

No One Understands You Like Me
Reading Jasun Horsley's *Seen and Not Seen*

‘The present book will come out and, as with the last seven books I’ve published, it will be ignored by the mainstream press and change nothing or little for me on a surface level. It will cross the sky like a comet in the dead of night while the world sleeps, and only a handful of insomniacs will ever see it. That’s all it needs to be. There’s no need to climb the mountain. I need to be down in the dirt, where the stone is buried. I will find my home at Zero’.

Jasun Horsley, *Seen and Not Seen: Confessions of a Movie Autist* (2015)

Fortress of Solitude

I hadn’t thought about the book since I rested it on top of the rather limited fiction section of my library a few months ago. I’d picked it up at a give-away stall at the tube station I pass through when revisiting London. It was the cover that caught my eye: a swirling design of black graphic doodles on a parchment-coloured background. The author’s name rang a not-too-distant bell. Maybe someone a friend had recommended. The title cinched it: *The Fortress of Solitude*. It wasn’t going to be Celine or Kafka, but, given the endorsements on the back, it would likely be well-crafted, New York existentialism-lite in the mode of Paul Auster. Perfect for the tube.

The yellow post-it now poking from the book indicated that I’d made it to page 40 before parking it on the shelf. That’s probably about the average distance I get into a novel before my interest wanes. This is no criticism of Jonathan Lethem as a writer. It’s the form. The interwoven lives of semi-invented characters just doesn’t work for me and it’s a rare day that I make it to the end of *any* novel. I keep trying though. Most of my friends seem to like them very much and plough through them like butter. But when it comes to novels, I seem to have some form of literary ADHD. But who knew? Maybe this was an author whose novels I might have enjoyed till the end. The odd thing was it hadn’t occurred to me until this morning that the author of my random find was the same Jonathan Lethem who’d written the postscript for the book I *had* just finished: Jasun Horsley’s *Seen and Not Seen: Confessions of a Movie Autist*.

Jasun had contacted me by email two months previously, having heard a conversation between myself and Erik Davis, inviting me to discuss our shared interest in Video Nasties on his own podcast. I agreed, in principle. But first I wanted to familiarise myself with his writings. When I perused Horsley’s [Auticulture](#) website and listened to samples of his [Liminalist](#) podcast I was wary about entering into a public conversation with him. I could see that his interests gravitated around what might be called the paranoid end of the contemporary cultural spectrum: UFO’s, child abuse, false memories, satanism, alien

abduction and mind control. It's not that I have a personal aversion to discussing these things. On the contrary. But they are issues I have moved away from over the last few years for reasons of personal wellbeing and professional smarts.

Having fallen into teaching out of practical economic necessity in the 1990's, it has taken many years to develop the kind of tactical intelligence that many of my colleagues in the education business seemed to have gleaned much earlier: keeping your head down, being 'politic' and not picking fights you can't win. I was always a little too post-punk for the job. That's all cool when you're in your 20s and 30's. And, if you play your cards right, even into your 40's. But when you're thirty years older than your students it just doesn't cut it. To hold down a precarious academic gig in art schools these days it's much better to be identified as the "theory guy" than the "horror guy". I still think that's the case, but I falter. Like many other "guys" I'd become mildly paranoid about how you're identified in the eyes of your academic peers. In an increasingly polarised, reactionary and socially mediated milieu, any association with authors or ideas identified as "weird", or worse "toxic", can jeopardise what is already an increasingly precarious life-work situation. And even theory, once a credible thing to be associated with, in art schools at least, is now also viewed with suspicion.

Suffice to say, getting older has meant becoming more risk averse to engaging with anything that might tarnish my "profile" in the eyes of the academy (whatever that might be), or more importantly, in the social media chat of its customers. In fact, I'd become so concerned about my enthusiasm for ideas now considered beyond the pale of the tenured-academic, Guardian-reading consensus, that I'd taken to listening to Radio 4 - something I've never done before - as a form of auto-hypnotic behaviour modification that would make me more amenable to university interview panels.

The second, and more interesting reason for being cautious about Jasun's work had to do with a sensitivity developed over many years investigating the relationship between psychopathology, paranoia and the occult, specifically to modes of thinking where rational-consensual thought folds into subjective fantasies that take on a life of their own. There is a kind of liminal zone, known well to those who have passed through it, between a reasonable person contemplating uncanny synchronicities with agnostic detachment and one who takes their amplification as sure proof that occult agents are running their lives. My immediate impression of Jasun was a person navigating this space with great analytical depth and sincerity. But I was unsure just how firmly in Chapel Perilous he was snared.

He offered to send me one of his books. I received *Seen and Not Seen* in the post a month later and had been reading it every morning since with my first cup of tea. What a joy!

Seen and Not Seen

‘What I want, both as a writer and a reader, is non-fiction with all the poignancy, mystery and suspense of fiction – or better yet, *pulp* fiction.’ *Seen and Not Seen* (p.19)

Seen and Not Seen is a book about the many influences and identifications of an author who, having been a life-long film lover, critic and aspiring scriptwriter, had recently entered into a deeply self-reflective and troubled relationship with the Hollywood dream machine. In it he reflects on his adolescent love-affair with cinema from a raw, deeply personal and emotionally entangled perspective, unearthing the unconscious influences that shaped his relationship to the movies, drawing parallels between the real and fictional lives of his heroes, his own biography and those of his artistic mentors.

Lethem, whose correspondence with Horsley helped steer the book to completion, is a central character in this super self-conscious biography of a traumatised cinephile. It was reading Lethem’s personal memoir about the culture of his childhood on his later vocation as writer, that inspired Horsley to reflect on his own cultural psychobiography.

‘It is possible I wouldn’t have ever started this book’, he writes, ‘if it weren’t for Jonathan Lethem’s *The Disappointment Artist*: ‘Reading the book was like bumping into an old friend whose existence I’d all but forgotten, and then diving right into fond and fevered reminiscences’.

The acknowledgment is not trivial, and points to the core issues of *Seen and Not Seen*: the play of narcissism, mutual recognition and inter-personal emulation by which an artist or writer comes into being; an underlying fantasy about how books beget books through a kind of psychological mimesis; and the crisis of authenticity that too much reflecting on the process can lead to. His literary friendship with Lethem forms the deep psychological holding pattern for the story. And in the psychoanalytic shooting gallery of Horsley’s media constructed idols, Lethem is the last ego-ideal left standing (except, perhaps, David Byrne, whose [song](#) gave the book its title).

What inspired me most about *Seen and Not Seen* was the unguarded style. Reading it was like encountering a former, almost forgotten self, a *real* writer for whom words flowed freely and honestly, rather than a writing hemmed in by academic formality, the fear of getting things wrong, of naively committing an academic *faux pas*. I had once written that way myself. The French had a word for that too (maybe they still do). They called it *écriture*: a writing that foregrounds the difficult craft of writing itself, the elusive intuitions that only writing summons but can never satisfy, the struggle to find the right words and the fear of failing to do so. It is a writing more about the *act of writing* than what the writing is ostensibly about, a subjectively *adulterated* writing, no longer able to maintain any pretence of distance or innocence, a writing of the stained, the marred, the guilty, grappling with the paradox of ever being able to set the story straight *in words*.

Horsley's approach is deeply psychoanalytic, digging through the archive of his past with a fine toothcomb, looking for missed clues and repeating patterns from which to glean a deeper and (possibly) occult level of motivations shaping the course of his life, interpreting the larger-than-life figures he has been drawn to as a writer as masked parental substitutes. What kind of formative childhood experience, Horsley asks, leads someone to seek out the false personas offered by cinema?

The *autist* of *Seen and Not Seen's* subtitle combines *artist*, the *auteur* of classical film theory and a person with *autism*. It is a characteristically self-deprecating play on the conceit of "Jasun Horsley" ever imagining himself a great "film artist". The story of 'The Author', plotted through the book, is one of a gradual dispossession of this adolescent illusion. After many years of watching, making and writing about film, Horsley had finally come to realise his life-long obsession with cinema was less an expression of unrealised genius than of undiagnosed Asperger's syndrome possibly masking hidden memories of sexual trauma.

Despite no formal diagnosis of autism, given the (now questionable) facts of an extremely solitary childhood, various obsessive-compulsive behaviours, a precocious intelligence and early experiences of bodily dysphoria, Horsley *assumes* that autism might help explain his over-identification with so many fictional and larger-than-life characters. This *assumption* should not be passed over too lightly, nor Horsley judged prematurely for an ableist appropriation of a neurodivergent diagnosis. The psychological process of emulating role models, adopting character-types and the identities of others, is at the core of Horsley's confessional style. "Forgive me, for I know not who I am", he seems to be saying. And it was, tellingly, the example of Lethem, who also self-identifies as autistic, that gave substance to Horsley's hunches. Autism, Horsley has said elsewhere, was a *persona* he was trying on, another mask, a way of assuming someone else's identity in order to gain the recognition he had spent a life time simultaneously aspiring to and hiding from.

Seen and Not Seen foregrounds the labour of its own construction, the stuttering, false starts, crises, ill-formed ideas and self-doubts that all writers grapple with. And in this sense the book reads more like an open-letter to a would-be analyst - or as-yet unknown friend - than a work of criticism in any conventional sense. It reminded me of how important a handful of intimate, understanding interlocutors are to get any writing project off the ground. The aporias, moments of difficult and shameful self-disclosure and expressions of deep self-doubt are all openings, between the writer and the reader, on to what Georges Bataille called *intimacy*: a mode of communication, bound up with the mystical and sacred, that occurs where one's self dissolves into an other's. At the same time, Horsley knows that making personal correspondences public to strangers is a paradoxical form of intimacy, like reading someone else's private journal. It is also an act that entices the reader *into* the text in ways traditional narrative and formal academic writing never really can. But as Horsley is

also acutely aware, the personal is also performed, is a kind of 'act', and as such it veers towards a certain duplicity, particularly when these expressions of intimacy are offered up on a public stage.

The Element of Crime

'Apparently I'd gone so deep undercover that I'd forgotten I even was undercover. I'd been programmed to remember my mission and the trauma was the programming'. *Seen and Not Seen* (p.282)

Horsley's hard-boiled self-analyses of the plot-twists in a life spent chasing a dark and disturbing Hollywood dream, leads him down some troubling psychoanalytic worm holes. A pre-occupation with sexual violence, an unhealthy identification with men who seek salvation through it, and a web of deeply conflicted family relations are his "elements of crime". In the hall of inter-subjective mirrors in which Horsley finds himself at large, even his most sincere, guiding questions seem to come from someone else's lips: "Well...How did I get here?"

In Lars Von Trier's 1984 film *The Element of Crime*, Michael Elphic plays Fisher, an expat Brit living in Cairo who undergoes hypnosis to recall the details of a murder case he was the lead detective on. Imagine Mark Fisher writing about the uncanny parallels between Von Trier's script, Elphic's biography and his own life, and you'll have a sense of the world according to *Seen and Not Seen*. Like Bob Arctor, the undercover detective in Philip K. Dick's novel *A Scanner Darkly*, who conducts a surveillance operation on his own household, Horsley is both agent and suspect of this investigation. Within this paranoid echo-chamber, Horsley's idols and influences are cast as the phantasmatic emanations of unresolved family complexes and unconscionable desires that he has spent his adult life trying to articulate and escape.

Exposing the mechanisms of a book's construction necessarily has a transtemporal effect. In formal narrative fictions there are a number of conventions to achieve this: letter writing, secondary reports, framing devices etc. What makes Horsley's use of these conventions interesting to me is how they operate as 'paranoid critical' devices rather than literary-novelistic ones.¹ In other words, the psychoanalytic optic on his own writing about other

¹ The paranoid-critical method was developed by Salvador Dali in the 1930's after reading Jacques Lacan's doctoral thesis on paranoia. I have been using the term 'paranoid critical theory' to describe a mode of writing that foregrounds the de-centered subject's essential uncertainty about the authenticity of its self in relation to a systematic 'big Other', a tendency characteristic of both literature in the paranoid-critical mode (Acker, Ballard, Burroughs, Dick), schizoanalysis and contemporary conspiracy theory (see 'Invisible Machines: Psychoanalytic Imaginaries and Paranoid Critical Theory' in *Drawing Analogies: Diagrams in Art, Theory and Practice*, Bloomsbury, forthcoming.)

author's works, and his earlier understandings of them, disrupts the narrative coherence and conventional structure of the book, in order to access a hard-to-reach and elusive layer of writerly desire that may, or may not, be of an occult origin.

The philosopher Hegel performs a trick in the introduction to *The Phenomenology of Spirit* that Philip K. Dick repeats in many of his novels: making the reader conscious that the words they are reading are being communicated to them through remote space and time. For Hegel language was how the Holy Spirit communicated the miraculous message of the soul's immortality, the transmission of Logos between the living and the dead. It worked the same way for Dick. As such language, in the metaphysical sense, opens consciousness onto a realm outside mortal time: a time of the gods, ancestors and angels. What I enjoy about Dick's novels is the sense that the thing I'm holding in my hands is no simple collection of words telling a story, but an opening onto a transtemporal continuum that intersects with my own present in oddly direct and uncannily personal ways. It is a method that draws me back to his books, which I not only finish, but, like *Seen and Not Seen*, feel compelled to re-read. Much like Dick's [Exegesis](#), in which he tried to make sense of his life's work after a series of mystical visions, *Seen and Not Seen* traverses a conceptual terrain between psychoanalysis, occult fantasy and unconcealed truth, where self-determination and authorship grapple with the potential of demonic or angelic control.

Correspondence and Coincidence

"What is my real relationship to time? I experience the near past, the near future, and the very far past; a lot of my soul or psyche seems to be transtemporal . . . maybe this is why any given present space time seems somehow unreal or delusional to me. I span across and hence beyond it . . ." Philip K Dick *Exegesis* quoted in Jasun Horsley 'How Am I not Myself? Philip K. Dick, The Autism Connection' (2013)

'I knew I might be projecting past my limits by imagining such affinities; but on the other hand, maybe those affinities were what had drawn me to Dick to begin with?' (Ibid)

Horsley's psychoanalytic questioning of the kind of formative experience that could cause a person to obsessively over-identify with the violent fantasy figures of Hollywood cinema is complimented by two secondary questions, intimated at in other works (notably [Prisoner of Infinity](#) and [The Vice of Kings](#)): What is the relationship between early sexual abuse and the creation of a writer's imaginary "fortress of solitude"? And how much of his experience has been deliberately designed by the film industry in order to create the kind of subject who is unable to see beyond their programming? (We might call this the Matrix question).

The double meaning of the word 'correspondence' is crucial to better understand the psychological architecture in which Horsley performs his confessional. On the one hand correspondence refers to patterns of similarity between different things. For Horsley these

are cultural artefacts like comics, movies, novels, his own writing, the writing of others, his biography and that of his idols and mentors. In terms of what we might call Horsley's psycho-pathography, such correspondences are close to what psychoanalysts call 'associations'. Correspondences between the content of disparate cultural objects fold into coincidences in the flow of his personal life. And the more he digs into the correlations between them, the more the uncanny relational patterns in his own life story reveal themselves. Such realisations are the ordinary stuff of any psychoanalytically-informed intellectual pursuit. But they can also become, under the right conditions, the stuff of existential dread and profound paranoia, the feeling that other agencies have been controlling your life without you knowing. From this perspective, recognising correspondences between disparate things is not experienced as a gain in intellectual agency and understanding but an abysmal loss of self-determination: "We have always been here", the dark agents intimate, "We made you do it."²

The other meaning of 'correspondence' - communication through the exchange of letters - forms a significant portion of *Seen and Not Seen*. Horsley quotes directly from letters between himself and his older brother Sebastian, the film critic Pauline Kael and his mentor Lethem throughout the book. The letters, like the auto-analyses of his earlier writings, are typically confessional too, the author laying his heart bare to surrogate parents. At the same time Horsley is very aware, as his brother's tragic life taught him³, that authenticity and artifice are never entirely separable for the artist and writer, and the sincerest confession is also a mask. Jasun is not as *bad* as Sebastian was, but nor is he as famous (yet). But what's the relationship between transgression and celebrity? Doesn't the desire to be famous always run the risk of being a Faustian pact? Confession, when un compelled by force, is a good way to summon sympathy for past crimes. And summoning sympathy, as every good liar knows, is a sure way to hoodwink the gullible and the good.

Between the correspondences and coincidences of his own life and that of his idols, *Seen and Not Seen* charts a sinister net in which the Horsley soul is ensnared. Jasun Horsley writes as one trapped in a web of his own making, unsure whether the people he thought would save him are in fact the phantasms of a delusional psyche. Horsley admits how important recognition from his idols has been in his career as a writer. But far from leading to his affirmation as a writer of significance and note, even the support of his mentors is subject to the same critical self-deprecating scrutiny he subjects his own writing to.

² From a psychoanalytic perspective, particularly as developed by Jacques Lacan, the unconscious is precisely that realm of 'determining agencies' that have nothing to do with one's self. Lacan famously used the expression 'big Other' to describe that which determines us despite ourselves. It is a category intimately bound up with parents, role models, authority figures and the law.

³ Sebastian Horsley was a flamboyant, notoriously transgressive dandy who briefly lit-up the fringes of the London art scene in the 1990's by having himself crucified. Like Jasun, Sebastian wrote about how growing up in a highly dysfunctional family shaped his life. He died of a drug-overdose in London in 2010.

Horsley dedicates two chapters of *Seen and Not Seen* to Kael, the first of his mentors and the person who “midwived” him into existence as a writer, quoting at length from their works and shared letters. Having read *The Blood Poets*, which was dedicated to her, Kael wrote Horsley a letter describing the book as like a long, personal letter to her. Towards the end of ‘The Movie Nomad’, the first chapter on Kael, he writes:

My words and sentences keep undoing themselves; by this point I don’t know *what* my opinion of Kael is. I can’t have a clear, coherent, precise perspective on her because she’s too deeply entangled in my own psychic formation, my development as a writer.

He continues:

It feels unsafe, forbidden, to admit that I might have been wrong about her or that I may have been deceived or negatively influenced by her writing in some way. And yet I know this is unavoidably the case, because it’s true of *everything* in my past. None of it is what it seems and to a degree it’s *all* a lie and I am wrong about everything. It’s all forged memoirs, bricks in the prison house of a false memory syndrome. Screen memories.⁴

There is a trace of prurience in Horsley’s confessions, particularly those that involve the sexually gratifying use he made of violent movies. But such transgressions pale into insignificance when compared to Sebastian’s, whose life in the extremes of deviancy and sexual debasement Jason reflects upon in two of the book’s chapters: ‘Crucified Hero’ and ‘Sebastian Horsley, R.I.P.’ The clues that Horsley reads into correspondences between cinema and biography pass easily into the realm of psychoanalytic mis-identification and transference. Where this play of identification turns sinister and more complex is when he writes about his brother and mother. On this level of correspondence, the clues become cryptic in the deepest and most morbid sense of the word.⁵

Having followed the leads of uncanny coincidence down my own psychoanalytic rabbit holes, I have a healthy lack of concern for the kind of spooky synchronicities that others might react to with alarm. But I’m still sensitive to their allure and feel uneasy getting close to people experiencing coincidence cascades. There is a real force of attraction, an actual transformative power, in these *thoughts with a life of their own* that can pull other minds

⁴ The psychoanalytic concept of screen memories, first outlined by Freud in the late 1900’s, proposes that the affective charge (or significance) of a particularly traumatic memory can be displaced through association with others of less importance but related to it. In the process of masking its affect, the new memory casts doubt upon the authenticity of its source.

⁵ The word ‘cryptic’, meaning ‘hidden’, ‘mysterious’ or ‘occult’, shares an etymological root with the Greek word for tomb (i.e. ‘crypt’). Paranoid critical theory leans into the realms of parapsychology, spiritualism and the dark art of necromancy, when the dead start sending cryptic messages to the living.

into their vortex. And a troubling side-effect of falling into someone else's occult paranoid reality hole is that uncanny synchronicities begin to occur in one's own life too.

In terms of coincidence, *The Fortress of Solitude* find was of a light, low-risk kind. But halfway through drafting my first reply to Jasun, I stopped by a local market where, two weeks earlier, I'd seen a book about Native American art. It was no longer there, but where it was, on a small stand, was his brother Sebastian's biography. *Dandy in the Underworld* was a well-publicized book, one that Stroud Guardian readers and East London emigres might well buy. So it wasn't *too weird* to bump into it there. I picked it up and read the blurb on the back:

"I was lying in bed withdrawing savagely from crack and heroin. I was looking and feeling fit only for the undertaker. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a blazing Technicolour explosion which I took to be a fruit cart. It was Mother."

For a moment I felt fate-bound to buy it. But I resisted.

Horsley's first formal contact with Lethem was sending him his essay on Philip K. Dick's autism: '[How am I not Myself?](#)'. Dick, a master of the mystical-paranoid style in fiction, is a writer I have been making work about for many years (as anyone who has read this blog will know). When Randy Cutler and I created [The Bughouse](#) in 2001 we began by asking participants to share "psychobiographies" of their first encounter with Dick's work. Jasun begins his essay on Dick's autism in the same way. His encounter corresponds closely to my own: reference to Dick's work in underground post-punk, new wave and noise bands in the 1980's: The Fall, Sonic Youth, Swans. (I would also add John Foxx-era Ultravox and Tubeway Army to the list, and William Burroughs, whose unrelated film script *Blade Runner* I'd read before seeing the film or reading any PKD).

After we'd shared our psychobiographies, the virtual residents of The Bughouse began a simultaneous, remote group-reading of Dick's 1974 novel *Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said* - Horsley's favorite - using the internet as a collaborative writing platform. This led to a live, web-streamed séance event - Project VALIS - commemorating the author's death twenty years earlier to the day on March 2nd 2002, named after the Vast Active Living Intelligence System that communicated with Dick between February and March in 1974. I've been working on a project called BC Time-Slip about Dick's nervous breakdown in Vancouver since 2016 which took its name from the same novel that inspired Jasun's essay on Dick's autism: *Martian Time-Slip*. At the time of writing *Seen and Not Seen*, Horsley was living in Hope, British Columbia.

But many people who are into Philip K. Dick are also pre-occupied, as he was, with cryptic trans-communication with ex-carnate beings and entities, esoteric belief systems, mind

control and media manipulation. And many of those are into horror films too. But Lethem's Postscript to *Seen and Unseen*, 'The Last Word (from our Sponsor)', makes reference to three personalities that are threaded through the outer-limits of my own psychobiography in weirder ways: Ian Fleming, Laurence Rickels and Harry Houdini.

My book *Undead Uprising* contains a chapter, 'Live and Let Die: Black Propaganda and Vodou Politics', about Fleming's role in the creation of negative depictions of Haiti and Vodou that were used by intelligence organizations in the 40's and 50's to shape popular opinion against Germany. The zombie, a being brought back to life through sorcery, is the central figure in this narrative. Fleming's novel *Live and Let Die*, I argue, was an extension of this campaign aimed at Papa Doc Duvalier, the 'voodoo-dictator' of Haiti in the 1960's. Laurence Rickels has written a series of peerless works on psychoanalysis, vampires, Nazism, mourning and media that draw on deep correlations between death, communication and the cryptic, which, as we will see, brought Houdini into my biographical orbit in the mid 90's (more on that later). He also wrote one of the [best books](#) on Philip K. Dick.

I could go on mapping the shared network of cultural influences and themes that shaped the Horsley-Lethem matrix and my own indefinitely.⁶ But that would be a somewhat indulgent endeavor, and I don't intend or assume to entangle myself in Jasun's psychodrama of idols, identification and influence. But my personal trajectory from horror to para-psychological sci-fi, and the warp and weft of memory, trauma and altered states of consciousness, uncannily parallels Horsley's. And what makes this so compelling for me, is the inkling of an explanatory perspective about how the psychology of spectacular horror is related to the paranoid modality in writing; how trauma effects our capacity to distinguish between inner and outer reality; and how discovering patterns between the two levels can be experienced either as an empowering, revelatory insight or crippling, existential dread. At the root of it all seemed to be an early exposure to sexual violence and sadistic eroticism in horror films, the impact of an alcoholic and emotionally damaging mother, and growing up in Yorkshire in the 1970's.

Screen Memories

'To succeed in the world, a person not only needs to develop enough insensitivity to let themselves be exploited, they have to learn to *like* it. Eventually they have to learn to exploit *themselves*. Only once they have aborted their own inner child – made their confirmed kill – can they enter into the cartel and become *made men*.' *Seen and Not Seen* (p.288)

⁶ Just as there is reputedly no more than six degrees of separation between any one human being on the planet and any other, there is, I believe, no more than six degrees between any one idea and another. All ideas can be connected in an infinite network of associations (or 'correspondences'). Why, in certain psychological states, the clustering intensifies is another matter.

Jasun and I happen to be a similar age and come from the same part of the world. Whether or not Yorkshire in the 1970's was a particularly dark place I've not been able to fathom. But returning to York, my home town, after many years of absence, often evokes fantasies of mass murder and bloody familicide that I'm hard pressed to account for. I don't think these feelings can be entirely explained by things that happened to me personally. I had a relatively difficult teenage and young adult life emotionally, and witnessed some pretty ugly and disturbing scenes at home, but nothing that could explain the feeling of malignant violence that seemed to flow through the landscape.

Jasun was born in Holderness, an agricultural region in Humberside, close to Hull, about 35 miles from York. The Ouse, which flows through York, and from whose slime, I have joked, my ancestors crawled, meets the River Trent at Flaxfleet in the East Riding from whence both rivers lose themselves into the Humber. Jasun is from a well-to-do, upper-middle class background whose inherited wealth was made from food and drink manufacturing. My family comes from tenant farming and rural service backgrounds, some of whom managed a degree of respectability as shopkeepers, tradesmen, secretaries and publicans in the 1960's. My mother's side of the family came from close to Pocklington, between York and Hull, where my estranged grandfather was born and where women from York would visit fortune tellers in nearby villages well into the 1980's.⁷ Despite the differences in wealth, status and opportunity, both families were affected by the twin scourges of alcoholism and moral malaise.

Mass murder and serial killing permeated the culture of the North in the 1970's and early 80's. The story of the Moors Murderers had put dreadful hooks of horror into every parent.⁸ They tried to shield us from the details, but they were already in the ether. Peering beyond the curtains after watching the television film *Helter Skelter* with my sister, thinking I'd heard mum and dad returning from the pub, I was terrified by seeing Manson's leering face superimposed on my own. Then, from the same enduring and abysmal darkness, came Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, who was convicted of murdering thirteen women and attempting to murder seven others in West Yorkshire and Manchester between 1975 and 1981. In the summer of 1980, my sister and her friends would frighten themselves listening to recordings of the voice of Wearside Jack - the man who, we later learned, was only pretending to be The Ripper - by calling a special police phone number. So whether or not any of us were actually subjected to sexual violence or abuse, unspeakable acts of sexual transgression and unimaginable horror permeated the cultural ether, infecting us *all* with *their* sickness.

⁷ Fortune telling, clairvoyance and mediumship are still popular practices in East Yorkshire.

⁸ For those unfamiliar with the story, Ian Brady and Myra Hindly sexually assaulted and murdered five children around Manchester in the north of England between 1963 and 1965. One of the most troubling aspects of the case was an audio recording they made of the torture of one of their victims that was played during their trial.

My Mother, The Matrix

'Reading the passage about his mother was the Turning Point in my relationship to Jonathan Lethem as a reader. It was the point at which I knew he was talking directly to me.' *Seen and Not Seen* (p.16)

'I am only half way through this "book." I put it in quotes because, until it's finished and published, it's not really a book, any more than a fetus in a womb is a baby.' *Seen and Not Seen* (p.5).

One of my earliest memories, early enough not to be able to distinguish from a dream, and one that gave me the first intimation of my mum's capacity for extreme emotional instability, occurred during a visit to Clifford's Tower, a landmark Norman keep in York whose gruesome history includes a 12th century pogrom of recently arrived Jews from Lincoln who had sought refuge there from anti-Jewish mobs.⁹ As we were walking around the then un-railed vantage platform of the tower, my mother was suddenly overtaken by vertigo and fell to the ground unable to move forward and pleading for me to step away from the edge. I am convinced that in that moment of terror my mother transmitted her vertigo into me. Ever since I've been unable to go close to a precipice without imagining falling or jumping to my death, feelings even more intense if someone else goes too close.

On the morning I finished reading *Seen and Not Seen* I sent Jasun an email congratulating him on the work and offering, as he had intimated in an earlier mail, to write a review:

"It's not often I get to the end of a book these days. My interest and enthusiasm usually runs out half way through. Most books, like Hollywood movies - of which I watch very few, and then only on long-distance flights - are to me at least a third longer than they need to be.

The last book I remember getting so much readerly enjoyment from was Paul Buck's "biography" of Nicolas Roeg's film *Performance*. I think you might enjoy that too, if you have not already. Paul is an old friend, and the person, more than any other, who encouraged me to develop as a young writer. Your book inspired me to write to him about it. I'm sure he'll enjoy it too. I'll be recommending it others I know who will appreciate it.

I'd like to thank you too for inspiring me to return to the kind of writing I moved away from some time ago. Maybe we can talk about why that was when we chat. As with all ideas for books, whether they ever see the light of day is in the lap of the gods. But I think *My Mother, The Matrix* has legs! I already have the chapter headings. It's a start!"

⁹ Realising they could not hold out against the attackers, each man of the family killed his own wife and children before killing themselves)

Jasun replied shortly afterwards asking if *My Mother, The Matrix* was the name of my proposed new book? If so, this was another uncanny coincidence because he was currently working on a book about AI called *Big Mother*. Excited by the coincidence I immediately replied, explaining how it was while reading the section on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre in Seen and Not Seen* that I was reminded how a decade of immersion in the aesthetics of horror was explicitly a reaction to the deeply conflicted relationship I had with my own mother, whose psychic control I had sought to extricate myself from through a naïve and unmentored immersion in psychoanalytic theory and continental philosophy.

In 1994 I made an exhibition for a gallery in London called [Buried Alive](#). The show was an attempt to represent a mental mapping process that had taken over my mind while I was completing a PhD about Georges Bataille and the Video Nasty controversy. Every bit of new information I gathered for the thesis was automatically attracted to a multitude of specific coordinates on the map of York. The process was entirely involuntary, as if some delirious librarian had taken control of my memory banks.

At first I attempted to psychoanalyse the locations, as if they were the manifest layer of some hidden unconscious content waiting to be deciphered. But that just seemed to take me deeper inside the memorial-informatic plane of my 'self'. I made a yarn work on one of the gallery walls in order to get a complete overview of the network in the hope that some pattern or figure might emerge to make sense of them. At the same time, conscious of the implied reference to the maps depicted in crime films, where detectives chart the date and locations of murders looking for clues about the killer's identity and next likely kill, I made a series of post-mortem portraits of influential friends and colleagues, asking them to imagine their own death scenes, an idea that came from another friend's recent suicide and the thought of how traumatic it must have been for the person who found him. Sometime towards the end of the show, after I'd finished writing [a text](#) which attempted to represent the process in writing, I was visited by the spirit of Harry Houdini. The reasons for this are fairly obvious (i.e. an escapologist famous for being buried alive, whose biopic I'd seen on television as a child), but the personal specifics less so.

Clifford's tower overlooks the Castle Museum, an Old Bailey which was rebuilt in the 18th century as a law court and prison by the architect John Carr.¹⁰ The prison, which was first used to house female prisoners, eventually became a debtor's prison. It was converted into a museum in 1938, one of the first in the country to contain a full-scale replica of a Victorian Street. I've no idea how many times I visited the museum. It was a popular destination for school trips, so I expect it was more than once. I must also have visited it as a

¹⁰ Carr, who gave his name to my junior school, also designed the lunatic asylum in York, Bootham Pak, which my mother would repeatedly tell us we were driving her to.

very young child with my family because of the memory which brought Houdini into the inner world I was trying to escape in 1994.

In one of the wings of the building, or perhaps in the cellar, the curators had created a historical replica of the cell where condemned debtors, destined for the gallows, spent their last days. There, in the gloom beyond the bars, was the figure of a man, grey with age and wretched from penury. Suddenly convinced he wanted me to take his place, I was overwhelmed by paralyzing terror and refused to walk past the cell. My grandmother had to reassure me that the man was not real and that he meant me no harm. It was through that figure, the condemned debtor, a simulation taken for reality, and a portent of what I would become, that Houdini emerged into my inner-landscapes, a spiritual envoy from the past, connecting my mother's fear to my own, and possibly holding the key to escaping the invisible prison of my present.

Paul Buck, the author who mentored me as a writer and from whom I learned about so many others, was one of the people that sat for a post-mortem portrait in the exhibition. Another was Nick Land, a philosophy professor at Warwick University at the time, who'd written a [rare and brilliant book](#) about Bataille, true to his dissident, heretical and anti-authoritarian spirit. Although Nick was not yet the guru-like figure he was to become, his influence was profound on the small intellectual and artistic community I was part of at the time, and he was, we understood, very open to communication with inhuman, extra-dimensional entities who seemed to be augmenting his already high-frequency intelligence. When I asked him what he thought about his involvement in the forthcoming exhibition, he simply said "the Matrix made it happen". This was five years before the film of the same name was released.¹¹

Nick's understanding of the Matrix (as I understood it) was derived from three sources; mathematics, William Gibson's vision of cyberspace and, most importantly, cyberfeminism. The latter was closely associated with his former lover and 'cosmic twin', Sadie Plant, who began using the term in the early 90's.¹² Taking her inspiration from the Australian arts collective VNS-Matrix, Plant described [cyberfeminism](#) as a virus that would infect and destroy the patriarchal security system (or 'big daddy main frame'). Her thinking drew out the sex-gender etymology of the word matrix with 'mother and 'womb'; the concept of the martrixial proposed by Lacanian feminists like Luce Irigaray and Bracha-Lichtenberg Ettinger; the hidden history of women in computing; and the transition from biological to technological understandings of 'reproduction'. Sadie was also on the fringes of my social

¹¹ Nick did direct me to an important work that related Houdini to shamanic practices of dismemberment, internment and re-birth, Rogan Taylor's *The Death and Resurrection Show: From Shaman to Superstar* (1983) that resonates very strongly with Horsley's thesis about the occult layer of Hollywood superculture.

¹² Fiona Hovenden, who was also depicted in the show, was the first person I knew to use the term in relation to Donna Haraway. She went on to co-edit *The Gendered Cyborg* (2000).

scene, and like Nick's, her ideas were very influential. "If the father's law is not to touch the mother", she told me at the time, "the mother's law is not to play in the tombs". It was advice that came a little too late for me.

My thinking at the time was deeply entangled in ideas about trauma, transgression, cinema and the Sacred-according-to-Bataille. I was also immersed in psychoanalytic theory and ideas about mourning, my own mother having died three years earlier leaving many of unresolved existential questions and inter-personal loose-ends. Like Houdini, I felt buried alive in my 'self'. Unlike him, I didn't imagine communicating with my dead mother would set me free. On the contrary, if I was buried alive, she had put me there and thrown away the key. So the idea that "the Matrix made this happen" sent a deeply unsettling shiver through the whole project: what if everything I do to extricate myself from this trap is bound to fail from the start because the very idea of self-agency and effective action was an outmoded, androcentric illusion. What if this matrix is the cosmic womb of all mothers, from whose flesh-material everyone is made and bound to, and that everything that happens is merely the effect of its streaming, pulsing fluctuations? When I learned from my good friend Scott Von that The Matrix was also the name for a series of [underground publications](#) that brought together everything that was then known about UFO's, extra-terrestrial intelligence, government involvement with aliens, esoteric theories of consciousness and something called the MCP (Master Control Paradigm), I fell into a delusional universe. The Houdini visitation at the end of the *Buried Alive* show marked the beginning of a brief 'psychotic episode' during which I was convinced that, due to my recent revelations about the Christian, techno-patriarchal suppression of the [Eostre](#) cult, I had been falsely identified as a pseudo-messiah and the police were coming to get me. These weren't just *any* rabbit holes.¹³

Paranoid Critical Theory and The Impossible Real

Horsley's self-engineered autism is crucial for understanding the direction *Seen and Not Seen* takes: that of a complex, subjective (un)masking process, driven by an autistic relationship with movies, that may, or may not, be the consequence of a forgotten experience of sexual abuse. The paranoid critical position, which Horsley's work is exemplary of, is characterised

¹³ It took several years to get far enough away from "thoughts with a mind of their own" to be able to engage similar mindsets without fear of their re-activation. In retrospect, the off-road psychoanalysis some of us were engaged in at the time, though a lot of fun, probably made things worse (not to mention the super-high THC content cannabis we were smoking). Cutting that out, having various phases of counselling and a little actual Lacanian analysis gave me a more practical and reality-orientated perspective. But ultimately it was letting go of the constant self-analysis that psychoanalysis tends to encourage that was most effective, something I learned from regular Buddhist meditation practice.

by the creation of “a big Other of the big Other” (i.e. behind what you think is controlling you, and what we all know is controlling us, there is something *more* other and *more* sinister). A crucial figure in this narrative, to whom Horsley dedicated *Prisoner of Infinity*, is Whitley Strieber, a horror fiction writer who later became a central figure in UFO lore after publishing a non-fiction about his abduction and abuse by aliens: *Communion* (1985). Horsley proposes that this moebius-like interweaving of implausible personal reality with the obsessive compulsion to create fantastic narratives for invented characters is “the crucial fiction” at the core of Strieber’s oeuvre. Similarly, the many fictions Horsley has created of himself and by himself upon the imaginary scenes of cinema and writing, is I propose, the Impossible-Real subject of *Seen and Not Seen*.¹⁴

What seems to happen in cases of paranoia, such as that I experienced, is that the normal, predictable and stable version of the self (which for Lacan is essentially an illusion), shifts into a zone of extreme ontological indeterminacy where the regular, social self, held in place by the symbolic order (Lacan’s big Other) appears as a false façade, a mask or persona. In the place of this false/true self a “new”, super-intelligent and hyper-sensitive self emerges, often having the character of an angelic, undead, demonic or synthetic being that is merely “[passing for human](#)”. Self-transformation necessarily coincides with the transformation of one’s given “reality picture”.

Symbolic and imaginary transgression of the kind depicted in art, much like the Sublime, of which it can be understood as a sub-version of, is a proxy encounter with all that could do us damage or wipe us out: in other words, that which we are “biologically programmed” to avoid. At the same time, following Bataille, human beings only experience life in the strong sense by confronting that which terrifies them the most. Cinema and its extensions (video, computer, phone, VR) affords us conditions sufficiently “hypnotic” and “detached” to enable us to suppress our natural instincts of fight or flight. Through spectacular media we are able to absorb feelings that would, IRL, repel us. And, slowly, we learn to enjoy them. The cinema of transgression then, as Horsley has realised and written about elsewhere, teaches us to enjoy having terror inflicted upon us and, by extension, that inflicting fear on others might be what they *really* want.

Although the depiction of violence in movies and other art forms is able to touch upon the Real in Lacan’s sense, the ‘reality’ of screen violence, like that of the screen memories proposed by Freud, is necessarily inaccessible to the person who experiences it (i.e. we can never know for sure if the acts of violence we witness on screen are actually happening or whether what we remember about our past is true or not).¹⁵ At the same time the experience of spectacular transgression touches upon the Sacred (according to Bataille). But

¹⁵ Generally speaking, any “knowledge” we have about the *authenticity* of things seen on screen, is lent to them by the *authority* of those we imagine “behind the scenes” (i.e. the media controllers).

it does so in relation to a 'mechanism' (cinema, television, video, internet) that is pre-programmed and endlessly repeatable.

The Impossible-Real helps explain the recursive character of the "traumatic kernel of the real" in cinema, and how it is bound to a "compulsion to repeat", associated by Freud with the death-instinct¹⁶. Cutting to the quick of a convoluted theoretical construction, let's just say the repeatable nature of cinema (you can watch it over and over again) coincides with the mechanism of repetition compulsion in a subjective response to trauma.¹⁷ Cinematic representations of traumatic realism bring us closer to the automatic, repetitive substrate of psychic mechanisms activated/revealed by trauma than do other modes of representation, simultaneously bringing experiences of the mystical and unfathomable into alignment with the automated, addictive and endlessly repeatable.

Towards the end of his career Lacan began using the term *sinthome* to refer to the subjective reconciliation of the registers of symbolic, imaginary and real through works of art.¹⁸ It is a process that requires understanding and acceptance that we can never entirely remove ourselves from the fictions which co-created us, nor extract the element of fiction from inside ourselves, traumatic or otherwise. We live in a world built on collective fictions, hemmed in by taboo and driven by desire. As Walter Benjamin foresaw in the 1930's, the mechanical art of cinema would call into question the traditional fictions of authority, authenticity and authorship that we ascribed to traditional, static works of art. From the endlessly repeating, time-binding perspective of cinema then, the crime cannot be solved, will never know the full truth, and the difference between the investigator and the investigated is ultimately illusory.

In the end, I'm not sure whether *Seen and Not Seen* helps us to better understand how the psychology of spectacular horror is related to the paranoid modality in writing. This is, I expect, more of a theoretical than a psychobiographical issue. But clearly, trauma, however

¹⁶ Although Freud's idea of a death-instinct has been taken seriously by many philosophers and writers, I am personally very skeptical of it. As with so many questionable but thought-provoking ideas, once enough people take it as a given, and build their own theories upon it, it eventually takes on "a life of its own".

¹⁷ The Impossible-Real combines George Bataille's notion of the Impossible with Jacques Lacan's category of the Real. Like so many of Bataille's guiding concepts (sacrifice, sovereignty, excess, *dépense*, and formless) the Impossible is paradoxical, elusive and eccentric relative to traditional philosophy. Generally speaking, it refers to an experience of the sacred that happens when one goes beyond the limits of reason, rationality and utility. One of the three orders of psychical phenomena in Lacan's work, the Real designates a category of felt experiences that exceed and elude representation and symbolization. The Impossible-Real then refers to a mode of strongly felt and 'sticky' experience that occurs when limits of the Symbolic (laws, codes, taboos, conventions) and Imaginary (dreams, fantasy, spectacle, artworks) are simultaneously breached. Importantly it is not an experience that *makes sense*.

¹⁸ *Sinthome* is the original Greek spelling of 'symptom' and a word play on 'synth-man', 'Saint Man' and 'Saint Thom' that begins, significantly for Lacan, with 'sin'.

that term is understood, seems to be foundational for Horsley, who also self-identifies as a paranoid writer. It would seem that in the “zone of trauma” the distinction between fiction and actuality become especially blurred, an experience that can be accompanied by an impending sense of doom and the dreadful feeling that one is either controlled by external agents, condemned to insanity (and all that goes with it: incarceration, isolation, loss of contact with loved ones, abjection, etc), or both.

Those who experience such profound ontological anxiety too intensely must construct an alternate theory of “reality” that helps give their “new world” some of security and structure that has been lost in the de-realization process. For Jasun, who has felt, and continues to feel things in such an intense way, writing books, as *Seen and Not Seen* shows us, offers a way to break out of his “fortress of solitude”, to seek out kindred spirits and supportive mentors in the wider world of “writing-on-cinema”.

Postscript

I began writing this “review” in August 2019. It’s now August 2023. In that time Jasun has written a crowdfunded and published [16 Maps of Hell: The Unravelling of Hollywood Superculture](#), published [The Kubrickon](#) and has another forthcoming ([Big Mother: The Technological Body of Evil](#)). Like Jasun, I spend much of my time thinking about how mass media and culture “socially engineer” moral values and public opinion in the interests of something beyond, and often at odds with, “the greater good”. But for me this knowledge doesn’t manifest itself in the need to write and publish books the way it does for him. Whatever the root cause of Jasun’s paranoia, it seems to function, as it did for Philip K. Dick, as a kind of compulsive writing engine, one driven by a powerful need to unmask the occult conspiracy beneath our contemporary superculture that is trying to trap us all in its fictions.

What made the writing so slow for me, besides the usual “life getting in the way” stuff, was managing the temporal ordering process of the text, deciding how far to take the reader down my own psychobiographical rabbit holes, and how to summarise the potentially infinite web of references and associations between my own world and Jasun’s. I have been constantly shunting paragraphs up and down the text to create a better flow. But each time I thought I’ve hit upon a solution, the logical order and temporal flow was disrupted, unhinged and stopped making “proper” sense. This is the same for any written composition. But when trans-temporal, inter-subjective and autobiographical elements are introduced to what is already a multi-layered poly-biographical text, the process gets excruciatingly complicated. This is what makes *Seen and Not Seen* such an inspiring and impressive work. Horsley is able to navigate the transtemporal disjunctions of his own present and past writings and thought in relation to both the work of his idols and lost love of cinema with great fluidity and precision, weaving his own messy feelings and uncertainties into the narrative without ever, fully, losing the plot.

Seen and Not Seen, like *Prisoner of Infinity* and *The Vice of Kings*, can be read as Jasun's attempt to create a new meaning structure to account for, and replace, the collapse of cinematic fiction into personal reality that led him deeper into his subjective isolation. This is what makes the epistolary element of *Seen and Not Seen* so essential. Writers have always built their works using journal entries, letters to colleagues, friends and lovers, and the confessional is a well-established writerly mode. Nor is critically reflecting on the virtues and failings of one's earlier efforts so unusual. But rarely is it done so publicly, and with such unguarded, self-effacing honesty. And more rarely still does the paranoiac mapping of the tangled web of cinematic self-loss and self-discovery become the art itself.