

## ALIEN RHYTHMS

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*From Deleuze's reworking of Kantian schematisation to Mark Fisher's theorisation of the weird and the eerie to the "zone" trope in contemporary science fiction, this essay examines 'pathological' productions of space and time first as rhythms, and then as sites of dread and desire. This paradoxical affect is owed to their alien, other, or "outside" status relative to, following Kant, the universal and homogenising "inside" of anthropic temporal succession and spatial co-existence. Their danger is apparent from the outset and yet they carry an irresistible allure for the various figures – professors, stalkers, scientists, tourists and travel guides – who find themselves under their spell. Functioning variously as alternative economies of material goods and genetic information, these alien rhythms concern transformation above all else. A transformation that involves great risk. But such is the cost of novelty.*

There was only one thing that I didn't like. In the very back of the garage, near the canisters, I could see something silvery. That hadn't been there before. Well, all right, so there was something silvery, we couldn't go back now just because of that! I mean it didn't shine in any special way, just a little bit and in a calm, even a gentle way. I got up, brushed myself off, and looked around. There were the trucks on the lot, just like new. Even newer than they had been the last time I was here. And the gasoline truck, the poor bastard was rusted through and ready to fall apart. I didn't like the looks of that tire. Its shadow wasn't right. The sun was at our backs, yet its shadow was stretching towards us. Well, all right, it was far enough away from us. It seemed OK, we could get on with our work. But what was the silvery thing shining back there? Was it just my imagination? Now, the thing to do would be to light up, sit down quietly and think it

through – what’s the silver stuff above the canisters ... why is the tire’s shadow like that? The Vulture Burbridge told me something about the shadows, that they were weird but harmless. Something happens here with the shadows. But what about that silver stuff? It looks just like a cobweb. What sort of spider could have left it behind? I had never seen any bugs in the Zone.

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*

What is the schema of the spider? The schema of the spider is its web, and its web is the way it occupies space and time. [...] take the concept of a spider; the concept of a spider will include all of its anatomical parts and even the physiological functions of the spider. Thus one will encounter that funny sort of organ with which the spider makes its web. But can you deduce from it what we can now call the spatio-temporal being, and the correspondence of the web with the concept of a spider, which is to say with the spider as organism. It’s very curious because it varies enormously according to the species of spider. There are cases of very extraordinary spiders that, when you mutilate one of their legs, which is nevertheless not used for fabrication, make abnormal webs in relation to their own species, they make a pathological web. What happened? As if a disturbance in space and time corresponded to the mutilation.

Gilles Deleuze, “The Schema and Synthesis,” *Lectures on Kant*

## **Xenomorph Extremism**

Alienness – and the alienation that results from a confrontation with alienness – is the genesis of novelty and change. Wherever one encounters the alien, a mutation or a transformation is not far behind. And yet, because alienness involves an aspect of unknowability and unpredictability – an erasure of the familiar and the homely – it is also one of the things in the world which makes us most afraid. We fear the different and the strange, yet we require these things in order to evolve. This makes for a paradoxical affective relationship with the notions of otherness and difference that alienness encompasses – a bizarre and complex orientation unifying dread and desire. Already there is a kind of geometrical confusion in this: desire drives you forwards, while dread forces you back. As Mark Fisher writes in *The Weird and The Eerie*, it’s not a simple case of “enjoy[ing] what scares us.” Rather, “it has [...] to do with a *fascination* for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience,” an affect that involves

terror and distress, but isn't wholly described by them.<sup>1</sup> Fisher's invocation of "the outside" immediately brings into play the prefix "xeno-," a denotation nominating what follows it as foreign or alien – an "outsider," someone or something that arrives from the outside.

Rebekah Sheldon offers the following extended etymology of the term, alongside some of its contemporary applications:

Xeno. Greek *ξενο-*, *ξεν-*, combining form of *ξένος*, a guest, stranger, foreigner, *adj.* foreign, strange; used in various scientific and other terms including, e.g. peculiar accessories; cross-species disease; symbiosis and parasitism; a snake genus; metamorphic mineral defacement or *partial* fusion; foreign rule; disease vectors allowed to feed on pathogens in sterile laboratory environments; a type of diagnostic comparison; cross-fertilization; germline engineering and the products thereof; taking its origin from outside the body, as in a disease or a tissue graft; glossolalia; emotional or sexual obsession with the foreign; a gastropod mollusk; a kind of fish with spineless fins, scaleless skin, and a complex sucking-disk between the ventral fins; mineral deposits found at high temperatures; an inactive virus; an armadillo; extraterrestrial life-forms or the study thereof. Etymologically, xeno is *trans*. As graft, cut, intrusion, or excession, xeno names the *movement between*, and *the moving entity*. It is the foreign and the foreigner, the unexpected outside, the unlike offspring, the other within, the eruption of another meaning.<sup>2</sup>

"Xeno-" describes both a vector and an alteration: it is the coincidence of *transition* and *transformation*. It thereby involves a relationship between an inside and an outside, divided (or linked) by a threshold which becomes the object of a crossing. To better grasp this notion of outsideness that both Fisher and Sheldon call forth, it helps to understand what constitutes the inside, or what Fisher designates as "standard perception, cognition and experience" (8). He provides a clue later in the book when he quotes from an enigmatic text first appearing the "Digital Hyperstition" issue of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit's infamous underground cyberzine, *Abstract Culture*, in 1999. The text, titled "The Templeton Episode," narrates a strange experience undergone by an

<sup>1</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2017) 8. Subsequent page references to this book are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Rebekah Sheldon, 'XENO,' *The Occulture*, 22 January 2017, <http://www.theocculture.net/xeno/>, accessed 19 December 2019.

eccentric philosophy professor named Randolph Edmund Templeton. Professor Templeton is a scholar of Immanuel Kant, and while meditating one dark evening in his attic room upon a copy of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, he has the unnerving sensation of not being who he thinks he is – of a threshold being crossed. The feeling that something alien – something outside time and space – threatens to invade, thus confirming Templeton's hunch that Kant's philosophy, although typically taken to be about the *limits* of human "perception, cognition and experience," if read correctly, in fact functions as a "time-travelling manual" (8).<sup>3</sup> In that moment, Templeton realises that he can use Kant's system "as a guide for engineering time-synthesis."<sup>4</sup> And "the key," it occurs to him, "is the secret of the schematism, which – although "an art concealed in the depths of the human soul" – concerns only the unutterable "Abomenon of the Outside."<sup>5</sup>

According to Kant, our experience of the world is governed by conformity to strict cognitive, perceptual and experiential rules. These rules give us objects, temporal succession (which is to say, time experienced as a linear flow that moves inexorably from moment A to moment B to moment C) and spatial co-existence (there are consistent cartographic coordinates that exist for everyone in the same universal space – Antarctica doesn't disappear just because no one is perceiving it). Human perception thus operates as an inbuilt clock and compass that systematise and universalise our experience, guaranteeing that, even when separated by vast distances, or great stretches of time, we humans think of ourselves as inhabiting the *same* space, and the *same* historical timeline, and that this space and time function consistently and predictably across the entirety of human experience. For us, time has only one dimension – that of a line – and space has three.

These rules draw the bounds of the inside by constituting the edges of shared perceptual, cognitive and experiential possibility for us as human beings. Consequently, there is a sameness that structures reality for us. Our experience of the world is navigable and communicable because of this sameness. It determines our rhythmic regime – a specifically anthropomorphic regime: linear time, simultaneous, three-dimensional space, and objecthood are its framing parameters – its tempo or its beat. Inside these parameters, diverse and idiosyncratic rhythms unfold – but they never break the beat. Time remains linear; space, simultaneous. Consequently, experience, at its most fundamental

<sup>3</sup> Ccru, "The Templeton Episode," *Abstract Culture: Digital Hyperstition* (London: Ccru, 1999) 55.

<sup>4</sup> Ccru 55.

<sup>5</sup> Ccru 55.

and unconscious level, is ordered, familiar, comfortable, and homely, scaled reassuringly to match our perceptual affordances.

It is not often that we come by experiences that threaten to disturb these patterns. Given the choice, most of us would deliberately avoid them. “It makes sense” writes psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud that “repetition, the re-encountering of identity, is itself a source of pleasure”<sup>6</sup> – for pleasure, as Fisher helpfully glosses, “always refer[s] to *previous* forms of satisfaction” – it is defined by familiarity (13). But what if this situation were inverted – the heterogeneity and diversity that can be sustained by rhythm preceding the necessary homogeneity of the tempo? What if objects didn’t work how you expected them to? What if the framing logic of time and space was different? What if the beat was ... *eerie*?

In his book, Fisher contrasts Freud’s *unheimlich* – the “uncanny” or the “unhomely” – with his own treatment of the weird and the eerie. The *unheimlich*, he writes, “is about the strange *within* the familiar [...] it is haunted by an outside which it circles around but can never fully acknowledge or affirm.” However, he continues: “[t]he weird and the eerie make the opposite move: they allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside” (10).

The weird and the eerie designate distinct affective tonalities related to “modes of perception” or “modes of being” proper to these zones of traffic, leakage, or porosity between the standardising pulse of the inside, and the transformative rhythmicity of the outside (9). While the weird is related to “that *which does not belong*” – bringing “to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled” with it using known rules of assimilation or intelligibility, the eerie describes the *absence* of a purposive agent where there should be one, just as much as the *presence* of a purposive agent where there should not be one (10). In the weird there is something extra and unintelligible in what would otherwise be an ordinary scene – “an exorbitant presence, a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it”; in the eerie there is a problem of misplaced action (61). “The eerie is fundamentally tied up with questions of agency,” he writes, it clings most readily to “landscapes partially emptied of the human” (11), where one is prompted to ask “*What happened* to produce these ruins, this disappearance? What kind of entity was involved? [...] What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all?” (110) He identifies it

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. Todd Dufresne, trans. Gregory C. Richter (Peterborough, ON, Buffalo, NY and London: Broadview Press, 2011) 75.

with particular acuteness in science fiction scenarios dealing with the inexplicable emptiness of outer space – and with the implacability of terrestrial capitalism: “eerie impasse[s]” arise “when mismatching modes of intelligence, cognition and communication confront one another” (115). When brought into contact with an eerie outside agency, “‘we’ ‘ourselves’ are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces” (11). Because both the weird and eerie describe the “new” in this radical way – as an intrusion of alien outsideness – whether as the operation of an eerie agency or of something in the environment which does not belong – they automatically indicate the impossibility of knowledge and explanation: “When knowledge is achieved, the eerie disappears” (62).

In a fashion similar to Fisher’s dismissal of the uncanny as subordinating alienness to familiarity – of merely locating the strange within the greater frame of the familiar, of neutralising novelty in advance – Sheldon writes: “If the uncanny marks the hideous return *as if new* of what was always already known – the groundwork whose repression allows the enclosure of a domestic interior, [the outsideness of] XENO is of its own order.”<sup>7</sup>

What exactly would it mean to come into contact with this “order” that is outside order? Where the weird and the eerie reign, where the parameters that structure experience are open to wild and violent variations that efface all knowability and predictability, that make every movement treacherous and charged with the ambiguity of desire and dread, novelty and fate? What if moving forwards through space did not necessarily mean moving forwards in time? What if “forwards” and “backwards” were to lose their meaning entirely? What would it feel like to interface with a spacetime – an *alien rhythm* – that does not follow any recognisable human pattern and whose agency remains opaque? Who are these perverse creatures that would *desire* such a thing?

If you are frequenting the right corners of the internet, you might be asked by some passing anon to “tag yourself” on a spectrum of alien desire that looks something like this:

<sup>7</sup> Sheldon n.p.



This chart, courtesy of the rabidly metastasising cultural distribution-system known as 4Chan, is interesting for several reasons. First, it conceives alienness on a spectrum devolving from traditional humanoid morphology to the wildly unfathomable monstrosity of “multidimensional eldritch horrors” in seven successive stages. Second, it figures this desire sexually – a suggestion which becomes graphically more untenable via the usual human means as monstrosity increases. And third, it implies a distinct – almost Orphic – threshold which, once crossed, offers no opportunity of return.

As the hypothetical object of one’s desire modulates across the spectrum from “humans” to “unconventional non-humanoids,” it correlates with certain intensities of xenophilia corresponding to an amplitude of sameness or difference. Those for whom anything beyond general humanity, with perhaps a dash of lime-green skin, is unappetising are designated as “Normies,” shading into the still dimorphically-sexed “Monster Girl Fan” (or Monster Boy Fan – this, as is stated in the bottom left-hand corner, is the “female edition”) with the transition to the fairly typical, traditional alien imaginary including “Greys” and “Little Green Men” – before emphatically crossing a boundary at the point where the human face starts to lose its distinctness, a desire for “Teratomorphic Humanoids” ominously classified as “Trapped with No Way Back.” “Open-Minded Alien Lovers” have a penchant for increasingly anomalous forms, moving from “Borderline Humanoids” in which a retreating anthropomorphism is concretised in the erasure of sex organs or the addition of various non-human

appendages, to “Conventional Non-Humanoids,” where it disappears completely in a chimerisation of insectoid, vegetal and machinic parts.<sup>8</sup> At the furthest extreme of weirdness one encounters the realm of “Unconventional Non-Humanoids”: dimensionally anomalous, of “indefinable shape” – a situation of strange liminal plasticity in which it becomes “unclear where [the] body starts and ends.” The corresponding subject position is that of the “True Xenophile,” one caught up in a desire of that which exceeds even form itself.

An ambiguous joke posted on a related thread reads:

“Why are monstergirls better than a real woman?”

“Because the monster is on the Outside.”

Here “xeno-” comes into its own. Strictly defined, a *xeno-morph[ē]* is something that is outside form. These aliens are at the furthest end of the spectrum – a spectrum whose logic follows an explicitly anthropomorphic order – because they overturn this order entirely. There is no eighth classification: form, past this point, is irrelevant. Alien desire extinguishes itself with the dissolution of form into the conditions of form: the laws of space and time. These extreme xenomorphs – formal outsiders – encapsulate something close to what weird fiction author H.P. Lovecraft gestures towards when he writes of his characters’ wishes “[t]o shake off the maddening and wearying limitations of time and space and natural law – to be linked with the vast *outside* [...]”<sup>9</sup>

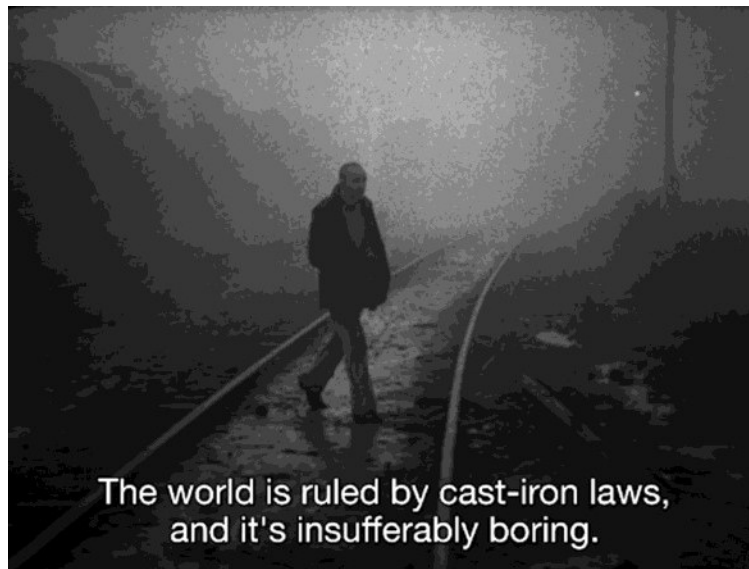
What I want to suggest here, applying Fisher and Sheldon’s concepts of outsideness as something beyond the fundamentally human rhythm of linear temporality and simultaneous, three-dimensional spatiality, to this spectrum of alien desire, is that the truly alien, the most extreme and productive mutant edge of alienating difference, is the alien understood as a *space-time* – a rhythm – a temporal cartography – an eerie beat – that operates in a way that is wholly other to the standardised “perception, cognition and experience” that spontaneously structures reality for us humans. A “True Xenophile” is a lover of alien rhythm.

<sup>8</sup> Untitled Image, ‘Ver. 1.2. / 2018-04-28, Female Edition.’ Page no longer exists.

<sup>9</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” *H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/wid.aspx>, accessed 19 December 2019.



## The Pathological Web



This is a scene from Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film, *Stalker*.<sup>10</sup> The eponymous stalker is just about to enter the "Zone" – a space in which physical laws do not seem to apply in the same way as they do in the outside world – or better the *inside* world, for once they have crossed the border of the Zone, the stalker and his customers, known only as the "Writer" and the "Physicist," find themselves beholden to a spatio-temporal logic that is entirely different from our own – a realm of extreme xenomorphia – the weird and eerie utternullity of an obscure and alien beat (125). Tarkovsky's *Stalker* is just one particular treatment of what has now become a persistent theme in contemporary science fiction – something we might call the "zone" trope, first innovated by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (who also wrote the screenplay for *Stalker*) in their 1972 novel, *Roadside Picnic*. More recently, invocations of the "zone" can be found in M. John Harrison's *Nova Swing*; Jeff Vandemeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* – comprising the novels, *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance* – and Alex Garland's 2018 film *Annihilation*, which is based loosely on the latter.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Stalker*, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky (1979, Moscow, Dom Kino).

<sup>11</sup> Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic; Tale of the Troika*; trans. Antonina W. Bouis (London: Macmillan, 1972); *Stalker*, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky; M. John Harrison, *Nova Swing* (London: Gollancz, 2006); Jeff Vandermeer, *Annihilation* (London: Fourth

These works speculate upon the appearance of a sudden, monumental, unexplained disturbance in anthropomorphic space-time known variously as “the Zone,” “the event site,” “Area X” or “the Shimmer.” Across their borders, a – sometimes fatal – unpredictability reigns. Space and time no longer function following intelligible human laws. Their rhythm is altogether inhuman. “Scale and perspective [are] impossible to achieve.”<sup>12</sup> Decay sets in unnervingly quickly in Vandemeer’s Area X. In *Roadside Picnic* it only effects certain objects, while for others, time seems to run in reverse. Compasses and watches are ineffectual. Gravity is fractious. Radio waves, light waves and genetic information partake in inexplicable exchanges under a strange logic of transversal refraction.

“Though the flowers were all on the same stem, and the same shape, they were of different colours.”<sup>13</sup> The environment changes suddenly and inexplicably, and cause-effect relations are indecipherable, if they even apply at all. “You can’t get change less ordered,” remarks Ascheman, a specialist detective in the Saudade Site Crime unit, to professional stalker and erstwhile site criminal, Vic Serotonin, a suspect in the case he has been assigned to. “Look at it, so raw and meaningless! The wrong physics, they say, loose in the universe. Do you understand that? I don’t.”<sup>14</sup> “What’s there to understand? ... It’s the zone.”<sup>15</sup>

In each of these texts, traffic into and out of the zone is monitored, policed and incompetently regulated by a local military apparatus. Its prime targets are the stalkers – social outcasts of some kind or another – who harbour an enigmatic attraction to the area. Risking their lives every time they cross the border, the stalkers survive by smuggling definitionally “weird” artefacts back to the ordinary world and selling them on the black market, or by offering their services to tourists, who, for similarly arcane reasons, find themselves ensorcelled by the zone’s strange allure – it is for this reason that the citizens of Saudade refer to Vic Serotonin as a “travel agent.” In Vandemeer and Garland’s *Annihilation*, the figure of the stalker is replaced by the participants of a series of secretive, experimental military expeditions: men and women deployed into the zone by a dysfunctional and authoritarian martial organisation known as the “Southern Reach.” In both the trilogy and the film, the first ten expeditions are deemed failures, tallying a collective survivor count of zero. It is only with the

Estate, 2014); *Annihilation*, dir. Alex Garland (2018, US and China, Paramount Pictures; International, Netflix). All following images are taken from Garland’s film.

<sup>12</sup> Harrison 209.

<sup>13</sup> Harrison 75.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison 44.

<sup>15</sup> Arkady and Boris Strugatsky 51.

eleventh and twelfth expeditions that someone makes it back alive. The first of these is a soldier, the second a biologist. But whether or not they can be said to have returned “intact” remains an open question.

The stalkers make maps but they rarely prove useful, if not downright deceptive. In Tarkovsky’s zone, the serpentine line is the shortest path, and all the stalkers know that one can never go back the way one came. “You’re saying we get out by going deeper in?” confirms the physicist in Garland’s *Annihilation*.<sup>16</sup> The only way out is through. The travel agents in *Nova Swing* rely on nothing more than determinate than chance to make it across the event site’s coruscating border alive: “No one knew a dependable route through the aureole [...] or, if they made it through, where they would end up inside. They weren’t even sure if inside/outside concepts had meaning.”<sup>17</sup> “What’s outside the border when you’re inside it?” asks a scientist at Southern Reach, “What is the border when you’re inside it? What is the border when someone is outside it? Why can’t the person inside see the person outside?”<sup>18</sup> “How do we know that what we come back to is the same?”<sup>19</sup> Does the world they have left even exist after they enter the zone? Intra-zone *temporal* logic is just as displaced in comparison to the ordinary world as it is spatially. Time passes at an accelerated pace.

In *Roadside Picnic*, the zone reverses entropy, reanimating the dead buried long ago in an ancient cemetery that has since become part of its territory, and offers an inexhaustible power supply in the perpetual motion machines or “spacell batteries” the stalkers retrieve from the debris to sell to the military and unscrupulous local entrepreneurs. “[T]he spacells violate the first principle of thermodynamics, and the corpses, the second; that’s the only difference.” It yields up impossible objects – like *Roadside Picnic*’s “black sparks” –

If you shine a light at [one of these] bead[s], the light will be emitted after a pause, and the length of the pause depends on the weight of the ball, its size, and a number of other parametres, while the frequency of the emitted light is always less than the original frequency. What does this mean? Why? There’s an insane idea that these black sparks are actually vast expanses of space – space with different properties from our own.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Annihilation*, dir. Garland, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SLV6UdWoI4>, accessed 19 December 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison 115.

<sup>18</sup> Vandermeer 42.

<sup>19</sup> Harrison 120.

<sup>20</sup> Arkady and Boris Strugatsky 137

– or the coveted “full empty” retrieved by Red Schuhart at the cost of his best friend’s life.<sup>21</sup> Yet perhaps the most unsettling feature of the Zone, the event site, Area X, and the Shimmer, is that they are *expanding* – their alien rhythms comprising not only a new logic of space, time and objects, but an inhuman logic of reproduction.

### The Rhythm of Division

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud posited the existence of two kinds of drives – a life drive and a death drive – that would be explanatory for the history of evolution. In developing his theory, he drew on the work of evolutionary biologist August Weismann. Weismann hypothesised that multicellular organisms were structured around two distinct elements: the germ plasm – a primary biological continuity containing all hereditary genetic information, and the soma plasm – comprising the individual bodies of organisms and their environments, linked and divided by a threshold that would become known as the “Weismann barrier” – a *link* because the organism is determined unilaterally by the differences latent in the continuum of the germ plasm, and a *division* because the unilateral nature of genetic expression – flowing from the germ plasm to the soma plasm – excludes the influence of environmental changes feeding-back into the germ plasm from the soma plasm. Despite complicated divergences, both Freud and Weismann’s theories posit a similar structure: a primary, enduring, and undead outside is related unilaterally to a secondary, ephemeral and temporary inside. In both, however, the primary force is cumulative, straight-forwardly hereditary, and ultimately entropic.

Deleuze would take both Freud’s and Weismann’s theories and alter them whilst retaining the general structure of a primary, continuous outside related to a formally-constrained inside: the prevailing operation is negentropic rather than entropic, virtual rather than possible, and the germ plasm evolves topologically, through folds, rather than in a linear fashion. Evolution, following Deleuze, is *transversal* – a cyberpозzed Weismannianism – in which the howling continuum of the biocosmic germline assembles series of multiplicities. Not the straight line of single, taut, thread, but a pathological web. “Am I confused when I remember, or try to, the time before I was born?” wonders one of Vic Serotonin’s zone-cursed clients.<sup>22</sup> It is something akin to what Sheldon describes in her definition of “xeno-” as “cross-fertilisation” and “germline engineering” via intrusion or alliance with the outside. Or, as Luciana Parisi has put it,

<sup>21</sup> Arkady and Boris Strugatsky 45.

<sup>22</sup> Harrison 75, 85.

[T]he forces that actually produce experience are for the most part without form or law. Thus, an actual difference, conveying the contingency of experience, is constituted through a chance concatenation of forces: converging and diverging fluxes that together produce something new and unpredictable.<sup>23</sup>

In *Roadside Picnic*, objects inside the zone “multiply by division” while the zone reproduces itself through vectors of mutation (the stalkers’ children, like Red Schuhart’s furry-daughter, or Tarkovsky’s stalker’s lame child, are notoriously alien) and contagion. *Roadside Picnic*’s outlaw medic, known fondly as “The Butcher,” rapidly becomes famous as “the first doctor on the planet to specialise in nonhuman illnesses of man,” while the black market economy ensures the circulation of the zone’s bizarre artefacts, so that “all that used to be in the Zone [will finally] settle in the outside world.”<sup>24</sup> *Nova Swing*’s event site is notorious for its “daughter code,” a biodigital plague that disassembles its victims and rearranges them: “Everything ran wild inside in him, as if his body was trying to be something else but had no plan: his organs switched on and off at random, his bones didn’t make platelets anymore. [It was] some hybrid virus which self-assembled in his cells from three or four kinds of RNA and a manufactured gene no one could identify.”<sup>25</sup>

The characters who find themselves inexplicably drawn to the zone – the expedition participants, the stalkers, the travel agents, and their clientele – are collectively animated by a drive towards the unknown. Searching for the very thing that breaks up their human rhythm, the source of their automatism, and an indefinable dissolution synonymous with a loss of the thing that maintains this restriction – the self. Memory ceases to function; names evaporate in the zone. Those who enter it finish up by becoming something else, subject to invasion by exterior forces. Artists of dissolution, driven by desire for an alien rhythm. “You want to know what it’s like in there?” asks seasoned stalker Emil Bonaventura of his protege in *Nova Swing*, “The fact is, you spend all those years trying to make something of it. Then guess what, it starts making something of you.” Connection wrought through division.<sup>26</sup>

In the final book of Vandermeer’s trilogy, standing in the ruined mirror lighthouse of the Lost Coast, a replica of the lighthouse that seeded Area X – the two

<sup>23</sup> Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex* (London: Continuum, 2004) 51.

<sup>24</sup> Arkady and Boris Strugatsky 69, 85.

<sup>25</sup> Harrison 114.

<sup>26</sup> *Annihilation*, dir. Garland.

shores separated by a black stretch of sea – the biologist watches her double approach her from the other side, transfixed by its “glory and monstrosity,” its “many glowing eyes” – “a living constellation ripped from the night sky.”<sup>27</sup> “In the multiplicity of that regard, she saw what [the eyes] saw. She saw herself, standing there, looking down. She saw that the biologist now existed across locations and landscapes, those other horizons gathering in a blurred and rising wave” – “a single abstract Wave at the intersection of all concrete forms” – “there was connection.”<sup>28</sup> A cosmic love of, or alliance with, the xenomorph. The profound and annihilating sorcery of an alien rhythm.

<sup>27</sup> Vandermeer 195.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004) 278. Vandermeer 6. Credit for the ending is due to Beau Deurwaarder, who made this connection first, and who is always, somehow, on the same weird wave.