

THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

by Neil Fulwood

CULTURE MATTERS

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for Amy Clarke

It seems probable that once the machine thinking method had started, it would not take long to outstrip our feeble powers … They would be able to converse with each other to sharpen their wits. At some stage, therefore, we should have to expect the machines to take control.
- Alan Turing: *Intelligent Machinery, A Heretical Theory* (1951)

It takes all kinds to make a world. It takes only one kind to unmake it.
- Martin Amis: *London Fields*

A hole is a hole is a hole.
- Richard Burton in *Where Eagles Dare*

CULTURE MATTERS

1.

The TV in the hotel bar's on mute,
the show's generic but I'll take a punt:
Some Mouthy Right-Wing Bastard in a Suit
or maybe a repeat of *Some Smug Cunt*

With Shiny Forehead Talking to Some Pricks
About a Place in France They Want to Buy.
All right for fucking some. My bank would nix
the fact I even bought a TV guide.

My bank would nix the TV licence spend,
despair to learn I have a set at all,
wish me a grim Amontillado end,
insolvency bricked up behind a wall.

My bank the toxic "friend" who can't get past
my inability to hoard the green,
who swears each next transaction is the last
and thinks each bookshop blowout binge obscene.

The hotel bar TV jerks through some ads
for crap that's new and shiny, all the rage
with TikTok influencers who've been had
by hype and greed and easy fame. Late stage

capitalism has entered the chat:
picture it as brother to Yeats' rough beast,
part feral dog, part *daikaiju*, part rat
up a data centre drainpipe. Unleashed

from fever dreams of Bosch or Brueghel,
daemon erectus (neoliberal form),
not marching to the fife, drum or bugle
but slouching to Palantir to be born.

Then slouching, coprophagous, with intent
to Google DeepMind, to Synthesia, to Wayve,
to Quantexa, to extinction event,
the world scraped clean: the cradle to the grave

truncated to a journey of just months,
an end-of-decade endpoint in its sights.
And the craziest thing is that the cunts
who pushed the button know full well the lights

will soon be going out around the globe
but have no reset, shutdown or abort,
no off switch, no Plan B, no cyber-pope
to cast out by the power of the Lord

the ghost in the machine. He got it right,
Iain M. Banks: *machina ex machina*,
the machine of the machine. But where light
and life-eternal brand utopia

were what he saw as worthy of the race
(albeit shored up by a black-ops team),
reality's banal: tech-bro disgrace.
Is that old rhyme a lie: life's but a dream?

2.

Here's a rabbit hole doubling as worm hole
waltzing the space-time continuum,
voyeur to sights you wouldn't believe,
history bollocksed to Kingdom Come.

There's a driverless car
on a narrow country lane
and a song on the radio
'bout heartbreak and pain.

Here's the battery-dead hulk of a rover,
scrap metal on dustbowl Mars.
Give it a couple more hundred years,
we'll have made landfill of the stars.

There's a runaway train
a bridge made of wood,
creek named for the dead
and a river in flood.

Here's every science-fiction movie ever,
here's Kurosawa ripped off in space,
here's star-struck utopia turning to shit,
here's the story of the inhuman race.

There's sweat, tears and blood
and rhetoric galore
as munitions factories
gear up for war.

Here's a cave painting found years later,
a clue as to what might have been:
it's crude and leaves experts uncertain -
Peacemaker or Glock 17?



3.

The lights flicker and dim, the TV glitches,
the drinkers in the hotel bar just shrug -
it's one of those not-unexpected hitches
we've ignored since we normalised the bug.

TVs, unassisted, changing channel;
sets snowed with drifting static, unplugged in;
sudden midnight bursts of aural rammel;
burglar alarms, unburgled, blurting din.

Clock hands slowly moving anticlockwise,
thirteen chimes at midday on the dot;
in high bright sun the flickering of streetlights
which promptly short out as the darkness drops.

Timers counting down through minus numbers
till factory-setting circuitry implodes.
CCTV recording signs and wonders;
a satnav showing fields and lakes as roads.

New browsers blipping open on their own;
clandestine downloads virused up AF;
ghosts on the doorbell cam; a mobile phone
called by a numbers station decades dead.

Equipment not hooked up to a patient
steadily measuring heart rate and pulse.
Departures boards at a disused station
still clicking through from York to Crewe to Hull.

That bit about more things in heaven and earth
makes weirdness lyrical. Another bard
thought a grain of sand could hold the world's girth;
now it's a flash drive or memory card

but who knows how badly they're corrupted,
how many trojans bide their coded time,
how brazenly our lives'll be disrupted,
how blandly we're inured to cybercrime.

Let’s circle back again: we’ve normalised
the things that should be hoisting up red flags;
bereft of fight, institutionalised
in prisons of ourselves; ourselves old lags.

We’ve fallen for the tricks, clicked on the links
that shake us down for PIN codes, passwords, porn;
an LED morse-codes its dying blinks,
the system clogged to hell like we were warned.

An old saw says we cannot have nice things,
a race whose self-fulfilling prophecy
is less a case of roundabouts and swings
than fuck-ups re-fucked-up eternally.

Another adage has it that when men
make plans God throws his Godhead back and laughs
though who knows what He’ll find to laugh at in
the endless dusty sands of aftermath.

4.

Down the rabbit hole, folks,
through the looking glass,
the Mad Hatter's in control
and he hates the underclass.

There's a tea party here, folks,
for Earl Grey's posh friends only.
The underclass, they have no beer
now the pubs are closed. It's lonely

in not-so-wonderful wonderland, folks,
and the lack of fun never stops.
The Blue King's methods are underhand
and the playing cards are cops.

Off with the poet's head, folks,
decapitate the dissenters.
"Hail the Blue King!" it's gushingly said
by the BBC presenters.

The rabbit hole emerges, folks,
in the square of the polling booth,
the Cheshire Cat's grin wins with voters
but the fox has a sharper tooth.

A sharper claw as well, folks,
as the Blue King will come to know.
At the fox's command, unleash all hell;
unleash more at the word of the crow.



5.

The ads crawl past on the hotel bar TV.
There's a trailer for next week's episode
of a dark, brooding murder mystery
set somewhere where it's bleak and cold and snows

more often than not: Scandi neo-noir,
the kind of feel-bad drama viewers love.
The main guy's a cop who flaunts the law,
marriage crumbling while he's in pursuit of

a genius but juvenile killer
with a trademark M.O. that's kind of crude.
At twelve parts, there's quite a bit of filler
(enough to back-fill, say, a fjord or two)

mainly about how he hits the bottle
over failure, thoughts of death, issues of trust.
Slow measured scenes. It's not full-throttle.
The Sweeney leaves it in the fucking dust.

But punters lap it up. They revel in
the wastelands of other poor bastards' lives.
They love the way fate bleakly meddles in
machinations of lust and hate and lies.

They love the rocky landscapes, cold grey seas,
the snow that cuts the little township off,
the secrets, power plays and jealousies,
the sex and death, the alcoholic cop.

The trailer ends. I get another drink in
and wonder why we like our heroes flawed.
Divorced, depressed, traumatised and stinking
drunk from a three day bender (maybe four);

driven by personal demons (or just
plain angry), rule book ripped in two and chucked,
a once high-flying career now a bust,
demoted years ago, his comeback fucked

unless, odds piling up like falling snow,
he can tap into the old intuition
and make that great deductive leap that blows
the case wide open: wrong ‘un nicked, mission

accomplished. Life back on track? There’s the rub:
these shows don’t deal in happy endings.
That great deductive leap was followed up
with a necessary act, not bending

the law so much as tightening a vice
and testing its structural integrity
with everything at hand, not thinking twice
of morals, consequence, legality.

So we leave him as we found him, our guy
who stands in for all our compromises,
who does what it would cripple us to try.
He’s our mirror, unpolished; no disguises.

6.

Internet browser as rabbit hole.
Roll up, roll up, one and all,
all you need's 5G and a password,
take two steps forward and fall.

The rabbit hole's virtual and endless,
all you need's a half-drunk idea,
an urban myth, an unsolved crime,
the urge to face up to a fear.

TOR software, dark web? You're not ready.
All you need now's a private browser:
true crime, executions, UFOs
or a Pornhub trouser arouser.

That's just for starters: your EE sub
will see you free to sample
social media bilge by the kind of bores
who blight your local. Example:

this fellow stomping into the bar,
thick neck and a pulsing vein,
face like a well-hammered anvil
or the map of a kingdom of pain.



7.

It’s pushing half nine in the hotel bar,
not SRO just yet but getting close.
The hierarchy begins to demar-
cate: the stranger in a strange town, morose,

alone by dint of whatever; the after-
work crew, ties loosened, tomorrow looming,
winding down, tabs settled, booking Ubers.
The conference delegates hoovering

up everything the night has to offer,
kicked back come-ons and the firm’s credit card;
the self-confident Jack-the-lad joker;
the easy target, fleeced, taking it hard**.**

Bachelorettes getting their orders in
like a world-wide prosecco shortage looms
while a would-be stud circles then homes in,
imagining a soirée in his room

(of *Girls Gone Wild* variety). His luck,
he’ll find out soon enough, can’t cash the cheque
his imagination wrote; he’s fucked
and not in a good way; our Nordic ‘tec

would recognise the signs: the bruised ego,
the self-despair, the hair-trigger response
to rejection or criticism; he’d know
how this story ends. If he’s seen it once,

et cetera, et cetera. Screen wipe:
a panning shot of barflies, blowhards, bores:
every known species of archetype.
And me, one eye on the clock, one on the door.

Then in he comes, shit-faced with bigotry,
trailing a crowd of echo-chamber mates
and barely is the first round necked than he
vomits a list of everything he hates:

Lefties, Muslims, the wokerati, Greens,
unions, feminists, RNLI,
LGBT (whatever those letters mean),
small boats, The Guardian, the great big lie

bad actors and spambots have sold him on,
the rhetoric and *faux* outrage peddled
by billionaire grifters, shysters, con-
men wearing their self-interest like medals.

He thinks they're old school patriots, no front;
swears down they're solid blokes and not the fash,
blind eye to how they ape the ranting cunt
with the bad comb over and shit moustache.

He'd struggle to explain what *Anschluss* means,
Kristallnacht, Lebensraum, Arbeit macht frei,
From the void, Santayana's muted scream:
"Those who forget the past …"
The echo dies.

8.

Comments thread as rabbit hole,
a warren of barren rapport
like a pub full of bores and braggarts
who refuse to be shown the door.

The group page, forum and chat room -
a portfolio of unreal estate:
flatshares in the ninth circle of hell,
Ts and Cs a warning too late.

Barrack room lawyers on Substack.
Vloggers flogging self-image wank
like the Evil Queen at the mirror
or Narcissus on the river bank.

A needledick with a selfie-stick
live-streaming fucking nothing,
hashtags and a rolling banner, like-
and-subscribe-sign-up-hit-that-button.



9.

The trailer for the drama show fades out,
the logo for UA or MGM
fades in: a war flick where the Allies rout
the Nazis in fine style; the classic men-

on-a-mission narrative; all-star cast
and a kick-ass main theme by Ron Goodwin,
all swelling strings and timpani and brass
urging on a last-gasp attempt to win

the war by taking out a V-2 fuel plant
or rocket-launching base; parachuting
in behind the lines to rescue a man
captured by the Hun, at risk of blabbing

the plans for this clandestine thing or that.
The slam-bang plots are interchangeable,
no less crowd-pleasing for being old hat.
But it's the music most of us recall.

The hotel bar TV's absence of sound
is counterbalanced by a bunch of guys
who strike up a humming, foot-tapping band,
base notes dredged from the gut, hitting the highs

of the string section in camp falsetto,
drummed fingers and banged fists driving the theme
to frenzy. A winner from the get-go,
never mind the mute button. Every scene

is etched into the collective memory of
a certain adult male generation
whose hormone-addled concept of first love
was Richard Burton and Clint Eastwood making

forbidding castles and cable cars look cool.
Six decades on from Alistair MacLean's
fan favourite, things have changed. Some weird rule
of thumb transmutes the trope of Nazi planes

and Nazi uniforms pressed into use
as disguise - essential to the movie's
double and triple cross and subterfuge
storyline - into iconography

to be echoed, emulated, embraced,
shared as AI-generated tat by
men so ideologically displaced
their profile pictures show the White Cliffs, sky

triumphant with Spitfires, while their updates
are straight up Joseph Goebbels 101,
Jews swapped out for Muslims, doctrine of hate
otherwise unchanged. What the fuck went wrong?

When did the soldier-worship, our-brave-boys,
shag-the-flag and paint-a-roundabout crew
sign up so blindly to the other cause
and - arm stiff, fingers straight - take the salute?

10.

The viral meme as rabbit hole,
a cartoon gif *Fantasia* dance
shucking off good-fun inanity
for grim political stance.

A cute nod to a blockbuster
reworked as blunt rhetoric,
a shiny childhood favourite
ruined by some hateful prick.

Popular culture hoovered up
by Meta and ChatGPT,
reposted to right wing pages,
propaganda in the land of the free.



11.

Another glitch from the TV, the bar
starting to empty, Richard Burton left
dangling from the roof of a cable car,
jaw set, brow creased, clinging on like grim death

and in his place a documentary
that's less *Where Eagles Dare* than *Where Wage-Slaves*
Fear to Tread, camera prowling shakily
through a dull landscape where the unmarked graves

of ambition and job satisfaction
are post-it notes on a cubicle wall
or posters pushing forced motivation.
This is where integrity took its fall,

where you bartered that first piece of your soul
to make a mortgage payment. This is where
any faith you had crawled into a hole
and curled up and didn't even waste a prayer.

This is eight and a half thousand square feet
of open plan in the city centre.
This is where debt, doubt and despair complete
their lousy equation. Ye who enter,

abandon hope. This is the office. God
and the devil and crypto billionaires
have yet to hymn a more soul-crushing ode
to the human condition. But who cares,

the documentary seems to ask (it's
tricky to fathom with the sound on mute)
when offices are work camps, bosses shits,
the HR grievance procedure a boot

stamping forever on the face of workers' rights.
He wasn't wrong, George Orwell - a decade
or two out on the date, but otherwise:
good call. (The politics muddled, maybe,

and not so much Big Brother as some twat
living his Assistant Team Leader role
as if it mandates him to wear the high hat -
cunt needs to fuck off down the rabbit hole.)

This is ennui incarnate, work station
as suicide booth. Meeting room as blank
canvas: studies in slow suffocation,
in compliance. No-one ever says thanks,

good job, well done, crack on … Crack on with what?
A paper exercise in tying down
a monthly BACS transfer that barely meets
your bottom line outgoings let alone

offsets the mindless, soulless corporate crap
with anything that inspires; anything
that heals. This is work. Welcome to it, chap;
this documentary won't change a thing.

12.

Down the rabbit hole one more time, folks,
pop another little pill with Alice.
Here's everything you did your best to forget,
laid out clean in the mind palace.

Pandora's unboxing your history,
all the things you were sure would pass.
They're polished, remastered, crystal clear,
suspended in the looking glass.



13.

It starts on the forest's perimeter,
tricksy as an optical illusion:
something like the watery shimmer
of a heat-haze. Anyone venturing in,

moving close to it, might be put in mind
of that quote (we've been here before) about
more things in heaven and earth. But our guide
isn't Shakespeare or even some z-grade out-

of-work actor mouthing the lines. It's not
the ghost of Thoreau still simplifying
life and the purposeful living of it,
rejecting the needless, centralising

truth in the experience of nature.
The camera glides beneath the boughs, into
un-sunlit depths. Branches merge to take a
tar brush to the sky. Twisting clutching roots

tear at feet. Vines lash at eyes. No, our host
isn't the Bard or Thoreau or David
Attenborough or even Robert Frost,
weighing up two paths. It's J.G. Ballard

writ large: the forest as eco-nightmare,
surreal; dystopian. Mulch as quicksand,
feet sinking to the knee, waist, chest, face, hair -
dragged down, sealed over, found wanting, damned.

What the fuck is the hotel bar TV
showing? What happened to the Scandi noir
trailer? The office documentary?
The ads? What happened to *Where Eagles Dare*?

The camera pushes deeper: tree trunks weep
at the collective memory of axe,
of chainsaw, sawmill, lathe and plane. Leaves
soaked through with poisoned chlorophyll react:

what was a shimmer at the forest's edge
reaches its dark apotheosis here
as trunks, roots, branches melt into the sedge
under a rain that kills as it falls. Years

of this: a slow reduction of woodland
to a landscape ruined and infertile,
the full stop of nature's final stand
under colourless sky. Mile after mile

in all directions: declivities that
were reservoirs once, that were rivers, lakes;
ghost traces of hedgerows; the endless flat
acreages of golf courses, public parks

now indistinguishable from the rest
of the ill-used earth. Ill-tended, ill-cared-
for, ill-replenished. Fought over, asset
stripped, depleted. Ill met by billionaires.

14.

Rabbit hole as rabbit hole:
a literal hole in the ground,
a sanctuary scraped out in fear,
dead earth scattered around.



15.

The TV in the hotel bar is dead.
The short took out the tills, CCTV,
the elevators. The green-amber-red
of traffic lights outside blink off. Cars veer,

side-swipe, rear-end. Horns blare. Drivers erupt
from behind the wheel, fists bunched. The street lights
go out next. Shop window displays give up
their consumerist come-ons to a night-

black emptiness. Grid after grid of streets,
houses, tower blocks fall dark. And silent.
The internet crashes. Mobile phones bleat
a last ringtone carillon in lament

for gif-emoji-selfie carelessness.
Bank records disappear; the vaults lock down:
fail-safes guarantee no further access.
The yen, the euro, the dollar, the pound -

names of outmoded gods, all meaningless
in this new world disorder, this cosmic
joke, where currency ceases to exist.
A chance to start again? Fuck that. Panic

is the order of the day - panic bred
from the commodification of hate,
the hallowing of the self. Instead
of love thy neighbour, steal his generator

and jerrycans of diesel, steal his booze;
leave the cunt good as dead if you have to,
steal any of his shit that you can use.
So it goes. *Muss es sein?* Fuck it. Cut to:

the big reveal, one part Philip K. Dick
(late-period) to one part *Matrix*
spritzed with some Gibson *Neuromancer* shtick
(maybe a little Strugatsky in the mix) -

here’s a screen of shifting ones and zeroes
(in horror-movie green for best effect),
a constant refining of strings of code,
the machine reaching out to connect

the machine with the machine with the ghost
in the machine, the phantom creator
introducing the virus to the host.
An easy job in the age of hater,

spambot, bad actor, troll. An easy job
to hit enter and send it worming through
the systems of the world, to let it rob
mankind of what we needed it to do.

An ouroboros devouring itself,
taking us with it. The perfect own goal.
Kool-Aid and a key to the gates of hell.
A landmine buried in a rabbit role.

Image credits

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Canto 2:
Mars rover (YolGezer)

Canto 4:
Alice in Wonderland (betidraws)

Canto 6:
data centre (Yamu Jay)

Canto 8:
Narcissus (GDJ)

Canto 10:
USA / white man with flag (Noupload)

Canto 12:
skull in looking glass (creatifrankenstein)

Canto 14:
digitised skull (Tyli Jura)