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Archaeological, industrial and biological dimensions of subterranean horror in L.T.C. Rolt's *The Mine*

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ABSTRACT

Subterranean settings are common in horror: the buried realms of darkness, demons and the dead have long and rich cultural histories. In this paper I explore three distinct themes in underground horror: the archaeological, where ancient buried mysteries meet modern interference; the industrial, where the arrogance of extractive modernity must be humbled; and the biological, where new forms of life – pale, blind, predatory – evolve in isolated darkness. To illustrate these themes I examine the 1948 short horror story *The Mine* by industrial historian L.T.C. Rolt, and consider how these three dimensions of the subterranean uncanny are weaved together into a striking and original tale. These are just three amongst many other cultural, literary and folkloric forms in underground horror, and this paper is intended as a starting point for further exploration of these intertwined themes.

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Introduction

What makes underground spaces scary? The subterranean world of caves, graves, cellars and mines is a popular theme in horror. The underground is the realm of the dead and other dwellers in darkness. To descend into the underworld and to (hopefully) return is an enduring archetype, from Theseus in the labyrinth to Christ's Harrowing of Hell and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It makes for useful if somewhat use-worn metaphors: as Rosalind Williams points out, reading Marx and Freud makes it 'virtually impossible to read a text about the underworld ... without reading the buried world as the subconscious, or the working class, or both' (Williams 2008, 48).

The idea of the underground as a realm of demons has deep roots in European religious and popular culture (Dillinger 2012). Any intrusions into these depths, whether in search of treasures, minerals, or occult or scientific knowledge, comes freighted with physical and spiritual danger. Modern supernatural fiction draws heavily on folklore, myth, and the religious and popular cultures of the past:

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Bleiler's encyclopaedic *Guide to Supernatural Fiction* contains an exhaustive and folklore-flavoured motif index to categorise different horror tropes. This includes a variety of 'subterranean horrors and marvels' including 'horrible monstrosities', 'humanoid (more or less) horrors', 'lost races' and 'supernatural beings who drag humans down'. To these, Bleiler adds 'see also HELL' (1983, 603).

As an avid consumer of supernatural fiction and a sometime digger of holes, I am interested in what makes the underground uncanny. In reading L.T.C. Rolt's 1948 short story *The Mine*, I identified three distinct but often entwined themes in subterranean horror. First, the antiquarian or archaeologist who digs where they should not, and disturbs ... something. Second, artificial underground spaces – mines, bunkers, cellars – where industry and modernity have intruded into mysterious underworlds. Third, and finally, the predatory creatures both real and imaginary that dwell in the deeps, evolving into blind and colourless versions of their original selves. These three themes – the archaeological, the industrial and the biological – form the structure of this brief analysis, and Rolt's story serves to contextualise my exploration of these components of subterranean horror.

The mine

The Mine is set amongst the winding houses and narrow-gauge rails of the Shropshire lead mines in the late nineteenth century, and the tale is adorned with technical details. L.T.C. 'Tom' Rolt (1910–74) was a pioneering historian of the industrial revolution and a prolific author, with a particular interest in canals and railways (Rolt 2005). His many books include biographies of Brunel and other pioneers of civil engineering, and *Narrow Boat*, a popular and affectionate account of exploring Britain's inland waterways (Rolt 2014). *Sleep No More* (Rolt 2012), his collected horror writings, was a rare but successful venture into fiction. Like many British writers of his generation, Rolt's tales were influenced by the antiquarian ghost stories of M.R. James (Sullivan 1978). Both drew on their fields of expertise to create convincingly 'detailed milieu' for their stories (Rhodes 2020). For James, this was the realm of medieval manuscripts and country houses; for Rolt, it was the landscapes of the industrial revolution – railways, canals, foundries and mines.

Like many tales of terror in the Jamesian tradition, *The Mine* has a framing narrative. In the *Miners Arms* in a Shropshire village, an old man sits by the fire as a storm rages outside. Why, somebody asks, is the old mine on the hilltop called Hell's Mouth? The old man fills his pipe, and the tale begins.

Hell's Mouth was once known as Long Barrow Mine, after the mound on the hilltop: 'some old burial-place when Adam was a boy-chap'. Several times archaeologists had begun to excavate the barrow, but none stayed for long. Driven away by the lonely atmosphere of the hilltop, bereft of wildlife, and perhaps something darker: 'Knowing what I know', the old man says, 'I don't blame them for packing up'. The true story of the barrow and its connection to the horrors that follow

remain unclear, but the antiquarian theme has been established: depth of time, something dead and long-buried, something that drives away diggers, and which is perhaps best left undisturbed.

Now the old man's story moves to the industrial history of Long Barrow Mine: more familiar territory for Rolt. Tramways and wharfs, narrow-gauge rail for moving the ore from the mine, and steam locomotives with shining brass: the technical details are laid on thick, and the reader settles into a new kind of narrative (Rhodes 2020). The trouble at the mine begins with a disappearance. Joe and Bill are mates, working a new level of the mine that follows a rich vein of ore. Bill returns alone to the pit face to retrieve his flask and vanishes: his colleagues can find no trace of him, nor any sign of an accident. The new seam sits unnaturally quiet and dark: an 'angry' darkness that sends the men running in fear. For a year nobody will work in that spot, until finally coaxed with extra pay.

For two weeks they work the new vein, plagued by bad luck. Then one day in the winding-house the signal bell rings out violently. When the cage is hauled to the surface, Joe runs out with a look of terror on his face, runs for his life and vanishes into the woods. One of the bystanders screams 'Run, run, for Christ's sake!' and then falls to the floor unconscious. In the mine, the would-be rescuers find nothing but the angry dark: 'It just told me pretty plain that we weren't wanted down there, and the sooner we cleared out the better for us'. Joe's corpse is found in an old quarry, his face twisted in terror.

Some weeks afterwards, the man who fainted regains his wits. He recalls that when the cage reached the surface there was something crouched on top of it: 'a human shape, he thought, even if it did seem terrible tall and thin, and it seemed to be a kind of dirty white all over, like summat that's grown up in the dark and never had no light'. It moved across the hillside pursuing Joe like a predator, silent and swift, reaching out its arms to seize him.

Shortly afterwards the mine is closed, the ropes and cables cut, and the mouth of the shaft sealed with 'girt great old timbers all bolted fast' to keep down anything that 'might come a-crawling up'. Amongst local people, the mine becomes known as Hell's Mouth.

Layers of horror

Like most good ghost stories, Rolt's tale is brief and takes a light touch, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps from the darker corners of their own imagination, and to speculate: did Bill die at the hands of the same creature as Joe, was he consumed by the mine or the darkness or was the creature Bill himself, monstrously transformed? Rolt's tale moves swiftly from the archaeological uncanny to the industrial, and finally to the biological: in the following sections I examine these themes individually, noting common elements and connections between them.

Archaeology

Why does Rolt begin with the archaeological account of the place-name? The diggers driven in discomfort from their prehistoric mound might be a nod to M. R. James, but the presence of the long barrow establishes a depth of time: it suggests that the malign presence in the mine belongs to this prehistoric chronology, rather than to the modernity of the late-Victorian lead mine (on depth and chronology, see Holtorf 2005, 21–22). The hasty departure of the antiquarians could be seen as a ‘do not disturb’ warning that the miners chose to ignore. The long barrow itself remains ambiguous: is it a grave, the origin or nest of the creature? Or did the prehistoric people of Shropshire already feel a need to placate something powerful living beneath the soil?

The uncanny in archaeology, a common and effective device in supernatural fiction, lies in part in this threat to reveal what should (by some measure) remain hidden, to delve into the realm of the dead and – worse – to bring something back (Moshenska 2006, 2012). The modern man of science ignores superstitious warnings and disturbs ... something. It is also a matter of intrusion into buried pasts, of people out of place and time (Paphitis 2020). The workers in Long Barrow Mine have stumbled upon a subterranean space where they are not wanted. They sense this anger in the darkness and silence, but press ahead regardless.

Fictional archaeologists intrude into the world of the dead, and in tales of terror they are punished for it: some are murdered like Joe Beecher, while others survive, chastened (see, for example, Brophy (2012) on Lovecraft’s archaeologies and underworlds). In her cultural history of the subterranean, Rosalind Williams notes that ‘Modern archaeologists continued to experience many of the emotions that Carolyn Merchant and Mircea Eliade attributed to preliterate miners: the sense of intruding into sacred mysteries, the feeling of awe and even reverence’ (2008, 42).

Another dimension of the archaeological uncanny is the lingering legacy of medieval European folklore that deemed the underground to be the realm of demons, and all buried things their property. There are accounts of rites of exorcism being carried out on possessions buried in the soil even briefly or for safekeeping (Dillinger 2012). The demons of the medieval and early modern underground guarded buried treasures, and whipped up storms of wind and rain to drive away treasure hunters: similar, in fact, to the storm at the opening of *The Mine*.

Industry

How does the mine and its infrastructure feed into the construction of the subterranean uncanny? Rolt’s description is vague on the depths of the mine itself, focusing instead on the cage of the mine elevator, the cables that carry it, the bell at the head of the shaft and the bell wires that run down to the galleries below. It is not the subterranean itself that bears the weight of the horror, but

rather the mechanisms that transgress the boundaries between realms by taking men down and bringing minerals (and other things) to the surface. The cage, quite naturally, features in mining folklore: some Welsh miners avoided taking the first cage of the day, believing it to be bad luck, and many would ride the cage with fingers crossed (Davies 1971).

The contrast of above and below, light and darkness, and the movement between these two realms is key to the sense of horror in *The Mine*. Rolt's narrator creates a sense of comfortable normality, describing the polished metal of a steam engine on the mine tramway, before pivoting to the mysterious disappearance and the sense of unease amongst the miners. At this point the horrors are second-hand or third-hand: a tale passed from Joe to the narrator, then to his listeners and on to the reader. Only later does the narrator himself, a mine worker but not a miner, descend in the cage as part of a rescue party and experience for himself the horror of the darkness:

The darkness experienced in underground mines is all-encompassing; suffocating for some, strangely comforting for others. For millennia people have felt the need to excavate into the earth to search for its treasures, which leads them deep into the unknown and forces them to overcome, or come to terms with, the challenges that darkness poses. (James 2016, 75)

Rolt's evocation of the oppressive darkness and silence of the underground is a driving force of the horror in *The Mine*. The two are consistently linked – 'the dark and the hush' – creating the sense of malign presence that both Joe and the narrator, struggling for words, can only describe as anger.

Mines have never been empty spaces. Mining folklore from around the world records encounters with spirits, demons, fairies and others, often as sounds and lights in the darkness. 'Knockers' guide miners to rich mineral deposits or warn them of impending disaster, while dead miners sometimes return as protective spirits. In Finnish mines, the floors of the lowest levels were painted with tar to prevent spirits from rising up from the ground.

Like the archaeological element, the industrial uncanny in Rolt's story is focused on intrusion into subterranean worlds. Both are extractive, both approach nature with a sense of entitlement and both are warned off. The miners, initially respectful of that warning, are tempted back: the rest of the mine has been dug out, and they are offered higher pay. In the end, it is the cage – the technology that takes the miners down into the darkness – that brings the creature to the surface, and it is in the daylight that it kills. As one critic put it: 'For all his affection for the industrial landscape, Rolt understands that it is impotent in the face of encroaching nature and it is often our trespasses against older, incomprehensible forces which bring disaster down upon us' (Roberts 2010). Through the arrogance of modern industry, a boundary has been broken and something evil has been let loose.

Biology

What of the creature itself? Mine demons are traditionally black in colour, but the 'dirty white' humanoid creature that emerges from the shaft has links to mining folklore as well. There is a tradition of white animals including rats, rabbits, doves and hares haunting mines, often as a warning of a fatal accident (Davies 1971, 89–90). The description of the creature brings to mind the 'Pale Man' of Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006): a skeletal creature with long limbs, skin hanging loose and empty eye-socket, with 'eyes encrusted in the stigmata of his palms' (Diestro-Dópidio 2018, 34, 67–68). The Pale Man sits motionless or asleep in his underground dining room, mirroring the world above, until the heroine Ofelia eats the forbidden fruit, whereupon he wakes and pursues her.

Rolt's narrator describes the creature as like 'summat that's grown up in the dark and never had no light'. By the time of Rolt's writing in the mid-twentieth century, cave biology was a well-developed field, and one that had puzzled and fascinated scientists including Darwin. The apparent paradox of a reverse evolution process had stripped many 'troglobites' of their pigmentation and their eyes. At the same time, survival in resource-poor environments had turned these blind, white creatures – fish, salamanders, insects, crustaceans – into astonishingly efficient hunters, using chemosensation, mechanosensation and other senses (Maderspacher 2022, R592–R593).

The horror of being hunted in the dark by pale, blind, subterranean monsters has naturally made the transition from speleobiology to supernatural fiction. The monster in *The Mine* finds echoes in the humanoid 'crawlers' in the movie *The Descent* (2005), and in the blind bat-like 'bioraptors' in *Pitch Black* (2000). Part of the horror of the crawlers in particular is the notion that humans could, like cave fish, evolve or transform into pale, blind, subterranean predators. The two-fold horror of *The Descent*, like *The Mine*, is the killing of humans who intrude into their realm, followed by the monsters' escape into our own world.

Discussion

The Mine is a short story – shorter than this short paper – but it manages to draw upon three different albeit related themes in the subterranean uncanny. First is the archaeological: for some horror authors, including M.R. James and E.F. Benson, the archaeological or antiquarian uncanny has served as the focus of the narrative; for Rolt it is just part of the background, but it nonetheless sets the tone for what comes after. Rolt's antiquarians, driven in discomfort from their barrow digging, are a warning that the lead miners choose to ignore.

Rolt's expertise in industrial history and archaeology shape the main part of the narrative: a convincingly detailed account of a working mine with all the trappings of Victorian modernity, the 'normal' against which the supernatural appears as a more horrifying intrusion. Here the focus is not the depths of the

mine itself, but the cage: the mechanism for bridging surface and subterranean, for intrusion and extraction, despite the growing sense amongst the workers that the mine should be left to its dark silence.

Last is the creature that rises to the surface to finish its hunt of the unfortunate Joe. Whether a demon, a human transformed by the darkness, an embodiment of industrial illness or something ancient and buried, its physical appearance and behaviour draw explicitly upon speleobiology, which remains a rich but understudied source for supernatural horror.

Taken individually, these are three powerful themes that echo across literature, folklore, film, religious tradition, art, cultural heritage and beyond. Combined, as they are in Rolt's work and elsewhere, they create a powerful impression of the subterranean, the surface and the rich transactions between the two.

These disparate elements of archaeology, modern industry, the subterranean and pale white monsters also come together in the dreamlike final scenes of Werner Herzog's documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). The film focuses on the Upper Palaeolithic artworks of the Grotte Chauvet-Pont d'Arc in southern France, but in a postscript that Herzog describes as 'a wild science-fiction sort of fantasy' we see the nearby Tricastin Nuclear Power Plant, and the mutant albino crocodiles that supposedly thrive in an artificial biosphere heated by its runoff. Herzog contemplates a future where the crocodiles escape to the Chauvet Caves, and wonders how they might understand the ancient art (Hogan 2010). Herzog did not set out to make a horror movie, but *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* is weighted with claustrophobia and a sense of disconnect between modern and ancient, surface and subterranean, human and animal.

The themes explored here are three amongst many elements of the subterranean uncanny, and *The Mine* is just one narrative that weaves them together to good effect. Future work might consider speleology and underground exploration, subterranean warfare such as the tunnellers of the First World War and the rich seam of horror based around catacombs. I hope that this short study serves to encourage further work in these and similar directions.

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Disclosure statement

The author denies any financial, commercial, legal, spiritual or professional relationship with the monstrous creatures who dwell in the dark depths of the earth.

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