

Charles Rudig
Myth In French Literature and Film

Mythic Resonances In Derelict Spaces

After the ruthless abstraction of all life the blank savagery of real time remains, for it is the reality of abstraction itself that is time: the desert, death, and desolator of all things.

-Nick Land, *The Thirst For Annihilation* Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

-King James Bible, Psalm 23-4

Chronology is an antiquated fetish.

-Marc Couroux

Spaces like deserts, ruins, and contaminated zones are unique in their ability to articulate the machinic flows of extra-human, real¹ time while simultaneously offering an escape from totalizing thirst for entropy.

In their traces they make explicit cosmic teleology: the cold, uncaring march towards annihilation that undergirds all material processes. A desert cannot be a desert without having before been a forest. A ruin cannot be a ruin without before being something that is not ruined. The Chernobyl power plant's fourth reactor with its concrete sarcophagus articulates a teleoplexic relationship with its past self as a functioning reactor. These spaces hold special roles in myth, which concerns itself so heavily with time's starting and stopping. In Lévi-Strauss's formulation, a particular instance of a mythic narrative is a diachronic assembly of synchronic mythemes that exist outside of linear temporality. It is this synchronic aspect that separates mythic narrative from non-mythic narrative: this call for re-capture or re-assembly of extratemporal narrative blocks. In this sense, myth is narrative that exists *outside* of time. It can be captured in particular temporal arrangements, but does not necessitate a particular temporal arrangement to actualize itself as a myth.

The concept of teleoplexy was first articulated by the philosophers of the Cybernetic Cultural Research Unit, primarily Sadie Plant and Nick Land, and it can be borrowed to describe the particular

¹ Not Real in the psychoanalytic sense. real in the sense of extraphenomenological reality

temporal affinities of these sorts of spaces. We know about time that runs in cycles (cyclical) and time that is goal directed (teleological), and even superimpositions of these two. For instance, in *The Solar Anus*, Georges Bataille describes the universe as functioning like the wheel of a steam locomotive: a piston and a wheel working together as a machinic productive force. Teleoplexic time is different in that it runs in two directions at once:

If entropy defines the direction of time, with increasing disorder determining the difference of the future from the past, doesn't (local) extropy—through which all complex cybernetic beings, such as lifeforms, exist—describe a negative temporality, or time-reversal? Is it not in fact more likely, given the inevitable embeddedness of intelligence in 'inverted' time, that it is the cosmological or general conception of time that is reversed (from any possible naturally-constructed perspective)?

-Nick Land, *Templexity*

I argue that these threadbare spaces exhibit particular mythic resonances because of their existence beyond or at least intra- to machinic time. Or, to use this particular language from speculative realism, exhibit a templex relationship to themselves. They simultaneously lay bare the “savagery of real time” and, within mythic narratives, offer an option for escape. The mythic articulations of derelict spaces have a shadow attached to them: an Outside force or agent that causes a (w)hole in the world as a denial of the determinism of the desolator and radically alter the subjectivity of the mythic subject by integrating them into the (w)hole: a spiritual encounter, ego-death, a profound introspection.

Ultimately, it is an event that accelerates the mythic subject's merging with matter and the world. A becoming-chthonic that articulates A.N. Whitehead's non-bifurcation between thought and matter and celebrates immanence as an escape route from the desolation of the abstract horror of machinic time.

“The fact is that the gap between myself and this land narrowed and composed itself: a sort of brotherhood, a metaphysical kinship bound me to those broken stones, fecund only of shy but tremendously stubborn lichens. And in the old dry river I recognized one of my fathers, ancient,

naked.”

-Italo Calvino, *Dry River*

In Italo Calvino's early short story *Dry River*, collected among other early stories in *Numbers In The Dark* (1993) the narrator returns to a dry river bed after a period of absence, and sets off in search of water prompted by a “religious desire” He finds the landscape, and to be different in ways that are difficult to put into words. Some aspect of it resists crystallization into the symbolic order. The river bed has been inflected with mythic resonances. In the narrator's words, the air had become concrete. The derelict space has been transformed from one of non-mythic diachrony, reflective only of the passing of machinic time (embodying the process of its own dessication) to a mythic derelict space. The narrator experiences themselves become part of the riverbed: the sort of diffusion of self into materials that I characterize as a property of these derelict mythic spaces. Though this diffusion of self, the narrator escapes the passage of machinic time articulated by the desiccation of the river bed, eventually finding a small stream of water:

The only remaining trace of water was a stream trickling almost stealthily, to one side. Sometimes the scantness of the flow between big rocks blocking the way and banks of reeds, took me back among well-known streams and conjured memories of narrower harsher valleys

As the narrator experiences themselves becoming material, the material vitality of the riverbed expresses itself producing a small trickle of water: a path back in time to undo the desiccation of the dry river and deny the inevitability of machinic teleology. In this sense, following this trickle represents a form of time travel: teleoplexy (currents or undertows of time moving backwards inside a larger stream of machinic teleology).

An anthropomorphized form of this spiritual merging arrives: a “shaman” who accompanies the narrator as he follows the trickle of water backwards through machinic time. Ultimately, the story ends with the narrator and his accomplice finding a large flow of water at the end of the river bed where they bath. The ending of the story is quite enigmatic: after bathing the two travelers are alerted to “the

distant sounding of a bugle” perhaps representing surrender to the teleoplexic chthonic landscape of the dry river. As a space left behind by machinic time, the dry river resists the elan vital of cosmic obliteration and is allowed to occupy a third, sort of zombified category that articulates machinic time's effect while also escaping it. By merging with this derelict zombie-zone, the protagonist becomes a sort of mythic xenosubject, immune to death but also somehow articulating their diffusion into material. The dry river is a (w)hole in the world: it simultaneously represents a rupture in rational time and space, and is a deterritorializing, unifying, and de-differentiating machine-force that urges its others to merge into it.

To clarify though, this is not the abstract-horror body confusion sort of merging of *The Thing* or *Akira*, but a spiritual mythic becoming-one-with the earth. A becoming-aware of the status of the (in)dividual as shot through from within and without by its own alterity. This is what I call xenosubjectivity, and it is heavily indebted to Karen Barad's concept of self-touching: the idea that by through being in material communion with ourselves we are made aware of this alterity.

What is certain is that the gray man kissed the mud, climbed up the bank with pushing aside (probably, without feeling) the blades which were lacerating his flesh, and crawled, nauseated and bloodstained, up to the circular enclosure crowned with a stone tiger or horse, which sometimes was the color of flame and now was that of ashes.

Borges, *Las Ruinas Circulares*

Borges's short story *Las Ruinas Circulares* immediately situates us in another one of the sacred, derelict spaces of subjective to material diffusion and teleoplexic time-reversal. A man arrives at the ash-stained ruins of a temple to a lost god. He is not driven by conscious thought, but perhaps by psychoanalytic drive, or extra human Schopenhauerian or Bergsonian vital forces. He is guided by a productive material intensity to asexually (cthonically) produce a new man through diffusion of his subjectivity into the materiality of the derelict mythic space of the circular ruin. This man is created via dream. In a very literal sense, this is a story of concept transducing into material: a literal articulation of

the Whiteheadian non-bifurcation.

The purpose which guided him was not impossible, though supernatural. He wanted to dream a man; he wanted to dream him in minute entirety and impose him on reality. This magic project had exhausted the entire expanse of his mind; if someone had asked him his name or to relate some event of his former life, he would not have been able to give an answer. This uninhabited, ruined temple suited him, for it contained a minimum of visible world; the proximity of the workmen also suited him, for they took it upon themselves to provide for his frugal needs. The rice and fruit they brought him were nourishment enough for his body, which was consecrated to the sole task of sleeping and dreaming.

This articulates the sort of ego death present in the phenomenon explored in this paper. The dreamer is totalized by his productive chthonic process of material diffusion that there is no room for ego, for subjectivity as it is generally understood. The derelict space is maximally threadbare, in Borges's words it "contained a minimum of visible world" to facilitate this concept/material transduction: the birth of an idea into the material world that is a theme in so much of Borges's work. The story is often read as an allegory that describes artistic production: a story about writing a story. In that sense the derelict space is representative of the imperfect membrane through which concept is captured by the symbolic order: the production of a man from a dream requires a process of translation and a faith in the fidelity of signifiers to the objects they purport to signify.

As the dreamer continues his dreaming, he imagines the circular ruins as an amphitheater filled with students listening to him lecture about magic science and cosmology. In his words, he was "seeking a soul worthy of participating in the universe". At this point, the potential pupils are Deleuzian virtualities. They are real in the sense that conceptual entities are real entities and exist as potentialities that exert themselves on the world, but are not actual: or pragmatically sensible materials in the world. The story explores this Deleuzian binary of virtuality and actuality quite thoughtfully, exploring the possibilities of a between virtual and actual, as well as the role of agents and knower in the crystallization of the actual from the infinite stream of potentialities that cuts through the immanent.

This method of cthonically creating a person, which Borges characterizes as dialectical, ultimately fails. His second method, building a sort of reverse BWO is what is ultimately successful. He begins with the particularities, with the differentiations and internal structural singularities of the body and works outward to a whole with a unified totalizing personhood: a subject. First he creates a heart, then some more organs, final a skeleton and then eyelids and at some untraceable point it becomes a person. A process of differentiation working in reverse. This is in a way teleoplexic as well, since the path of machinic time is towards becoming-molecular, runaway autocatalytic differentiation. *The ruins of the sanctuary of the god of Fire was destroyed by fire. In a dawn without birds, the wizard saw the concentric fire licking the walls. For a moment, he thought of taking refuge in the water, but then he understood that death was coming to crown his old age and absolve him from his labors. He walked toward the sheets of flame. They did not bite his flesh, they caressed him and flooded him without heat or combustion. With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him.*

At the end of the story, the dreamer not only merges into the derelict space through being burned to the same ash that covered the walls of the ruins when he first arrived at the circular ruins, but he comes to a moment of realization directly before his return to the matter that he is part of a cyclical process elaborating itself in the cthonic production of human beings from their own conceptual entities and virtualities. This forms a teleoplexic embedded reverse-time loop in machinic time. The derelict space articulates machinic time in its own dilapidation while inscribing a backwards, cyclical time structure in the negentropic cthonic (re)production of human subjectivity.

Earlier in the story the dreamer announces they are “At times, [...] disturbed by the impression that all this had already happened”. The circular ruins, as one of these zombified, extratemporal mythic spaces is stuck in a time loop. The dreamer will continue to create the dreamed who will become the dreamer and so on. A sort of direct, bacterial reproduction by budding that never runs out of fuel for its process: since its fuel is the autopoietic virtualities of the dream themselves. The timescape of the

circular ruin is, like mythic time in general, neither fully synchronic nor fully diachronic. A scratch in the record of machinic time has been made by the mythic resonances of this derelict space, one that causes it to repeat the same fragment of cyclical time endlessly into eternity: a glitch that defies rationality and the forces of entropy.

Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker* takes place in and around a mythic derelict space called the zone. In the novel *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Stugatsky, which the film is loosely based on, the zone is described as being made-mythic by visitation by aliens. In *Stalker*, what happened to the zone to make it the zone is left ambiguous, which is ultimately more effective, as I will discuss. The main character is a stalker, or a sort of sherpa who sneaks guests into the zone, which is off limits and heavily guarded by military presence.

The zone is filled with the ruins of contemporary society, and has the bombed out, dilapidated appearance as a space left uninhabitable by anthropogenic disaster: a nuclear accident, a bombing, or a chemical spill. Supernatural merging of self and material, conceptual and world, etc. permeate the zone, but one decaying room deep in its center is said to possess particular mystical capacities. Particularly, it has the ability to fulfill one's deepest desires: desires that might not be the symbolically expressed wishes one enters the zone expecting to have fulfilled. Such is the case of the titular stalker's teacher Porcupine, who entered the zone expecting to have his brother brought back to life but instead was granted great wealth. This led him to take his own life.

The zone, like the circular ruins, is productive. The zone seems to have a will of its own, and Tarkovsky ambiguously gestures towards it perhaps being sentient. In the film, the Stalker leads a scientist and a writer to the room. The zone is apparently full of virtual, invisible dangers, and the stalker throws metal bolts to test for these dangers as they make their way to the room. The scientist reveals that his motivation for visiting the room is to destroy it with a bomb he brought with him, in order to prevent evil people from accessing the room and bringing about great suffering. Ultimately, the three men sit at the entrance of the room while rain falls through the decaying ceiling, and decide not to

enter. Aside from a surreal moment where the men answer a phone in the abandoned building where the room is housed, there are no direct supernatural interventions in the film. The final scene, in which the Stalker's daughter Monkey appears to move a glass telekinetically is shown to potentially just be an effect of a nearby train shaking their house.

The invisibility of the zone's mythic resonances throughout the film suggests that they always hover in the realm of the virtual, ready to be made material at any moment though they avoid this: ,only articulating themselves in memory and potentiality. We know the zone can affect the world radically through the experience that Porcupine had, the mysterious telephone call, and the ambiguous suggestion that perhaps Monkey possesses telekinetic powers.

One of the reasons the film is so powerful is that the great mythic Event: a rupture in temporality or a (w)hole in the world that makes everything and everyone part of a cthonic materiality is always on the horizon. The scientist *could* have destroyed the room with his bomb, but he didn't. The travelers *could* have followed the wrong path to the room, hitting one of the zone's traps and triggering some cosmic horror, but they do not. The stalker, the writer and the scientist go about their lives as normal, leaving the mythic resonances of the zone as a lingering filter subtly distorting the mundanity of symbolically-mediated waking life.

The zone possesses clear teleoplexic characteristics. Like the other derelict spaces examined in this paper, it articulates the progression of machinic time through its status as a once-was while undermining it. The zone has the power to bring people back to life, to change the past and the future.

Through its capacity to grant the desires of interlocutors, it can undo entropy. Like the circular ruins and the dry river it is a space of negentropic chthonic productivity, fueled by the disruption of subjectivity and a becomming-material. Unlike those two spaces however, the zone is a sort of intelligence of its own, or at least it might be. It has the power to re-arrange itself, as an infinitely unfolding virtual labyrinth (as we know, labyrinths are classic mythic spaces). The stalker is unable to memorize the structure of this elaborating maze. Since it is always indeterminate virtuality, the stalker

must throw bolts to crystallize it into material actuality.

An additional mythic resonance: the stalker acts as a Lévi-Strauss-ian mediator, like the trickster in the native American myths he examines. Like the trickster, the stalker is of ambiguous motivation and has a fluid, shifting personality. While the trickster mediates between life and death, the Stalker mediates between concept and material, virtual and actual. In Lacan's sense that "the world of words creates the world of things" there is a sort of sorcery involved with the stalker's characterization of the zone. The virtualities of the zone are prodded towards actuality through the stories he tells. The way he uses language to bring the zone into being. It is the symbolic order reimagined as verbal necromicon: no longer a technology of partial capture ensnared in the power discourse of the law of the father it becomes a machinic technology: a transducer of virtual to actual. The voice of the Stalker is a mystical generator of of time loops and negentropy.

Or, that is one way of looking at it. Mythic theory, with its origins in the (understandably) human-centered disciplines of anthropology and psychoanalysis offers analysis of myth that disclose aspects individual and society-wide ways of being in the world from their own discursive positions. Mythic theory would, as the previous page attempts to do, analyze the zone from anthropocentric positions from how it effects the human individuals in the film and how the individuals in the film affect the zone, both virtually and materially. However, what if instead of saying the zone is sentient or sapient , we assign its effects to a form of what Jane Bennett calls thing-power: a material vitality that articulates the affectual potentialities of nonhuman material and virtual agents. Perhaps *Stalker* inverts this trope of subjectivity diffusing into materiality. Perhaps it is a film about the vitality of the zone, its thing-power diffusing into the subjectivity of the stalker, the writer, and the scientist. The Bergsonian elan vital of the zone in this scenario plays the central mythic role that would be traditionally be assigned to one of more humans.

This does not mean the zone is a knower in the sense that human beings are: it is likely not self-reflexive, etc. However, the tenancy to presume all affectual bodies are moving through the world the

way we humans are moving through it is to disclose a deep epistemological anthropocentrism. Things both material and virtual affect the world, and move with us in ways that articulate our own self-alterity and xenosubjectivity. If we already contain multiplicities from within and without in a productive affectual meshwork, it is not such a stretch to say a different meshwork, such as the materio-conceptual assemblage the zone could be a mythic protagonist.

I think maybe a synthesis of these two perspectives is most accurate to articulating the mythic resonances in *Stalker*. The zone and the stalker, like Borges's dreamer and dreamed are bedfellows in an autocatalytic teleoplex loop of cthonic self-reproduction. The zone creates the Stalker, and the Stalker creates the zone. In this sense *Stalker* is a *Las Ruinas Circulares* for an encroaching cyborg epoch. By the end of the 1970s our prosthetic enmeshment with technology and our material others was already an undeniable part of existence. A symbolically mediated human-thing assemblage is a perfect mythic subject, since it characterizes the constant state of human being in the world.

In examining three works that deal with abandoned spaces, this short paper examines ways that these spaces are imbued with mythic capacities: to break down standard structures of temporality and fuse the mythic subject with the materiality of the derelict space. These spaces often provide a forbidden access: to an escape of the symbolic, and, in the case of the three stories I examined, an escape from human perceptual boundaries in general: a spiritual, extrasubjective communion with the dry river, the circular ruins, and the zone that transforms the world interior to the myth: throwing a wrench in the gears of machinic time.

Bibliography

- Stalker* Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. Moscow: Mosfilm, 1979.
- Barad, Karen. "Agental Realism." In *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, edited by Lorraine Code, 16. New York and London: Routledge, 2003.
- Bataille, Georges. "The Solar Anus." in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927- 1933*, Ed. and trans. Alan Stoekl. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press 1985.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Circular Ruins" in *Collected Fictions* trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).
- Calvino, Italo. "Dry River" in *Numbers in the Dark* trans. Jonathan Cape (Milano: Palomar, 1993).
- Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- Lacan, Jaques, *Familial Complexes in the Formation of the Individual* trans. Cormac Gallagher.
- Land, Nick. *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge: 1992).
- Lévi-Strauss , Claude. *Structural Anthropology* trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963).