

## "Look at the Bunny": The Rabbit as Virtual Totem (or, What Roger Rabbit Can Teach Us About the Second Gulf War)

*"Myxomatosis"*

*Caught in the centre of a soundless field*

*While hot inexplicable hours go by*

*What trap is this? Where were its teeth concealed?*

*You seem to ask. I make a sharp reply,*

*Then clean my stick. I'm glad I can't explain*

*Just in what jaws you were to suppurate:*

*You may have thought things would come right again*

*If you could only keep quite still and wait.*

PHILIP LARKIN

### 1. Follow the White Rabbit

This chapter begins with a decoy question: why bunny rabbits?

Certainly, the bunny rabbit looms large in the Anglo-American imaginary as a virtual totem for ontological uncertainty; and it is this thematic consistency of the role played by rabbits in cultural texts and discourses which interests us here. For while an analytical map of any given animal could yield interesting hermeneutic patterns, the rabbit has proven itself to be a catalytic object for dialectical questions of presence and absence, as well as metaphysical explorations of madness, sanity, and those existential forms of psychic liminality which lie between these relative poles.

To begin with, consider the prototypical magic act: pulling a rabbit out of a hat. This prestidigital standard has amazed and delighted children for many generations, since the hat seems to work as a kind of cosmic portal from which rabbits manifest themselves "as if from nowhere." Indeed, if pressed, the children may say that the hat serves as a kind of burrow leading to a parallel universe populated by bunny rabbits; suggesting that the particular bunny on stage is a kind of tourist in our own dimension. There may or may not be a puff of smoke, helping the bunny make the remarkable transition from *not-there* to *there* – a transition which subliminally initiates the children into the basic philosophical question: "Why is there something and not nothing?"

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Doubtless, once again, a hamster or a dove could serve the same function as the rabbit, but for some mysterious reason the latter is the creature endowed with the greatest symbolic weight. So while our decoy question may be "why rabbits?", we are actually using this question as a portal to understand the psychosocial subtext of a particular genealogy involving rabbits as ontologically unstable, *virtual* creatures. Creatures which sometimes help, and at other times hinder, our comprehension of what it means "to be" and/or "to become" in different media-historical contexts. As with *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Matrix*, we will try our best to follow the white rabbit, enlisting various bunnies drawn from films like *Harvey* (Henry Koster, 1950), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988), and *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001) – as well as books like Richard Adams' *Watership Down* and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* – in order to see just how unfamiliar and unsettling these "familiar" can be.

All the while another, altogether different, question attempts to pull itself out of the hat, drawing our methodological focus in the opposite direction. This alternative question reflects on the way in which "looking at the bunny" has become a relatively common term for the process of being distracted from more important events unfolding nearby, denoting a very deliberate form of diversion. What is it, then, we ask, that we are *not* seeing – as a culture in general – when we become too entranced by the antics of real or imagined bunny rabbits?

## 2. Shadow Puppets

*You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.*

GLAUCON, IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*<sup>1</sup>

Much has been made of the perceived link between the shadows flickering on the walls of Plato's cave, and the various distractions of the contemporary spectacle; whether this latter is figured as the identifiable simulacra of "the media," or the even more all-englobing consensual hallucination of "the Matrix." Plato himself is not too specific about the form or content of these shadows, making reference to "all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals."<sup>2</sup> (Certainly, if everyday experience is anything to go by, the rabbit is one of the most popular shadow puppets due to the recognizable pointy ears; so we could perhaps presume that these "strange prisoners" were watching bunnies ... but this is to indulge in pure conjecture.)

What concerns us here, however, is the homologous role of the shadows – no matter what they represent – with the function of the bunny rabbit in the mod-



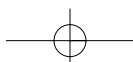
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ern phrase: "look at the bunny." For while the origin of this phrase is quite obscure, it extends all the way back to the Platonic process of distraction. Hence we have the situation where a man manages to escape from the cave, but is dazzled by his new surroundings, with the result that he continues to believe that "the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him."<sup>3</sup> And so when we say "look at the bunny" to a child who is about to receive a painful doctor's injection (perhaps employing a hand puppet provided for just this procedure), we form part of a conspiracy with far-reaching implications. Elements such as the operator (doctor), operation (inoculation), *telos* (health), subject (child), and decoy (parent-bunny complex) thus constitute a paradigmatic assemblage for much cultural activity.

For, on the one hand, we have the metaphysical distraction of Plato's cave – a fetish of shadows rather than the objects which lie at their source. And on the other we have the more strategic, "political" distraction of using one object to draw the attention away from another: the logic of the decoy. The question at the heart of many studies linking Plato's cave with the wider social media concerns the extent to which we can separate these two forms of distraction, and whether or not they are in fact interdependent, even in the original text. The critique of capitalism, given a fresh boost in the academy by the deployment of the term *Empire* by Hardt and Negri, sees little difference between a philosophical project of compromised vision in relation to concepts such as "the good," "the unthought," "pure form" etc., and the political project hostile to those advertising companies which churn out shadows on a daily basis, for projection on the walls of our own personal, IKEA-decorated caves.

Interestingly, the proleptic powers of Plato extend as far into the future as the Academy Awards, as witnessed in the section which reads: "And if they were in the habit of conferring honors among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he [i.e., the enlightened-Keanu-Reeves-Jim-Carey-type figure who has escaped the Cave-Matrix-Seahaven] would care for such honors and glories, or envy the possessor of them?"<sup>4</sup> Thus those figures who refuse to accept their Oscar statuette, like Marlon Brando and George C. Scott, subconsciously play the role of the Platonic character who has escaped the seductive irrelevance of the shadows; to become the exceptional person who refuses to "look at the bunny."

But what is it that has the power to break the hypnotic power of these flickering images, especially in the modern context? Well, ironically enough, the bunny rabbit figure itself. For just as Alice follows the march-hare down the rabbit hole



leading to Wonderland, Neo (Keanu Reeves) is inspired by the tattoo of a rabbit to execute the series of events which will short-circuit his slavish access to the Matrix. In these two symptomatic bookends of the twentieth century – which in a certain sense traced an arc from Lewis Carroll to the Wachowski Brothers – the bunny is a slippery figure which may or may not be in the service of cognitive (re)orientation.

### 3. Surfing God's Channel to ToonTown

*For some time now I have used the metaphor of the rabbit and the hat in connection with a certain way of making something appear from analytical discourse that isn't there. I might almost say that on this occasion I have put you to the test of eating raw rabbits. You can relax now. Take a lesson from the boa constrictor. Have a little nap and the whole thing will pass through.*

JACQUES LACAN<sup>5</sup>

Richard Kelly's debut film *Donnie Darko* is a rather ragged attempt to wed David Lynch's surreal suburban Gothic enigmas, with the angst-ridden search for existential answers posed by the average Marilyn Manson fan. It does, however, continue the proud tradition of featuring a rabbit with dubious ontological credentials (albeit a rabbit with a pronounced insectoid-skull mutation). Donnie himself is a high school senior with "emotional problems," who sees daylight hallucinations of Frank the Giant Bunny Rabbit, even when taking his medication.

Two details are worth noting: the first being that Donnie is definitely aware that the rabbit is "not real." For when his psychiatrist asks if Frank is real or imaginary, he answers the latter. The second point is that Frank is not so much a bunny rabbit, as a person wearing a bunny rabbit suit.<sup>6</sup> These details intertwine as the film develops, along with its obsession with virtuality, time travel and predestination. At one point, Donnie can see the virtual path of people's movements before they happen, visualized by a "vessel" or "vector" or "sphere" that extends out from the chest. In following this vector (which looks like a horizontal tornado),<sup>7</sup> Donnie can see what is going to happen before it happens; as if the universe is predestined by God, and one need only this form of second sight to anticipate the next move. Indeed, he explains this process to his psychiatrist in similar terms: "Every living thing follows a set path," and thus follows "God's channel." Moreover, the central problematic of the film pits this statement against the possibility of altering fate – a tension which unfolds under the knowledge that "every living creature on Earth dies alone."

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Freudian resonances are, as always, present, but should perhaps be considered red herrings. Donnie asks his friends: "What's the point of living if you don't have a dick?" and also confesses to his shrink that he follows the bunny into his parent's bedroom. "What did you find?" she asks. "Nothing," he says, in blank denial.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, the self-destructive time loop (signalled by the skeleton suit that Donnie wears during his Halloween party: a form of virtual iconography or "premediation"<sup>9</sup>), forms the circular arc of the death drive, leading from the womb via the tomb back to the womb again.

The significance of these "time portals" or "wormholes" should not be reduced to the psychodrama of the traumatized ego, but extended out to link-up with other intertexts. As already mentioned, bunnies seem to be the guardians of portals into parallel universes; acting as guides through the looking glass, often teasingly leading people towards the Brigadoon of human happiness.<sup>10</sup> At one point Donnie talks to Frank the Rabbit through a liquid mirror, recalling the genealogy linking Alice to more recent wonderlands. In fact, this reference to Alice should not be underestimated in this or other contexts, especially – and this may at first seem surprising – as it invokes the recurring theme of paedophilia. For if the "wonderland" trope is traced from its origin to those texts inspired by the Alice mythology, bunnies emerge as a decoy for more disturbing urges and activities. Even without alluding to Michael Jackson's *Neverland* fantasy project, we can appreciate the split symbolism of "innocence" which is both created and violated by the modern "invention of childhood." Bunny rabbits play a key role in this discursive development, as witnessed by the constant presence of "space-bunnies" in the BBC's *Teletubbies*, whose "sex(uality) ... seems at once over-explicit and unspecified."<sup>11</sup>

The troubling ambiguity of Alice's erotic ambience has only increased with each published biography of Charles Dodgson's (i.e., Lewis Carroll's) hobby of photographing young children with loving attention. From a certain perspective, this hobby could be seen as a symptom of a creative mind responding to the dawn of the age of mechanical reproduction, and the ways in which technologies circulate within the libidinal economy of virtuality itself (that is, the way minors/mirrors begin to function as signifiers of purely potential sexuality). Jan Svankmajer, in his semi-animated version of *Alice*, was not shy about emphasizing this aspect of Carroll's story. Furthermore, in that *other* 1988 film blending animated with "real" actors – *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* – eagle-eyed viewers will spot the graffiti, "For a good time, call Allyson Wonderland" (a strange joke for a kid's movie).

In fact, the shift from copy to simulacra, effected during Carroll's lifetime, could be described as a change in paradigm from Plato's cave to Alice's looking-glass. J.G. Ballard's novel *Super-Cannes*, in some ways the ultimate statement of late postmodern globalization, reserves a special role for Alice, since the intrigue

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revolves around a library stacked with multiple copies of Carroll's book, each one representing an orphaned girl available for abuse by successful, corrupt corporate types. (Just as the prepubescent dance group "sparkle motion" is exploited for similar purposes in *Donnie Darko*.)

However, it is possible that the cultural matrix of *Alice-liminality-sexuality-bunny rabbit* is simply related to the child's capacity to imagine things which are not strictly "there." While training for his part in *Roger Rabbit*, Bob Hoskins watched his young daughter to learn how to act with imaginary characters. In an interview with *Starlog* magazine, not long after the film premiere, Hoskins explained how she

was three at the time, and she had all these invisible friends whom she talks to – Geoffrey and Elliott. And I realized that, as we get older, our imagination goes further and further to the back of our head. When we're a kid, we can actually take it out and look at it. I mean, we can see it. As we get older, senility comes in, and the imagination comes to the forefront again, and takes over. So, I just concentrated on an immature imagination – forcing it back to the front so I could actually take it out and look at it. And I managed to actually see them, which was all right, but you do it for sixteen hours a day for five months! I started to lose control and hallucinate in all kinds of embarrassing places. Some of it's quite rude, but there's not much you can talk about. At one point, it was quite frightening, weasels and all sorts of things turning up.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, in an uncanny reverberation of both *Harvey* and *Donnie Darko*, Hoskins starts hallucinating "actual" bunny rabbits. (Indeed, speaking on the *Parkinson* talk show a few years later, Hoskins was still clearly haunted by the experience, despite using it as the basis for jokes).

The 2003 "featurette" *Behind the Ears*, filmed for inclusion with the DVD special edition of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, features a wealth of observations by the production team on the "blurry line" between the cartoon world and what they call the "live-action" world. In fact, the experience of making the film seems to have served the function of one of those ACME "portable portals"<sup>13</sup> that saves Eddie Valiant's life at one crucial point in the story, allowing them a glimpse of another parallel universe. (Indeed, all the animators have the same protruding eyes, which suggests that they have all been staring at "the other side" for quite a while now.)

Charles Fleischer, the actor who provided the voice for Roger Rabbit himself, is also clearly a little crazy; at least according to his co-stars. From his decision to wear a rabbit suit from day one of shooting, despite engaging in strictly "off-cam-



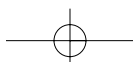
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era acting," to his exposition of "trans-projectional acting," Fleischer is clearly a graduate of the F. Murray Abraham school of delusional thespianism. Seeing him talk so earnestly about the process, however, dressed as a two-bit, flea-bitten rabbit, is yet another revealing glimpse of the bunny-as-totem. (Indeed, it is not a stretch of the imagination to see the same character in *Donnie Darko*.) Which is not to isolate Hoskins or Fleischer as psychic victims of "this monster," but to emphasize the fact that the very production process of the contemporary spectacle leads to the point described by Ed Jones, the optical photography supervisor: "All of us were loony tunes by the end of it."

However, if we get diegetic for a moment, we can see how the same tropes are transported inside the frame of the film. In the opening scene, which is 100% animated, Roger is warned to behave by the mother of the house, or else he's "going back to the science lab" (a clear and perverse reference to the less-than-cute fate reserved for most bunny rabbits). The main story which follows, unfolds in Hollywood 1947, focusing on private investigator Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins), who refuses to "work ToonTown" since a Toon killed his brother with a falling piano. From the beginning, it is clear that Toons are second-class citizens, flagged by the disparaging way Valiant dismisses "toons" (as in "coons"), and the fact that many of them – Dumbo in particular – "works for peanuts."

Being the alcoholic, broke, film-noir cliché that he is, Valiant takes a job involving Toons, despite his bitter reservations, noting in a prophetic meta-comment (given Hoskins' gruellingly surreal onset experience), "the job's ridiculous." During this job Eddie warms to these creatures from the wrong side of the tracks, and attempts to foil not only a vast real-estate swindle, but full-blown genocide of Toons by a renegade Toon-turned-humansque character, Judge Doom.<sup>14</sup>

Anticipating chapter 6 somewhat, dedicated to the trope of public transport, we can point to the fact that Judge Doom's foiled evil plot centers on the dismantling of Los Angeles' tram system (ironically "the best public transportation system in the world," back in 1947), in order to clear the way for today's dystopia of freeways, billboards and roadhouses. In a thinly-disguised reference to the ethnically coded survival (whether it be the "safe haven" of Israel, also "created" in 1947, or the many metropolitan struggles against gentrification), ToonTown is eventually saved from these diabolical plans. And so, the equation between joy, enchantment and public transport is made explicit; along with the key role of a rabbit that is, and is not, *real*.



#### 4. The Private Life of the Rabbit

We have already identified the *illicit* subtexts of rabbit-related sexuality, but we need not dwell on this alone, for there are many instances of a more socially-visible form: namely, *adult*-bunny-sexuality. The most obvious, of course, is the Playboy empire, founded on the famous logo of the eponymous bunny. But while we have traced an outline of the bunny-trope, we have made little progress in explaining the *sexual* association, or even appeal, of the rabbit. It seems altogether too far-fetched to suggest that the girls in the employ of Hugh Hefner, wearing cotton tails and bunny ears, incarnate some kind of sublimated curiosity in bestiality (despite Donna Haraway's enthusiastic promotion of the practice in her cyborg manifesto). Rather, it seems more related to their symbolic role as the mascot of procreation; that is, as creatures which .. well ... breed like rabbits.<sup>15</sup>

Picking up on the bunny-bombshell motif, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* introduces the now iconic Jessica Rabbit, who has since become something of a standard figure in the tattoo and cartoon fan world. Indeed, Jessica (who is not a rabbit, per se, but a human Toon *married* to a rabbit), was so successful as a sex symbol, that certain scenes had to be reanimated in order to ensure anxious parents that she is wearing underwear. The voice for Jessica was provided by Kathleen Turner; however, Betsy Brantley, a virtually unknown starlet, served as the body model. (A process which seems to have reached its apotheosis with the new CGI characters such as Lara Croft and S1m0ne, both of whom have an originary-isomorphic relationship with flesh-and-blood women.)

A quasi-structuralist reading of the film would no doubt emphasise how crucial Jessica is to the narrative: she mediates between the "real" world of filmed humans and the "artificial" world of Toons, being at once human and Toon. Moreover, she can be a legitimate object of desire for humans insofar as she is doubly inaccessible: both Toon *and* married to one. "Rabbit" becomes at once proper noun, married name, and patronym – and absolutely improper insofar as it derives from something that's neither really real nor really a rabbit. And because Jessica is married to such a hysterical, clearly "feminized" cartoon rabbit, it's just as "clear" that her relationship with Roger *cannot* be a sexual one. "He makes me laugh," she finally explains to Eddie (no doubt giving the audience another chance to dream of impossible cartoon sex).<sup>16</sup>

Such digitally-created characters suggest that we may be moving closer to an age where we may indeed interact with virtual characters in a culturally-acceptable form of "daylight hallucination." For while we are expected to be polite to (an underpaid guy dressed as) Bugs Bunny when we encounter him in Warner Bros Movie World, we are not yet prepared to psychosocially assimilate holographic

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versions going door-to-door (first deployed, no doubt, in the services of marketing). Spokespeople for the "imagineering" industry tell us that it is only a matter of time before the avatars found in video games and contemporary cinema step out of the screen and into what we now simply refer to as RL (Real Life). In which case, ToonTown will indeed be a place where the animate and the animated rub shoulders in a strange kind of ontological co-existence.<sup>17</sup>

As usual, science fiction has anticipated just such a scenario. In William Gibson's 1996 novel *Idoru*, the human protagonist, Laney, blushes when he finally finds himself face-to-face with the virtual pop star Rei Toei, whose bodily presence is in fact projected by a sophisticated hologram device: "He looked into her eyes. What sort of computing power did it take to create something like this, something that looked back at you?"<sup>18</sup> The fact that Rei's gaze prompts a flush to his cheeks suggests that she is not simply a hallucination; but that some kind of unprecedented intersubjective encounter is taking place – despite the humanistic logic which would affirm that this is not possible.

Moreover, today's digital technologies are allowing increasingly believable on-screen interactivity between advanced "Toons" and humans; something the overworked, hand-painting animators of *Roger Rabbit* could only dream about. The CGI character Gollum in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002) is one such generation of Idoru-esque credibility, despite being more convincing in close-up than when placed beside human actors – and, in close-up, perhaps more convincing than many of the humans themselves. Unfortunately, there is no opportunity here to further explore the link between this coded virtual creature and the claymation Golem of Jewish legend (especially as treated by Derrida). However, it is worth mentioning that the genesis of the biological and the digital are not so different as they may initially appear, since the animators of *Shrek* tell us that one small glitch in the code can lead to a strange "explosion" of the molar character, as happens with DNA glitches during the cloning process. Does this point to a deeper connection between digital information and biological information? And if so, what does this analogous relationship tell us about the process of emergence, or life, or intelligence?

Thus while we have strayed a little from the realm of rabbits, we are still close to the elusive line which separates the virtual from the actual, and the subject from the object, since both Bob Hoskins and the viewer experience the same uncanny connection as Laney and the *Idoru*, when face-to-face with Jessica Rabbit.<sup>19</sup>

But we have yet to address two of the most influential texts on invisible rabbits: John Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men*, and Henry Koster's 1950 film *Harvey*.

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In the former, we can see the treatment of themes already explored in our analysis. The large simpleton Lennie Small is forced to hit the road with his smarter side-kick George, after refusing to let go of a little girl's red dress, and being subsequently chased out of town. (That is, after the girl "rabbits in an' tells the law she been raped.")<sup>20</sup> The book is at pains to make clear, however, that Lennie has the intellect and spirit of a child, and therefore this attraction had little to do with a predatory instinct, but is rather the expression of his innocent desire to stroke pretty things, on a purely sensual level. Nevertheless, this desire seems to have a habit of spiralling out of control, since he accidentally kills a puppy with his crude attentions: a prelude to doing the same with a young woman simply called "Curly's wife" (described as "jail bait," despite being old enough to be married).

This rather tragic canonical tale is perhaps most famous for the now popular refrain: "tell me 'bout the rabbits." This phrase, itself following the plague vector of bunny rabbits around the world, was promoted by Robin Williams during his early career as a stand-up comic; and has since become something of a catchphrase to be used whenever someone needs solace or motivation. For this is, of course, how the phrase is used in the book. George is forever being prompted by Lennie to *tell him 'bout the rabbits*, in order to take his mind away from the brutal, menial, vagabond life which has befallen them. His friend George uses the image of a peaceful life, tending rabbits, to soothe the simple fellow to sleep, only to threaten its withdrawal to make him behave. Thus the image of rabbits – their virtual presence in Lennie's life, as it were – functions like a carrot dangling in front of a donkey; goading him forward, and keeping him on course.

Lennie's monomania is often exasperating to the man whose voice has the power to constantly evoke these rabbits into life: "The hell with the rabbits. That's all you ever can remember is them rabbits."<sup>21</sup> As Lennie drifts into sleep, his imagination paints the scene in hallucinatory shades: "Let's have different color rabbits, George." To which the latter replies, "Sure we will .. Red and blue and green rabbits, Lennie. Millions of 'em."<sup>22</sup> However, when George decides to threaten the rabbits with premature extinction, Lennie becomes defensive, stating the counter-threat that he "can jus' as well go away ... an' live in a cave."<sup>23</sup> (An interesting choice of retreat, given the Platonic genealogy of distraction.)

Steinbeck is well aware that these rabbits serve a virtual function for Lennie; to the extent that he prompts this character to threaten any "future cats which might dare to disturb the future rabbits."<sup>24</sup> The object, in this case, constitutes one of those "incalculables" that Heidegger refers to in his "Age of the World Picture" – immaterial, unquantifiable phenomena which, in contrast to Plato's cave, casts an *invisible* shadow over the world. According to the argument of this same treatise, Lennie is trapped within the representational limits of the world-picture, for

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where a Hellenic subject awaits the coming-to-presence within *fantasia*, the modern man "as representing subject ... 'fantasizes,' i.e., he moves in *imaginatio*, in that his representing imagines, pictures forth, whatever is, as the objective, into the world as picture."<sup>25</sup> And so, Lennie is not the only person who navigates the world through a visualization of the future (a visualization which in facts contributes to the *construction* of any such future; much like the vessel-vectors in *Donnie Darko*). George and another character, Candy, both buy into the fantasy of freedom, private land and unalienated labour: Lennie just makes it more obvious by constantly vocalizing the utopia ahead of him.<sup>26</sup>

The stress of unintentional murder, and the swift retribution that is bound to follow, provokes a breakdown in Lennie's mind, so that these virtual rabbits combine into one megabunny, which leaps out of his head and into the world. At first this vision looks uncannily like his stern Aunt Clara, but then she soon morphs back into a gigantic rabbit which happens to speak in Lennie's own voice: "Tend rabbits," it says scornfully. "You crazy bastard. You ain't fit to lick the boots of no rabbit. You'd forget 'em and let 'em go hungry. That's what you'd do."<sup>27</sup> As with *Donnie Darko*, the central fear seems to be loneliness and abandonment, for the rabbit taunts him with the mantra: "He gonna leave you, ya crazy bastard. He gonna leave ya all alone" – meaning, of course, his only friend George. When the latter finally finds him, a few minutes ahead of a lynch-mob, the rabbit scuttles back into Lennie's brain, only to be blown to smithereens in an act of tragic compassion. Again, as with *Donnie Darko*, the disturbing hallucinations are only "cured" through death. Hardly the message we usually associate with cute, cuddly bunnies.

## 5. Nobody Here But Us Rabbits

*Dr. Sanderson: "Trauma ... It means shock. There's nothing unusual about it. There's the birth trauma – the shock of being born." Elwood P. Dowd: "That's the one we never get over."*

HENRY KOSTER'S *HARVEY*

Psychoanalysis plays a large role in *Harvey*, an increasingly forgotten film adapted from the Pulitzer Prize winning play by Mary Chase. The protagonist, Elwood P. Dowd (James Stewart) continuously disturbs his family and the town in general by insisting on always introducing his good friend Harvey. The disturbing aspect concerns the fact that Harvey is a 6 foot 3 inch white rabbit, which nobody else can see. Elwood's aged sister Veta is fed up with the resulting social stigma, and

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decides to commit him to a sanitarium, whereupon – in the lingo of the business – “hijinx ensue.”

Veta makes the mistake of admitting in her exasperation to the resident psychiatrist that every once in a while, she even sees this rabbit herself. The psychiatrist, Dr. Sanderson, realizes that this woman is somewhat “jumpy” and – after confirming a bout of depression following the death of her mother – commits her instead; at least until the mix-up is straightened out. As the story unfolds, however, the viewer is given certain clues as to the actual existence of Harvey, beginning with the discovery of a hat with two holes cut in the crown (presumably for rabbit ears to fit through). The second clue comes when the sanitarium’s strongman, Mr. Wilson, turns to the encyclopaedia to look up the unfamiliar word “pooka.” He reads aloud, for the benefit of the viewer:

“Pooka ... from old Celtic mythology. A faery spirit in animal form – always very large. The pooka appears here and there, now and then, to this one and that one. A benign but mischievous creature. Very fond of rumpots, crackpots, and how are you Mr. Wilson?”

Mr. Wilson pauses in surprise, before repeating: “How are you Mr. Wilson? *Who in the Encyclopedia wants to know?*”

Another key scene occurs when the head of the sanitarium, Dr. Chumley, goes to Veta’s house in order to both smooth-out the potentially litigious confusion, and to bring Elwood back to the clinic for treatment. A painting on the wall, recently put in pride of place by its subject, depicts Elwood with Harvey himself, the only visual representation afforded the viewer of the pooka-rabbit.<sup>28</sup> Before noticing the actual painting, Veta gives Dr. Chumley a lecture on art in the age of mechanical reproduction:

“I took a class last winter. I learned the difference between a fine oil painting and a mechanical thing, like a photograph. The photograph shows only the reality. The painting shows not only the reality, but the dream behind it. It’s our dreams, doctor, that carry us on – they separate us from the beasts. I wouldn’t want to go on living if I thought it was all just eating and sleeping and taking my clothes off ... I mean putting them on.”

In contrast to his sister, Elwood (“the screwball with the rabbit”) seems to have discovered the secret of living in a world largely comprised of the banal, the quotidian and the disenchanting. Despite the fact that his best friend is a giant invisible rabbit, and drinks martinis almost constantly, Elwood seems to be one of the

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most down-to-earth people in town. Unlike the other characters, driven by social vanities and other "flyspecks" of daily distraction, Elwood harbours no prejudice or discrimination between people, places and situations. Straddling the line between saint and sociopath, he seems to have no recognition of class and its importance, despite his wealth, so that hardly a scene goes by without him handing out his card to taxi drivers, nurses, jailbirds, gatekeepers, etc. What's more, this isn't a business card, but simply a calling card: a token of the willingness to expose oneself to another human being, prior to any judgment on social purpose or personal compatibility.

And yet, despite the increasing number of clues as to Harvey's actual existence – to which the viewer, by the end of the film, is not left in any doubt – Elwood is re-committed to the sanitarium in order to have an injection designed to cure his "third degree hallucinations."<sup>29</sup> This despite the fact that the head of the facility, Dr. Chumley, has seen the rabbit, and is convinced of its supernatural powers. The film thus emphasizes the limitations – indeed the dangers – of the scientific perspective on paranormal phenomena; habitually dragging it within the diagnostic realm of mental health, and the attendant modes of curing and containing "madness."<sup>30</sup> (A process famously described and denounced by Foucault.) And so, only minutes before rolling up his sleeve to receive the prescribed injection, Elwood is talking privately to Dr. Chumley about the magical powers of Harvey, subtextually reinforcing the film's critique of the impoverished system of psychoanalysis, which seeks to rationally explain the supernatural, the unexplained, the uncanny and the bizarre.

One of Harvey's gifts, anticipating the rabbit in *Donnie Darko*, is prophecy, for he can reliably predict the future. Another, even more impressive power, is the capacity to create a *fermata* by arresting the flow of time:

Elwood: "Did I tell you he could stop clocks?"

Dr. Chumley: "To what purpose?"

Elwood: "Well ... You can go anywhere you like, with anyone you like, and stay as long as you like, and when you get back, not one minute will have ticked by ... You see, science has overcome time and space,<sup>31</sup> but Harvey has not only overcome time and space, but any objections."

The key phrase here – "any objections" – is Hayes Code language for the social sanction of erotic fantasies (of which the good Dr. Chumley happily confesses).<sup>32</sup> The elusive object of Harvey himself thus authorizes the libidinal abandon that psychoanalysis sets up as both its object and objective (through socially-acceptable sublimation, etc.).

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Elwood, however, perhaps liberated in a different direction by the *pooka*, has reached an almost Nietzschean affirmation of things the way they are, and is free from the fantasies which only encourage melancholy, and its attendant sense of lack. When Elwood is earlier encouraged to "face reality," he says that: "I wrestled reality for thirty-five years, doctor, and I'm happy to say that I finally won out over it." The implicit meaning here refers to social reality, since Elwood is anything but delusional, embracing the world exactly as it appears, rather than racing towards a dream-goal dangling in the future like a carrot on the end of a stick. And in this sense, he practically passes Nietzsche's test of the eternal return: "I'd almost be willing to live my life again."

Stepping outside the logic of the script for a moment, we can see how the figure of an extra-dimensional rabbit overlaps with all the other texts covered so far. As with *Donnie Darko*, the rabbit is considered by most people to be a hallucination, but in fact turns out to be an ontological messenger, intimately connected to the quantum mechanics of time. As with *Of Mice and Men*, the rabbit functions as the totem for a "simpleton" – although in *Harvey* this familiar underlines the importance of the present, rather than the (false) promise of the future. (Another significant difference is that Elwood is a very smart simpleton.) As with *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Matrix*, one need only follow the white rabbit to an alternative take on your own universe, and its associated assumptions.<sup>33</sup>

Some significant connections can also be traced to *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*<sup>34</sup> In a taped interview with James Stewart in 1990, included on the video version, he admits that: "I have a special admiration and love for that big white rabbit ... He became a very close friend of mine. You can see it in the performance ... All of us, you can see all of us sort of accept the existence of this rabbit." Despite the qualifier "sort of," Stewart talks in terms similar to those who worked on *Roger Rabbit*, bearing witness to the phenomenon where a virtual object has actual effects – whether you choose to "believe" in it or not. And although Stewart's ability to focus on dead space does not rival Hoskins', certain paraphernalia associated with the production and the promotion of the film attest to the *presence* of Harvey as a pseudo-ontological being. One photographic still, for instance, behind the scenes, includes a cast member's folding-chair with the name Harvey. (Obviously we have no idea if he is sitting in the chair or not.) Similarly, the original poster for the film shows James Stewart sitting to one side, dominated by the shadow of the rabbit.

Without wishing to popularize Heidegger's rather more weighty concepts into the ether, this shadow is another instance of the "incalculable" introduced above:

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Everyday opinion sees in the shadow only the lack of light, if not light's complete denial. In truth, however, the shadow is a manifest, though impenetrable, testimony to the concealed emitting of light. In keeping with this concept of shadow, we experience the incalculable as that which, withdrawn from representation, is nevertheless manifest in whatever is, pointing to Being, which remains concealed.<sup>35</sup>

The *Da-sein* (being-there) of Harvey – according to this positive gloss on shadows – is to be simultaneously there and not-there, according to the criteria of Being applied by humans. So while the thought of dying alone terrifies both Donnie Darko and Lennie Small, Elwood P. Dowd is more strictly "philosophical" about the being-toward-death which necessarily follows the birth trauma.

All of which brings us to the sardonic, throw-away line offered by Elwood's bartender, in answer to the question posed by Dr. Sanderson while anxiously looking for his escaped would-be-patient. "Is he alone?" asks the doctor, gesturing to Elwood sitting in a booth with two martinis. "Well," replies the bartender, "there are two schools of thought on that."

## 6. The Dubious Hospitality of the Shining Wire

*Rabbits ... are like human beings in many ways. One of these is certainly their staunch ability to withstand disaster and to let the stream of their life carry them along, past reaches of terror and loss. They have a certain quality which it would not be accurate to describe as callousness or indifference. It is, rather, a blessedly circumscribed imagination and an intuitive feeling that Life is Now.*

RICHARD ADAMS, *WATERSHIP DOWN*<sup>36</sup>

**Hlessi** – *A rabbit living above ground, without a regular hole or warren. A wandering rabbit, living in the open. (Plural, hlessil.)*

"LAPINE GLOSSARY," IN *WATERSHIP DOWN*<sup>37</sup>

Richard Adams' enormously popular 1970's novel, *Watership Down*, informs us that: "It is true that young rabbits are great migrants and capable of journeying for miles, but they do not take to it readily."<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, a group of bunny rabbits abandon the relative safety of their warren to become *hlessil* in search of a "high, dry place," prompted by the Aeschylan visions of horror, suffered by the rabbit Fiver. (Cassandra's visions are quoted in the first epigraph, providing a high-

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culture precedent for Fiver's apocalyptic prophecy, "... it's coming – it's coming. Oh, Hazel, look! The field! It's covered with blood!"<sup>39</sup>). The journey and events that follow could be interpreted as an allegory of diaspora and exodus in general, but things are not as easily decoded into didactic types, as they are in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, for instance.

The narrative does, however, resonate with the dilemma of the deracinated as figured through bunny rabbits (especially "outskirter" bunny rabbits, "thin-looking six-month-ers, with the strained, wary look of those who are only too well used to the thin end of the stick"<sup>40</sup>). Speaking of the mass movement of migrating animals, the narrator notes:

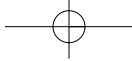
anyone seeing this has seen at work the current that flows (among creatures who think of themselves primarily as part of a group and only secondarily, if at all, as individuals) to fuse them together and impel them into action without conscious thought or will: has seen at work the angel which drove the First Crusade into Antioch and drives the lemmings into the sea.<sup>41</sup>

What the book calls (in a phrase which would strike fear into the heart of any farmer) "that great, indestructible flood of Rabbitry,"<sup>42</sup> flows across the countryside and toward new and foreign warren systems. In a key Derridean chapter, entitled "Hospitality," the wandering rabbits are suspicious of the welcome that receives them, along with the pronounced lack of suspicion.

The host rabbits offer them food, shelter and entertainment, despite the protagonists' insistence that, "After all, you might be afraid that we were coming to take your does or turn you out of your holes."<sup>43</sup> The hosts do not seem to be prone to paranoia concerning the motives of visiting strangers, so that: "All over the burrow, both the newcomers and those who were at home were accustoming themselves to each other in their own way and their own time; getting to know what the strangers smelled like, how they moved, how they breathed, how they scratched, the feel of their rhythms and pulses."<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a more naively poetic description of Levinasian deference to the Other, and Derridean hospitality, than the following:

[and] so this gathering of rabbits in the dark, beginning with hesitant approaches, silences, pauses, movements, crouchings side by side and all manner of tentative appraisals, slowly moved, like a hemisphere of the world into summer, to a warmer, brighter region of mutual liking and approval, until all felt sure that they had nothing to fear.<sup>45</sup>



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But as is often the case, a perceived utopia disguises more sinister designs. The visiting rabbits soon realize that a shining wire is subtracting their fellows one by one, until Hazel feels sure in announcing: "That warren's nothing but a death hole! The whole place is one foul elil's larder! It's snared – everywhere, everyday!"<sup>46</sup> The local bunny rabbits remain unaware of the horror at the heart of their lives, since they themselves have adopted the strategy at the heart of our study, namely, "look at the bunny." (Although, in this case it means not looking at the bunny – especially the disappearing bunnies). Hazel explains to his companions that the locals are distracted by "songs" and "shapes on the walls" which "passed the time and enabled them to tell themselves that they were splendid fellows, the very flower of Rabbitry."<sup>47</sup>

Hazel continues:

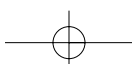
And since they could not bear the truth, these singers, who might in some other place have been wise, were squeezed under the terrible weight of the warren's secret until they gulped out fine folly – about dignity and acquiescence, and anything else that could make believe that the rabbit loved the shining wire. But one strict rule they had; oh yes, the strictest. No one must ever ask where another rabbit was and anyone who asked "Where?" – except in a song or a poem – must be silenced. To say "Where?" was bad enough, but to speak openly of the wires – that was intolerable. For that they would scratch and kill.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, the realization that the shining wire may itself constitute both the decoy and the object of destruction, simultaneously denied and executed, is one we would do well ourselves to learn in the age of hyper-cynical media manipulation. (That is, in an age in which Nike can use the phrase "100% slave-labor" as an official ad campaign, and the Pentagon can use the daily events of war to obscure the *motivation* of war in the first place.)

In other words, we have become so entranced by these kind of objects that their power to fascinate serves to camouflage their (usually destructive) purpose. That is, we are so amused that the Trojan Horse has the words "Trojan Horse" written across its side in bold, day-glo colours, that we let it in anyway (just to share the joke with others).

Which brings us almost full circle.

Since by now, we should not be surprised that *Watership Down* finishes with an epilogue introduced by Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*: "He was part of my dream, of course – but then I was part of his dream too." This feedback loop between the spectacle and the spectator, the bunny rabbit and the human, the



being and the yet-to-be, is the enigma of the age – acting like a carrot-on-a-stick for those who still believe there are lessons to be drawn from a media-environment seemingly far more concerned with producing noise than signal.

And yet, perhaps it is in the white noise (or the "white blindness," as Adams would put it), that we can conceive afresh the link between the cave and the looking-glass, via the white rabbit-hole.

## 7. Avatars of Otherness

*Ought I to say: 'A Rabbit may look like a duck'? Would it be conceivable that someone who knows rabbits but not ducks should say: 'I can see the drawing as a rabbit and also in another way, although I have no word for the second aspect'? Later he gets to know ducks and says: 'That's what I saw the drawing at that time!' – Why is that not possible?*

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN<sup>49</sup>

Joseph Jastrow's duck-rabbit image has since been made famous by Wittgenstein, who treated this visual conundrum more in the mode of early cognitive theory than the deconstructionist standby of "undecidability." Essentially, Wittgenstein ponders the process behind the perception of the image as either a duck or a rabbit – perhaps considered one and then the other, but never both simultaneously. Has the image changed, he asks, or has our attitude toward the image changed? Or has only our description of the image changed? Moreover, on what basis do we distinguish these allegedly autonomous processes?

What Wittgenstein calls "aspect-regarding" or "continuous aspect-perception" suggests that we see "the world" through a grid of pre-formed grid of cultural and personal expectations, assumptions, memories, and knowledges: meaning, we already see something *as some thing...* which is (to varying degrees) familiar. This particular spin on Husserl's notion of "structuring" obviously has profound political implications, for we tend to project our own patterns and meanings onto the things we see. So while the question of whether an image is a duck or a rabbit may seem purely hypothetical, the question of whether a man wearing a turban is a Sikh or a Moslem, a terrorist or a freedom-fighter, an enemy or an ally, is one of vital quotidian importance. This constitutive cultural-political aspect of phenomenological interpretation links the question of hallucinated rabbits directly to those "avatars of otherness" which have been persistently evoked by politicians and the media to mobilize certain rhetorics of domination and control. Moreover, this process has a viral, meme-like infection rate.<sup>50</sup>



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Before enemies are flesh-and-blood targets<sup>51</sup>, they are virtual figures who stalk the imagination as much as the world itself. (As the old Cold War posters warned: "Are there Reds under the bed?") Thus, during the so-called "fall of Baghdad," we hear an American citizen proudly stating that: "If they strike us, we strike them." The *they* in this case is not so much the abstract "they" of Heidegger or Sartre, but the stigmatized, explicitly delineated, *they* of political paranoia. Structurally, it follows a hallucinatory logic, which like *Donnie Darko* and *Of Mice and Men* can only end in the expedition of death.

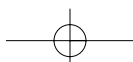
And so whatever answer we give to the question, "why rabbits?" – whether it be a simple case of literary tradition (Lewis Carroll–John Steinbeck) cross-breeding with folklorish symbolization ("breeding like rabbits"–Bugs Bunny) – it is still a matter of responding to a decoy. Presuming that the twenty-first century will continue to unfurl itself under the signs of both Plato's cave and Alice's wonderland, then "the object of fear" will always already be a virtual one: and yet no less dangerous for that.

As cultural critic Mark Dery reminds us:

a P.R. firm, Hill & Knowlton ... orchestrated the congressional testimony of the distraught young Kuwaiti woman whose horror stories about babies ripped from incubators and left "on the cold floor to die" by Iraqi soldiers was highly effective in mobilizing public support for the [first Gulf] war. Her testimony was never substantiated, and her identity – she was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the U.S. – was concealed, but why nigger over details? "Formulated like a World War II movie, the Gulf War even ended like a World War II movie," wrote Neal Gabler, "with the troops marching triumphantly down Broadway or Main Street, bathed in the gratitude of their fellow Americans while the final credits rolled." (*Culture Jamming*)

What is now referred to in some circles as the "military-industrial-entertainment complex" spends a great deal of its energy on producing spectacular bunnies for the citizen-consumer to become entranced by (another metaphor for Chomsky's "manufacturing consent").<sup>52</sup> As touched upon above, the difference from the distraction model offered thus far in our account, is that the *inoculation itself* has now become the distraction as well. The operation and the decoy have fused in the millennial media, so that the *coverage* of war effectively does just that – it covers and conceals the events "on the ground" as well as "behind closed doors."<sup>53</sup>

In the case of the Second Gulf War in March and April 2003, the alibi for invading Iraq was the disavowed presence of weapons of mass destruction. The fact that few if any were actually unearthed afterwards did nothing to hinder the



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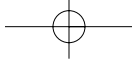
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rhetoric coming from the Pentagon, The White House and Number 10, Downing Street. Mimicking the representational logic of cognitive scientists, the Anglo-American Easter bunny found what it had simply put there in the first place (both epistemologically and historically speaking). One would have as much chance convincing that smug trickster-figure Bugs Bunny himself of desisting his "wascally" ways as persuading the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld-Blair hydra to desist from implementing the frightening recommendations of the Project for the New American Century. ("What's up doc?" ask the administrators, deaf to advice from academics who do not already speak the language of world-historical nihilism.)

One of the more disturbing images broadcast on news channels during the Second Gulf War was not the gruesome footage of murdered and injured Iraqi civilians, but the seemingly playful scenes of an American GI, standing on a stationary tank, and introducing a gathering of Iraqi children to the game of Hoky Poky.<sup>54</sup> One initial reaction to this surreal lull in battle is to make comparisons with the infamous football match between the English and the German army in the First World War. However, this would be to misread the general pattern of events. The remarkable fact of the latter case was the genuine playful spirit which can emerge at liminal moments such as Christmas time, affording a brief break in the relentless momentum of killing and hatred. The former, however, is more cynical, even if it is not experienced as such by any of the participants.

A dancing GI is a clear case of "look at the bunny," in a kind of punishing Energizer logic of endurance inflicted on the soldiers by Rumsfeld and other engineers of the war. In twenty-first century conflict, civilians are a major element in the battle plan, and must be "distracted" from options such as resistance, protest and subterfuge by things like food aid, water, promises, strange Western summer camp games, and other modes of symbolic support. And thus the warm glow which should accompany a GI dancing with a group of Iraqi children (given the alternatives), is actually just as chilling, given the Platonic economy in which it is involved. For all we know, the kids are being distracted from the fact that their parents are being rounded up for brutal interrogation, or worse. Thus the Hellenic concern with shadows merges with the Roman priority of bread-and-circuses, in a millennial empire that has mastered philosophical and political discourse. (Or at least recognized the artificial basis for any border between the two.) A radical politics therefore begins by asking who is the bunny? What brand of battery powers the bunny's frenetic drumming? Who owns that brand, and what are its other interests? Who benefits most from the operational procedures involving doctor, parent, child, syringe, and finger puppet? And – most sinister of all – what if the bunny is not only a decoy, but the object itself?



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Such a complex of questions exposes the fundamental violence supporting the ethical edifice of who has the power to acknowledge, and who is (or is not) acknowledged. These are the stakes of relationality itself – the politically loaded premise of interactivity (a preferable term to "intersubjectivity," given this latter term's prejudice toward the subject). Thus, to give only one of a multitude of examples, the decision to refuse refugees the right of entry in to Australia lies on the same continuum as the instinct to deny that James Stewart has a large invisible rabbit for a friend. It is an expression of certain assumptions regarding ontological status; as well as the sovereign power of bequeathing or denying such status. Looking at the bunny (and then away from the bunny, and then back again), affords a glimpse of the complex processes assembled and operated by institutions which manufacture and maintain the precious right to be.

That is, to be *before* having to be any *thing* in particular.

