
A Warning to the Curious

M. R. James and the archaeology of the Uncanny



the archaeology of the uncanny

a question for consideration...

How can exploring the *archaeology of the uncanny* (i.e. an excavation of the psyche/unconscious mind) lead to creative encounters with forbidden things, inviting retribution?

...A Warning to the Curious

M.R. James and Victorian Ghost Stories

The Christmas Ghost Story



Ghosts of Christmas Past...

Essential Qualities of the Gothic Tale

a reflective quote

‘A Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) **in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space** – be it a castle, a foreign place, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, **or some new recreation of an older venue**, such as an office with old filing cabinets, an overworked spaceship, or a computer memory. Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are **hidden some secrets from the past** (sometimes the recent past) **that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise** at the main time of the story’ (Hogle, 2006: 2).

A Warning to the Curious (1925) (1972)

M.R. James

buried treasure protected by
ghostly guardian



“no diggin’ ‘ere”

**Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to
You, My Lad**
(1904) (1968)

M.R. James

ancient whistle that summons
terrifying spirits



"Who is it that comes"... "thief, blow, weep"



M.R. James and Victorian Ghost Stories

Eerie Essentials

Key Features in M. R. James

Ancient Threats and the
Active Landscape

- **Atmosphere** - A **Bleak Stage** and **Solemn Landscapes**
- The '**Active**' **Landscape** which has its own '**agency**'
- **Buried Treasure** - discovery of '**hidden**' **objects** – e.g. bronze whistle, ancient crown, ring
- **Ancient Threats** – demonic creatures summoned by inorganic artefacts
- **Ghosts and Monsters** – spectral visitations
- **Cautionary moral**, warning of the dangers of investigating/eroding boundaries between categories,
- **Liminal Landscape** - uses its haunting coastal landscape as a corresponding image to this message.

(un)heimlich

the archaeology of the Uncanny

excavating the psyche

Ghosts, Landscapes and Social Memory

- Freud described the uncanny in terms of fear: **“It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror”** (Freud 1995: 120).
- What distinguishes the uncanny from the merely frightening is the unusual interplay of the **familiar/safe** and the **unfamiliar/frightening** that it embodies.
- “everything is **unheimlich** that ought to have remained **secret and hidden** but has come to light” (Freud 1995: 126);
- “archaeology and the archaeological act is by definition an **‘uncanny’ act which reveals that which should have remained hidden**” (Vidler 1992: 48).

the archaeological and the everyday

Setting stories in the everyday,
can be better to introduce the
uncanny

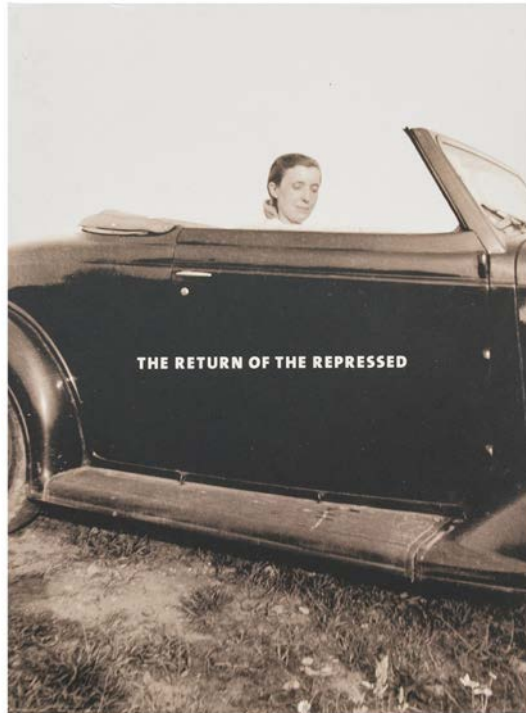
‘If I’m not very careful, something like that
may happen to me’



13-Year-Old Amateur Archaeologist Discovers the Buried Treasure of a Danish King

In January, amateur archaeologist René Schön and his 13-year-old student Luca Malaschnitschenko were scouring a field on an island in the Baltic Sea when something small and silver triggered their metal detector. What they initially thought was aluminum trash turned out to be a coin from a 10th-century treasure hoard that once belonged to a Danish king.

Return of the Repressed



"derivatives of the unconscious"

Freud sought actively to dig down through the layers of **memory, uncover repressed memories, reconstruct the history stored in the unconscious fragments**, and use that history, once brought to the patient's consciousness, to facilitate psychoanalytic cure.

James, in contrast, indicates that digging into the past/the unconscious is a mistake: the results are invariably horrifying and sometimes even fatal ... If **James' antiquarians would only let sleeping ruins lie, they would remain safe** (Cowlshaw 2007: 173).

James believes in leaving buried what Freud would have us excavate and confront.

The Turn of the Screw

Henry James

An Uncanny Story - Henry James's

The Turn of the Screw is a **supernatural tale of a haunted house, AND/OR** a psychological tale whose narrator imagines ghosts as an aspect of her **mental breakdown**.



The Turn of the Screw (2009)

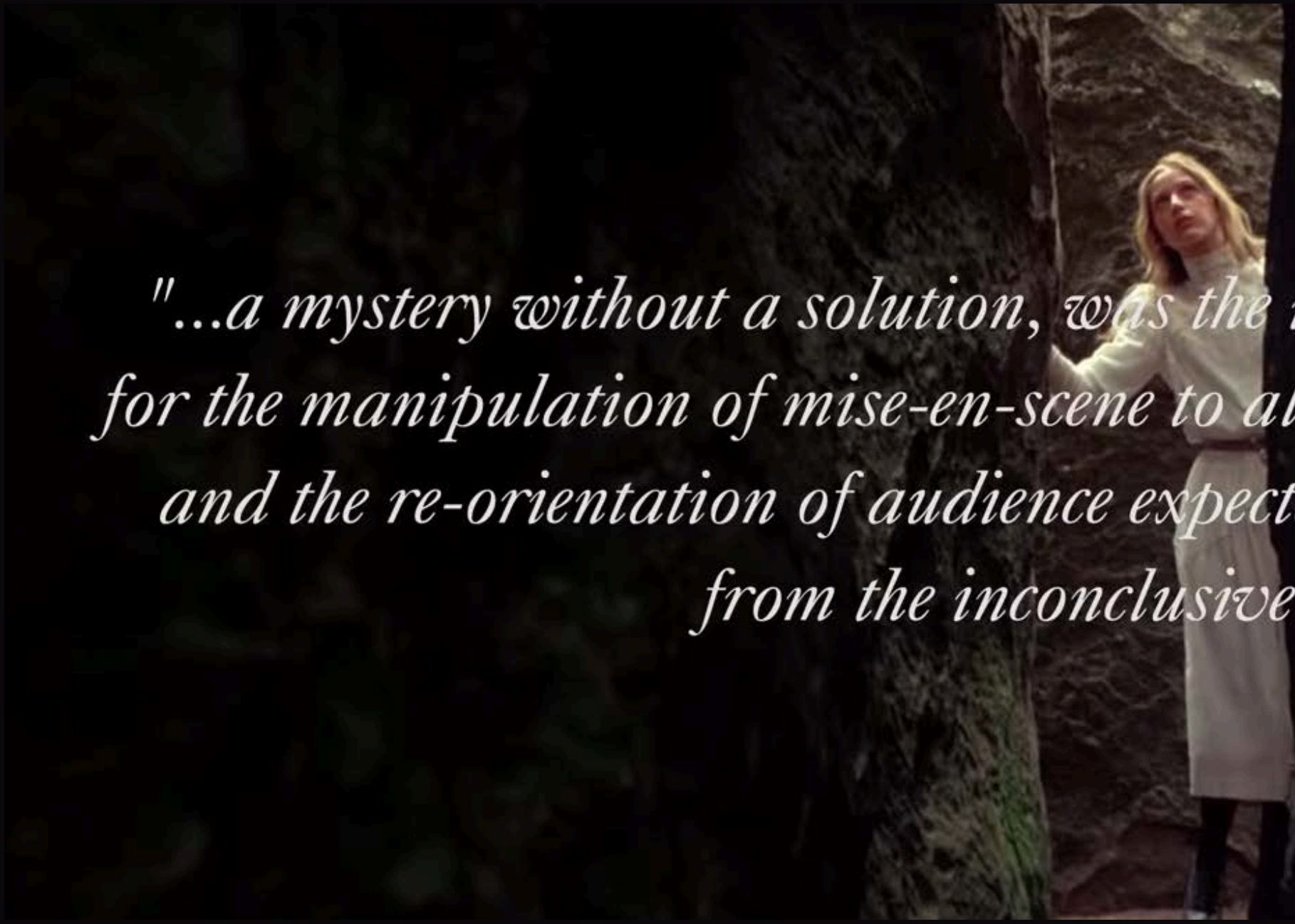


The Turning (2020)

The Terror of the Abyss

a reflective quote

We have no reason to mistrust our world, for it is not against us. Has it terrors, they are our terrors; has it abysses, those abysses belong to us; are dangers at hand, we must try to love them...Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us. (Rilke 1962: 69)

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a white long-sleeved dress, stands in a dark, rocky cave. She is looking upwards and to the right, with her right hand resting on a rock. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting her against the dark background.

"...a mystery without a solution, was the ideal vehicle for the manipulation of mise-en-scene to allusive affect and the re-orientation of audience expectation away from the inconclusive narrative."

- Rayner

sonic hauntology

the sound of the weird and eerie

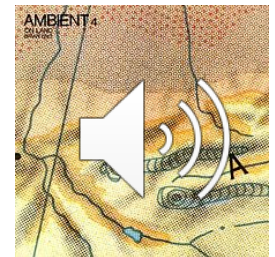
The shift into sound opens up the eerie.

There is an intrinsically eerie dimension to **acousmatic** sound — sound that is detached from a visible source.

pulsing beyond the confines of the mundane —
achingly alluring even as it is disconcertingly alien



“Shadow”– On Land (1982)
–Brian Eno





archaeology of the uncanny

ancient threats and the active landscape

Workshop Exercises

(and prep for Field/Location Studies)

- **Level 4 (Storytelling for Screen)**

Starting with the theme of the archaeology of the uncanny - Identify potential storyline(s) based around the hunt/excavation/accidental discovery of a sacred/secret object artefact/talisman etc. using Rosehill Quarry as a test location.

- **Level 5 (Cinematic Specialisms)**

Starting with the theme of the archaeology of the uncanny - Explore ways to emulate examples of **good practice relating to your specialism(s)** using Rosehill Quarry as a test location.

- **Level 6 (Advanced Film and Television Production)**

Starting with the theme of the archaeology of the uncanny - Explore ways to experiment...with codes and conventions **relating to your specialism(s)** using Rosehill Quarry as a test location.

- **Level 7 (Exploratory Praxis and Research)**

Starting with the theme of the archaeology of the uncanny - Explore ways to express a distinct visual style/aesthetic that using existing models as a point of departure...relating to your current ideas - using Rosehill Quarry as a test location.



Eerie Spaces – Cretan Labyrinth at Rosehill Quarry



ideas, key concepts and keywords

- Archaeology – excavation – buried treasure - hidden, secret
 - M.R. James – Ghost Stories
 - Freud – psychoanalysis – ego, dreams unconscious mind
 - Uncanny, heimlich (homely)
 - Repression – Return of the Repressed
 - Taboo – Forbidden Desire
 - Inconclusive Narrative
 - Morality – Cautionary Tales
 - Sonic Hauntology – The sound of the weird and eerie
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