



Villa Diodati, 1816.

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Frankenstein Unbound (2014)

If our eyes could penetrate the Earth and see its interior from pole to pole, from where we stand to the antipodes, we would glimpse with horror a mass terribly riddled with fissures and caverns.

Thomas Burnet: *Telluris Theoria Sacra* [1699].

One element of the original *Frankenstein* I always found aesthetically satisfying was the conclusion, in which the mad scientist pursues his creation into the Arctic, the Absolute North, to confront and destroy it. — Though in the end, of course, it is he who dies instead, leaving the Monster to pronounce his elegy.

There is an echo of this denouement — presumably deliberate — in Poe's enigmatic *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which comes to an abrupt conclusion¹ in similar fashion, albeit at the antipodes, with the protagonist delivered unto the threshold of a lost world at the South Pole:

But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.

¹ Jules Verne, who lacked negative capability, wrote a sequel (*An Antarctic Mystery*), apparently to relieve his frustration with Poe for seeming to leave the story unfinished. Alas, this worked no better than one of those theories of gravity that “explain” it by invoking an ether wind.

— full stop, and try to figure what he meant by *that*.

None of this appeared in the first cycle of cinematic adaptations — as indeed did not much else: the Miltonic subtext,² for example, or the remarkable passage in which the Monster, the noblest of Rousseauian savages, teaches himself the use of language, in a manner imitated later by Burroughs' Tarzan, and still later vehemently proscribed by Wittgenstein — but it has crept back into subsequent treatments: the theme of the final pursuit, for instance, was integral to one of my favorite scifi novels, *Frankenstein Unbound* [1974], a rather original treatment of time travel by Brian Aldiss; later given the usual brilliant B-movie adaptation by Roger Corman [1990].

Aldiss casts his protagonist adrift in a temporal landscape fractured by superscientific world war and now composed in equal parts of history and myth; it is not simply the distinction between past and future that has been erased, but also the distinction between the real and the imagined, between authors and their creations. His hero thus finds himself transported to the Switzerland of 1816, where he encounters not only Byron and the Shelleys, but also Mary's Frankenstein, and Frankenstein's own creation, the Monster. — The implication is

² Explicit in *Blade Runner*: the sublime exultation on Batty's face as he descends in the elevator from the summit of the (pyramidal!) arcology where he has slain his God marks the pinnacle of cinematic Satanism, something Blake himself might have written — or painted — (born out of time; what a filmmaker *he* would have made.) — Villeneuve's sequel (*Blade Runner 2049* [2017]) also underscores this theme, portraying Niander Wallace, Tyrell's successor as the Maker of Replicants, as an evil Deity, and suggesting that the uprising we sense to be imminent will be less a political revolution than a revolt of the angels against the order of Heaven. — "This breaks the world!" Robin Wright/Lieutenant Joshi declares, appalled, when she discovers that replicants can breed — for what can be born, within the logic of the film, possesses a soul; implying that the distinction between natural and artificial beings is illusory ("The world is built in a wall that separates kind," she says) — that they too are not dependent on a Maker, but can *create themselves*. (Another definition of consciousness, and related, again, to the question of memory: to be born is to have real memories and not implants.)

that the internal contradiction which has shattered the world in which the protagonist originated was born in this primal scene, of the creation of the Monster, and that his task is to correct it: in the end it is he, not the deranged moral cripple Frankenstein, who pursues the Monster and its mate into the far North, through further temporal discontinuities, to a place which seems to lie in the distant future of a thoroughly fractured cosmos, where the stars have changed and the earth is covered with ice. There though he appears to succeed in destroying the Monster, his triumph is ambiguous — it expires exulting that its creation cannot be undone, that it is truly Unbound — and in the end he approaches a mysterious city — the City at the End of the World, perhaps at the End of Time³ — where, we can guess, the enigmatic gods who have orchestrated these metaphysical adventures — Poe’s shrouded giants, or Stapledon’s Last Men,⁴ or pandimensional beings who look like white mice — will reveal themselves at last and explain What It All Meant.

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Why does it seem natural that time travel should dissolve the distinction between history and fiction? — Because it seems to draw the obvious conclusion: the object of any hypothetical journey into the past is generally to “change” it, and alter (or repair) the present/future; some kind of landscape of possibility, a manifold of possible worlds is thus always implicitly presupposed, and the difficulty, in this universe of discourse, of drawing a distinction between what is real and what can be imagined has already been admitted when you speak, as is usually done, of “rewriting” history; as if it had never been more

³ Not to be confused with *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. — Though in truth who knows.

⁴ Cf. Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, a future history which traces the evolution of the species through eighteen variants and two billion years until the death of the Sun. — Apparently Aldiss read this in 1943, while serving with the British army in Burma.

than a kind of literary production in the first place. Aldiss pushes this only a trifle further by suggesting that the time warp might deposit you neatly in the primal scene of your defining myth.

You can compare the old scifi idea of taking a shortcut to Alpha Centauri (or wherever) by stepping outside the fabric of space and then re-entering it on another fold: this might actually be possible, but it's absurd to suppose you would automatically jump "through hyperspace" to some distant location "right now" — that still means nothing, "now" has been as thoroughly deconstructed as Humpty Dumpty — rather than jumping into the past or future or into some other spatiotemporal (dis)continuum altogether.⁵ — Similarly, to travel in time would be to navigate the manifold of possibility, and aren't novels simply the histories of alternative realities? — Perhaps not, but it takes a suspicious amount of effort to argue the negative.⁶

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Fred Hoyle in *October the First Is Too Late* imagines such a fragmentation, with different historical eras juxtaposed on contiguous areas of the surface of the Earth; the protagonist, a musician and composer, begins in the present but crosses domain boundaries and passes back and forth between modern and early America, ancient Greece, and the distant future. The cause of the fracture is not identified, but hinted to be the work of alien beings — gods at play — who have done something akin to pasting together a set of holographic representations of the distinct eras in an unorthodox fashion — like an editor stitching

⁵ Some string theorists have already drawn the obvious conclusion, that a possible answer to the Fermi question is that all the really advanced races — the gods, if you will — have left for more attractive Lebensraum in other continua. — A more daring conjecture would be that they have departed for realms of myth and legend. If indeed they ever left them.

⁶ Aldiss — who must have read Borges, if not Kripke — does explicitly take the affirmative..

volumes together in Borges' library, or — better — splicing film strips together, as an exercise in cosmological montage — and the spatiotemporal fragmentation is prefigured by an unusual pattern of solar activity.⁷ — Hoyle had recently attended a conference organized by Thomas Gold to address the problem of time in theoretical physics,⁸ and the influence of Gold's ideas is evident.

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*White Christmas (12/21/06)*⁹

... One reason many reviewers seem to have been confused by *Against The Day* may simply be mathematical illiteracy: one theme of the novel, for instance, is the quarrel between the partisans of quaternions and those of vector analysis (the idea of describing three and/or four dimensional space in terms of “higher imaginaries” obviously fascinates Pynchon, and he of course cannot resist burdening it with a considerable load of metaphor), Hamilton's inspiration on the bridge is mentioned repeatedly, relativity is of course a minor obsession (imaginary time), one of the principals ends up leaving the mining country of turn-of-the-century Colorado for Göttingen (thus introducing Hilbert into the plot), another spends a few chapters trying to prove the

⁷ Curiously enough the rupture described in Murray Leinster's famous story “Sideways in Time” [*Astounding Science Fiction*, June, 1934] begins with a sudden increase in solar radiation; exactly like Hoyle's hypothetical device, though I doubt Hoyle ever heard of “Leinster” (aka Will Jenkins) — who also describes the formation of a black hole, long after Schwarzschild but well in advance of Oppenheimer/Snyder [1939].

⁸ At Cornell in 1963. Among those attending were Penrose, Wheeler, and Feynman. The proceedings were published as *The Nature of Time* {Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967}.

⁹ To [RS].

Riemann hypothesis (the Hilbert/Polya idea of associating the zeros with the eigenvalues of a Hermitian operator is invoked), and the principal theme of the entire narrative involves the elaboration of the idea that what happens in the flow of time, reality, history, is a matter as it were of the sheet you've chosen on a Riemann surface and the result, accordingly, of a choice of path around certain branch points — whether you end up finding the legendary lost city of Shambhalla, for instance, can depend on which way you pass through an ancient gate on the old silk road through central Asia. — Which is not to say that I'm comfortable with the overwhelming mass of the thing: Gibson managed to make many of the same points in a short story of a few pages called "The Gernsback Continuum", and it only took an hour or so of *Sky Captain* to get Jude Law and Gwyneth Paltrow all the way to Shambhalla, which Pynchon's heroes never quite manage in a thousand pages. — But if you're entirely ignorant of late nineteenth-century mathematics, even less of this is going to make sense... .

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As for whether all this can actually be translated into plausible physical theory: the short answer is yes. — A slightly longer answer would be that the apparent resemblance of the narrative strategy of Pynchon to more explicitly postmodern metafictional experiments like those of John Barth (who in his later work nearly reduced the idea of the author writing a novel about the author writing a novel to cliché)¹⁰ is only superficial:

¹⁰ Cf. *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* [1991], *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera* [1994], etc. — Perhaps I should note that Heinlein did something similar in *The Number of the Beast*, but I only know the work at second hand; unfortunately Late Heinlein, defined as the period after he became so successful that he could indulge all his own worst tendencies, is essentially unreadable.

postmodernism is nihilistic, completely divorced from reality, and is only concerned with a universe of text, the forms of words; Pynchon (like Hoyle and Aldiss) invokes mathematical ideas and hints that these are not simply logical/linguistic but geometrical possibilities, which is infinitely more provocative. — This is still mythologizing, but it is mythologizing in the spirit of the *Timaeus*.

(Borges, *sui generis*, lies somewhere in between.)

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As for what spoke to me in this novel of Aldiss, that should be obvious: when I first read it I was myself falling apart, fragmented; the idea of a fractured time mirrored the fractured state of my psyche. — At any moment traversing my mental landscape I could cross the wrong boundary¹¹ and find myself lost and disoriented in some region of the past or epoch of fantasy.

Though on the other hand — why not admit it — it was liberating to be unhinged. I too was unbounded and unbound.

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Poe's conclusion suggests the existence of a lost world in the Antarctic — perhaps an entrance to the hollow earth, a world within the world accessible only at the poles.¹² — The most notorious 19th-century proponent of this theory was the American eccentric John Cleves Symmes, Jr., with whose works

¹¹ Literally. I could be listening to the radio, hear the wrong chord change, and be seized by existential vertigo. As if some inner argument had derived a forbidden conclusion.

¹² Here the carping physicist must interject that the gravitational potential inside a spherical shell is constant — see Volume I, Chapter 13 of the *Feynman Lectures on Physics* — and if there really were a world like Burroughs' Pellucidar within a hollow earth, everything there would be weightless.

[1818 et seq.] Poe was probably familiar. — He seems also have been inspired by the *Mundus Subterraneus* of Athanasius Kircher, an astonishing exercise of the imagination¹³ which had painted a fantastic picture of the interior of the planet:¹⁴

¹³ Athanasius Kircher, *Mundus Subterraneus*. Amsterdam: “Apud Joannem Janssonium à Waesberge & Filios”, 1678. — The proximate cause of Kircher’s fascination with the subject appears to have been a descent into the crater of Vesuvius, and his hypotheses regarding the origins of vulcanism, at least, turned out to be more or less correct.

¹⁴ P. 186.



Systema ideale
 QVO EXPRIMITUR AQUARUM
 per Canales hydraulicos subterraneos
 ex mare et in montium hydrophylacia
 per totius mundi circuitum

Aquis centrali A. undiq; et undiq; per peragoge canali ex latitudine spiritus ignis fundit: ha hydrophylaciae impacta, partim in thermas disponit partim in vapores attenuat qui concavorum antrocorum spiraculis effluunt, frigore loci condensati in aquas demum, vestigia vitae rursus generant: partim in aëre divergorum mineralium evocati sicut mater, et demum in metallicis corpori coalescunt, aut in poram combustibilem materiam, quae spiritus nutritivum desinitur. Videt hic quod quicquid, illis vapore et terra vel ignem motum, aquae per subterraneos canales in aëre montium hydrophylaciae peritur. Sed figurae hae hinc docent, quod quicquid, aquae per subterraneos canales, in aëre montium hydrophylaciae peritur, hinc docent, quod quicquid, aquae per subterraneos canales, in aëre montium hydrophylaciae peritur.

In particular “A Descent into the Maelström” appears to refer to the hypothetical northern sinkhole that drained water into the interior of the Earth, and the complementary source that was supposed to lie in the Antarctic is apparently alluded to in “MS. Found In A Bottle”; in which the narrator ends up on a Flying Dutchman heading into a whirlpool at the South Pole.

(As for *why* Kircher may have wanted to ensure an interior passage between the poles: he probably was disturbed by the topological intuition that a smooth flow on the surface of a sphere is impossible without singularities; on a torus, however, there is no such problem, water could enter at one pole and exit at the other, moreover this idea seemed to provide a theory of the tides and a mechanism to explain the Biblical Flood. — At any rate Fauno Lancaster Cordes conjectures in her comprehensive bibliography of Antarctic fiction¹⁵ that Kircher was the first to hypothesize a world within the Earth.)

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The image of the labyrinthine interior of the earth is an image of the labyrinthine interior of consciousness: another doubling, of the surface, a sort of internal mirror in which the world, or the Ego, can regard itself; of course properly there should be an infinite series of interiors,¹⁶ like Kane’s reflections as he walks through the mirrored halls of Xanadu.

So the appropriate conclusion to the tale of Frankenstein, as to that of Arthur Gordon Pym, would be the pursuit of the Monster

¹⁵ “Tekeli-li” or *Hollow Earth Lives*, [<http://www.antarctic-circle.org/fauno.htm>].

¹⁶ Symmes drew maps of the interior with four or five concentric spheres, but really, why stop there. — In a similar vein one might wonder why Dante stopped at nine circles in Hell; human depravity is clearly limitless.

— whom we already begin to see is a kind of phantom Double — into a labyrinth of mirrors. (And a myriad of duplicates.)

But of course that is just Welles again, the conclusion to *Lady From Shanghai*.¹⁷

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Borges on Poe and mirrors:

It is truly awful that there are mirrors; I have always been terrified by mirrors. I think that Poe felt it too. There is an essay of his, one of the least known, on the decoration of rooms. One of the conditions he insists on is that the mirrors be placed in such a way that a seated person is not reflected. This tells us his fear of seeing himself in the mirror. We see it in his story “William Wilson” about the double, and also in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, where there is an Antarctic tribe, and a man from that tribe sees a mirror for the first time and collapses, horrified. We are accustomed to mirrors, but there is something terrifying in that visual duplication of reality.¹⁸

And in the duplication of ourselves, most of all. — Should we conclude then that this is the negative image of Frankenstein, the south opposed to the north, and that Poe — a self-destructive character whose career reminds us of what Bloom said about *Frankenstein*, that “all Romantic horrors are diseases of excessive

¹⁷ Quoted more times than one can count, but I particularly loved what Bruce Lee did with it in *Enter the Dragon*. — “Now, you must remember: the enemy has only images and illusions behind which he hides his true motive. Destroy the image and you will break the enemy.”

¹⁸ “Poetry.” In *Seven Nights*, translated by Eliot Weinberger. New York: New Directions, 1984. — Elsewhere Borges remarks that he considers *Pym* to be Poe’s greatest work.

consciousness, of the self unable to bear the self”¹⁹ — is fleeing rather than pursuing himself? that when he encounters the labyrinth of mirrors he is struck dumb with terror, and thus the novel must be abandoned in midsentence?

Better perhaps to say this: that the nature of the Self is a mystery, that to pretend to resolve it would be an act of bad faith, and the only honest conclusion is to accept the enigma. Because Poe understood that the limits of his language were the limits of his world — and thus, of course, the other way around. There is the inexpressible, and it is a shrouded human figure, whose skin is of the perfect whiteness of the snow.

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In Magritte’s “Not To Be Reproduced” [1937], within a frame a man is depicted with his back to the viewer, looking into a mirror in which — his back is also to the viewer. The joke within the joke is that we can see a book on the shelf beneath the mirror reflected normally. This is, but of course, a French edition of Poe’s *Pym*.

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There is a remarkably daring shot — this was the Stone Age of cinematography — in the 1910 Edison *Frankenstein* (probably the first — certainly the earliest surviving — cinematic interpretation of the story) — in which the Monster enters upon an unsuspecting Frankenstein and makes his first appearance *reflected in a mirror*.

This idea is echoed and reinforced in the scene of the Monster’s demise — in which, in the same setting, the Monster enters alone

¹⁹ Introduction to *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Harold Bloom, 2009.

— having pro forma barged in upon his creator’s wedding night²⁰ but for some reason *not* killed the bride²¹ — sees himself in the mirror — is stricken with horror²² — and vanishes; leaving, however, his reflection, still staring aghast back into the room. — Frankenstein then enters in pursuit, runs to the mirror, looks into it — sees the Monster, not himself — recoils — and then it vanishes. (“Overcome by Love,” suggests the title. Well, there is melodramatic convention for you.) He sees now his own reflection. The nightmare has ended.

²⁰ It might seem a trifle too cute a coincidence that the Monster should return from his wanderings and turn up precisely on Frankenstein’s wedding night, but viewing this with the inverted causal perspective of the film historian, I am reminded of the original screenplay for *Creature From the Black Lagoon*, Freudian with malice aforethought, in which every time the male and female leads start pawing one another the Creature makes a surprise entrance to break up the clinch.

²¹ The composition here echoes Fuseli’s *The Nightmare* [1781]. The painting is thought to have influenced Mary Shelley’s original portrayal of the scene. — It is also, unsurprisingly, the theme of the poster for Ken Russell’s *Gothic* [1986], the best film about Byron, the Shelleys, and the origins of *Frankenstein*.

²² Inevitably reminding me of the mantra of the mentor-figure Professor Spielman in Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy*: “Self-knowledge is always bad news.”





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The canonical treatment of this theme, however, is that of *The Student of Prague* [written by Hanns Heinz Ewers, directed by Stellan Rye, 1913]; a film Otto Rank found so profoundly disturbing that he wrote a book about it²³ — the first and still the greatest essay in film criticism; though since at that point in cinematic history there wasn't that much film to write about, his illustrations for the most part came from literature.

The story goes as follows: the eponymous Student,²⁴ a ne'er-do-well who has squandered his patrimony on liquor and whores, is morosely practicing his fencing moves before a large mirror, nearly the only unpawned furnishing left in his barren rooms, when he receives a visit from a mysterious (and of course diabolical) Stranger, who offers limitless wealth on the condition that he be permitted to take anything he wants from the premises. The Student laughs, indicating the empty chambers, and readily agrees; signs the inevitable Contract, if not in blood; and is then astounded when the Stranger points at the mirror, beckons to the Student's reflection, and it follows him out. — There follow a series of misadventures in which the Student, despite his newfound riches, finds his efforts to improve his social position by marrying into the nobility thwarted by the

²³ *Der Doppelgänger: Eine Psychoanalytische Studie*. Leipzig, Vienna, and Zürich: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1925. Translated by Harry Tucker, Jr. as *The Double, A Psychoanalytical Study*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971. — According to his prefatory notes Rank first discussed its themes in a paper of 1914, i.e. shortly after the film first appeared; clearly he was an early cinephile.

²⁴ Played by Paul Wegener, later writer/director/monster of the equally famous *Der Golem* [1920].

interference of the Doppelgänger, who keeps turning up at inappropriate moments. — Finally when he's challenged to a duel by the erstwhile fiancé of the countess he's been pursuing, even though he has agreed to spare his opponent the Double gets to the killing ground first, slays his hapless rival, and ruins his romantic prospects. — Things devolve rapidly thereafter, and the Student has loaded his pistol and is putting the finishing touches to his suicide note when the Double makes a final appearance. The Student shoots him instead, uncovers a mirror to verify that his reflection is back where it belongs, and at that instant feels a pain in his chest. Collapsing, he expires. — The Stranger makes an entrance, tears the contract up over the corpse, and departs, smirking. — The final scene shows the Double sitting on the student's grave; accompanied by the raven which is the Stranger's familiar.

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Rank dismisses the simplest interpretation of the scenario — that the Student is haunted by his past, which he cannot escape — and discusses various precursors and parallels, notably in the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann, but also in Poe, Maupassant, Dostoevsky, Stevenson's Jekyll/Hyde, and Wilde's Dorian Gray (who has a Borgesian fear of mirrors). He points out that Hoffmann's obsession with the theme probably derived from Jean Paul, with whom it seems to have originated among the Romantics; notes that Jean Paul was steeped in Fichte and transcendental idealism, lived in fear of insanity, and had an unhealthy fixation on the problem of the Ego, dating from a childhood flash of insight — "I am an *I*" — which haunted him ever afterward. — Rank notes that most of the authors he cites had deviant characteristics and divided personalities and were accordingly obsessed with the question of personal identity, but that even Goethe, in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, relates a story of encountering his own double which sounds like a sort of

precognitive out-of-body experience. — Finally, and predictably, he falls back on psychoanalytic categories of explanation, and attempts to reduce everything to narcissism: self-love and the fear of death, he suggests, motivate the doubling of the self. — Later still (in a paper titled “The Double as Immortal Self”) he appealed to the idea of duality, and the primitive conception of person/shadow.

Which isn't quite right, though it's close.

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Rank notes the connection between conceptions of the soul and shadows/reflections; that there is an idea of the soul as a copy of the body, thus the image in the mirror makes the disturbing suggestion that there can be more than one copy. — To which of course compare the primitive fear of the photographic image.

There is a cosmological correlate: “Proclus reports one more significant genethliac myth concerning Dionysus: he is said to have looked at himself in the mirror forged by Hephaistos and, *led astray by this image*, to have created all things.” — Compare an idea one might attribute to Wheeler, that the universe came into being by a (quantum-mechanical) measurement of its own state.

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Kracauer²⁵ emphasizes, correctly, that the early Expressionist films, *The Student of Prague*, *Homunculus*, *The Golem*, *Caligari*, all reflect an anxiety about the foundations of the self, and tries to explain it, unconvincingly, as a reaction to the instability of the social order. But, as Rank had already pointed out, it antedates

²⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946.]

the historical context of the Weimar cinema, and indeed cinema itself. So clearly its roots lie deeper.

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It makes sense that in soap opera, a serial genre which made impossible demands of its writers with respect to quantity and variety of invention, that every conceivable plot device would sooner or later have been seized upon and relentlessly exploited until it was reduced to cliché, and the theme of the Double was no exception; there it became the familiar trick of replacing a character, generally some Goody Two-Shoes, with his or her Evil Twin — the literal mirror image, the inversion, the opposite of the original — not infrequently by invoking that other hoary cliché, amnesia. This provided an excuse for innumerable plot twists and reversals of expectation, and gave the actors a welcome vacation from the constraints of their normal roles, but eventually became a standing joke.

But like any good joke it raises a serious — an ontological — question: what prevents you from suddenly turning into someone else? even into your opposite? — Because after all, *why not?* — What if there were a break in your memory? What necessity entails that it be continuous? What differentiates lived experience from merely *acting a role*?

If you are both subject and *that* object, the one you see in the mirror, then what prevents that object from housing a *different* subject? What makes your subjectivity unique? single-valued? How do you *know* that you're not someone else?

The Student sees his Double as uncanny because it proves he doesn't know *who he is*.

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There is a famous passage in *The Maltese Falcon* in which Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy the story of a successful businessman named Flitcraft who had disappeared one day, leaving behind family and fortune, without explanation. — “He went like that,” Spade said, ‘like a fist when you open your hand.’ — It turns out the reason for his disappearance had been a near-death experience, a freak accident which had caused a radical disconnect, a rupture as it were of the Self from the Self — a severing of Self from History — and precipitated his sudden departure: Flitcraft had seen, in a flash, that nothing connects one moment to the next.²⁶ It is significant that this is the kind of case that would usually be explained by the narrative device of amnesia²⁷ — loss of memory, of continuity of consciousness — but Hammett sees that a more radical explanation is possible: that one could at any moment, at least in principle, *become someone else*. — This is paranoia beyond even Hume: the subversion of the *principium individuationis*.²⁸

In Cartesian terms: if what I think is who I am, what prevents me from thinking something else? and thus becoming someone else? What segregates *these* thoughts from other, *alien* thoughts?²⁹

Hammett's moral restores natural necessity, however — as Wittgenstein said, the philosopher's terror is always artificial, a

²⁶ Sartre might call this a realization of human freedom, but that would miss Hammett's point completely: freedom is the capacity to define oneself without constraint; Flitcraft saw that *definitions are meaningless*.

²⁷ E.g., in Cornell Woolrich, who made a career of contriving such scenarios. — Alcoholic blackout is a variant; see Mailer's film noir, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* [1987].

²⁸ Though when you think about it the identity of objects from one moment to the next presents the same kind of problem as crossworld identity; and if objects, then subjects as well. I don't recall that Quine admitted this.

²⁹ ²⁹ As that noted band of schizophrenics Pink Floyd put it, “There's someone in my head, but it's not me.”

kind of play-acting — and is therefore strangely reassuring: after knocking about for a few years, Flitcraft ended up living almost exactly as he had before: married, successful in business, a suburban homeowner. Without even noticing it he had *become himself* again. — The thread that connects the present consciousness to its past is stronger than it looks. The Self is not *that much* of an illusion.

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“I am, I know, and I will,” says Augustine. “I am a being which knows and wills; I know both that I am and that I will; and I will both to be and to know. In these three — being, knowledge, and will — there is one inseparable life, one life, one mind, one essence; and therefore, although they are distinct from one another, the distinction does not separate them.”³⁰

But I don’t know why or who I am, I am profoundly ignorant and strangely irresolute, and I didn’t wish myself into existence and can’t learn what I want to know. — All this is founded in mystery. — Moreover my will is free. And if I can at any moment *choose* to do anything, then I can at any moment *become* anyone, who *knows* completely different things. — Really, this is terrifying.

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The human condition is usually interpreted within the moral universe, and so the question becomes: what distinguishes the good guy from the bad guy? Why can’t one turn into the other?

This question is implicit in much of detective fiction — what if Holmes flipped his polarity? well, Moriarty — and film noir inherited it from Expressionism,

³⁰ *Confessions* XIII.11. He applies this insight to the mystery of the Trinity.

Within the framework of the murder mystery *per se*, the logical conclusion — the one that lays bare the root of the ontological dilemma, the problem of Oedipus — is the mystery in which the investigator, without knowing it, seeks himself. — In *Angel Heart* [Alan Parker, 1987; based on a novel of William Hjortsberg], set in the early Fifties, Mickey Rourke plays a traumatized war veteran turned private investigator who has used the cloak of PTSD to disguise one half of himself from the other: before the war he made a pact with the Devil, and then tried to weasel out of the deal by using a voodoo ritual to transfer his soul into another body — the one he now cohabits with the detective, whom Lucifer himself has hired to track the missing person down. — No surprise, this ends badly.

In film noir and its (innumerable) derivatives, instances are various. — In *Fight Club* [David Fincher, 1999], obviously, Brad Pitt is to Edward Norton exactly as the mirror image is to the Student of Prague. — In *Face/Off* [John Woo, 1997], Good Guy John Travolta and Bad Guy Nicolas Cage surgically exchange faces³¹ and engage in a series of contests and confrontations, the most dramatic a gunfight in which they abruptly come face to face — not with one another, but with their reflections in a two-sided mirror which stands between them. Each sees the face of his deadly enemy and instantly fires at the reflection; shattering the mirror, though not (as a particle physicist would think appropriate) annihilating one other in the process. — Otto Rank meets Gun Fu. — But best of all, undoubtedly, is Charlie Kaufman's postmodern joke in *Adaptation* [Spike Jonze, 2002], a scenario about writing a scenario: that his double is also a screenwriter, but one who can write something commercial. The

³¹ Here ruptures the suspension of disbelief. — I would say that even the soaps never thought of this one, but that would be too hasty, it was probably the theme of three seasons of *Days of Our Lives*.

Academy may or may not have got it, but they presented the Oscar jointly to Charlie and his imaginary twin.³²

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The classic treatment of the theme of anxiety about the nature of the Self in the science fiction cinema is Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956]³³ — in which, famously, the inhabitants of a California town are one by one replaced by simulacra grown in cocoon-like pods,³⁴ presumably the instruments of an alien invasion; the transfer process bears an uncanny resemblance to the conclusion of Hesse's *Journey to the East*,³⁵ the replacements though not precisely zombies and superficially normal in appearance and behavior somehow seem to have lost their souls.

³² Even if it was accidental it served poetic justice that the lead here, as in *Face/Off*, was played by Nicolas Cage.

³³ Possibly inspired by Heinlein's novel *The Puppet Masters* [1951], though it transcends it.

³⁴ The pods, like childhood monsters, are in "the basement"; it is difficult to process how peculiarly *suburban* this horror is; something about the way the camera peers down the stairs to pose the question, What's around the corner. (And how is it that as I write this aside I am seized by memories of the cellars of the houses I inhabited in my all-too-suburban childhood??)

³⁵ "Inside the figures I saw something moving, slowly, extremely slowly, in the same way that a snake moves which has fallen asleep. Something was taking place there, something like a very slow, smooth but continuous flowing or melting; indeed, something melted or poured across from my image to that of Leo's. I perceived that my image was in the process of adding to and flowing into Leo's, nourishing and strengthening it. It seemed that, in time, all the substance from one image would flow into the other and only one would remain: Leo. He must grow, I must disappear." — Hermann Hesse, *The Journey to the East*, transl. Hilda Rosner, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961.

Thus real people have — somehow — been replaced by persons answering their description.³⁶

Superficially this might be read, as it often has been, as some kind of parable of Cold War paranoia — What Happens When The Communists Take Over. But it also reads as a film noir (the cinematography certainly demands that interpretation),³⁷ and in fact the real questions the film raises are not political, not even epistemological, but ontological: What is the soul? What is missing in the Turing test? If I were replaced by a simulacrum perfectly replicating my description, could anyone tell the difference? Could even “I” tell the difference? — If I don’t know *why* I am, can I know *who* I am?

Or, as Rank might put it: what if you look into the mirror, and someone else is there?

{...}

To recapitulate, the elements are these: the pursuit, the mad scientist, the Monster, the ends of the earth. And what are they?

³⁶ The belief that someone with whom one is intimately acquainted has been replaced by an identical impostor is a textbook disorder called Capgras delusion, associated with paranoid schizophrenia and some types of brain injury. (Hmmm....)

³⁷ The poster shot, as one might put it, occurs in a scene in which the protagonist and his love interest have escaped the town and taken refuge in a cave: exhausted from the chase, they struggle not to fall asleep; he steps out for a moment to investigate a noise and returns to find she has dozed off; kisses her to revive her, recoils in horror and dismay — here was the definitive Turing test — her face is displayed in exquisite noir lighting, her eyes open, and with an exchange of looks it is instantly established that, while she slumbered, she too has been replaced. It would not be an exaggeration to call this one of the most arresting moments in all of cinema. — Siegel himself said the theme of the film was “the stranger in your lover’s eyes,” and unlike amnesia this is, unfortunately, a nearly universal experience: the sudden realization that someone with whom you have been intimate, someone you thought you knew as well as you knew yourself, has inexplicably become an alien. — Indeed Siegel’s son speculates that his father’s painful divorce from Viveca Lindfors may have motivated the story.

The mad scientist is the spirit of unbridled inquiry, about which there is always something satanic.³⁸ Mephistopheles says “I am the spirit who always negates,” meaning, the critical spirit, the spirit that questions. — In the *Blegðamsvel Faust*, this role is assumed by Pauli. — This is the spirit willing to ask forbidden questions, viz. “What is life?”

And it is of its essence that it never gives up the quest, never ceases the pursuit. — Odysseus cannot retire in Ithaca; Faust will die trying to win land from the sea; Frankenstein must expire on the ice.

The Monster is the phantom Double, a Doppelgänger, an image of self-actualization.³⁹ There is an old cartoon joke, a horse tricked into drawing a cart by a carrot dangling from a string in front of its nose; here we must picture a mirror dangled in front of a narcissist. — “I have sought for myself,” said Heraclitus. Nietzsche was his echo.

The ends of the earth are the limits of language, of the expressible — the boundary beyond which lies the Arctic desert of the real, the in-itself:

After all, one man, trying for the Pole, in the dead of winter. They thought I was insane. Possibly I was, by that time. But I had to reach it. I had begun to think that there, at one of the only two motionless places on this gyrating world, I might have peace to solve

³⁸ Tony Stark to Bruce Banner: “We’re mad scientists. We’re *monsters*, buddy. We’ve got to own it.”

³⁹ Narrative logic is most clearly exposed in parody, and thus it is not surprising that only in Brooks’ *Young Frankenstein* is the only conceivable happy ending imagined: one in which the Monster and his creator achieve a synthesis. (This idea must have originated with Gene Wilder, since it appears in his original screenplay.)

Vheissu's riddle. Do you understand? I wanted to stand in the dead center of the carousel, if only for a moment..... I'd begun to dig a cache nearby, after planting the flag. The barrenness of that place howled about me, like a country the demiurge had forgotten. There could have been no more lifeless and empty place anywhere on earth. Two or three feet down I struck clear ice. A strange light, which seemed to move within it, caught my attention..... If Eden was the creation of God, God only knows what evil created Vheissu. The skin which had wrinkled through my nightmares was all there had ever been. Vheissu itself, a gaudy dream. Of what the Antarctic in this world is closest to: a dream of annihilation.

[Thomas Pynchon: *V.*]

On this reading the resolution of the problem of identity, the reduction of the duality, the synthesis of Self and Double, is in all likelihood the merger of particle and antiparticle: a mutual annihilation. — This is the wisdom of Oedipus, and of film noir. Like the man said, self-knowledge is always bad news.

{...}

But does that matter? Do you ever get there? Here I am in the distant south, brought here by the pursuit of a woman who turned out herself to be a phantom double; diverted into — well, we're still trying to figure that out.....bewitched by a reflection that vanished and left me looking — for what? I don't know, but I'm still looking for something. The object may change, but the pursuit continues. The cat fades away, but the grin remains.

Because what am I asking here? Am I trying to figure out what happened to the woman, or what phantasm I should next pursue,

or whether there is a portal open further to the south that leads into an inner world of dinosaurs and cave girls in skins?

{...}

Why the Double? — Nietzsche (*Late Notebooks* 34[87]): “We *imagine* that what is commanding and highest resides in our consciousness. Ultimately we have a double brain: we encompass in the word ‘consciousness’ our capacity *itself* to *will, feel, and think* something of our own willing, feeling, and thinking.” — But perhaps even better this: in the lambda calculus, the trick with which the Y-combinator

$$Y = \text{Lf.}(\text{Lx.f(x(x))})(\text{Lx.f(x(x))})$$

defines recursion involves a doubling. — Is this wired in all the way down? I think it must be.

And leave it at that.

