At every Underground stop, people climb to the surface, emerge into the light of day, but the train goes on, the circulation continues, the Circle Line providing a visual and conceptual magnet for the way the city stays alive by pumping flows of energy around the system. At the end of the line this fiction dissolves; it is not only people but the place itself that releases its grip on the idea of the city as a closed system.


Turning away from the rationalisation of time and space represented by the Tube Map, Rod Mengham and photographer Marc Atkins set out to chart the region where this pattern most obviously unravels. In their photo-essay ‘The End of the Line’, termini on the Central, District, Metropolitan and Jubilee are shown to burrow into other organisations of space, or even into entirely different times, ‘portals into something other than the idea of the city we automatically link them with’. At the western extremity Uxbridge is entombed in a future remembered by all who were teenagers in the 1960s. Stanmore is paralysed at a fixed point in the history of the Underground’s development: ‘Passengers climbing up and down the hill traverse the strata of transport archaeology, with the prehistory of railway heritage’. And in Richmond, there is a peculiar overgrown patch of ground between the buffers and the end of the track: ‘This small deposit of neglect, with its little pockets of chalk and the different-sized gravels, has accumulated indifference at specific moments of alteration and redefinition: it is a transport midden, a municipal burnt mound; by-product of energies that were focused elsewhere’. Mengham concludes that this overlapping of materials, constantly revised by the superimposing of new layers, provides an even better insight into the historical process than the more striking anachronisms at Uxbridge and Morden: ‘the evidence of powerplay is not enshrined in the canonical details of a metal-framed clerestory, or an abstracted Egyptian façade; it is preserved in a pile of detritus’.

This emphasis on the marginal aspects of a place is a feature of psychogeography. The term was invented by the Lettrists, forerunners of the Situationist International, to describe the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment on the emotions and behaviour of individuals, and gained currency in the early nineties through work by London-based writers Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd. Originally a reaction to the renovation of Paris in the post-war period, it is no coincidence that the psychogeographical project should have resurfaced in London in the wake of the urban regeneration initiated in the Thatcher Era. As Phil Baker observes, psychogeography represents a last-ditch attempt to resist the erasure of place by space: ‘It accompanied an alienation of an almost unprecedented kind from the built environment, responding to anxieties perhaps definitively expressed in Marc Augé’s book Non-places.’ This is why psychogeography takes refuge in interstitial zones of private meaning and esoteric knowledge, privileging aspects of place that are not reducible to economics: to maintain a psychic investment in the street. ‘Its overlap with histories and myths of place is a further way of gaining a purchase on the inhospitable environment of the metropolis. People want to inscribe marks and find traces in the city, like the stories they used to tell about the stars and constellations, in order to feel more at home in an indifferent universe.’

In practice this means that writers must have recourse to the trope of the uncanny. ‘Only ghosts, after all, can walk through walls, breach the boundaries of the increasingly privatized zones of the city, and shimmer impossibly between past and present Londons’, writes Roger Luckhurst. According to architecture historian Anthony Vidler the more ruthless the modern speculative
transformation of the city, the more likely it is that suppressed history will return as the uncanny in the wasted margins and surfaces of post-industrial culture: ‘in contemporary architecture, the incessant reference to avant-garde techniques devoid of their originating ideological impulse, the appearance of a fulfilled aesthetic revolution stripped of its promise of social redemption, at least approximates the conditions that, it Freud’s estimation, are ripe for uncanny sensations’.[11] Recent interest in the uncanny as a metaphor for our fundamentally unliveable urban condition may therefore result from the fact that ‘within many of the projects that pretend to a radical disruption of cultural modes of expression, there still lurks the ghost of avant-garde politics, one that is proving difficult to exorcise entirely.’[12]

Perhaps this is why the network is so often featured in psychogeographical material. As one of the earliest modernist spaces, the London Underground is a prominent symbol of urban alienation – but one that remains peculiarly open to forgotten places with tremendous myth-making potential.[13] As Mengham points out, there are forty ghost-stations in the city-centre alone: ‘repositories of gloom, amplifying the distant vibrations, allaying the slight breezes that pulse through the labyrinth, to decelerate as they get further and further away from the rushing air of tunnels where the trains still run’. [14] Resisting the panoptic rational pattern embodied by the Map of the Underground, these abandoned stations excite our imagination because we see in them the working of forces hitherto unsuspected in the modern city, but which we are aware of in some remote corner of our own being: they speak to our condition as ghosts in the machine, our sense that we haunt rather than inhabit the modern city.[15] This essay will suggest that the primary theme in millennial film and fiction set on the London Underground is the possibility that there may be some power in our status as Unheimlich.

The possibility that other times and places might exist somewhere in the darkness between stations is the premise of the fantasy television-series *Neverwhere* (1996). Based on an idea by comedian Lenny Henry, with a script by novelist Neil Gaiman, music by Brian Eno, opening titles by artist Dave McKean, and performances from Laura Fraser, Hywel Bennett, and Paterson Joseph, the series is surely one of the most unusual ever produced by the BBC.[16] ‘There are little bubbles of old time in London, where things and places stay the same, like bubbles in amber,’ explains one character. ‘There’s a lot of time in London, and it has to go somewhere — it doesn’t all get used up at once’. [17] Astonishingly, most of these bubbles of old time in the city are entirely real. According to Gaiman, the producers were simply making the most of a low budget. Unable to build large sets, they were compelled to film in striking subterranean locations never seen before on screen. Serpentine’s dinner-party, for instance, takes place on the platform of the ghost-station at Down Street; and the miniature tube-train in which Mr Croup and Mr Vandemar hunt down the unfortunate Varney is on the former Post Office Railway. The series itself is an object lesson in how easily such forgotten places in the capital can be taken over by the Unheimlich.

Having fallen through the cracks over millennia, these fragments of time have entered the subterranean realm of the lost and forgotten, called London Below. Invisible to the surface-folk, its citizens are divided into rival baronies and fiefdoms, haunted by rat-speakers, vampires, and a solitary angel. Significantly, these mythical creatures are, for the most part, inspired by names from that pre-eminently rational space, the Tube Map: there is an order of black friars, and there is an earl’s court (which moves about in a tube-train, feasting on coke and chocolate snatched from vending-machines whenever his baronial hall happens to stop at a station). Gaiman has exploited the fact that these richly resonant names, cut loose from whatever they once signified, have been rendered potentially uncanny by the clinical whiteness in which they float: ‘an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced,’ Freud observed, ‘as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes’. [18]
Significantly, the protagonist enters this uncanny realm by becoming homeless. Richard Mayhew lives a boring but comfortable existence with his fiancée Jessica until the night he sees a young homeless girl bleeding to death on the street, and stops to help her. This act of charity costs Richard his life. He wakes up on Monday morning to find that no one can see him—his friends cannot remember him, his credit cards do not work, his flat is repossessed. Richard seeks help from the homeless girl he saved, but learns that she is in trouble herself, hunted by an engaging pair of psychopaths, called Mr Croup and Mr Vandemar. Richard is now a non-person, one of the ‘people who fell through the cracks in the world’. In order to win his life back he must obtain a magical key for an angel called Islington, reputed to live at the heart of the labyrinth of alleys and roads and corridors and sewers that have fallen into the world of the lost and forgotten over millennia: and the key can only be taken by one who passes though an Ordeal.

Having fallen this far into wonderland it is a tremendous shock to find that the Ordeal is nothing other than reality. Richard sees his reflection in the window of a tube-train in Blackfriars Station: ‘He looked crazy; he had a week’s growth of beard; food was crusted around his mouth and in his beard; one eye had recently been blackened, and a boil, an angry red carbuncle, was coming up on the side of his nose; he was filthy, covered in black, encrusted dirt which filled his pores and lived under his fingernails; his eyes were bleary, his hair was matted and snarled. He was a crazy homeless person, standing on a platform of a busy Underground station, in the heart of the rush hour.’ In a savage sequence of jump-cuts, freeze-frames, fast-forwards, and flash-backs, Richard is told by a doppelganger who claims to represent whatever is left of his mind, that this is the closest to sanity he has been in a week, pointing out just how ludicrous the story-line has become by this point. Undercutting the suspension of disbelief slowly engineered over the course of the previous episodes, Gaiman breaks the one rule of the fantasy genre: and the result is devastating. ‘I wandered, alone and crazy, through the streets of London, sleeping under bridges, eating food from bins and skips’, intones the other Richard. ‘Shivering and lost and alone. Muttering to myself, talking to people who weren’t there ...’. Kicked and buffeted by commuters in the London Underground, Richard’s profound alienation, his status as a non-person, is forcibly impressed upon him by the space itself.

Then the Underground tempts him with the promise that he can once again belong. His former fiancée calls to him from a poster over the track; his former best-friend throws one of the plastic trolls Richard used to collect onto the third-rail; ‘if he could only get the troll back, perhaps he could get everything back’. The viewer is suddenly aware that all the posters in the tube-station are telling Richard to commit suicide: ‘HAVE A FATAL ACCIDENT TODAY’. Crawling to the platform’s edge, Richard realises he wants to belong again, even if that means becoming ‘an incident at Blackfriars station’. ‘The train was coming towards him, its headlights shining out of the tunnel like the eyes of a monstrous dragon in a childhood nightmare. And he understood then just how little effort it would take to make the pain stop — to take all the pain he ever had had, all the pain he ever would have, and make it all go away for ever and ever.’ Richard is ultimately saved by the memory of the heroism displayed by a homeless girl. Refusing to accept the logic of a consumer-society that says he has no right to exist, Richard holds fast to his condition of alienation: and thereby wins ‘the key to all reality’.

This is a recurring theme in subsequent material set in the London Underground. Homelessness is invariably the key to the uncanny realm. For instance, in the movie Creep (2004), Franka Potente is pursed through the uncanny spaces beneath the capital by a mutant raised in a long-forgotten government institution (perhaps the veneful ghost of the botched welfare state? an aborted Blitz Baby?) soon after encountering a homeless couple in the tube-station at Charing Cross. In the final shot of the movie, Potente is herself mistaken for a homeless girl by a commuter, as she slumps exhausted on the platform by a stray dog. According to Julian Wolfreys, ‘the Freudian uncanny relies on the literal meaning and the slippage of, and within, the German unheimlich, meaning
literally “unhomely”.[28] Perhaps the homeless represent, in its most extreme form, the unhomely condition of the modern capital. As Marc Augé said of beggars in the Paris Metro, ‘All moorings broken and with their only link to the world the scribbled text at their feet (sometimes written directly on the ground), they symbolize by way of negation and to the point of dizziness the whole social order, terribly concrete and terribly complete — black holes in our daily galaxy’. [29] The homeless are the human-resources that the state and market cannot use. They are the End of the Line. They are the point from which we can survey our society in its entirety and the gap within the structures we mistakenly believe to be unities, complete, whole, and undifferentiated. [30] They are the representatives of ‘the gods and the dead’. [31] In offering alms we simultaneously acknowledge our kinship with them and reinforce our sense of separation, paying off the powers that rule this space so that life can continue. Thus in Seamus Heaney’s District and Circle (2006), the poet offers alms to secure safe passage through earth scarred by recent terrorist atrocities:

I’d trigger and untrigger a hot coin
Held at the ready, but now my gaze was lowered
For was our traffic not in recognition?
Accorded passage, I would re-pocket and nod,
And he, still eyeing me, would also nod. [32]

Perhaps the most skilful portrayal of the homeless as a portal to the urban uncanny is Tobias Hill’s Underground (1999). The protagonist Ariel Casimir is a Polish immigrant who works in the London Underground because he believes that there is a feeling of control in the tunnels and halls, ‘their light and air and even life rationed out’, which enables him to feel that the darkness in his own history is under control — ‘It is something he needs, the control’. [33]

The Underground starts out perfect. At first it isn’t like the city above it because it is conceived all at once. Everything must be created, heat and passage of air. For the engineers and architects it begins as a perfect technical form. Then years go by — decades. Cross-tunnels are found to be unnecessary, so they are bricked up. Deeper tunnels are added by the government, then closed down. Limestone comes through the concrete as if it were muslin. Up above, communications die out. Stations are abandoned. ... The Underground becomes a reflection of the city above — organic, not perfect. Full of small animals and weak plants. Good hiding places, and places that are dangerous. [34]

These hiding places are soon occupied by those sheltering from the cold or the police. Their graffiti and posters cover the walls, their music echoes in the empty tunnels. Casimir can sympathise with them: ‘he knows homelessness in himself, years old, still felt as if the bones are indelibly stained inside him?’ [35] But he knows only too well that the tunnels can be an unsafe hiding place: ‘There is always the way the Underground can contain things, trapping them in its corners, hiding them, making them stronger’. Against his better judgement, Casimir is drawn to this souterrain, ‘all snickets and pope-holes’. [37] Fascinated with a beautiful white-haired homeless girl, Casimir tracks her through neglected cross-passages to the abandoned station at South Kentish Town, where rows of tiny stalactites hang from the platform’s lip: ‘Now it feels more like a great natural cave than a place dug and built’. [38] The girl is called Alice, and she sleeps here underground, ‘Like something from a children’s story or folk tale’. [39] Casimir thinks of the mythical Ohyn, ‘babies stillborn with caulds and teeth, who come back at night to eat their grieving parents’, and in her parting words Alice herself seems to echo the folk-tale of Eurydice, ‘Don’t look back’. [40]

As in Neverwhere the homeless girl is being hunted down by a monster in the dark. There is a serial-killer in the tunnels who pushes young, white-haired women onto the third-rail, and his true target is Alice. Hill builds on this trope in an inventive manner, eventually revealing that the serial-killer is Alice’s former foster-carer, and that Casimir’s confrontation with this perverse father-figure is the symbolic resolution of the character’s own long-standing conflict with his monstrous father in
Poland. In chapters that alternate with those set in the present, it is revealed that Casimir’s mother is Jewish and his father a vicious anti-Semite, and that this secret has cast its shadow over Casimir’s earliest memories, filling them with images of subterranean darkness. It is in an underground den, that Casimir imagines making love to a local Jewish girl called Hanna, and it is here that he hurls a squirrel in a cage down a shaft into deep water. Killing the squirrel is an act of violence against Hanna, whom Casimir both loves and fears because he suspects that he might be Jewish too: like Hanna, ‘It is a beautiful thing, but it scares us too’. The crisis takes place underground. Hanna gives Casimir an amber lion as a gift, a symbol of the secret name given to him by his mother, Ariel, which, she tells him, means Lion in Hebrew. Angry and upset, Casimir throws her gift down the shaft into water, to join the drowned squirrel. Hanna’s revelations raise awkward questions that Casimir long refuses to confront. And when he finally can bring himself to ask about his parents, the facts are even worse than he might have expected. In spite of loving his wife, Casimir’s father participated in a pogrom that killed forty-two members of the Jewish community returning from Buchenwald:

‘You see how it is now? Your father hated the Jews, and married a Jew. ... Myself, I always thought he hated Anna too. Hated loving her. And now there’s you. I wonder if he hates you too.’

Casimir’s outrage is compounded by the revelation that his father earns money selling nerve-gas to terrorists. Significantly, the moment he turns against his father is marked with images of submersion and eclipse:

A shadow is coming across the sea towards us, racing across the flat water. It is the shadow of the moon. It is as big as Poland. It makes no sound as it swallows us, a cold mouth without language. I look up, head right back on my shoulders. Straight up into the sun’s black death mask. ‘Casimir? Casimir?’ I look back down for my father, but my father has gone. Behind me stands nothing but an evil man.

This is why Casimir has taken to places where the darkness seems to be under control. ‘He is here because the dark is here, because he will not run away from it. He has never turned away from what scares him. Because the fear is too great for him to ever turn his back.’ But as his belief in the ordered nature of the tube-network begins to fade, the space starts to facilitate the return of the family history he has repressed. In his nightmares Casimir imagines the rattle of the squirrel’s cage coming at him in the Underground; and when he at last confronts the killer, the latter’s broad, moon-like face clearly recalls the solar eclipse that marked the beginning of Casimir’s homelessness. ‘It reminds Casimir of his father, and he tries to picture him. A weak man, twisted by amorality and a brutal, simple nationalism.’ In this novel, homelessness is thus rendered the key to the psychological as well as the architectural Unheimlich. The father comes back to insist upon a relationship that Casimir and Alice have both sought to suppress, and proceeds to haunt them with violence until he is acknowledged.

Hill also imparts this pattern with political significance. The protagonist’s struggle to forgive his father echoes the problematic relationship of citizens across Eastern Europe to Communism, for which so many atrocities were committed by the USSR. At one point Hill even likens the Underground to ‘Joe Stalin’s railway, where one bloody worker died for each sleeper’. In order to rescue the homeless Alice, Casimir must first break with the crimes of the past, and this means acknowledging that he is his father’s son: ‘He remembers Anna’s voice: There is good in you that
comes from him.’ In the final act of the novel, Casimir remembers how strong his father was, and wonders whether [he] would have used his strength for this: ‘Casimir thinks that perhaps he would’.[48]

In thus aligning communism with the uncanny, Hill is building on an important theme in China Miéville’s fantasy novel King Rat (1998). In this story the protagonist, Saul, is compelled to flee his home after the murder of his foster-father, an old-fashioned Marxist, by an unknown assassin. Saul finds that he is in truth the son of the Rat King, and that he is being hunted by an Enemy who represents the consumer-capitalism his foster-father warned him against: the supernatural piper of Hamelin, who can summon tube-trains with his flute to crush opponents.[49] Sleeping rough in the sewer-system, Saul opens himself to an urban voodoo that enables him to defeat the piper and the financial Gormenghast of the City: ‘He had defeated the conspiracy of architecture, the tyranny by which the buildings that women and men had built had taken control of them, circumscribed their relations, confined their movements.’[50] In the last chapter, Saul is said to inhabit an abandoned tube-station, where he incites his army of rats to revolution: ‘let’s put the “rat” back into “Fraternity”’.[51]

This curious insistence on the uncanny power of Marxist Theory in the renovated, overly-determined cityscapes produced by international consumer-capitalism may reflect the enormous huge impact that Jacques Derrida’s historic lecture on Spectres of Marx (1993) has had on so much psychogeographical fiction set on the London Underground. It is interesting to note that Nicholas Royle, the man who has literally written the book on the Derridean Uncanny, decided to set much of his novel The Director’s Cut (2000) in the forgotten spaces of the London Underground. His avant-garde film-director Frank Munro is said to haunt the ghost-station at Wood Lane and rides the Hammersmith & City Line, roaming from carriage to carriage with a cut-throat razor in his pocket, killing those passengers who fail to make the ‘final cut’. In the course of the novel it emerges that he is the double of another Frank Munro (whom he killed), and that has assumed another alter-ego in order to conceal his crimes, reflecting the emphasis Derrida placed upon the iterability of the spectral.[52] Speaking in that period when the West first started to implement capitalism in what had recently been the Eastern Bloc, Derrida insisted that the end of history declared by the American political theorist Francis Fukuyama, was yet another, inevitably unsuccessful, attempt to exorcise the spectre of Marx: ‘Hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting’.[53] Derrida observed that Marxism had in fact never been anything other than a spectacle -- a revenant — a memory that comes back. ‘A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism’, wrote Karl Marx in the Manifesto of 1848.[54] Contrary to what good sense might lead us to believe, the spectre therefore signals toward the future. It is a legacy that can only come through that which has not yet arrived. ‘Repetition and first time, but also repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time makes of it also a last time’. [55] The revenant is a staging of the end of history, and calls for a hauntology, or logic of haunting, larger and more powerful than an ontology, or a thinking of Being, which would harbour within itself the discourse of the end, and the opposition between to be and not to be.[56] ‘Hamlet already began with the expected return of the dead King. After the end of history, the spirit comes by coming back [revenant], it figures both a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again.’[57]

The logic of haunting is a key theme in Conrad Williams’ London Revenant (2004). In this novel the protagonist, Adam Buckley, is propelled into lost pockets of magic in the rotten heart of the city, where he becomes increasingly aware that his own past is honeycombed with the forgotten. He seems to recognise people he has never met, at parties to which he cannot remember being invited. He cannot help thinking that he somehow knows the person who is pushing people under tube-trains in the rush-hour. He slowly begins to understand that all his haunts in London are governed by the ‘dirty magic’ of the Underground.[58]
There were thirty or forty of these limbo stations beneath the city. Lonely platforms, dead staircases, gutted lift shafts. Places that had once known thousands of feet a day now knew none, none that were human at least, beyond the plod of staff, or the occasional guided tour. This is how it used to be. This is how we were. How many more souterrains were there? How many more secrets could a city keep before it collapsed under the weight of them all? How strong could a city built on a honeycomb be?[59]

Eventually it is revealed that Adam was once one of the ‘Missing’ in the *Big Issue*.[60] Some years earlier, Adam was captured by a community of troglodytes inhabiting the forgotten Fleet Tube, and made to work on the excavation of a portal into the mythical subterranean city of Beneothon.[61] He has now been returned to his previous life in order to track down the serial-killer in the tube-network, a renegade from the world below:

> Here we know him as Blore. We need to stop him, and the handful he has recruited, bent to his will, or he will reveal us. And that must not happen. ... There are religions down here, philosophies born of the earth. If knowledge is observation, we have all the wisdom we’ll ever need to survive here. Up Top, we’d be dust.[62]

As the Queen of the Underworld speaks, thick furry coats of grime move against each other like wads of iron filings in the field of a magnet, and it occurs to the protagonist that she is dust already.[63] The serial-killer, on the contrary, is a vital incarnation of the capital’s repressed history, willing to tap the potential of the *[Unheimlich]*. It is revealed that he is the descendant of a workman killed in a particularly gruesome accident while excavating the earliest tube-railway in 1887.[64] As the protagonist observes, he is the Tube’s history, all its energy and desperation, its blood and sweat, its disease, its tears: ‘Blore was somehow a link, the connective tissue between topside and Underground. He was London made flesh, a cipher between the living and the dead.’[65] And this *revenant* is entirely aware of his role as a force that can shock people out of themselves and into new selves:

> I never intended to kill anyone. Death isn’t the point to all this. Life is. One I pushed, she lost an arm. I read about her. She was a data inputter for a law firm in the City. She was suffering from RSI, she was paying through the nose for a tiny flat in Holborn. Now she’s looking after sheep on an island in the Hebrides. She’s happier now than she ever was.[66]

As a revenant himself, Adam’s perception of the Tube is very similar to that of Blore. ‘I didn’t like the way some people appeared down there, as though they’d left their brains behind before leaving for work,’ he says, ‘or were this far away from snapping and massacring everyone in the carriage. Nobody wore an expression worth the name in the tube. Nobody laughed, and there was no reason why they should.’[67] Adam watches people climbing out of Warwick Avenue station and notes that they emerge staggered, as if even a short period away from daylight rendered them amnesiac to everyday sights: ‘I had seen young men halt at the top of the flight and look around, blinking like owls while the man holding a wad of *Big Issues* tried to break their catatonia’.[68] It is surely no coincidence that the reaction of the commuters in this passage so resembles that of the ‘pit-ponies’, compelled to excavate the portal to *Beneothon*, when they are set free later in the novel: ‘Spilling out of the rent in the earth came a torrent of naked, malformed bodies. Picked out by the sun, they were anaemic, pathetic figures, so thin that I could see the flutter of their organs through transparent skin.’ Adam and Blore pause for a moment mid-fight to watch these ‘phantoms’ stagger around, their faces upturned, smelling the air, their useless eyes now darkish nubs in their heads:
Some were too weak to continue their trek beyond the rim of a world they had believed they would never see again. Undernourished but muscular, their limbs deformed or stunted, they panted on all fours, too exhausted or frightened to move. They were free. They were back in the city they had once known. But every one of them was still missing. Would they ever truly return?[69]

Blore’s objective is to alert everyone else to the quiet, creeping dangers that he fell foul of — to provide a wake-up call to the people who are letting their daily routine grind them into the dust of the Underworld.[70] As Adam observes, ‘On the Underground, time becomes this vampire that attaches itself to the back of your neck, tapping you of energy and the ability to relate space to movement.’[71]

Because there’s nothing to look at, people immerse themselves in fiction or Metro, trying to keep hold of a place that is normal and human, using the immutable ink in much the same way that they use the handgrips that dangle from the ceiling. We fear the swift glide into tunnels, the jarring and jolting, MIND THE GAP and platforms choked with commuters, like rats congregated on a sewer ledge. Descending: it is not something we look forward to really, perhaps because we step nearer the place we ultimately wish to stay away from. It’s a constant reminder of burial.[72]

It is revealed that the revenant is rehearsing for a catastrophe that will herald the end of history: according to Adam, Blore is aware that a violent earthquake is about to hit London.[73]

An intense flare of fire lifted into the sky towards Shepherd’s Bush. Smaller explosions thudded around me as the ground discovered fresh levels to settle into and gas pipes ruptured and ignited. A great chasm yawned nearby, sucking in cars, lorries and a Hammersmith & City Line Tube train. The lights went out everywhere. As they did so, a great tide of sound rose from beneath my feet, like a rush of gritty air forced through tunnels. It took me a while to realise that what I heard, but did not see, was a crowd of people cheering. A while longer and it dawned on me that I was making the same noise.[74]

The catastrophe is followed by the long-delayed combat between Adam and Blore. Blore is caught in a huge explosion: and the project of building a modernist utopia begins anew, but this time renovation will leave no possible space for the Unheimlich. ‘The Underground had been damaged beyond repair. It was decided that it should be completely sealed off and tenders sought for a new overland transportation system.’[75] The earthquake is even said to have been a blessing in disguise: ‘The designs that had already begun to be considered for the centre would see the streets completely pedestrianised, with plenty of green spaces instead of road choked by taxis and buses. Shuttles that clung to tracks on terraced buildings would provide transport around the heart of the capital. The government pushed for people to get their bikes out. Adverts for cheap microlite aircraft began cropping up.’[76] But, as in a trashy horror flick, every time Adam thinks he has finally slain the monster, Blore comes back, and comes back. The outcome of their last combat, in which it looks as though Adam might achieve victory, remains beyond the scope of the novel. It would seem that, while the uncanny must return after the end of history, the human imagination cannot pass beyond the extirpation of the Unheimlich.

This may suggest that the uncanny is in fact part of the viral onslaught on rationalised time and space examined by Jean Baudrillard in The Transparency of Evil (1990). London Revenant cannot pass beyond the elimination of the uncanny because it is precisely this uncontrollable, unknowable component in the machine that constitutes the essence of what it means to be human. According to Baudrillard, it is thanks to the ‘vital resistance’ offered by the viral that we shall not be going straight
to the culminating point of the development of information and communication, ‘which is to say: death’. As cultural-geographer Lewis Mumford once observed, the processing that has become the chief form of metropolitan control cannot stop with production, prices, and movement, but must finally make over the human personality: ‘So complicated, so elaborate, so costly are the processing mechanisms that they cannot be employed except on a mass scale: hence they eliminate all activities of a fitful, inconsecutive, or humanly subtle nature — just as “yes” or “no” answers eliminate those more delicate and accurate discriminations that often lie at one point or another in between the spuriously “correct” answer.’ The final result, Mumford predicted, would be the triumph of the de-humanised homunculus he called ‘Post-Historic Man.’

He will look remarkably like a man accoutred in a ‘space-suit’: outwardly a huge scaly insect. But the face inside will be incapable of expression, as incapable as that of a corpse. And who will know the difference?

According to Baudrillard, the extreme phenomena which periodically afflict the closed system of our society may be an attempt on the part of the human to survive such a culture of total transparency: ‘the actual catastrophe may turn out to be a carefully modulated strategy of our species — or, more precisely, our viruses, our extreme phenomena, which are most definitively real, albeit localised, may be what allows us to preserve the energy of that virtual catastrophe which is the motor of all our processes, whether economic or political, artistic or historical.’

These themes are central to Geoff Ryman’s remarkable internet-novel 253 (1998). Set in a tube-train heading south on the Bakerloo Line from Embankment Station on 11 January 1995, the novel has two-hundred and fifty-three characters and takes place in the seven and a half minutes it takes for the tube-train to travel to the Elephant and Castle. Ryman provides each character with one page of exactly two-hundred and fifty-three words, the characters are numbered, and their personal information divided into the following ‘helpful’ sections, ‘So that the illusion of an orderly universe can be maintained’.

**Outward appearance:** does this seem to be someone you would like to read about?

**Inside information:** sadly, people are not always what they seem.

**What they are doing or thinking:** many passengers are doing or thinking interesting things. Many are not.

The passengers are thus pigeonholed, numbered, and regulated in the grid of the train in a manner which serves to recall Certeau’s claim that the railway car is a perfect actualisation of the rational utopia: ‘A bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed an autonomous insularity.’ In a spoof online-advert, Ryman promises the reader powers of surveillance that he terms ‘Godlike’. He promises that the ‘253 description code’ will enable the reader to ‘categorise people’ more effectively, so that we can spot the criminals in our midst with ‘professional’ acumen. This theme is important in a work in which most characters are observing other passengers or are being observed. No.145, for instance, works for a company that offers image enhancement to video surveillance systems. A visit to Scotland Yard is said to have left him exhausted. He has watched cameras follow a man the operators didn’t like around a department store, warn the other stores by radio after he leaves, follow him down the street with further cameras, watch him board a bus, and then video the interior of the bus to make sure the man does not get off. ‘The whole country is wired’, he reflects; ‘The English live in 1984 and don’t know it.’ The internet-novel replicates this situation, presenting the reader with a database composed of passengers, their personal information structured by a numerical grid. In fact, the process of reading 253 is an experience that resembles nothing so much as the use of other web-based data-retrieval systems, such as Wikipedia. In his choice of form, content and medium, Ryman
has come as close as possible to presenting the reader with the spectacle of that total transparency of data feared by Mumford.

But, as Baudrillard predicted, totalitarian surveillance produces its own opposition. Seeking to eliminate external aggression, integrated and hyper-integrated systems secrete their own internal virulence, their own malignant reversibility: when a certain saturation-point is reached such systems undergo this alteration willy-nilly, and tend to self-destruct: ‘A world purged of the old forms of infection ... offers a perfect field of operations for the impalpable and implacable pathology which arises from the sterilisation itself’. [86] According to Baudrillard, virulence takes hold when a network rejects its negative components and resolves itself into a system of simple elements: ‘It is because a circuit or a network has thus become a virtual being, a non-body, that viruses can run riot within it’. [87] The triumph of transparency must render the machine itself immaterial and thus peculiarly open to the vengeance of the ghosts it has created along the way. As Baudrillard concludes, virtual and viral go hand in hand. [88]

Passenger 83, for instance, works at the NHS Tabulation and Processing Agency. [89] She wants the institution to have an ISO standard quality accreditation: a process that involves plying ‘ambulance customers’ with a questionnaire intended to ascertain whether they think the vehicle comfortable, the driving of a safe but speedy quality, the staff polite and informative. She overlooks the fact that someone in need of an ambulance is not very likely to want to provide feedback. The form intended to improve the customer’s experience can only frustrate its own end. Effective surveillance must fail to take the human into account — and must thereby eliminate its very reason for being. Traces of this terrible omission assume an uncanny significance. Within the restrictive numerical and structural grid imposed on each character-sketch humanity re-surfaces, a revenant, beyond the panopticon’s comprehension or control. To read Ryman’s internet-novel is like watching a brilliant escape-artist emerge, without apparent effort, from two hundred and fifty-three seemingly inescapable cages. The story of the first passenger, Valerie Tuck, perfectly illustrates the procedure of the novel as a whole. [90] After a theft of computer chips from her office Valerie, with the rest of the work-force, has been compelled to wear a photo-pass with an unflattering blue photograph, on a badge held by a clip or chain. We learn that she is writing an article on how to wear the photo-pass stylishly. ‘Try hanging it down your back from its chain. This is simple, elegant, and less nerdish than clipping it to your front pocket.’ She recommends spraying the badges lightly with gold nail polish, ‘to neutralise the ice-blue, just-arrested look’, and suggests that ‘Younger staff members into punk may wish to clip badges to ears or run the chains through nasal piercings.’ [91]

However, this inherent unpredictability in the machine comes at a huge cost. Consider the fate of Steven Workman, inventor of a satellite-navigation system that can provide every driver in the country instant information on where they are, the best way to reach a destination and the traffic problems en route by tapping into Scotland Yard’s traffic monitoring unit. On exiting the tube-car Steven catches his watch in the frazzled hair of Angie Strachan and is carried on to the Elephant — where the tube-train smashes into the barriers in a catastrophe that wipes out all but three of the thirty-eight passengers still on board. In the space of just seven pages, each little community formed in the previous seven and a half minutes is annihilated. It’s like watching a society vanish. And though the carnage in each tube-car is dealt with in exactly two hundred and fifty-three words, the effect is not to impose order but rather to undermine the idea that numerical systems can maintain the illusion of a controlled universe. In line with the theories of Baudrillard, the catastrophe is brought about by the human component at the heart of the machine. The driver, Tahsin Celikbilekli, has hung his jacket on the Dead Man’s Handle (the device which should automatically stop a tube-train in the event of a driver being incapacitated), and fallen asleep. As the tube-train is flattened, Tahsin dreams of golden letters in the ancient language of his home-land: Love, Freedom, Peace. [92]
Significantly, this final section in Ryman’s novel is called ‘The End of the Line’. As in the essay of the same title by Mengham, this is a place where our belief in the power of rationality to order and control our lives, our belief in the closed system, breaks down. The terminus is literally the portal into another order of time and space. The passengers in Car 6, for instance, shoot forward to the New York Metro, to the shimmering towers and bullet holes of Lebanon, to a limbo of vengeful cabbies, to the Monkey-God Hanuman, and ‘away from the illusory which exfoliates like stone, towards the airy real’. The perspective imposed by ‘The End of the Line’ imparts every passenger’s tiniest thought and action with a significance the various surveillance systems featured in the text have failed to comprehend. Harold Pottluck, the market-researcher, for instance, is invited to dance with an elderly lady moments before he is killed. Though he is moved by her appeal, he chooses to finish his report. The old lady pleads that they have so little time — ‘This is a matter of life and death’. In the light of the coming crash, Harold’s refusal to embrace this utopian moment becomes nothing less than a tragedy. In this astonishing text, humanity seems to haunt the margin between total control and catastrophe, an immortal ghost that is compelled to return after the end that each should impose. Rising up from the mangled carriage, Passenger 253 takes the list Harold has compiled of people who do not travel on the Underground: the unemployed, the sick, the retired and elderly, the mentally subnormal, prisoners, pre-school infants, nuns, children driven to school, housewives: ‘It is the list of useful people who will survive’. Murmuring the kaddish for the dead, Passenger 253, the now immortal diarist Anne Frank, walks up the tunnel to the light: ‘She wanders and bears witness. She cannot forget them, nor can she die.’

Ryman’s internet-novel suggests that recent psychogeographical interest in the urban uncanny has its roots in cultural anxieties that animate the theoretical discourse on the death of man and the end of history. In each instance, theorists and psychogeographers are following the lead of Marx, Freud and Lacan in rejecting the belief in a natural human essence that manifests itself in political structures and social relations, situating our being instead in the repressed, the viral, the Unheimlich. ‘I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think’, claimed Lacan, reformulating the classic equation of humanity with reason. ‘I think of what I am where I do not think to think’. As Neil Badmington observes in Posthumanism (2000), it is evident that the crisis in humanism is no longer confined to critical theory but is manifesting itself in popular culture too. According to Badmington, as a result we are witnessing the triumph of a hybrid literary form that Maurice Blanchot termed ‘fictive theory’. This innovative mixture of fiction and theory is the format for Christopher Ross’s Tunnel Visions (2001), a text that interweaves reflection on the posthumanist condition into an account of a life spent in travel that has gone to seed in the London Underground. Ross explains he had begun to understand that even an action-packed and eventful life is mostly a series of nothings, of things we cannot and do not notice, because we hardly perceive them at all, and this realisation causes him to become very interested in the idea of heightening focus on the ordinary, to see what happens when nothing is happening. Reasoning that the best way to achieve this is to do something mechanical over a long enough period to wear out the novelty, something not too challenging so as to free up enough energy to perform the experiment well, Ross becomes a Station Assistant in the London Underground. In the course of the book, nothing is revealed to be nothing less than surreal. There is a woman who walks her fox in the rush-hour. Another woman carries a baby chimp about in a nappy. Tropical mosquitoes unknown to western science thrive in the humid tunnels. And having helped an elderly blind man to a train, Ross finds himself marvelling at a pale white butterfly that hovers momentarily in the place where he had been standing: ‘I noticed that no one looked up and it passed unseen until I too lost sight of it.’

According to Ross, this failure of vision is endemic and it has enslaved urban man. ‘How many times did someone say to me “I cannot find the way out. Why are there no signs?” There were eighteen Way Out signs on or near my platform, but they might as well have been invisible. What they were asking for was to be shown or led out by someone who knew the way. And to be soothed and
reassured that it was indeed impossible to get out alone.’[101] Ross suggests that we are prisoners
who have evolved a language in which it is nearly impossible to describe accurately life outside the
prison, or to approach the question of escape.[102] He insists that only by becoming aware of the
forces operating in any situation, which may be removing the volitional, can we begin to understand
what it means to be free.[103] In order to do so, we must revive our perceptive capacities, must
manufacture a space in the mind to sift for the truth: ‘By pacing and performing work which, once I
knew what to do, made few demands on me, I had, I realised, and quite by accident, begun to clear a
space for serious reflection’. [104] This express commitment to freedom within, rather than without,
the system is entirely in line with posthumanist thought, which rejects recourse to a timeless utopia:
‘It seemed germane that certain means of transport, such as the passenger car and even more so the
train, could go only where road or rails had gone before them. Freedom to travel by such means
then is only the freedom to choose between existing routes. No train traveller carries rails to lay
down a new track as they go along, to blaze a trail.’[105]

But the transition to this new way of seeing is shown to be far from straightforward. In one long
section Ross describes how a homeless youth steps out into the path of a tube-train while the rest of
the city is Christmas shopping. The young man has gazed for a while at a poster in which a beautiful
girl sells something for £19.99 and realised that he should ‘just do it, like the Nike ad’. Ross returns
to the spot again and again the following day, trying to surprise a clue as to why someone might
choose to die in this place, but there is nothing there to see, except the litter produced by another
big brand: ‘I thought I could see a trace of blood, but it was only a KitKat wrapper’. [106] Measured
exclusively by his potential to enhance economic performativity, the young man, neither a producer
nor a consumer, is nothing more in this subterranean bubble of consumer-capitalism than waste.
According to Ross, far too few people ever have the time and space necessary to contest this
inhuman criterion: ‘Life in a city is so fast that in general we fill our minds with so large and so
continuous a flow of sensory impressions that there is only time to process it—yes or no, and-gates
and or-gates—so that most mental processes are mechanical and unable to benefit from the slow
stroll of reflection’. [107]

The short-comings of this blinkered outlook are particularly evident in the training program in
People Management, which Ross defines as ‘Pop psychology filleted and applied to produce happy
workers in an ever more efficient enterprise, joyously interfacing with optimistic and sated
customers who just couldn’t get enough of our services’. [108] Ross is subjected to a psychological
system called Transactional Analysis. He must respond to a series of sixty questions loaded with
value judgements, choosing from answers that will be classified as childish, adult and parental. Ross
observes that something about this type of test forces him to adopt a persona not his own, and
suggests this is one reason why market surveys always seem to be wrong. ‘The questioner may make
adjustments of a percentage point or two—a so-called margin of error—but should instead
wonder whether cultural factors mean that all the answers are “errors”’. [109] Based on the false
humanist premise that mankind is a rational animal, these attempts at surveillance produce ghosts
in the machine the very moment they appear to achieve a total transparency of data. Having failed
to comprehend humanity, the material produced by people-management is inevitably riddled with
the mechanical errors that bear witness to this terrible oversight. Another test produced by People
Management states that it will enable you to ‘Identify who your customer are (sic)’, and remind you
to think: ‘Customer, \ People (you), Business’. [110] The phrase seems to have been automatically
generated by a computer. It would appear that those involved in People Management have
completely forgotten how real people think.

Ross intimates that such a failure of imagination could easily bring about catastrophe. He is
‘comprehensively briefed’ on bomb threats for instance by means of the following slogan:

Beware
Observe everything
Maybe it’s nothing
But don’t take a chance
Still inform the following –

* Line Controller
* British Transport Police (Auto 999)
* Station Supervisor

Remember: Bombs can come in all SHAPES and sizes[111]

Ross notices how the first letters of the catchy slogans spell BOMBS, and expresses sarcastic admiration for the author of these notes: ‘It was really helpful to remember the words Beware and Observe, although Maybe, But and Still were, I thought, of less real value’. [112] The full extent of the potential risk represented by such training-material becomes fully apparent when there is a real bomb-alert at the end of the book. ‘Fragments of concrete and metal — the plaster on the platforms was fixed over a grille of wire, like chickenwire, and any explosion would immediately convert this material into shrapnel, superheated segments of wire that would julienne strip anyone caught in the blast — rushing towards you at hundreds of feet per second’. [113]

In the light of the bomb-threat, the socio-economic significance of the non-time Ross has spent in the Tube is shown to have been horrifyingly slight. In the three minutes it takes him to clear the station, he earns nearly 40p: ‘Less than the price of a Mars Bar. Was that, then, the price of my life in the situation I had voluntarily got myself into?’[114] Ross recognises that his psychogeographical project must appear futile to the people more fully immersed in this value-system, the very people he has written his book to help. In a subsequent flash-back, his attempt to warn passengers of the impending catastrophe is frustrated by their inability to perceive the Unheimlich.

I run through the tunnels shouting at the thousands of people swarming along, each intent on his or her thoughts, lost to the world around them, separately enclosed. Rank upon rank of faces surge forward like waves in a human sea. I shout at them, but there is no sound. I wave my arms to attract the attention of the group closest to me. They do not see me, do not hear me. In fact, they walk right through me — and then, only then, do I realise I am a ghost, insubstantial, not real to them, beyond any sense register they can experience or credit as existing. [115]

This momentary lapse of faith is certainly unfounded. This essay has demonstrated the extent to which the uncanny spaces in the London Underground have fascinated writers since the early nineties. This essay has established that the posthumanist vision of humanity revenant is a recurring theme in one branch of psychogeographical material that manages to be very technically innovative while retaining its broad popular appeal. The writers considered in this essay have chosen to assert the imaginative potential of the uncanny in the face of our renovated, overly-determined cityscapes, and their work proves that modern space can be haunted by the human imagination at least, if not inhabited. ‘Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate’, observes Certeau; ‘without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer’. [116] The salient fact is neither alienation nor its negation but the negotiation that each of us conducts every day — the construction of the sense of the individual life from the limited number of routes possible in the virtual spaces of the modern world: ‘Except for a few cultural details and a few technological adjustments, every society has its subway,’ remarks Augé, ‘and imposes on each and every individual itineraries in which the person uniquely experiences how he or she relates to others.’ [117] The material considered in this essay confirms this impossible haunting: our monstrous but vital movement within the Machine.
Endnotes


[2] Ibid., p.199. [^]

[3] Ibid., p.201. [^]

[4] Ibid., p.204. [^]

[5] Ibid., p.208-209. [^]

[6] Ibid., p.209. [^]


[8] Phil Baker, ‘Secret City’, Kerr and Gibson, p.332. [^]

[9] Ibid., p.326. [^]


[12] Ibid., p.3, p.14. [^]

[13] See Plates 8.1 and 8.2. [^]

[14] Mengham, p.199. [^]


[18] Freud, p.244. [^]

[19] Gaiman, p.128. [^]

[20] Ibid., p.318. [^]

[21] Ibid., p.318. [^]

[22] Ibid., p.254. [^]
[23] Ibid., p.256. [^]
[24] Ibid., p.255. [^]
[25] Ibid., p.258. [^]
[26] Ibid., p.357. [^]
[27] *Creep*, dir. Christopher Smith (UK Film Council, 2004). [^]
[30] This is how Wolfreys’s defines the Unheimlich in Victorian Hauntings, p.6. [^]
[31] Augé, pp.47-49, p.65. [^]
[34] Ibid., p.136. [^]
[35] Ibid., p.6. [^]
[36] Ibid., p.45. [^]
[37] Ibid., p.8. [^]
[38] Ibid., p.67. [^]
[39] Ibid., p.164. [^]
[40] Ibid., p.62, p.149. [^]
[41] Ibid., p.111. [^]
[42] Ibid., p.120. [^]
[43] Ibid., p.199. [^]
[44] Ibid., p.215. [^]
[45] Ibid., p.62. [^]
[46] Ibid., p.239, p.246. [^]
[47] Ibid., p.87. [^]
[48] Ibid., p.247. [^]

[50] Ibid., p. 288 [^]

[51] Ibid., p. 420. [^]


[54] Ibid., p. 50. [^]

[55] Ibid., p. 196, p. 10 [^]

[56] Ibid., p. 10. [^]

[57] Ibid., p. 196, p. 10 [^]


[59] Ibid., p. 184. [^]

[60] Ibid., p. 274 [^]

[61] Ibid., p. 299. [^]

[62] Ibid., p. 83. [^]

[63] Ibid., p. 83. [^]

[64] Ibid., p. 327. [^]

[65] Ibid., p. 239. [^]

[66] Ibid., p. 288. [^]

[67] Ibid., p. 26. [^]

[68] Ibid., p. 29. [^]

[69] Ibid., p. 289. [^]

[70] Ibid., p. 88. [^]

[71] Ibid., p. 39. [^]

[72] Ibid., p. 39. [^]

[73] Ibid., p. 286. [^]

[74] Ibid., p. 262. [^]

[75] Ibid., p. 307. [^]
[76] Ibid., p.308. [^]


[79] Ibid., p.4. [^]

[80] Ibid., p.542. [^]

[81] Baudrillard, p.40. [^]


[83] Ryman, the website. [^]


[85] Ryman, p.202. [^]

[86] Baudrillard, p.35. [^]

[87] Ibid., p.36. [^]

[88] Ibid., p.36. [^]

[89] Ryman, p.121. [^]

[90] Ibid., p.12. [^]

[91] Ibid., p.12. [^]

[92] Ibid., p.10. [^]

[93] Ibid., p.350. [^]

[94] Ibid., p.351. [^]

[95] Ibid., p.340 [^]


[97] Badmington, pp.8-9. [^]

[98] Ibid., pp.8-9. [^]
