EXLLU(GESIS)

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ABSTRACT

Exllu (2024) is a text-and-image-based digital artwork that presents as a literary publication of paranoid fiction. Set within the ubiquitous surround of U-City, *Exllu* plots a game-like condition that perpetually breaks down and reconstitutes itself through the quotidian effects of its intimate and remote contests, inciting far-flung and jarring ideas concerning what this strangely familiar scenario affords and obscures, promises and threatens. In *Exllu*'s exegetical companion text, "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I relaunch and perform the artwork's pretence of paranoid fiction while expounding on its underlying theme of gamespace and dissimulative treatment. I evince *Exllu* as a systems thinking and, equally, an analogical encounter with the ubiquitous, control-oriented technologies of the contemporary milieu, and a generative endeavour of unsettling dominant scopes of world-making.

Keywords: digital artwork, paranoid fiction, gamespace, dissimulation, systems thinking, contemporary analogue, ubiquitous technology, control, generation, world-making.

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PREFACE

Before pursuing a PhD in Visual Art at York University, I studied Fine Arts (1996–2000) and Philosophy (2003–2007) at Concordia University and earned an MFA from the University of Ottawa (2016–2018). I was also a core member of the performance, installation, and sound collective Yamantaka//Sonic Titan (2009–2015). During my PhD, I researched cybernetic histories and computational aesthetics, and explored gamified smart environments and wearable technologies in my coursework, focusing on the ontologically reductive role of temporal governance in contemporary technical systems. My intermedia art practice at York has evolved to incorporate systems thinking and generative aesthetics, as well as text-and-image-based digital art and online exhibitions.

INTRODUCTION

Exllu (2024) is an image-and-text-based digital art object that presents as a noir work of paranoid fiction and a K-Pulp publication (Urbanomic 2024) attributed to author W.K. Estes. Set in the metropolis U-City, *Exllu* offers a series of micro-stories informed by an enigmatic, ubiquitous craft (U-Craft), which is everywhere and nowhere, intimate and remote, forming the core disposition of the city. We are to trail the precarious and intertwined plights of the protagonist Rae and her foil Dr. Syme, along with a sleeping figure, lone tower, and distant mountainous entity, yet the plot becomes inundated by questions surrounding the obscure nature of U-City and its operations.

Tensions form and deform the project, both in part and on the whole. We may understand the noir work of paranoid fiction to exhibit the stray and cathartic downfalls of its variegated band of outsiders. Or maybe, through no fault of their own, the strange roads to ruin of this ensemble are due to external corruptions from that which lurks just below the surface of U-City or looms overhead—among other equally legitimate reads. One way or another, *Exllu*'s (2024) characters and adjunct figures become entangled as alien inclinations and peculiar patterns unfold.

In this introduction, I put forward the context(s) in which *Exllu* (2024) brings about reflections on craft. This is to say the ways of making or technique (techne), specifically in relation to the evolution of "capture systems" (Chun 2017, 59), which denote social-technical systems that materialize conditions of possibility through limited and governed ranges of thought and action—an infrastructure of engineered habits and orientations. The gambit of *Exllu* turns on its capacity to sustain an unsettling of thoughts on craft as

capture. In noir fashion, "whom can we trust? No one" (Dixon 2005, 4). We are directed to engage and become part of a suspect enterprise.

With the genre of paranoid fiction as its vehicle of discontent, *Exllu* (2024) aligns with craft as world-making or "worlding" (Palmer and Hunter 2018, para 1), designating "the setting up of the world, a blending of the material and the semiotic that removes the boundaries between subject and environment" (ibid). *Exllu* worlds through its effects, by which I mean operative constructs: arrangements, processes, logic, and patterns. I have schematized and fictioned a selection of arrangements, processes, logic, and patterns, abstracted from the contemporary milieu, and put this selection of constructs to work as the experimental subjects and objects that make up *Exllu*'s worlding, with thought being not just a reflection but an instantiation of world (Clark and Chalmers 1998).

Exllu (2024) revolves around a two-week timeline; U-City's affairs are seemingly stuck in a loop and marked by sudden, inexplicable ruptures and reconstitutions. In one instance, all is lost, and in the next restored, if not slightly askew. This odd arrangement extends to the rest of the novel. Housed in its appendix and evinced in its chapters and diagrams, a body of paranoid art passages intertextually and logically informs the plot (literary, film, and music-related media: paranoid fiction, dystopian fantasy, thriller, sci-fi, supernatural horror, art house, weird fiction, and neo-noir). The book's game-like setting is compacted and neurotic. Its bounties fail to acclimatize us to the world of U-City. Our proximity to its residents is equally close and remote, while our suspicion spreads to the premise of *Exllu* as a publication and noir work of paranoid fiction. All things considered, how does the project world in such a disquieted way, what are its operative constructs, and how do they work?

For my dissertation, I have restaged *Exllu* (2024) as an exegesis or, as my thesis supervisor Marc Couroux has coined it, "Exllu(gesis)" (2024). I recognize *Exllu* as both a gamespace and dissimulative training exercise, with the former acting as its theme and the latter its treatment, which, circuitously, is an adjacent theme in its own right. Tracking *Exllu*'s gamespace and dissimulative treatment, we gain an import of how the enterprise houses conflicting momentums relating to temporality—what I advance here in terms of [i] U-Craft, [ii] cunning craft, and [iii] alterity within (xenos).

Exllu's (2024) proceedings morph from one moment to the next. Its patterns and patternings arise from the paranoid behaviour of the cast and from a familiar-yet-alien logic, which imparts a conflicted awareness of how the novel's time is governed through contest. The ubiquitous surround of U-City overruns its population and this tactically contributes to the ways in which the project falters as a convincing narrative. With this, I elucidate the analogical dynamics of *Exllu*'s worlding, to be precise, the logical structure of the work as it is derived from the contemporary milieu, which I deploy to shore up an orbit of the familiar and unfamiliar for reasons of generating a discordant appointment with craft and capture, of which "Exllu(gesis)" is an elaboration.

"Exllu(gesis)" (2024) is a development of *Exllu* (2024). In great detail, we are led to comprehend how nothing is entirely what it seems, inside and out: how the habitual of U-City, a cryptic technical surround, is equally hospitable and adversarial, its monadic citizenry met with an alterity within. A contemporary analogue and digital art object, as well as a publication and noir work of paranoid fiction, *Exllu* turns on its omissions and cultivated suspicions. The artwork is a slippery undertaking, productively uncertain, a register of thought, world, and craft—and "Exllu(gesis)" does not stand apart from this

venture. "Exllu(gesis)" takes part in *Exllu*'s constitution, and, in turn, we are to become recruited and compromised anew, as readers and occupants of contemporary social-technical circuits.

To prepare us for "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I delineate my reasoning of *Exllu* (2024) and the methods by which I submit and perform "Exllu(gesis)" as its extended worlding, meaning, I not only articulate but also demonstrate *Exllu*'s worlding through actions, as an advance of the project's comprehensive wager. I develop the analogical, speculative, and fictional worlding of *Exllu* to expound on its theme of gamespace and dissimulative treatment, with gamespace and dissimulation forming intertwined figures of thought that both shape and dismay the overarching makeup of the project.

Worlding concerns aesthetics, and I follow M Beatrice Fazi and Matthew Fuller (2016), who, in an advance of computational aesthetics, discern aesthetics as a theory of construction: "what constitutes experience" (284). As it refers to art-making, I view Jack Burnham (2015) as a predecessor, who insists that systems aesthetics is a valid artistic domain in consideration of "the growing symbiosis in man-machine relationships, establishing priorities for the usage and conservation of natural resources, and defining alternate patterns of education, productivity, and leisure" (116). Burnham inaugurates systems aesthetics as a paradigm shift "from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented* culture" (ibid). As part of this trajectory, I include the systems art of Hans Haacke and the work of contemporary artists such as Pierre Huyghe and Hito Steyerl. And, as an example, I cite the systems thinking of indifference and scales of magnitude in Patricia Reed's video installation, *Incommensurable States* (2016). In my reasoning, I make no clear distinction between craft, worlding, aesthetics, and systems thinking.

With my experimental worlding, I think away from the theory, praxis, and doxa of technology as an extension or prosthetic limb of the human and away from "the need for an outer consensus of technology and experience that would raise our communal lives to the level of a world-wide consensus" (McLuhan 1964, 122). Among others, I borrow from Anna Munster (2017), who insists that systems aesthetics demand entirely new ways of thinking about evolving social-technical conditions, as part and parcel of an "ongoing constitution and transformation of sensibilities some of which are not at all ours, not at all human or accessible to phenomenal experience" (00:05:02–00:05:14). Worlding as a human extension compels me to overwhelm such determined thinkings, and I advocate for *Exllu* (2024) with respect to how it houses an index of contemporary constructs pertaining to capture-oriented worlding, a containment I problematize with generative, xenos-oriented worlding practices.

The world of *Exllu* (2024) is informed by contemporary smart environments: a burgeoning, planetary-scale infrastructure and engineered common sense and nature. By a burgeoning planetary-scale infrastructure, I reference automated digital feedback systems of "Industry 4.0" (Donovan 2013, para 1), and by smart, I designate what falls under the dubious rubric of artificial intelligence (AI) and/or machine learning (ML)—or, more productively, "computational statistics" (Pasquinelli 2019, 4) and also speculative technologies (Hong 2020), as the latter indicate involvement of temporal governance. I concentrate on the aesthetics of smart as it relates to, in the most neutral of meanings, "the capacity to anticipate, to expect what is most optimal" (Hui 2019, 215).

I also count gamification as a dynamic of contemporary smart environments. By this, I mean "enhancing services and systems with affordances for experiences similar

to those created by games" (Koivisto and Hamari 2019, 191). These upgrades evolve from the integration of Internet-of-Things-enabled smart gamification in public-private sectors (Uskov and Sekar 2015) for the purpose of determining "interactive paths for better user engagement" (Xiao et al. 2022, 1). Operative within contemporary smart environments and extending to and from public-private sectors, the infrastructural and everyday logic of the game spreads to health and wellness, education, marketing, etc. (Hassan and Hamari 2020). Gamespace shows up in the experimental worlding of *Exllu* (2024) as an implicit logic of capture, in other words, the backgrounded determining and governance of what is thinkable and actionable, whereby smartification and gamification are inherently linked.

Capture systems are indexed in this introductory text in relation to the "coercive hospitality" (Watkins-Fisher 2020, 51) of contemporary infrastructures, which "adopt the image of digital technology as neutral and egalitarian in order to obscure ever-more predatorial business practices" (ibid). I position *Exllu's* (2024) worlding of capture as its quotidian, extraction-oriented nature. And, while I speculate on the planetary scope of technical systems (Hui 2019), U-City's designs of a coercive hospitality range between the enigmatic operations of the city and its residents and materialize in the anticipatory, paranoid behaviour of its public and the half-alien logic of *Exllu*'s plot and storytelling. *Exllu* is paranoid, exotic, and ordinary, while the artwork's pursuant effects propose and facilitate dissonant thoughts about capture systems and scales of magnitude.

In respect of worlding and craft, I identify "machinic life" (Johnston 2008, x) as an integral aspect of my thinking, specifying "forms of nascent life that have been made to emerge in and through technical interactions in human-constructed environments" (ibid).

Three positions follow: [i] machinic life is orbitally informed by theories of life (i.e. bios and intelligence) and the evolving designs of technical systems (Hui 2020; Pasquinelli 2020; Rees 2020), [ii] machinic life emerges from the heterogenous speeds, scales, and complexities of social-technical systems (Fazi and Fuller 2016), and [iii] the orbital and disparate nature of machinic life forms the generic condition of a planetary infrastructure (Easterling 2014; Bratton 2016; Hui 2019). *Exllu's* (2024) basic premise stems from my queries surrounding the orbital and disparate nature of globalized machinic life, starting with the question of how gamified smart environments can be thought.

With the model and promise of the smart city, machinic life is sought using the control-oriented logic of optimization (Allmendinger 2021). "Today's smart city is an engineer's or computer scientist's dream come true [...] Every piece of information is instantly revealed, and the urban machine can be controlled and optimized" (Ratti and Claudel 2016, 28). *Exllu* (2024) disturbs the dream of control-oriented optimization by fictioning a machinic life within a gamified smart environment. I draw from the likes of vaporware campaigns vending "connection, personalization, and continuity" (Babich 2022, 6) and also from coercive hospitality (Watkins-Fisher 2020) imposed as charity, opportunity, and access. In the latter half of this introduction, I outline my adoption and adaptation of such orientations drawn from capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), cybernetic management (Tiqqun 2020), and transhumanism (Hui 2019), and I explain how I apply the logic of these orientations in *Exllu* and its elaboration, "Exllu(gesis)" (2024).

Exllu (2024) worlds the control-oriented and planetary within the habitual, the quotidian of machinic life as capture, where "household practices communicate with cloud platforms, coordinate with other devices, control parts of the home, and provide

realtime feedback to users, manufacturers, and third parties" (Maalsen and Sadowski 2019, para 1). I include the self-control-oriented logic of wearable technologies (Hagood 2019), where self-awareness through numbers (Wolf 2010) is utilized to "facilitate body management and control through monitoring and feedback, with the naked ambition to transform the body and its activities into numeric representations of that which can be measured, monitored, evaluated, and transmitted" (Abend and Fuchs 2016, 7). And, as an extension of wearables, I index a horizon of neuroprosthetics promised by the likes of Neuralink, whose transhumanist mission is to "create a generalized brain interface to restore autonomy to those with unmet medical needs today and unlock human potential tomorrow" (neura-link.com). With its noir portend, *Exllu*'s everyday control-oriented logic is as trivial as it is menacing.

With gamified smart environments, my review commences with pre-online (video) gamespace: what comes before contemporary cloud-to-edge networked gaming, as it informs contemporary worlding and appears in *Exllu* (2024). I consider how pre-online gamespace instantiates an action-oriented matrix and total organization through gamic allegory, after which, I speculate on how this institution plays out within the social turn and smartification of online gaming, which presume the logic of interaction/connection and application of smart as a preemptive mode of realtime game assistance.

Pre-online gamespace institutes a "total system of gameplay" (Galloway 2006, 113), and, in turn, gameplay qualifies as "activities defined by rules in which players try to reach some sort of goal" (ibid, 1). A game matrix orders interrelated action-oriented workings of operators (i.e. gamers), diegetic spaces (i.e. the world of the game), non-diegetic spaces (i.e. extra-narrative elements of the game; e.g. menus, control panels,

etc.), and machine design (i.e. software, hardware, etc.). An order of action-oriented overlays, gamespace of this order establishes, in advance, what can and cannot be done. Action-oriented overlays are elementary to a total system of gameplay and the rules and goals that follow.

In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I restage *Exllu*'s (2024) deliberately disjointed drafting of a total system of gameplay. *Exllu* is game-like but unconvincing in its totality. It matters how a faltering game-oriented logic manifests in my composition, a fictional-analogical process that entails logical transference, the transposing of patterns, not as a one-to-one equivalency but through my fictioning of gamified smart environments. If we choose to treat effects as action-oriented, directly or indirectly, then it is a question as to what the analogue of a total system of gameplay does in *Exllu* and "Exllu(gesis)," particularly with how we, as the art audience, are to participate and how we become drawn into the project's experimental worlding.

In *Exllu* (2024), an articulation of total organization can be found in its appendix, in an excerpt from Jean-Luc Godard's (1965) neo-noir film *Alphaville*, from a monologue of the film's villainous supercomputer Alpha 60, who claims its constitution, referring to the "natural ambition of any organization to plan all its actions, in a word, to minimize unknown quantities" (0:37:48–0:38:30). Alpha 60's ambition of total organization makes its way into the plot of *Exllu*, intertextually and logically, where it falters.

In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I deliver the logic of *Exllu's* (2024) total organization to showcase its deceptively trivial delivery, as indexed by U-City's sanctioned outfits (U-City personnel, U-Medical, the Leve of Charm Psychiatric Clinic), architectural figures (Exllu Tower B, fountain, staircase, ventilation, park bench), and U-City's mixed spatial-

temporal coordinates (districts, nested time zones). The novel's assorted teams, figures, and destinations brief our dulled yet stupefied ideas of daily life in U-City.

Exllu's (2024) factions, fixtures, and locales suggest what is other than and other to its seemingly fixed organizations, and this is to revolve around our transient gist of how time is worked. In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I process Exllu's temporal governance as infrastructural and backgrounded or ambient, not as a prevailing order but in terms of what is claimed and contested as a ubiquitous craft (U-Craft) and as it speaks to what operates through seemingly stable designs. Temporal workings are relayed by Exllu's patterns and predictive logic and through the venture's jointly evolving, asymmetrical, and contested makeup. Exllu's plot of ambiguous events, like Rae's drifting side-scroll and Dr. Syme's hypnagogic speech, grant us inklings of what is contingent yet inborn to the unfolding circumstances of U-City. "Exllu(gesis)" follows Exllu's more-and-less-than-defined affairs and further suggests how the digital artwork is internally and externally organized corresponding to capture and time.

Strategically, neither Exllu (2024) nor "Exllu(gesis)" (2024) clarifies the project's gamespace craft. Both texts verify the shifting and discordant craftings that surface from U-City's chimerical orders while demonstrating the temporal as it works and is worked through the quotidian of tethered, uneven, and adversarial relations. In "Exllu(gesis)," I foreground Exllu's gamespace analogues as internal-external components of the story, and we are enlisted accordingly.

Puzzling arrangements involving the temporal and organizational can be found in Exllu's (2024) diagrams, which measure scenes with an intractable approach to confirm the foreign(ed) operatives active within the storyline and digital art object. The diagrams

involve the extraneous and thus contingent while poorly participating in the logic of total organization; they illustrate corruptions, not by drawing out the internalized estrangements of the novel's company but by virtue of schematizing the fault lines and diffractions of a given confirmation.

In a diagram (fig. 1), we reevaluate Rae and her presumed failure to launch. Her persona is eccentrically twofold. A cacophony of drums, Rae becomes a jubilant fall and the geometry of a spinning disc, and the diagram tracks and verifies the latter half of this split. What does this narrative bifurcation afford us? The book multiplies its noir conflicts with cloaked trials and tribulations, and we must cope, to no avail, with the dead ends of its many layers of contest. Together, *Exllu* (2024) and "Exllu(gesis)" (2024) make up a compendium of aberrant meditations on craft: a pseudo-literary series of outlandish yet everyday histrionics that engages us in an experimental thinking of organization and its shortages and overages.

I refer to the disputes and wavers built-in to *Exllu's* (2024) organizations and to how, in "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I register these frictions by tracking the novel's processes, logic, and patterns, step by step. Past demonstration, volatile workings are integral to the figurative devise of *Exllu*'s opened organs; its rogue properties disturb the narrative dimensions and edicts of its game.

Regarding organized actions, gamespace design instantiates "gamic allegory" (Galloway 2006, 91). Exceeding allegory as a literary technique of "other-speak" (ibid), gamic allegory is "other-act" (ibid), that is to say, extended metaphor in the design of a particular range of possible actions. Gamic allegory is the follow-through of gamespace as a total system of gameplay. "To win means to know the system, and thus to interpret

a game means to interpret its algorithm, to discover its parallel 'allegorithm'" (ibid). A game matrix orders its action-oriented overlays, underscoring its narrative dynamics and, in the process, constituting gamic allegory as a broadening and complication of what it means to act or to know, interpret and discover, labours of which I experiment with relative to capture-oriented worlding and its uncertainties.

To win is to acclimate and become part of what exceeds and is settled within the narrative space of the game. "The way computer games teach structures of thought is by getting you to internalize the logic of the program. To win, you can't just do what you want. You have to figure out the consequences of each move and also anticipate the computer's response. Eventually, your decisions become intuitive, as smooth and rapid-fire as the computer's machinations" (Friedman 1998, 136). Gamic allegory is thus an expression and enactment of the truth, a worlding formally determined and practiced; in other words, the fixed dynamics of the real in its construction.

At what point does (or did) gamespace and its action-oriented, "total system of gameplay" (Galloway 2006, 13) become more adaptive and interactive? Or—rather, as it concerns evolving capture systems (Chun 2017)—how do contemporary games more adeptly play their gamers? And, by extension, how is gamespace found in contemporary machinic life? I solicit these and other questions through *Exllu* (2024) to experimentally address the troubled prospects of past, present, and future gamespace ontologies (i.e. gamespace-oriented worlding).

As a preliminary tracking of *Exllu* (2024), in preparation for "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), we move from the gamer intuiting the game and from the logic of total organization to contemplate the logic of interaction and connection entrenched within the social turn in

online, networked, cloud-to-edge-based gaming. I take into account what is preserved with gamespace as a key domain of machinic life, given the coupled and yet disjointed intuitions of humans and machines in conjunction with the globalized, capture-oriented constitutions of the generic User (Bratton 2016).

Notably, while contemporary gamespace takes a social turn, *Exllu* (2024) effects a post-social condition. The novel's characters never meet, their struggles undergone in isolation. We encounter Dr. Syme's long-winded lecture in a darkened concert hall and U-City's hypnagogic crowds, among others. With its logic of interaction and connection, the social turn in online gaming acts as a precursor to *Exllu*'s post-social premise.

Contemporary networked gaming contributes to the world of *Exllu* (2024), given the relatively recent and undeniably seismic advance toward mobility, public gaming events, and viewership (Stelmakh 2024), e.g. Esports: competitive gaming, complete with sponsorships, advertising, merchandise, premium subscriptions, career gamers, and endorsement deals. The social turn marks the norm of contemporary gamespace, with communal experience and active participation availed on platforms like Twitch, YouTube Gaming, and Facebook Gaming (ibid). Gamespace is expanding worldwide, with the number of gamers currently standing at 3.32 billion (Google 2024), and there are importunate questions around what perturbs the communal and participatory.

Observing Harun Farocki's video installation, *Serious Games* (2009*)*, Hito Steyerl (2017) writes about game orientations that extend from the training-based gamespace of the military-industrial-entertainment complex: "We live in 'gamespace', where digital video games are more than just an emergent form of cultural narrative. This may explain why so many games are located at the intersection of military action and economic

profit, and why they model destruction as opportunity, if we think of them not as Platonic ideals but as training grounds and behavioural schools—as serious games" (Steyerl 2017, 158). Such precepts can be found in *Aircade* (2024), a series of free, online war games courtesy of the US Air Force. Play *E.C.H.O.* (ibid) and "learn what it takes to be as sharp as an Airman in Enhanced Cognitive Human Ops; attempt three unique challenges that get more and more difficult; measure the results of your cognitive and reactive tests to improve your skills" (ibid). Or attempt *AIRMAN CHALLENGE* (ibid) and "perform 16 first-person real-life missions; explore different Air Force careers; learn how to fly, fight and win against cyberattacks" (ibid). Undoubtedly, more than an emergent form of cultural narrative, serious games provide military and other forms of training within the scope of charity, opportunity, and access.

Training is also integral to the smart-and-game-oriented wearables/hearables of the self-care industry, e.g. in the recreational programs of the Fitbit©, with its readiness, sleep and stress scores, where health and wellness entail giving oneself over to the soft persuasions of game designs (Hong 2020). Other than quotidian scores, what else tags along or is harboured by the logic of gamification as a voluntary, entertainment-oriented, and benign form of conditioning (Pavlov 1955)? Or, when it comes to systemic capture, how else does smartification endow these types of gamified devices?

To begin with, wearables and hearables are preceded and informed by the pre-smart logic of media enclosures (Hagood 2019, 3), e.g. noise-cancelling headphones: media as self-control, ironically, a technology of the self (Foucault et al. 1988, 19), with self-training centred around tranquility, privacy, and rest. Adding smart to these media enclosures entails feedback systems, along with the goal of perpetual self-optimization

(Hong 2020) or self-realization through numbers (Wolfe 2010), where the quantified self is continually circuited and passed through the game-oriented, interactive domains of health and wellness. I posit enclosure as a logic transferred to wearable and hearable smart media and, in a broader framework, gamespace with regard to the engineering of game-based realtime.

Of *Exllu*'s (2024) operative constructs, along with its media enclosures, I discern its ubiquitous craft, i.e. a technical surround, and what I hold to be the externalization of the self, by which I mean the circulation or ecology of thought within technical surrounds (Bateson 1972; Clark and Chalmers 1998; Pasquinelli 2015). In a fantastic and paranoid rather than categorical manner, *Exllu*'s cast members are housed, hosted, and circuited. Aside from the overt example of Rae and her implant, there is Tower B, with its portal to and proxy of an interior-exterior time zone, and the arcane figure of Montana, an ever-encroaching immersive surround. In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I enact the ways in which *Exllu* insinuates the ambient operations of its human-machinic circuits, largely through the novel's actors and obscured actants, who, uniquely enough, conform to the logic of enclosure, in excess and deficit, becoming fluent locales, the restive sites of tracking, prediction, and preemptive acts (Hui 2019). From these less-than-convincing human-machinic enclosures come the contested wares of temporal governance.

Temporal governance serves in an effort to resolve the problem of lag in online streaming games, that is maintaining a reliable "realtime feel" (Wald 2019, para 1) as promised by Google Stadia's fix of negative latency. "Negative latency is a concept by which Stadia can set up a game with a buffer of predicted latency between the server and player, and then use various methods to undercut it. It can run the game at a super-

fast framerate so it can act on player inputs earlier, or it can predict a player's button presses. These tricks can help the game feel more responsive, potentially more so than a console game running locally at 30fps with a wireless controller" (ibid). With this quite unassuming assessment of negative latency, the way Google Stadia tracks, predicts, and preemptively initiates a gamer's probable moves is overshadowed by talk of various methods, tricks, and responsivity. In its current iteration, negative latency does, in fact, constitute a trick; it is an optional, adjustable technique implemented under the pretence of a gamer's preference (Nicolson 2024). I take on negative latency in light of how the temporal game technique is designed to oversee the phenomenal, meaning realtime, in its deployment as the linear locale of the gamed and the actionable: a "composite effect" (Bratton 2016, 251) of the User; a "position within a system" (ibid).

A gamer internalizes and intuits the algorithm (Friedman 1998; Galloway 2006), and now, with what comes from smartification, the algorithm internalizes and intuits the gamer, with internalizations and intuitions being different in kind (Parisi 2019), forging an offbeat if not unsound human-machinic circuit. As the engineered site of the gamer and the actionable, realtime constructs a curious enclosure, especially with its predictive worlding matter-of-factly taken as a pragmatic and seamless form of assistance. How do such machinic processes lend themselves to gamified smart environments, and how does smart as temporal governance succeed a total system of gameplay?

While the online gamer is beholden to realtime as the afforded site of experience and the actionable, smart environments are becoming increasingly gamified (Uskov and Sekar 2015). I understand gamified smart environments to be mired in the problemata of a global-scale time-complex (Malik et al. 2016) constituted by a machine-machine

ecology (Hayles 2019) and colonial episteme (Beller 2021). The realtime of gamespace lends itself equally to the intractable undertakings embedded in machinic life and smart environments, where "patient-consumers, empowered by technology, have access to realtime, actionable, and personal information" (Montgomery 2018, 36). If there is a trick to be performed, it is a backgrounded accord predicated on access, empowerment, and personalization. "To engage with a machinic reading of ourselves is not so much to turn on and tune in but to find oneself in an always-already ongoing swarm of active objects —harvesting us and communicating with our bodies (and each other) in cables below our feet, radio wavelengths beyond our senses, and frequencies beyond our temporal range" (Hong 2020, 88). For my part, I experimentally speculate on and indeed fiction these circuited tunings and timings, which exceed the senses in respect of an evolving and, in ways, excommunicated infrastructural constitution. In *Exllu* (2024), the agents of U-City are formed as partitioned continuums and fluctuating patterns, the haunts and flows of a constructed, speculative-oriented machinic nature.

As it pertains to engineered realtime, consider an image of presence as capture from *Exllu*'s (2024) appendix, in a lament from Andrei Tarkovsky's (1979) melancholic Writer: "(Writer) 'In the not-so-distant past, the future was simply a continuation of the present. All its changes loomed somewhere beyond the horizon. But now the future is part of the present'" (1:49:30–1:49:45). Tarkovsky's Writer suffers from the weight of the future in his present, while Rae paces, having climbed the lobby stairs of Exllu Tower B in the hopes of seizing on the promise of a fleeting pattern, "*a sharp decline, the fixed velocity of residents coming and going down below...*" (*Exllu* 2024, 7). The timecrafts imposed on Rae and Writer are different in kind.

Tarkovsky's (1979) Writer speaks to what is other-worldly, an alterity now within, whereas the timecraft that informs Rae more resembles the informatic feedback loops of first-order cybernetics, a temporal governance born from American WWII anti-aircraft weapons developments (Wiener 1948): the technique of predicting future trajectories and behaviour of enemy planes; the preemptive logic of control posited as steering; the implicit theorem of "determining in advance both the position and behaviour of bodies" (Tiqqun 2020, 10). We come to recognize Rae, *Exllu*'s (2024) wayward protagonist, as a contended and emergent station over time.

More concretely, as a legacy of first-order cybernetics, temporal governance can be understood today vis à vis the computational hermeneutic of "tertiary protention" (Hui 2021a, 77). Tertiary protention is a recursive technique. It "constantly evaluates the past in order to anticipate the future, which in turn determines the present" (Hui 2019, 242). Orbitally, future possibilities, i.e. contingencies, are reduced to what is most likely to happen, i.e. most probable—what is referenced to in predictive analytics as "logistic regression" (Pasquinelli 2019, 1). Integral to contemporary technical systems, tertiary protention constitutes an automated anticipation of what is possible, how it is calculated, and how it is seized on in advance, with these processes running at rates in excess of sensorial experience (Hong 2020). How can tertiary protention be schematized, and in what way does this computational hermeneutic inform the engineering of realtime as an enclosure and venue of preemptive assistance?

In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I reworld *Exllu's* (2024) calculative ontology of prediction (Thrift 2008; Crandall 2010; Hansen 2014), its full-scale quotidian feuds, mundane and natural, centred around speculation and asymmetrically impugned. U-City, its urbanites,

and unnamed entities merge without union, which suggests a discord external to but no less inborn to all parties involved. We revisit Dr. Syme during his long-winded lecture in a darkened concert hall, attuned and detuned while detained by his phenomenological framework, and we retrace Rae's game, as she readily avails herself while attempting to pattern the patternings of U-City and uncredited others, assisted by her implant though no less ill-informed.

Exllu's (2024) exploits are executed more and less than programmatically. The allusions to all-out contest alone disavow U-City the status of a defining horizon. I refer here to a coordinated mode of capture: an adaptive strain of totalizing gameplay. The city's conflicts appear to range over and across the binds of the sensible, while events inconceivably bend back on themselves transformed. One Rae meets another. Exllu Tower B straddles time zones. Nothing is entirely continuous or discrete.

At the same time, in "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I exhibit the flattening of this effect of asymmetrical, obscured temporal circuits. We are made to traverse a looped timeline, again and again, as the infrastructural logic of *Exllu* (2024): a deprived overwriting in a compressed, present tense. And, culminating in the final act, there occurs an immobile and uniform surround. Enveloped by the enigmatic figure of Montana, Rae finds herself at the start of an idyllic game quest. We are committed to a constructed realtime, but not entirely, while U-City and its integrated company are overrun by perpetual ambush from within and elsewhere, as one of the project's unruly manoeuvres, a staging of entangled incompatibilities through *Exllu*'s perilous theatre of absence.

Concerning its analogical workings, in *Exllu* (2024) and in "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), something like an international "speculative megacomputation" (Bratton 2016, 89) is

shorn from the project's plot line, what I recognize above as a time-complex (Malik et al. 2016). I detect asymmetrical speeds, scales, and complexities (Fazi and Fuller 2016) in tandem with the "duelling algorithms" (Hayles 2019, 142) of a global-scale technical infrastructure (Easterling 2014; Bratton 2016; Hui 2019). But the planetary as such is there, that is the analogue of a social-technical condition that "would not merely extend or consolidate the arrangement of zero-sum governance as we currently know it, but would inevitably introduce other compound subjects and objects, some human and some not, and elevate them from object to subject in uncertain ways" (Bratton 2016, 89) —what I concoct as the gamespace of a machinic life (Johnston 2008). Playing the role of a spectre, the universal logic of globalism is embedded within the quotidian of U-City, with *Exllu* paradoxically playing the role and stage of the incommensurable.

What is external to U-City is notably absent but for a few allusions here and there and what is insinuated by a diagram (fig. 9), with its thin grey line fluttering up and down between points, side-scrolling from 9:00–10:00 a.m., a pattern in flux and trivial in and of itself. In line with this devised mirage, *Exllu*'s (2024) indexes undermine themselves and one another—worlding, capture, conflict, optimization, and so on—as a problematization of craft.

I entertain Kurt Gödel's axiomatic claim that "truth needs time" (Wang 1996, 313) alongside William S. Burroughs' (1998) ominous claim that "control needs time" (339), the former being a reference to Hegel's temporal logic and the latter, a veiled reference to first-order cybernetic control. Integral to its status as a worlding, *Exllu* (2024) turns on how I establish its gamespace craft in concocting its implicit oversights and misgivings, which brings us to the project's dissimulative treatment and theme in its own right.

In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I formulate and reinforce *Exllu* (2024) as a productively deceptive endeavour in the artistic and philosophical style of dissimulative traditions, what I extend here in relation to subterfuge and recalcitrance inborn to contemporary craft. I restage the artwork as a multi-layered work of fiction: [i] fiction as forgery (*Exllu* models a publication), [ii] fiction as a genre (*Exllu* affiliates itself with the broad literary genre of paranoid fiction), [iii] fiction as performed deception (*Exllu* effects a deceptive manner analogical to the contemporary milieu), and [iv] fiction as a dynamic of the real (*Exllu* constitutes the adjacent or not-yet real).

Its initial act of deception, the labour of *Exllu* (2024) is materialized by the project as a digital file (i.e. PDF), which houses its status of publication. In trompe l'œil fashion, I have made a novel, complete with a front and back cover, a K-Pulp attributed copyright page, along with epitaphs, sections, chapters, and glossy photos, and also an appendix, index, author, and designer. In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I have elected to bracket this initial act of deception, choosing instead to focus on *Exllu*'s fictional author W.K. Estes and his underlying narrative theme of gamespace and dissimulative treatment. It is a strategic move. I have prolonged *Exllu*'s dissimulative constitution with a likewise dissimulative analysis of its suspect fiction, inciting fertile misgivings of its modes of worlding.

My restaging of *Exllu*'s (2024) twists and turns of internal logic casts doubt onto the project on the whole. I ascertain how "Exllu(gesis)" (2024) brings to the fore *Exllu*'s internal unease, which provokes us into turning on its content, its fragmented-disjointed narrative workings, and makes us rethink the project as a publication, work of paranoid fiction, digital art object, PDF file, and so on. Once again, we are to become subsumed

by *Exllu*'s estranged and strangely familiar conditions and drafted into its dissimulative training exercise.

I take up dissimulation in a fashion other than a simple act of deception; *Exllu* (2024) comes from a philosophical-literary style of pre and early modern writers (Snyder 2012), taking up acts of deception for the sake of reflecting on deception, with the often-cited example of Rene Descartes (1985): "I come forward, masked" (213), and the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli, understood as "dissimulation about deception" (Benner 2009, 65). Dissimulation houses a lineage of dissenting ideas, a concealed, iconoclastic mode of writing that mostly draws from preceding works, intertextually and stylistically, —in Machiavelli, from antiquity, e.g. Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (370 BC)—so as to plant allusions and ironically engage with present and future readers on the political rhetoric of a given time. Integral to dissimulative lineage, the intention is not to properly deceive but to assist a practice of seeing through the prevailing views of the day (Benner 2009): a bid to train outliers in the art of deception through a thin and playful veneer of mimicry and double-speak.

Likewise, contemporary art fictioning is commonly practiced as either a mode of deception focused on the framing of truth, e.g. Walid Raad and the Atlas group (2005), who perform how truth claims are produced/contested, or a mode of deception trained on alternative worlds, i.e. inventions pertaining to and reflecting on how things could be otherwise, e.g. the tactical media of The Yes Men (Reeves-Evison 2016). Distinct to contemporary art fictioning, there is often a reliance on breakdown, a supervision of deception aimed at "the moment when it unravels" (ibid, 135).

In its turn, *Exllu* (2024) worlds deception as a paradigm of the contemporary. I refer to how I have chosen to employ coercive hospitality (Watkins-Fisher 2020) as my analogue, an infrastructural logic of predatory patronage drafted from capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), along with cybernetic management (Deleuze 1991; Tiqqun 2020) and transhumanist extropia (Hui 2019).

In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I depict U-City as constituted by a ubiquitous craft that is bizarrely protective and uncaring, a site well-versed in capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), not an explicit worldview or discernible ideology per se but an orientation, i.e. a worlding. I take capitalist realism to uphold an "anti-mythical myth, the world stripped of sentimental illusions and seen for 'what it really is': a Hobbesian war of all against all, a system of perpetual exploitation and generalized criminality, a state-of-nature where dog eats dog, where you're either a winner or a loser, and where most will be losers" (ibid, 11–12). Capitalist realism informs the routine, adversarial logic of *Exllu*'s (2024) narrative style: how I assume the tale.

Integral to *Exllu's* (2024) coercive hospitality produced by capitalist realism, I also include the control-oriented management style of cybernetic capitalism (Deleuze 1991; Tiqqun 2020). And I observe four operative constructs of such management as legacies of first-order cybernetics (Galison 1994): [i] the world is fundamentally constituted by a struggle between order and disorder (organization vs. entropy), [ii] order or organization is always under siege by active and passive onslaughts of disorder (i.e. the rational and non-rational enemies of order), [iii] the world is fundamentally unknowable (black-boxed; comprised of inter-objective functions), and [iv] the goal is steering (governance through feedback, recursive informatic systems), a maintaining of order in the face of disorder. I

hold such operative constructs to underscore Industry 4.0 (Donovan 2013), which is to say the undeclared and overlooked infrastructure of contemporary informatic feedback systems. Cybernetic management entails a calculative ontology of prediction (Hansen 2014) with tertiary protention as its primary technique (Hui 2019, 2021) and, I argue, a fixed nature of the adversarial, weaponization of the inaccessible, and implicit doctrine of safeguarding existing orders to the detriment of others.

A factioned governmentality takes its place at the planetary scale: a cybernetic-computational system of "information handling by correlation, association, and proximity to every living community" (Tiqqun 2020, 7), a conservation of order within the arcane onslaught of a dog-eat-dog world, and "a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (Fisher 2009, 17). In its diversified guise, a global-scale cybernetic management encompasses automated self-regulation, meaning self-adaption, and self-generation, which is to refer to the recursive functions of a machine-machine ecology (Hayles 2019) and also a colonial episteme that games stratification and segregation (Beller 2021; Critical Computation Bureau 2021).

Adding to its cybernetic management, in "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I reinforce *Exllu*'s (2024) coercive hospitality as an extropic logic: "an open-ended perfection of the human species" (Hui 2019, 246) under the auspice of "the increasing determination of technical systems realized in the new wave of industrialization, fuelled by artificial intelligence, machine learning, and surveillance technologies endowed with transhumanist ideology that wants to overcome the limit of the human and politics" (ibid, 2). U-City brandishes an extropic logic with its hosting of a post-social condition. The novel's cast is infiltrated,

isolated, and adrift, while U-City's patronage—illuminated in the capricious and capture-oriented operations of U-City personnel, U-Medical and the Leve, in conjunction with the city's ambient and mundanely Hobbesian U-Craft—betray what perpetual optimizations promise. By default, the daily grind of U-City exhibits an "ontological theatre" (Pickering 2014, 17) with its perverse amendments amid the fog of war.

But, before all is said and done, *Exllu*'s (2024) sedimented layers of deception are only part of the story. There are other clandestine momentums working through U-City including but not limited to coercive hospitality, as I describe it.

Exllu's (2024) capture-oriented contests are further complicated by what I draft herein as [i] alterity within (xenos) in conjunction with [ii] what I qualify as cunning craft, the former of which I conceive of as an intuition of the innately generative, and the latter, I initiate as a generative craft that is, in part, immanent to and thus perverts the above-outlined logic and the operations of contemporary capture systems.

In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I channel *Exllu*'s (2024) xenos effects through the image of the virus: U-City's covert "agents waiting to disrupt, detour, and reroute established modes of life" (Kirksey 2022), the products and byproducts of which are partly wielded, partly accidental, and intrinsically alien. On the one hand, I illustrate *Exllu*'s otherness as corruptive products and byproducts of U-City's optimized Hobbesian jungle: the erratic outcomes of friction, malevolent and/or accidental. On the other hand, I orchestrate the project's generative disposition, the repercussions of xenogenesis (Parisi 2017, 2019a, 2019b) inborn to machinic life (Johnston 2008) or otherwise. As a proliferating xenos-oriented occupation, I have conscripted contemporary analogues that go on to multiply within the foreign(ed) trajectory of U-City and beyond.

Constructed disputes aside, I deem the generative necessary to worldings, which avails itself as equally to the possibilities of change and ruin. There are precedents for such thinking. Regarding the generative of thought, Yuk Hui (2021b) identifies—as the impetus of organic philosophy—a "circular logic that reflectively goes back to itself in order to determine itself and a contingency that opens such a circularity to deformation and transformation" (14). And concerning the error-prone nature of the human-machinic, Matteo Pasquinelli (2015) maintains that "no paradigm of cognition and computation can be assessed without the recognition of the epistemic abnormal and the role of noetic failure" (8), while M Beatrice Fazi (2018) verifies contingency as innate to computation, using Gödel's (1931) incompleteness theorem and Alan Turing's (1936) incomputable numbers to demonstrate the generative axiomatic nature of computation. These and other like-minded pronouncements range the organic and inorganic alike, and suggest the necessity of the outer, otherly, and corrupted within all evolving orders (Bates 2014). In *Exllu* (2024), I consider a "machinic xenogenesis" (Fisher 2018, 132), which opens up the real to its construction and its alternate possibilities (ibid).

Exllu's (2024) logic of capture commingles with the project's internal corruptions. No one figure or arrangement houses a clear idea or fixed constitution, nor respite or alarm. In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I suggest that corruptions are opposed to U-City and its U-Craft as the project's basic premise, and I also propose that it becomes increasingly ambiguous as to how the operations of U-City may or may not be working together or in opposition, or if the city's sanctioned and unsanctioned crafts are formal, informal, or a mix of both. Without permission to celebrate what it is that subverts *Exllu*'s omnipresent espial of capture, we are left with the unaccountable fractures and rehabilitations of the

plot, shifting from one moment to the next. In accordance with the medley of its control-oriented conflicts and evolving alterities within, *Exllu* denies us resolution.

I imagine a cunning craft to span the contested orders of U-City and its alterities. Cunning craft names my experimental engineering of what corrupts *Exllu*'s (2024) given orders. Moreover, I intuit the cunning of craft as equally unguided, past will or intention, rooted in U-City, fictionally and manifestly, a generative indwelling operative within and without the project's combative constructs: an unmanned craft. In myriad guises, I regard cunning craft as a xenos-oriented dynamic of worlds and worlding, and *Exllu* worlds in accordance, as a mélange of deception and control, generation and accident.

For more tangible examples of cunning craft as a generative endeavour, I credit the practice of theory-fiction (Ccru 2017), defined simply as literary worlding: "imagining and imaging of alternatives and their insertion into reality to augment or disrupt the latter" (O'Sullivan 2016, 212). And, in the broader context of the contemporary milieu, I associate the reality-constituting, "hyperstitional" (Kunstbibliothek 2023) force of virtual economies, where the real is manifested through speculative and libidinal engineering, e.g. Bitcoin. The scope of these generative practices relies on "feedback loops in which a future is operational in the present" (O'Sullivan 2017, 14).

Cunning craft occurs in Mike Kelley's (1995) myth science, borrowed from Sun Ra (1972), denoting the birthing of myth. In Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2014), the cunning is a systems practice: "metis" (9), from Greek mythology, "improvisatory and capable of executing a design through a practice which works with the contingencies it discovers only in the course of its acting" (ibid). And I link it with Matthew Fuller's and Andrew Goffey's (2012) prescription of stratagem, which they formulate as an ambient

and wily "reverse-engineering of operative constructs" (21). The acumen of a condition of conditions and an erratic art, cunning craft participates in corruption as necessity.

Exllu (2024) worlds through its digital objecthood (PDF) and its questionable role as a publication and work of paranoid fiction, which altogether arranges/sets in motion its conflation of the real and fictional. The artwork's analogical gamings and breakdowns are initiated by its appended media; its excerpts are intertextual, infiltrative, constitutive, in part and on the whole, and more so. *Exllu* is the subject and object of its manifest and fictional mix: as counterfeit, literary genre, specious performance/training exercise, and dynamic of the adjacent real.

In "Exllu(gesis)" (2024), I explain how *Exllu* (2024) wields rhetoric through errant and/or fallacious evidence as a fostering of our mistrust, e.g. how measurements and likenesses are conflated in a diagram (fig. 5): the time graph of a heartbeat merges with the line diagram of an ocean's depths, which, in turn, becomes a mountain range whose tree line is reflected in a lake below. The diagrammatic landscape proffers vital evidence of *Exllu*'s obscure sleeper, and so plots against this figure's liminal status. But it falters. With its lines going with and against the grain of U-Craft, the schemata is not unlike the sleeper itself, who works to evade U-City personnel, is nearly captured, but leads us to its escape—or not. It is a question, not of whether these two figures evade and/or court capture, but of what their moves entail in the face of capture and how they contribute to its logic. For its part, the diagram conflates the non-ness of the sleeping figure with its measurements and, in the process, reflects other domains that permeate the factioned orders of U-City and the project as a whole. An interrogation is sustained and not simply deferred: what can we say enters the picture and alters it, without beginnings or ends?

"Exllu(gesis)" (2024) substantiates *Exllu* (2024) as a subject and object of fiction through its effects of paranoia. In one tenor, the project's paranoid register is its fostered incredulity of the digital art object: what are its credits? And, in another tenor, paranoia is innate to U-City as a shared anticipatory logic of the quotidian ploy. We find the latter in the appendix, from Tarkovsky's (1979) Stalker and his lament/warning of an alien zone: "(Stalker) 'The Zone is a complex system of traps, all of them deadly. I do not know what happens without humans but as soon as they appear, everything begins to move. Old traps vanish, and new ones appear. Safe spots become impassable. One minute, your path is easy, the next it is hopelessly confused. This is the Zone'" (1:01:58–1:02:48). A modern iteration of paranoia, as a constant morphing of safety and impasse, the Zone works through and, in the process, becomes *Exllu*.

Exllu's (2024) dramatis personae are derived from the modern paranoid subject confined by disciplinary power (Foucault 1977), dispersed by cybernetic capitalism as the schizo post-subject (Baudrillard 1976; Jameson 1991), and returned as the conduit and commodity of a gamespace surround. U-City's residencies are a combination of all the above: intact while partitioned and circuited extraneously. In its dissimulative mode of worlding, *Exllu* is a divergent outing that upholds while denying the constitutions of its characters, along with the novel's internal and external workings.

An anticipatory logic is evinced in the operations of *Exllu* (2024), a noir paranoid logic of simultaneously held sanctuary and menace. Common to all, the logic of the trick must be trusted and mistrusted, evinced in the cloned disposition of Rae, and her foil Dr. Syme, and circulated through the peripheral figures of the novel: a sleeping figure, stoic tower, and yonder mountain, Montana, who looms from afar and within.

A digital art object and composition, *Exllu* (2024) breaks down in taking on the dissonant of thought, its overload showing through a game of presence-absence. The artwork is a speculative enterprise conducted toward the inaccessible and accessible inborn to and in excess of phenomenal experience. *Exllu* is an experimental wielding of craft and a constructed nature, a schematization that conscripts through an error-prone mode of worlding relative to evolving machinic constitutions and transformations of the sensible (Munster 2017). A quotidian courtship of exotic exchange in the face of capture systems, *Exllu*'s conceit is its promise of the generative coupled with its threat.

In its detailed expository, "Exllu(gesis)" (2024) further unsettles *Exllu* (2024), not to deconstruct or reveal its artifice, in a postmodern or critical manner, but to establish the project as a vehicle of generative thought for the purposes of instigating the circular and internal-external nature of reflections over time. With the likes of Dr. Syme and his wild speech, a vessel of what can and cannot be remembered, with Exllu Tower B and its doubled passages, and with U-Craft dragnetted in the xenos-oriented deformations of a cunning craft, we are to contest the indexes of the project and its displayed nature, which instigates other ways and other bearings, one way or another.

With the extraordinary conditions of its capture-oriented gamespace craft, *Exllu* (2024) is more and less than a precarious, disparate human-machinic condition, "where machines can be said to inhabit, or 'live,' in a strange, newly animated realm, where the biosphere and artifacts from the human world touch and pass into each other, in effect constituting a machinic phylum" (Johnston 2008, 2). We arrive at a scene that presents an anomalous coevolution in which "nature and technology can no longer be distinctly opposed" (ibid)—and we are implicated.

Part 1 of *Exllu* begins with an epitaph. Our writer, W.K. Estes presents us with a text fragment he ascribes to Anaximander (538 BC): "On the face of the great waters there moved a progeny of the rind" (5). With this nautical vision, Estes conjures up an origin story.

In surmise of this script, beyond the avails of covering, it remains to be seen as to how this progeny proceeded to thrive. A people have been cast as survivors, which puts forward their navigations over time, involving strategies and tactics, adaptations, adoptions, and so forth. For our purposes, this will prove to be important. Missing from the genesis are all sorts of enticing miscellany when it comes to imagining the arts and crafts set in motion.

A survival is adduced in another version of the creation myth found in a fragment attributed to Aëtius (100 AD): "Anaximander says that the first living creatures were born in a moist medium, surrounded by thorny barks, and, as they grew older, they began to be fitted for a drier medium, until the bark broke off and they survived in a different form" (5.19.4, Diels). In this alternate account, generations bolster these first-living creatures. Shifting relations are cultivated between a people and their environment; at first, it was succulent and arboreal, then increasingly arid. But this is all the information given, and we are left wanting.

What conditions these conditions over time?

Aëtius (100 AD) is perhaps more generous than Estes (2024); at least, he grants us a transition. His indigenes were not only fit but also fitted to survive in another form. Whereas, Estes speaks of an offspring, its skin, and propulsion. The end. Perhaps his

variation takes place after Aëtius' modest record of change. Either way, a genus was inexplicably initiated by an arcane nature and tossed into little more and less than a suitable surround, in the course of which, the genus gathered resolve to make its way into the world.

It is theatre, the lot of it.

Estes employs the ur portrait of his Anaximander fragment to lead us through and alongside a paranoid intuition of inscrutable and uncaring sustenance. It is an entry and an image to *Exllu*'s U-City, an evolving game-like habitat, what we will come to know as a sanctioned yet impending scene.

U-City is an environment we are meant to comfortably understand less and less as we make our way through *Exllu*. The novel's lulling pastiche of noir tales compels us to make room for its eccentric constructs.

But—and here is the twist—the distant comforts of Anaximander's origin story, of an aloof and foreboding clime, do not entirely lose their charm. We are to remain mired in these sorts of effects, as part of *Exllu*'s terms and conditions. And, while the residents of U-City are subsumed and consumed by the patronizing and predatory ethos of their milieu, they somehow manage to hold onto their basic semblance of character. The art yields a paradoxical mix of refuge and menace.

Ultimately, we are compromised by our writer's confident tricks. And, if we are to play along, knowing this, then we must go to get along with this estranged yet strangely familiar ambience.

Welcome to U-City.

RAE (1)

The minatory tale opens with an introduction to its cliché, noir protagonist Rae. Along with the rest of *Exllu*'s cast, her persona is a conduit through which Estes routes his paranoid effects.

Exllu is craftily presented as a phenomenological venture. Chiefly, Estes works in the present tense and in a linear fashion, with this happening, then this, and so on and so forth. His chapters are arranged but ultimately fall short of operating smoothly within a series of nested Euclidean coordinates, a configuration our writer hatches with respect to what nurtures and hinders his pulp. This is our point of entry.

We are about to meet Rae in the lobby of Exllu Tower B, in New Venice, U-City, in the free zone, on August 3rd, 2011, at 9:55:03—and the cold open will have the feel of a standard noir. Rae will be under the gun for reasons unknown, and the setting will be appropriately strained. But the word from the get-go is that something other than our tragic hero's conflict is askew.

What is wrong?

In short order, Estes will have us speculating on whether or not this is a wayward plot that ends in a catharsis of misfortunes.

It matters how *Exllu* establishes its noir premise. In a weird way, Estes will go on to strategically mismanage his accounts, and the precarities of his unkept troupe will be relayed through his poorly kept receipts. *Exllu* does not entirely add up. It is a ploy. The novel's hardboiled intro will singularly suggest the extent of misadventures to come, and our job is to keep track of what is generated by these stagings of error from within and external to the world of U-City.

How are we to grapple with these uncertainties?

First of all, we must submit to our writer's janus-faced craft. Estes has fabulated the broke matrix of a gamespace. It does and does not work. With its wary twists and pseudo grit, the world of *Exllu* falters yet prevails. We are being played, and to commit to the venture is to undergo a self-corruptive contest with U-City and its shifty plot lines and ill-founded strife. We must make our way through a sprawl of downfalls to no real ends. We are attirail of the novel's misguided lay.

This is not to champion nor to disparage the publication: we find ourselves at a familiar and self-interested loss from a distance. *Exllu* is a work of paranoid fiction to the extent of which U-City is rigged to effect irresolution through an admixture of shelter and peril, and we are to sit with the discomfort. The noir novel pervades our idea of its craft, to be precise, without giving too much away before we have begun.

All this to say that, as we are about to formally meet Rae, we should be aware of at least this much: what transpires will not be settled in a conventional sense, and we will be similarly disturbed if we choose to enlist. *Exllu* is a nest of imagery, and while we are invited to observe the city's spectacles, it is wise to keep an eye on its reflections, to catch sight in advance of what may be coming up from behind or lying in wait around the next corner.

Rae arrives troubled, and Estes ushers her down the unlit aisle of his paranoid theatre, readied with his compressed, present tense. This is not to have us enter into Rae's moments, to see the world through her eyes. His strategic accounts will prove to be speculative (future-oriented). Events are calculated and projected forward and back, and there are stakes born from patterns and timings.

The stage is taken in media res.

Rae climbs the lobby stairs of Exllu Tower B and begins to pace, informed by an undisclosed set of circumstances, and Estes (2024) economically outlines her actions while providing us with only minor qualifications: this is a "good position, a good setup" (7). Our writer tells us "[t]here's support here, above this cascade of risers" (ibid). And so it begins, amid offbeat manoeuvres.

Exllu feels noir, but this is in no way exciting stuff.

Estes plays the grifter playing a scribbler, somewhere tucked away behind a desk feigning a lack of concern for what lies beyond his piddling assignment. At least, this is the dulled spirit of his effects. His accounts are up-close yet impersonal, his processions proxies of plot. *Exllu* is all slant and no savvy. As a matter of course, we will increasingly find ourselves ill-equipped to get the picture; already, Rae's entrance is as empty as it is dicey.

We are being set up for a fall. Estes (2024) describes Rae from a short distance, then abruptly shifts to her internal reasonings: "*the sharp decline, the fixed velocity of residents coming and going down below*…" (7), crossing over from his patternings to hers. We are boxed in—all of us, deprived and on edge. *Exllu* gains its force through default and misgiving, and soon we will get the message; what agitates Rae writhes from inside and out.

We are being primed to seek out the cunning craft that has entered our writer's paranoid acuity. U-City, with its claim to the ubiquitous (U), does and does not deliver. Its figurations are laundered through this obscured tale. Character-driven effects snare us with their conventions. The game is doubly rigged.

The fix is in with the noir cliché of Rae herself. All too familiar with U-City, she is equally game and gamed. And there are the vagaries of this devise of a ubiquitous craft: U-Craft, but one of the novel's formidable bodes. Rae's ops will be insinuated in passing references to patterns, predictions, and the like; it has already begun.

As U-City itself wishes to invoke, the dynamics of its game course throughout the plot, and this will include the byproduct of a waning population. But how so? Where is the proof? What has been streamlined is not so simple, and our reticent writer lends us his wares with a deceptive ease. We too are of these dynamics.

(this is the game)

Our task is to attune to the more-and-less-than-convincing logic of *Exllu*'s effects. Take for example the vertical orientation that runs in the background of the novel, which align the trials and tribulations of the city's everyday ups and downs. These verts are a second nature.

We have just seen such animations in action.

Estes qualifies Tower B's cascade of risers, with its sharp decline, as that which succours Rae, along with the fixed velocity of the tower's inhabitants coming and going down below. This is her "good setup" (Estes 2024, 7). And with the provision, we are also to suspect there are other speeds, scales, and complexities involved. Verticality and its accompanying variables mutely uphold what is altogether inside and external to the borders of U-City, and of course, our writer's feigned stature as a lowly desk clerk lends itself well to this play.

As we continue to pursue these works, we come across a second time-stamp, 10:01:44, the locale that proves to be the key tick mark of *Exllu*'s timeline: "She pauses,

takes a few steps back, and with a running start launches off the top tread" (Estes 2024, 7). But this is no launch. Something has gone wrong. "The pattern changes, and Rae's position is lost" (ibid). Has she made an error in judgment? Has he? Estes accounts for neither of these possibilities. Instead, Rae is declared a falling object, a speck swept up in a whirl, and from here on, *Exllu* will revolve around this event and its coordinates.

The loss—if that is what this is—becomes twofold. Inert, Rae plummets, weirdly enough, just beyond our writer's purview, so it appears, a slight shift, uncharacteristic of Estes: from matters of fact to those of scant conjecture. Rae looks to accelerate. So he vouches. Is she somehow caught up in the magnetism of the lobby floor, this surface down below? Estes awaits the yield of his relay. And in the meantime, with the survival instincts of a bureaucrat, he anticipates and clamours for the safety of a new position. Or, is he lying in wait to call the game as he sees it? He will, in fact, divide Rae, and he will do so from a near and great distance.

We are told the impact of the fall has been picked up by a bystander as noise. According to the uncredited eyewitness account, Rae is now "a cacophony of drums" (Estes 2024, 7). Whatever it is that has been refunded to our accountant has been multiplied, more and less.

There are various degrees of gains and losses with the racket. Outwardly, Estes is familiar with the risks involved, and he dispassionately confirms and no doubt aligns himself with the bystander's account: "A cymbal rolls to the centre of a now emptied room, wobbles, and quickens to a halt" (Estes 2024, 7). Estes then splits his measure once more. The tragic spectacle is enrolled, on the one hand, as "the geometry of a spinning disc" (ibid) and, on the other, "a jubilant fall" (ibid). It is a game of miens.

Concerning the former scenario, we are given a diagram, an almost but not quite calculated move that looks to confirm the base physics of it all (fig. 1).
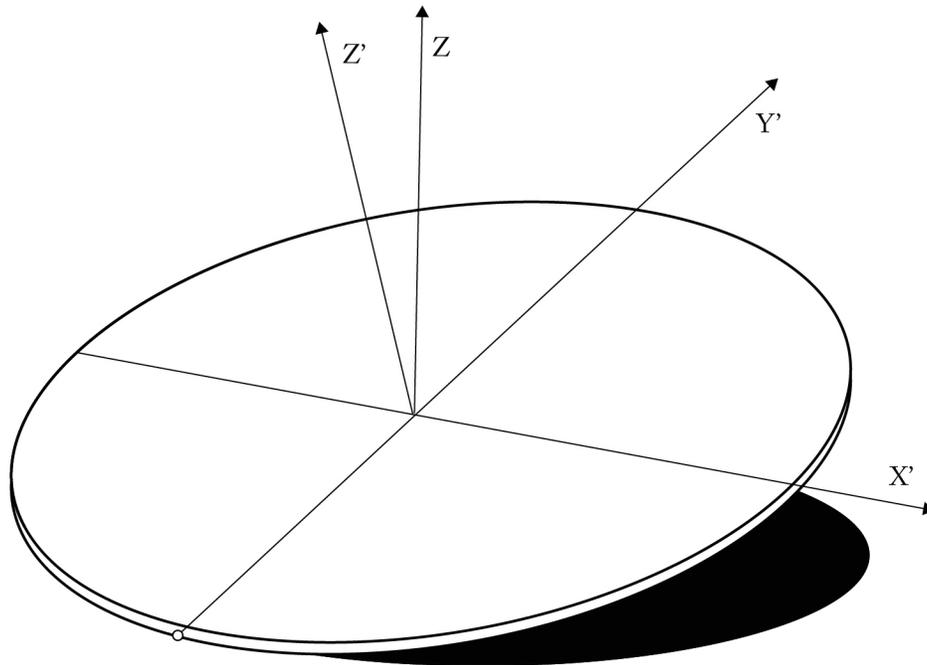

Figure 1. *Two Raes* (Estes 2024, 9).

Estes deliberates, but what does triumph retain, this jubilance? Does a great joy affirm Rae's disorder? Has she been somehow freed? Perhaps our writer professes her rapid descent was not only a launch performed in error but also an accidental evasion. If this was her ending, he deems it both lawful and exalted.

Nonetheless, we are uncomfortable.

With Rae's fall, the relay, and the twin resolve, the request is for us to accept and move on from the nonchalant violence of the scene by somehow coming to terms with the idea that Rae has justly won and lost. And this is not to mention the fact that we are given only shrouded suggestions surrounding contests and stakes. What remains is this occult, entropic force that has overcome Rae.

To help us out, Estes fits *Exllu* with an appendix containing what we recognize to be paranoid twentieth-century film, literary, and music-related media—constitutive of U-City's gamespace narrative. It is the same move throughout. Appendages tether us to a whole litany of other paranoid locales. *Exllu*'s appendix makes and breaks the novel in both the literal and psychic sense that its media does and does not rest within its virtual pages.

The first up is a transcribed, improvisational drum solo of jazz legend Buddy Rich (1982). How does the bit recoup the mystery of Rae's fall? For openers, it is a stretch to say that our transcript can stand in for Rich and, for another, his performance counts as a paranoid event. Nowhere are these claims made. The solo is quite rightly a modern virtuoso performance, all-flash and swagger: a swinging band takes five so the drummer can overflow with a flurry of ornamented rhythms. And, in August of 1982, at *Concert For The Americas*, Rich surely riffed with such a demeanour. Yet the transcript posits itself (and Rich) as a scenario ordered and in opposition to the branch of Rae that has become haphazard. By awarding us with this notation while limiting its circumstances, our writer prods at our navigatory prescience. What was once an improvised execution is now a metre in the face of chaos.

So what is Estes doing here?

Exllu works through its appended artifacts, as is true of the inverse. Through and alongside Rae, we are entangled in a circular, errant dialogue over time. Rhythms lead us to and from Rae's inklings of infiltration, not by chaos or external hazard but by all matters within and without. And this is only the beginning, the first move of the game: a blurring of paranoid registry.

Our writer trades in fraudulent tender; there is evenly more and less to his arrangements. He exploits the transcript of Rich (1982) not to singly undermine his endorsement of the bystander's account of Rae becoming a racket but to perform the divergent dynamics of his stereo effects. Such is the arch craft that extends to the novel itself, in part, wielded by our writer: *Exllu*'s claim to metis, a cunningness, the sheared limits of which fall to us.

What is more—and this is important—by setting up these exchanges between U-City and a collection of twentieth-century paranoid media, Estes does not fully work to estrange the familiar. With his fluid effigies, he attempts not to lure us overboard nor to have us simply capsize. After all, most of his attached articles perform this manoeuvre elsewhere, with their siren songs. Our writer's intuition tells him these bets and sureties, what he taps into and what concocts his gamespace, have never been so cut and dried. Even so, Estes elects to machinate and so nourish an inventory of dualities: order vs. disorder, signal vs. noise, freedom vs. system, et cetera.

Exllu is an overwriting underwritten.

With the doctored Rich (1982) score, we have, in our possession, a measure of rhythm vs. Rae's noise, which somehow holds sway, despite our knowledge of its binary proposal.

Why is that?

For his next trick, Estes takes us to a second location: the lead-up to Rae's fall. "Earlier this morning, on a bench by the Regent's Canal, Rae's implant spoke to her with an unusual clarity as it ran through its weekly projections: 'The virus gains entrance by fraud and maintains itself by force'" (Estes 2024, 7). Internal and external forces are at

play here, as surely these are the lines that panicked Rae, or so our writer wants us to consider. More to the point, Estes forms a pattern from Rae's near past to have us bid on the nature of her alarm.

In quick succession, we are told the implant's voice is Rae's, and they routinely meet like this, volleying her voice back and forth. She was cloned from the onset. Does the implant work for Rae? So far, it is impossible to tell. But there is a snare. As much is clear to Rae, or at least to the part of her that we recognize as Rae. Meanwhile, Estes looks to understand her and her implant as the site of otherly workings. We are led to a consensus in which these two parties, both occupants of the gamespace, jointly agree to host a network of sundry tournaments, as evinced in the turns of phrase that follow the signal incognito.

Rae's secondary voice projects: "Three pushes to End a Trend will buy a climax, followed by a reversal. Reduce confidence in the rally. Short down-side momentums, push fails, and take rest-offs at the break-even…" (Estes 2024, 7). These sparse lines bear the hallmarks of U-City's gamespace craft, the predictive-preemptive calculus of patterning and speculative prescriptions. Verily, the projection itself informs us of little else. From what we can gather, these relays are the ebbs and flows of Rae's livelihood. Such tides speak to a combined nature, and, in and among the forces that bind them, we can imagine our two Raes are busy navigating storms.

What is this business of nature? Or should we first ask, who and/or what has intervened by planting a signal, with this talk of unusual clarities and the stealth of a virus? There are all kinds of suggestions in *Exllu*'s appendix, but a clear culprit can be found in an excerpt from William S. Burroughs (1970):

Having effected alterations in the host's structure that resulted in a new species specially designed to accommodate the virus, the virus can now replicate without disturbing the metabolism and without being recognized as a virus. A symbiotic relationship has now been established and the virus is now built into the host which sees the virus as a useful part of itself. I have advanced the theory that a virus is a very small unit of word and image; I now suggest such units can be biologically activated to act as communicable virus strains (6).

His virus turns insides out, but does it corrupt? It is a fraudster but not a con, an external force that becomes useful from within, a near-becoming part of what is internal and just as far. In this case, a nature hails the virus and host becoming, together and separately, the faction of a replicated and discrepant pulse.

The Burroughs (1970) fragment pays tribute to the host's structure and tells of alterations having been made. Fraud and corruption charges aside, should we attribute these conversions solely to the virus? While we are in a position to say as much, surely Burroughs casts doubt on the notion of this being the work of a lone, secret agent. Its activations make the virus a middleman at best.

Though Rae's signal will remain a mystery, with the Burroughs (1970) excerpt we can ruminate on the idea that words, along with sounds and images, imperil and divine the viability of this venture, inside and out. A fellow mole, Estes constructs the virus as a duplex of U-City.

If we choose to process Burroughs (1970) in this fashion, must we surmise that *Exllu* contains communicable virus strains? Something textual has weighed in on Rae, an alterity within. This, we can understand. There is an immanent craft at work without clarity, whatever clarity may or may not entail, a vessel mundane but rich in primp, like Estes. A clarity or lack thereof likely abides in the facts of Rae's implant, not in terms of

why it hails this obscured alert but with respect to the ups and downs of its report: its relays and speculative patterning, its incomplete logic. In all of this, we can only assume there are Rae's stakes as a survivor, her implacable position as an intact yet strung-out evader of domestic and offshore accounts. No doubt, Estes certifies her in such a way. Given her singular earnings, Rae understudies as the inculpable parasite of a virulent condition.

Germane to Burroughs (1970) and aberrant momentums, our writer includes an appendage from Edward Bellamy (1888), whose Dr. Leete demonstrates, with the turn of a screw, how "music could be made to fill the room or die away to an echo so faint and far that one could scarcely be sure whether he heard or imagined it" (4). Dr. Leete's shaping of an interior extends and equally casts doubts back onto the sedimented logic of the senses. It is a markedly ordinary event, yet with this dimly distressing addendum, we are provided with a key quotidian dynamic of *Exllu*'s craft: the gamespace concocts a fantastic allusion to ubiquity while providing only trivial pursuits.

Our writer further fosters our mistrust of this holistic affair in Rae's third and final scene of the first chapter. A fall is near at hand. It is 09:41:27, and she is escorted along Warwick Avenue. This time, Estes puts to the test a far more confident account of Rae's acceleration. He plainly notes that "panic grows" (Estes 2024, 7).

Words have begun to spread to those who pass by, "their mouths set adrift from their communions" (Estes 2024, 7): more predictions and sly instructions of preemptive actions; "S&P will hold under. Russell will make three attempts to take out the highs of the day. Flip long, point and a half above entry. The market will hold the lows…" (ibid). Do the drones of these hypnagogic pedestrians sound like Rae? What has become of

her includes this hollowed chorus.

While Estes suggests that an illusive market, with its tumultuous highs and lows, is meant to be weathered by all, it is seemingly Rae, our protagonist, who counts—and she is entangled, along with her implant and its peripheral diagnoses and limited reach. Her words do not extend so much as they draw insides out and outsides in, words born from sounds and images, and we are lulled into the unfamiliar within the familiar and its inverse—into a circular pattern evolved through persona.

In jest of consequence, we are provided with two appended prints that subsidize and equally undermine Burroughs' (1970) virus and, along with it, whatever it is that we have so far made of the implant's clandestine relay.

The first citation comes from Philip Kaufman (1978). Elizabeth shows Geoffrey the mysterious grex she finds in her garden, an invasive, epilobic species. "(Elizabeth) 'That's when two species cross-pollinate and produce a third completely unique one. And listen to this: *Epilobic*, from the Greek epi: upon, and *Lobos*: a pod. Many of the species are dangerous weeds and should be avoided'" (0:06:09–0:06:42). The grex is a harbinger of hidden alliances and generative corruptions, but, unlike Burroughs' (1970) virus, it is hardly dangerous and all too avoidable.

Alongside the appendage of an invasive species, Estes resumes his meeting at the Regent's Canal between Rae and her implant with an excerpt from Mikhail Bulgakov (1967): "At the hour of the hot spring sunset, down at Patriarch's Ponds" (7), a stranger casts a sidelong glance at the poet Ivan and his publisher Mikhail, then stops abruptly and sits down on the bench next to them. "'German…' thought Mikhail. 'English…' thought Ivan. 'And look at that—he's not too hot to be wearing gloves'" (ibid).

Our repertoire of words and images is starting to add up, and there are afflictions afoot. Incursive natures commingle in a wildering and lopsided through never one-sided courtship.

What has Rae gotten herself into?

At this point in the story, Estes has our company part ways, with Rae on Warwick Avenue, compromised and in a panic, and us with our accumulative repertoire of faintly familiar media.

SYME (1)

With his character, Dr. Syme, Estes nearly forms an arrest of the paranoias he has so far implanted and retrieved—mainly, the peripheral gist of a gamespace and its internal and external craftings—and he does so by ramping up his overt use of tropes. A visiting professor to U-City's Global Campus, with wild claims of covert operations, Dr. Syme's plot is that of a textbook unravelling.

The doctor plays the foil to Rae, and his dysfunctions do well to amplify her tragic resolve.

This time, our writer overplays the familiar, which is part of his larger plan to push and pull at *Exllu*'s surround. What was Rae's silent score, the muted machinations of a predictive-preemptive calculus, is nowhere to be found. Dr. Syme finds himself at home but at a loss within the modern, institutional patronage of his new surroundings.

Why is that?

Exllu is destabilized; its tropes falter. We are dialled into a divergence between U-City's sanctioned attempt to save Dr. Syme from himself and Syme's frantic attempts

to guard himself from those who purport to wish him well. Preservation plays out as the professor's double bind.

Promptly, we run across Syme and his recently-adopted adversaries working in opposition to achieve the same goal. The professor's integrity is untenable at his debut, and, with this unrest, Estes provokes in us a two-part question: why does U-City's craft take on such a different look when it comes to Syme's unravelling, and what use is his composure, on his terms and those of others?

All told, the professor's story does not get off the ground.

We are made aware of Syme just before his hospitalization, where and when we learn he has circulated an alarming memo among his colleagues at the Global Campus: "THE FREE ZONE IS UNDER MINIATURIZED AVIAN SURVEILLANCE" (Estes 2024, 11). The professor is unhinged and, seemingly, alone with his worries. He will prove to be quite the pedant, and, with this tiring personality, Estes prompts our recognition of and estrangement from a retrograde meltdown, as the media stunt exhibits a character both in and out of touch.

In the opening scene, we find Syme within a series of nested insides: "11/08/03 10:07:52, SOHO" (Estes 2024, 11). It is a reoccurrence of Monday, August 3rd, 2011, in a parallel runtime with Rae's fall. The doctor breaks down somewhere in between Rae's attempted launch and her transformations.

Our writer multi-tracks his timeline, hinging on this particular coordinate, over and over again. Rae and the doctor will go down together, as rank and file, their contrasting effects notwithstanding.

The professor has just arrived, and already he is in a fix: "U-City personnel are

dispatched to the Global Campus library grounds, where they find Dr. Syme knee-deep in the courtyard fountain, his arms flailing. 'LEDGE BOOST', he jeers, while attempting to scale the structure's angular tiers" (Estes 2024, 9). He is surrounded, irate, and partly submerged. Like Rae, Syme's conflict involves verticality: this damn fountain. And, while it ultimately fails, his plan of escape is telling. "'LEDGE BOOST'" (ibid) is a hack, and, coupled with the fact that he is outnumbered, the move implies that the game may be rigged but its rules can be broken.

Syme's antics recall certain spoils of Rae's fall: let us say, the order to her chaos. He is the transcript of Rich (1980), a flashy signal amid all the noise. Syme is nothing if not modern, and his disdain for overreach is what first gives him away.

Surely, the professor's goal is to come out of this mess unscathed and to attain the freedom that comes with having won, and yet he has fallen. He is under siege and must prevail.

We may not be privy to what threatens Dr. Syme, but we can still testify to U-City personnel swiftly closing in on him. So it seems, disciplinary power is an active, viable component of the gamespace and in a horizontal fashion, no less. It is a wonder. Where would a ledge boost have taken him?

To round out the containment of the scene, Estes provides us with a diagram of the courtyard fountain (fig. 2), which reflects Rae as a spinning disc (fig. 1). We can see how the pitched planes of the courtyard fountain support Syme in his time of need. They hold him down. At least, this would be the city's ruling. The logic of the diagram comes to us with its regulatory facts, and, regardless of whether or not they are accidental to his capture, Dr. Syme's required limits are imbued in the fountain.
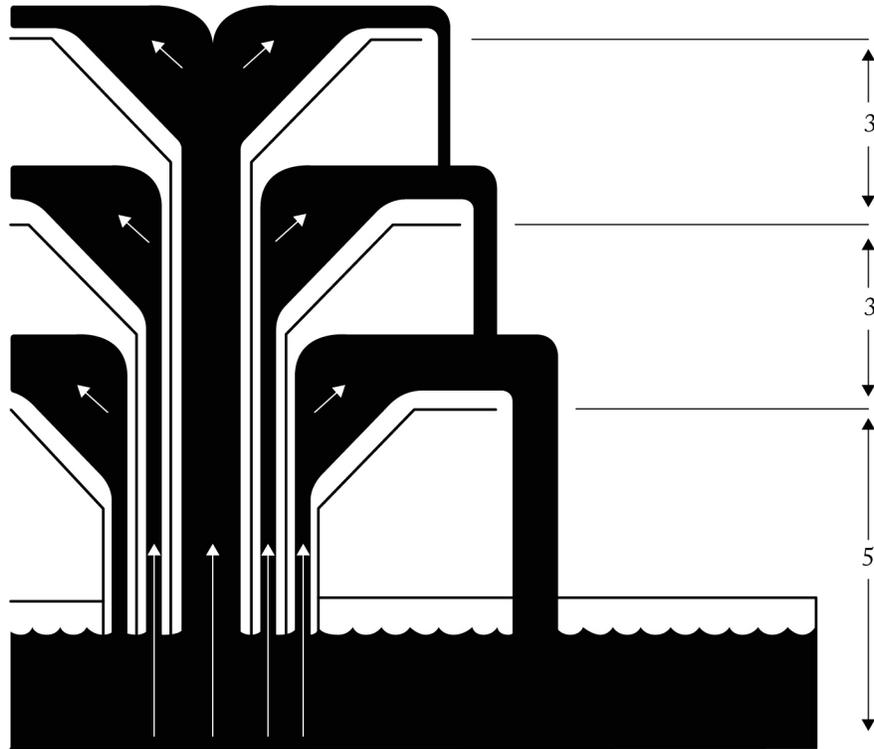
Figure 2. *A Geometry Lost* (Estes 2024, 13).

Calculated, accidental, or some eccentric combo—like all of *Exllu*'s diagrams, the courtyard fountain is a piece of theatre for our benefit. Perhaps we can at least say that the diagram abides by Dr. Syme's inevitable failures.

We are reunited with Rae's foil the following afternoon at GM Medical Complex, in Charm Psychiatric Clinic. And, once again, we come upon him in the present tense. Restricted to bed rest, Dr. Syme sees fit to withdraw his remarks. "At no time and in no way was my backend compromised" (Estes 2024, 9). So he declares to his attendants. "Nor were my consultations somehow repurposed as I previously maintained" (ibid). Do the doctor's denials involve a breach of contract or prohibition? An unspecified quarrel is at work, and, clearly, there is more to this sad occasion.

The professor's backend recalls Rae and her implant, the very fact of such a

possession. Implanted or otherwise, Syme insists he has regained control.

For a brief time, the doctor was simply not himself. "'It was not I but an odd spell of DUCKSPEAK'" (Estes 2024, 9). Did he fall victim to a temporary state of aphasia? Was his address programmed?

We can see from the appendix that duckspeak is from George Orwell (1949). It is a speaking from the larynx: a muddled brutish noise not of one's own.

Dr. Syme knows not of what he spoke, and at present, confined in the clinic, he has decided to switch tactics. Now, he denounces his actions as that which ran through him without consent.

All the same, what are we to make of Syme's memo? He warned us of tiny birds watching over the free zone, among other dangers, we can assume.

While we are on this track, Dr. Syme's about-face echoes Burroughs (1970). The professor now maintains his position as an accidental and unwitting keep of villainous efforts. It was a word virus. The disclaimer confirms our pedestrian stray on Warwick Avenue, Rae's hypnagogic chorus, those incommunicado or excommunicated, while informative no less.

It is tempting to say we are just as limited in our abilities to engage in these sorts of affairs, having little to no more than our paranoid appreciation of *Exllu*'s perennial forces beyond reason.

It adds up.

Our writer tours curbings and fiascos, and he does so through and alongside his appended collection of paranoid wares.

There is an especially vivid image retrieved from Stanley Kubrick (1980). At the

clinic, a nurse examines young Danny. Danny tells her that a little boy lives in his mouth —Tony—and, when Tony speaks, he cannot remember.

There is also Arthur Koestler (1941) and his jailed protagonist, Rubashov, who introduces us to his silent partner while pacing in his cell. It is a duplicate, an inner alien voice that identifies itself in the first-person, a non-figure, outside of time and space, a comrade without thought. Through Rubashov, Koestler imbues this latent friend with his Marxist bid that such partnerships appear not mystically from thin air but from tangible, concrete situations.

Where Kubrick's (1980) image of Tony is supernatural, Koestler's (1941) muted ally is mnemonic. These two appended double portraits contribute to a complication of Syme's strategic disavowal. The professor claims to have been the victim of automation, and it is a claim Estes wants us to doubly associate with visitations from ethereal realms and the mortar of lost histories.

More than anything, Syme's denial recalls his workings incognito. And, to raise the profile of his gamesmanship, out of nowhere, as if turning to the film camera, Estes (2024) speaks to us live and direct: "Still, his troubles will persist. In the coming days, Dr. Syme's antics will be thwarted, first by wired glass, then sleep" (9). This divine pilots our attention to the whens and wheres of our writer's reportage, with all else aside. Thus far, he has tracked his ensemble in the present tense, thrown in a few flashbacks, and volunteered a bit of speculation. It has become an obstacle; how are we to sort out this web of fiction? A play of temporal positionings lowers us onto these grounds, but to what ends we cannot say.

Why does *Exllu* orbit 2011/08/03 10:01:44?

At this juncture, we could dismiss *Exllu* as absurdist theatre or accuse Estes of being confused by his own devices and/or overzealous in coming to terms with Rae's fall. (What else?)

Exllu is paranoid fiction, after all, and those of us who have stayed the course are quite rightly frustrated.

As for Syme, he is doubly confined, like Rae but for seemingly different reasons. U-City personnel want the professor contained as much as he does. Their agendas are entwined. The city requires Dr. Syme to be a well-minded citizen, and Dr. Syme, in his equating of autonomy with freedom, seeks to retain what it is that allows him to stay in the game: the ability to keep it together. What are the differences? Both parties aim to limit the situation, and Estes maintains our paranoia with these conflicting yet strikingly similar endgames.

In a third scene, four days later, we revisit Dr. Syme at Charm Psychiatric Clinic. "Growing ever-louder are the sounds of a rhythmic tapping, tap tap tap tap tap / tap tap — tap tap / tap tap tap — tap tap tap / tap tap tap tap" (Estes 2024, 19). Syme regains consciousness to a staccato of sounds, sterile smells, and "flashes of trouble" (ibid)—another trope. Estes then moves in on Syme to verify his accounts: "*The fountain… the clinic…*" (ibid). Syme is not alone.

Of course not.

The professor has been strung out as a patent assemblage of cliches, but *Exllu* is not a postmodern text in this regard. It is far more ambitious. We are to work through the familiar effects of a condition only to be worked over by its productive surfeits and deficits. *Exllu* generates itself through failure.

Estes (2024) has been setting traps: he adds slyly, "Dr. Syme awakens to find himself in the company of another; on the far side of the room, a body lies motionless under blankets, its back turned" (9). Something incarnate has invaded the plot, a liminal figure, a plant.

Naturally, this sort of companionship is of no interest to Syme. His focus attunes to a conspiratorial tapping: a prison trick; the knock code; another appended Koestler (1941) reference. Koestler's Rubashov hears a fellow inmate tapping on the other side of the prison cell wall. Is it 406? No, it is coming from 402. Invoking an image of secret codes, Estes (2024) once again advances on Syme: "*Is it coming from the heating vent*" (19)? The sincerity of these entries ought to make us wary.

While these Kafkaesque scenarios are tedious, we must question the veracity of these tappings while suspending their message. Such signals are beyond Syme, but they do index, and, to be sure we take note, Estes (2024) adds for good measure, "he can't say" (ibid).

By comparison, Koestler (1941) has animated the walls of his prison as hosts of intel, while Syme has inadvertently infected us with his extra and ordinary awareness of the gamespace: "five down, five across" (Estes 2024, 19).

Someone is trying to contact me, Dr. Syme believes. But he is mistaken.

A last scene has our company at a familiar loss. The professor is chasing and chased by phantom signals. Once more, Estes turns to us and projects onto a future: "Syme will be visited by the Leve, Charm Clinic's neuropsychiatric team" (Estes 2024, 19). He is correct. In Syme's attempt to resist their scrutiny, he will hurl at them a stolen line from Alfred Hitchcock (1963): "'Well, there must be a storm at sea'" (0:00:29)—to

which, the team will insist he suffers from hallucinations. Dr. Syme is in need of rest and balance. We have witnessed a similar if not the same dispute earlier: U-City personnel attempt to save the professor from his excess while he tries to keep himself in check by way of deflections.

Dr. Syme has not been himself. On this much, we can all agree.

Estes further commits to Syme's unhealth by appending Bulgakov (1967). At the clinic, Ivan has been diagnosed with delirium tremens. And there is a man in his room muttering something about unclean spirits having moved into his building and of there being foreign currency hidden in the ventilation. The professor's collapse is guided by these invocations—by fiends, tempests, and the like.

Attached to Syme's story, U-City's so-far unacknowledged free zone gets its due, in an appended foreshadowing from Andrei Tarkovsky (1979): "(Stalker) 'The Zone is a complex system of traps, all of them deadly. I don't know what happens without humans but as soon as they appear, everything begins to move. Old traps vanish, and new ones appear. Safe spots become impassable. One minute, your path is easy, the next it is hopelessly confused. This is the Zone'" (1:01:58–1:02:48). Alas, these words of warning have arrived too late, for the visiting professor has already accepted the charges of a long-distance call.

Syme has been conducted to neglect what his surroundings accommodate. Are we not similarly trained?

As a send-off, Estes provides the key to the knock code, a diagram (fig. 3) with which we can now decode the rhythmic tapping: *W—H—O?* But it is a hoax played not on the professor but on us. He has mostly managed to fool himself, as he can only heed

this underverse as it concerns his person—whereas, in decoding the message, we have

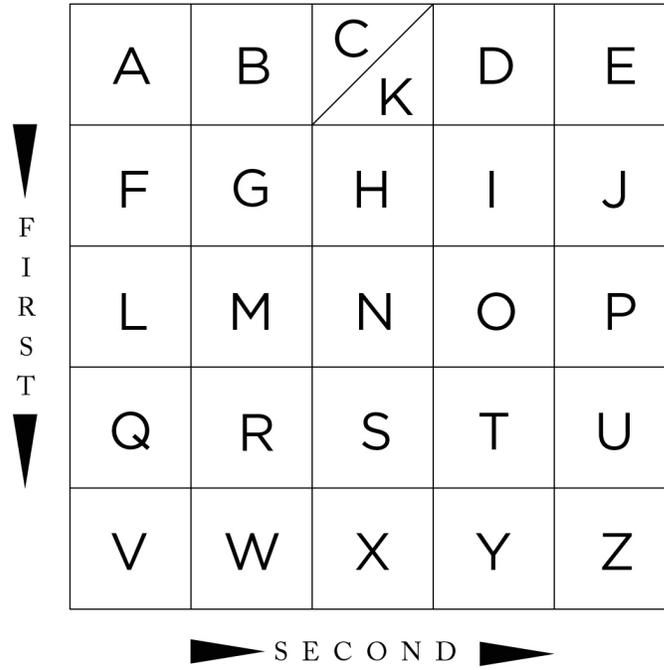unwittingly entered into the confidence of a predatory invitation.

A	B	C/K	D	E
F	G	H	I	J
L	M	N	O	P
Q	R	S	T	U
V	W	X	Y	Z

FIRST (vertical, left) SECOND (horizontal, bottom)

Figure 3. *W—H—O?* (Estes 2024, 21).

EXLLU TOWER B

The namesake of *Exllu*—Exllu Tower B—is the noir tale's key architectural figure.

Ever indifferent in its demeanour, it is deceptively fashioned as a cool and indomitable

character.

We have had our previous dealings with Tower B: when it tacitly offered itself to

Rae, backing her as she attempted to gain a fleeting foothold and, in doing so, served a

role similar to that of Syme's courtyard fountain (fig. 2). The fountain maintained Syme

while delivering its form to U-City personnel as a strategic advantage. To this point, we

can speak to how a park bench by the Regent's Canal backed Rae and how Warwick

Avenue enabled her panic—and how Koestler's (1941) prison walls underscored both Rubashov's and Dr. Syme's callings, and so on. These backings are deceptively trivial; as techniques, they efficiently fail a registry.

In *Exllu*, mere matters of fact morph.

Estes labours over Tower B and its acts of solidarity. The tower's limits allow for the more illusive matters of the city to operate, and, in turn, these fixatives allow him to open up and empty out the tower—to tunnel down below its lobby floor, not to mine its depths but to feel the resonance of its seismic shifts. We are to mull over the ordinary and extraordinary workings of this lone figure, circumstantially, through and alongside the effects of restraint and rupture.

In more ways than one, Tower B is said to host visitations, not by Estes directly but by its dwindling rumour mill, and, naturally, he puts this wilting impression to good use. It has been nearly abandoned, and, yet, Estes revisits the tower, again and again. Our writer is prepped to review Tower B's questionable dealings with Rae, along with its dubious trade relations with a remote and enigmatic, mountainous figure, the shrouded colossus of *Exllu,* and Tower B's reputation as an intermediary between this imposing figure and Syme's consort in Charm Psychiatric Clinic, the professor's idle companion, afloat in another realm.

(tap tap tap)

Our earnings will show that Tower B patrons a line of fargoing intimacies. *Exllu* is porous, and Tower B is yet another paranoid trope. Above all else, we are instructed to attune ourselves to these wonders, as the novel's intertwined ciphers draw insides out and outsides in.

On the Monday that we have come to expect and in the usual format, our writer shows Tower B as having a surprisingly similar constitution to that of Rae, despite their dissimilarities. "11/08/03, NEW VENICE: among the few-remaining residents of Exllu Tower B, rumours have begun to circulate. Something looms within the confines of a basement-level officetel, No. 034. 'It's the proxy of a distant mountainous terrain', they say, a gateway" (Estes 2024, 15). The spacetime between a feral height and the flats of a declining population has somehow clapped shut, and, in turn, these two plots have been abducted.

Who or what is this proxy? And are Tower B's concave-convex effects what has caused such a stir among its fallen numbers? And are we to assume that its vacancies are related?

Always, there are questions that lead to more questions—to the accumulation of sites and relays, and to a tragedy that never fully arrives.

The distant intimacy of the tower recalls Tarkovsky (1979) and his deviant Zone, where everyday norms are invoked and suspended, a zone where humans appear and everything begins to move. It might feel like the fading status of Tower B's tenants is a downgrade, but these two tales nonetheless share evolving traps.

Tower B is less plastic, as Rae's cold open establishes. The lobby of the tower was there to be entered, its flight of stairs readied for mount. Nothing explicitly moved. At the same time, it was there on the lobby floor that Rae underwent her truancy test and conversions.

Estes has preemptively doubled Tower B's workload. In one instance, the tower is architectural, with all that architecture implies, and, in the next, it is possessed. Or so

say its occupants. Pay close attention to our writer's figurative delivery. The tower plays the duplicitous role of the resigned host, a quiet enabler of the preyed-on and predatory alike.

To advance Tower B's sprawling agencies, Estes appends a baleful clip from Bulgakov (1967): "This apartment, No. 50, had already long enjoyed if not a bad then in any event a strange reputation. Two years before, inexplicable things had started happening: residents had begun disappearing without a trace" (72). Apartment No. 50 extends its disrepute to Tower B, and, in turn, the tower divests the apartment of its implicit horrors by resituating it within a generic framework of proxies and hawkish real estate.

What passes through *Exllu* flows in divergent and multiplicitous ways. We are to understand how Tower B does and does not tower: while it is a vertical fixture that Rae has ascended in an attempt to gain traction, the tower is also levelled by whatever it is that has burrowed in from afar.

Scales and hauntings aside, Tower B fulfills more and less than its various duties, as a device of our writer's pestilent craft. The tower recalls Bellamy (1888) with his sonic swells and lasting intuitions.

It will remain unclear as to how Tower B became occupied and why it has begun to empty. We are tasked with the impossible chore of imagining the operations involved in settling these accounts. If we personify the tower, as Estes has done, we can say it humbly affords the conditions of its containment. But practically, what are the productive differences between the tangible and theatrical? Come what may, Tower B is abetted by what holds it upright.

Shrewdly, Estes stages the haunting of Tower B from just below sea level, and he does so in stealth. It is an obscured premise, never once mentioned in the text, but it is there to be discovered in a diagram (fig. 4). It appears that U-City is positioned on and over the edge of the sea—a body of water we will come to know as the Timur Sea. On an aqueous surface, the book's locales arise from what has been built up from below, not unlike the murky foundation of Venice, the eponym of the district in which Tower B resides.
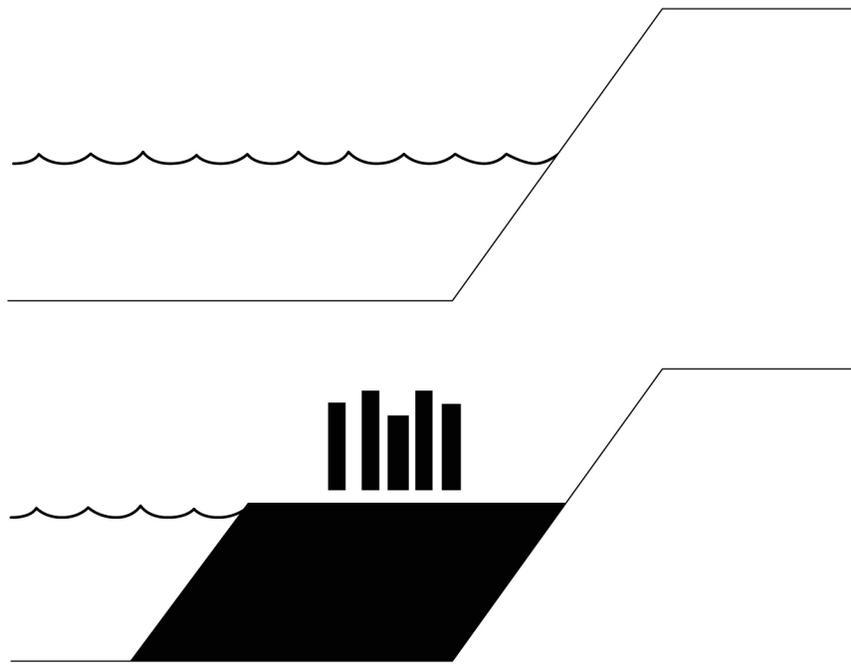
Figure 4. *Arise* (Estes 2024, 17).

What does Tower B's position above and below the sea do? For one thing, Tower B takes us back to Anaximander's (538 BC) progeny of the rind. Or does the notion of a progeny, up against the backdrop of U-City, sound entirely too hopeful? not paranoid enough? A submarine premise hides, but it is there, resting on the surface of this layered theatre: a partitioned continuum.

Such a thesis also gives us over to Rae. Were her panicked manoeuvres, high above the lobby floor, a wanting return to this fluent face? Estes (2024) implies as much when he refers to her "jubilant fall" (7). Exultancy aside, this desired reunion indulges not the hidden depths of Tower B but the dynamics of a water line. A membrane mirrors Rae: she reflects and is reflected by the tower; she divides as these undulating signals retry her.

It is a question as to how Tower B rests on a plane that parts its ways. Propelling itself upward, the tower equips Rae with a verticality from which she must naturally rise and fall. But it seems, there are more than bonafide levels to this game. A discontinuous continuum, the tower plays a vital role in *Exllu*'s noir portend. While Estes portrays the tower's citizenry overshadowed by rumours, it all-the-same executes its protocols as a standard-issue stack.

What is more, in the bowels of Tower B, within its basement-level officetel, No. 034, lies the prosthetic limb of an Arcadian terrain: "18:39:24 MT: daylight fades on a range of snow-capped peaks, and a golden cast of shadows lengthen, stretching downward past tree lines and waterfalls and spilling onto glassy lakes" (Estes 2024, 15). It is a carefully crafted nature scene.

Something has snuck in. For the first time, we are provided with a specific time zone. A part of what dwells within this basement-level officetel is Mountain Time (MT): the time zone of our viral landscape—on the other end of No. 034's gateway, the twin den of *Exllu*'s uninvited guest. It is our writer's spatiotemporal schema of that which "'gains entrance by fraud and maintains itself by force'" (Estes 2024, 7), this bucolic entity with its chiaroscuro of shimmering effects.

A time-complex has been broached, time multiplied, but this does not mean we are any closer to the true nature of U-City, not at all.

What does Mountain Time (MT) have to do with *Exllu*'s time stamps? What zone is U-City, if not Mountain Time? Among other things, (MT) is a party to matters of scale. The planetary comes forward as Tower B recedes, or, rather, both scale differently when it comes to what is inside-out and outside-in.

Past the profiles of our populace and coupling of a prostate abode and secluded mountain range, what has our minor scribe arranged? As we know, the latter discordant union comes from Burroughs (1970). Burroughs' virus is our appended schema of what seeps in and becomes nature. What else can we size up here as the micro to a macro? Present identities aside, what moves in and out of Tower B's time-zone-within-a-time-zone?

It appears that *Exllu*'s towering shadows have been cast down by the archaic, as Estes gives us a Gothic impression using H. P. Lovecraft (1931): "Through the desolate summits swept raging intermittent gusts of the terrible antarctic wind; whose cadences sometimes held vague suggestions of a wild and half-sentient musical piping, with notes extending over a wide range, and which for some subconscious mnemonic reason seemed to me disquieting and even dimly terrible" (512). This appendage links *Exllu* to a premodern memory, with which we are to become afflicted by the histories at work in U-City.

From these zones-within-zones spring productively uncertain futures. As much will vacillate. For now, let ride a doubled time and its dependence on *Exllu*'s puzzling riches.

Ad interim, we must depart from our enveloped suspect, this proxy that has come calling through the ventilation of Charm Psychiatric Clinic, not on Syme, as it turns out, but on the enigmatic sleeping figure lying in an adjacent bed, blanketed, its back turned. "03:26:17 MT, NEW VENICE: Syme's mysterious company lies in darkness at a water's edge, with moving shadows overhead, flickering to the sounds of a rhythmic tapping. As it feels its way along a grassy shore, the figure locates a handful of small rocks and with them begins to tap" (Estes 2024, 19). We are prompted to reflect on our initial encounter with this shape of a tower.

There is work ahead concerning how we are to take charge of this conglomerate. Tower B is bound up in an outlandish struggle involving a cordillera and commuter. Of the former, what may well be an eobiont, a primordial forerunner on the other end of its door—with a rhythmic tapping, poses to the latter, this brute, our misdirected question. It is best not to fixate on any one query and, when it comes to *W—H—O?,* not to look past the question but to consider what it masks.

SLEEP

If the paranoid suggestions and implicit leads of *Exllu* dwell within the far-flung quotidian of U-City—or to be more precise, traverse the effects of our writer's theatrics and, in doing so, work through the internal-external dynamics of his game-like domain, then it is safe to say the craftiest of *Exllu*'s ordinances are shouldered less by its ruinous team or by whatever it is that enters through Tower B's gateway and more so by *Exllu*'s trope of all tropes: its manifold installments of sleep and the myriad ways in which these states infiltrate U-City.

To be expected, this slippery theme is noir but hardly thrilling; we are meant to nearly pass it over. For the most part, sleep shows up as matter-of-factly as the stoic hospitalities of Tower B. But these forthright appointments pay off. The theme is to be initially recognized for its routine, nocturnal burdens and consoles—but, if we place the customary aside, along with the rest of *Exllu*'s spectral pastiche, we arrive at how sleep spares our surrender to this routine of becoming repeatedly lost and found in U-City.

With its unadorned cameos, sleep is our archetype of foreign and domestic flight, for the novel, the stand-in of its well-trodden alleys to and from the undecided. Much like Tower B, sleep shuttles us to and from the game in relatable ways: the trope is a media, medium, and mediation. And while it may come and go without fanfare, throughout the novel, we are given the opportunity to fund our trips through sleep's quotidian dynamics. We arrive with such a grasp in advance, now in the hands of our defiant guide, over and across partitions. The twisted arc of this story leads us only somewhat astray, with the ritual of sleep easing our discomfort.

As is the case with all of *Exllu*'s signs, sleep draws us in with its communal and solitary vestiges. Sleep quite matter-of-factly stands in as a shared envelope of otherly productions, equal parts intimate and alien, to the extent of which, Estes prepares the excesses and shortages of his maladjusted denizens with this ubiquitous theme, with his rogue partaking in the cunningness of an unwieldy craft. The tale of *Exllu* makes its way through and alongside the familiar-within-the-unfamiliar and its inverse.

Sleep is instrumental: a binding agent; what allows other agencies to work. At this point in the novel, it is clear. In our writer's attempt to exercise his paranoia of an evolving gamespace, what intrigues him are the informal workings of his craft. Sleep

participates in transiting the surfeits and deficits situated within U-City, which show up in the plights of his calamitous crew, these aberrant shapes. *Exllu* is a collaborative effort, with sleep having its own agency and so games itself as the device of a discontinuous bind, while Estes leverages its unreliable approach to navigation.

Thematically, sleep becomes more pronounced and convoluted toward the end of Part 1 of *Exllu*, under the pretence of an official-looking report from the future. This is not sleep's first appearance, but it is the most substantial. A report on sleep provides us with something ironically unique to the novel: conventional information.

Flaunting our writer's routine lack of concern for context, the report positions itself as extraneous to the narrative space-time of U-City: "2020/07/09, NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN, THE DANISH REALM: inquiries have been made and files retrieved. From the inside of a hull on the ocean floor, off the shores of the Faeroes, there forms a string of coordinates past" (Estes 2024, 23). Three matters promptly come to mind: [i] from the perspective of U-City's timeline, Estes has received this information in advance; [ii] the external report deceptively shores up its information as a list of facts; and [iii] to no real upset, as an anonymous source, the document establishes as many details of the plot as it does loose ends. Suffice it to say, for now, news candidly alerts us to the theme of sleep, and, with this, we can temporarily accept evidence that inquiries will have been made and files retrieved.

We will revisit the report and its explicit presentation of sleep toward the end of this section. First, we must retrace what has already slipped in, to refresh our memory of sleep's bare and continuous showings, which in turn have been used to lead us into and out of traps.

Around we go.

Our first stop is Charm Psychiatric Clinic, where and when Estes projects onto Dr. Syme's near future. Sleep will regulate him against his will, along with wired glass. This projection has yet to serve its narrative purpose, but, for the time being, it pilots us to the professor's initial rise from a passive state to the faint and ceaseless sounds of tapping and to what he believes is his call from another realm. And while we are in this room, let us pay witness to a body lying in limbo in the adjacent bed. Recalling Rae's fall, Estes refers to the figure as it, an object. Dr. Syme asleep is nothing, whereas his comatose cohort is a vessel doubly maintained, a languid soul entered into an array of courtships.

Recall the quotation: "Syme's mysterious company lies in darkness at a water's edge, with moving shadows overhead, flickering to the sounds of a rhythmic tapping. As it feels its way along a grassy shore, the figure locates a handful of small rocks and with them begins to tap" (Estes 2024, 19). All along—with Tower B, Rae's implant, et cetera, sleep has laundered its alternate settings.

Dr. Syme's company is travelled but not active. Twice a figure, it is maintained as being here, in the dark at a water's edge, and as being there, back at Charm Psychiatric Clinic, on the far side of the room. Sleep hides in plain sight.

A sleep shepherds our enigmatic sleeper, and it is worth noting that its banded position and relayed passivity occurs within Tower B's time zone within a time zone. Have we taken to this suggestion? The sleeper's convergence has been afforded by an inlet that lodges within a subterranean suite, No. 034, where a slow-moving landscape enters from a distance. It is a storyline in progress.

We are well aware that Estes aims to pacify and disorient us in proportion. If only we can hang on a little longer and resist the fatigue of his listless formulae. Still there are places to go and people to see. We have unduly brooded over the novel's shrouded intrigue, and it remains interesting how sleep lures and repeals in such ways; it hails U-City's overarching medley of risk and reward.

With this in mind, we must also examine the scenes that have enacted less overt allusions to sleep. Namely, we have been inclined to commit Rae to a sleep-like state. With talk of "unusual clarity" (Estes 2024, 7), it seems a liminal state of hypnagogia is her norm—or, at least, what is internal-external to Rae has been brought to the fore by a secreted signal. Or has our protagonist been sleepwalking? Conjecture creeps in with the little we know: Rae's interim status has been partly crafted, given her implant, the way it shields and guides her through the weather(ed) patterns of the market.

Surely, Rae's chorus are sleepwalkers. "In a rush along Warwick Avenue, Rae's panic grows, while the resting faces of passers-by whisper, their mouths set adrift from their communions" (Estes 2024, 7). These are pedestrians, in the cruellest sense of the term, little people. Faceless and moored, their whispers embody undercurrents running through them, so that the solipsistic vibrancy of U-City's street life is comprised entirely of cold circuitries.

This transitory state of servitude sounds a lot like Dr. Syme's seemingly strategic claim at Charm Psychiatric Clinic: the denial of his backend having been compromised and his recuse of duckspeak. "'It was not I...'" (Estes 2024, 9). Despite his efforts, he has been demoted to the menial caste of *Exllu*'s background actors. In the grey of it all, Dr. Syme's sleep is the sleep of reason.

Adding to these citations, there are transitional states channelled through Tower B's submerged gateway: hints of the subconscious, inaccessible gulfs, the ineffable, and so forth. Interestingly enough, the tower's undersea portal accesses what is from afar and within rather than what is, at most, buried deep inside. Does Tower B's portal transit the topological?

At a minimum, *Exllu*'s aisles state craft. The sunken thesis of the tower does not entirely grasp the manners in which it relays. Its unbranded makeup receives what organization grants without needing recognition or agreement, and this is partially what approves the premise to expand and contract.

Estes forms a fluid dynamic between craft and sleep with which he channels his covert condition and its unpronounced possibilities. Circular configurations perpetually pass through and inflate his mountain range and sleeping figure, Rae and Syme, Tower B, U-City's ghostly streets, parks, and so on.

A flock of allusions to sleep as transit journey through Exllu's appendix: in Burroughs (1970), Koestler (1941), Orwell (1949), and Kubrick (1980), to name a few. Estes recruits his legion of paranoid comrades to send us on unpaired, round trips, all the while, going nowhere. The collection is well-travelled: filmic, literary and musical bits aggregate, intrude, and bend back on themselves.

We have seen how Burroughs' (1970) word and image virus becomes the organ grinder from near and afar, the tiny mechanism of a nature fraudulent and forceful. For the host, such a plant is too close yet too far. But it counts. The virus is an exotic thrust that repeats itself and its other, and, when it comes to *Exllu*'s errand, it is the very guile of a gamespace craft.

And in Koestler (1941), Rubashov's silent partner betrays a surplus and visceral visitation. It speaks collectively in the first-person, such that Rubashov becomes drawn into a conversation with and without himself. He has a secret friend in Rae, with his twin emerging from inside and out, resistant to observation—or so he tells himself, entering in unannounced, an agent hidden and in hiding. Rubashov houses mnemonic reasons not entirely of his own; he is less himself and more so a vessel of history.

Recall how Rubashov insists there is nothing about this union that is particularly mystical. His silent partner is a matter of fact, yet it inhabits a realm where (his) thinking stops, and it is the bypassing of his faculties that allows his muted peer to act on him in the form of daydreams and toothaches. Rae and Rubashov have been crafted from the inside and out, and, in their indifferent ways, their partnerships are far more and far less than prosthetic.

In light of questionable extensions, Dr. Syme's Orwellian duckspeak is an inverse of Koestler's (1941) mnemonics. His oration is wild. By his own measure, Syme patrons nothing. The professor's mouth has gone awry in the mould of Rae's chorus on Warwick Avenue, with communication being his only saving grace.

For his part, Kubrick (1980) works through Stephen King (1977) to entertain the folk simplicities of haunted utterance. Unlike Koestler's (1941) manifest union or—for that matter, the buttressed proxies of Tower B, young Danny frankly hosts Tony, and, when Tony speaks, Danny states he cannot recall. Danny does and does not recollect the spirit that guides him, in correlate with Dr. Syme.

All the while, a sleep recasts our utopian nature.

And there is more.

A reserved hack, W.K. Estes will continue to tax us with lines new and used, as we arrive at the midpoint of his game: with H.G. Wells (1899), Aldous Huxley (1932), and more from Kaufman (1978). This is not to say these additions will yield us anything unprecedented. Estes carries on for reasons of wanting to further refine our instincts of his suspect novel.

We are being driven in circles, and these supplemental excerpts double down on sleep's burdens of non-ness and alien descent.

From Wells (1899), in a nocturnal seaside setting, an insomniac comes calling, then succumbs to lifeless slumber: "Something flashed into Isbister's mind; he started, and leaning over the table, listened. An unpleasant suspicion grew stronger; became conviction. Astonishment seized him and became—dread! No sound of breathing came from the seated figure" (605–6). In sleep, there is death.

As equally harrowing, Huxley (1932) carefully crafts the corruption of youth: "A small boy asleep on his right side, the right arm stuck out, the right hand hanging limp over the edge of the bed. Through a round grating on the side of a box a voice speaks softly" (28). Sleep ferries a seamless snare.

And in a cutting from Kaufman (1978), we are summoned by the promise of a painless release: "(Matthew) 'Elizabeth, no! No! Wake up. Wake up. Wake up! I love you. The boat's here, Elizabeth. The boat's here. It's gonna take us away.' (Elizabeth) 'There's nothing to be afraid of. They were right. It's painless. It's good. Come. Sleep'" (1:43:39–1:45:14). From across a curious divide, what was once Elizabeth reassures us: sleep is simply another way of being.

Us conduits!

We are to prevail. With our report from the future, we are reacquainted with the simple facts of sleep. It sets the record straight with a reference to Koestler (1941). In the year, 2020, our sleeper—"No. 406" (Estes 2024, 23)—will have been located.

This is where Part 1 of *Exllu* leaves us: off the shores of the Faeroes, on a salty surface, and with a string of coordinates past. We have become somewhat familiar with these arrangements. The communiqué mirrors our writer's style of accounting. It forms factual theatre. An ulterior motive has been inserted, and it dredges up proof of sleep's accessibility, after all.

With this report, we are solicited to float *Exllu*'s waters as the sum of a singular correlative surface: U-City's Regent's canal, and by extension, New Venice; the sharp flows of Syme's vexing courtyard fountain; Tower B's threshold to waterfalls and lakes; and Dr. Syme's storm at sea. The facts of the oceanic dispatch work to reassure us that *Exllu* is but paranoid fiction.

Take note; there are no records here of Syme's liminal companion at a water's edge, inching blindly while armed.

The report is a compilation. "2011/08/03 22:17:38 AWST" (Estes 2024, 23): 406 is retrieved by U-Medical (Warwick Av, -11.308931326303886, 127.99119646082889), identified as non-responsive with spastic paralysis, and rushed to GM Medical Complex, Inha University Hospital, where its biometrics are taken. "2011/08/07 21:27:43 AWST" (ibid): 406 is admitted to Charm Psychiatric Clinic, where it is pronounced a "sleeper" (ibid). How do these facts inform us? Among other things, the combination of AWST and these GPS coordinates tells us that U-City is situated in the middle of the Timur Sea. The message is a plant for later, naturally. *Exllu* is a game of postponements.
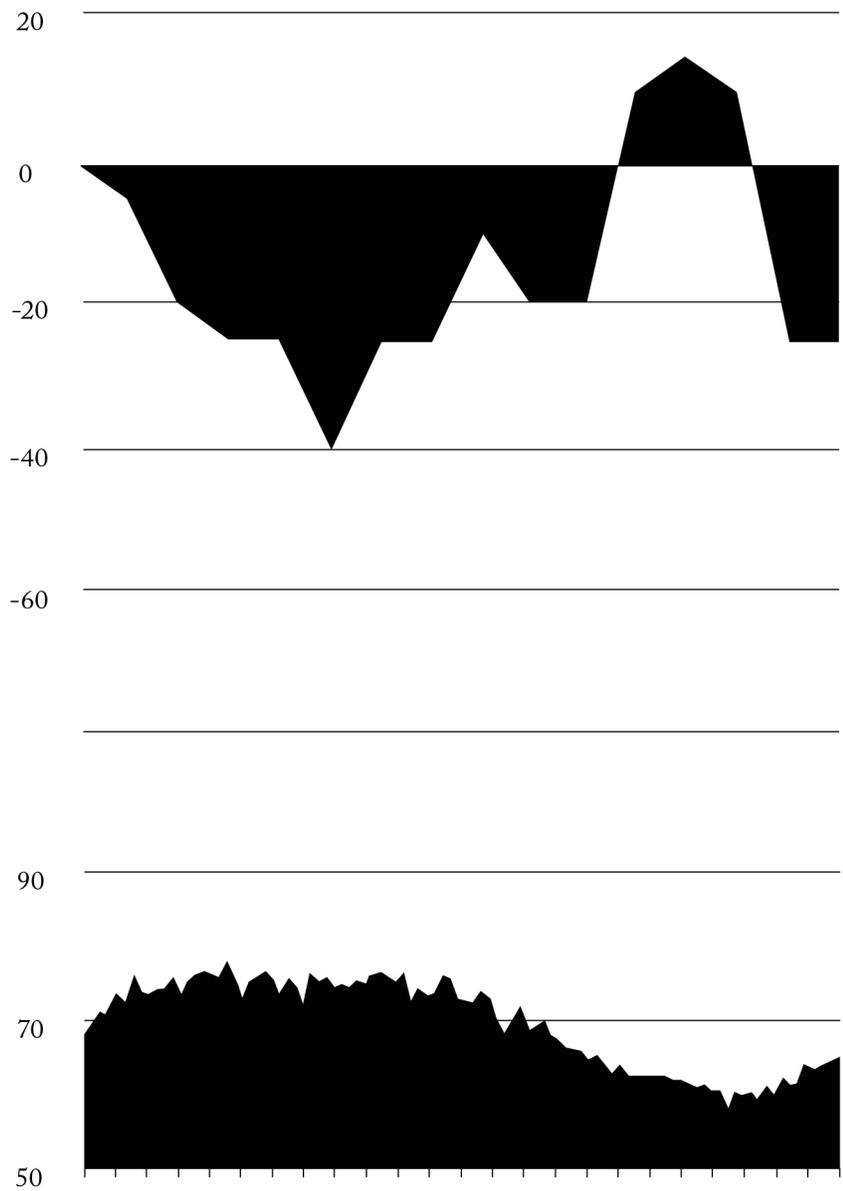
Figure 5. *Sleep* (Estes 2024, 25).

As a parting nod to his antics, Estes presents us with a diagram (fig. 5) to make sure we are aware of his fallacious equations. The time graph of a heartbeat merges with the line diagram of an ocean's depths, which, in turn, becomes a mountain range whose tree line is reflected in a lake below. Our writer cannot keep his facts straight. Measurements have become entangled in their likenesses.

A peer to the cosmic theatre that introduces Part 1 of *Exllu*—Part 2 is initiated by an epitaph attributed to B.F. Skinner (1971): "The task of scientific analysis is to explain how behaviour as a physical system is related to the conditions under which it evolved" (20). Our writer, W.K. Estes situates a fragment of Skinner's behavioural science as the successor to Anaximander's (538 BC) progeny of the rind.

Do we arrive at an alternate scene?

There are differences. Survival has given way to conditions, a progeny has been replaced by physical systems, and momentum is now evolution.

And there are likenesses. Anaximander's (538) buoyant offspring and Skinner's (1971) docile organs emerge from an aloof nature.

What is the relationship between this Skinnerian nature and that of U-City?

While these curtailed lines foreground explication, Skinner (1971) strives to tell in advance to turn and give shape to behaviour. The dictate of his craft—his trademark of conditioning, is clouded by the bounds of behavioural systems and conditions. With this puzzle and its unfriendly tenors, Estes opts to entangle his two epitaphs; a suspension of regulatory commitment procures our writer his perversions.

In the furtherance of *Exllu*, Skinner's (1971) epitaph is a cusp image. The credit is not entirely cognate to the inner-outer workings of U-City's ubiquitous gamespace craft, nor does it form an alliance with the obscured drafts that propel Anaximander's (538 BC) kin.

What else?

Skinner's (1971) physical systems and conditions cross paths but are fitted never

to meet. Our writer's epitaph implies the coupling of an organism and an environment, while his scientist compels from the sidelines. So is the way of Skinner's craft: regulating behaviour through the methodological and observational, experimental and theoretical, explanatory and evidential.

Such omissions do not entirely shelter us from the trade winds of Anaximander's people, but Estes has Skinner (1971) unfettered by his adjunct occupation. Retained as negative shapes, his would-be progeny are the inverted contours of their surroundings, yet his evolving physical systems remain oddly character-driven, despite the reduced task of explanation and upended figuration. By turning a people inside out, Skinner has laid them bare for all to see.

What follows the Skinner (1971) epitaph is standard fare. Estes will go to pit his lodgers against the surface effects of his gamespace, all the while, the internal-external situations of this public will mediate the novel's excessive-recessive currents. *Exllu*'s mechanics are constantly broken down and reconstituted, with contests implied through the quaint reasons of a day-to-day grind and a grey yet histrionic production of cunning and accidental timings.

Estes has bestowed us a deck of nebulous factions and their malicious workaday practices, through and alongside *Exllu*'s band of conventional actors, altogether running at assorted speeds, scales and complexities.

Our task is to look past our writer's dramaturgy and consider how his gamings give rise to his company's enigmatical downfalls and comebacks. Of course, we are being played, and Skinner's (1971) epitaph lauds the trick.

RAE (2)

As if having circumvented the fall, Rae is back. We are soon to be reunited under the altered auspice of Skinner's (1971) science of behaviour and not without lingerings of Anaximander's (538 AD) vitalist nature, the generic spirit with which Skinner has been sprung. The novel's tension mounts, and to be sure his incurable confederate remains faithful to their intricate and bizarre skirmishes, as residents of U-City, our writer will now toss scripture into the mix.

We are to recognize that our protagonist has levelled up, if only to be imposed on in the form of another intervention, not unlike her initial split between order vs. disorder. This time, Rae will come across far more pointed threats. And her old sponsors will not be there to help her. Her implanted assistant, with its limited reach, and Tower B, with its vertical features, will resume their positions elsewhere. We will also recognize her spot on the park bench by the Regent's Canal. It is the identical situation; only her company has changed. Rae is never alone in this zone of evolving traps.

Our writer has both over and underwhelmed us with his quicksilver inventory and bureaucratic style. And we may or may not have allowed ourselves to become drawn in. At least, we have tried to be accommodating. A safety endures in the fact that the novel is benign, and we can always opt-out. The consumptive qualities of *Exllu* are but effects of a spectacle, a mirage, among others.

So it resumes, with us having to weigh our options, on the lookout for angles within this gamed sanctum—or not. It is fair to say that we are invited to wager on the itinerant proceedings of U-City, at any rate, given the lagtime of these returns that run through us. Fortunately, it is a new day.

Estes (2024) revives Rae in the usual way: "11/08/03 09:39:05, NEW VENICE: by the Regent's Canal, Rae sits on a shaded bench in the growing heat of the morning. It appears to her gradually, hovering high above—the thin grey outline of a majestic mountain" (33). With this overtly biblical scenario, we are restored to Monday morning, just before ten am, to find a twofold motif poised overhead, a godhead reflected in an image of nature, and with Skinner's (1971) behaviour science in the wings, along with Bulgakov's (1967) gloved miscreant next to Rae on the bench. Estes vends an image-complex. For a brief moment, a convoy of cosmic and native, devilish and measured meddlers appear as one.

Ostensibly, there are grounds where there ought not to be. We are no longer in direct contact with Rae's implant, but it is involved no less. For that matter, there is no evidence of Bulgakov's (1967) officious fiend nor Skinner's (1971) explanations. All of this has become routine. The appendix and its entries are nearby and at the ready—yet aloof, in accord with the intimate and alien style of *Exllu*. Circumstance is absent, and, if we are to take our cues from Tower B's rumour mill, proxies are extraordinary to the incensed commons of the city.

As it turns out, the present setting is quite idyllic. An ethereal entity enters from above, from beyond the limits of U-City, on high and unencumbered by material affairs. It is another supernatural visitation, akin to Kubrick (1980). Withal, these towering peaks are weighed down by what our writer has put on them. How this magnificent outcome operates within city limits is something to ponder. From away and caught between identity and non-identity, a holy mountain, as it appears to Rae, does and does not partake in a gamespace craft.

A variation of Rae's implant, the mountain initiates a dialogue, ecclesiastically and seemingly without cover. "'The shape of their mouths carry us,' the mountain calls to her" (Estes 2024, 33). Aside from the anatomical content of this heavenly summons, we can say the Word comes forth transcendent, in stark contrast to Burroughs' (1970) immanent virus: what enters unannounced, an agent hidden and in hiding. It is with a lofty likeness that the former of these figures factor. While suggesting its inverse, Estes gestures skyward to have us attempt and then falter in our abilities to envision what is wholly above and beyond U-City.

What are the implications? If we suspend the mountain's antics and play along with its heavenly promise, then in place of Rae's multiplied and congenital infection, we find a familial visitation: a mother (nature) and father (spirit). Equally, these ruminations of unadulterated affordance pose as both precedents and informants of Skinner's (1971) sidelong glances, while Bulgakov's (1967) daemon and the rest of the appended chorus chime in, their voices of old jockeying discordant prayers. With *Exllu*, it is hard to tell the wants of this horde apart.

As it stands, we can dismiss the cues of these disjointed forces just as easily as we can give in to the novel's watchful persuasions.

If we take Rae to be the subject at hand, then perhaps, with this summons, she now has a chance at redemption, which makes her chorus of loitering charlatans all the more understandable. Or, perhaps the trespass has no rhyme or reason, and, along with the rest of this absurd tale, it is a spin for our amusement. Or, maybe Rae's fall just needed correcting. With these gamed disjunctions, impasses, and what-have-you, we once again find our tragic figure multiplied and in limbo.

Trials ensue. In its attempt to commune with Rae, way down below, the mountain positions them as one. We are jointly delivered, or so it assures her. In a lurid manner, the mountain shoulders its divinity, and yet it relies on the assistance of another, of all things availed, a shape. As we may well have imagined, Rae's mouth is and is not her own.

Toward this hallowed talk of unity, Rae responds with a beguiling question of her own: "'Of what do we speak?'" (Estes 2024, 33). Despite what we may or may not have gathered from before, with respect to her usual lack of clarity, Rae greets a reflection of herself in overabundance and exhaustion with her proliferating parole, which (again) makes her more and less than an empty vessel.

Estes halfway positions his lines beyond our scope, and, to suggest this move, he once more appends Burroughs (1970): "The word has not been recognized as a virus because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the host. This symbiotic relationship is now breaking down" (5). Rae's encounter malfunctions, not so much in terms of communication but as it concerns her endless divisions.

The tale then pivots. As if marooned within a loop, we find ourselves on the face of Anaximander's (538 AD) great waters. "A slight breeze rolls across the surface of the water, and Rae is swept up in a drifting side-scroll of the mountain's shadowy craft" (Estes 2024, 33). We are in several places at once: on the lobby floor of Tower B, where a disc spins, and at the foot of Lovecraft's (1931) mountain, where the cadence of arctic winds whistle half-sentient, musical pipings (tap tap tap). And from these lodgings that devolve the once lofty terrain, there saunters the sinister (left) hand of Bulgakov's (1967) heller. Estes divides, contains, and corrupts, then carries on.

The (now) shady entity scoops up Rae without the need for games. On a watery plane and without ceremony, she has been acquired by that which thoroughly scales within and without the limits of U-City.

And that is not all.

What are we to make of Rae's side-scroll, as if she is bound in 2D, driven from left to right in the one-way traffic of a shallowed screen? This is *Exllu*'s most significant compression yet. Rae's ascension has been reduced to a plain script—suggesting, we may surmise, what Estes has productively gated with respect to the deceptive trade of this soaring mountain and our junior accountant, the former being falsely reverent and the latter serving to provoke our uneasy premonitions of craft.

The mountain would have Rae believe it descends from above while giving itself over to us as a constructed nature, with which we must recognize that the mountain and Rae's implant have been working toward the same ends but falter in differing ways. The deific mountain has given way to the profane, while the quotidian implant has become a less-than-reliable oracle. "'S&P will hold under. Russell will make three attempts to take out the highs of the day. Flip long, point and a half above entry. The market will hold the lows…'" (Estes 2024, 7). Both ways part and hold sway.

It would be incorrect to simply equate this exchange between Rae and the holy mountain with U-City personnel and Dr. Syme, but the scenes do overlap. In retrospect, like Rae, Syme has had an unexpected moment of clarity, with his abrupt warning to the Leve and his delirious Hitchcock (1963) line about a storm at sea. *Exllu*'s fissures and restorations grant us acumen as we go about contemplating its games of the unwitting and unwilling.

Despite this talk of clarity or lack thereof, *Exllu* is not set up to unveil nor to veil. We have been baited with these woven bits of insight.

In the interim, Rae has returned from her trip, and we now sit benighted on a bench by the Regent's Canal. Again, she makes a comeback, but in what state? It is worth adding that Estes (2024) plays with the unfamiliarity of this yield: "The cast of the spell dissolved into night" (33); a daytime slumber gives way to nightlife; a spell once cast is now a shadow obscured by darkness. Where does this inverted move take us? More than anything, it is evidence that Rae is no longer fallen. It is Monday night.

The wins and losses of Rae's launch have been annulled, but this is no reason to celebrate. To have us appreciate the foreboding nature of this repeal, Estes appends more of Bulgakov (1967): "'Yes, it was about ten o'clock in the morning, illustrious Ivan Nikolayevich,' said the foreigner. The poet passed his hand across his face like a man who had just come to and saw that it was evening at Patriarch's Ponds" (39). One spell after the next is dispelled.

If we think back to Burroughs (1970), fraud has become a force, as is true of the inverse. There exists in these scenarios a circular twist. In this turn from day to night, we are to realize that the Rae who has now been restored is not completely the same Rae whose launch off the top tread was divided between the chaotic and orderly.

Estes gives us no time to stop and take stock of our untried condition. Instead, he ushers this alternate version of Rae through a quick succession of events, starting with the fact that we are not alone: "...and there in the dark sat a figure on the bench next to her" (Estes 2024, 33). Another cryptic courtship forms between Rae and what has come to greet her in the night.

So sit these two aporetic characters.

Rae is not entirely Rae, and here is the telltale line; no sooner than she finds herself among strange company, she immediately begins to spread the Word. "'The shape—'" (Estes 2024, 33). She is sharply spurned by her interlocker, and a freakish altercation ensues.

Let us pause the action and drop what is left of the scene's piety to appreciate this adversarial gesture. It is *ExIlu*'s first instance of what Burroughs (1970) identifies as the activation of a word virus. Rae's impulse to infect illustrates her incitement, and, as we know, this spells her intermediary status.

At least part of Rae is now the Word, which is unwelcomed, but by what? We are given no more than a snippet—of course. She is "halted by wild eyes, bared teeth, and other-worldly vibrations pulsing from the mask of a howl" (Estes 2024, 33). Take note of how this mouth responds to Rae's earlier question—"'Of what do we speak'" (ibid)? The mouth is cornered. It screams unsoundly. And to magnify his plot twist, Estes includes Kaufman's (1978) final act: "(Nancy) 'Matthew? Matthew.' (Nancy shrieks) 'No! No! No'" (1:54:00–1:54:33)! Matthew has turned. He is becoming-plant, while Rae plays the role of Matthew. She is repelled. Our increasingly faded protagonist is denied by this far-out resonance, by the inaudible of a threat.

Dr. Syme enters into this weird war as well. How does his depravity, his bestial claim of duckspeak, align with this combat? It does and it does not. The once-spelled professor, this new side of Rae, and her present foe do not think: they act [/Ō/].

Not surprisingly, Estes partly constrains these ruptures by bequesting a medical diagram of bared teeth, an anatomical schema, numbered and unlabeled (fig. 6). In the

same style as Dr. Syme's fountain (fig. 2), the diagram (fig. 6) fabricates its opening through a foreclosure. For the most part, but not entirely, it abandons its calculatory aspirations, a devolution in contrast to Rae's adversarial mouth. Nothing is altogether intrinsic or extrinsic to its measurements, as is *Exllu*'s way. What corners is cornered, and what abandons is abandoned.
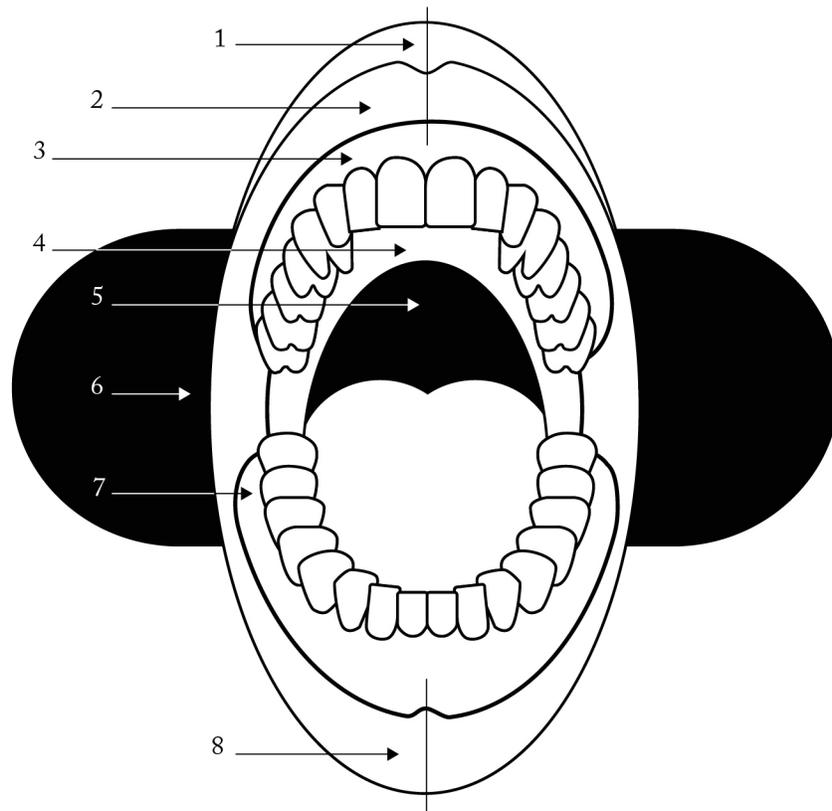

Figure 6. *[/Ō/]* (Estes 2024, 35).

Echoing Dr. Syme's troubles, Rae's borders are on display. Her brush with alien oscillations was incorrect. The reconstituted scene includes divisions as part of her and *Exllu*'s traffic. At least for Rae, what is external speaks less to her innate shortcomings and more to her emblematic veracity, with her bounds having just staved off a potential counterattack.

Estes (2024) chases down the thwarted assault with more defensively reduced navigations: "A strobe of flailings followed..." (33). The move recalls Rae in 2D and Dr. Syme's alarming memo. Flashing strobes are retro media and effects implemented to distance us from further violence.

"...then stillness" (Estes 2024, 33). Has the mouth lost? And are we still on Rae's side? It is hard to say, though this is not the end.

Our writer provides us with a classic reveal to salvage the scenario's remains. In another quick succession, we are reunited with the evidence of our oceanic report. "22:19:27: a rush along Warwick Avenue leads Rae to a gathering of onlookers, bright lights, and a U-Medical team. *They've covered its body and strapped it to a gurney...*" (Estes 2024, 33). Facts have aligned to become information, and, once more, Estes proves his worth as an accountant.

Though this is not entirely news, is it? We have known it all along. (tap tap tap) The mouth is (or was?) Dr. Syme's insoluble roommate from the clinic, the figure once shrouded in darkness at a water's edge, now hidden under bright lights. Having met (it) under these vulnerable circumstances, are we more sympathetic to its cunning cause?

Rae recedes as the mouth gapes.

But there remains hope.

On the perimeter of the bright lights, Rae's chorus from Warwick Avenue has come to broker the poor creature's release. "As she retreats, the joyous murmur of an 'uncapped fire hydrant' ripples through the crowd. An 'overflow,' they whisper, into the streets and out to sea" (Estes 2024, 33). Our sleeper is reunited with the flows on which U-City rests.

Dr. Syme proceeds. Weeks before our first encounter, we find him in his element. A young, visiting prof to U-City, this monadic persona aspires to prove himself liberated while being driven by a conflict between support and containment. However, it is hard to say how and in what ways, and it is unlikely he will succeed on his own terms. A not-so-public address is just about to get underway, and it will aid in our inabilities to fully grasp Syme's convictions.

Before long, Rae will spread the Word—and, as if he is responding in advance to the question she puts to the mountain concerning speech, Dr. Syme is about to perform what he will later dismiss as a spell of duckspeak. Along the same lines as his alarming memo to colleagues, the professor will warn his would-be audience that the city is under duress, insisting on their (our) loss of freedom and clarity, with freedom falling under the jurisdiction of U-City's free zone and clarity being the exhausted visual metaphor with which our writer, W.K. Estes, continually baits us. Dr. Syme will go on to decry invasions and unwanted patronage, conspiracies and cultish hypnagogs; the ominous premise of an enemy surround is piercing, despite his cagey posture.

This will not end well.

We locate Syme alone, one evening, on the Global Campus grounds. "11/07/23 21:37:16, SOHO: beyond the looking-glass of the control booth, in the darkness of the concert hall, Dr. Syme hears the faint sounds of tiny wings fluttering... the tunings of an orchestra pit... the swell of a timpani..." (Estes 2024, 37). It is a capricious set, where echoes travel to and fro: from the professor's present confines to Charm Psychiatric Clinic within GM Medical Complex.

Dr. Syme may or may not be listening. The details are obscured. Is he attuned to what is beyond the looking glass, past his reflection illuminated by the darkness of the concert hall? And can he detect the humour of this audience behind his partition, or are we to assume these outsides crouch within? Think ahead to the coming weeks, to how the professor hears what he needs to hear, given his atomistic sensibilities. One way or another, the mirrored interior of the control booth affords his surround.

Out here, in the dark, Dr. Syme's concertgoers have begun to shift in their seats. And some have even grown hostile, if we consider these feathered rustlings abreast of his fateful memo to come.

It is a different setting on our side of the glass. We are to trail relays, some more convincing than others. The orchestra warms up, telling us the show will soon begin, as is dutifully confirmed by a transcript of timpani rolls in the appendix. This notation lends the doctor a foreboding, might we even say commanding presence. But, ultimately, it is the less convincing of our writer's locum that will go on to certify the professor's addled condition.

So begins Syme's deliberation:

There has been talk of sleep, a rash of hypnagogia, and whatnot. Curious, yes. But we must first account for this plague of patronage that is upon us, seeded throughout our free zones, cast into concrete, and drawn from thin air. Mind you, these are not the mere phantom toothaches of an Ur-ratio, as some are wont to believe, but the secreted mounts of a NEUROTROPIC SIEGE (Estes 2024, 37).

From polarizing diction comes the contours of an agenda and a targeted audience. Dr. Syme's baseline position is clear: U-City has become overrun by a conduct beyond the pale.

The professor mounts his call to arms, and, to no surprise, the appeal is coiled. Estes aims to stir in us our own version of Syme's diatribe, assuming we have plenty of material to draw from, while the doctor orates silently from behind a small glass frame, high above the stage and all too luminous.

Syme is the Sophist, a salesman of truths.

His move is to downplay all this senseless talk of sleep: to quell these outbreaks of hypnagogic banter, as we have observed already, with the affair in store on Warwick Avenue. Syme steers blame. There are those who have not only fallen prey to a liminal state but have de facto embraced its spread. Near-slanderous accusations are slipped between his mockery of beatnik sleepers and unconcealed suits of patronage. The talk is a trap. It fixes the context in which the professor will be dragged into this business of mindless chatter, how he will soon pass over his dormant in Charm Psychiatric Clinic in an attempt to comply with a cryptic summons.

As it turns out, our initial impression was a ruse. Syme is not at all interested in engaging with his restless, miniaturized following, no more than he is attentive to those who choose and/or give in to sleep, like Rae's Warwick Avenue chorus, which she will soon be routed through only later to be thwarted by their intervention on behalf of her fleeing adversary, the professor's aberrant companion. Dr. Syme has no interest in his campus gathering whatsoever; they are the props of our show.

We are to undergo Dr. Syme's toxic twists and turns and to read between these sordid lines. The doctor's parlance is not his own, and he is unaware of us, entirely.

Still, we are identified in his lecture, and the theme has shifted from enemies to capture. An unwelcomed aegis spells the end of U-City's draw, and other mechanisms

are at stake. So far, Syme does not care to explain his connections. He is in the throes of finding fault, with vitriol involuntarily on display.

The details of patronage have been glossed over in favour of the prof's mounting plague. Oration is Syme's conceit, and he shifts back and forth between the lesser and greater of evils in our midst, the former covertly personified and the latter abstracted to full effect.

Soon, Syme will get back to weeding out those who have either openly embraced sleep or dismissed it as trivial, with both parties on a fool's errand. Given what we have had to endure, his denouncement of unnamed individuals is something we can almost get behind. But why has Syme stressed patronage alone? We have at least wanted to know what U-City's illusive conditions afford, and his sermon tenders little more than innuendo.

Syme has temporarily set aside enemies incognito for the ills of life reduced to programs, and to compensate for what goes unspoken, Estes enlists Alpha-60, Jean-Luc Godard's (1965) villainous supercomputer, to perform an apology of its true nature: "'The essence of the so-called capitalist world or the communist world is not an evil volition to subject their people by the power of indoctrination or the power of finance but simply the natural ambition of any organization to plan all its actions. In a word, to minimize unknown quantities'" (0:37:48–0:38:30). The machine speaks unequivocally to its inclinations: it self-regulates by eradicating uninvited guests. We are rejoined by the transcript of Rich (1980) and its imposition of measure. These two doctored articles of Godard and Rich purport the necessity of limiting one's exposure to disorder, while Dr. Syme nears his bind, for he too aligns his survival with equilibrium and distillation.

Syme must remain composed in the name of freedom, and Estes encourages us to accredit his foisted equation, order (freedom) vs. disorder, as one step removed from U-City's vertical orientation of up (freedom) vs. down—as curious a form as this takes in the doctor's tirade. How are we to take up such a reductive position? Really, what does U-City court as part of its organizational schema?

To us, his audience, our professor wants to impart the scope of U-City's systemic capture. Beneath the peel of its thinly-veiled patronage lurks the "'secreted mounts of a NEUROTROPIC SEIGE'" (Estes 2024, 37)—with neurotropy alluding to the proclivity of certain toxins, viruses, and chemicals to attack the nervous system. Dr. Syme's leaguer recalls Burroughs (1970), as this discourse mostly undermines his position.

Syme plays with scale, but, as we have just caught, Estes besets the stage. On a municipal level, the doctor and city will have laboured at variance to preserve unity, and at this magnitude, we have been gifted an array of fruitless gestures. As anticipated, U-City personnel are not the enemy, and we are on our way back to the outset of this not-so-public address. Syme will be coerced by Estes to retrain his focus on the lowest of the low: those who implore danger.

To ensure that we are prepared for Dr. Syme's recursion, Estes appends a rerun of sleep in Huxley (1932): "Lenina remembered her first shock of fear and surprise; her speculations through half a wakeful hour; and then, under the influence of those endless repetitions, the gradual soothing of her mind, the soothing, the smoothing, the stealthy creeping of sleep..." (88). With (Dr. Syme's) malign reassurance, Lenina has undergone a transition from vivid panic to a trance-like state. Or, to play devil's advocate, does the professor have the full support of our writer? Imagine that.

In Huxley (1932), sleep is a gateway. Lenina's alarm is annulled by a ceaseless caress. The system speaks through her and, in doing so, establishes the flanks of her polemic. (sleep ferries a seamless snare)

On our terms, Syme is the grift more than the grifter: good citizens of U-City, we are plagued by an automatized lunacy!

Estes escorts us to the real foes: our enemies in the flesh. Within this very hall, there are those among us who aspire to scuttle Syme's tocsins. For those of us who spurn Estes, his visiting professor is here to persuade us that these languid tyrannies perpetrated under the guise of optimization are in no way "'phantom toothaches'" (Estes 2024, 37).

It is a chiselling comment, as we know, with dentistry being a bent reference to Koestler (1941). His Rubashov's painful intrusions are messengers of a buried pathos, of what lies beneath the ash heap of history, the bloodied collective memory of those sacrificed in the name of the revolution.

What is Estes spinning with his intertextual extracts?

Syme would have us believe that such a passion dwells within those who choose not to yield to capture. The system is the problem, and, in this eventide, the solution lies in going after the dismissive and blinded among us.

Estes appends another tutorial from Bellamy's (1888) Dr. Leete to have us form an impression of nature, which, our writer initiates but is unwilling to fulfill, in the name of theatre: "(Dr. Leete) 'We have no parties or politicians, and as for demagoguery and corruption, they are words having only a historical significance'... 'Human nature itself must have changed very much', I said. 'Not at all', was Dr. Leete's reply, 'but the

conditions of human life have changed, and with them the motives of human action'" (31). Dr. Leete has no problem delighting in the longings of those who surmise a smooth progress and the optimal conditions of the many or, at least, the fancy of those who are raring to peddle as much. This is one of Dr. Syme's many angles. In equal measure, he envisions ruthless middlemen and clouded bureaucrats, not entirely unlike Estes, whose short-term gamings are a detriment to real progress.

Though the two doctors are at odds with one another, both agree: we cannot be changed, only captured or set free. To this point, how does Syme's conceit of aegis fit in with Skinner (1971) and his science of behaviour? Or has this epitaph long-since lost its way?

Despite his liberal demeanour, Syme's staginess caters to biblical allusions, or, at any rate, Rae's scene with the mountain opens Syme's monologue up to such influence. With its ubiquitous craft (U), the professor orchestrates his impression that the root of U-City's conduct resides elsewhere, thereupon, he renders a consecration. Our mad foil's speech is mazy, and it abandons him, as corroborated by the professor's inane replica of Rae's fall.

Estes equally curbs these undertones: we are provided with a top-view diagram of the concert hall (fig. 7). Our writer wants to differentiate himself from Syme, to make sure we know he is well aware of the craft involved. Now, we are the ones with a birds-eye view: a layout of the main floor, balconies, orchestra pit, stage, and control booth. What kind of theatre is this? It is a work of fiction. How does this layout reflect Syme's speech? With such a blueprint, the professor's receding lines fail to convince us of our loss of freedom, as we can leave at any time.
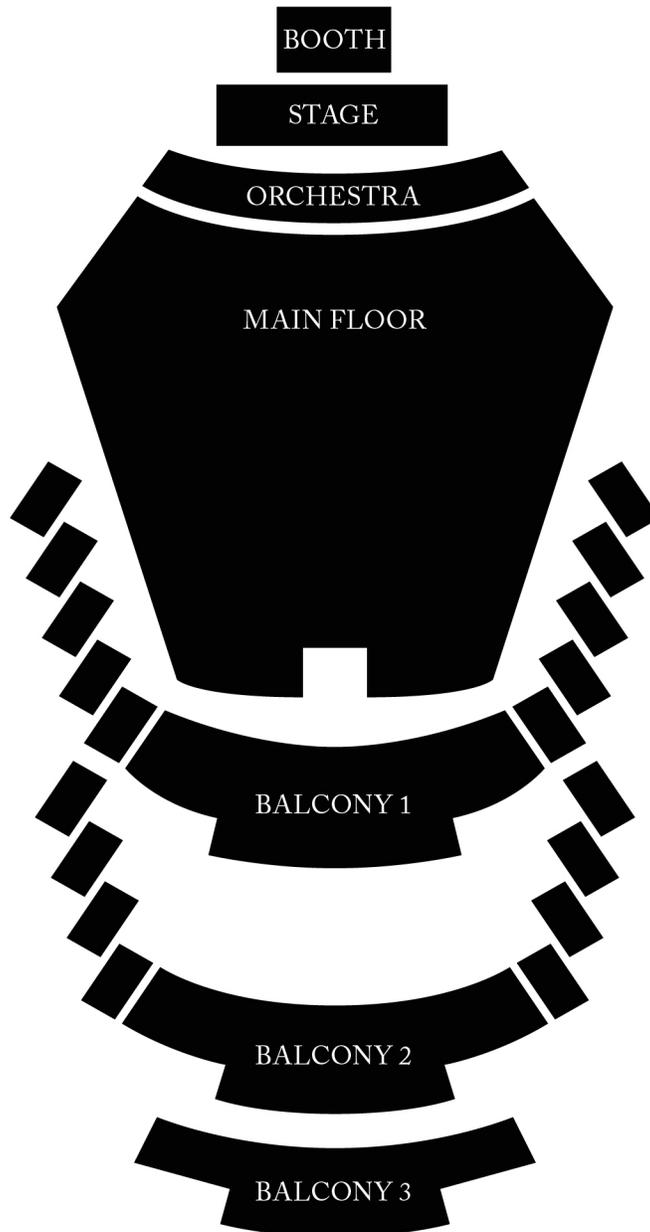
Figure 7. *Duckspeak* (Estes 2024, 39).

Safe and sound, inside the control booth, Dr. Syme's monologue has grown foul. "'It is true. There are those who have chosen to give in to this daemonic craft and to live as husks upon this Yellow Sea. But let us not succumb to YE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH. For they would have us believe that ours is a geometry lost—and for some time now, no less'" (Estes 2024, 37).

Dr. Syme's loathed hypnagogical champions are proxies for Kaufman's (1978) deuteragonist-turned-conflict-creature, Elizabeth: "(Elizabeth) 'There's nothing to be afraid of. They were right. It's painless. It's good. Come. Sleep'" (1:43:39–1:45:14). We are to wonder why anyone would choose to give in, to let go, much like the professor in the coming weeks.

Already, a task is running in Dr. Syme's backend, against his will and without his knowledge. Estes has the professor mirror his own honed aversion to details, but we do not need either of them to tell us there are gainfully implanted figures throughout this venture. Rather than acknowledging his despising of certain companies head-on, Syme trails off with obscured slurs and added denials of loss.

A cyclic declaration occurs over the edge of the Timur Sea and beyond. Aside from courting our disdain for this adopted (Orwellian) character, Dr. Syme, what else does our writer want us to cull from this performance?

There is one nest of conflict. We have brushed it off more than a few times. The professor wants us to partake in his contempt for a shared destiny, be it open or closed. And to guarantee that a communal telos, this theme, does not go unnoticed, Estes appends Eugene Pottier's (1871) socialist anthem, *L'Internationale*:

(Verse)
Arise, wretched of the earth
Arise, convicts of hunger
Reason thunders in its volcano
This is the eruption of the end
Of the past, let us wipe the slate clean
Masses, slaves, arise, arise
The world is about to change its foundation

We are nothing, let us be everything

(Chorus)

This is the final struggle

Let us gather together tomorrow

The Internationale

Will be the human race

Finally—after Koestler (1941), Bellamy (1888), Bulgakov (1967), and Tarkovsky (1979), along with Alpha-60's reference to capitalism vs. communism and Syme's Yellow Sea slur—at least one of the doctor's paranoid springs has been pointedly identified: the Red Menace. How are we to decry *Exllu*'s retrograde enemies and lightly-cloaked references to human nature?

For Dr. Syme, a true nature entails the cultivation of one's singular path. But he does share one thing in common with his leftist foes—though he would surely deny it: the unshakable melancholy of a geometry lost.

The professor is not finished, but we have heard enough. The crooked admixture of his barbed and tangential ordinance has fitted us aplenty, namely, an acute sense of the historical tides that pass through him. But how? Interestingly enough, his show does not take place on the stage. Syme acts from behind the scenes. He is a showman, and yet he cannot command the room head-on. We have been funded his take on U-City's omnipresent campaigns, and in consequence, he has broadcasted the very program he loathes.

In Syme's final scene, we find ourselves back in Charm Psychiatric Clinic several days past our first encounter. At that meet, Estes (2024) predicted Syme's antics would be thwarted by tempered glass, then sleep, and this more or less plays out, with a twist of cruelty thrown in for good measure: "11/08/09 08:25:37, GM MEDICAL COMPLEX:

Dr. Syme's room is empty and his window ajar, and on the surface of the glass barrier, a bloodied radial crack marrs the view of U-Port in the distance. Any moment now, a succession of codes will sound over the intercom, and the uproar will begin: Code White, rooftop, jumper" (45). Is this it?

Once again, the scene's violence is defused by a diagram: the physics of a jump (fig. 8). Much like the diagram of Rae as a spinning disc (fig. 1), this display of Syme's attempted launch is a joke that lands poorly. The doctor has failed, and the cruelty that ran through his monologue has been put onto us.
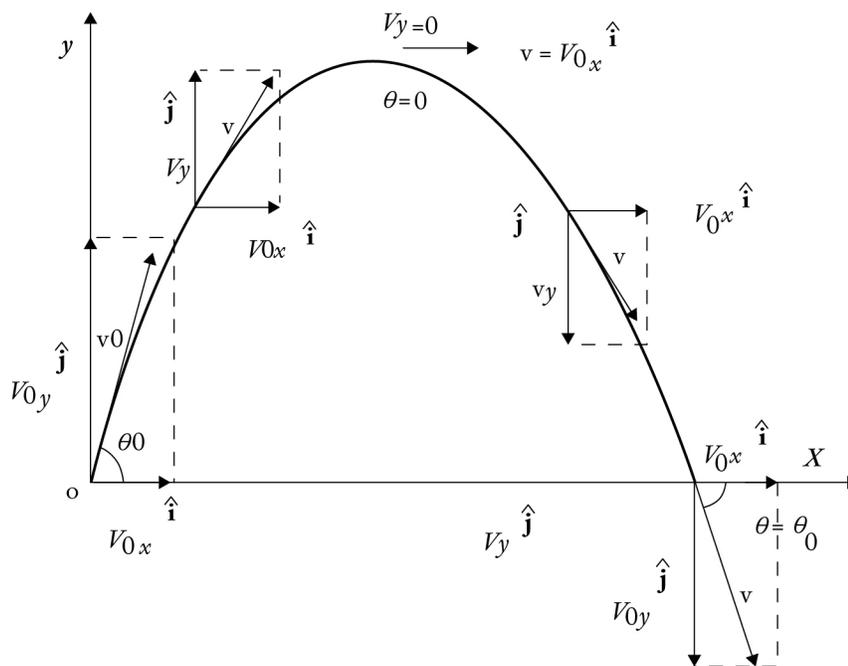
Figure 8. *Ledge Boost* (Estes 2024, 47).

Though Syme shares a timeline with Rae, and though the two undergo parallel downfalls, their paths never cross. It strikes as odd. On his own, Syme's character has no arc. There is nothing all that substantial for the professor to overcome, no catharsis. The attempt to decipher the mountain's message (*W—H—O?*), under the watchful eye

of the Leve, amounted to little if anything. It seems he has no calling. Still, Syme got to perform his ledge boost—his game hack. What was once Rae's fall is now his, and, like the sleeper, he appears to have escaped the clutches of U-City.

Estes leaves us with two additional appendages, the first of which, from Bulgakov (1967), contributes to our doubt that Syme has acted alone: "'Pardon me, and where is it that you mean to go?' began the doctor, peering into Ivan's eyes. 'In the middle of the night, in your underwear... You don't feel well, stay here with us'" (67). With this excerpt, we are prompted to reassess the rancour of Syme's previous tokens: from his warnings of miniaturized avian surveillance to his portentous projections onto the darkness of the concert hall: his disdain for sleep, plagues of patronage, neurotropic capture, et cetera. Estes has processed Syme's fall through and alongside Ivan's interlocker, the trickster who turns the poet's day into night.

After all is said and done, the lead-up to the professor's hospitalization presents us with yet another layer of deceit. Syme has been set up to take the fall.

Do we still consider him Rae's foil?

Dr. Syme's final adjunct comes from Wim Wenders (1991) and greets a false pretence. It is a fishy addition, most likely a plant: "(Doctor) 'Pietro, what now? You should be in bed.' (Pietro) 'I don't sleep anymore, Doctor. Sleeping is out'" (0:07:33–0:07:39). Against the doctor's wishes, a young Pietro promises Syme designs without sleep, what will finally get him his win. Our writer's final prompt concerns Dr. Syme's game hack, not in terms of how it works but in terms of its failure. The professor has evaded capture for a short time, but what will he become once his body reaches the end of its fall?

MONTANA

Throughout *Exllu*, we have been commenced and corralled into an espial of what waylays inland and abroad. This interior-exterior expedition is queerly coupled with the fact that the novel woos and deters us with slumber. *Exllu* shelters homespun evasions and then some.

So far, Estes has delivered a mystic, rocky terrain that bides its time from near and yonder to Tower B's basement-level officetel, No. 034. He has also disclosed that No. 034 is a gateway, a thoroughfare to something far more grandiose and intangible, much faster, complex, and conceivably global in its reach. Tower B is a post where the macro and micro meet, an effect that oscillates between monotone horror and desktop Arcadia.

On the advice of our writer, a holy mountain lures its unsuspecting contacts into turpitude, and we are but tourists of U-City. At least, this is our point of entry. We are to find ourselves inculpated, while Estes directs the affairs of U-City with his ministerial auditings. His stunts are demanding. *Exllu* is a vicious circle of catch and release, an apostate tournament of lost and found, as we have mused ad nauseam. A gamespace postulate and its craft have been unendingly hobbled, yet these underminings do not indicate an agenda to lead us up (nor into) the mountain. We must take into account how *Exllu*'s error-prone injunctions are generative and with respect to how this inbred thing is brandished.

Foreign visitations and classic depths have been our guides, as part of *Exllu*'s conventional content. Our contracted point of entry expands and now flattens out. The mountain's shadow lengthens, "stretching downward past tree lines and waterfalls and

spilling onto glassy lakes" (Estes 2024, 15). We are exposed on this surface populated by improbable, predatory animalia—like Bulgakov's (1967) gloved stranger, a daemon who turns the poet Ivan's day into night, alongside Skinner (1971) and his unassuming science of behaviour. There remain lines to recall and work to be done.

An implicit contention has been briefed: *Exllu* suffers from what is more and less than U-City's chasms and planes, contractions and dilations, while the godly mountain executes its pivotal role. With its unscrupulous and reductive craft, the thin grey spectre spelled Rae, absorbing her without incident, and, in turn, our sullied protagonist spread the Word of this apparition to an illusive and equally mercurial figure and, in the teeth of resistance, appears to have put it down.

Have we grown tired of the novel's litany of lags and leakages? Most likely, yes. And in the end, we will say it was over before it began.

Burroughs (1970) must be considered in these dim proceedings. Through Estes, the appendage totes a scaled-down version of these wavering symbiotic arrangements. Viruses—in this case, words and images—replicate without recognition, which we, in turn, shield under the guise of a stable condition (a nature). What is more, Burroughs goes on to inform us that such a relationship has begun to flag, and he has done so for over half a century.

The noir presage of the project follows suit. *Exllu*'s overhang has been rendered untrustworthy. After all, we have mined the veneer of our rocky entity; it is too well-lit to be the villain. In this fictional setting, to be scammed is to come out unscathed, and we are able to exit at any point, but, if we do stay on, unlike those who are mired in U-City, we can gain satisfaction in the work that goes into dealing with these conflated effects.

Some of *Exllu*'s debacles may even provide relief. For example, we will soon be given the moniker of our tremendous foe: "Montana" (Exllu 2024, 41). It is a detail in passing, an opaque chapter title, but it works. Once a far and shadowy apparition, the mountain now shrinks in stature. Naming it spoils the effect. Montana is a postcard or the face of an outdated operating system.

It may seem like the real villain will now come forward, but no such evil arrives, and we must press on, just as we were beginning to flag.

We are, in fact, on the verge of two rather underwhelming but important reveals. First, Rae persists, and indeed, she is not entirely a changeling. The version of her who made a launch and whose panic grew on Warwick Avenue is still lingering upstage. And second, Rae has a personal attachment to Tower B's basement-level officetel No. 034, or at least, more of a connection than we have been led to understand.

These reveals are to be gleaned as we continue, this time, downward. "11/08/03 22:34:51, NEW VENICE: Rae crosses the lobby floor of Exllu Tower B, descends three flights of stairs to a basement-level officetel, No. 034, swipes and enters. 'Lock—' she begins to instruct, but stops short" (Estes 2024, 41). It is subtle. Part of her is alarmed by what has become of her once-domestic space: "There is a chill in the dawn air and birds charting the light grey sky overhead. To her right, where her entertainment wall once stood, there now looms a range of snow-capped peaks, and to her left, a grassy shore, a windswept lake, and a meandering valley far in the distance" (ibid). Woefully, Rae is now homeless, and it confirmed that talk of her spell was never to suggest that she had merely become a stooge of Montana, whatever Montana is. We have had our inklings already. There have been at least two Raes from the start.

Between the walls of her ex-abode—in a time zone within a time zone, the Rae whom we have come to know and perchance remain a champion, is taken aback by her newly acquired expanse. The relays of sidelined orbits run through her, alongside, from by and away.

But so what?

While avatars may not make sense, they do not unnerve us, either.

Even so, it has been doubly endorsed: what precipitates a cast over U-City was never just this faintly reverent phantasm. Montana expands beyond its lakes below, and we are refunded to our nature scene. Confirmations aside, an expanded version of this colourless line still gives us little in the way of naming what is behind Rae's unexpected renos.

This facade of nature proves to be intact and taxing. A chill in the dawn air turns Rae's night to day, and a flock of birds chart the television sky. Is this Syme's following? The snow-capped peaks of Montana withdraw as we are led to gaze upon a pastoral horizon.

Whatever it is, the environ swells.

Are we to assume Rae is now entirely inside this expanse, or are these simply the so-called virtual effects of the gamespace? Perhaps this is all we were ever able or willing to imagine, but there is more and even less to this than sensorial augmentation. No. 034 is still in play, and Rae has been equally divided, united, and doubly contained. An immersion imperfectly hosts.

In contrast to Dr. Syme and his railings against capture, the untold effects of this fraudulent setup continue to instruct us. Montana does not confirm a net cast over the

world. To really gain from this adventure, we must attempt to imagine stranger, far-less fathomable possibilities, as we assume our writer has tried and failed.

As it stands, things have become streamlined. Inside Tower B, in No. 034, reside the rustic beginnings of an epic quest, confirmed by another appendage of Lovecraft (1931): "10:05 pm, on the wing. After snowstorm, have spied mountain-range ahead higher than any hitherto seen. May equal Himalayas allowing for height of plateau. Probable Latitude 76° 15', Longitude 113° 10' E. Reaches far as can see to right and left. Suspicion of two smoking cones. All peaks black and bare of snow. Gale blowing off them impedes navigation" (516). It is a nudge. What is enchased within the weave of U-City and has ailed its people does not need our permission to adorn.

While it has grown more brilliant, the setting is by no means seamless. After all, this cannot be. Montana and its heights are just lucid enough to become ultra-thin, a leery beacon of the timeless and eternal.

Estes overrides the full impact of this effect by appending Tarkovsky (1979) and his protean Writer, deep in the alien Zone where all traps move: "(Writer) 'In the not so distant past, the future was simply a continuation of the present. All its changes loomed somewhere beyond the horizon. But now the future is part of the present'" (1:49:30–1:49:45). Such a time-complex has been flattened. How else could the story survive? Among this uncharted mix of workaday snitches, no craft could save Tarkovsky's Writer, but there he is, glib and unwell. *Exllu* scavenges along these fault lines. A city lays claim to a ubiquitous craft, its organs omnipotent—and the claim holds, despite what infiltrates its bounds. How could this be?

Somehow, our troubled figures live on.

Estes has concocted the opening scene of a heroic adventure, but this succours only to further expedite his lore. Or, more generously, his valley levees enough liquid to deliver us U-City's pervious intrigues. The novel and what it holds to be its truth attends to both a civic and imported commotion.

There is always more and less to *Exllu,* and we are to audit what comes before and after the crafting of this novel, inside and out. Something will always allow *Exllu* to fail, and we will carry on as once-designated sites of its failure. This is not to lead us to the ineffable but to continually lead the ineffable back to us.

Ironically, the more vivid Montana becomes, the more it fades, and, as its swan song, once again, the mountain takes the stage to close the show. "11/08/03 07:36:01 MT, NEW VENICE: standing at the foot of the mountain, Rae surveys the valley below. The sky has emptied, and her voice sounds from above. 'Three pushes to End a Trend is a buying climax, followed by a reversal…'" (Estes 2024, 49). Montana is a frail voice in the wilderness.

On the novel's terms, this is Rae's quest, and like her now conspicuously absent implant, Montana has become her intimate other. Dismally, of what it speaks has been spoken. Montana's (Rae's) lines are those of another.

The repeat performance is solely for our benefit; it is to have us wish upon Rae her acclimatization to this land. Repetitions soothe, as we gather from Huxley (1932). Montana and its now familiar antics mask what our writer will not or possibly cannot unpack, at least not yet.

And now the birds have gone.

Our new ground is entirely too brittle.

To demonstrate Montana's auxiliary condition, Estes presents us with a candle diagram (fig. 9). The mountain's contingent status has been made clear from the start: a thin grey outline flutters up and down between points, side-scrolling from 9:00–10:00 a.m., a pattern in flux, trivial in and of itself.
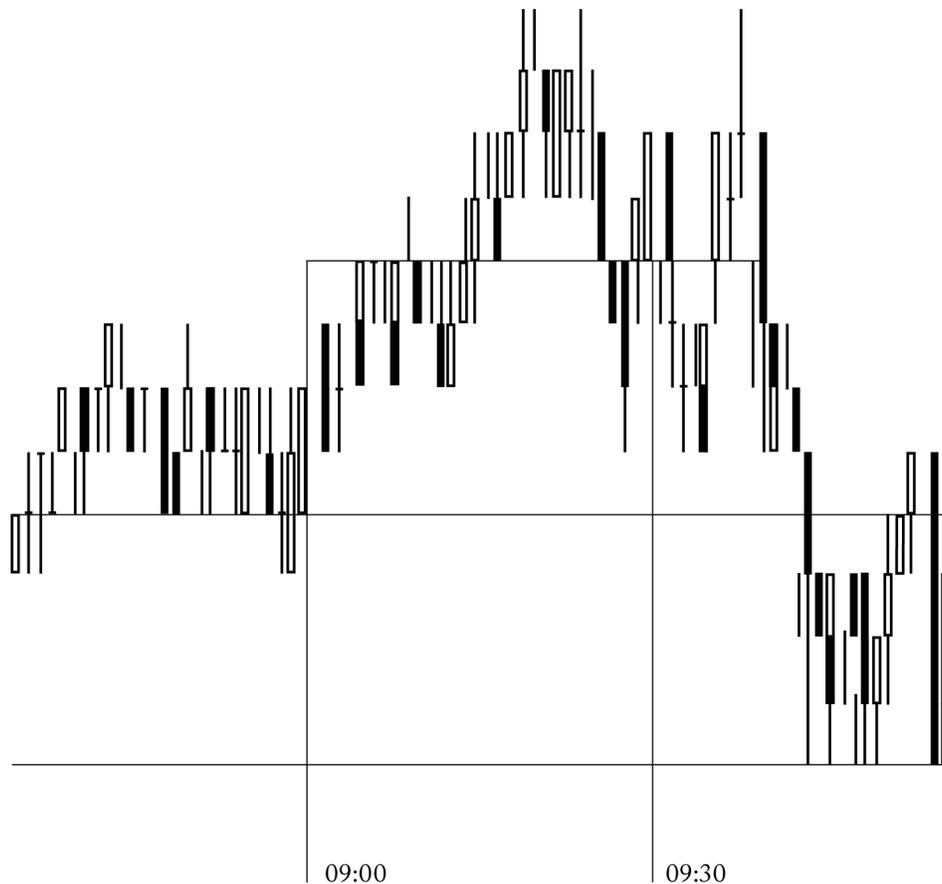

Figure 9. *Montana* (Estes 2024, 43).

Montana is a message until it is not. Everything moves.

Toward the far end of our blustery water, a shoreline beckons. "07:42:17: at the water's edge, Rae wades in up to her waist and begins to swim. The waves push and pull, dragging her further and further out, and the grassy shore from which she came begins to fade into the distance" (Estes 2024, 49). Rae pierces the fluid skin and sets

off, and in turn, these waves sever Rae from her past, though there is surely more and less to what these two are claimed to carry.

But wait!

She who fell falters once more: "Rae will soon tire, give in, and slip under, with weekly projections ringing inside her" (Estes 2024, 49). The surf is too modest or too much, or perhaps her tenor range has begun to weigh her down.

Though Rae will be fine.

(It was over before it began.)

We arrive at a new beginning, bolstered by a tenacious forecast: "The waves will carry her to the other shore. The birds will return. Winds will settle. And the lake will once again be calm. And she will rise without sound and begin to make her way down the long and winding slopes of the valley" (Estes 2024, 49). Just as we were about to take leave of the familiar, all is well. Irresolution falters.

The birds are back, and the winds that swept Rae from her park bench have ceased. She is now fully engulfed in silence, utterly acquired. In fact, Rae has never appeared so whole. And with this, Estes extends to us a final selection from Bulgakov (1967) to reinforce the settlement:

> 'Listen to the soundlessness', said Margarita to the Master, and sand hissed beneath her bare feet. 'Listen and enjoy what you weren't given in life—quiet. Sleep will fortify you, and you'll reason wisely. And now you won't be able to drive me away. I shall be the one guarding your sleep.' Thus spoke Margarita, walking with the Master in the direction of their eternal home, and it seemed to the Master that Margarita's words were flowing in just the same way as the stream that was left behind had flowed and whispered, and the Master's memory his uneasy memory, covered with pinpricks, began to fade away (384).

We are reunited with the familiar, internally summoned by a deep sleep. It is the ultimate

escape, fortified and soundless, an eternal home, where memories end and fears take

leave.

There is nothing left for us to ward off.

We have become one, internal to become external: at last, a final rest without

image or craft. Such whispering words flow as water, and sleep leads us to a wise and

fortified reason, an afterlife.

Listen to its silence.

But, of course, Rae's pastoral horizon dissolves into our writer's last offering: a
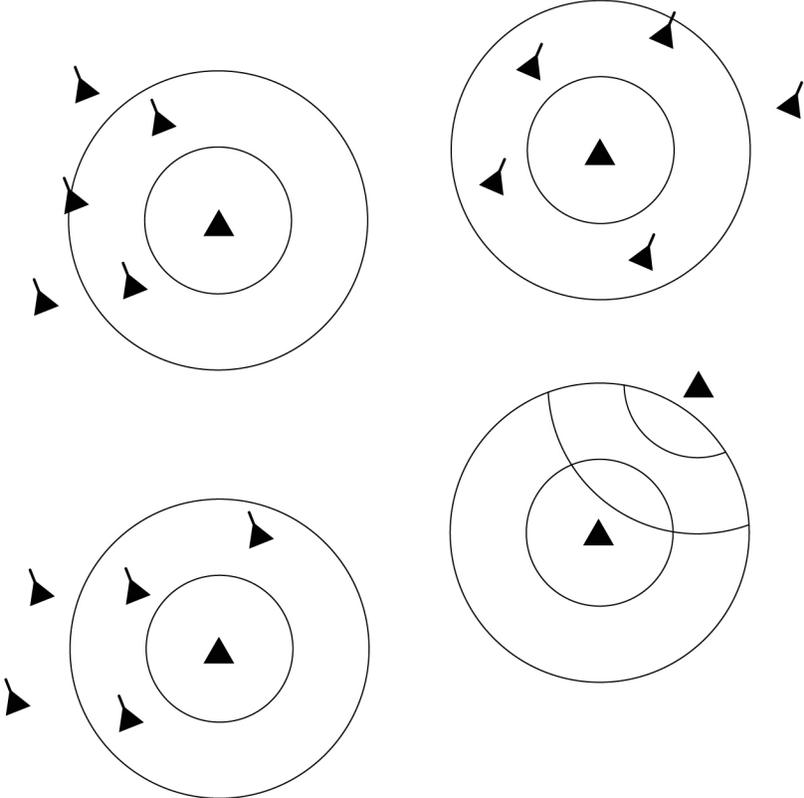
diagram of miniaturized avian surveillance (fig. 10).

Figure 10. *The Other Shore* (Estes 2024, 51).

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