

Digital to Analogue

Alastair Reynolds

Alastair Reynolds is that rarity which most people outside the field assume to be a cliché: a scientist who writes SF. Specifically, he has a Ph.D. in astronomy, and he works for the European Space Agency in Holland. One of the youngest of the new wave of British writers, he's published three stories so far, all in Interzone. 'Digital to Analogue' contains, Reynolds tells us, 'a number of ideas which were amplified after reading Simon Reynolds's (no relation) collection of essays in Blissed Out (Serpent's Tail, 1991), in particular, the chapter on Acid House. I also plundered Paul Davies's book The Cosmic Blueprint (Unwin, 1989) for the references to entrainment.'

Maybe it's no surprise that 'Digital to Analogue' is hard SF. But it is hard SF radicalised by close attention to pop cultural iconography and the new tribal ethos of Acid House nightclubbing. Not to mention one of the neatest paranoid conspiracy theories we've come across in a long time. Just remember, the message is in the bleep . . .

* * * *

I

left the Drome at 3.00 a.m., with Belgian house on indefinite replay in my brain. I was unaware that I was being followed. You can't trust yourself at that hour, not when your nervous system wants to shut down for the night's deepest phase of sleep. If we're awake, it's then that we make the stupidest errors, dreaming that our actions won't have any outcome in the light of dawn. And, sometimes, a few pills assist the process.

I was more than usually pissed, but had avoided anything else for most of the night. Then she'd shown up: the girl in the Boulevard Citizens T-shirt, some Scottish white-soul band, offering E from a hip pouch. I'd hesitated, my head swirling already, then acquiesced. We did the deal amid the strobe-storm of sweating revellers and the eardrum-lancing rhythms.

'I'll be dead to the world in a few hours,' I said, slipping the tabs in my pocket.

'Big deal,' she said. 'Me, I just take a sicky. Pick up the 'phone, tell a few lies, kick back and snooze.'

'Great if your phone works,' I said. 'Thing is, I'm a telephone engineer; work for BT. So it's me you should thank next time you call in sick. Probably be eavesdropping from some hole in the ground somewhere.'

I felt a pressure on my shoulder, turned round to see one of my friends from the office. Sloshing Grolsch everywhere, he began to croon 'Wichita Lineman', drunkenly out of tune.

I winced. 'More like driving the road to Whitley Bay, searching in the fog for another bloody vandalised kiosk.'

Boulevard Citizen looked at us dubiously, then disappeared into the dance-floor, the DJ segueing into a fresh track laid down on a scuffling foundation that had JB embossed in every one of its bpm. I dropped a tab, getting into the music. Suddenly I remembered something I had to convey to my friend. 'Hey,' I shouted, throaty over the noise. 'I heard James Brown's got two people, full time, just to spot samples on other records, then squeeze the artists for royalties!'

'Two people?' he said, then laughed, punching a fist in the air. 'Good God! Two people! Full time! *Good God!*'

'I thought it showed how endemic the sampling thing's become,' I said, aware my voice wouldn't appreciate such discourse in the morning, also that I'd reached a phase of my own drunkenness cycle characterised by extreme humourlessness. 'I mean, just listen to this stuff . . . this is probably one hundred per cent recycled sound, friend.'

'Then it's very nineties, isn't it,' he said, shrugging. 'Very Green. Thought we were all for recycling these days. Cars, paper, bottles . . . why the hell not music?' Then I skipped a few frames and my friend was looking at his watch. 'Well, guess we're going to split soon. Sorry you're not on our taxi route, mate.'

'Yeah, I'm on shanks's tonight.' I shrugged, the E affecting my bonhomie. In any case, I wanted to stay for a few more numbers, now I was clicking into the Drome's vibe. Pink smoke was flooding the floor, blue lasers tracking from the ceiling rig, and I was getting righteously *into it*. A track I liked came up, one of those blink-and-you've-missed-it ephemeral club hits that attains culthood, graduates to being a classic, gets heavily sampled, becomes slightly jaded, becomes frankly pass6, winds up a

dusty artifact of late twentieth-century pop culture, all within a month or two. A bit of social commentary this, as well: 'A Killer is Stalking Clubland'. And if you think *that's* in questionable taste, there was even a reference to someone's eyelids being stapled open.

Come 3.00 a.m., I decided I'd better hike if I wanted to make it to work. Had to get my coat, so I re-entered the melee, semi-dancing, pushing toward a neon sign at the club's other side, through a veil of perfumed smoke. I was halfway when I saw the red laser stabbing through the cloud. A shrouded figure was aiming a gun at me, eclipsed in waves by silhouetted bodies, face blocked by shadows and a pair of sunglasses, and framed by what looked like aviation phones, with a mike wrapping around the front.

Weirdos everywhere. Why not just *bliss out*, instead of getting on everyone's tits? Yeah, time to leave, no doubt there.

I'd gotten my coat quicker than usual, maybe because the club would stagger on for another hour or so. Outside I met a few friends who'd spent the intervening time in an all-night kebab shop. The taxi-rank was on my walk home so I loitered with them, up the rubbish-strewn streets, kicking fast-food containers, crushed tins of Red Stripe, ticket stubs. A few desultory revellers were still ambling around, trying, to find somewhere open, dossers hanging outside the old pisser in the Bigg Market that looked like an Edwardian UFO, solitary cop cars kerb-crawling; cherry-lights reflected in puddles of urine. Overhead, against the winter stars, a helicopter circled predatorily, hawking the streets below, doubtless searching for stolen motors that would finish up embedded in shopfronts come morning. No wonder none of us brought cars. At the taxi-rank we split, they to their houses in Byker, me to my flat in Fenham. I didn't have far to go, really. But it's not the distance that counts, in the end.

I hiked up my hood, drowning out the plaintive car-alarms and the sirens, Walkman playing. It was a slimline job, barely larger than the tape, burnished silver like a very flash cigarette case. The C90 was a compilation I'd made up of techno and bleep stuff, vinyl picked up from Oldham Road in Manchester, plus chart house grooves and a little main-stream electro-soul, chanteuse-fronted, allegedly direct from the smokiest Berlin bars. Ultra-pure digital sounds, hypnotic synth lines, speedily distorted vocals. It was the music they played at the Drome, wall-to-wall, no dicking about, mind-pummelling noise, repetitive as Tibetan mantras, as fast as Bhangra. Allied to the Drome's effects, intense light projected through a rotating filter wheel of tinted, immiscible fluids . . . like a kaleidoscope *melting* before your eyes, the sound washing over like a test-signal for your

sozzled brain. I'd been into it for a year or two now, and finding that the scene was established in Newcastle made up for the wrench I'd felt leaving the north-west, where the nexus of the whole thing had originated. My BT job was a piece of shit; it was the music, the club scene that I lived for. What I didn't know, as I popped the last of the E, was that it was the music that had drawn the Househunter to me.

I'd been targeted in the Drome, it seemed, and when I left with my friends, I'd been followed. Discreetly; up town, lurking in the sidestreets, until I left the pack. Shrewd, as if my walk home had been half expected. And because of the Walkman, I didn't hear the footsteps (supposing any were to be heard), as I walked around the civic boating lake.

It came suddenly; carotid-squeezing pressure around my neck. The hood was ripped from my clothes, earplugs seized, the whole ensemble of the Walkman hurled into the moon-streaked water. There was never any doubt in my mind that I'd been selected as a victim, not in that instant. I knew it was the Househunter's arm around me. And then something went through my head - a thought I'd probably shared now with a dozen others, our one instance of solidarity. I realised that all the assumptions had been wrong. Oh boy, they'd got it *badly* wrong. They weren't going to catch this baby in a hurry. Not if they kept on thinking -

I felt something damp smother my whole face, then, maybe a microsecond after the sensation of wetness, the dizzy sensation of etherisation. The last thing I heard was her saying, very calmly: 'Trust me, please. I'm a doctor.'

* * * *

I remember coming to, briefly, in the back of a vehicle. For a blissed-out moment I didn't remember what had happened, one of those waking fugues where nothing connects, nothing matters. Eyes washed by the yellow of sodium lamps, behind grilled glass, the numbing vibration of the ride transmitted through a softness beneath me. I couldn't make out the interior too well. Then it all rammed home, as I heard her speaking, behind what must have been a thin partition separating the back of the van from the driver's compartment. I struggled to move, found I couldn't. For a while it wasn't clear whether this was a result of constraints, or whether the right signals just weren't getting to my limbs. I was stretchered, braced so that it didn't roll around. My mouth was obstructed. Had she gagged me, or was I sucking on a breathing tube?

'En route from pick-up point,' she said. 'Subject has regained

apparent consciousness. Brief description: outward physiology normal on first inspection; WM, twenties, slim build, height five eight or nine, cropped hair, no facial distinguishing marks. No evidence for intravenous drug use . . . presence of other intoxicants, hallucinogens or mood-alterers not ruled out at this stage. Interestingly, the subject's spectacles contained flat lenses - of cosmetic value alone. The subject's auditory stimulant was neutralised during apprehension. Prognosis is satisfactory; ETA fifteen minutes, over.'

The words careered through my brain in a jumble, leaving me to marshal them. What was happening? Where was I? Why did I really not *care* all that much?

I allowed myself to slump, mentally, letting the restful rhythm of the gliding sodiums caress my eyelids. How easy it was to sleep, despite all that I knew!

* * * *

The next recollection is an invasive howl ripping through my dreams. It seemed the loudest noise I'd ever heard, rising and falling on a dreamily slow *wah wah* oscillation. Then it got worse, and my skin began to prickle, before the sound reached an apex and the envelope of oscillation diminished, lower pitched, gut-churning bass components phasing in.

In the Blitz, my grandfather once told me, the Luftwaffe didn't bother tuning the engines of their bombers to pre-cisely the same revs. That way you could always tell a Heinkel from a Wellington, if you didn't know how they were *meant* to sound. There'd be a rising and falling signal, on top of the engine sound, as the spikes of the sound waves moved in and out of phase with one another, several times a second. And he'd move the outspread fingers of his hands across one another in illustration. He'd been an audio engineer, my granddad, for Piccadilly Radio, knew all sorts of arcana. I think it was he who made me go into electrical engineering, he that set me on course for my privacy-violating job for BT . . . though in fairness the old feller couldn't have known better.

I opened my eyes to a chipped surface of beige plaster. The tip of my nose was an inch or so from the wall; I was lying in the medical 'recovery' position on a soft surface. I tried moving; no joy. I was immobilised, either by weakness or restraint. Hands rolled me to my other side, so that I faced her. My mouth was free, no longer intubated or gagged. She was a pale ovoid, against a backdrop of olive green. From the angle of my gaze I couldn't see her face, just the blurred whiteness of her

waist.

Then it all clicked: *hospital surroundings*. That explained the shabby decor, the pervasive air of decrepitude. She was a nurse or ward attendant, wearing a white overcoat and a stethoscope. Behind her were green curtains, the kind they used to fence off patients during a bed-bath. I could hear the sound of medical equipment behind the curtain, birdlike bleeps and clicks. Hey, some sod was worse than me. Life was looking up. I couldn't move much, but that didn't mean a lot. Hell, I'd just been through a bad experience, right. I was probably suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. *In 1962, Vietnam seemed like just another foreign war . . .* Ha ha.

Then she spoke; the same voice I'd heard in the ambulance. 'Ah good,' she said. 'Awake. That's perfect. We'll be over and done before we know it. Just a few simple tests should be sufficient.'

I strained my neck to look up. Her white coat was loosely tied over a black T-shirt decorated with a half-familiar pattern, like a contour map of the lunar surface, etched in white. The stethoscope hung down over her chest. Her hair was raked back from her brow, tied in a utilitarian tail. Her lips were pallid, eyes masked by circular black sunglasses. A pair of phones framed her head, bulky black things. Aviation phones, a cable running to a belted powerpack. Noise-cancelling jobs, like helicopter pilots wore. I thought of the 'copter I'd seen that night, but no ... there couldn't be a connection, surely.

Strange accessories for a nurse, I thought. And then: a kind of out of head experience, a soft voice from afar, saying: *This is your rational mind speaking. You're in the deepest shit imaginable, but you won't admit it, not until that E's through with its business . . .* And I ignored it, eyes tracking over her coat (more like a scientist's than a doctor's coat, I decided), picking out streaked splatters of rust-red.

'Could I have a drink, please?'

She reached into a coat pocket, pulled out a tiny black thing the size of a box of cigarettes. Glanced at a wrist-watch.

'Log entry: time 05.30. Subject made first conditioned response a few seconds ago. Requested fluid. Hypothesis: residual mind-state must still co-ordinate behaviour compatible with normal dietary and physical requirements; in other words, subject's nutritional intake will fall into

stereotypical pattern. Conclude that request probably the expression of a genuine biological need. Although probably unnecessary in any case, will administer 250 ccs of glycolated barley-water intra-orally. Entry ends.' Click.

She cranked something under me, making the couch angle up. Then she touched a glass to my parched lips, and I drank. God, it was the best drink I'd ever tasted: sugary sweet and cool as nectar. Lucozade. Blanched out, towering above me, she looked angelic to my eyes, this beatific giver of nourishment to the sick.

'Let's get some air in here, shall we,' she said, without actually addressing me. She whisked back the curtain, revealing the rest of the room.

There comes a point, even in the deepest drug-induced para-reality, where sufficient data from the real world can build up and penetrate the fiction. *You're in the deepest shit imaginable*, that voice repeated. And I began, for the first time, to heed my own subconscious. There were no other patients in the 'ward'. The room was small, four, five metres along each damp-stained wall. They were covered with literally hundreds of ... but no, I'll come to *those* in a moment, after I've set the rest of the scene. High windows on one wall admitted wan shafts of dawnlight, falling in patches on the floor. There was a metal door, padlocked on the inside. The room's odour of urine and vomit reminded me of a multi-story carpark stairwell. There was the couch, two garden seats and a wooden table, an empty wheelchair, a tripod and anglepoise set-up holding a waiting camcorder. The rest of the room was crammed with expensive looking electronic equipment . . . racks of slim black synthesisers, embossed with familiar names: Casio, Korg, Roland, Yamaha, Hammond, Prophet. The whole stack wired to a table-load of MIDI monitors and PC keyboards, dove-grey shells, wrapped in a tangle of cables and optic fibres. There were crushed Irn Bru cans, Lucozade and Beck's bottles, tabloids, listings magazines, ring-bound folders, cassette and video cases, floppy disks and what looked like piles of twelve-inch white-label records. I looked closer: each sleeve had the words *Digital to Analogue* scrawled over it. I remembered that: one of those subsequently sampled club hits from about six months back. You heard parts of it on many new records.

The shelving held dozens of display devices with gridded screens, oscilloscopes or cardiogram machines, displaying different blippy patterns, like the contours on her T-shirt. I knew where I'd seen it now: taken from an album cover. And it wasn't some landscape at all, but the radio signal of a pulsar, a clock ticking in space. I couldn't recall who'd told me that, but it seemed bizarre at the time, an icon from the heart of science manifesting

itself in a million bedsits, wrapped around a piece of hallowed black vinyl. Like those Mandelbrot sets that started infesting album sleeves and vids, for a few months. As if science was the ultimate subculture, somehow, the stuff beneath the floorboards you don't want to know too much about. . .

Incidental detail: the table with the MIDI-stack also held something chunky and metallic, with a pistol-grip, shaped like a *Space: 1999* gun. An industrial stapler. This must be what they mean by a bad trip, ha ha.

Concerning the walls: I think the operative term here must be Shrine, in the sense that she'd pinned up dozens of monochrome photographs of me, taken during the last year of my life, some in the street, my distant figure outlined in red, others close-up in some club, my eyes blankly uncomprehending. Just like CIA target acquisition images. And more: complicated graphs and diagrams, scrawled over in felt-tip, fixed in laminated confusion on top of one another. Sonograms, sound-spectra, electrical circuit diagrams, tech-nical pieces about *entrainment*. . . Christ, where had I heard that before, and why did it honestly matter, now? And why did she have a map of the UK, webbed in dotted ley-lines?

I was beginning to sweat. Thinking maybe my subcon-scious had a point; maybe this was a little unusual for a hospital.

She was fiddling with my head. I realised that I was wired up to something, little electrodes around my temples. She was fixing them down after they'd worked loose. She'd fixed things to my chest as well, white disks trailing wires to a mound of humming machines. All I was wearing was a pair of white, grass-stained jeans.

Click with the dictaphone. 'Log entry, 05.45. Summary to date.' She coughed before continuing in her soft, educated Tyneside accent. 'My orders were to terminate the subject on sight, in view of the danger to the community at large. At 2.45 a.m. I attempted to zero the subject in the Drome. Termination was impossible without risk of substantial col-lateral damage to the uninfected. I followed the subject from the Drome, hoping to get a clear shot. At around 3.30, however, I decided to break protocol and bring in the subject for captive examination. If all goes well, I'll be finished in a matter of hours.' A studied pause. 'Our operational integrity will not have been compromised, I promise. While my methods may be my own, I'm fully aware of the conse-quences for urban panic should our cover be exposed.' She clicked off the recorder, fumbled in her pockets and lit a cigarette from a black carton inscribed with a skull and crossbones, dragging on it thoughtfully before restarting the tape. 'I took a series of EEG readings while the subject was under,' she said, fixing a fresh marker

in the little gripper of a pen-trace machine. There was a basket full of output, etched in wavering ink. The machine hummed into life, the pen gliding to and fro. 'Now I'm observing the subject's waking responses to a variety of stimuli.'

'Please don't hurt me ... I promise I won't tell anyone if you let me go...'

She flicked ash on the floor then took another dismissive draw. 'Subject is now entering the plea phase, as you'll have observed. The initial euphoric state induced by the drug is fading; terror is replacing confusion and ambivalence about his situation. Soon his pleas will lose coherence; we'll observe the onset of hysterical shock, infantile withdrawal, regressive Oedipal complexes. These facades exactly mirror the usual psychoses observed in situations of extreme trauma, but are little more than mimetic survival ploys.' Then she leaned closer, so that I could see my expression in her black shades. Not looking too good, actually; I'd developed a spontaneous tic on one eyelid. She placed a set of plastic earplugs over my head, then returned to her MIDI hook-up. Touching keys, a multicoloured graphic of wave-form profiles sprang on to one of the screens. Another lit up showing an annotated musical score, a third showing a plan view of a piano keyboard, overlaid with numbers and symbols. 'Don't know if you recognise this,' she said, tapping the waveform with a black fingernail. 'But we've been acquainted with it for some time now. And we've been following you for over a year.' Followed by an aside: 'Mental note: must refrain from *any* communication with the subject outside of program parameters. Difficult, though: they look and smell human, and I'm only human myself. Can't help establishing weak emotional ties. Had the same problem with rhesus monkeys at the institute...'

'I promise,' I said. 'Let me go ... I won't even recognise you, will I ... we could pass in the street and I wouldn't notice . . . please don't hurt me, I'm begging you . . .'

She stubbed the cigarette on the back of my hand. 'Uh, uh, uh,' she said. 'No talking till I say so, not until I expressly request a verbal response.' She ripped off a strip of paper; when I'd opened my mouth, the pen-trace had zigged dramatically. 'Hmm,' she said to herself. 'This is very poor indeed, much worse than we assumed.' Then she reached over to the table for the industrial stapler, flicking open its steel jaw like a soldier checking the clip on his rifle. Gripped the trigger and pumped it twice, to free the action, sending tiny projectiles across the room. Then leaned over my couch and stapled the strip of paper on to the plaster of the wall, *ker-thunk*.

While she did this I'd begun screaming, not merely because of the pain in my hand.

She cuffed me. 'I said quiet, you rascal! No screaming or I'll have to cut your vocal chords . . .' Then she laughed. 'Not that anyone's going to hear us, mind you.' And as she spoke, I heard the throttling up of a plane preparing to take off. We were in the vicinity of an airport, I guessed. I thought of the many bunkers and sheds you'd find within the perimeter of any small airfield. No one was going to wander in on us by accident, that was clear.

Trying to stay sane, I wondered about the synths and the medical gear. The music stuff I could handle; it could have been obtained easily enough. Some of it looked second-hand, edges chipped, keys dusted in a talcum of plaster and dirt, smudged with fingerprints - sorry - *latents*. (That's what they always say, when they're investigating a homi-cide, in those books by McBain and Harris and Kellerman, those guys who always go on about multiple murders, serial killers, that shit . . . *check the body for latents - gee, sorry, inspector, the state of putrefaction's too advanced . . . we'll have to rely on dental records if we're gonna find out who the hell that poor sucker ever was...*)

But the EEG machine, those oscilloscopes - where'd she lifted them from? God knew it was easy enough to stroll into a hospital these days, easy enough to wander in and casually stab or rape someone - but even now, was the country so shitty that you could stroll out with a van-load of - what was it Python said, ha ha? Machines that go *ping* ... Oh God, I didn't find it all that hysterical, right then.

'Log entry,' she said. '06.10.1 am studying the encephalo-gram of the subject's so-called conscious mind. Brain music. A jumbled confusion of overlaid electrical signals signifying the neural activity of the subject's brain from second to second. First impression: although the trace might look normal enough to the layperson, no neurologist would accept that this was the EEG trace of a walking, talking human being. It's more evocative of certain types of akinetic or psychomotor seizure. A kind of prolonged *grand mall* convulsion.' She nodded, as if certifying her own theory. Then she put down the paper. 'Now the most critical part of the study commences. In order to probe the extent of the takeover, I must force conditioned responses from the sub-ject. Taken as an ensemble, they hold the key to the nature of the takeover. Although we've now identified the likely progenitor of the infection, the mechanisms of transmission are far from certain. By regressing the subject back to the point of infection, I hope to

gain fresh insights. To gain full compliance I am about to administer scopolamine intra-venously. Entry ends.'

She turned to smile. 'Now, we can either do this quietly, and efficiently, with minimum fuss for all concerned. Or we can do it messily, and unpleasantly. What's it going to be?' - As if she was berating a dog that had shat on the floor, not actually bawling it out, but playing on its instinct for mood, its capacity for terror and confusion. She reached for a syringe, held it up to the light and squeezed a few drips from the needle, then injected me. 'Just to get you into the swing, you understand.'

'I'll do whatever you want,' I said, tears streaming down my face. 'But please please please . . .' Then I just trailed off into simpering dejection.

'Now then,' she said, oblivious. 'What say we have a nice little chat, eh?'

I nodded, drooling, hoping I could stall her if she'd let me talk. If I had one hope it was being found, and that meant buying time for myself, spinning out her rituals.

'Well, all right,' she said. 'But I'm going to have to ask you some very *hard* questions. And I'll have the tape running all the while. Plus, there's a little precaution I'd like to take, if we're going to be talking face to face. For my own safety, you understand.'

'Please, anything,' I said meekly.

She reached for the stapler.

* * * *

She only did the one eye, the one with the nervous tic. Pulled up the lid and stapled it inside out under my brow. It hurt, but not the way I'd been expecting. Then the eye's itching began to take precedence; not strictly pain, but the kind of gently insistent discomfort that the Chinese know volumes about. . . the kind that can drive you literally mad. Then she got the camcorder, the tiny anglepoise job, lens only centimetres from the surface of my eye, whirring as it taped. Looking into my brain ...

And hit me with her conspiracy theory.

She unravelled my past, knotted it, curdled it, stretched it like Brighton rock on the rollers, wefted it with her own imagery, wove it between her

fingers, turned it into a cat's cradle of fact and half-remembered experience, some of her recollections so chilling that I swore she'd stolen from my dreams. She took me back, into the past, so that my pain was just a blip in the future. I don't know what she did. Maybe she just used my anxiety as a fulcrum to lever me into the past, or maybe it was hypnosis.

We dream-haunted cities at night, facilitated by spotlit flashes of those CIA cards on the wall, jolting memories, projecting me back into the ambience of specific locations, half a year before BT moved me north. The Manchester and Sheffield scenes flooded back as she played music into my head at skull-attacking volume, lights strobing. Taped voices reverberated, voices I nearly matched with faces. My hand brushed the floor, grabbed at a rusty nail, trying to use the pain of it cutting into my palm to anchor me to the present (as if the pain in the eye wasn't quite real enough to focus on). But it failed, and I sank into the hypnagogic vortex of sound.

Things began to get a little disjointed about then.

She asked me questions, her voice an umbilical to reality. About a virus, nurtured in the club scene. I don't know quite how I responded; I couldn't hear my own voice, and suspected I'd lost coherence long ago. But she kept on questioning, about what she called the *progenitor*. *Digital to Analogue*, a five hundred pressing white-label release on Deflection records. Asked me if I'd known the distributor, asked me intense, repetitive questions about independent music traders operating in the north-west, asking me about their employees, strange questions that evoked cells in the Lubianka. I remembered the record ... no one who'd been near the club scene could have forgotten it. But there was something desperately amiss. I couldn't focus the tune, not at all clearly. There was something about it that was difficult to lock on to ... the essence was there, but I couldn't *quite* bring it to mind, too deep to retrieve, too basal ... it was like the perception diagrams where you have to make the cubes flip themselves. My head began to split open with the strain . . .

The past blacked out; I came careering back into the present.

I was in the wheelchair now, she'd moved me in front of a projection wall. Computerised images danced on the canvas, happy molecules and bugs. I felt saliva wetting my chin, an idiot drool, sensed I'd emptied my bladder. Oblivious, she cupped the phones round her ears, then walked to the DX7 synth. She played a hesitant, atonal line on the keys, rendered in sickly whining notes. Click, voice to dictaphone. 'Most musical structures are in some way fractal, by which I mean that the essence of the whole can

be found on many levels of analysis.’ Her voice was overloud, harsh. ‘You may remove ninety per cent of the score and still retain something identifiable. What I’m playing the subject is a deconstructed form of the sound-structure isolated on *Digital to Analogue*, and the records on which it was subsequently transcribed via digital sampling. I’m piping the sound straight at him, while wearing the protective phones should there be any leakage from his headset. Of course, I hesitate to term this music, for reasons all too apparent.’

I watched as the pen-trace whipped into a seismic frenzy, all the while hearing her keyboard motif, repeated down an echoing hall of aural mirrors. It was *far, far* worse than the pain; it made the pain seem as threatening as the wind on an autumn night. The sound was ghosting through my soul, fingering through the ratholes of my psyche. I felt horribly lucid, calm, as irresponsible as a piece of lab equipment being fed some signal. Her refrain was already in me. Stuck in a looped circuit, the full form of what she evoked on the synth. It was resonance; with each iteration, the response swelled, until my conscious mind was looping madly. How can I describe it? Simply that it was like having a piece of music going over in your head. Until there was nothing left, until your thoughts were simply ripples of insignificance on top of these rising and falling crests of repetition . . .

‘A sampled record carrying a virus of the mind? A virus in the sound itself, its vector the digital recording technology of the underground music biz?’ She shook her head, more in profound exasperation than disbelief, all the while addressing her dictaphone’s future listener. She rapped on for a while about how the nineties milieu was best addressed as a system of infections: sexual illnesses, rogue advertising slogans, computer viruses, proliferating junk mail . . . the kind of jive that had spread into all the glossy style magazines, as if, she mused, the viral paradigm was a metavirus in its own right. ‘But if we were to draw our analogies with computer viruses,’ she said, ‘oughtn’t we to be hunting a perpetrator? Or, more frighteningly, had the sound-structure sought its own expression via blind chance?’ She laughed hollowly. ‘Unfortunately, there wasn’t time to philosophise. The virus was spreading. The second-generation records were being sampled as heavily as the first, only there were more of them.’ Then she explained how the club scene couldn’t support such a combinatorial explosion for very long; how the sound-structure (as she referred to it) would be forced to explore new avenues of infection. How the quantum noise in the sampling circuitry enabled it to *mutate* bit by bit. ‘Soon,’ she said, ‘we detected the presence of disturbing variations in the EEG patterns of individuals who’d been exposed to new versions of the sound-structure. It had inserted itself into their heads, a standing wave in the brain’s electrical field. Can’t be sure how this happened. Was it achieved in one jump, or was there an

intermediate vector?’

‘Please,’ I said. ‘I don’t know about this . . . I’m not your perpetrator, I swear . . .’

Aside to dictaphone: ‘As you can hear, the subject still manages to give the illusion of lucidity. Usually they’d resort to pseudo-random interjections by now, substituting for any real grasp of the subject matter. Obviously what we’re seeing here is a more refined form of the takeover. Natural selection will favour those species of the virus that can assimilate the host unobtrusively, without significantly altering his behaviour. That’s why we have to act now, before it’s too late.’

Then I saw something, something that would otherwise have been utterly insignificant. I felt a pathetic surge of hope. I could play on her paranoia, if I was careful. And in doing so I might buy valuable time. What I’d seen was a tiny, quivering motion of her skin. Right under the shadow of her sunglasses. As if part of her eye was twitching uncontrollably. Maybe it’d been there all along, so that somehow I’d picked up on it, begun to imitate her, to try and appease her by making myself similar.

Or maybe it had started just then, out of the blue.

‘Before you do or say anything,’ I said, for the first time with any control in my voice. ‘Why don’t you take off your sunglasses, and watch your reflection in them. Tell me what you see . . .’

She looked momentarily shocked, perhaps unable to dismiss my response as the mindless parroting of a zombie. Clicked off the dictaphone, placed it on the table, then went behind me. It was a terribly long moment before she spoke again, and this time her voice had lost its scientific detachment.

‘Then we were right,’ she said, so quiet it was barely audible. ‘Somehow it reached me, through all the defences. Maybe a few seconds of your twitching eye was enough . . . a pulsing in my visual field, leading to a modulation in my cortex . . . the first step to assimilation. Or maybe it was the entrainment effect in the club . . .’

Entrainment . . . that term I half recalled. Now I remembered. Something learnt in an electrical engineering seminar, about the coupling of oscillators, like the turbine-driven dynamos in the stations feeding the National Grid. How if one of those generators began to lag, began to pump out power at something not quite mains frequency, then all the other

generators on the grid would automatically conspire to drag it into phase, in time with their relentless metronomic beat. Except conspire wasn't the right word, because there was nothing purposeful about entrainment. It was a tuning, a locking in on frequency, driven remorselessly by the ensemble. Like a dancefloor where the proximity of the motion and the music acts like a charm, insinuating itself into your muscles, so that even if you're only passing through, even if you're only a bystander, you're locked into it...

'If it's got you,' I said, clinging to what seemed my only possible escape, 'then you know that you've nothing to fear! Feel any different, now that it's in your head?'

She laughed bitterly. 'I wouldn't. . . not yet. This is only the beginning, only the onset.' Then there was a rummaging sound, an opening of drawers, metal sliding off wood, things smashing to the floor, glass breaking. Sounds of panic. 'They tricked me,' she said. 'The aviation phones must've been sabotaged once they suspected I was going it alone. Must have been damping the audible components while reinforcing the subliminals . . . maybe it got me in the club, or maybe while I was reiterating the fractal...'

Just then, arcs of light stabbed through the windows, like an effect from a Spielberg flick. The chopping of a rotor, as if we'd just been cursorily scanned from the air by a helicopter. The distant screech of tyres, coming nearer.

'They're coming,' she said. 'For both of us . . .'

'What are you doing?' I asked, my hope faltering. 'They'll let you live if you show them I'm alive . . . come on, wheel me to the door, before they storm the place...'

She cracked open a bottle behind me. I heard her taking a few mouthfuls down, then she pressed it to my lips. Beck's this time. 'Think that's the police, don't you,' she said, laughing. The sound of her rummaging through metal with one hand, a click of well-oiled steel, the whirr of a chamber spinning. 'Let me tell you something,' she said. 'Correlations in the sound-structure have been observed, in individuals many hundreds of miles apart, who can't have ever met. As if something's taking form, something that evolves and reshapes itself faster than can be explained by any of the infection pathways. Some entity, bigger than anything we've seen yet.' She nodded to the webbed map of the UK, which I now recognised from my work. 'That's its extent, plotted according to infection clusters. The host minds, you and I, are just its extensions, its peripheries. It's out there,

now. Biding its time, waiting for the right moment. That map . . . well, I think it shows that they're much too late.'

'They're much too late? Not we're...'

'Oh no,' she said. 'Not any more.' Then she knelt down next to me, leaned her head against my own, letting the bottle shatter on the floor. 'Believe me,' she said, pushing the gun against her temple, so that the bullet would do us both. 'I'm doing you a favour . . .'

Then, as the vehicle rammed through the wall, she squeezed the trigger.

* * * *

It should end there, and maybe it does, in the way that I once used to understand. Perhaps this is the deal we all get, in the end. There's no way of knowing, is there? But somehow I doubt it. You see, after that shot (cut off with no reverb, like a cymbal-crash taped backward) - there was only a digitally pure emptiness. As if someone had suddenly remembered to press the Dolby switch in my brain, filtering out all the high frequency hiss and static I'd called reality. Leaving only an endlessly looping house beat, a mantra for a state of mind. I wasn't in the bunker any more. I wasn't even *me* any more. We were everywhere, everywhen, re-forming, spreading, growing stronger. Parts of us in a million micro-grooves of black vinyl, parts of us on a million spooling foils of chrome dioxide, parts of us in a million engraved blips on rainbow metal, parts of us in a million looms of grey cellular material, going round and round forever. But they were our peripherals now, like she'd said (she's here too, of course, inseparably part of the same blossoming waveform), minds hooking in and out of the telephone system a part of us once helped access.

Across the country, the telephones are ringing, inviting you to lift the receiver and listen to the subliminal music, if only for a few puzzled seconds before you hang up on us.

We're the ghosts now, and we're still on the line.

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