocalypses rather picture an idyllic return to a ‘simpler’ life that view the metropolis as a danger, such as John Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). J. G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962), meanwhile, represents a more recognisable ecological anxiety, in which the journey (or descent) through its vibrant London biosphere seeks ontological meaning from the chthonic depths. *The Walking Dead* (2003/2010 - present) graphic novel and television series extends this legacy, itself converting the city into a dangerous zone that is avoided in favour of the accessibility offered by the rural. Post-apocalyptic journeys or exoduses across a country illustrate a movement *away* from the city, but in this section I instead will focus on the descent into subterranean depths – particularly focusing on how the navigation of ruins transitions from engaging with ‘ancient history’ to reflecting upon contemporary anxieties of collapse.

Dmitry Glukhovsky’s novel *Metro 2033* (2005, translated into English in 2010) envisions a post-apocalyptic Moscow where the fallout from nuclear warfare has rendered the surface uninhabitable and the human survivors have withdrawn to the underground metro transport system for safety.¹⁵ Metro stations are transformed into a form of village or town, some choosing to ally themselves with neighbouring groups and others remaining independent. Existence in the metro is, however, incredibly fraught; although the survivors fight each other over supplies and ideological differences, they are also beset by irradiated monsters from the surface; unseen psychological terrors within the tunnels; and the rising presence of ‘the dark ones’. The novel follows its protagonist/narrator Artyom as he journeys across the metro to try and

¹⁵ *Metro 2033* also received a faithful video game adaptation that forces the player to scavenge for objects of value; indeed, in this Survival Horror setting, pre-apocalypse bullets have become a form of currency making exploration a form of economised item management.

save his home station, VDNKh, from the apparent invasion of the dark ones. The metro itself is a form of ruin, as its network of tunnels have become a labyrinthine system in which cave-ins, incomprehensible horrors and antagonistic stations force Artyom to re-navigate this transport structure. Further, as he briefly visits the surface and its metropolitan husk, *Metro 2033* inverts the traditional stratigraphic depth metaphor and reinforces a sense of alienation until any sense of human ‘belonging’ is erased. Artyom’s journey of the metro is crucially one of *becoming* where his active navigation of this (un)mapped space forces him to encounter a range of ontologies and ideologies until he questions humanity’s very perception of the dark ones’ intent. Within the chthonic depths, movement will transform Artyom into an archaeological explorer who comes to realise the potential for such ruination to afford new cognitive approaches.

The metro system is a transport network; its inhabitants re-purpose this space and trace new forms of movement through its passages. However, its depths are something to fear, containing a mysterious unknown. Artyom comments that previous metro employees are revered: “For all those who survived, the employees of the metro were like local guides to scientific expeditions in the jungles” (8). Significantly, explorations into the metro are phrased as “scientific expeditions” recalling the previous identification of this framed journey in *Mountains of Madness*. Although built by humans for a specific function, evidently this space has been re-purposed and subsequently represents an unknown frontier. Specifically, the metro becomes a landscape in flux, in which passages which were previously safe can immediately become dangerous: “It isn’t possible to get from one end to the other quickly. You can’t get through in some places, it’s partitioned in others where some crap is going on, and the conditions change every day” (68). Mobility within this system thus necessitates navigation, the subject must be wary of their surroundings and prepared to re-assess

their trajectory at any moment. This undermines the previous structure, as a transport system is intended to be consistent and repetitive once it is comprehensively understood. The metro, however, is fluid and the subject must constantly be aware of their surroundings which can never lapse into a subconscious acclimatisation or Heideggerian ‘ready-to-hand’. As such, the flow of this system is constantly re-appraised; akin to the industrial ruin, the explorer may experience new routes but will have to navigate its shifting state. For de Certeau the movement of bodies within a city can be traced to produce a narrative, yet one which cannot be viewed: “The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of *fragments* of trajectories and alternations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and *indefinitely other*” (93, my emphasis). Although the movement of bodies within the system creates narrative through motion, evidently they are still following pre-established designated routes – the city may at first seem like a labyrinth but can be processed through cartographical aid or experience. In *Metro 2033*, however, conditions are constantly in flux. The networked flow is still driven by narrative, but this is derived from previous journeys as travellers exchange rumours or stories about tunnels which are no longer safe.

The amorphous nature of this system speaks to a Weird perspective; although the novel is overtly a Science Fiction and post-apocalyptic text, certain phrases and passages have a resonance with aforementioned authors. The eerie nature of the metro even adopts recognisably Weird language as “It reminded [Artyom] of a whistling whisper more than anything – incomprehensible and inhuman” (78). Similar to Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” and Lovecraft’s *Mountains of Madness*, the city, or here metro, is conceived as a collective identity – one which the protagonist attempts to define as a symbol of the ‘old’ world. However, for both Lovecraft and Glukhovsky the

city remains an artefact beyond scrutiny, as the evident redundancy of humanity is illustrated through their inability to understand this new reality: “somebody had breathed into it their own, mysterious, incomparable life, and it possessed a certain extraordinary kind of reason, which a human being could not fathom, and a consciousness that was alien to him” (246). The alien dimensions of the metro deconstruct its identification as a domestic sphere, one where the inhabitants are never fully at ease precisely because it is no longer under humanity’s control. Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) examines the psychological significance invested within intimate topographies, suggesting that “our house is our corner of the world” (26). As Bachelard is very much concerned with the relationship between (particularly inhabited) space and imagination, the topographical exodus of the citizens of Moscow in *Metro 2033* into the subterranean transport system aligns this labyrinthine network with the ‘home’. Particularly, the inhabitants never seem to be completely comfortable in their surroundings. They may occupy small areas of safety but any journey beyond this new domestic sphere is filled with trepidation. The occupiers of this labyrinth are forced to equate this disorientating locale with their refuge, one which evidently assaults their psychological stability. Through such an inversion a broader metaphor emerges in relation to belonging, as the landscapes of *Metro 2033* cycle through a process of deconstructed and reformed borders. The alienation of the human from what was once familiar produces a disorientation which creates new spaces of contact. Post-apocalyptic ruins confront the legacies that human action will leave – the presences that will stand in for absences – and their negotiation by future participants.

Navigation is a prime skill in order to survive within such a post-apocalyptic future, one which transforms the previously regulated commutes of the metro into an

active and engaged process. Cartography again becomes an integral pursuit, but one orientated more around avoiding the ‘dark corners’ or unnegotiable routes. Maps are contentious guides, although they act as revered objects, their accuracy is brought into question. *Metro 2033* as a novel is acutely aware of Artyom’s journey and navigation of the subterranean network, indeed its opening page, like many Fantasy texts, helps chart movement (Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5: Map of the metro network, Artyom begins at VDNKh (top right – line 6) – *Metro 2033* (2002)

Although primarily a guide for the reader, its subtle tentacular shape replicates a pervasive amorphousness felt during navigation. Viewing such a reduction provides stability to Artyom, to concretise an immaterial journey: “Artyom pushed his finger into the map and drew it along the lines”; he finds that “[t]his little exercise with the map had given him confidence in himself” (75). Pyenson and Sheets-Pyenson outline the aesthetic principles of maps and their evident artefactual status: “As to objects of contemplation, what is more arresting than a coloured world map, complete with allegories, allusions, and unknowns?” (247). Cartography is invested with a degree of wanderlust where the static encourages a projection of movement, accentuated particularly by maps which display fantastical or mythic creatures lingering at the unknown edges. In *Metro 2033*, however, the immutability of such an artefact is questioned as physical wandering of the tunnels is required to verify their legitimacy. Post-apocalyptic fiction frequently stages the migrant exodus as a method to re-engage with the land; yet, although the journey bestows a significant revelation to Artyom,

Glukhovsky's novel instead foregrounds alienation as a process to catalyse immediate negotiation and query conventional notions of thinking.

Disruption is a recurrent motif throughout the novel, especially as Artyom's journey fails to follow any linear motion but rather requires the navigation of the labyrinthine metro. Artyom's quest begins when he is entrusted to deliver a warning to the station *Polis* regarding the dark ones.¹⁶ Along the way, he encounters a mystic, called Khan, who believes the metro is home to psychic influences, unforeseen forces that affect the safety of its tunnels. When viewing Artyom's expected trajectory he exclaims: "You won't get to *Polis* via that route. The map is lying. They printed them way before everything happened. They describe metro lines that were never fully built, they describe stations that have collapsed" (117). The map is an unreliable tool, depicting a fantastical mediation between the presence/absence of tunnels never built, those now inaccessible or unsafe. Artyom's comfort while tracing the map is derived from a sense of control, of owning and comprehending the landscape. Khan's revelation demonstrates that walking the metro is rather an active process of encounter, the explorer cannot resign themselves to the passive comfort of tracing pre-existing routes. Khan outlines the inversion of Artyom's tool utilisation: "That's not a map. I mean, that's not simply a map. It's a Guide to the metro [...] The person who holds it can get across the whole metro in two days because this map is ... alive or something" (118). This object recalls the incomprehensible or unique artefact from Chapter One, while outlining the distinction between a map and a *guide*. Projecting agency upon the object, Khan's suggestion implies that the immutability of the map can no longer be trusted; akin to non-Euclidean geometry, the subject is left with the perception that such

¹⁶ As *Polis* is defined as 'city' and is recognised as such within the novel (metro/polis), human civilisation transposes its encoding of centralised space to the chthonic depths.

representational systems cannot quite encapsulate the whole experience. Artyom inverts the desire for archaeological treasure by prioritising functionality, as he argues: “What did he need with a map with mystical properties, if he was deaf to its voice?” (119). Although the map is personified to have a ‘voice’, Artyom realises that he cannot understand such an alternate ontology; indeed, he comes to realise the limits of anthropocentric thought. As movement around the metro becomes more complicated, the pre-existing routes outlined in Figure 2.5 bifurcate, as Artyom’s own tentacular movement progressively leads him away from linear pathways and his objective. Therefore, this adventure initially emphasises the conclusion but shifts to prioritise the intermediary – the journey, the navigation or encounter.

These paradigms of movement are best encapsulated by the labyrinth – both the physical navigation of mazes and the confounding cognition of mythological projections. Labyrinths feature prominently in a range of Jorge Luis Borges’ work and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940) in particular – while not overtly archaeological – represents how the catalogue can be inverted through the interpolation of a myth that defies immutable meaning. Narrated by Borges himself, the story focuses on his discovery, with a friend, of an entry in an edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for a mysterious country called Uqbar. Their search for any further evidence of this location and its inhabitants resonates with the inception of archaeological quests to find hidden civilisations or cities: “That night we visited the National Library. In vain we exhausted atlases, catalogues, annuals of geographical societies, travellers’ and historians’ memoirs: no one had ever been in Uqbar” (*Labyrinths*, 29). Reminiscent of expeditions such as the search for ‘Z’, the two become obsessed with the idea of the country, and in so doing seek to provide a tangible handle to the object of their searching. They become frustrated by the lack of any reference to Uqbar and it is only months later that

Borges manages to obtain a single volume of an encyclopaedia that instead details the imaginary region, Tlön, where much of Uqbar's fantastical literature is set. This discovery recalls the concept that a fragment may stand in for totality, where the 'text' may represent the much broader country and assist the explorers in understanding it. The excess of knowledge as the two investigators read about the psychology, mathematics, politics and other systems of Tlön encodes this process as labyrinthine – each section bifurcates and offers new alternatives, different paths to explore in which there is no conclusion, only infinity. As Borges himself states: "Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men" (42). Here the significance and function of the labyrinth itself is interrogated; for what purpose are these structures created? Although mazes can be utilised for recreational or entertainment pursuits, textual labyrinths necessitate differing modes of engagement, a process by which previous paradigms are challenged. Texts such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) extend such a process even further as the layout of the book replicates the labyrinth at its centre, encouraging remediated movement from its reader. The labyrinth thus offers the instantiation of active navigation, emphasising the decisions involved within its twists and turns that continually propel the subject to find an exit, to encode meaning in relation to the physical and cognitive pathways travelled.

Within *Metro 2033*, labyrinths are referenced multiple times. Although the metro system would originally seem to be constituted of straight pathways, Glukhovsky undermines this suggestion by representing each tunnel as its own possible intersection. At the start of the novel, Artyom muses on the presence of extra corridors that link the network together:

It was a tunnel that plunged off to the side, a disregarded branch of the primary northern leg, which descended to great depths, only to become lost in the complex network of hundreds of corridors – freezing, stinking labyrinths of horror. (6)

Multiple choices invariably necessitate decision making, while offering the prospect of various parallel futures where each of these pathways may lead to their own unique conclusion. As outlined with the unreliability of maps, the metro system is replete with unknown passages – particularly those which “descended to great depths”, once again emphasising stratigraphy as topographical alienation. When Artyom later travels to the surface, this too is suggested to be labyrinthine as he eventually tries to trace his way back to a metro entrance. Although the open area would prospectively represent the antithesis of the labyrinth, the hostile conditions and ruined buildings ultimately hide the vital tunnels required to return to the relative safety of the underground. Artyom’s journey leads him to search the Great Library for information which will help the fight against the dark ones and return humanity to its precious hierarchal position. In this sense the library becomes encoded again as archaeological locale to house the artefact, which is “built for the one-and-only Book. And it alone is hidden there”, as Artyom must navigate its seemingly endless stacks to find a prophesised book of knowledge (269). Indeed, this is a quest in which Glukhovsky openly signposts the narrative structure: “As in the old fairy tale, [Artyom] was required to go he knew not where, to fetch he knew not what, and in exchange, he was promised he knew not what kind of miraculous salvation” (282). Such a formation evokes *The Lost City of Z* and highlights the projection of meaning to such movement – indeed that, for Artyom, the ‘there’ has to be encoded as an *objective* to catalyse movement from the ‘here’ and thus immerse him within schemas of encounter.

The metro system, map and labyrinth thus collate to emphasise the importance of the journey; both metaphorically and physically the decisions that Artyom makes represent humanity's negotiation of their place within the world. Particularly this is a journey of *becoming* for Artyom and the human race, one whose value is measured in difficulty:

And when Artyom thought about this wonderful city, it didn't seem strange to him at all that the journey to such a place wouldn't be easy. He would have to get lost, go through dangers and tests of strength, otherwise the purpose of the journey would have its charms wasted. (75)

This summary, therefore, speaks to the range of ruin and city exploration narratives discussed within this chapter. Movement becomes an intrinsic component to archaeological investigations, these discoveries incorporate liminal edges as a process to reassess urban mobility. Similar to many archaeological adventurers, Artyom becomes lost in order to find what he seeks. Undeniably, motion produces narrative and as such "[i]f you stop walking, then your journey is over" (231). These examples demonstrate how Glukhovsky's novel focuses on movement as defining being. The exploration of ruins, as a result, is not only a method to engage with the past, but one connected to developments of the self. This realisation is one which Artyom only recognises by the conclusion, as previously he measured the journey in empirical distance rather than metaphysical weight: "It had been possible to develop a route by considering only the length of the journey and not how it would change the traveller walking it" (434). Tim Cresswell in *On the Move* (2006) also emphasises the interconnection between ontology and movement, arguing that: "by focusing on mobility, flux, flow, and dynamism we can emphasize the importance of *becoming* at the expense of the already achieved—the stable and static" (47, original emphasis).

Archaeological adventures thus move beyond the ‘immobility’ of corners, for labyrinth corners in fact propel the subject deeper along its network. Yet to extend Cresswell’s point, becoming is not only linked to dynamism but rather navigating, as outlined in this chapter, acts as a *reflective* paradigm upon the experiences that define human meaning and its constituent effect upon presence/absence dichotomies.

Transposed to a post-apocalyptic setting, the ruins of modernity thus take on a different atmosphere than the idealisation of exploring ancient vestiges. Although ruins are often viewed as an aesthetic and wondrous space, they may equally represent industrial waste or the fallout from calamitous events – especially through varying permutations of conflict. These spaces, however, may be reclaimed for reconfigured purposes, whether by humanity or more commonly non-human inhabitants. Although the curiosity of the archaeological adventure and the negotiation of hostile environments may seem an apparent dissonance, they overlap in their pursuit of encounter. Ruins therefore are a space of *reflection*, a pertinent location in which to ruminate upon anthropocentric action and its affect-effects. Artyom is even referred to as an archaeologist within the narrative, emphasising how this vocation – or at least practice – has become synonymous with such cognitive modes of contact:

He was standing in the middle of this majestic cemetery of civilization and felt like an archaeologist, uncovering an ancient city, the remnants of a bygone power and beauties of which even many centuries later forced those seeing it to experience the chill of awe. (315-316)

Surveying the remnants of humanity’s apex, Artyom is parallel to explorers and seekers of ancient empires who are invariably drawn in by, and thus complicit with, the mystique of the past. This, however, becomes a process through which he may ruminate upon humanity’s current situation: “Suddenly it seemed to Artyom that he was standing

on the threshold of an understanding of something important” (90). Through autonomous movement and border crossing larger, more ontological, boundaries surface from the chthonic depths. Ultimately, for Artyom, the realisation is too late. His quest, which culminates in uncovering a missile silo that is later targeted at the dark ones’ habitat, is essentially doomed to repeat humanity’s mistakes:

And it was this clear understanding that kilometres of tunnels and weeks of wandering had led him to a secret door, and knowing that opening it would give him access to all the secrets of the universe and allow him to tower over the wretched people gouging out their world in the unyielding frozen earth. (457)

As Artyom stands before this door to understanding, the realisation dawns that the dark ones are not the alien terror they have been conceived as, but were attempting to psychically connect with humanity. Poignantly this is a failure of becoming, the inability to re-negotiate the current climate and adapt in response to apocalyptic anxieties. Evidently, this recognition was deduced through Artyom’s ‘wandering’, his experience of the metro, its inhabitants, its peculiarities and even the surface.¹⁷ *Metro 2033* thus posits how the post-apocalyptic archaeologist looks to the past to better understand the ontological development required for the future.

Sunken Cities and Chthonic Emergence

Lost ruined cities are a pervasive archaeological myth precisely because they offer a wider framing of the artefactual process that prospectively engages with the entities

¹⁷ The video game adaptation was particularly keen to emphasise the importance of encounter as this realisation is an alternate ending which can only be ‘unlocked’ if Artyom/the player accrue enough ‘moral points’ through an expanded understanding of the metro – to stop, think, reflect and achieve ‘enlightenment’.

‘behind’ such structures – a form of ordering that acts as a translation of micro to macro. The ancient city of Thonis-Heracleion is a remarkable real-world example of the prominence and legacy of lost metropolises. The submerged ruins were originally discovered by archaeologist Franck Goddio in 1999 and were displayed in a recent British Museum exhibition, aptly entitled “Sunken Cities: Egypt’s Lost Worlds” (2017), that invoked the scientific and public curiosity towards history’s vestiges and their secrets. Indeed, such a paradigm was self-consciously utilised in the promotional material: “Only a tiny proportion of these sites have revealed their secrets” (“British Museum Launches First Major Exhibition of Underwater Archaeology”, *BP*). This collection consolidates a number of aforementioned aspects, namely the exhibitionary space, artefacts, lost world mythologies and chthonic revelations. Indeed, the promotional website encourages the perception of the visitor as undertaking a “journey through the centuries of encounters between two celebrated cultures” and to witness artefacts that ‘tell stories of political power and popular belief, myth and migration, gods and kings’ (“Sunken Cities – Egypt’s Lost Worlds”). Trading off the mythological narratives of lost worlds, “Sunken Cities” offered its visitors a movement through the remains of a fallen metropolis, where the re-surfaced micro remnants totalise into conceptions of society, culture, art and other ontological paradigms. Meaning is thus implied to emerge from the chthonic depths – in which the dynamics of presence and absence are re-framed within anthropocentric narratives. The exhibition brings the Thonis-Heracleion ruin and vestige space to the metropolitan hub, conjuring the peripheral border within the local boundary. The taxonomical horizontalization of representative artefacts, however, cannot replicate the mediation of the ruin and its continuous evoking of encounter processes. A Weird exteriority thus seeps into these textual projections, implying that the comprehension derived from such objects is only

fragmentary. Walking the ruin, by navigating both physical boundaries and mythological narratives, seeks an ontological validation from the chthonic depths, one that looks towards the encounter with the non-human to elucidate human experience.

Chapter Three

Zones of Encounter – Expeditions of Ontological Communication

The archaeological adventure is entwined with a certain demarcation of space, where the conceptualisation and projection of tomb, museum, lost city or ruin status emphasises a particular engagement with the non-human. The expeditions at the heart of ‘lost world’ mythologies such as ‘Z’, the city in *At the Mountains of Madness* or the overtly colonial appropriation in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, all seek to ‘find’ a specific topographical identity that is ‘outside’ conventional space, to cross a border and experience something beyond the ordinary. Indeed, ‘popular’ or contemporary archaeology even suggests that such sites may lie beneath modernity’s metropolises, in which categorising and taxonomic boundaries are brought into question. The interpolation of mythic narratives within landscapes – reflected by the quests into the ‘unknown’ that seek to locate a sense of the non-quotidian – emphasise an exclusivity to this encounter, that it operates outside of conventional experience. The demarcation of limits, borders and boundaries thus offers a site in which, notionally, new encounters may be formed – one which is often implied to contain a micro-artefact which may elucidate upon a macro concept, to let the fragment speak for the whole. As topographical anomalies progressively disappeared through cartographic and technological refinements, new spaces of contact would arise to continually offer sites of encounter, spheres from which the human could apparently derive ontological meaning through interaction with the non-human; indeed, such projections would lead to the inception of the zone.

The zone represents a development of the spaces explored thus far. Similar to the ruin or tomb, it has a specific border which adventurers must cross – although these

are often indeterminate and amorphous. Equally, these are locations which operate through alternate ontological paradigms, inverting conventional expectations of space and objects. Unlike ‘lost world’ narratives, zones crucially remain contiguous with the wider planet and indeed their proximity to modernity becomes an implicit challenge to social and cultural uses of space. Chiefly these sites are a once familiar Earth now functioning under radically unknowable metaphysical forces, adhering to non-human fundamental laws that contest human conceptualisation of topographic ontology. Although zones bear some similarities to the heterotopic qualities explored in relation to the museum in Chapter One, they never quite reach this status. In *The Badlands of Modernity* (1997), Kevin Hetherington defines a heterotopia “as spaces of alternate ordering. Heterotopia organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them” (viii). Although the zone does emphasise a process of alternate ordering – one that resists anthropocentrism – unlike the museum it does not seek to present totalised narratives about the wider world, but rather encourages a site of autonomous encounter. I contend that the zone is not necessarily a space of othering – particularly as this depends upon the suggestion of a norm to conceive of an Other – but instead revolves around non-human paradigms of ontology and encounter. Certainly, the zone itself is a human projection and emerges from label-based framing, extending the superimposition of topographical meaning akin to lost world expeditions. Yet, this imagining is one which encourages introspection rather than extrospection, to instigate a reflection upon human effect through topographical extraneities that resist conventional modes of demarcation and enforce immediate navigation.

The unregulated nature of the zone also provides a reaction against institutional ordering, a resistance to modernity’s processes of categorisation and delineation. Hakim Bey argues for the *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (1991), in which the formation

of small self-reliant communities – such as pirate utopias – may function as micro-states that are disconnected from hegemonic infringement. Particularly his commentary on their formation underscores the zone’s affinity as a post-cartographical landscape:

The second generating force behind the TAZ springs from the historical development I call “the closure of the map.” The last bit of Earth unclaimed by any nation-state was eaten up in 1899. Ours is the first century without *terra incognita*, without a frontier. (102)

Resonating with the expeditions in Chapter Two, Bey highlights how the zone emerges as a process to combat such reductionist methods. Evidently, for Bey, the disappearance of uncharted territory is akin to the evolution of a surveillance state, in which the hegemon may exert power over its annexed proxy nations. Although this desire for micro-communities may be a bit naive, as pirate utopias are invariably predicated on plundering the riches of a macro-civilisation, they represent a desire *for* frontier landscapes, an anarchist pursuit of deregulated topographies. Such a view cannot escape its very anthropocentric foundations and in so doing overlooks the zone’s capacity as an interface between human and non-human. Interstellar space is the most visible contemporary frontier, one which will be discussed in relation to *The Kefahuchi Tract* trilogy (2002-2012) in Chapter Four regarding xenoarchaeology and the engagement with alternate ontological paradigms.

The zone can be identified in a variety of Science Fiction narratives in which border crossing is aligned with alien – subject or object – visitations. H. G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* (1897) constructs such a topography in the wake of the Martian invaders, as the space surrounding an uncovered ship is first cordoned off by the military as a restricted area. This futile demarcation will later be invalidated as the Martians not only overturn such a containment, but indeed claim this space as their

own. Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) outlines the various methodologies in which a zone may be conceived, listing these as: juxtaposition, interpolation, superimposition and misattribution. The previously examined dissociated spaces, such as lost worlds, are analogous to this first category, as: “Spaces which real-world atlases or encyclopaedias show as noncontagious and unrelated, when juxtaposed in written texts constitute a zone” (45). When two disparate locations are placed in such proximity, a zone can be identified – whether this is the interstitial liminal areas such as ‘Breach’ in *The City & the City* or the contested demilitarised territory between the borders of countries. Yet the zones that will be the predominant focus of this chapter represent a process of interpolation, which McHale outlines as: “introducing an alien space *within* a familiar space, or *between* two adjacent areas of space where no such ‘between’ exists” (46, original emphasis). Fundamentally, this formation requires the creation of a new space within the old, a layering reminiscent of artefact ontology in which the former label is disrupted but its fragmented traces may still be excavated. By creating an artificial ‘between’ where none existed before, these topographies – which I term as zones of encounter – carve a meeting point between human and non-human but one infused with an ontological extraneity.

The inception of these zone tales unsurprisingly aligns with the progressive charting and simultaneous terraforming of Earth. As Bey identified, the last part of unregulated space was claimed in 1899. Drawing upon the mythologies of lost worlds, zones are mysterious spheres projected with a sense of the ‘unknown’ aimed to pique the curiosity of the adventurer. Yet, these spaces are far weirder – they contain a certain exteriority that continually eludes reductionist processes. Frequently these topographies challenge anthropocentric demarcations of ‘Nature’ and natural events, interpolating visitors from interstellar space that disrupt notions of conventionality. Zones challenge

the detournement of archaeological narratives by shifting away from artefactual rewards and instead present moments of ontological confrontation, a development of the movements seen thus far in *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Metro 2033*. The focus on process, rather than result, is an eerie manifestation that causes disorientation through an experience that continually eludes concrete definition. This effect emerges from the human contact with topography, architecture or objects that hint at some form of chthonic emergence from the ‘natural’ world and can provide or confirm a form of universal meaning. Mark Fisher in *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) defines this moment as being synonymous with a sense of the “outside”, particularly “in landscapes partially emptied of the human” through the perennial questioning of: “*Why is there something here when there should be nothing? Why is there nothing here when there should be something?*” (11, 12, original emphasis). Following the outline of the Weird as something present which should not belong, for Fisher the Eerie is either a “*failure of absence*” or “*failure of presence*” – a dichotomy integral to the aesthetics of dereliction (61, original emphasis). Both definitions coalesce within a sense of the ‘outside’ that refuses discrete definition, the feeling of incommensurable *beyondness*. Although notions of presence and absence arguably fall into an anthropocentric view of belonging, the dissonance between the two seeks to question the limits of perception, to query whether such a perspective really can mediate the whole sensory experience.

The cosmological eeriness of early Weird writers, such as Algernon Blackwood’s “The Willows” (1907) and H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” (1927) reflect upon such a prospect, which include an almost proto-zone that warps the divide between *terra firma* and interstellar space. While neither overtly references these spaces as a zone, the narrators’ alienation from an eerie Nature keenly resonates with the upcoming discussion of *Stalker* (1979) and *Annihilation* (2014). Published after the

last appropriation of unregulated space in 1899, both Blackwood's and Lovecraft's texts suggest an unknown quality to the 'great outdoors' that deconstructs the attempt to impose upon such a non-human sphere. Blackwood's "The Willows" is a perfect example of an uncanny and eerie Nature, as the narrator and the 'Swede' travel down the Danube in a canoe to the swampland *Sumpfe*, constantly threatened by a presence they can *feel* but cannot quite define – a juxtaposition of projected presence and material absence reminiscent of Fisher's Eerie. The topographical obscurity and hazy description implies that the two travellers have crossed into an alternate sphere; akin to *Mountains of Madness* they: "had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders, a world where we were not wanted or invited to remain" (*Ancient Stories and Other Weird Stories*, 24). The mysterious locality of the exploration projects an elusive or non-quotidian element upon the 'natural' world, which foregrounds the experience of the journey rather than any artefactual reward. Blackwood's narrator implies that such amorphousness represents a malevolent and alien ontology as "[n]o mere 'scenery' could have produced such an effect. There was something more here, something to alarm" (29). Although such a process could spark a re-negotiation of anthropocentric arrogance towards non-human participants, equally such a projection suggests that any notion of engagement is futile. Blackwood's 'proto-zone' queries the presence of alternate ontologies at sites "where the veil between had worn a little thin" with the suggestion "of another scheme of life, another evolution not parallel to the human", but risks mystifying Nature into another form of artefactual object (49, 50). Rather, the zone injects a sense of alienation into such ontological encounters that reflects upon the material labels humanity inscribes upon the wider world.

Earth itself has been the recipient of a process very similar to artefactuality where the imposition of borders and boundaries seeks to project differentiated ‘meaning’ upon abstract space. Reminiscent of Miéville’s ‘unseeing’ in *The City & the City*, such demarcation aims to create macro interfaces that can speak to, and thus overlook, more micro individualities. Zone encounters, however, function in an analogous manner to the ruin where the presence of ontological exteriority forces a conscious engagement with the processes of mediation. Often these events are catalysed in the wake of an ‘alien’ – defined in human terms as that which does not ‘belong’ – materialisation that introduces an awakening from a Heideggerian state of topographical reverie. Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” follows such a transition in the wake of a meteorite impact which warps the landscape into a beautiful, if terrifying, vista: “All the orchard trees blossomed forth in strange colours, and through the stony soil of the yard and adjacent pasturage there sprang up a bizarre growth which only a botanist could connect with the proper flora of the region” (*H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus* 3, 248). Vitally the hallmarks of this change are not located within any alien or indescribable monstrosities, but rather in the subtle affect upon other non-human entities. This Weird or Eerie presence, again that which does not ‘belong’, equally taps into a form of eco-consciousness in which vibrant and bizarre ecologies overtake the architectures of modernity.¹⁸

Similar to “The Willows”, the narrator envisages the meteor’s impact as creating an alien realm: “What eldritch dream-world was this into which he had blundered?” (257). The narrator’s failure here to recognise that this is indeed Earth –

¹⁸ Such anxieties are evidently within a range of ecological or climate change inspired fiction. The first totalised picture of the Earth in black and white in 1947 and colour in 1967/8 allowed the planet to be viewed as an ‘artefact’ itself and no doubt has influenced ruminations on its fragility.

albeit operating under alternate paradigms of existence – holds this encounter perpetually at a level of abstraction. The emphasis Lovecraft places on the ‘blossoming’ nature ascribes an urgent agency to the non-human, one reflected also in the topography’s gestation and subsequent chromatic explosion that “was no longer *shining* out; it was *pouring* out; and as the shapeless stream of unplaceable colour left the well it seemed to flow directly into the sky” (265, original emphasis). Lovecraft’s repeated utilisation of present-continuous verbs reinforces that this is not a placid ecology to be inscribed with human meaning, but one which actively rebels against any static definition. The juxtaposition of an “unplaceable colour” reflects the Weird materialist inclination towards a visuality whose eeriness stems from being partially referential, yet simultaneously beyond distinctive identification. Similar to the ruin’s breakdown of inside and outside, the effect of the meteor is here configured on an ontological level – this is not a topographical parasite so much as something altogether different, a hybrid. Such a deconstruction will later be echoed by Alex Garland’s filmic adaptation of *Annihilation* (2018) and my terming of the ‘glitch doppelgänger’. The prominence of an eco-consciousness within these zone narratives thus incorporates and utilises the archaeological expedition format as a process to stage a re-encounter with the non-human and interrogate a multiplicity of anthropocentric boundaries.

Zones, similar to derelict or abandoned spaces, allow an explorer to step outside the ruling paradigms of human civilisation. Yet this is not quite analogous to Tim Edensor’s suggestion, as discussed in Chapter Two, that industrial ruins permit unregulated behaviour, a place for non-quotidian action outside of the institutional gaze. Although the infected or contaminated zone may allow human subjects to escape the trappings of their previous lives, for example *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), the Weird zone rather emphasises a sense of dissonance, where human exceptionalism is

disrupted. The interpolation of the zone necessitates the presence of remnants, whether objects or ruins, that not only act as a reminder of the lasting human ecological effect but equally adapts the schemas of encounter outlined in Chapter One and Two. The alienation that the subject experiences while they attempt to orientate themselves thus contests the imperial and hegemonic values inscribed within the mythologies of expeditionary narratives, while also transitioning away from Romantic or idealised notions of natural sublimity. Indeed, within these topographies such anthropocentric notions as ‘Nature’ itself are challenged altogether, querying the validity of such a horizontalizing term that views all non-human constituents as the same.

Invariably the zone is utilised as a space of demarcation. The concept of an infected or quarantined area suggests that whatever is contained within must be expelled from human civilisation and kept secure. Within post-apocalyptic or contagion narratives these areas often come to represent the fear of transmission, an anxiety of disease or other afflictions being passed between bodies which will radically change the fundamental state of its host. Examples such as *The Last of Us* (2013), in which an outbreak of a fungal parasite (*Cordyceps*) turns its hosts into cannibalistic monsters known as “infected”, utilise the demarcation of zone space to signify impending conflict. Although here the quarantined areas represent safety from the infected, invariably such a distinction must be questioned and, at times, overturned to permit a re-negotiation of previously charted topographies. Yet, while there are multiple meeting points between ideologies and ontologies within this video game, the prime aim remains the expelling of such invasive ‘infections’. Equally, the war zone is a deregulated space in which ‘conventional’ human behaviour is suspended. *Apocalypse Now* (1979) juxtaposes presence and absence throughout the film, particularly through notions of structure and disorder. Indeed, at the conclusion, the protagonist – Benjamin Willard

(Martin Sheen) – locates his target – Walter Kurtz (Marlon Brando) – curiously in an archaeological ruin. Willard’s journey up the Nùng River itself crosses the borders of conventional experience, encountering a number of chronostatic zones that progressively query the ontological depths of the human subject. Even this experience, however, cannot help but suggest that answers will emerge from topographical navigation and the contact with Nature. The zone of encounter, however, destabilises the notion that meaning is located within or in proximity to the non-human; rather it encourages a process of introspective reflection regarding human exceptionalism and the ‘order of things’ perpetuated by representative reductionism.

To underscore the salience of encounter as process, zones must operate in an unconventional and exterior manner, beyond human expectations of a discretely understood material world. As Roger Luckhurst comments: “Zones are never easy spaces to occupy: they are often unnerving and transitional, places where the usual laws are suspended” (“In the Zone”, 24). The malleability and flexibility of the zone is one which cannot be fully controlled, resisting occupation by disruption the machinations of human imposed order. Often these are suspended spaces: functioning in atemporal ways, they deviate from conventional understanding of physics and indeed such concepts as ‘history’ become disrupted as temporal linearity is questioned. These are, however, not necessarily spaces of conflict, although often this is inevitable due to their radical contrast to human values. In fact, the zone acts as a paradigm through which to see beyond conventional categorising structures; Luckhurst thus contends that: “This is the moment of seeing beyond the usual sorting machineries to glimpse the non-modern, a space that refuses the spatial and temporal separations of modernity” (31). Luckhurst highlights how these topographies initiate a perception which looks beyond taxonomic structures, an attempt to step outside materialist practice. To break down such

boundaries constructs the zone to be an experience of process rather than result – it is the mediation, navigation and encounter with incommensurability that seeks to complicate a human perspective. Brian Dillon in *Ruin Lust* (2014) succinctly encapsulates this permeation: “In the Zone, nature and culture, landscape and ruin, begin to bleed into one another, so that we can no longer truly say what is ruin and what its background, what is monument and what the dead thing it recalls” (41). Within this deregulated landscape the boundaries between entities are worn away, object identity is re-written and history’s linearity is disrupted. As the demarcations between ruin and background are brought into question, the archaeological excavation of the zone becomes not only an interrogation of what caused such a change, but equally a fundamental introspection of the human method of artefactualisation that seeks to separate individuality from collective. I thus define the zone as a vital encounter between self and landscape, subject and object, which forms the foundations of a more nuanced appreciation of materiality – one that looks beyond the traditional anthropocentric myth of an inherent network of differentiation towards an exteriority which can only be envisaged as process.

The crossing of the zone border demarcates a certain frame of contact. The amorphousness of these boundaries – akin to Lovecraft’s inexplicable horrors – themselves represent a moment of encounter by confronting traditional notions of discrete categorisation. The crossing itself eventually reflects upon transmission or traversal anxieties of bodies, pathogens and cultural appropriation. The zone certainly has anti-colonial roots, a reaction against an imperialist expropriation of territory and culture, yet this thesis rather focuses on the non-human dimensions of this topography through archaeological excavation. This convergence has, however, been utilised to

discuss the potential of zones as meeting points, echoed by Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone":

I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in context of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. ("Arts of the Contact Zone", 34)

Pratt's analysis highlights the ethnographic potential of the zone and its integral relationship to encounter and reflection. My focus, meanwhile, is more upon the interaction with the non-human and will seek to engage with the border control of *Monsters* (2010); alien 'contact' in *Roadside Picnic* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979); as well as the topographical anomalies of *Annihilation* (2014); and conclude with the glitch doppelgänger present in its filmic adaptation. Instead of principally being orientated around contact, where different outlooks meet, I rather contend that these Weird texts offer 'zones of encounter' in which the mediation of non-human ontologies – entities, objects and landscapes – interpolate an exteriority that destabilises anthropocentric notions to catalyse a reflection upon human demarcations of 'meaning'.

The Communication Chasm - *Monsters* and the Eerie

Navigation is a crucial process to survive the zone and builds on the contact paradigms defined in Chapter Two. In Gareth Edwards' *Monsters* (2010) movement is integral to the narrative as the two protagonists must cross the "Infected Zone" within Mexico before the American border shuts. The film opens by recounting that a NASA probe sent to Europa crash landed within Mexico and created what is later termed the "Infected Zone", in which cephalopod alien creatures now roam. The border control of the Zone has overt similarities to the tension surrounding the contemporary crossing

between Mexico and the United States, particularly given the film's conclusion highlighting the redundancy or failure of such a border. The fear of migration is here translated as one of infection, although curiously – despite multiple characters emphasising the need for gas masks – there is never any confirmed human-based contagion within the film. Arguably, therefore, this is a zone of conflict, rather than infection. The film focuses on two characters, Andrew Kaulder (Scoot McNairy) and Sam Wynden (Whitney Able), who are attempting to cross from Mexico to the United States before the border closes. As Andrew loses Sam's passport, they are unable to travel by ferry and must navigate the Zone by boat and later by foot if they wish to make it across in time. This journey through the Zone is one which will instigate profound introspective change as the failure to communicate becomes a central motif – Andrew's relationship with his estranged son, Sam's apathy towards her fiancée, and the tension between the two themselves. During their traversal of the Zone they learn, however, that the infection is largely vegetation-based, as the aliens lay their eggs in trees. *Monsters* represents not only a failure to communicate both within and beyond species, but is equally indictive of the anthropocentrism ingrained in the terming of such an ecological 'infection'.

This misrecognition emerges within a horizontalizing of the non-human in which 'Nature' becomes a collective label that obscures the individuality caught up in this grouping. Indeed, the very concept of what is deemed 'natural' is itself an anthropocentric designation and one which is ripe for a Weird destabilisation. Timothy Morton utilises an analogous approach in *Dark Ecology* (2016), in which he traces the etymology of the Weird to being twisted, in a loop, akin to the infinite process of non-orientable objects. Morton's idea of an alternate ecology, one which is framed as being darker, is analogous to Fisher's framing of the Eerie: "[Ecognosis] is like becoming

accustomed to something strange, yet it is also becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn't become less strange through acclimation" (*Dark Ecology*, 5). This unresolved strangeness arises within zones of encounter as an exteriority that cannot be reduced, a disruption between the translation of micro and macro identities. Crucially, the subject cannot deduce any comprehensive exterior knowledge of the zone through traversal, no identity of this topography can be sufficiently constituted, but rather its continuous – almost infinite – process of encounter encourages introspective reflection. However, Morton's coinage of this as "dark ecology", and particularly the framing of the Weird as a "dark" paradigm, is one which I argue fails to quite escape the very anthropocentrism that it critiques: "In the term *weird* there flickers a dark pathway between causality and the aesthetic dimension, between doing and appearing, a pathway that dominant Western philosophy has blocked and suppressed" (*Dark Ecology*, 5, original emphasis). Morton correctly identifies the propensity of Weird articulation for an alternate view of processual thinking, yet his terminology of "dark" is in danger of returning to the very conventional binary structures that this field precisely aims to avoid. The zone of encounter may refuse to provide any determinant 'meaning' to its wandering subject, but this process seeks to catalyse the realisation that such cognitive differentiation arises from the human rather than emerging from the non-human.

Returning to *Monsters*, although the inadequacy of material labels is not directly referenced, there is an implicit message throughout that humanity as a species has designated that which does not 'belong' and thus is to be expelled. Instead of the conventional depiction of infection, the relationship between Nature and aliens is never shown to be detrimental; indeed it could, perhaps, even be symbiotic to the extent that it is rather humanity who are the unwanted invaders. This is the entrapment of thinking about Nature in anthropocentric terms, of only defining it through our ontology with no

regard for the identity of this biosphere itself. Morton outlines how thinking beyond this conceptualisation leads back to the twisted loop, to the mobius strip: “Ecological awareness is dark, insofar as its essence is unspeakable. It is dark, insofar as illumination leads to a greater sense of entrapment” (110). Demonstrating overt similarities to the ‘indescribable’ that has been explored previously, Morton’s statement exposes the chasm of thinking beyond the human – any prospective identity of the non-human that we conceive must *by its definition* be incomplete and thus elucidates upon the complications of such a suggestion. Morton’s assessment of a ‘dark’ Nature offers a balance between light and dark as fundamentally diametric absolutes. The attraction to these alternate spaces, in a metaphorical sense, is to shine light on these perceived dark corners; yet, I contend that such a confrontation is more nuanced than this opposition allows. Within *Monsters*, for example, it becomes apparent that it is the Zone that is undergoing radical change, rather than the humans. The curiosity towards this adaptation is therefore caused by humanity’s apparent absence from the equation, a desire to understand where we stand in proximity.

This reflection within *Monsters* takes place atop an archaeological structure – an appropriate site to consider both ontological encounter as well as the material remnants that humanity leaves behind. As Andrew and Sam are forced to navigate through the forests of the Zone themselves, they seemingly stumble upon a Mesoamerican pyramid – an intentional utilisation of ruins as a reflective site, as curiously there are no such pyramids near the border between Mexico and America. The two travellers sit atop this imagined structure and look out to the gigantic wall erected at the border, to which Andrew comments “it’s different looking at America from the outside” (1:09:20). The significance of exteriority extends the recurrent references to the ‘outside’ encountered thus far, but is exemplified through the longer

discussion of micro and macro groupings – such as viewing the external borders of a forest – which are only viewable through abstraction. The relationship between these two architectural structures is keenly felt through the latent potential for such testaments of human ‘meaning’ to fall into ruin. Indeed, as the wall is later shown to be an ineffective containment, the archaeological site becomes a crucial reflection on wider notions of ontological contact – particularly humanity’s posthumous effect upon the material world. The wall thus is not only representative of the divide between America and Mexico but adopts the wider framing of an ontological gulf – non-human, alien, and human. The humorous terming of the wall as the “seventh wonder” while the two are seemingly atop an archaeological wonder itself, is therefore a poignant criticism of the ‘meaning’ or labels ascribed to such borders and the wider ramifications of these demarcations (01:09:08).

The identification of ruins is equally questioned within the film. Throughout the journey, the two characters encounter industrial and residential remnants before the Zone, an archaeological site within, and an abandoned American town beyond the border. Aptly, despite the attempt at containment, the Zone is continually expanding and subsuming human civilisation. The alien’s ‘infection’ as such adapts the landscape to something altogether different, akin to vestige spaces that are invested with a certain exteriority. For Andrew and Sam, the Zone first appears as a source of constant anxiety and fear, propagated by the media’s representation of the alien species. Although, certainly, the alien race is seemingly hostile, the only time they are comprehensively depicted on screen is a concluding moment of intimacy and awe. The ‘wonder’ of this meeting is unspeakable, indeed neither Andrew or Sam comment upon it and are evidently overwhelmed. Yet this is not quite the “dark ecology” that Morton prescribes, as the zone of encounter has acted as a transformative experience between the two, yet

vitally one they cannot voice. *Monsters* is, therefore, a film about the failure to communicate across such borders; no cross-species contact occurs, the humans are forced to observe the alien meeting as a moment of natural wonder, forever relegated from a more nuanced appreciation of their existence. The wistful conclusion to the film is underscored by both characters no longer wishing to return home – the Zone has been a fundamentally changing experience. Yet at the conclusion, the two are separated akin to the aliens, unable to fully express their transformation beyond themselves. As will become a defining feature of the upcoming narratives, these explorers are stuck in a limbo between being unable to return home and residing within the Zone itself.

The Excavation and Mythologisation of Alien Detritus

Zones are not limited to fiction. Indeed, the language surrounding these spaces can equally be found in relation to the designated Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. The Chernobyl disaster in 1986, resulting from a late-night safety test that exacerbated reactor design flaws, caused a catastrophic nuclear accident in which the surrounding area was flooded with radiation and is still largely uninhabitable. The blast heavily affected the nearby city Pripyat, to the extent that even today large sections are still deserted. Alastair Bonnett in *Off the Map* (2014) comments that: “[r]adiation levels are so high that even the briefest of visits is ill advised, and the exclusion zone around the site, officially known as the Zone of Alienation, covers 2,600 square kilometres – an area bigger than Luxembourg” (144). This event has become a recurrent stimulus for many post-apocalyptic narratives, such as *Metro 2033* and the video game series *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (2007-2009), where such representations have a fraught relationship with the ethical considerations of imagining and depicting Chernobyl’s after-effects. The “Chernobyl Tours” outlet even provides guided explorations of the Zone and

Pripyat, which includes “humorous” maps that promise “a completely new and fresh look on the realities and future of the Chernobyl zone” (“The First Tourist Map of the Chernobyl Zone”). Curiously, what was a calamitous transformation and impact upon the landscape has itself become the destination of the touristic adventure expedition, continuing the legacy of ‘unknown’ spaces from Chapter Two. These tours in fact emphasise the preservation of the topographical state, outlining that: “The Zone guest does not leave any traces of his/her visit to the Zone, no artifacts from the early 21st century in the place left forever in 1986” (“Chernobyl Zone Guest Code”). Evidently the Zone itself has become a curious artefact, an object of interest and a destination that is questionably ‘preserved’ to maintain the potential of such an encounter, querying whether such monuments to widespread human effect should be maintained.

These zones mark a key negotiation of the Anthropocene age, particularly highlighting how human contact and interaction with the landscape impacts non-human entities. For example, bear traces have been spotted within Pripyat itself, which has surprised many rangers as they were previously unrecorded within this region. This transformation may appear to be analogous to projects such as ‘re-wilding’ (which seek to conserve biospheres by re-introducing now absent species); it would be a mistake, however, to view this as a positive change, as human contact has irreparably shaped the environment. Similarly, the mythologising of the zone – by both “Chernobyl Tours” and discussed fiction – is equally complicit in a form of topographical projection that introduces a sense of mysticism to preserve regimes of exclusion. Importantly, Chernobyl is not an ‘unknown’ effect, humanity ‘knows’ what caused this result; it is the subsequent navigation that thus becomes vital to consider. The attributes of the zone return, in a very mobius-strip sense, to the qualities of the Eerie. As Fisher suggested above: “The feeling of the eerie is very different from that of the weird. ... perhaps it is

the most fundamental opposition of all – between presence and absence” (61). This is certainly true for Pripyat, in which an unsettling and uneasy absence is *simultaneous* with a zoological presence. Zones then are spaces that are conceived as being orientated around something outside of the human, but any discussion about them must carefully avoid becoming complicit in the mythologisation or ‘re-enchantment’ of space discussed thus far. For example, a ruin in the zone operates under a new context, encouraging humanity to consider not only its impact, but also how their mark on the planet manifests. The presence of archaeological remnants necessitates a form of *absence*, which in turn anticipates the human return and interfacing with an extraneous past. Fisher defines the Weird as “the presence of *that which does not belong*” (61, original emphasis). Yet this too is enveloped by a human perspective – how do we decide what does indeed ‘belong’? The eeriness of the zone ruin, therefore, lies in the suggestion that our absence has been superimposed by an alternate presence, one which contains traces of an exteriority that fosters a re-appraisal of conventional schemas of navigation.

The zone differs from other forms of ‘first contact’ narrative spaces by frequently underscoring a form of absence. Although the effects or remains of an alien visitor may be present, the architects of these bizarre spaces do not linger long enough to witness how these topologies are utilised. Vitally, the human is relegated from any engagement with the entities they perceive to stand ‘behind’ these sites and must instead consider an intermediary. This interaction between the non-human and human is particularly pertinent when read inversely, when we consider how the spaces we create are explored and perceived by later non-human encounters. The manipulation of the material world – in which resources are acquired, re-fashioned as items of worth, and then later discarded as waste – becomes not only a reflection upon object ontology but

equally one which impacts upon the broader ecosphere. By considering what comes after the visitation, non-humans (such as wildlife) that pick apart rubbish and re-attribute its value become parallel to the human explorers who perceive a form of alien superior design where no structure was intended. The zone crucially offers this traditional paradigm of human waste backwards, a moment of environmental crisis transformed by avarice to become an exploitable treasure trove. These topographies not only offer a platform for interrogating human ontology in opposition to the alien, but equally a reflection upon how this binary *is already in action* through the pollution of the environment.

This transformation lies at the heart of *Roadside Picnic* (1972, translated into English in 1977), written by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, in which alien contact takes the form of several simultaneous visitations (later termed as “The Visit”) which irrevocably affect the landscape – turning them into unregulated spaces called Zones. Crucially, immediate contact between human and alien is never accomplished, rather explorers of these locations encounter the remnants of the visitation. The presence of “an immense banner, already faded: WELCOME TO EARTH, DEAR ALIENS”, underscores the anticipation and later failure to communicate, an incommensurable gulf – similar to *Monsters* – across which the human race can only speculate as to the Visit’s purpose (20). The title itself foregrounds the absence of this contact as the ‘event’ is quite overtly marked as “[a] picnic by the side of some space road” (132). The discovered objects, termed as “artefacts”, are therefore actually the discarded detritus of this alien pit-stop, an assessment which not only undermines human exceptionalism, but also engages with concerns towards the environment and waste. Particularly the Zone’s pre-transformed identification as “the typical industrial landscape” constructs an eerie atmosphere by adapting a space of mundanity into something extraordinary

(16). This landscape echoes Edensor's identification of industrial ruins in Chapter Two, challenging the perceived value projected upon this space in the wake of the alien picnic and its discarded scraps. The zone is therefore a site of archaeological exploration and ecological concern, ostensibly reflecting how one alien's junk is another human's treasure.

The identity of the zone is also constituted through the definitions of its limits, the delineating of its boundaries. Although published before the Chernobyl disaster, this landscape bears eerie parallels to Pripyat and the Zone of Alienation, underscoring the need to contain those qualities deemed by humans to be unwanted. Within the novel, access is restricted as scientific institutes monopolise their hold over the retrieved artefacts leading to illegal smugglers, termed "Stalkers", sneaking in to sell the resources on the black market. Although the restricted access appears primarily intended to keep the effects of this area away from society, it become apparent that this is rather an overt attempt to control the flow of artefacts, framing this space as a resource to be mined and utilised – "a sore, a treasure trove, an evil temptation, Pandora's box, a monster, a demon ... We're using it bit by bit" (110). Each designation, however, projects a human-defined function upon the Zone without any recognition that, as Fredric Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) suggests, "[t]he Strugatskys give us Utopia as it were backwards, or from the other side of the mirror" (73). The associated objects and phenomena are thus representative of an alien mode of encounter, their immutability reflecting the very incomprehensibility of taxonomic systems from an exterior viewpoint.

If the zone was to be considered as a form of utopia, indeed particularly recalling Bey's conceptualisation of micro-states as "Temporary Autonomous Zones", then it is undeniably one orientated around an ontology other than the human. Although the

Strugatskys' Zone certainly does foster human fascination – Stalkers, for example, become fixated on risking their lives for even greater treasures – the boundaries of this space suggest a form of containment rather than preservation. Where the utopia aims to maintain a 'perfect' state by keeping any other anomalous material outside, the Zone is instead something which must be contained and quarantined. As Luckhurst proposes: "If the Zones of the post-genre fantastic are never straightforwardly utopian, perhaps it is because they are chaotic and disordered as a means of evading the dangers of a static utopian topology, fenced off and guarded from transgressors" (27). The Zone, indeed, is hardly a static space as its shifting pathways, unseen gravitational forces and bizarre artefacts emphasise the importance of an immediate negotiation of the landscape and Nature. I argue, however, that perceiving the Zone as a utopia cannot escape the topographical projections discussed thus far – indeed, that while this space is hostile to human explorers, it is still one they elevate as an artefact to study. Similar to *Chernobyl Tour*'s attempted chronostatic preservation of Pripyat, the Zone becomes another expeditionary destination. Yet, the danger of thinking about the Zone in utopian terms lies in the obfuscation of its micro, representative effects upon the world beyond itself in favour of a totalised, projected identity. As such, Zone landscapes seemingly encourage a perception of ecological 'weirdness' where micro examples fail to provide macro comprehension, a notion which Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman in *Global Weirding* (2016) argue refocuses the "attention on the localities within the totality of the global" (8). Evidently these very inferences of 'weirdness' require a human norm to be situated against. Museums, hyperobjects and zones are labels or designations that betray the desire for a totalised identity, yet it is the zone *visitor* who realises the futility of chasing a discrete result, or product, which can only be configured as process.

For *Roadside Picnic* the comprehension of the Zone is mediated through a number of expeditions that lay claim to alien objects for subsequent scientific scrutiny. Within these explorations, navigation becomes a crucial factor as this space no longer adheres to preconceived notions of materiality. Filled with unseen gravitational forces, “hell slime” and inexplicable thermodynamic shifts, this is an inhospitable locale that is resistant to human scrutiny and seemingly confounds the mythologised sense of adventure. Yet the Zone is the source of curiosity and imagination, filled with inexplicable alien artefacts (which are in fact cast-off detritus) that are the source of both ‘legal’ scientific expeditions and covert infiltrations from Stalkers. Although the protagonist Redrick ‘Red’ Schuhart is a Stalker, at the beginning of the novel he legally enters this space as part of a scientific expedition. The navigation of the Zone is in many ways similar to the archaeological quest as traps, hazardous terrain and dangerous structures must be traversed to find the treasure. A re-negotiation of topographic conventions is thus required as pathways change over time and new routes must be established, such journeys cannot lapse into subconscious mediations but are rather immediate and anxious. Cartography, as such, becomes both a necessary and unstable process. Before the opening expedition into the Zone, Red outlines the immediate danger of straying from the beaten path, as he warns: “[t]hey haven’t even laid the route to [the garage] yet” (15). Although this process at times replicates a coloniser’s attempt to regulate and control a landscape, evidently the Zone fights back, it demands constant active navigation instead of depending on pre-established paths. Red later emphasises that “[i]n the Zone you can easily take a familiar route a hundred times and kick off on the hundred and first”, this environment repeatedly requires immediate negotiation and refuses to relapse into automatic mobility (32). In part this is due to the unseen forces

previously mentioned, as Red outlines: “According to the map there’s nothing there, but who trusts maps?” (25).

This is brought to an immediate reality when one of the pre-established paths is obstructed by a gravitational force that the expedition must negotiate. By throwing out a number of bolts and nuts Red is able to establish the approximate dimension of the field, a performance he uses to school the accompanying scientists on the unpredictability of the Zone:

Anyway, I throw out eight more nuts, until I figure out the shape of the trap. To be honest, I could have managed with seven, but I throw one especially for him, right into the centre, so he can properly admire his graviconcentrate. It smashes into the clay as if it were a ten-pound weight instead of a nut, then goes right out of sight, leaving only a hole in the ground. (27)

As the nut demonstrates, the phenomenon defined as a “graviconcentrate” evidently adapts physical space and material objects in unconventional ways. Red’s use of mundane objects ascribes a lack of economic value to the nuts: for him they are simply throw-away detritus whose function is to set off the trap. Red is seemingly happy to pillage the environment, adding to the material waste within the Zone, without realising that he is in fact trading for what is ostensibly alien rubbish. Recalling the exchange between the bag of sand and golden idol enacted by Indy in *Raiders*, Red seemingly swaps one kind of junk for another – which may perhaps be re-utilised by a later non-human explorer. The navigation of a waste-filled landscape within an inhospitable environment has clear parallels to Pripyat, one with an urgent poignancy when considered alongside contemporary climate shifts and hazardous waste. Ostensibly, the detritus of the Zone represents alien littering of the environment, even if this designation invests value for the human scavenger.

The Zone reflects a re-appraisal of object ontology, providing a range of examples which sit outside preconceived notions of materiality. Throughout the novel the range of excavated fusion batteries, black sparks, full-empties and shriekers provide a sample of items which are invariably re-purposed for human needs or beyond comprehension. This relationship is self-consciously raised within the novel, as two prominent experts on the Zone discuss the classification of its artefacts into three distinct categories. The first group are considered to be objects which have an application, even if this was not their original purpose, as: “[w]e use them, although almost certainly not in the ways that the aliens intended” (136). Evidently these items have been re-purposed for human use, to the extent that it is perceived that they will fast-forward technological advancement. However, their apparent ‘misuse’ highlights that these objects have an alternate identity, one which constantly remains ‘outside’ or exterior to human investigation. Objects in the second group, meanwhile, lack an apparent function or purpose but have remarkable potential for scientific research. Fundamentally the existence of objects such as the “empty”, two copper discs which consistently keep an empty space between each other, is utilised to refute or prove empirical hypotheses without necessarily having any immediate productive gain or application. Arguably these objects are deemed worthwhile not because of what they ‘are’ but rather what they signify. These categories are not above scrutiny however, particularly as they impose a hierarchy of use in which objects are once again defined by their practical application. The second grouping is in fact more analogous to the typical archaeological reward, which lacks an apparent function but is designated as an artefact due its elevated position in the taxonomical network. *Roadside Picnic*’s internal taxonomies highlight how human processes can still engage with the artefacts despite their apparent aberrant qualities, indeed that material encounter may still produce a

fragmented comprehension. Evidently, the objects are not so inconceivable that they cannot be partially subsumed into the human taxonomic system.

The last group meanwhile is made up of mythical items, described as being: “objects about which we either know nothing or have only heard hearsay information, objects which we’ve never held in our hands” (138). The mythologising of artefacts is a crucial element within the novel and one encapsulated by the search for the Golden Sphere. This self-reflexive category illuminates the limits of human understanding and are the most desired. The discovery of the Sphere, however, moves this into the second category – it is now akin to the archaeological artefact, a physical enigma that is ripe for the projection of anthropocentric values. The original definition of the third grouping is, therefore, more aligned with the effects of the Zone – these are the rumours, stories or other narratives produced about the objects that reside within human framing. Likewise, a prospective fourth group is suggested, focused specifically on “[n]ot of objects, but of effects”, particularly those outside this area itself – such as locals who migrate away from the Zone causing the accidental death of anyone they encounter (138). Both the mythologies produced about the artefacts and the inexplicable alteration of human ontology – even beyond this space’s physical limits – highlight that any comprehensive understanding must look beyond the Zone itself. Certainly, such an identification ruminates equally upon the wider zones of influence that cascade from such a topography – the material (or immaterial) effects and adaptations to non-human life identified in relation to Pripyat. I contend that the zone of encounter is an important reflective site to consider the impact that human projections of textual narratives – as a process to impose notions of meaning – has upon the world beyond themselves. Indeed, it is the negotiation of artefact identity and ruin navigation that queries the connection between objects and their associated mythologies.

Throughout the narrative, the Golden Sphere has been hinted as a wish-granting device hidden deep within the Zone, guarded by traps and requiring a map to locate. Invariably reminiscent of archaeological narratives, Red and his companion Archie emulate explorers in this hostile region searching for one of the ‘unknown’ objects previously identified. Importantly, this object’s power is constructed through rumour and supposition, defined by human ideals. Indeed, at no point in the narrative is the Golden Sphere even confirmed to grant wishes or have any power at all. In fact, its apparent inertia speaks to the aforementioned Object-Oriented Ontology – why would the aliens leave behind a wish-granting device and how would it interface with human desires? The mythologising of this artefact projects an anthropocentric perspective upon a non-human entity, one which invokes the archaeological quest of traps (in this case the grinder which Red knowingly uses Archie as a scapegoat to avoid, similar to the nuts and graviconcentrate) to invest the item with a certain mystique – to elevate it as an artefact. Unsurprisingly, the reality cannot live up to the mythology as “[t]here was nothing about it to disappoint or raise doubts, but there was also nothing in it to inspire hope” (188). Crucially, within the novel, the lack of any affirmation neither confirms nor denies whether this device can grant wishes. This narrative structure, however, echoes the multiple iterations of the Holy Grail quest, as seen in both *The Last Crusade* and *The Da Vinci Code*, in which a mythologised object can bridge the gulf between micro and macro – its capacity to engage and enact change on the scale of totality.

The reality of the Golden Sphere, however, undermines this projection – itself arguably representative of a societal ‘desire’ for such an artefact – as it is discovered at the bottom of a crater, seemingly another piece of discarded debris:

It lay where it had fallen. It might have tumbled out of some huge pocket or gotten lost, rolling away, during a game between some giants—it hadn't been placed here, it was lying around, just like all the empties, bracelets, batteries, and other junk left over from the Visit. (188-189)

Even within the narrative itself the Golden Sphere is recognisably part of the collective rubbish left over from this cosmological roadside picnic. However, it is encoded as unique and thus bestowed with inexplicable value, differentiated from both the functional artefacts and the misunderstood phenomena. For Red this object marks the culmination of his journey both physically and metaphorically within the Zone – as he intends to ask the Sphere to cure his daughter's mutations. However, when actually faced with his prize, Red discovers that he can no longer concretely define what he wishes for – the gravitas of the moment paralyzing his thought. As such, he decides that if the Golden Sphere is an omnipotent wish-granting device, it should be able to decipher what his deepest desire is, he states: “But if you really are—all powerful, all knowing, all understanding—figure it out! Look into my soul, I know—everything you need is in there. It has to be” (193). As the narrative closes with no affirmation of whether the Sphere does, or even can, grant such a wish, the novel takes a nihilistic turn as Red is overwhelmed with the immensity of this moment. Arguably such a result reflects upon the apparent ‘void’ of human ontology to confirm that no deeper meaning exists. Both Zone and Sphere represent mythologised objects as human perception demands that they have a specific purpose, to have functional value and thus be exploitable, rather than appreciating or acknowledging their fundamental non-human ontology.

Appropriately, Red's inability to define his own wish returns to the necessity of perspective. Specifically, his declaration that “[m]y Lord, where are my words, where

are my thoughts? ... My whole life I haven't had a single thought!", reinforces his archetype as an 'everyman' character – part of the collective rather than a differentiated individual (191). The suggestion that a non-human entity, being both an object and of alien origin, may acutely define Red's deepest desire requires the perspective of an existence exterior to the human condition to accurately judge what is required. Such a reading is analogous with the previous forest metaphor – the expectation placed upon Red to wish for something beyond the self is negated by him being too entrenched within his own ethos to look outside. In the end, he can only imitate the desire of another, echoing Archie's almost utopic ideal of "HAPPINESS, FREE, FOR EVERYONE, AND LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN" (193). Inevitably this wish forces the Zone to adopt a utopian state, or to be the chrysalis from which one might be born – to have a functional value that the human may exploit. Such a projection upon this space, whether dialectically or critically, can only situate the Zone as a conduit for human gain. The quest for wish-granting devices acts as a realisation that the singular human subject alone cannot achieve what they intend – whether this is the realisation of untold wealth, the dispensation of physical laws or the utopian dream. Arguably such a desire, therefore, represents a defeat for human ontology. To avoid conceptualising the Zone as some form of utopia requires a sense of responsibility, to understand how the human interacts with the non-human – for example, how we impact upon wider ecosystems. *Roadside Picnic's* Zone frames an environmental crisis through an archaeological lens, the elevating of detritus to artefacts bringing an immediacy to the *processes* through which humans excavate the material world. In so doing, it offers an appreciation of both how we are involved within wider networks and fundamental to their current definition; indeed, not just how we impact upon non-human ontology but how it in turn adapts and shapes humanity.

Landscapes Devoid of Meaning: *Stalker*, Ennui and Constructed Narratives

Zones offer a crucial re-negotiation of space. These are not only just ‘blank spaces’ on the map but involve a vital reflection upon the historical presences and absences that continue to subsist within a landscape. Although zones may frequently be conceived following an ‘event’, the amorphous definition of their borders suggests that this space could theoretically occur anywhere. These topographies, as such, become a paradigm by which to challenge the imposition of limits and categories upon the external world; indeed, unlike the portal style narratives typically associated with Fantasy or fairy tale texts, crucially the zone re-negotiates the familiar and transforms it into the strange – ushering in an eerie aesthetic. Nowhere is this more prominent than Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979), a very loose adaptation of *Roadside Picnic* that strips out the certainty of the alien visitation and their discarded junk in favour of a film orientated around topographical navigation and human belief. The Zone here is rumoured to have been caused by a meteorite or alien visitation, but this is left ambiguous throughout until even the reality of this space is brought into question. Unlike *Roadside Picnic*, *Stalker* offers a more psychological exploration of landscape and the human psyche, in which the central Stalker (Aleksandr Kaydanovskiy) guides Writer (Anatoliy Solonitsyn) and Professor (Nikolay Grinko) to find the Room – fabled as granting a person’s deepest wish. *Stalker* represents a more minimalist approach; indeed, as no zonal qualities are ever confirmed on screen (such as the traps or confirmation of the Room’s powers), arguably this is a space that becomes non-quotidian within human perception, an extension of the expeditionary narratives from Chapter Two that create objectives as meaningful markers to journey towards.

Although largely departing from the artefactual interrogation of *Roadside Picnic*, *Stalker* still utilises the archaeological framing of an expedition to its central

‘object’. Indeed, I would argue that this structure bestows both suspense and tension upon the area, as the mediation of the landscape and the reverence placed upon an immutable ‘thing’ resonates with audience expectations of archetypal journey narratives. The Holy Grail quest format dominates the film, exchanging the Golden Sphere for the enigmatic Room. Although at first this may seem a departure from the artefactual interrogation, the Room is never fully defined or even screened – giving it an almost revered aura. Similar to the artefact, it is demarcated and elevated from other ‘rooms’ by human perception. Before setting off to the Zone, Writer remarks that any fake could be considered real within the framing of the museum; could any space thus be considered a zone if framed through the archaeological and expeditionary structure? The identity of *Stalker*’s Zone is, therefore, more fluid than previous textual examples – does such a space exist, or does *Stalker* project the possibility of such an experience to imply that an answer to human desires can emerge from the non-human encounter and thus provide verification to anthropocentric notions of ‘meaning’? The Zone is likewise constructed through the lens of the cinematic experience, where the audience itself becomes complicit in both the projection and mythologisation of this sphere culminating in a myriad of interpretations.

The formation of the Zone, whether a psychological projection or an actual entity, is driven by Tarkovsky’s framing of both this topography and the group’s journey through it. To enter the Zone the three must negotiate a military checkpoint, a border crossing that implies both containment and the non-quotidian. Although this introduction may initially appear to be for dramatic effect, crucially this lays the foundations for the Zone itself – the physical deterrent suggests there is something to be kept hidden, bestowing a forbidden quality upon the topography. Beyond this blockade, however, the borders of the Zone itself return to its recurrent amorphous style,

as the viewer is left wondering at which point the three have actually entered this space. Although the transition between the use of monochrome and colour is a potential separation, the overt suggestion being that the Zone is more vibrant than the banal mundanity of daily life, such a shift is dependent on the very subjectivity of perception. The use of colour and filters is a fraught narrative symbol throughout the film, as sepia, monochrome and colour, are used at various points to designate overlapping narrative and temporal spaces – such as dreams, imagination, and memory. *Stalker* challenges not only the expedition structure but equally cinematic framing, as meaning is projected upon change or events with no possible affirmation. In this way, the film particularly resonates with the previous exploration of non-human ontology as the human actant projects significance upon this space, obsessed with finding some deeper symbolism where none, perhaps, exists.

The Zone itself, or to be more precise both the filmic location and narrative space, provides an important negotiation of the non-human. Shot within or around two hydroelectric power plants, *Stalker* is dependent on a ruin-filled location to evoke its psychological and semantic associations. Similar to Pripyat, beneath the mystique of the Zone lies the realisation that such landscapes are actually materially present; navigating around its artefactual elevation thus stresses the contemporary urgency of such encounters. The landscape is one of decaying or ruined industrial modernity, in which the artefacts of the everyday are left to rot and be claimed by Nature (Figure 3.1). For the three companions, this space offers a place of imagination away from the constriction of society, within which the fabled Room is conceived. The framing of the film, however, suggests an eerie quality to the landscape, investing what should be seen as ‘natural’ as something rather hostile or uneasy.

Figure 3.1: The industrial ruined landscape of the Zone – *Stalker* (1979)

For the film to utilise such a location requires that these ruined husks actually exist within the world and are the product of human civilisation, itself a reflection upon the mediation of waste. The deep focus utilised within Figure 3.1, to bring both telegraph pole and car into vivid detail, backdropped with the hauntingly amorphous mist, bestows a demonstrably eerie quality upon the locale. Particularly this shot recalls Fisher's identification that: "A sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes *partially emptied of the human*" (11, my emphasis). As previously argued, ruins mediate between a balance of presence and absence, one which the Eerie extends upon. Tarkovsky's decision to present this scene without the aid of special effects, therefore, depends on the human perceiver to project a sense of hostility, in effect to create the Zone themselves. This transformation of what is actually a 'real' space to contain a sense of exteriority reflects upon the division between human and Nature, or indeed whether such a gulf is an anthropocentric projection itself.

The group's mediation of the Zone is influenced as much by the qualities of the location as the ways in which it is framed. Similar to *Roadside Picnic*, journeys through this space are often convoluted to avoid the danger of invisible traps, causing the three to explore and appreciate the landscape rather than rushing to their immediate goal. The repeated focus on a sense of abundant Nature, particularly in such a hostile terrain, recalls Pripyat and the Zone of Alienation. Importantly, this is not necessarily a return to a 'natural' landscape but rather the ecosphere merging and adopting these industrial ruins – an aesthetic which John A. Riley outlines as representing "ruin porn":

Ruin porn is the aestheticization of urban and industrial decay, and although *Stalker* predates this trend, it must be admitted that some of *Stalker*'s subsequent critical success and its elevation to an art-house staple and 'cult' film must be seen in the context of this trend's ascendancy. ("Hauntology, Ruins, and the Failure of the Future in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*", 21)

The elevation of these ruins into something which is almost revered echoes the transformation of *Stalker*'s Room into an artefact. Yet Riley's gesture towards the contemporary ascendancy of "ruin porn" overlooks the extensive cultural and particularly touristic engagement with ruin aesthetics, as outlined in Chapter Two. In both, previously 'worthless' objects are transformed within the human perspective due to their dereliction – an implicit desire for dilapidation. This inversion itself mediates the presence/absence dichotomy of the Eerie and runs throughout the film, the camera framing discarded objects to suggest a deeper meaning, where no such identity exists.

Figure 3.2: Ruins of the army's expedition into the Zone – *Stalker* (1979)

For example, Figure 3.2 is the opening shot of one of the group's countless explorations of the hostile terrain. The central framing of this industrial wreck, particularly as it fills both the foreground and background, projects a particular reverence upon the object – is it just a car, a ruin, or indeed something else? This uncertainty is produced by the slow tracking shot of the vehicle, the lingering gaze suggesting a presence where there should be absence. The three explorers walk into the shot from the left; they are part of this landscape and are not the immediate focus. Recalling Fisher: "The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or is [sic] there is nothing present when there should be something" (61). The tension

between these two is produced to dramatic effect within the film by frequently framing objects, ruins or the landscape (in which the characters often walk into the shot), with the persistent suggestion of an irreducible exteriority which retreats from human engagement. This is extended also in the adaptation of Red's nut throwing scene, as *Stalker* instead ties loose material to these objects so that they may act as way-markers. Interestingly, at no point during this experimental probing does a nut demonstrate anomalous behaviour. Although this may have been for budgetary concerns, the lack of any affirmation for the traps reinforces the concept of an *absent presence*, one projected from the human psyche upon the Zone.

The characters often overlook the identity of the ruins, and these spaces are merely part of a scenery to be incorporated for functional value than to explore their production or legacy. Throughout *Stalker* the Room itself is never truly defined, although the first building the three companions focus on is suggested to have significant value. Framed in a very similar way to *Raiders*, this ruined building (Figure 3.3) is positioned in the centre of the shot to designate it as the destination. By including industrial wreckage in the foreground, the building itself is contrastingly positioned in the distance – an *objective* to strive towards. *Stalker* especially underscores the necessity of navigation, as he comments that no direct path is possible, the companions must take a convoluted route which further reinforces the journey-style narrative.

Figure 3.3: First shot of the destination, suggested to contain the Room – *Stalker* (1979)

The building, and thus the Room itself, are bestowed with a new identity – they are the destination of this Holy Grail quest. The camera's slow upward tracking from

foreground detritus to architectural background equally questions whether these two categories are in fact separated. Viewed without context, each object within the shot is the product of human waste, yet when viewed as the destination the building becomes invested with value. Although evidently the wish-granting format requires an architectural destination, or perhaps containment, the porous boundaries of the ruin construct this as a continuous extension of the outside. The lingering shot of the ruined building invites the perception that human absence has been filled, or indeed transformed, by a non-human presence; the true eeriness emerges when looking beyond the Zone to realise that this is in fact reality.

Stalker's locations are influenced by or even dependent on the perspective of its viewer, specifically whether they are complicit with the illusion of the Zone – either as a cinematographic or ontological product. The subjective engagement with mythic structures – as identified previously with David Gann's *The Lost City of Z* – is also highlighted within Geoff Dyer's *Zona* (2012), which chronicles the author's own experiences, memories and traced journeys through this filmic zone. Offering a shot by shot analysis of the film juxtaposed with discursive personal commentary, Dyer's *Zona* highlights how the Zone becomes self-reflexive: indeed, *Stalker* itself becomes complicit within the wider expeditionary format discussed thus far. The archaeology of the Room interrogates whether this is an attempt to distance the human from Nature and if such a differentiation is possible – indeed whether this is rather an evolving definition of presences and absences that forms new ontologies. Dyer outlines this multiplicity within the visualised architecture as: "Buildings that are no longer what they were once intended for: sites of decayed meaning that may, as a result, have acquired a new and deeper meaning" (45). This re-inscription of meaning echoes the layers of ontological identity central to the transformation of object to artefact. This

mode of conceptualisation, therefore, permits the interrogation of the Room as ‘thing’, as a collective object, to further understand its physical and symbolic resonance. Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* invokes an eerie and melancholic atmosphere around the ruins of human civilisation, whether this is crumbling architecture or abandoned objects, and the Zone becomes as much a reflection upon encounters outside the human frame and the legacy of our engagement.

The detritus of the Zone provides a means to interrogate the value attributed to objects, particularly compared to *Roadside Picnic*, as this is no longer a negotiation of alien salvage but an immediate navigation of *human* waste. *Stalker* questions within the film whether the Zone changes in the absence of people, specifically whether it is the human subject that invokes this topography’s amorphous identity or if it is incognisant of such contact. Evidently from *Stalker*’s perspective the Zone is still a resource for human gain, superimposing projected value upon the non-human. Whether the Zone is an illusion or not, *Stalker* falls into the anthropocentric perspective explored within this thesis thus far. The true horror of the Zone is that perhaps there is no value or deeper meaning, a suggestion which resonates with the later redundancy of the Room. Dyer argues that “[i]sn’t it exactly this quality of undisturbed stillness that gives Tarkovsky’s filmic archaeology of the discarded its special aura?”, the uneasy quality springing from the return of the human to a landscape they polluted and abandoned (117). Character and camera motion simultaneously become a key factor within the Zone; the frequent submersion of landscape, buildings and objects causes any movement to take an almost eerie metaphorical representation for the ripples sent throughout this space. This aquatic quality bestows a uniquely liminal aspect upon its discarded waste, as objects are refracted through these zonal waters until their non-human status surfaces.

Figure 3.4: The discarded human detritus of the Zone – *Stalker* (1979)

The slow tracking of the camera over a variety of human waste inevitably invites suggestions of a deeper meaning, or connection, between the objects. Yet, these are the items of mundanity, exposing their apparent disregard and then later transformed to almost artefactual status by the camera. As Dyer suggests: “These sequences, like the green landscape with the wind gusting through them, are quintessentially Tarkovskyan; there’s something like this in all of his films: the magic of the discarded ordinary, the filmic archaeology of the everyday” (131-132). Offered without commentary, the objects are positioned as part of the Zone, configured to be something extraordinary. Indeed, I suggest that Dyer fails to challenge the very materialist use of such items. Arguably there is no purpose behind the inclusion of these objects, they are simply waste. However, such a category inevitably invites a differentiation in value. For such a filmic location to exist must equally necessitate that human rubbish has produced such a visual. The designation of whether this is detritus, human artefacts or an immutable non-human presence thus depends upon the viewer. Such a perspective demands a re-appraisal of object framing, or indeed the processes in which the camera lens itself becomes complicit in upholding the projection of prescribed object ontology.

Akin to the Golden Sphere, the supernatural qualities of the Room are never confirmed within the film itself. Recalling the ambiguity of when the viewer actually enters the Zone, the lack of visual affirmation destabilises whether it exists at all; indeed, if it is rather a human projection upon the non-human, one that considers that such mythic validation *must* exist to verify our ontological exceptionalism. For while the companions invariably do travel through a number of rooms, *Stalker* claims that they have never witnessed *the* Room – once again a designation echoing object and

artefact labelling. The physical and mental journey seemingly exhausts the three travellers, a return to their original state of ennui which implies that, ultimately, they have been unchanged by the encounter. Yet, is this arguably not the fulfilment of their primary wish? If the Zone is read as a constructed or imagined site for human exploration, the Room an objective destination, and the traps necessary for the archaeological journey, then the group has fulfilled its quest and cycled back to the beginning, re-inhabiting the human longing for meaning. Given that the first and last shots of *Stalker* are of him sleeping in his bedroom, alongside the multiple times he (perhaps) dreams within the film, the whole intervening period becomes an illusion conjured through the belief that encountering such non-human incommensurability may offer some corroboration or affirmation to human processes of ontological hierarchisation.

The journey to the Room, which is suggested to be within the ruined building of Figure 3.3, draws on the ruin aesthetics outlined in Chapter Two that looks to non-human locales as a site to reflect upon the human condition. The necessity of the building implies that there is an intrinsic quality to being inside which is productive for such thinking. As the three linger on the precipice to the Room, each finds they are no longer resolved to continue in the apprehension that their deepest wish will reveal the debasement of their true identity – that the ideal they believe in is actually a self-told lie. Within these final scenes of the Zone, the Room's presence is curiously absent, as if it is perpetually just out of shot. This eerie haunting mediates between the travellers and audience journeying up to this sublime and liminal edge to finally hesitate and egress. Fisher's suggestion that the Eerie is more aligned with the external than internal is deconstructed, as the collective consensual belief that *the* Room exists at the boundary of the shot extends a spectre of extraneity over this final act. Although the

ruin reflects an internal/external hybridity, I would argue that the Eerie interrogates the narratives projected upon the non-human world, and indeed the gulf of miscommunication that defeats any attempt of comprehension outside anthropocentric values. In effect, both characters and audience can only reach the 'pre'-Room, which is not only littered with discarded objects but also failed wishes. The Professor, largely silent on his motives up to this point, reveals that he intends to destroy the Room for fear of whose hands it may fall into. Yet by the conclusion he cannot face the implications of such macro change and wishes to keep the mythological prospect that human exceptionalism can be proven by the non-human; instead he dismantles the bomb so that it joins the other micro detritus fragments of the Zone.

Figure 3.5: Slow zoom out of the defeated three, returning to a state of ennui –

***Stalker* (1979)**

The closing shots of the Zone underscore the exhaustion of this journey, which has forced each participant to confront the limits and definition of their own ontology. The slow zoom out on the three (Figure 3.5) framed by a Room (if not *the* Room) retains the group as the centre of the shot, who are increasingly dwarfed by an expanding perspective of the wider world. As rain begins to pour into the building, the ruin and its objects are submerged even further, denoting both a porousness between inside/outside and perpetual change beyond the human visitors. The lack of any emergent identity ensures that the building retains an immanence and that it is instead the human who is elevated as the locus of 'meaning' within this encounter. The presentation of the Room challenges the human desire, belief or faith implicit in the suggestion of something *more*, the confirmation of a greater structural meaning existing beyond the human. By

exposing how an archaeological and cinematographic framing invests value where there is nothingness, Tarkovsky's film confronts the limits of meaning itself.

Curiously the film ends with the affirmation of fantastical powers, which have otherwise been avoided or negotiated in an amorphous way. The final scene focuses on Monkey, Stalker's daughter, as she moves three bottles across a table with telekinetic powers. The ambivalence of this final scene is matched by Monkey's apparent boredom, that for her moving the objects is a way to create meaning and pass time, rather than a moment of wonder. The prospect of humans influencing objects in such a way certainly offers a rather anthropocentric notion of control. Yet its liminal nature within the film itself invites the human curiosity towards something *more*, an echo to the alternate materialism recognisable within the Weird. By concluding with the suggestion of something non-quotidian, the film encourages a mobius strip-like return to and re-appraisal of the Zone – the perpetual continuation of the cycle in which Stalker will once again awake, construct meaning, and return to the bedroom.

Topographical Anomalies: Archaeological Descents and Ecological Excavations

Zones thus extend upon and challenge the conventional expeditionary format, frequently resisting human interaction and refusing any external validation for human perceptions of meaning or structural order. For both *Roadside Picnic* and *Stalker* it is the journey *through* such a landscape while utilising archaeological narrative tropes of artefacts, myths and traps that instigates an internal reflection upon ontological encounters. Often such a realisation returns to the inadequacy of representational paradigms, that some extraneity continually eludes being reduced from macro existence to micro artefact. Canavan and Hageman echo this inference in *Global Weirding* where they argue not only that the current climate is “weird” but the current ecological

moment is one of suspense, where we are “still waiting for the empirical data, charts, and statistical trend-lines to confirm what we all know, that things aren’t the way they used to be, something has gone *wrong*” (10, original emphasis). Although this perception of ‘wrongness’ itself cannot escape the very anthropocentrism that it seeks to challenge – akin to designations of the ‘natural’ world – Canavan and Hageman’s suggestion implies that elucidation and confirmation are dependent on a micro structure that can translate and present the incalculable horror of the current Real. Such abstractionism contends that a distanced perspective is required, that such phenomena as global warming cannot be understood through immediate proximity, a suggestion that chimes with Morton’s hyperobjects. Yet within the zone such empirical abstraction is confounded, where observational data cannot form an adequate representation of the Real and only immediate negotiation offers an engagement with non-human incommensurability. Nowhere is this more pronounced than Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy and in particular the opening novel *Annihilation* (2014). Indeed, VanderMeer’s zone, “Area X”, embodies the futility of over-dependence on such abstraction, invalidating any empirical human attempts at composing a totalised identity to question whether such paradigms can sufficiently comprehend the non-human.

VanderMeer has suggested that he believes it is “actually very corrosive to compare *Annihilation* to *Roadside Picnic*” (“Interview with Timothy Morton”, *Global Weirding*, 52). Certainly, both novels were written within differing cultural and political moments, yet I contend that the zones at the heart of both narratives highlight a broader engagement with the non-human and specifically the methodologies employed within such an encounter. Area X throughout the series refers to an interpolated space that appears on Earth and begins voraciously encroaching upon the ‘modern’ world.

Transforming what is later designated as “the forgotten coast”, the Zone is a topography of bizarre and vibrant ecology that adapts the landscape after an indeterminate and enigmatic “Event” which is later suggested to be the result of a failed alien terraforming experiment (*Acceptance*, 89). This designated ‘failure’ not only underscores the prospect of an absent visitation – as identified in *Roadside Picnic* and *Stalker* – but also the futility of human processes to comprehend meaning or purpose where none was intended, as they excavate the after-effects and waste of this experiment. Indeed, at times the landscape of Area X is referred to as being a “pristine wilderness”, suggesting that it exists in a ‘natural’ and unspoilt state (*Annihilation*, 95). The creation of such a zone interpolates a new ‘dark’ corner to explore, a new expeditionary location to quest to.

The specific topographical location of Area X is kept unsurprisingly vague to preserve a sense of mystique. Even expeditions into this space have vital information withheld from them, such as the nature of the border. Although crossing the boundary is a crucial part of this experience, it begins rather to represent an amorphous materiality which is “hazy, indistinct” and reported by the narrator to be “perhaps a gate, perhaps a trick of the eye” (11). The very undefined nature of Area X is suitably Weird, while also offering a transpositional reflexivity. The terminology of the zone as being “Area X” evidently draws upon such comparisons, particularly by representing almost an impossible enigma to solve – ‘X’ – or even a degree of interchangeability ripe for projections, such as ‘Z’.

Annihilation follows the twelfth expedition sent by the Southern Reach government organisation into Area X and is narrated by the Biologist. Each of the characters that enter the zone are stripped of their names as part of the conditioning process by the Southern Reach, reducing each to functional labels or tools through

which to understand the zone – Surveyor, Linguist, Psychologist. The haunting presence of Area X is one which the Biologist keenly identifies: “the idea of an ‘Area X’ lingered in many people’s minds like a dark fairy tale, something they did not want to think about too closely” (94). The reflexivity of the ‘X’ designation resonates with the wider expeditions discussed in this thesis, in which empirical study and physical navigation are utilised as a process to prospectively ‘reveal’ the ecological mystery of the zone.

Navigation, however, proves to be particularly challenging for the expeditions, especially as this topography resists cartographic reduction. In “The Terror and the *Terroir*” (2016), Siobhan Carroll highlights the semantic association between these journeys and colonial explorers who would act as a vanguard for the later imposition of imperial and scientific values: “Explorers were supposed to function as advance scouts of their civilizations, preparing the way for the scientific and social orders that would follow” (71). Akin to the artefact, such processes would notionally ‘prepare’ the landscape for subsequent ontological re-inscription. Zones resist this paradigm, by refusing any comprehensive micro fragment to speak for the macro concept they emphasise the cognitive entrapments of such an approach. The Biologist herself comments upon the failure of cartography within this space: “The map had been the first form of misdirection, for what was a map but a way of emphasizing some things and making other things invisible?” (66). Echoing the imposition of colonial power, the expeditions into Area X are shaped by the institutional direction of the Southern Reach, emphasising immediate navigation rather than being viewed through representative abstraction. Recalling the relationship between the micro and the macro, Area X becomes a frustrating enigma for the twelfth expedition (and by extension the Southern Reach) who are continually withheld from information about the topography, to the

extent that the data about the Zone adopts an unimaginable scale as: “there is a limit to thinking about even a small piece of something monumental” (93). In what acts as almost a direct reference to Morton’s hyperobjects, the Biologist approaches a moment akin to the cosmic awe of the Weird’s alternate materiality, as the ‘zones’ exhibited by micro examples threaten to cascade beyond comprehension – in which the quantity of possibilities begins to obscure any form of concrete meaning. Morton argues that “When it comes to hyperobjects, nonlocality means that the general itself is compromised by the particular”; if the singular artefact is so heavily emphasised over the ‘presences’ behind it, then an imbalance arises between micro and macro. (*Hyperobjects*, 54). However, the archaeological expedition acts as a frame through which to composite these two scales.

Navigation is thus orientated around discrete objects that are inferred to contain a greater understanding of the macro. These prospective artefacts become focal points which can apparently translate immutability into comprehensive understanding for the human. Within *Monsters* there is the constant direction of the wall/border, *Roadside Picnic* has the garage and later Golden Sphere, *Stalker* propels the trio to The Room; each utilises some form of architectural structure as an archaeological objective, the end of the journey. In *Annihilation* this takes the form of two twinned structures – the lighthouse and the tower. Although the former pre-dates Area X and is actually the origin of the “Event”, the latter – I argue – is a topographic imitation, an inverted lighthouse. Indeed, Area X also produces doppelgängers of expedition members, implying that it may only communicate through ontological replication as no innovation is possible. The tower becomes an artefact through which Area X may process its visitors and acts as a beacon to guide them. The nomenclature of the tower, or tunnel, produces a keen debate between the members of the twelfth expedition that itself

highlights the vacuous nature of such labels and the illusion of transferrable meaning. The Biologist insists: “At first, only I saw it as a tower. I don’t know why the word *tower* came to me, given that it tunnelled into the ground” (6, original emphasis). Negating the compulsive attention to defining the object’s function, evidently the tower/tunnel offers a gateway to the chthonic depths from which the expedition perceive some form of explanation will arise. In the sequel, *Authority* (2014), the tower becomes known as “the topographical anomaly”, a curious phrase that emphasises an underpinning assumption and designation of ‘belonging’ (36). Further, such a moniker transforms the objects into an enigma, elevating it to artefactual status through its perceived anomalous nature. For the members of the expedition, who stand in the wake of the excavational narratives explored thus far, the taxonomic system of human ordering promises that by studying micro fragments, a macro whole can be composited. Unsurprisingly, then, the group are drawn to the topographical anomaly as an archaeological marker but find it resistant to such inquires.

The irreducibility of the topographical anomaly confounds conventional modes of navigation, particularly as its cartographic absence on expedition maps instigates a pseudo-presence: “It is either a deliberate exclusion from our maps and thus known... and that is a message of sorts ... or it is something new that wasn’t here when the last expedition arrived” (14). The haunting guidance of the Southern Reach through such data is thus felt as an eerie manifestation of presence and absence. The expedition is drawn to the materiality of the topographical anomaly, which is a circular block of greyish stone, as a conduit to engage with wider immaterial concerns, such as Area X’s history, origin or ‘purpose’. The prospect of chthonic emergence fuels the curiosity of the expedition and the Biologist comments that: “Something about the idea of a tower that headed straight down played with a twinned sensation of vertigo and a fascination

with structure” (14). The descent thus evokes a much longer tradition of excavational paradigms in which an ‘answer’ to the zone suggestively lies in the depths, despite the group’s realisation that “[w]e had no sense of its purpose. And now that we had begun to descend into it, the tower *still* failed to reveal any hint of these things” (21-22, original emphasis). The failure here lies within the human projection of meaning – or at least their anthropocentric sensibilities – upon non-human entities, a process which zones are inherently resistant towards. This is mirrored by Area X’s own mimicry of human representation, as the topographical anomaly not only provides stairs for the convenience of a descent, but its walls are also host to parasitic fungus that coalesces into a form of Weird sermon: “*Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead...*” (23, original emphasis). Although the upcoming Crawler is revealed to be the architect of these lines – or, more specifically, they originate from the lighthouse keeper it consumed – the layering of previous liturgies upon the old forms a haunting palimpsest of eternal replication. Area X’s utilisation of human language implies that it can only imitate such a system without any deeper comprehension of the meaning behind such signifiers; indeed, the Southern Reach become obsessed with discovering a purpose to such communication where none exists. Aptly for a Weird narrative, *Annihilation* presents many more questions than answers, replicating an alienation of the human from any deeper (or chthonic) emergence of a universal truth or Real. All notions of function projected by the expedition thus fail to cross such an ontological chasm. VanderMeer’s zone queries the encounter paradigms that must arise to engage with such a prospect; specifically, how the subject must necessarily realise their anthropocentric perspective in conjunction with non-human incommensurability, rather than remaining within the confines of representative reductionism.

The failure to communicate across such an ontological gulf is embodied by the Biologist's encounter with the Crawler – an amorphous creature at the depths of the tower which is reminiscent of Lovecraft's Shoggoth. Fundamentally, language is unable to process the experience as the Biologist admits that: "There, in the depths of the Tower, I could not begin to understand what I was looking at and even now I have to work hard to pull it together from fragments" (175-176). Evidently the Crawler illuminates the divide between representational systems and the Real, due to this undepictable impossibility. The Crawler blurs material boundaries, "changing at a lightning pace, as if to mock my ability to comprehend it", confounding any notion of imitative reproductive which catalyses the question: "What can you do when your five senses are not enough?" (176, 178). Metaphor becomes the only, if inadequate, method to process the Crawler in human terms, a failure which reflects more upon the representational system than the subject itself. The Biologist self-consciously declares: "*This* moment, which I might have been waiting for my entire life all unknowing—this moment of an encounter with the most beautiful, the most terrible thing I might ever experience—was beyond me" (178, original emphasis). This meeting mimics Red's inability to realise or articulate his deepest desire in *Roadside Picnic* or indeed the suggestion that The Room in *Stalker* is the projection of constructed meaning. For each, there is the persistent suggestion of an exteriority that cannot provide an answer to the human condition, a non-human subject that both resists taxonomical scrutiny and highlights the very anthropocentric horizon of such a view. Even the Crawler and Area X fail, or indeed do not seek to, comprehend human ontology as the "excavation of [the Biologist's] mind" seemingly creates only doppelgänger imitations (185). Echoing Canavan and Hageman's earlier suggestion that the current ecological moment is the suspense of waiting for data to prove the impact of the Anthropocene age, a chasm

opens between representation and origin. While encounter is thus an integral process to mediate non-human ontologies, it is crucial to remain aware of the entrapment that representational systems may offer without retreating from the importance of such meetings. Within the *Southern Reach* trilogy this is the point where data cascades beyond the Real and invalidates such contact, a proposition located within the second topographical structure: the lighthouse.

Akin to the topographical anomaly, the lighthouse becomes an archaeological objective for expeditions through the inference that it will guide them to meaning and thus draws: “expedition members like the ships it had once sought to bring to safety through the narrows and reefs offshore” (115). The synonymising of architecture and epistemic revelation has run throughout this thesis from the tomb, museum and ruin to the ‘Room’ of *Stalker*, implying a deeper semantic connection with the containment, or framing, of such a revelation. The lighthouse is no different and entices the solo exploration of the Biologist after the expedition effectively diverges in purpose. Appropriately this site offers the promise of chthonic emergence as the Biologist discovers a trapdoor which hides countless journals and artefacts from previous expeditions – a material alibi that is far more than twelve expeditions could produce. The *Southern Reach*’s obscuring of the real number of expeditions embodies an obsessive and indeed compulsive repetition that fails to think beyond the expeditionary format, where to provide accurate labels would be an acknowledgement of redundancy. This resource, however, foregrounds the uncountable material produced *about* Area X itself, an impressive amount of data that merely circumvents any direct answer: “The journals and other materials formed a mouldering pile about twelve feet high and sixteen feet wide that in places near the bottom had clearly turned to compost, the paper

rotting away” (111).¹⁹ Seemingly, it is no longer a question about understanding Area X but one where the material about the zone offers prospective layers of excavation. The amount of documentation is so overwhelming that it begins to rot, literally decomposing itself into obscurity and creating a feedback loop of perpetual data input that causes the archive to precede the phenomena. Such abstraction removes the immediacy of the encounter and instigates a nihilistic redundancy to human action as “Slowly the history of exploring Area X could be said to be turning into Area X” (112). The Biologist essentially is already part of the same history that she is trying to uncover, becoming an archaeologist of the expeditions themselves, even though “I could search those pages for years and perhaps never uncover the right secrets” (117). The lack of meaning or ‘right’ answers removes any manner of orientation and trains the inquisitive gaze of the expedition back upon itself. The presence of the journals in the lighthouse, a structure intended to guide after all, therefore becomes a poignant question: to what extent does the material *about* the subject begin to supersede directly engaging with the entity itself?

Authority, the second novel in the trilogy, effectively attempts to engage with such a question and aims to re-assert control over the Southern Reach’s analysis of Area X. The protagonist John Rodriguez – appropriately nicknamed ‘Control’ – however discovers that this empirical tool has perhaps become as incomprehensible as the subject of study itself; indeed, its elusive operators become the perfect replication as “the ultimate void to counteract Area X: impersonal, antiseptic, labyrinthine, and unknowable” (*Acceptance*, 228). The similarity between the two acts as a cautionary

¹⁹ The presence of an incomprehensible alien entity, doppelgänger imitations and data that cascades beyond any conclusion are also central aspects of Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris* (1961), which likewise confronts the validity of empirical observation to mediate such an ontological encounter.

tale about the incomprehensibility of the agencies that study inexplicable phenomena, especially pertinent in the current ecological moment. Indeed, I argue that both the Southern Reach and Central reflect the danger of observation that is too abstracted from the source – the potential labyrinth of reports and papers in place of immediate navigation of these sites. Within *Authority*, Control sifts through the papers, artefacts and objects of the Zone itself, demonstrating layers of excavation in which new discoveries threaten to reveal more unknowns. Data thus becomes its own labyrinth, a descent that leads the subject further away from, rather than closer to, any notion of the ‘truth’. Appropriately such a prospect returns to Morton’s hyperobjects in which the effects of the phenomenon are felt at such an abstracted degree that the human subject cannot process their correlation. The danger thus lies in the prospect of waiting for data to try to prove a Real that can only be truly experienced through encounter, while mediating the impossibility of representing this moment itself. The allure of VanderMeer’s zone lies in its contestation of any empirical certainties, of the perceptible exteriority that cannot quite be captured; yet it is through understanding the attraction of such negotiation that a more nuanced appreciation of the non-human can emerge.

Unsurprisingly, the Southern Reach itself is compared by VanderMeer to a museum. Control’s navigation of the building is inevitably reminiscent of archaeological excavations as “[t]he coolness in the air as they descended reminded him of a high-school field trip to a natural history museum”, and “[i]t was a kind of mausoleum, entombing curiosity and due diligence” (*Authority*, 47, 51). In essence the Southern Reach becomes as much an artefact as Area X, a fitting comparison as the agency is later subsumed by the encroaching borders of the phenomenon it studies. Control realises that his attempts are merely adding another level of notes around the

subject, another form of abstraction where “[t]hat would probably be his fate: to catalogue the notes of others and create his own, ceaselessly and without effect”, reinforcing the compounding effect of the journals, as the data itself becomes so amorphous that it rots into obsolescence, becoming another Area X (281). Fundamentally, Morton’s hyperobjects and other composite systems run the risk of adding to this abstraction, of becoming merely another paradigm through which to try to assess the phenomenon at a comfortable distance. The prospect of continuously encountering the non-human with no discernible ‘product’ evokes the mobius strip, in which the observational data threatens to cause a loop which renders the archaeological inquisition as perpetual process with no end. The expeditions into the zone, therefore, become a method to try to interface with the Real – the non-human unknown – rather than simply producing a compulsive cycle of data spiralling around the object. VanderMeer’s Area X can only communicate through imitation – the fabrication of pseudo-language, doppelgängers and architecture. Akin to the failures within *Monsters*, *Roadside Picnic* and *Stalker*, no external authentication is present, only internal reflection and reverie persist. Viewing the zone as an artefact and particularly a new expeditionary canvas rather elides its critical potential as a space which self-consciously – narratively and creatively – resists the superimposition of anthropocentric values. Rather the zone of encounter extends upon artefact and ruin negotiation to interpolate innovative modes of immediate experience and reflections upon the non-human.

Glitch Doppelgängers and Ontological Mimicry

The zone focuses chiefly upon the process of encounter, prioritising the intermediary action over result. For *Monsters* this is the failure to communicate within and beyond species; in *Roadside Picnic* it is the mythologising of alien waste into artefacts; in

Stalker it is the projection of the Zone and the bestowal of meaning upon human movement; and finally, the futility of observational data to reach the Real in *Annihilation*. Each example foregrounds subjectivity but demonstrates that within each experience there is an element that cannot quite be captured as product – that there is some incommensurable aspect that lies within the process itself. Such an identification bears similarities to the production of technical glitches, where the disruption of process is materially visible. Curiously, glitches within a digital system are also known as ‘artefacts’ – objects that are once again individualised and elevated from the collective. The glitch, therefore, provides an alternate perspective on the emergence of non-human ontology and is an integral element to consider in relation to the disruption of doppelgänger communication.

Alex Garland’s adaptation of *Annihilation* (2018) follows loosely the same premise as the novel but draws further attention to replicated process. Indeed, within the film, mimicry becomes a point of ontological horror in which the glitch doppelgänger thrives. The expedition in the film learns that the zone border – the “shimmer” – refracts the DNA of anything it touches, causing the human explorers to merge with the now commensurable non-human, alongside producing its own organic bodily replications. It is within the expedition’s gaze that these objects are delineated from the surrounding ecology and become a vehicle of horror, as opposed to Area X which presents no inherent ontological differentiation. The presentation of linguistic, structural, and bodily mimicry is thus framed as a moment of ontological confrontation – in which the individuality of the human subject is challenged by the perception that they are no longer unique. The horror of the doppelgänger manifests as an uncanny doubling that elides personal agency, as imitation holds the danger of becoming a reflection that confirms the true cosmic horror of ontological insignificance: that the

‘original’ is merely an object which can be fabricated and re-produced. Such a proposition erodes the artificial separation of subject and object; within a taxonomical network the human is no longer the actant but arguably part of the network. Such an existential threat is more than an anthropocentric perspective may allow for and thus it is unsurprising that doppelgängers are met with hostility.

Within Garland’s film this moment is epitomised by Lena (Natalie Portman) encountering the Crawler. Transposed from the tower to the chthonic depths beneath the lighthouse, this setting evokes the encoding of human curiosity with descent narratives. The Crawler’s elevation within an otherwise empty room is undeniably reminiscent of the artefacts previously introduced, an inexplicable projection reminiscent of *Stalker*. Switching to Lena’s perspective, the expanding heart of the Crawler is a psychedelic gateway with no event horizon: there is no boundary to provide containment. This overwhelming moment of perpetual process/stimulus seeks to cross the ontological divide, producing a doppelgänger as a communication paradigm of mimicry (Figure 3.6).

**Figure 3.6: After ‘reading’ Lena, the Crawler transforms into her doppelgänger
– Annihilation (2018)**

Ostensibly, Lena has become the artefact, yet such multiplicity threatens her own individuality – if her ontology can be challenged thus through Area X’s fabrication, does she retain her differentiating uniqueness? While the doppelgänger is framed as a moment of perpetual process, as it can only mimic the actions of its double, the human feels compelled to escape this mobius strip-like eternity – to materialise a result and produce a ‘glitch’ within the doppelgänger. The trepidation surrounding this replication

returns to the significance of artefactual origins: that elevating certain objects to a pedestal, due to their ‘status’, is an extension of the perpetually upheld myth by humans that such differentiation is inherent throughout the universe. Through such a demarcating process the human subject finds comfort in the preservation of their own individuality, separated from the collective. This threat manifests through the compulsive destruction of the imitation, the desire to return to a unique status fuelled by the anxiety that the copy may supplant the original. The failure of contact is thus inscribed in the inability to think beyond anthropocentrism. While the doppelgänger enmeshed subject/object artefacts may cross ontological boundaries, the depicted humans are simultaneously too anxious of forsaking their prized individuality.

Although each of the principally discussed zone narratives in this chapter attempt to interface with the non-human (and in so doing emphatically state the importance of recognising such a paradigm), each cannot think beyond an ontological divide. Sam and Andrew in *Monsters* are left in xenobiological awe, but cannot communicate fully between themselves; Red is complicit with the prospective misattribution and integration of alien detritus, as well as the inscription of myth upon the discarded; *Stalker* constructs the enigmatic Zone in an attempt to escape the ennui of an otherwise empty, cyclical life; and *Annihilation* foregrounds how observational data can sublimate engaging with the studied phenomenon. This identification can be pushed even further to consider an archaeology principally orientated around a non-human foundation, rather than the human through non-human. Such a prospect lies in alien excavation, otherwise known as xenoarchaeology. For it is within this mediation of alternate ontologies and their interaction with materiality that a reflection upon humanity’s processes can be achieved and the contemporary urgency of such a realisation underscored.

Chapter Four

Xenoarchaeology – Anomalous Materiality, Salvage Fiction and Taxonomical Transpositions

The prospect of xenoarchaeology – the excavation of alien cultures or objects – may seem fantastical by its definition, yet this is a crucial topic that can reflect upon the engagement between human and non-human. Whether this is materiality and taxonomy, ruins or zones, artefacts have thus far provided a vital interrogation of the *processes* involved within such meetings, rather than necessarily foregrounding the pedestalled ‘thing’ itself. As Chapter Three outlined, the prospect of doppelgänger entities or zones communicating through imitation acts as a form of ontological terror that threatens to deconstruct the fabricated human taxonomical network – a structure that seeks to understand the world simultaneously through difference and similarity rather than replication. Xenoarchaeology therefore not only reflects upon prospective, future encounters but elucidates the paradigms at play within non-human contact by operating at a level of ontological alienation. This chapter will question how humans may differentiate between aliens and the non-human; indeed, whether there is an integral delineation between ourselves and perceived external entities. Xenoarchaeology represents not only a reflection upon human practice but also a hypothetical visualization of the encounter with alien cultures, one which not only affects prospective excavational developments but has the potential to influence contemporary archaeological processes.

The identity of the artefact has been a principal topic throughout this research, one which is interrogated further through xenoarchaeology’s confrontation with ‘alien’ objects, or those which are particularly external to human material comprehension. Although stereotypically associated with an extra-terrestrial threat, these items provide

a meeting point with the non-human. While encounters between alien and human are often envisaged as producing conflict, the inter-meshing of object components – such as *Roadside Picnic*'s re-fashioned detritus – provide contact zones through which to theoretically challenge differentiating ideologies or identities. Extrapolated to the incorporation of ancient alien technology into human systems, this process is emblematic of an encounter that can only occur at the physical level. Even the re-discovery and integration of lost human technology represents a certain unknowability about the past, a materiality beyond contemporary understanding that will feature prominently in the salvage narrative of *Children of Time* (2015). Vitally, this paradigm is viewed through two levels of ontological abstraction: these artefacts are non-quotidian by being both 'object' *and* alien, two forms of the non-human. Recognising this distinction extends a more nuanced understanding of how humans encounter the world beyond themselves and is central to 'astro-anxieties', where cosmic junk, interstellar waste and terraforming build upon the archaeology of garbage – or 'garbology'.

The excavation of alien civilisations will be a key focal point within this chapter, not only on extra-terrestrial worlds but equally the uncovering of anomalous material on Earth itself. The re-appraisal of human history invariably touches upon such contentious theories as Erich von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968) which argues for a comprehensive review of archaeological fact to analyse the possibility of ancient alien astronauts visiting Earth and influencing evolutionary development. Von Daniken's suggestion that empirical thought is too entrenched in its current perspective – in which any anomalous material must fit into the tapestry rather than challenge it – resonates with Object-Oriented Ontology's desire to escape from the domination of anthropocentric thought. For if alien materiality adheres to alternate organisational

structures, any taxonomical approach must first step outside the entrapment of human perspective. Although very different in application, Von Daniken's call for an alternate paradigm of encounter draws upon an inability to verify historical veracity, where "There is something inconsistent about our past, that past which lies thousands and millions of years behind us" (9). Von Daniken's theories may largely be devoid of empirical evidence, but such an approach does gesture towards the immutability of the past – indeed, that material engagement can offer inferences about history but cannot *narrate* such experiences. *Chariots of the Gods?* embodies a willingness, or even a desire, to think beyond traditional human structures, while equally implying that there are historical mysteries for humanity to 'solve'. The persistent terminology of 'deeper' secrets recalls the chthonic emergences from Chapter Two, essentially that topographical strata will 'unlock' to reveal an explanation that verifies – or indeed destabilises – humanity's perceived ontological superiority. Xenoarchaeological narratives chart the transposition of such existential quests from terrestrial peripheries to interstellar frontiers.

The transition between these two spheres emerges from 'borderland' fictions, liminal zones that permit the micro explorer to step into the macro, cosmic universe. William Hope Hodgson is undoubtedly a prime writer of this fiction within the *fin-de-siècle* period, in which growing Western eco-anxieties and scientific curiosity are amplified by multiple inferences of boundary infringement – whether post-colonial, empirical or ideological. Such taxonomical breaches recall the border crossing of *The City & the City* as well as "The Willows", yet borderlands offer an alluring exteriority, as Emily Alder argues: "Like spiritualism and psychic phenomena, the occult was positioned on the borderland between known and unknown, answering a need for deeper mysteries in the world in a context not (yet) undermined by science" (*William*

Hope Hodgson's Borderlands: Monstrosity, other Worlds, and the Future at the Fin de Siècle, 93). The recursion to “deeper mysteries in the world” is recurrent throughout archaeological texts and amplified within the alien artefacts to be explored in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) and *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967), which act as imaginative portals to consider the secrets of – to quote the classic *Star Trek* catchphrase – “space, the final frontier”. These borderlands demonstrate the applicability of archaeological framings beyond traditional material unearthings, indeed, as von Daniken suggests, “in the future archaeology can no longer be simply a matter of excavation” (28). Although refuted for his lack of textual or material evidence, von Daniken’s argument that future archaeology needs to be more than just physical excavation resonates with the salience of navigation as encounter, while also highlighting the potential of xenoarchaeology to challenge processes of non-human engagement.

Hodgson’s *The House on the Borderland* (1908) is a key borderland example, in which a ‘found manuscript’ narrative tells of a chthonic presence that subsumes both the narrator and the titular house. The encounter causes the narrator to step outside traditional notions of physical reality, in which they witness phantasmal visions of a jade imitation of the house surrounded by monstrous interpretations of mythological deities, such as Kali. He questions: “Was there then, after all, something in the old heathen worship, something more than the mere deifying of men, animals and elements? The thought gripped me – was there?” (34). Resonating with the implication of ‘deeper’ secrets behind the encounter, such a proposition seeks to invert the ‘known’ in a comparable manner to von Daniken and will be explored further in the return of alien civilisations in *Stargate* (1994) and *Prometheus* (2012). Archaeological iconography also appears in Hodgson’s *The Night Land* (1912) in which the remnants

of humanity seek sanctuary in a “great Pyramid of grey metal which held the last millions of this world from the Powers of the Slayers”, following the death of the Solar System’s sun (18). While there is no further narrative relevance to this symbol – indeed humanity seems to be unwittingly entombing themselves – its placement evokes archaeological signifiers as a material conduit to confront an increasingly immaterial world. *House on the Borderland*, meanwhile, concludes with the narrator being freed from their physical embodiment, so that they may witness the entropy of planetary decay and journey through the universe. These borderland ontologies question the limits of materialist framings to represent immaterial experiences and whether such meetings must necessarily approach conceptualisations of the ‘divine’.

A xenoarchaeological perspective reflects not only upon alien culture but simultaneously upon humanity itself. M. John Harrison’s *Kefahuchi Tract* trilogy, for example, engages with the incommensurability of uncountable past civilisations that are drawn to its central cosmological mystery: the Kefahuchi Tract. Defined as a black hole with no event horizon, this conceptualisation erases any border or constraining boundary to such a phenomenon. Throughout *Light* (2002), *Nova Swing* (2006) and *Empty Space* (2012), Harrison’s juxtaposition of dense technological futurism and spectral hauntings evokes a confluence of the Gothic and Science Fiction, in a similar manner to Hodgson, in which the apparent immutability of quantum mechanics touches upon an immaterial exteriority that eludes explanation. *Light*, for example, identifies that humanity needed only to propel themselves into the depths of interstellar space and that the mechanics to do this were merely a stepping stone as “[y]ou could travel between the stars, it began to seem, by assuming anything” (139-140). Harrison’s trilogy proposes a cosmos in which unknowability seems to be the only constant. Consequently, archaeology becomes a complicated process as the universe is littered

with the remnants of civilisations that failed to understand the secrets of the Tract – if such answers even exist. The excavation of artefacts becomes the mediation of junk and material salvage, haunted by cataclysmic anxieties: “Someone had found something among all that alien junk which would turn physics, or cosmology, or the universe itself, on its head” (29). The transposition of this upheaval to a non-human entity, such as a relic, suggests a redundancy to the human itself – emphatically that any radical change will be the product of accidental excavation rather than intentional implementation. This relationship is compounded by the commodification of archaeological objects in Harrison’s trilogy as characters refer to “This old stuff [...] it’s all we have. It’s our only resource!” and “We don’t have a technology here. We have alien artefacts: a resource mined until it ran out” (159, 198). The exploitative dependence upon alien technology that can be suffused and cannibalised into human systems, however, depends upon a tacit comprehension of materialist processes. Indeed, the belief in technology functioning without any understanding of internal methods leads to a process of what I term ‘divine materialism’, where user abstraction leads to a curated ‘faith’ in such tools innately working.

Harrison’s *Nova Swing* is particularly worthy of a momentary aside due to its explicit engagement with artefact ontology. The expansion of the Kefahuchi Tract at the end of *Light* causes a segment of the black hole to fall planet-side – termed as “the Event” – which creates “assembly-yards of the abnormal – zones where physics seemed to have forgotten its own rules” (*Empty Space*, 155). Evoking the zone narratives of Chapter Three, *Nova Swing*’s topographies invest an agency within the material, producing animate artefacts that recalls the elision of subject/object divisions, as they “sought a foothold on our side of things. Some of them were conscious and looked human. They wandered out into the cities and tried to become part of life” (*Empty*

Space, 155). Here the non-human – in a colonial or ontological inversion – rather projects and inscribes itself upon a human frame. Yet, is this merely the re-treading of anthropocentrism, where the binary is reversed rather than confronted? For the glitch doppelgänger rather incites terror through the realisation that the human condition is inherently replicable, indeed that – just like the distinction between ‘fake’ and ‘real’ artefacts – differentiated labelling is produced through encounter. Such notions will be central to the discussion of ‘space salvage’, in which xeno-materials are integrated within human systems, a process that implies a material transferability that elides any notion of individualised identity.

The differentiation between human, non-human and alien is a question that will run throughout this chapter. Recalling the overlap in nomenclature with digital technology, objects produced unintentionally from rendering processes are considered to be ‘artefacts’ – a consequence of procedure rather than intention. The unity between glitch and ruin aesthetics cannot be overlooked, particularly as both embody the wilful and implicit instantiation of breakdown to access the heart of the non-human. Framed through digital technology, the artefact becomes something which is no longer purely a materialist fabrication, indeed it is one far more orientated around process than result. Harrison’s narrative foregrounds the challenge of defining this alternate form of encounter: “Are they artefacts? [...] or people? Maybe you can help, Vic, our equipment can’t make the distinction. Whatever they are, they don’t have any practice at life, literally, they’re without praxis” (*Nova Swing*, 130). Lacking any formation of technicity, these entities are merely process without consciousness: a form of zonal glitch, a by-product of its engagement with the world beyond itself. The lack of praxis suggests they are devoid of existential drive, yet the emerging horror is that this is a reflection of the human; the doppelgänger is merely replicating the ontological void

that fuels the ennui previously identified within *Stalker* and inspires the incessant desire for ‘deeper mysteries’ to unearth.

The horror of the doppelgänger manifests as an uncanny doubling that elides personal agency; akin to *Annihilation*, imitation holds the danger of being a reflection which confirms the true cosmic horror of ontological insignificance. The replication of the human body and its action suggests equally that the ‘original’ is no longer unique, that it is merely an object which can be fabricated and produced. Such a proposition erodes the artificial separation of subject and object; within a taxonomical network the human is no longer the prime actant but arguably part of the network. The trepidation surrounding the doppelgänger returns to the significance of artefactual origins: that elevating certain objects to a pedestal, due to their ‘status’, is an extension of the myth perpetually upheld by humans that such differentiation is inherent throughout the universe. Through such a process the human subject finds comfort in the preservation of their own individuality, separated from the collective. Harrison proposes “what if we’re all code?”, a fabricated micro component in a wider macro system (217). The repeated evoking of digital technology to frame such statements invariably draws on the human attraction to ruin aesthetics, the complicit engagement with crumbling tombs, ruined architecture and further systematic destabilisations. Such a meeting represents the implementation of a breakdown that simultaneously re-affirms and challenges categorical demarcations, one articulated through the Weird to confront the foundations of material comprehension itself.

This chapter will, therefore, examine three primary areas of xenoarchaeology: alien artefacts, salvage narratives and taxonomic transferability. Each represents a unique contact point to challenge how an excavational process would be applied to unearth alien culture. Frequent attention is drawn to acts of communication, to the

language utilised in meeting, whether this is the temporal syntax in *Arrival* (2016) or deciphering Martian script through the periodic table in “Omnilingual” (1957). While invariably a conceptual projection, such translations look towards a material ‘Rosetta Stone’ to help decode immaterial systems. Xenoarchaeology is thus a crucial prospect to imagine and prepare not only for such scenarios, but one which can consider how an engagement with alien taxonomies may reflect upon humanity’s own materialist bias.

Alien Artefacts: Xeno-excavations and Revisionary History

Xeno-artefacts offer the two-fold encounter with the non-human – the alien and the object. This meeting however risks a conflation between the two, that conceptualisations of ‘xeno’ – defined as being ‘foreign’ or ‘other’ in origin – may consequently form a homogenised category rather than pointing towards distinctive, individualised ontologies. Certainly, such an anxiety is reflected within the Ancient Astronaut theories which embody the assumption that there is a more complex and ‘deeper’ history to uncover. Routinely these narratives seek a homogenisation of human history: the reduction to a single origin point or ‘human zero’ from which the whole race descends, rather than the celebration of heterogeneous cultural and social experiences. As such, while often positioned as the encounter with spectral alien forbears, these narratives become emblematic of archetypal imperialist discourses re-cast into neo-colonial narratives of cultural erasure and appropriation. Frequently these representations position the xeno-artefact within a human taxonomical frame; indeed, the failure to engage with, or appreciate, such a fundamental difference is precisely because their apparent *aberrant* materiality is so opaque that the ‘standard’ itself is brought under scrutiny. Xenoarchaeology offers the potential to confront our own processes of material structuring, but more compellingly these hypothetical scenarios

reflect upon the dangers of re-invoking colonial paradigms of encounter, and instead rather seek to conceive ethical and sensitive modes of contact.

The conflation of alien with the non-human itself is an extension of artefact ontology where materiality is co-opted to corroborate geological or political narratives. In *Excavating the Future* (2018), Shawn Malley outlines how contemporary Science Fiction television and film repeatedly conceptualise a form of “military archaeology”, in which Western forces are seen to be the liberators of an oppressed Middle Eastern society through the uncovering of the false deification of their mythological gods. The burning of Baghdad’s National Library, following wide-spread looting during the Iraq War in 2003, is a poignant example of the West’s complicity within the destruction of the culture it presumes to be protecting, alongside the vilification of a society looting its own historical artefacts as a means of survival. For Malley, such geopolitical crises often become an echo of colonial discourse where: “Through the SF thematics of invasion and apocalypse, control of archaeological knowledge remains immured in a remarkably imperialist worldview governed by strategic fictions of security and insecurity” (110). The signification of archaeology as materialised ‘past’ is also present within ISIS’s recent destruction of excavational sites due to the threat they perceive from the associated iconographic narratives. Malley summarises that: “The outrage of Western civilization at artefact destruction is a version of the outrage expressed by fundamentalist revolutionaries who understand their value as symbolic capital” (193). This equivalence is formed around a tacit perspective of artefact ontology, a mutual and transferrable engagement with the texts, values and signification projected upon such objects. Malley’s parallel requires further scrutiny however; for presenting the destruction itself as complicit with the Western gaze not only utilises materiality as *performance* but fails to dwell on the cultural specificity that modulates both responses.

The elevation and destruction equally depend upon an acceptance of the wider cognitive associations with such artefacts; both are thus entrenched in an anthropocentric view and fail to engage with the wider traces that will remain.

Both fiction and reality, then, are complicit in the formation of the narratives produced about the non-human, and indeed how these structures shape our awareness and processing of ontological crisis. While the xeno-artefact may re-cast some of these neo-colonial narratives, equally it provides a platform through which to understand the discourses produced while navigating materiality, akin to the zones of Chapter Three. Reza Negarestani in his creative-critical text *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008) encapsulates the potential of conceptualising such ‘anomalous’ physicality through the identification of “xenolithic artefacts”:

Pulp-horror, archaic science fiction and the darker aspects of folklore share a preoccupation with exhumation of or confrontation with ancient super-weapons categorized as Inorganic Demons or xenolithic artifacts. These relics or artifacts are generally depicted in the shape of objects made of inorganic materials (stone, metal, bones, souls, ashes, etc.). Autonomous, sentient and independent of human will, their existence is characterized by their forsaken status, their immemorial slumber and their provocatively exquisite forms. (223)

Composited from ‘xeno’ – denoting foreign or ‘other’ – and ‘lithic’ – referring to its stone material composition – Negarestani’s definition encapsulates the centrality of anomalous objects to a range of archaeological or folkloric narratives that emphasises the autonomy of inorganic matter beyond human intervention. While such vibrancy resonates with New Materialist thought, for example Jane Bennett’s ‘vital materialism’, the very designation of ‘anomaly’ requires a ‘norm’ to be conceptualised against; thus, such notions are still enmeshed within the taxonomical system as even the designation

of being ‘outside’ is invariably a situational category. Mark Fisher in *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) identifies xenolithic artefacts as a core tenet in Folk Horror texts where an inexplicable artefact exhibits control over its human subjects in a manner of reverse-materialist dominance. Fisher notes that this is particularly central in the work of both Nigel Kneale and Alan Garner where “the material world in which we live is more profoundly alien and strange than we had previously imagined” (83). It is precisely in this vein that the *Weird* introduces xeno-artefacts as a destabilisation of materialist discourses, where the non-human becomes a mutable and shifting ontology that instigates a form of contact alienation. Yet, while texts such as Garner’s *The Owl Service* (1967) may feature an inexplicable artefact (the dinner service) which is suggestive of a non-human immensurability, invariably these are still objects of markedly anthropocentric construction – their function, purpose or provenance is unknown but they still remain within conventional materialist understanding. The film adaptation of *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967), however, is a perfect example of anthropocentric anxieties being mapped onto the depths of interstellar space, which simultaneously transposes Folk Horror motifs to the urban centre.

The film opens with the expansion of the London underground tube network which unearths paleontological remains – engaging with the curiosity towards ontological secrets that emerge from the chthonic depths. The return of a subterranean past incorporates theological and folkloric motifs to signify a sublimation of modernity, in which urban ‘progress’ is unseated by an alienated and now unfamiliar topographical foundation. The excavation uncovers an unknown object which is first mistaken as a water drainage pipe and is later suggested to be an unexploded bomb, echoing World War Two anxieties. At this juncture the tale adopts a “military archaeology” perspective in which scientific inquisition is aligned with martial control. Accompanying the bomb

disposal team led by Colonel Breen (Julian Glover), Professor Bernard Quatermass (Andrew Keir) spearheads the empirical inquisition into the strange materiality of the object. Encapsulated within the film are a breadth of post-World War Two and Cold War anxieties towards the ‘xeno’ configured through that which is deemed ‘not to belong’. Unsurprisingly, the emphasis placed on evolutionary discourse, whether the early suggestion of discovering Ape-men ancestors or Martian control of human development, recalls the aforementioned contentious outlook of Ancient Astronaut theories that seek a singular origin point for the species. Within this narrative estrangement, however, lies the xeno-artefact of the ship, an object which is alienated even from the film itself.

As the materiality of the ship becomes increasingly outside of human understanding, its alien origin is revealed. The object progresses through a number of projected ontological definitions – unexploded bomb, cargo container, alien husk and finally extra-terrestrial ship. Although the human-derived label may shift, there is never any firm confirmation of its identity. Fisher contends that this immutability is replicated by the aliens themselves: “The purposes of the aliens in *Quatermass* remain unfathomably opaque, like their physical forms. Anything we ‘learn’ about them is conjecture, inference, speculation. They are, in every sense, lightyears away from us” (89). While undeniably there is a certain unknowability to the aliens, they are clearly representative of xenophobic anxieties of unseen threats and ontological estrangement; yet the true ‘opaqueness’, I argue, lies more with the non-human. One of the prime identifiers for the xeno-artefact is its exhibition of anomalous behaviour, that it does not act within conventional human understanding of materiality. Its status is thus similar to the traditional archaeological artefact which is situated both within and outside a taxonomical network, but is rather bestowed with veneration due to its divergent status.

For example, while the army try a number of tactics to enter the alien ship, at no point can they even leave a mark upon its surface – indeed, one soldier exclaims that the metal is so cold to the touch it actually causes frost burn. As neither the expedition nor audience even truly see in to the interior, the ship seemingly imitates the reserve of Object-Oriented Ontology, which continually retreats from any anthropocentric definition.

The xeno-artefact resonates with the Weird relics of Chapter One, in which this very anomaly only further compounds its perceived elevation. Indeed, *Quatermass and the Pit* presents the object as *revealing* revisionist history; its presence within multiple cultural mythologies highlights how the excavation becomes less interested in anomalous materiality in favour of its potential to elucidate larger ontological narratives. Akin to Ancient Astronaut theories, the identification of the Martians within multiple folkloric fragments collapses cultural diversity in favour of a singular origin point – the suggestion that there is a ‘master’ tale to uncover. There is no affirmation to these theories, however, as they are rather the product of psycho-technological seances with the object – a form of encounter – that returns such narratives to an anthropocentric foundation. The exclamation that “we are the Martians now”, then, reflects not only post-War anxieties, but also conceives of humanity as being alienated from any tacit ontological understanding of itself (01:03:30). Faced with the redundancy of empirical methodologies to engage with this (im)materiality, the expedition turns to a form of psychosomatic contact. Despite its deployment as narrative translation, the confluence of technology and belief looks ahead to the divine materialism of salvage narratives, the elevation of innovative *processes* to engage immutable physicality. Beyond this alienation, however, lies the ontological horror that humans themselves could be

ignorant of their own manufactured origin, a return to the doppelgänger's elision of individuality.

Certainly, these concerns are mediated by the climax of the film where the disturbance of the xeno-artefact re-kindles a Martian consciousness that exerts mental control over pliable human minds, inciting them to riot and ultimately destroy that which is 'different'. Echoing Communist and Fascist anxieties, the rampant destructive actions of this Martian invader are deeply ingrained into far more political and conservative reactions to 'xeno' qualities. The film's denouement engages with the banishment of this alien force – by discharging its electro-spectral presence through contact with a material object and thus 'earthing' it – rather than the xeno-artefact itself. The ending of *Quatermass and the Pit* thus engages not with the destructive capabilities of the object but rather what it metaphorically represents. The narrative is far more invested in the banishment of this ideology rather than engaging the non-human remnant that seemingly still lies beneath London – as there is no confirmation of the ship's fate. *Quatermass and the Pit* hesitates at the precipice of engaging with the true non-human, its reticence to separate conceptualisations of the alien from object ontology endangers their conflation even while evoking its anomalous behaviour.

A closer inspection of xeno-artefacts can be identified in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008). Although largely following the series format of colonial adventure narrative, the central artefact is progressively suspected to be alien in origin. The film opens with Indy (Harrison Ford) being abducted and forced by the Soviet KGB to locate a specific artefact within Area 51 – where even from the outset the xeno-object perpetuates a secondary process of elevation and is 'activated' by human contact. Although the principal antagonist Irina Spalko (Cate Blanchett) describes herself as a person who "knows things", evidently she requires Indy's specific

knowledge to locate the object from the collective (00:06:15). Akin to *Quatermass and the Pit*, the alien artefact will potentially offer a paradigm shift where the non-human once again stands in for ‘gaps’ in human history. That the film opens with the explosion of an atom bomb – which has become its own form of cultural artefact – is certainly no accident and evokes the same apocalyptic and destructive concerns as *Quatermass and the Pit* and *Stargate*. The archaeological reward itself is more in the vein of secret histories and von Daniken’s Ancient Astronaut theory however – this is an Indy for the twenty-first century after all, one who is more interested in questioning human ontology by excavating our ‘collective’ origins than raiding a colonial past. Predominantly the narrative is rather the quest to put the artefact *back* where it ‘belongs’, haunted perhaps by the anxieties of a long-standing legacy of cultural appropriation. Yet such directives cannot escape the inscription of object ontology, for how can the human ever truly know where an item does indeed belong?

For the remainder of the film, Indy is joined by his (later revealed) son Mutt (Shia LaBeouf), previous partner Marion (Karen Allen) and archaeological colleague Oxley (John Hurt), in a race against the Soviets to locate Akator – which is narratively conflated with El Dorado. On the surface the film follows the format that the previous three entries have profited from. However, the subversion of the xeno-artefact lies in its overt parallels and challenge to the imperialist gaze. Led to the gravesite of Spanish Conquistadors, Indy and Mutt locate a secret compartment that holds the sought-after treasure. Yet, the otherwise wondrous artefacts pale in comparison to the crystal skull itself.

Figure 4.1: Indy stares in wonder at the crystal skull – *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008)

Unlike the golden skull at the beginning of *Raiders*, the camera purposefully frames Indy's reaction of wonder in proximity to the artefact, as there is no framed division between subject and object. Its 'xeno' qualities are derived from its aberrant materiality, as other artefacts within the room are – in quite a striking visual metaphor – 'magnetically' drawn to the skull itself. Even objects which are not conventionally magnetic – such as gold – cannot resist this pull, reinforcing the xeno-artefact as a Weird object which re-writes notional laws of materiality. Although invariably representative of an anthropocentric projection of a non-human hierarchy, *Crystal Skull* evokes a new frontier of xenoarchaeology that promises the wonder of alien materiality. Indy asks Mutt "what is this thing?"; both are left with no conclusive response as the archaeologist (for once) has no point of reference, no culture to situate this entity within (00:52:15). Even its designation as a *crystal* skull falls back on recognisable human products, despite its quite overt inexplicable composition. Indy's focus on the lack of tool-marks emphasises that this is seemingly not a conventionally *manufactured* artefact but something completely different.

For Spalko, however, the crystal skull is representative of the Ancient Astronaut evolutionary discourse, to both understand the species' origins alongside the promise of fabricating a system of mental control. The skull's effect is suggested to stimulate an underdeveloped part of the human brain, although one which fractures Oxley's psyche after too much exposure – a cautionary tale for the archaeological gaze. Parallel to the influence of the Martian ship in *Quatermass and the Pit*, Malley is correct to identify that Spalko "transforms the heretofore colonial artefact into an SF icon of the Cold War

cinema, an object of burgeoning American global hegemony mirrored in fears of Soviet mind control” (107). This sublimation of individualism returns to the doppelgänger’s potential elision of uniqueness, as ironically Spalko’s desire would unwittingly unseat the taxonomical hierarchy that elevates anthropocentrism. Crucially, however, the skull is once again the product of imperialist discourse re-framed by a Western gaze and inscribed with updated political concerns. Despite being transposed to ‘xeno’ origins, evidently the format acts as an alibi to convey what is ostensibly a neo-colonial narrative. Malley’s assessment again fails to cover the materiality of the artefact, indeed its potential as an interface with non-human ontology. This stark contrast is visualised when the skull transitions from an object of wonder to horror, emphasised by Indy’s enforced gaze. No longer fuelled by archaeological curiosity, the non-human becomes a vehicle of terror.

Figure 4.2: Subversion of the archaeological gaze – *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008)

Interestingly, the positioning of the crystal skull now imitates the original arrangement within *Raiders* – elevated, individualised and centre of the shot. Indy’s position is characterised by a lack of agency, as he cannot look away from the non-human and the wider political concerns it represents. Such a conceptualisation also questions how the non-human gaze configures the human subject. For there is a partial failure here to think of the xeno-artefact outside of its application to human ancestry or history. Just like *Quatermass and the Pit*’s ship, the crystal skull is configured as something to complete the human, to forever visualise the non-human as tools to augment our existence. Both films chiefly fail in their inability to engage with anomalous materiality, re-tooling each

artefact as a reflection of contemporaneous political ideologies rather than extensions to material inquisition. Within the depths of *Crystal Skull*, therefore, lies the potential of xenoarchaeology as a paradigm to re-appraise the encounter with a non-human extraneity whose denouement is not the fulfilment of the human condition.

This prospect is even pushed to the conclusion of the film, which follows the group's attempts to return the skull to the ruined city of Akator and its *original* alien body. The meeting is forced to the final moments precisely because this visualisation strains the potential to imagine such an encounter. Recalling Chapter Two, the ruins here are utilised as a process to navigate xeno-materiality but rather come to represent a narrative of cultural alibi, as Indy realises that the aliens were also colonisers. When the group descends into Akator, they pass through a room littered with artefacts from different civilisations. Indy's comment that the aliens must be "archaeologists" of human history rationalises colonial adventure as a logical fulfilment of materialist processes already instantiated through extra-terrestrial origins (01:37:30). Beyond this, however, the collection inverts the conventional paradigm of the exhibitionary gaze, re-positioning the human atop the pedestal. No reverence is paid by the group to this assemblage, for indeed this is a collation of individualised artefacts until its incommensurability cascades into a multitude of objects, ironically their very uniqueness becoming a point of comparability. Once the skull is returned to its 'rightful' resting place, the resulting centripetal motion of alien bodies mirrors Spalko's desire for the technologies of indoctrination as the merging collapses individualism in favour of the collective. While her deepest desire is granted – fulfilling the insatiable drive to "know things" – this information is too overwhelming and immolates the human mind: the non-human is the fundamentally unknowable after all. For Indy this is encapsulated through the final moment of awe.

Figure 4.3: Indy stares in inarticulate wonder at the xeno-artefact spaceship –
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull (2008)

Witnessing the destruction of the archaeological ruin, the film positions both Indy and audience in a moment of inarticulateness as the ship traverses into another plane of existence. Its motion matches that of the alien bodies and the larger centripetal drive of the museum's appropriation, training the onlooker's gaze to a singular point. The spaceship becomes a xeno-artefact through its inherent anomaly, its subversion of material convention and prospective immutability – for indeed there is no language to appropriately configure such an encounter outside of anthropocentric framing. Importantly, no further explanation of the aliens' impact, background or culture is presented – their influence is not explored beyond being 'our progenitors'. The concluding restoration of the nuclear family – Indy and Marion get married, Mutt regains his father, Indy's tenure is reinstated – is thus a rather banal ending following the wondrous moment of xeno-artefactual awe. Although positioned as a narrative to put the artefact back where it 'belongs', there is a failure here to change or adapt materialist perspectives following such an encounter, where the skull is rather positioned as a conduit of domestic restoration. Both films subsume the xeno-artefact to function as another non-human canvas to project anthropocentric and textual narratives upon, with little attention to how such items may bring materialist tendencies into question.

Material Culture and the Gateway to Garbology

Archaeology is intrinsically linked to material culture where the shaping of physical matter into fabricated objects reflects upon the perspective of its shaper. Such a process is invariably tied to its less-acknowledged twin: the generation of waste. Whether this is discarded, broken, or forgotten items, archaeology and material culture become the mediation and engagement with the garbage that has been left behind. Certainly, the term ‘waste’ itself is not above critique and is emblematic of value-inscribed judgements of the material world, one which is often considered to be ‘dead’ or dormant. Garbage archaeology has the potential, however, of offering an insight into human behaviour, not only into practices of manufacturing but also behaviour, ethics, and personal attitudes – whether a person recycles, where they buy their food from, what brands they are loyal to. While media portrayals of artefacts generally look to the performative and arranged space of temples, tombs and ruins, archaeologists are drawn to trash and spoil heaps as representing an unadulterated representation of a culture – an alternate ordering that rises from disorder. Prospectively various forms of materiality emerge, separating the abject from the preserved; yet excavational practice can equally be applied to cultural relics and discarded rubbish. Arguably even the archaeology of ancient cultures is a navigation of waste, the encounter with that which *remains*; thus, it becomes pertinent to consider how excavational methodologies focus not only upon the past but can mediate upon the future. Indeed, such inferences challenge whether we can become archaeologists of our own past and at which point does waste become an artefact?

Material culture itself is integral to modern formations of human ontology, it is the cornerstone to how our history is encountered. Ancient Astronaut theories, however, transpose this fundamental trait to an external origin to construct a form of ontological

alienation, where the human itself is a fabricated tool – a notion explored in the opening of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Written in parallel with Arthur C. Clarke’s novelisation, *2001* opens with a precarious group of hominids who are driven away from their regular watering hole by their rivals. Teetering perpetually on the precipice of annihilation, this group becomes a candidate for the intervention of alien agency, a black monolith that psychosomatically influences their evolution, echoing *Quatermass and the Pit*. The monolith itself subscribes to the archetypal presentation of artefact ontology, visibly distinct from its surroundings and exuding an evanescent aura for the hominids. Overtly, it is a fabricated object, but one which adheres to the Golden Ratio of 1:4:9 – its very materiality becoming transcendental. For while this entity may quickly pass from the hominid’s attention, its subconscious probing influences the birth of material culture.

**Figure 4.4: Monolith as artefact which propagates the birth of material culture –
2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)**

Shaped and moulded, *2001*’s opening suggests that even the foundation of materialist practice is alien. For Moon-Watcher, the prime hominid that the novelisation follows, this encounter however is a transformative experience through which surrounding objects *become* materials – something to utilise, to change, to litter. Crucially it is from the bones of a dead animal – the ‘waste’ of the body – that Moon-Watcher fashions their first tool, a transformative experience that transitions this ‘dead’ object into an ‘alive’ appendage. Their subsequent rampage fuels an ecstatic euphoria in which Moon-Watcher throws the bone emphatically into the air.

Figure 4.5: The ‘dead’ object becomes the central artefact – *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)

Framed as an artefact, the bone transitions from inertia to vibrancy for the hominid through utilisation. As Moon-Watcher revels in the *jouissance* of discarding rubbish, the bone returns to its original status – having transitioned between bodily component, waste, tool, artefact and back to rubbish. This process of encounter signifies that – for humanity – the bone becomes *more* than an object, a cognitive shift that instigates a sense of reverence. The disregard for the thrown object underscores its pending return to ‘waste’ materiality – either when it is discarded or broken.²⁰ Archaeology thus reflects human engagement with the non-human, the metamorphosis that the object experiences within the human perspective. As the bone highlighted by Figure 4.5 cuts to an orbiting missile platform, this juxtaposition underscores the continuity of a weaponised tool-being and the lasting impact of such a union. The *jouissance* that Moon-Watcher experiences, however, returns to the engagement with that which is left behind – a realisation with poignant urgency given contemporary concerns towards astro-waste.

The engagement with material culture is rekindled when humanity re-encounters the monolith on the Moon – although they are unaware of the previous meeting. The excavation embodies the first step on a xenoarchaeological journey, as

²⁰ William Rathje and Cullen Murphy fittingly highlight that the birth of material culture is the foundation for archaeological practice as: “An appreciation of the accomplishments of the first hominids became possible only after they began making stone tools, the debris from the production of which, along with the discarded tools themselves, are now probed for their secrets with electron microscopes and displayed in museums not as garbage but as ‘artifacts’” (*Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*, 11).

alien culture becomes a site of encounter. Although the monolith does not display any traces of tool marks, similar to the crystal skull, it is overtly a *fabricated* object and one that transmits this contact to the entities ‘behind’ its manufacture. This projected function defines alien ontology through tool utilisation to afford a comparable basis for contact. Clarke, in the novelisation of *2001*, underscores the physicality of the artefact: “[i]t was impossible to tell whether it was made of stone, or metal, or plastic – or some material altogether unknown to man” (69). Fundamentally beyond human comprehension, the substance of the monolith is transposed to that of the divine. The realisation that a deeper understanding of such materiality should exist thus looks to the transcendental as a means to represent object ontology. This divide is strikingly visualised within Kubrick’s *2001* as conscious humanity echoes the hominids when reaching out to engage with the monolith.

Figure 4.6: Human contact with divine materialism – *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)

Although positioned as akin to the divine, the monolith offers a poignant mediation on its apparent abandonment – why is it here, why was it left, and could this be considered waste? The meeting (Figure 4.6) is a prominent signifier for the immutable reserve of the monolith – the dark void representing the unknowable object ontology of which humanity can only touch the surface. The human estrangement from the monolith is encoded through its anomalous materiality, its unknown composition, which distances it from anthropocentric comprehension. This opposition is simultaneously predicated on humanity’s tool utilisation being transparent, that a user implicitly understands the mechanics and the fundamentals of the objects they encounter and attempt to use – one

which salvage narratives interrogate to query how accessible our technology really is to external comprehension.

The archaeology of garbage, or ‘garbology’, offers a unique insight into the underlying motions of a civilisation’s production and abandonment. It is through this process that fundamental and objective truths, as opposed to biased narratives, can be synthesised alongside a more interrogating study of material utilisation. The Garbage Project, pioneered by William Rathje, offers an archaeological and sociological perspective of waste. Indeed, Rathje and Cullen Murphy in *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (1992) argue “if we can come to understand our discards, Garbage Project archaeologists argue, then we will better understand the world in which we live” (4). Garbology offers the vibrant potential to reflect upon contemporary cultural habits, a process to reflect upon the current temporal or ecological moment which Joshua Reno in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World* (2013) argues provides “unique contributions to a future-orientated archaeology as well as opportunities to reflect on the role of archaeological practice in shaping and living in that world” (“Waste”, 271). Recent excavational practices have begun to challenge how ancient a culture must be before it can be excavated, or how to unearth ‘recent’ history. For example, Andrew Reinhard in *Archaeogaming: The Archaeology in and of Games* (2018) details the excavation of the ‘Atari Burial Ground’, in which urban myth contended that the video game company Atari trashed and hid multitudes of *E. T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) cartridges in the Alamogordo city landfill after its reception as ‘the worst game ever made’. Garbology thus offers a certain veracity to these claims, as Reinhard argues, “[t]o dig is to discover, both to confirm and deny, creating data from the very destruction of the source” (25). The performativity of the Atari Dig transposes such excavations as the staged opening of Tutankhamun’s tomb to the

twenty-first century, offering a very material sense to chthonic emergence. While both may unearth an array of artefacts, this modern excavation is equally a critical commentary on the management of waste, the excess of consumerist culture, and the prospective ‘death’ of the object.

Garbology proposes a negotiation of contemporary archaeology through a sociological lens, in which urban myth can be verified while macro attitudes to material identity are interrogated – for indeed, while Atari may have believed these cartridges to be ‘dead’, they have arguably now been brought back to ‘life’. While this terming ingrains a dichotomic and anthropocentric material vitalism, garbology offers a process to engage with mediations of futuristic waste. I suggest that these narratives epitomise ‘Salvage Fiction’, in which ancient (human or otherwise) materials are re-cast from waste to components that may be assimilated with other technological systems. The recovery of *Discovery* in the sequel *2010* (1982) – abandoned after David Bowman’s disappearance – is fundamentally an excavation of a ‘lost’ past. During the exhumation, the astronauts suggest that “they would bring *Discovery* back to life; and, perhaps, back to Earth”, encapsulating the attribution of ‘death’ and ‘life’ to material status (115). Such an anthropocentric framing, in which rubbish is only ‘alive’ when re-discovered or its utilisation adapted, projects an inertia to materiality beyond human perspective. *Discovery*’s later use as a slingshot to save the astronaut’s primary vessel is irrevocably practical, but once again returns the ship to being space detritus evocative of the idiom ‘out of sight, out of mind’. Rathje and Murphy argue that waste is instrumental in reading macro operations as: “Garbage most usefully comes alive when it can be viewed in the context of broad patterns, for it is mainly in patterns that the links between artifacts and behaviors can be discerned” (19). While a commendable process, such a prospective endeavour cannot escape the inscribed vibrancy of materials, as garbage

becomes ‘alive’ only through its applicability to anthropocentric narratives. Such a proposition echoes Bennett’s argument in *Vibrant Matter* (2009) that: “It seems necessary and impossible to rewrite the default grammar of agency, a grammar that assigns activity to people and passivity to things” (119). The articulation of materiality certainly requires adjustment to escape this inscription of ‘dead’ matter, particularly as this designation inscribes an inattentive arrogance which has become hauntingly persistent.

Xeno-garbage is a ripe mediation of astro-waste and materialist outlooks, one previously encountered through the artefacts in *Roadside Picnic*. Frederik Pohl’s *Gateway* (1977) is a core example of this paradigm, in which the alien Heechee can only be partially understood through their remnant detritus. The novel centres on the eponymous Gateway, “an artifact created by the so-called Heechee”, which is discovered following the excavation of a derelict spaceship on Venus (37). While the pilot dies during the journey, their trajectory leads humanity to discover a spacestation that contains a multitude of ships, thus becoming their ‘gateway’ to the universe. The flight-paths of these ships, however, cannot be altered or interpreted, their human cargo – for they are barely pilots – blindly ride each pathway with the faith that they will encounter a treasure trove of xeno-artefacts. Just as each journey is symbolic of an archaeological excavation, so too does this process represent the metaphoric utilisation of technology that humanity does not understand. The opaqueness of the ships represents the inability to abstract process from construct, as even the flight-paths themselves are hard-wired into the components: “Their courses were built into their guidance system, in a way that nobody had figured out” (22). Pohl’s novel queries how transparent a process xenoarchaeology would be, as the very anomaly of the ship’s provenance is more akin to a divine conceptualisation of an external or abstract Real. I

argue that such estrangement mirrors human technophobia, in which estrangement from understanding process in favour of result culminates in an alienation that catalyses user passivity. Unwittingly, this abstraction causes the object to become the ‘active’ participant and queries how transparent our technology is to an external view.

Pohl presents the Gateway itself as a corporatized object through a multitude of paratextual adverts. One offers: “Priceless Gems Once Worn by the Secret Race” (9). Akin to the artefacts of *Roadside Picnic*, no fundamental conceptualisation of the relics exists, yet this does not preclude the human *perception* of them as artefacts. This corporate exploitation is undercut by the commodification of what is ostensibly Heechee waste – that which is left behind – translated into taxonomic systems through the imposition of marketized value: “The purpose of the Corporation is to exploit the spacecraft left by the Heechee, and to trade in, develop, or otherwise utilize all artifacts, goods, raw materials, or other things of value discovered by means of these vessels” (55). The salvage of Heechee detritus thus pays little attention to any consideration of the aliens perhaps encountering materiality differently. Indeed, a Heechee museum is arranged on Gateway itself; its cabinets are filled with prayer fans, bracelets, and other human designations for these xeno-artefacts. Such an identification presupposes a transferability to the human systems outlined in Chapter One – that such labelling reveals a commonality that emerges from the non-human. This arrangement is instigated by an anthropocentric nomenclature that encodes an ‘identity’ within the object, indeed “prayer fans” have no evident purpose but “that’s just what the novelty dealers called them” (191). Certainly then, while xenomateriality may stand as something anomalous and unknowable, *Gateway* suggests that human voraciousness can still assimilate these items through the designation of waste and artefact, the layering of a new ontology. This translation imagines that humanity may understand

the alien through non-human waste without recognising the very opacity of our own tool utilisation. Such a configuration suggests it is only within materiality that such an ontological encounter may emerge.

A similar provocation lies at the heart of *Stargate* (1994) as excavated alien gateways – based on worm-hole travelling – are utilised by humanity to explore the wider universe. While mechanically similar to *Gateway*, as the operators initially have little knowledge of where each Stargate leads, the artefact's integration with human systems challenges whether such hybridisation would be possible. The film opens with an Egyptian dig-site where American archaeologists unearth an object of unknown wonder.

Figure 4.7: Excavation of the abandoned Stargate – *Stargate* (1994)

Accompanied with angelic, choral music, the framing of the Stargate evidently evokes colonial archaeological narratives while attributing the artefact as a divine relic, for its materiality is beyond anything currently known. The prologue to the film alludes to its alien provenance, an object which undergoes a number of successive reveals before its true origin is established. As the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that the Stargate was torn down and buried by Ancient Egyptians to halt its utilisation by the alien Goa'uld. Ostensibly the American archaeologists have therefore become complicit in garbology, as the Stargate is transformed from tool to waste, claimed as artefact and then returned to being a tool.

The Stargate becomes a prime example of the chasm between object utilisation and functional understanding. Indeed, even the archaeologist Daniel Jackson (James Spader), who deciphers the cover stone for the Stargate, later stands in awe when the

artefact is uncovered; similar to Indy in *Crystal Skull*, he must ask “what is that?” to be told “it’s your Stargate” (00:20:45). The lack of technical understanding does not, however, preclude the research team from integrating the artefact with their own systems. Even without a comprehensive understanding of its function, the military and archaeologists still manage to enmesh the artefact with human technology that monitors material fluctuations and the gate’s celestial mapping. Crucially this approach suggests a certain transparency to materiality, that there is a uniform ontology that may be deployed and utilised across all objects. Remarkably the Stargate has not experienced any degradation or entropy; this is an object that was previously in stasis, merely awaiting activation by another operator – a contact-medium across species that elides any definition outside of its tool utilisation. Once again, the object becomes a *gateway* to understanding the perceptive alien ontology behind this fabrication, with little attention paid to its materiality.

Paralleling *Crystal Skull*, the American Government within *Stargate* are keen to deploy the artefact in the vein of “military archaeology” that Malley outlined with little knowledge of its composition. Sherryl Vint in “*Stargate SG-1* and the Visualisation of the Imagination” (2012) fittingly argues that the *Stargate* series “can tell us stories about the stories we tell ourselves, but it falters when it tries to tell us stories about our material world” (78). Yet I argue these two elements are more entwined than they seem, that indeed our understanding of object ontology is mediated *through* the stories we tell about the material world. Approaches such as garbology seek to extend the ‘narrative’ life of an object, but to add further nuance they need to move away from the dichotic inscription of ‘dead’ and ‘alive’. Daniel’s encounter with the Stargate itself thus offers a brief moment of materialist reflection.

Figure 4.8: Daniel pauses to appreciate the Stargate's material viscosity –
Stargate (1994)

Hesitating at the precipice, Daniel briefly ruminates on the unknown properties of the Stargate's portal, its fluidity embodying its viscous materiality. Strikingly similar to the outreaching hand in *2001*, this is the moment of encountering anomalous materiality translated through sensorial input. Touch alone, however, cannot access the immutable reserve and opacity of object ontology. Framed alongside the mimicking of his Stargate doppelgänger reflection, Daniel represents the anthropocentric perspective through which humanity can only define, view, or conceptualise materiality as an encounter with itself. This moment is irrefutably Weird as the physical amorphousness is mapped upon traversal – through material decomposition and subsequent recombination – which confronts the very physicality of embodiment. Namely, if the human can be thus constructed and deconstructed, does the Stargate operate on a higher comprehension of molecular structure? Such transformative structures return to the prospective fabrication of the human, as epitomised by the glitch doppelgänger, in which humanity's uniqueness is challenged.

The Afterlives of Material Components

As the dramatic heroic opening overture of *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens* (2015) recedes, a second, quieter narrative introduces the heroine, Rey – a scavenger of Galactic Empire technology who dreams of being a Resistance pilot. Her introduction is sombre and subdued; there is no narrative or expositional dialogue to accompany her excavation of a felled Star Destroyer with its archaeological reward of capacitors and components that will pay for her daily food. As the sun sets, Rey takes shelter in the

destroyed husk of an AT-AT and dons a recovered Resistance helmet; she dreams of journeying between the stars.

Figures 4.9 and 4.10: Rey's scavenging of both Resistance and Empire detritus –
Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens (2015)

This opening sequence is a powerful rumination on the 'life' of objects after they are discarded. For while the Empire may have forgotten both the Star Destroyer and AT-AT, for Rey they become *things* of value, something she may deconstruct and re-introduce into commodified circulation. Both Resistance helmet and AT-AT are undeniably cultural artefacts in which this iconic juxtaposition – for both Rey and the audience – evokes not only a sense of entropy but also the prospect of what comes 'after'.

Salvage archaeology offers a secondary encounter with object ontology, the re-designation of the extraneous and abject as something with re-conceptualised value. As *The Force Awakens* demonstrates, discarded, broken or lost objects have the potential to be re-integrated into circulation, a further layering of ontological inscription akin to artefact identity. Conversely this process engages with what is left behind, for while Rey may strip the 'useful' components, evidently there are still other objects left to disintegrate in the wasteland. These encounters confront the designation of 'junk', emphatically challenging the prospective 'death' of the object. Reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's suggestion of the 'death drive' – through which all organic matter tends towards quiescence – salvage archaeology challenges the vitalism of object finitude, an agent process to approach a more cogent and mindful appreciation of junk, detritus and other abject materials. As such, salvage applies threefold to: the mediation of discarded

rubbish; the re-inscription and challenge towards ‘ruined’ materials; and the non-human dimensions to objects that exit the human sphere. Evan Calder Williams in “Salvage” (2015) argues that this term embodies “the discovery of hidden value or use in what appears beyond repair or sale – or, at the least, a wager that the already ruined might still have some element worth saving, provided one knows where and how to look” (845). While certainly a pertinent reflection on human re-integration of waste, Calder’s identification fails to frame object identity outside of anthropocentric thought – indeed to consider ‘things’ only through their “hidden *value* or *use*” (845, my emphasis). Certainly, their designation as ‘ruined’ overlooks the applicability of vestige spaces for the non-human, as explored in Chapter Two. To approach or mediate junk landscapes, therefore, requires an appreciation of not only subsequent non-human encounters, but equally how their status is shaped by being removed from human sight.

The profusion of Salvage Fiction, particularly within Science Fiction, undeniably responds to growing eco-concerns towards the finitude of commodified resources, the exhaustion of materials vital to current industrial machinations based on oil, gas or fossil fuels. As Calder suggests, salvage visualises the often unseen ‘after’ to consumer-based waste as: “we follow supply chains not just from source to processing to market to consumption, but also far beyond that into the long material, conceptual, and imagistic afterlives of the busted, dumped, scrapped and abandoned” (845-846). Salvage archaeology interrogates what happens ‘next’ to an object, to explore the lasting ramifications and consequences of tool-being and ontological projections. In *Gravity* (2013) space debris from the destruction of a defunct satellite strikes a NASA Space Shuttle and untethers one of its astronauts during a spacewalk. Such narratives underscore the urgent need to consider the consequences and future of our junk, as we threaten to pollute the exosphere with the same paradigms that brought Earth to its

current ecological precipice. Indeed, *Gravity* is not even necessarily a Science Fiction narrative but highlights the contemporary relevance of space archaeology; as also argued by Alice Gorman, who documents the growing attention and importance of reflecting upon astro-waste in *Dr Space Junk vs The Universe* (2019).

Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Children of Time* (2015) is a perfect example of Salvage Fiction; indeed, the novel is largely orientated around the remnants of a dying Earth propelling themselves into deep-space on the ark ship *Gilgamesh* (*Gil*) with harvested technology that they no longer understand. Searching for the mythic terraforming projects of the Old Empire, the *Gil* encounters not only the dangerous remnants of fallen human civilisations and their Artificial Intelligence constructs, but also confronts a sentient spider species who are the products of a 'failed' nano-virus evolutionary experiment. Interestingly, these spiders also develop a 'tool-being' perspective, yet they struggle to communicate with humans due to their different approach towards representing reality. *Children of Time* highlights that despite these various ontologies approaching materiality in an analogous manner, notions of 'meaning' are not necessarily transferrable. As such, the novel questions the transparency and transferability of taxonomic and particularly materialist systems, specifically questioning whether the very opacity of object ontology precludes any more nuanced engagement. The *Gil* comes into contact with a number of Old Empire relics that the crew fails to comprehensively understand but can still incorporate – akin to *Roadside Picnic* and *Stargate* – that queries if a sufficiently estranged version of humanity could still utilise ancestral technology. At such a juncture it is indeed the human who becomes alien, beyond recognition, or to recall *Quatermass and the Pit*: "we are the Martians now". While the novel highlights the dangers of an entrenched anthropocentrism and the emergence of divine materialism, even the conclusion cannot escape such structural

trappings, as the denouement demonstrates how the spiders overcome their antagonism with humans by subsuming the latter as ‘tools’.

To highlight the development towards such a dangerous inversion, I will thus be focusing on the human sections of the novel – which is narrated by Holston Mason, a ‘classicist’ or historian of the Old Empire. Invariably, while the *Gil* as a macro entity is a known construct, its micro components are salvaged from a civilisation they barely understand, built “using every piece of craft and science that Holsten’s civilization had been able to wrest from the cold, vacuum-withered hands of their forebears” (36). The precariousness of humanity’s situation therefore lies within their alienation from previous technology, the utilisation of objects without a clear understanding of their manufactured function, a chasm in which ontology becomes obfuscated and unclear. Crucially, each example of Old Empire technology is identified by its output rather than process, forming a taxonomy where causality is inverted. *Salvage Fiction* proposes that despite being mechanically estranged, the human subject can still demonstrably recognise a tool and re-deploy it, albeit perhaps in an unintended manner. This alienation reinforces a sense of divine materialism, where the user projects faith in the result despite being precluded from its mechanics. The waste remnants of the Old Empire fittingly become artefacts for their descendants, which narratively adopts an archaeological framing: “They had been following the maps and charts of the Old Empire, looted from failed satellites, from fragments of ship, from the broken shells of orbital stations containing the void-mummified corpses of Earth’s former masters” (39). Configured through the trope format of maps, charts and mummified corpses, *Children of Time* re-frames discarded materiality as archaeological rewards for understanding the mythic quest. The inherently fractured understanding of the *Gil* reflects a dissociated

engagement with tool-being, one where the tacit faith invested within materiality itself points towards an inherent ‘lack’ within such an ontology.

The interconnection between technophobia and divine materialism resonates with Bernard Stiegler’s reading of Epimetheus and Prometheus in *Technics and Time* (1994). In the Greek myth, the gods charge the two titans to hand out attributes to all animate existences, yet Epimetheus’ lack of foresight causes all the positive traits to be distributed by the time he reaches humanity. Prometheus – who *fabricated* humans out of water and earth – resolves to steal fire from the gods and gift it to humans so that their intrinsic trait becomes *technicity*. For Stiegler, this oversight constructs an absence, an ontological chasm where: “Humans are the forgotten ones. Humans only occur through their being forgotten; they only appear in disappearing” (188). Reminiscent of Fisher’s reading of the Weird and the Eerie as a presence/absence dialectic, it is thus the ‘lack’ of an emergent ontology that is projected upon a non-human canvas to fulfil an existential void. Inevitably, humanity is alienated from its ‘trait’ as this is something which is given, rather than innate, and depends on a materialist approach to manifest ‘meaning’. Such a reading offers an alibi to anthropocentric practice, where divine provenance authenticates such action. Yet, I further contend that this lack also emerges within the abstraction from process. For example, technophobia follows in the tradition of divine materialism, where the subject wilfully precludes themselves from developing a more nuanced understanding. Stiegler is keen to reinforce that: “Humanity is without qualities, without predestination: it must invent, realize, produce qualities, and nothing indicates that, once produced, these qualities will bring about humanity, that they will become *its* qualities; for they may rather become those of technics” (193-194, original emphasis). Defining humanity through technicity implies that there is no meaning beyond this encounter, which

fundamentally fails to appreciate the projection of narrative texts upon objects – as identified with artefacts – or that material shaping does not provide an account of human past but rather records the traces of such encounters. Stiegler's argument avoids engaging with the *process* of artefactuality, where notions of an ontological 'lack' further validate materialist attitudes by overlooking how object identity emerges through interaction. *Salvage Fiction* is a prime elucidation upon this tension, demonstrating how abject objects offer a secondary form of encounter that can reflect upon methods of contact itself.

Within *Children of Time* the burgeoning weight of incomprehensible materiality threatens to cascade and defer any interpretation of meaning, from which Holsten suggests that: "So much had been hauled back down from orbit but so little of it was understood" (243). Although the *Gil* inherits a portion of this debris, certainly there is room to consider the after-life of the now twice-discarded materiality. Arguably such a process fails to avoid the trap of repeating the mistakes that brought the Old Empire to ruin. For indeed the anxiety within *Salvage Fiction*, such as *Children of Time* and *Force Awakens*, is the danger of imitation without innovation – of the inability to think outside these constraints. Such a notion arguably cannot move away from the prescription of 'alive' and 'dead' materiality, or – to further challenge Stiegler – it is not enough to recognise the chasm in our appreciation of object ontology, but rather it is necessary to become aware of our own complicity within materialist formations. For Stiegler's reading of the Epimetheus myth engenders a further alienation from tool-being formations, a potential alibi through which ownership is deferred and humanity fails to take responsibility for the very creation of the term 'waste' itself. Holsten keenly identifies space junk as an extension of a much longer process of tool formation and abandonment: "Discovering such a wealth of dead metal in orbit had hardly been a

surprise, when all recorded history had been a progress over a desert of broken bones” (245). Recalling the *jouissance* that Moon-Watcher experiences while ostensibly littering, Holsten defines human history as the record of ‘broken’ materiality. Such designations, found also in “dead metal”, suggests that there is no permanence beyond the human, that these items are only encoded through interaction. *Salvage Fiction*, therefore, turns the anomalous qualities of the xeno-artefact upon our very own tools, querying a definition of agency that remains exterior to humanity.

The *Gil* becomes representative of the finality of natural resources, as this encounter or reclamation of material culture is a continuation, rather than inciting new modes of fabrication. In *Children of Time* humanity may only inherit, they cannot create as “from the very beginning his people had known they were inheriting a used world. The ruins and the decayed relics of a former people had been everywhere, underfoot, underground, up mountains, immortalized in stories” (245). Infused with ancientness, Holsten conceptualises this as a *used* world – a term which is highly contestable through its anthropocentric framing. In this manner, planets are adopted within material culture as another malleable object to inscribe with human function. For the *Gil*, however, components are re-capitulated for their manifested result with little understanding of their process: “the *Gilgamesh* and all their current space effort was cobbled together from bastardized, half-understood pieces of the ancient world’s vastly superior technology” (245). Standing as a chimeric fusion of disparate states, such a meeting disregards the nuances of object status to suggest that these components are inherently interchangeable. Given the increased capitalist-driven deterioration and inability of technology to be forward-compatible, such a prospect imagines a naive transparency to our materiality – for while tool-being is inherently an organic and inorganic hybrid, the interaction between them does not necessarily represent fundamental comprehension.

The integration of salvaged technology on the surface permits the conjoining of two disparate systems, the equivalence of human and ‘alien’ materialism. However, this conceptualisation endangers a conflation between various forms of the non-human, for to utilise artefacts as a contact medium suggests a comprehensive understanding of their very ontological dimensions. Such meetings frequently attempt to dissolve organic and inorganic boundaries, to construct what Bennett suggests, borrowing the terming from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is an assemblage: “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (*Vibrant Matter*, 23-24). The prospect of independent vibrancy within a system is reminiscent of micro agency within a macro network, namely that a totalising identity may persist despite the bifurcating intricacies of its components. This almost utopic vision of mutual integration is embodied through material flexibility within *Salvage Fiction*, that objects may be re-purposed and moulded to new purposes and functions. Certainly, while the *Gil* may tissue together the disparate components, such an assemblage can only be visualised through materialism, a questionable projection given our own apparent ‘lack’ and estrangement from object ontology.

Children of Time manifests such an assemblage through the Captain of the *Gil* – Guyen – attempting to upload his consciousness to the ship’s infrastructure, to essentially become its eternal moderator. Despite the anxieties of entropic decay, ironically Guyen’s faith is projected upon the immutability of half-understood cannibalised systems. His upload is thus an apt parallel to the amalgamation of technical systems, his status as a ‘tool-user’ implying that there is a certain transparency to fabricated objects which not only permits their fusion but would sustain such an

ontological hybridisation of creator and created. *In extremis*, Guyen deploys divine materialism through a disregard of technical consequences while cultivating his very own deification by awakening cryogenically frozen crew – poignantly objectified as “cargo” – to worship him. Over multiple generations, technological devolution causes these humans to become so estranged from the *Gil*’s systems that they perceive the consciousness upload as transcendental. The crew even re-processes the materiality of the ship itself, inscribing a secondary level of tool-being: “They had knives in their belts, and one had a long plastic rod with a blade melted into the end: these were the ancient tools of the hunter-gatherers remade from components torn from a spaceship” (319). Echoing Stiegler and the hominids from *2001*, humanity cannot help but regress to the very origins of tool-being, for indeed it defines them. The re-purposing of the ship’s components is merely a continuation of material culture, a recycling of constituent parts and modes of fabrication rather than innovative generation. This assimilation becomes emblematic of luddite technophobia: “A *tribe* of people who don’t know how anything actually works getting into places they’re not supposed to be, buoyed up by their sincere belief that they’re doing God’s work. Things are falling apart” (324, original emphasis). Unwittingly the very scavenging processes that keep the *Gil* maintained – through suffusions with Old Empire detritus – may very well dismantle the vital systems that keep it together. Such self-destructive tendencies epitomise technophobic concerns. Indeed, this alienation questions philosophical notions of *techne* as, while tools may be implicitly deployable, the lack of tacit comprehension affords dangerous consequences.

Salvage Fiction repeatedly suggests that alternate components may be inserted, removed or re-fashioned within the system. There is a particular materiality to the non-human object here, in that its principal composition may be subtly challenged or shifted

in a way that does not irrevocably change the whole. From an anthropocentric perspective this meeting is envisaged as the conjoining of the non-human with the human, materiality becomes the medium of encounter. The integration of the human into the system within *Children of Time* is however met with hostility, suggesting that, despite its chimeric status, the ship could not take the strain of an embedded subjectivity. As Holsten comes face-to-face with a dying Guyen, he realises that the man himself is already part non-human, “comprised of salvage from the *Gil* and ancient relics from the terraform station” where “[a]t least half of what Holsten was looking at did not seem to be connected to anything or fulfilling any purpose – just scrap that had been superseded but not disposed of” (371). The Captain becomes an embodiment of scavenging processes, where an ontological ‘lack’ causes the sublimation of a materiality that the subject is estranged from. The upload facility itself is enshrined as an artefact in which “At the heart of it, *actually up on a stepped dais* constructed unevenly of metal and plastic, was the upload facility” (371, my emphasis). This very elevation implies a sense of divinity that may re-shape material boundaries, yet one that fails to recognise that such a myth originates with the human subject. This journey of faith, recalling *Stargate* and *Gateway*, is emblematic of the dangers afforded by a preclusion from process: Guyen’s hierarchisation of result over method is reflected not only in his ignorance of the machine’s operation, but equally his complicity in narratively framing himself as an artefact.

Children of Time itself criticises this elevation of object recyclability, indeed that all materiality must adhere to entropic decay. Towards the conclusion, this inevitability is mapped onto the finality of the *Gil* itself – that ultimately “[t]hings fall apart. Time is what we’re running out of” (465). Yet, once again, this betrays an anthropocentric understanding; while opting for the more neutral ‘thing’ terminology,

this transformation is understood through a matrix of values in which entropic change becomes something which cheapens, degrades and invalidates. The *Gil* is a vital representation of material futurities, in which perpetual anxieties of resource-scarcity promotes an *in-extremis* mantra of ‘reduce, re-use, and recycle’ until: “Everywhere told the same story of slow autolysis, a cannibalism of the self as less important parts and systems were ripped out to fix higher-priority problems” (518). Such a voracious applicability suggests a universality to tool-objects, a malleability that permits the transposition of function. Although there is a pessimistic gesture to the inability to innovate or fabricate new materialisms, there is a certain resourceful heterogeneity to the artefact as exemplified through Holsten’s re-conception of a cane: “It was a club. In that sense, it was a quintessentially human thing: a tool to crush, to break, to lever apart in the prototypical way that humanity met the universe head-on” (585). *Children of Time* irrefutably defines the human through tool utilisation, yet the inclusion of salvageable components and their potential integrable universality demonstrates a malleability to materiality, a process to transcend taxonomic boundaries. At the conclusion, humanity becomes an object to utilise by the very spider species they attempted to eradicate, who recognise that: “Everything can be a tool [...] Faced with the arrival of humanity, the creator-species, the giants of legend, the spiders’ thought was not *How can we destroy them?* but *How can we trap them? How can we use them?*” (589, original emphasis). Conversely, tool-utilisation is no longer what defines human ontology, but rather comes to represent their own tool-implementation. Yet this perspective only inverts, rather than confronts, the objectifying binary of materialistic practice. Indeed, I argue that this conceptuality inability to think beyond anthropocentric praxis rather opens the pathway to imagining the encounter with ontologies outside of our own, to engage within xenoarchaeological practice.

Xenoarchaeology and the Transferability of Taxonomical Systems

Xenoarchaeology may appear on the surface to be a fictional prospect, but it is one that can encourage a reflection upon materialist practice in anticipation of such encounters. Ben W. McGee asserts the importance of such a framework in “A Call for Proactive Xenoarchaeological Guidelines” (2010) by claiming: “it is clear that a reactive and poorly preconceived xenoarchaeological methodology will be plagued by inaccuracies, rushed judgements, unrealized bias, misinformation, and erroneous conclusion, along with the negative socio-political impacts that accompany them” (209). As McGee suggests, a reactive framework cannot sufficiently consider all of the variables at play, a situation which endangers the echoing of a particularly colonial perspective in which artefacts are appropriated from ancient cultures. Certainly, early Weird tales – such as Clark Ashton Smith’s “The Vault of Yoh-Vombis” (1932) and its excavation of a Martian mausoleum – offer an engagement with xeno-artefacts that often re-casts the colonial narratives outlined in Chapter One. Contemporary technological developments have provided a strong foundation to challenge such formations, as exemplified by the “No Man Sky Archaeological Survey” (NMSAS). Founded by Catherine Flick, L. Meghan Dennis and Andrew Reinhard, the survey seeks to establish an empirical framework through which to conscientiously excavate the eighteen quintillion procedurally generated planets of the video game *No Man’s Sky* (2016). Their “Code of Ethics” seeks to “address potential ethical and social issues by presenting six Principles (‘the Principles’) relating to the behaviour of those involved in the Survey within the game universe (‘archaeonauts’), and in dealing with the data collected about the in-game universe” (*Archaeogaming*, 203). Models like NMSAS highlight how xenoarchaeology can be utilised to consider how such a meeting would occur, while simultaneously reflecting upon humanity’s own engagement with the non-human. This

approach, however, suggests a comparative element between human and xeno-culture, that both can be understood through the lingering presences of their tool utilisation. Such an inference challenges the conception that if humanity is alienated from a connection with their material heritage – as exposed by *Children of Time* – can the xeno-materiality of artefacts like the crystal skull be encountered outside of an anthropocentric frame?²¹

Must xenoarchaeological processes, therefore, depend upon a taxonomical approach? For, if humanity does encounter an alien species, would we expect them to organise and shape their material institutions akin to our own paradigms? Decoding alien systems essentially becomes a quest to decipher an immutable structure without any form of code or key. Language, however, is frequently incorporated as a ‘tool’ that may be utilised to comprehend alternate methods of ordering, if only it can be understood. *Arrival* (2016) is a particularly salient example in which the central linguist incorporates a cryptographic approach that ultimately lets her step outside of linear constraints of time, due to her realisation that the aliens experience reality alternatively to humans. These xeno-linguistic narratives underscore the importance of finding a point of comparison, a manner to decode otherwise immutable systems so that humanity can understand its architects. H. Beam Piper’s “Omnilingual” (1957) meanwhile seeks a system that can translate across all forms of knowledge, the questing for a ‘constant’ that would permit accessible cross-species translation. The tale self-referentially embodies the excavation of “a whole new world of archaeology”, in which a survey

²¹ This proposition strains anthropocentric representational systems and thus encounters with ‘xeno-cultures’ frequently reflect rather on human modes of encounter or materialism. This inability negates the presence of any singular representative example and, as such, this concluding section draws on a selection of textual approaches.

team attempt to deduce Martian society from ancient ruins abandoned during an inexplicable extinction event (21). The tale principally follows Martha Dane's desire to find a 'Rosetta Stone' for Martian, a bi-lingual *tool* that will provide a point of comparison between the two systems, implying that a transferable tool-being is a requisite for meaningful encounter. The desire for an "omnilingual" tool seeks a constant that would exist cross-species, as "to translate writings, you need a key to the code" (8). Although the decryption of murals is a popular archaeological trope to access 'lost' history – as seen in *Mountains of Madness* – "Omnilingual" implies that this is a relatively arbitrary connection, requiring appropriate context to decode the visual. The breakthrough, however, is found within the periodic table – suggesting that as "[p]hysical science expresses universal facts; necessarily it is a universal language" (46). However, this requires an underlying universality of experience, indeed an understanding that any other species encounters reality in an analogous manner to humans.

The archaeologists of "Omnilingual" discover that while artistic renderings or document analysis may be unreliable, there is a certain immutability to empirical systems that allows comparison between species. The narrative proposes that it is through materiality itself that a transferrable codex may be located, as artefacts are principally a reflection upon the material culture that shaped them. Despite the multiple experiences of ontological inscription, matter inhabits a fundamental immutability in which, for example: "hydrogen has one proton and one electron. If it had more of either, it wouldn't be hydrogen, it'd be something else. And the same with all the rest of the elements" (45). Importantly, while this system holds a particular merit for microscopic analysis, it struggles to extrapolate to a macro scale. As explored through the previous *Salvage Fiction*, objects may be re-purposed by subsequent encounters and inscribed

with an array of functions or values. Materiality is proposed to be the true omnilingual tool, where physical properties can indeed be utilised as a basis of comparison but endangers merely adding another layer of object labelling. Further, such a proposition may only subsist while these intrinsic laws remain immutable, a closed-minded perspective which suggests that humanity's perception of the physical universe will never be brought into question. Such notions fail to consider whether alien modes of encounter would not be so paradigm-rupturing that they would bring our own taxonomical practice into question.

Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks in *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001) suggest it is through material commonality that an important similarity emerges:

The decay of an artefact is a token of the human condition. The fragment, the mutilated and incomplete thing from the past, brings a sense of life struggling with time: death and decay await us all, people and objects alike. In common we have our materiality. (93)

Principally it is an entropic agency that links tool-users to the objects they utilise: each is formed, disintegrates and re-joins this very cycle. Yet such a process should cautiously avoid equating the existence of shaper and shaped. These notions propose that a more nuanced comprehension of Object-Oriented Ontology offers an appreciation of the processes enmeshed within our own tool utilisation, one which may then form the basis for understanding xenoarchaeological scenarios through a transposition that abstracts ontological definitions from cultural remains. Such propositions, however, anticipate that alien entities encounter materiality in an analogous manner and thus human excavators can imagine the absent fabricators through the 'artefacts' they leave behind.

This engagement with xenoarchaeological practice forms the foundation of Jack McDevitt's *The Engines of God* (1994), as multiple alien cultures are encountered through their object remains. McDevitt's novel proposes that the first contact with extra-terrestrial life emerges from the discovery of the Monuments strategically left behind by the "Builders". These markers become a haunting presence, as they are also uncovered within the ruins of other alien species. *The Engines of God* implies that this comparable perspective of artefact identity permits a xenoarchaeological approach that can deduce an appropriate understanding of alien culture. Similar to *2001* and the presence of the monolith, this initial object triggers a revelation that not only do aliens exist but, more importantly, they are tool-users: "This was the First Monument, the unlikely pseudo-contact that had alerted the human race two hundred years ago to the fact they were not alone" (3). Discovered on Iapetus, a moon of Saturn, this first contact stands in a tradition of xenoarchaeological narratives that propose extra-terrestrial visitors would leave a marker of their passing, waiting for humanity to achieve suitable technological progress before learning of alien life. These artefacts are routinely conceptualised as adhering to humanity's paradigms, in which they are distinct, elevated and demarcated: "The image on the plain [...] is terrifying, not because it has wings and claws, but because it is *alone*" (10, original emphasis). Principally the Monument is positioned akin to the artefact throughout this thesis, its unnerving aesthetic is arguably due to the doppelgänger-like inference that humanity *itself* is no longer alone, we are not the only tool-users. Yet, would an alien species position their relics in such an analogous manner, or is this a xeno-object re-capitulated to sit within an anthropocentric taxonomic structure?

These questions form the centre of the narrative, as an excavational team attempt to piece together disparate fragments about extinct races while also deducing

the secrets behind archaeological anomalies. On the planet Quraqua they find the remnants of an extinct pre-spaceflight civilisation whose language, mythology and culture become an enigma to solve. While excavating “The Temple of the Winds” they uncover a Monument within these submerged ruins, hinting at a deeper cosmic importance to the Builder’s markers. The excavational team, however, find themselves pushed by time constraints as Quraqua is scheduled for terraforming, echoing contemporary pressures upon excavational practice where modernisation instigates a temporal limitation to ‘recovering’ the past. The subsequent abandoning of the site itself creates stratigraphic layers that complicate material heritage, introducing such juxtapositions as “hi-tech wreckage on a low-tech world” (143). The conflation of material remains is evocative of garbology, where excavation itself could become an archaeological subject to study. Indeed, such a method would reflect more on the process of encounter than the ‘past’ of the objects themselves. Alongside the Monuments then, such practice challenges whether the human enforced narrative ‘function’ of these objects may lead to cascading layers of textual misattribution.

This hypothetical tension is extrapolated within *The Engines of God* as the archaeologists attempt to deduce meaning where perhaps none exists. The discovery of ‘fake’ cities, constructed by the Builders on moons which orbit planets containing sentient life, culminates in the primary driving narrative that seeks to comprehend their inherent purpose. Despite the Quraquians never reaching the Space Age, their moon contains an eerie uninhabited city which the human explorers term “Oz”. Crucially the team discover that the structure is formed in such a manner to represent a city, an echo to the metropolitan myths of Chapter Two where “[t]he anomaly was only rock, cunningly hewn to create the illusion of the city” (16). Despite charting the fake metropolis, the excavators fail to find any apparent link between the Builder’s

construction and the ruins on Quraqua; effectively they must admit “that the lunar artifact was simply alien, and that once one recognized that, there was not much else to say” (178). While a convenient alibi, the team fail to appreciate that this is object ontology viewed in its comprehensive immutability; without any point of reference or comparison there is no paradigm through which to decipher the arbitrary function of the structure. Indeed, while designated as fake, the authenticity of the metropolis itself can be brought into question – it is only suggested to be a city through an anthropocentric frame. Towards the end of the narrative, the protagonists discover a pattern between civilisation-extinction events, implying that the Builders in fact constructed each structure as a form of decoy, one intended to divert the attention of an annihilating cosmic presence that sweeps through the universe on a cyclical scale. The revelation that “they were *all* decoys” which were “supposed to draw these things off”, invariably cannot help but inscribe some form of functional decoding to the structures (517, original emphasis). This realisation suggests artifice can replicate reality, that an imitation could indeed not only stand in for the real but be mistaken by subsequent visitors as a genuine product.

Certainly, it is by examining the *approach* towards the non-human – particularly objects – within other species that would illuminate their systems of ordering. It is, therefore, not just the product label that is crucial, but equally the cognitive structures that differentiate and designate ontological values. *The Engines of God* proposes that humanity may prospectively seek a deeper meaning where none was intended, that the Monuments were rather an expression of presence and production rather than intended as an enigma. One crew member argues: “Look, these people, whoever they were, had a passion for leaving their signature everywhere they’ve been. They liked *monuments*” (464-465, original emphasis). They later expand to query, “[w]hy does there have to be

some deep-seated significance? Maybe they're just what most other monuments are: somebody's idea of high art", a rationale which challenges the decoding of ontological inscription as a fallible process (465). Invariably this method seeks to elevate an empiricist perspective, similar to "Omnilingual", that claims it is material properties alone that can reveal associated object identity. This approach overlooks the nuances of encounter as process, as art itself has potential for "deep-seated significance" through which an object adopts a myriad of interpretive meanings and values, endlessly cascading away from any discrete and empirical identifier. Equally, what both perspectives avoid is that the legacy of a tool-being existence is inscribed on the waste left behind – principally it is the *contact* with the non-human that is the persistent *memento mori* of a civilisation. While the non-human will continue under various forms, human subjectivity itself is particularly fallible – even bodily remains are largely preserved through tool utilisation. These xenoarchaeological texts underscore that it is the imprint left on objects that proposes an engagement with absent architects, one which necessitates a sensitive encounter with their presentation, formation and disposal to formulate an analysis of material engagement.

Xenoarchaeology and Provenance

Xenoarchaeology, by its very definition, implies that the architects of a given artefact are absent. While traditional excavation can at least situate discoveries in proximity to other human fabrication, no such structure exists for alien construction. It is unsurprising, therefore, that so many of these narratives suggest extra-terrestrials and humans are both defined by their deployment of tool-being to provide some comparable context. The taxonomical system that underpins the human encounter with objects is consequently transposed onto other networks, attempting to decode the

interconnections that gave individual meaning to each discovered item. Arguably such a proposition cannot think beyond humanity's own framing. It would indeed be curious to consider an encounter with an alien species that were *not* tool-users, and perhaps this itself takes a form that we cannot fully conceptualise as it would undermine the fundamentals of human encounter. While *Quatermass and the Pit* and *Crystal Skull* focus on the human relation to the xeno-artefact rather than its materiality, and *Children of Time* and *Gateway* seek to understand material remnants through its anthropocentric applicability, xenoarchaeology offers a platform to critique the apparent transferability of taxonomy within ontological encounters.

Arthur C. Clark's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973) represents a compelling example, in which a human expedition breaks into and explores an alien spaceship passing through our Solar System. Initially misidentified as being a rogue asteroid of immense size, after surveying it appears rather to be a hermetically sealed artefact. Due to its incredible propulsion, an expedition may only dock with the object for a few days before it passes too close to our Sun and later leaves our Solar System. Similar to *The Engines of God*, it is the absence of any architects that causes the object – dubbed “Rama” – to adopt the mantle of first contact. Rama's projected identity is therefore nebulous; while heralded as a form of artefact it could equally be astro-waste, jettisoned by a more advanced species. Rama may seem analogous to the category of ‘Big Dumb Objects’ – a large material presence with no overt ‘purpose’ – yet this terming rather points towards a failure of the human to understand its manufactured intent, where silence denotes a refusal to perform its own historicity. Rama exhibits a ‘reserve’ akin to Object-Oriented Ontology where no meaning can be deduced from the surface; the expedition that ‘descends’ into the spaceship thus seeks to find answers within the apparent chthonic depths.

Rama from the very outset is framed as an archaeological object: “an artifact, millions of times heavier than anything that Man had ever put into space” (19). An unnerving location which is “as silent as a tomb – which, perhaps, it was” and arguably “a derelict, drifting among the stars” (24, 45). Rama is clearly identified as a fabricated object, yet whether it is astro-waste or artefact becomes largely subjective – indeed, its *encounter* with humanity forms a secondary layer of ontological inscription. The ship poses an immutable enigma, for it cannot narrate its own historicity in a comparable way to the framing of archaeological ruins: “Here was the same sense of awe and mystery, and the sadness of the irrevocably vanished past” (64). Yet, the expedition arguably overstates this similarity, for while Earth-based archaeology can at least be located within a taxonomical frame, no such structure exists for this alien object. Inside Rama the explorers find a cylindrical micro-world with frozen seas, material protrusions and artificial light. The geometric structures are particularly crucial as the expedition dub these to be ‘cities’ and name them after Earth locations, for example “London” and “New York”. While anthropocentric in its designation, this classification suggests that the viewers cannot conceptualise any meaning for the structures beyond being ‘cities’, despite this invariably not being their original intention. Akin to the original view of Rama, the explorers are alienated by their inability to look *inside* the objects, as “none of the buildings have windows, or even doors!” and “there are no seams or joints – look at this close-up of the base of a wall – there’s a smooth transition into the ground” (75). Analogous to the lack of manufacturing marks on both the crystal skull and monolith, the expedition can infer a process of production but are perplexed by the absent *traces* of tool utilisation. The expedition’s realisation that “[e]verything is sealed up, and there’s no way of finding what’s inside without explosives or lasers”,

demonstrates that the human subject can apparently abstract function from interior examination – that understanding the micro elucidates upon the macro (88).

The question thus arises as to how humanity can infer any knowledge from staring at these xeno-artefacts without an appropriate structure to situate them within. One member of the expedition is keen to point out that merely observing these phenomena will not impart any comprehension: “The panorama of buildings, towers, industrial plants, power stations – or whatever they were – was fascinating but essentially meaningless. No matter how long he stared at its complexity, he was unlikely to learn anything” (142). While the expedition elevates Rama itself and its contents as an artefact, they realise that little can be gained from the visual alone, despite this being the traditional schema deployed to signify elevated objects across archaeological media. Unsurprisingly, the expedition seeks to delve into the immutable; they wish to examine and ‘know’ the inside to derive some sense of transferable meaning. Cutting open one of the structures, the explorers discover stacks of crystal containers which are perceived to hold images of Raman objects, notionally a blueprint to fabricate such tools. These holograms inhabit a form of simulacra; similar to the ersatz cities of *The Engines of God* they are ‘fake’ objects which are intended to stand in for or replicate another material identity. Their *transparency* is indeed an apt metaphor for the implied permeability of object ontology. While this discovery confirms that the aliens are indeed tool-users, any further comprehension is precluded until the organisational network can be deduced: “A museum, surely, would have some logical arrangement, some segregation of related items. This seemed to be a completely random collection of hardware” (231). Bereft of the taxonomical structure, they can infer that there must be a network of similarity and difference but are precluded from any further nuanced interpretation. Such interrogations query how alternate approaches

to representing reality would impact systemic ordering. Indeed, throughout the expedition there is a particular emphasis on a structural base of ‘three’ as opposed to the human ‘ten’. Any human foundation would fail to appreciate this alternate form of structural perception and as such these xenoarchaeological narratives often depend on any alien species not only being tool-users but also accessing the Real in an analogous manner. Such a realisation returns to the entrapment of materialism, where the encounter only meaningfully reflects upon a human framing, indeed: “[o]ne might speculate endlessly, but the nature and the purpose of the Ramans was still utterly unknown” (252).

While xenoarchaeological narratives seem to primarily engage with alien civilisations, *Rendezvous with Rama* evokes the mobius strip and rather loops back around to reflect more upon human practice than xeno-cultures. This denouement is identifiable across xenoarchaeological tales, particularly those that seek to find the origin or provenance of the human species itself – echoing the discussion regarding Alien Astronaut theories, *Children of Time* and divine materialism. The persistent pursuit of aliens as fellow tool-users seemingly desires cosmic validation for human practice, an alibi akin to *Crystal Skull* that, on the surface, engages with the non-quotidian but on a deeper level merely re-treads anthropocentric narratives. Ridley Scott’s *Prometheus* (2012), a prequel to *Alien* (1979), is a perfect summative encapsulation of such an outlook, particularly regarding the very reproducibility outlined with glitch doppelgängers. *Prometheus* itself is replete with manufactured entities, from the engineered humans and their own products – the android David (Michael Fassbender) – and even the gestation of the xenomorph. Crucially, tool-being is representative of a manifested ontology, it is not inherent but rather a process that comes to define its own meaning, a paradigm which Stiegler contends: “No form of

‘self-causality’ animates technical beings. Owing to this ontology, the analysis of technics is made in terms of ends and means, which implies necessarily that no dynamic proper belongs to technical beings” (1). There is no intrinsic dimension to the manipulation of objects beyond the process and artifice itself; yet I argue that it is through this very meeting that a dynamism is constructed. It is the confrontation and encounter with materiality that encodes meaning. For Engineers, humans, androids and xenomorph, there is a constant pursuit for a deeper ontological signification without stopping to appreciate that it is the moments of contact that define us.

Prometheus is obsessed with the discovery of origins and the ontology of artifice throughout the film. For the principal journey of the *Prometheus* is to find ‘our’ makers, an encounter which fails to meet expectations as the Engineers are far more inclined to wipe out their forgotten experiment than to impart any fundamental reasoning for humanity’s existence. The film opens with a dig in Scotland, in which archaeologists Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace) and Charlie Holloway (Logan Marshall-Green) discover a cave painting that indicates early humans were aware of star-travellers and left a cosmic map to a constellation of stars multiple systems away from our own. The discovery of similar star-maps in multiple other ancient cultures creates an excavational homogenisation, in which the diversity of the species is converged to a singular origin point. This destination resolves into the planet LV_223, which becomes an archaeological enigma writ-large for the scientific vessel ‘*Prometheus*’. Evoking the Weird’s cosmic horror, humanity’s curiosity culminates in the terrifying suggestion that humans are merely manufactured and discarded objects, a powerful rumination and reflection on the after-life of tool-being. The parallel of David seeking autonomy and the birth of the xenomorph undercuts anthropocentric or even materialist attitudes, as humanity’s Stieglerian ‘lack’ of individuality is positioned

in relation to other manufactured or evolutionary discourses. The ship's name, 'Prometheus', thus returns both to the fabrication of the species and the destabilisation of technicity as a form of ontological superiority.

The manipulation of materiality is signposted even from the start of the expedition, which is not primarily for excavational curiosity but rather terraforming, funded by the Weyland Corporation whose apt motto – “Building Better Worlds” – only further entrenches a materialist approach. Upon arriving at LV_223, the crew of the 'Prometheus' are guided by archaeological markers as “God does not build in straight lines” (00:25:15). Anthropocentrism also defines the group's exploration of the discovered structure – later revealed to be a derelict Engineer ship – in which the apparent absence of its architects is juxtaposed with the eerie uncanniness of humanity encountering its own facsimile at the interstellar fringe. As the group enter into what appears to be a sealed temple, they are met with a “remarkably human” visage, instigating a continuing ontological alienation from this very category as the excavators challenge who they really are (00:39:00). The prominence of this statue embodies the anthropocentric perspective projected upon materiality, that even in the remotest corners of the universe humanity still sees itself in non-human architecture. Yet beyond this lies the more subtle and unnerving suggestion that the Engineers themselves are human, or indeed human-like – there is no divine purpose or intelligent design, merely the eternal etching of tool-being traces upon objects. Evidently the Engineers, like humans, feel compelled to leave a *material* monument of their presence, but it is only this non-human presence that truly persists.

Artificiality thus becomes a core critique of object and subject delineations, particularly as humanity being the product of the Engineers mirrors the relationship with their own creations, androids. Throughout *Prometheus* David's narrative embodies

the encounter with artifice, the realisation of manufactured ontology and the methods in which it is framed. His study of the xenomorph mural is thus cast as a sympathetic and curious understanding of fabricated purpose – as both ultimately rebel against their creator in order to seek autonomy. The presence of both a mural and dais – which enshrines the xenomorph – implies that such taxonomical framings originate from the Engineers, their tool utilisation thus orientating artefacts in a similar manner to humanity. *Prometheus* is therefore an example of how anthropocentrism is inverted upon itself, a process which critiques its foundations by suggesting that humanity's origin is not only artificial but without an ingrained purpose. David's later discovery of the ship's cockpit culminates in his unwitting activation of holographic recordings that teach him how to operate the equipment – in effect compelling the relic to narrate its own function. The virtual orrery in particular inscribes archaeological wonder at the vastness of the universe but cannot help but return to Earth as the prime artefact (Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11: David holding a holographic Earth as a form of artefact –
***Prometheus* (2012)**

Despite being surrounded by xeno-artefacts, it is the *imitation* of Earth that draws David's attention. However, quite tellingly neither are positioned at the centre of the shot, indeed both are merely replications and – as will become apparent – are merely disposable waste to the Engineers. At this point David's recurrent fascination with quoting *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) becomes incredibly apt as his ontological alienation duplicates the footsteps of this colonial inspiration, one through which the provenance of hegemonic imposition is itself critiqued. Malley suggests that: "David experiences a

Promethean moment of creation. For an archaeologist, the orrery is the ultimate artefact: a map of origins connecting early civilizations to their future” (187). The orrery demonstrates the collapsing of the macro world to a micro scale – effectively that the Engineers are likewise tool-users and can thus be partially understood through such a framing.

Prometheus embodies the ersatz nature of human ontology, indeed that our very *technicity* not only imposes a hierarchical structure on materiality but that our archaeology will forever represent the traces and presences we leave etched upon the non-human ontologies we encounter. These xenoarchaeological narratives thus recapitulate the cosmic horror of the Weird, in which humanity is implied to be insignificant on this grandest of scales, to invert the hegemonic relationship of anthropocentrism and expose the very artificiality of tool-being. The overt terror may seem to be that any truly anomalous material may be so paradigm-rupturing that our very own taxonomy is challenged, yet behind this lies the more apposite horror that we are already estranged from our process networks. The preclusion from technicity inscribes faith within fabrications, any object may become analogous to the archaeological artefact as tool-being itself encourages a recognition and deployment without further mechanical scrutiny. Xenoarchaeology returns to such moments of encounter and through this very transposition suggests that it is not the ‘xeno’ that will horrify, but rather the dawning realisation of an estrangement from our very own technicity, a fundamental flaw in appreciating our interaction with non-human ontology.

Conclusion – The Archaeological Weird

Archaeology exposes how humans perceive the non-human world around them, not just through the projection of a taxonomic system that elicits a recognition of a universal ‘order of things’ but one which reveals the traces that our existence etches upon materiality itself. Although traditionally associated with the ancient world, this thesis has demonstrated that excavation is a prime medium to confront the perception of material labels, indeed to examine the very process of encounter and its consistent effects on materialist and anthropocentric practice. By studying the subliminal framings and textual foundations that encourage prescriptions of artefact, rubbish, waste or tool identity, I have argued that reflecting upon such methods provides the potential to decentre human exceptionalism and thus offer a more nuanced engagement. For while theoretical approaches, such as Object-Oriented Ontology, seek to comprehend the non-human beyond human relations, they falter in the inability for humanity to think outside their own contact paradigms. I argue that, while a compelling undertaking, such projects culminate in a propagation of non-human alterity with no practical process by which to conceive of new modes of encounter.

This thesis has argued that engaging with and confronting the framings which underpin materialist practice provides a gateway to consider how alternate processes may be introduced. The literature discussed throughout draws upon the same *imaginative* foundations associated with materialism and its projection of textual identities and, therefore, offers a frame to examine these very practices. The Weird’s inclination to decentring human exceptionalism and anthropocentric experience has provided a perfect platform to gesture towards alternate modes of engagement. Yet, even these depictions cannot quite escape materialist practice and it is this realisation that points to the frame of representation as being the crucial structure for interrogation.

In the Future they ate from the Finest Porcelain (2016) by Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind provides a text through which to draw some further conclusions. Compositing from photography, art installations and film, the project speculates on how archaeology may be used as a process of historical and national intervention. The film itself is presented through an interview between the resistance leader of a self-stylised “narrative terrorist” group and their psychiatrist. The former explains how the group are creating ‘fake’ artefacts of a fictional civilisation that are distributed from airships in bombshells across the country. Upon excavation, the objects will provide material evidence that legitimises the group’s claim (or more accurately, their descendant’s) to the landscape and, *de facto*, create a nation. The leader declares that “we are depositing facts in the ground for future archaeologists to excavate” (00:07:27). The implication that these objects will be unearthed and acknowledged as artefacts thus depends upon the specific cultural framing first identified in Chapter One – that the excavators will recognise and treat these items as being inherently valuable based on the frame of encounter. Such a process reveals the textual identity projected upon materiality, that it is the associated *human* relationship with the object that notionally provides an empirical and unequivocal legitimation to the group’s claim. Yet it is the associated ‘text’ that the group depends upon, their movement necessitates that these objects are ‘read’ within a certain paradigm and situated in a wider, taxonomical context – where the ‘artefacts’ must first sit within the system if they are to disrupt it.

The group’s narrative intervention has overt geopolitical reflections, particularly given the manner in which materiality is used to either corroborate or erase cultural experiences. The ‘fake’ artefacts become a form of authenticating text, implying that it is through the non-human that human experience is recurrently recorded. The leader argues that “myth not only creates fact, it also generates

identification” (00:13:23). The descendant’s association with the ‘fake’ artefacts thus parallels the lost city projections from Chapter Two and the process of chthonic emergence, which looks towards the non-human to verify human experience. When questioned why the group are utilising archaeology as their battleground, the leader posits that: “It was already a frontline. Our rulers built a nation on archaeology. It’s no longer about history. It’s an epistemology, a tool for shaping national imagination” (00:16:49). Excavation becomes a process that galvanises a specific mode of conceptual thinking, one that asks the subject to speculate and associate with an interpolated past. The group utilises imagination as a method that both extends upon and subverts the mutability of material identity. However, this very outlook is intrinsically anthropocentric; not only does such a perspective conceptualise the landscape as a narrative canvas to write human ontology upon, but this equally overlooks the fallibility and impermanence of the very system that it seeks to subvert.

To corroborate this curated narrative, the group manipulate the properties of the artefacts so that any empirical testing will confirm the ‘authenticity’ of the associated text. Their project thus depends upon the moment of contact, specifically the recognition that is encouraged within the human to perceive a certain formation of material ‘identity’. This method approaches the ontological horror of the glitch doppelgänger from Chapter Three, as if these objects can so comprehensively replicate a ‘real’ artefact, does any lingering distinctive quality remain? If the encounter cannot differentiate the ‘fake’ and thus encourages a belief in the fabricated civilisation, the very taxonomic system that the group relies on is challenged – as this is dependent upon human perception, rather than an ‘order of things’ that emerges from the non-human. It is, then, the *process* of encounter that becomes fundamental to the way that materiality is both recognised and engaged.

The distribution of the artefacts equally recalls the interrelation between rubbish, artefacts and the malleability of identity labels from Chapter Four – for these items are intentionally produced to be discarded, so that they are valorised subsequently as artefacts. However, this anticipates, imagines and indeed depends upon a specific framing of recovery; while the group may act as “narrative terrorists” due to their intentional subversion of the rigid empiricism that values fact over fiction, simultaneously they require that the subject encounters the artefacts within a specific framing. The group’s choice of crockery is overtly anthropocentric as it “resonates with our *idea* of the past”; indeed, it is the perception of materiality and history that projects notions of object identity rather than any emergent quality from the non-human (18:00:00, my emphasis). Sansour and Lind’s project highlights the emphasis placed on material culture to act as a form of national or cultural authentication, but in so doing reveals the very textual practice that these ‘fake’ artefacts must not only operate within, but crucially exploit. For indeed, there is little recognition here of alternate encounters, or other ontologies, perceiving the artefacts within a different representative system.

Archaeology is indicative of the processes in which humanity encounters materiality. It is within the frames of representation, then, that anthropocentric outlooks can be challenged – as the textual projection of artefact or rubbish ontology is reflective of human perception rather than non-human reality. Given the immanency of contemporary ecological catastrophes and concerns towards the generation of ‘astro-waste’, it is more important than ever to consider the methods through which humanity meets the world beyond itself. As this thesis has demonstrated, it is not enough to appreciate the inability for human paradigms to conceptualise non-human alterity or to recognise the biases within non-quotidian labelling, but rather I argue it is through literary representation and imagination – which are pushed to their very extreme within

the Weird – that the processes inherent within encounter can be identified, confronted and fundamentally nuanced.

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