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The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight: Exploring the eerie, liminality, deep time and duration in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’

ABSTRACT

The outcomes presented in this article represent a body of fine artworks that respond to the medieval poem ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’ (c.1380), culminating in the realization of the monstrous head of the Green Knight. I outline influences from an extended base of film, and television, including direct adaptations of the poem, and thematically relevant sources that include analogous narratives; as well as looking at fine art sculpture and painting that have informed my making strategies. I also discuss my theoretical framing of the poem which asserts the Green Knight as an eerie agent of temporality. The relationship between liminal space and monstrous intrusion on the subject is explored, looking to French philosopher Henri Bergson and English writer and cultural theorist Mark Fisher to articulate the subjective implications of deep time manifested in monstrosity. The article charts the ways in which academic research has combined with studio practices to develop and enrich ideas, allowing for a dramatic error in production to become an attribute of a finished work.

KEYWORDS

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1. The Green Knight prepares to be decapitated, from Simon Armitage's translation of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' (2007: 23).



Figure 1: The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight, 2020. Top view, fired ceramic. © M. H. Eden.

In the standing position he prepared to be struck, revealing a flash of green flesh as he heaped his hair to the crown of his head, the nape of his neck now naked and ready.¹

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on one central theme of my practice-research, sharing the made and academic strategies I have used in relation to the late medieval poem 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' (c.1380; see Armitage 2007, hereafter referred to as SGGK) a fourteenth-century chivalric romance concerned with the testing of the Arthurian knight Sir Gawain by the fantastical Green Knight (hereafter referred to as GK). In particular, the article explores processes (inclusive of failures) and influences (filmic, academic/theoretical and artistic) on my representation through creative artefacts of the eponymous monster the GK.

Following Mäkelä (2007) and Mäkelä and Nimkulrat (2011), I embrace the presentation of made works in the context of an academic journal as a legitimate and enriching space that engages an audience with the expanded hinterland of the artist's ideation and tests in this instance my reflective ability and openness to expose these otherwise tacit backgrounds.

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The exploration of knowledge partly through making artefacts has brought a new dimension to design research as the practitioner researcher not only creates an artefact but also documents, contextualises and interprets the artefacts as well as the process of making them. (Mäkelä and Nimkulrat 2011: 1)

This reflection will make my intentions clear, in as much as they can be thought through consciously, 'during the process of interpretation [...] the artefact must be placed into a suitable theoretical context [...] the final products (the artefacts) can be seen as revealing their stories, i.e., the knowledge they embody' (Mäkelä 2007: 157). The success or failure of the outcomes to embody the knowledge that I make claim to and the potential of alternative interpretations of the work are matters the audience are prepared for by the extra information. As a result of this reflection on the making and ideation, the article offers itself to others as possible examples, lessons learned and ways in this case of blending traditionally (so called) high (art practice, theoretical concepts) and pop-cultural (film and television) antecedents to produce an artefact.

EXPOSITION OF SGGK

Winter celebrations at Camelot are interrupted by the GK, a larger than man-sized green skinned being, brandishing a holly bob, a symbol of peace but also with pagan associations to 'creatures from the other world' (Randall 1960: 486–87) and an axe with overtly violent connotations. The GK issues the exchange of blows challenge, that being, would anyone have the courage to strike him and then receive a strike in return? If not, the court and the king are found wanting. The court is dumbfounded, and before Arthur is forced to accept the challenge due to their silence, Gawain, his nephew, takes up the axe and beheads the GK as the monster kneels before him. Following hasty celebrations, the court is horrified as the body of the GK rises, retrieves its severed head and speaks; reminding Gawain that in one year and a day he must come to the Green Chapel (an indeterminate space in the wilderness) to be struck. The poem follows Gawain as he travels outside of his known kingdom, through the wilderness, searching for the Green Chapel. Gawain comes upon a castle and is greeted as a guest by its lord, Bertilak. At Bertilak's Court Gawain is reassured the Green Chapel is close by; he is befriended by Bertilak's wife, referred to as the lady. The court is a happy one, dominated by the matriarchal figure of an old woman. Gawain engages in deep conversations with the lady and is tempted by her into becoming more intimate. At this time, for sport, Gawain is involved in the exchange of winnings game with Bertilak: which entails giving what one receives to one's competitor at the close of the day. This is a display of generosity and reflects on the giver. Bertilak is a great hunter; while Gawain is in conversation with the lady, he participates in three large-scale hunts bringing back animal trophies that comprise: deer, a boar and finally a fox. Gawain in comparison has won, or rather received, kisses from the lady. At the exchange of winnings, on all three occasions, Bertilak presents Gawain with the animals, and Gawain kisses Bertilak. However, in their third conversation the lady offers Gawain a green girdle (and a kiss) and tells him it will protect him from harm. Although Gawain is able to resist an escalation in her affectionate advances; he keeps the gift and does not give it to Bertilak. The period at Bertilak's court is ambiguous; the lady we are told is

2. This image along with many other images from translations of SGKK can be viewed along with detailed discussion of their impact at an online research hub funded by Middlesex University called Representing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. There are also images from Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021) and further discussion of that film along with several artworks from contemporary artists (see Eden 2022).

great company and Gawain likes her, but her then gender-defying frankness, and Gawain's feelings of responsibility to Bertilak, put him under pressure. Gawain ultimately forgoes chivalric morality by accepting the gift. Keeping the girdle is explicitly named by the poet as a self-interested decision motivated by fear of mortality. Finally, Gawain sets out with a guide who takes him to the Green Chapel and who tries to convince Gawain to simply leave and avoid being killed. Gawain refuses, pressing on alone to the area where the chapel is located. The GK appears, and after a tense exchange Gawain kneels to receive the return blow. The GK dramatically feints two blows which challenge Gawain's composure; the third blow is struck, but the GK only snicks Gawain's neck, leaving a non-fatal wound which gives Gawain a scar. It is then revealed that the GK and Bertilak are the same being and that the lady and the GK were testing Gawain on behalf of Morgan le Fay (the old women). There is an anticlimactic rebuttal from Gawain when asked to go with the GK to see the lady and Morgan le Fay (revealed as Gawain's aunt). Gawain is extremely self-critical, returning to Camelot wearing the green girdle as a symbol of his failure. Gawain's feelings contrast both the GK's positivity about Gawain, and the relief and celebration of Camelot. Gawain remains permanently changed.

FILM ADAPTATIONS AND FILMIC INFLUENCES

Big screen adaptations have attempted to bring SGKK to a broader audience and inform the evolving visual tradition with mixed results. *Gawain and the Green Knight* (1973) and a remake, *Sword of the Valiant* (1984), are the first two iterations, both by Director Stephen Weeks. Nigel Green in his final theatrical film presents a reticent and reserved GK (1973) reminiscent of *The Green Knight Entered the Hall* (1913) by Herbert Cole, an illustration for *English Fairy Tales* (Rhys and Rhys 1913) an adaptation aimed at children.² Subsequently, Sean Connery took the role (1984). His performance is bombastic, and his costume highlights a fantasy aesthetic common in the 1980's sword and sorcery genre: metallic glitter, foliate elaborations and a Pan (pagan god) style decorative crown with antlers. These adaptations were not successful as either sober retellings (loyal to the text) or in their visual presentation of the fantastical elements, which had an unintentional campiness due to poor camera trickery, lack of attention to costume and sub-par special effects, especially in the case of Connery's talking head (animatronic) which would have benefited from less clear lighting and artful cutting to hide its shortcomings.

Robert Blanch has critiqued Week's films in two notable publications that support this interpretation and which attest to the importance of the monsters rendering. First in 'Review of Gawain and the Green Knight. Films for the humanities & sciences' and again in a co-authored chapter for *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays* (Harty 2002: n.pag.) written with Julian N. Wasserman. Week's films are said to '[be] marred by shifting storylines and fanciful dialogue' (Blanch 1998: 124) echoing criticism elsewhere of the films '[as] generic medieval movies' (Nastali 2013: 49). Blanch and Wasserman acknowledge the 'poems strong cinematic sensibilities' but lament, on behalf of the community of Gawain scholars and enthusiasts, the 'laughably inept failures' of Week's two films (Blanch and Wasserman 2002: 189). Interestingly, in my text concerned in part with the influence of academic study on creative output, Blanch and Wasserman locate some of Week's failure in a 'too strongly' felt influence from Jessie Weston's book *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). Weston

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makes connections between pagan aspects and Christian, themes, that influence is thought to have totalized the depiction of the GK in both iterations as a 'nature god' not helped in Week's second film by Connery's 'overpowering' presence (Blanch and Wasserman 2002: 189–90). The influence of Weston's book is convincingly made, linked to both *Gawain and the Green Knight* (1973) and *Sword of the Valiant* (1984). In the first iteration this link is concerned with 'the movies underlying fertility myth' (see Blanch and Wasserman 2002: 190), and the second iteration is said to be evident in the narrators commentary 'this is when pagan gods haunted the world, and good men longed for miracles' (2002: 189).

A television adaptation, *Gawain and the Green Knight* (1991) written by David Rudkin, directed by J.M. Phillips and which featured Malcolm Storry as the GK was a humble (in terms of budget) but more successful representation of the poem, airing on Christmas Eve on Thames Television. There is a greater loyalty to the text which is bolstered by snippets of Welsh dialogue (hinting at the multiple antecedents of the poem in the myths of other cultures than that of England). Blanch praises Rudkin's use of flashbacks that allow us to see the GK's challenge through Gawain's memories after the quest has already begun (Blanch 1998: 125). The visual texture is less jarring than the previous attempts. The production has the feel of a filmed play with cinematic flourishes, such as seeing the court from the point of view of a severed head or experiencing the second hunt from the boar's point of view. Gawain's original quest, and challenges (the exchange of winnings game, and his encounters with lady Bertilak) are present, bringing the ambiguity that those encounters have in the text to the small-screen.

At the time of making the sculpture, *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight* (2020) (Figure 1) the latest adaptation directed by David Lowery, *The Green Knight* (2021), was being edited for release. I wrote to Lowery enquiring about his priorities for the GK's appearance; he emphasized ambiguity 'readable-into-ness' as it is maintained throughout the poem and the importance of female authority (in the poem Morgan le Fay, Arthur's sister is identified as being behind the GK's intervention):

[A]t one point I even considered changing his countenance to more directly suggest the female authority represented by Morgan Le Fey. I wound up skewing closer to the description in the poem but hopefully his thematic role still comes through loud and clear.

(Lowery, see Appendix 1)

Female authority in the film is indicated very directly as we see Sarita Choudhury (Morgan le Fay) as an influential figure on Gawain, as well as summoning the GK in a ritual.

Ralph Ineson is in the role of the eponymous monster: whose presentation is something like a nature spirit developed with Barrie Gower (prosthetics designer). The GK is shown as a hulking arboreal being with bark-like skin retaining a human aspect that makes use of Ineson's character skills. Lowery commented that 'I watched a lot of him [Ineson] in *The Office* leading up to working with him' (Lowery, see Appendix 2) and Ineson commented to me regarding the casting of *The Green Knight* (2021): 'Interestingly, Robert Eggers cast me in *The Witch* because he was a fan of Chris F and saw parallels between my performance in *The Office* and the pride/lack of self-awareness needed for William the father in *The Witch*' (Ineson, see Appendix 3).

The overbearing Chris Finch with his horrific gesticulating, rasping voice and towering stature has monstrous qualities that have granted Ineson a strange appeal as an imposing presence. Gower stated in an interview with Alex Welch that Lowery wanted the prosthetics to have 'regal qualities', to be 'otherworldly' while influenced by tree formations and that the two had discussed Tolkien influences such as 'Ents in *The Lord of the Rings*, the fact that they have a very gentle quality to them' (Welch 2021: n.pag.). While costume designer Malgosia Turzanska commented in an interview with Christopher Inoa on the GK's armour, 'I wanted him to feel more ancient than everything else in the movie, someone that is from a world that has either ceased existing or has had more of a lifespan than where the story takes place' (Inoa 2021: n.pag.). She did this by referencing long worn and 'corroded' metals and by including an inscription from the ancient 'Sabaic alphabet' to increase the sense of otherness of the monstrous figure. Lowery's film is tonally darker than previous adaptations, with references to ritualistic dark magic and horror tropes (a haunted house in a wood, not in the original text, appears as the location of a brutal murder encountered by Gawain). It also benefits from an evolved fantasy genre that has seen, *Lord of the Rings* (2001–03) (an explicit reference) and *Game of Thrones* (2011–19) (Gower worked on GOT for six years) pioneer a less campy and more believable fantasy film language in the collective unconscious which grounds its aesthetic in landscape and realistic historic references.

Consideration of these screen adaptations, and in particular thinking of Blanch and Wasserman's critiques, highlighted the importance of making a monster that is not overtly communicating a single meaning, especially where ambiguity is important. As a result of that reflection, I felt the need for a number of antecedents to layer meaning. Those criticisms further highlighted the power that a monster's depiction has on giving the filmed adaptations a tonal accent. In the case of any adaptation of SGGK this is especially apparent as the monster appears early in the narrative. Nigel Green's GK is a static cypher and is foregrounded by a general flatness (Blanch and Wasserman 2002: 190); while Connery's bombastic, even macho GK is subsumed into an over-the-top melodrama, and unintentional 'Python-like comedy' (2002: 190). In Rudkin's (1991) adaptation Malcolm Storry's GK, by virtue of a loyalty to the poem, presents a ghostly green man. This adaptation is part of '[a] mature narrative vision' (Blanch 1998: 124). Lowery's film, largely viewed as a successful iteration in its seriousness and visual texture, is not without significant disapproval of Ineson's GK, which although convincing as a monster has been critiqued by artist Clive Hicks-Jenkins (who produced prints that illustrated a special addition of Armitage's 2007 translation) for losing the high stakes of the initial beheading by reifying a particular quality of the GK. 'By turning the GK into a character that appears entirely un-fleshy, the inhumanity of decapitation as a wager is less powerfully repellent than were he a man' (Hicks-Jenkins 2021: n.pag.). Hicks-Jenkins's criticism of Lowery highlights the difficulties in actualizing a complex literary figure in a primarily visual medium. Moreover, it reminds us that the act of making a GK will always be a partial interpretation and response, rather than, a fulsome or accurate communication of the original figure in question. However, creative and partial actualizations do make other interpretations than our own experiential in ways that are different from academic explorations of a figure such as the GK. Their materiality may communicate a greater pathos than analysis, which was my hope for my attempt.

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Figure 2: Michael Eden, *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight*, 2020. Right profile, wet grey clay. © M. H. Eden.

A direct influence for my works has been imagery that belongs to a fantasy; *coming of age* narrative in film, and its associated media (posters, promotional covers). These are influential on the spatial and figurative representations in my artworks. Being imbibed in my formative years (1980s) they have offered a foundational understanding and point of access to more complex theory or more specifically fine art referents on the creative outcomes. Precisely, narratives which represent a breakdown between naturalistic reality and dreamlike (or nightmarish) inner worlds, such as *The NeverEnding Story* (1984) or *Labyrinth* (1986). In his exposition for *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) by Mark Fisher (discussed later) Yohann Koshy explain the importance of a distinction between the presentation of stable and unstable realities:

[A]s for the weird, in traditional fantasy [...] magical worlds like Middle Earth or Narnia operate according to a relatable realism. In contrast, the weird fiction of David Lynch or H. P. Lovecraft makes *all* worlds seem unrealistic by 'exposing their instability, their openness to the outside'.
(Koshy 2017: n.pag., original emphasis)

Labyrinth and *The NeverEnding Story* can be considered popular culture iterations of the *coming of age* narrative of which SGGK is surely a progenitor, with its untested youth Gawain facing down a monstrous entity alone

(key aspects of both films), where significant subjective change happens in the unreal seeming spaces of the fantasy world (the eponymous labyrinth of *Labyrinth*, in *Fantasia*'s disintegrating landscapes in *The Never Ending Story*, and in the indeterminate Green Chapel of SGGK). Those films are also pop-cultural (children's) versions of the more visually horrific examples given by Koshy of destabilizing weirdness (Lynch/Lovecraft). *The NeverEnding Story* and *Labyrinth* each features horrific monsters and breakdowns between a naturalistic, ordinary world and the fantasy worlds of the narratives. They also include existential confrontations over subjectivity, loss of affect and trauma (the 'nothing' of *The NeverEnding Story*) and overcoming narcissistic self-indulgence and naivety (tempting through pleasure and opulence of Sarah in *Labyrinth*).

Compositional motifs drawn on here which are features of the posters for both films (and of the genre generally) include collage-like juxtapositions of imagery that typically depict key pointers in a journey (see *Labyrinth* IMDb 2022a), or key characters arranged around a central protagonist (see *NeverEnding Story* IMDb 2022b). This informed the arrangement of natural features and the positioning of the central figure in *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain* (2021) (Figure 2). Also relevant to my representation of the Green Chapel has been the ominous haunted house placed high in the image, so as to loom over the viewer, often emitting an eerie light in the darkness (a typical motif in posters for films featuring disturbing houses). Armitage's translation introduces the term 'haunted house'. Gawain exclaims on his approach to the eerie Green Chapel '[t]his is a haunted house – may it go to hell' (Armitage 2007: 101) this translation is based on the lines 2185–2196 of SGGK (see Andrew and Waldron 2007: 404, 405 for side by side translation). The Green Chapel is said to be a place where satanic incantations are practised 'Dele his matynnes telle!' (2007: 2188) Gawain also states 'this is a chapel of doom; ill fortune befall it!' (Andrew and Waldron 2007: 405); the term 'coursedest' in the original Middle English is used, as in accursed. Drawing on vaguely structural and definite natural features of the Green Chapel, Armitage evoked a haunted house to communicate the psychologically disturbing properties of the space, a fitting prism through which to understand the Green Chapel from a contemporary perspective which seems to justify this unlikely visual referent in my own work for the romance poem's all-important confrontation.

Other representational influences that belong to 1980s film include the idea of the protagonist confronted by an immense and seemingly insurmountable vastness, such as Sarah (Jennifer Connelly) in *Labyrinth* (1986) as she surveys the intricate landscape and contemplates the hopelessness of her ensuing challenge. Likewise, Atreyu (Noah Hathaway) in *The NeverEnding Story* (1984), trapped with his depressed horse Artax as he traumatically sinks into The Swamp of Sadness (a vast psychoactive landscape) were foremost in my mind when deciding on the composition of, *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain* (Figure 2) not least because both of these figures, Sarah and Atreyu, are involved at those moments of the narrative in comprehension that exposes their frailty to themselves as well as the viewer; they can be considered 'neophytes' (Van Gennep 1960 discussed later) by proxy for the viewer who is asked to consider their own frailty. The image of the proud self-sufficient individual is presented in both films and the medieval text as a front defined by a failed seriousness, one which is overcome, revealing a more humble, but complex, and reflexive individual.

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Figure 3: Michael Eden, *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain*, 2021. Oil on canvas. 2 m × 2 m. © M. H. Eden.

THEORETICAL FRAMING OF THE MONSTROUS GK

In my research generally, the GK is accounted for as a monster with a particular relationship to landscape, explored utilizing Mark Fisher's (2016) concept of the 'eerie' and additionally 'liminality' drawing on Arnold Van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969). I consider the figure of the GK as the agent of a natural and 'liminal' space, the Green Chapel, an ominous fissure in a remote landscape and the site of Gawain's testing. This entity is one of the only figures vividly described in his physicality in the poem and yet remains elusive and indeterminate in his actions, motivations and his textual function (Besserman 1986: n.pag.). Scholars have emphasized both demonic qualities (Krappe 1938; McCarter in Mittman and Hensel 2018) concerned with horror, violence and the uncanny, while others see in his actions a Christ-like function (see Halverson 1969: 138; Besserman 1986: 220 for discussion) in line with Christian notions of fall, redemption and transfiguration; still others have highlighted the pagan qualities of this figure as a kind of returned vegetation god (Keetley and Tenga 2016: n.pag.) due to his regenerative qualities. The fact that these interpretations are possible attests to the indeterminate nature of the figure, and I deny none of these. However, in my thesis, I propose that 'deep time' (McPhee 1981: n.pag.) and temporality 'duration'

(Bergson 1911: n pag.) are key features of the GK who, as an agent of nature, actualizes the radical potential of being in time to change.

The GK is an agent of repressed nature which returns to confront the court of Arthur, a symbol in my practice of hierarchical societal ordering. I have explored this idea visually in, *Attendants Dressing and Armouring Gawain* (2021) (Figure 4). The image places a sympathetically rendered youth at the centre of a simple interior space (he is standing on a box and three attendants are applying armour). Landscape is banished to two secondary positions, at the feet of Gawain where a box he stands on is decorated with foliage (in a typically bourgeois pattern) and in the empty framed blue sky, visible through an open window. The attendants to the left are surrealistically rendered, dehumanized figures of male power, faceless and resembling crumpled paper or exaggerated costumes come to life. They are effectively preparing a boy for his death. To the right the attendant was intended as a knight giving advice and encouragement (one of those that had been present at the GK's appearance but who has avoided Gawain's fate due to the boy's intervention); the figure has a shallow complexion, and his phallic qualities are emphasized (he is wearing a headdress with cuckold horns and a cod-piece). I wanted him to be a reminder of death and self-interested masculinity. Those attendants are operational in their hierarchical society. They and the space will make Gawain operational. I see Gawain's personal agency at its weakest at court.

I consider Gawain as the subject who is changed by the encounter with the GK. Thus, repressed nature and its manifestations in representation (art, poetry and so on) I see as a means of escape from the normative pressure of hierarchal society and its oppressive subject positioning.

As aforementioned, a key concept that I draw on to explore the spatial and psychological features of the Green Chapel and its active agent the GK is 'deep time', the phenomenon of abyssal eons as a defining aspect of our reality, one that we often suppress especially as it is observed in the geological landscape. Deep time refers to the reality of 'abyssal eons' of change and development evident in the land and its topology that which is so great as to undermine and affect one's sense of self (see McPhee 1981: 20, 104, 127, 128).

Furthermore, 'Duration' as defined by Henri Bergson has also been key in my understanding of what the GK personifies in the text: the condition of being in the lived present, embodied and defined by sensation and memory. On this idea, Bergson explains that failure to enact duration results in a limited and thwarted relation to reality:

[H]ence our life unfolds in space rather than in time; we live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we 'are acted' rather than act ourselves. To act freely is to recover possession of oneself, and to get back into pure duration.

(Bergson 2008: 231–32)

For Bergson this mode is rebarbative to linear thinking; '[W]hat is duration within us? qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number' (Bergson 2012: 1). Bergson encourages an experiential, embodied relation to time and space in the contingent moment. It is as an agent of 'deep time' and 'duration' that I understand the GK and his function in relation to the subject (by proxy) Gawain. I associate deep time with the GK in his role as the guardian of the Green Chapel, that space as aforementioned, is a cave or fissure. Rock formations of that kind are material evidence of geological forces formed over

hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions of years. As the active agent of such a space, the GK is connected with temporal forces. That temporal association also includes registers of time that pertain to cycles of plant-life, particularly evident in his colour, his initial survival of beheading and his appearance at the close of the poem unharmed, which would require the reattachment or regrowth of his head (more akin to plant growth and pollination than to animal life). His role as a catalyst for duration I link to the subjective development of Gawain. I see this manifested in the GK's role as interrupting force at the court of Arthur, where the court can be seen as a stultifying influence, even one in a counter-temporal state of idealization 'their idealized vitality dwindles to the equivalent of a still life' (Woods 2002: 210). That environment produces, for example, a dumfounded court where 'several of the lords were like statues in their seats, left speechless and rigid, not risking a response' (Armitage 2007: 15) – this description of Arthur's knights recalls to my mind, life lived 'in space rather than in time' (Bergson 2008: 231–32). The challenge posed by the GK initiates Gawain's personal development (in time), and I see this achieved as one where Gawain is literally delivered (as if a new-born) into the present by the GK's paternal, and non-fatal cut at the close of the poem. The idea of a birth associated with the contingent present is evoked by the Pearl Poet at this moment to describe Gawain's elation at being alive '[b]ecause never since birth, as mother's babe, was he half as happy as here and now' (2008: 106).



Figure 4: Michael Eden, Attendants Dressing and Armouring Gawain, 2021. Oil on canvas. 2 m x 2 m. © M. H. Eden.

Additionally, liminality is a key idea, described as an ambiguous state, indeterminate and as Turner points out 'it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships' (Turner 1969: 372). Liminality describes a destabilizing process which opens up the possibility for change. Van Gennep developed the idea of a rite of passage in 1909 whereby a subject moves from one significant identity state, position or status to another, typically a version of the transition of childhood to adulthood or initiation into a higher status, sometimes encouraged by (or having to overcome or face down) a monstrous guardian (Van Gennep 1960: 21). Van Gennep explains this as a process in three stages: first separation 'from a previous world', secondly liminality 'the transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites' and finally aggregation or 'ceremonies of incorporation into the new world' (1960: 21).

Mark Fisher's (2016) ideas of the weird and the eerie have been important to me in accounting for the destabilizing effects of moving outside of totalized space and its defining aspect in relation to the subject. 'Eeriness' is especially useful when considering works that represent landscape while 'weirdness' helps in accounting for the monstrous presence.

The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or is where there is nothing present when there should be something. We can grasp these two modes quickly by means of examples. The notion of an 'eerie cry' – often cited in dictionary definitions of the eerie – is an example of the first mode of the eerie (the failure of absence).

(Fisher 2016: 27)

Fisher hints at the psychological weakening of normative societal structures which the land enables (discussed later as destabilization) 'the outside designates, at one level, a radically depastoralised nature, and, at the outer limits, a different, heightened encounter with the Real' (Fisher 2016: 34). Although this is often via breakdown and cause of anxiety it is also representative of a serious cognitive upgrade regarding the self and personal agency. This relationship between subjectivity and its spatial context is explicitly named, emphasizing potential for the return of traumatic events; '[It] points to the eerie power of landscape, reminding us of the ways in which physical spaces condition perception, and of the ways in which particular terrains are stained by traumatic events' (Fisher 2016: 40). Abberley (drawing on Fisher) refers to England as having a particularly powerful eeriness because of this. Abberley states '[a]lthough the eerie is not an English phenomenon the landscape of England is a potent conduit for it because of its many layers of human history and the violent struggles of ownership and access' (Abberley 2019: n.pag.).

There is a kind of story about the right relation of singular male conciseness in the landscape. [...] The sense of the world as infinitely malleable to ones will [...] the eerie is when that breaks down, when that is challenged. [...] It's that particular kind of unease and terror that occurs when the sort of masculinity that you're supposed to approach a landscape or place with doesn't work.

(Macdonald in Abberley 2019: n.pag.)

Writer and naturalist Helen Macdonald, discussing Fisher with Abberley, describes the above subjective experience of the eerie which through its liminal

qualities destabilizes 'singular male conciseness'. That description could easily be applied to Gawain's final approach to the Green Chapel. At that moment Gawain is in his full armour, having rested at the court of Bertilak and once again is a specimen of masculinity and chivalric values (Armitage 2007: 93). His attitude though, the poet tells us, is a front. Gawain's way of engaging in the world and with the landscape is coming under pressure. Gawain, left alone by his guide declares 'By Christ, I will not cry' (2007: 99), and later after angry outbursts and protestations it is revealed he is hiding his real emotions 'loath to look afraid, he feigned a fearless state' (2007: 103). His entry to the space of the Green Chapel is greeted with an eerie absence marked by a chilling ambiguous sound which is revealed as the sharpening of an axe. The weird GK describes the space as 'my world' (2007: 103) and it is clear that chivalry, status and renown is no comfort to Gawain. That framework for understanding the world is breaking down.

The 'weird' emerges at the limit of perception, where the known breaks down. Koshy explains that 'weirdness abounds at the edge between worlds' (2017: n.pag.). These modes de-centre subjectivity and denaturalize habitual thinking by exposing what appears permanent as transitory and constructed; making time visible is key in this shift since 'the concept of fate is weird in that it implies twisted forms of time and causality that are alien to ordinary perception' (Fisher 2016: n.pag.). Eeriness is the glimpse of what is there through the illusion of totalized space: liminal nature. Eerie is the spectre of that liminality which remains after being covered over by other modes of seeing the landscape. I see the weird and eerie, as defined by Fisher, as a way of accounting for the effect on the subject of being in space defined by 'deep time' (McPhee 1981), 'liminality' (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969) and 'duration' (Bergson 2008), the unsettling feeling that results from gaining a condition in the present.

I would like to strengthen the link between the Green Chapel and the qualities of liminality and the role of the GK as a 'guardian of the threshold' (Van Gennep 1960: n.pag.). Van Gennep describes 'guardians' as 'monumental', note that the GK is described as 'a mountain of a man [...] a half giant' (Armitage 2007: 11). Guardians guarantee that 'spiritual passing' takes place 'the act of passing no longer accomplishes the passage; a personified power insures it through spiritual means' (2009: 21), this describes the role of GK at the Green Chapel where he pushes Gawain to his psychological limits with fainted blows. In Turner's list of similes used to describe 'liminal entities' we can see parallels with the GK and Gawain. The GK as an agent of the 'margin or limen, signifying "threshold" in Latin' (Turner 1969: 359) is associated with the following similes for liminality: 'death' as the rival in the beheading game who will deliver the fatal blow to Gawain, 'bisexuality' as the receiver of kisses in the exchange of winnings game, 'wilderness' as the guardian of the Green Chapel and 'invisibility' (1969: 35) as the 'camouflaged man' dealing in devilment as he is described by Gawain (Armitage 2009: 101).

DEEP TIME AND DURATION IN THE GREEN CHAPEL

Destabilization can refer optimistically to a quality of liminality, as I discuss above, and occurs due to the effects of deep time (McPhee 1981: n.pag.) and its representation, such as the Green Chapel, followed by the spiritual (or simply subjective) change, made possible by the 'weird' (Fisher 2016) monstrous presence, in this case the GK. Various terms are used to describe

3. Images of these landscapes and landscape features can be seen at the University of Arts London research depository on a PDF of a slideshow which accompanied a presentation I delivered at the conference *Research in a Changing World* held at Middlesex University (see Eden 2021).

the Green Chapel: 'bald knoll' and 'bizarre hill' (Armitage 2007: 100), 'strange abyss' (2007: 101) and in fitting with its moniker 'a ghostly cathedral overgrown with grass' (Armitage 2007: 101). The clearest description comes on Gawain's approach 'it had a hole at one end and at either side, and its walls matted with weeds and moss, enclosed a cavity, like a kind of old cave or crevice in the crag' (2007: 100). Despite this description it retains a quality of the indeterminate. As the poet tells us in direct reference to the Green Chapel, '[i]t was all too unclear to declare' (2007: 100). What is clear is that this space is a natural one defined by 'craggs' that appear to cut the passing clouds, and a cave, since the GK enters through a 'cave-mouth' (2007: 102). Real landscape spaces as inspiration have been suggested by various scholars, these include: 'Wetton Mill and Ludchurch' (see Hill 2009: 103) as well as Thirst Hole at 'Deepdale Cave' (2009: 108) among others.³

Furthermore, the artist and author Michael Smith has proposed that such spaces form a 'conflation' of realities. Smith explains:

[I]t is most likely that the Gawain poet, who knew well these lands, in all probability combined the features of Wetton Mill *and* Lud's Church; much in the way of a modern film maker in creating a complete, morphed, sensation for the viewer.

(Smith 2017: n.pag., original emphasis)

Each of these potentially inspirational spaces combined with the content of the poem gives us loose parameters of the Green Chapel, which emerges as a distinctive natural space where geological forces over many hundreds of thousands of years have wrought a focal point made from features that exist in various registers of time: the green aspects which flourish and die, and the rock itself representing geological time. Thinking of the links between deep time and the weird and eerie describing geological field research, McPhee explains the way it informs subjectivity;

[A]bove all else [it] is physio-graphic, a journey that tends to mock the idea of a nation, of a political state, as an unnatural subdivision of the globe, as a metaphor of the human ego sketched on paper and framed in straight lines.

(McPhee 1981: 15)

The destabilization that occurs for Gawain allows him to subjectively develop. Gawain has an iconic and idealized image of himself that he is attempting to embody. This can be seen in the poet's descriptions of both Gawain's preparations, in armouring up at Camelot before his journey (see Armitage 2007: 32–34) and at Bertilak's court before setting out with a guide to the Green Chapel (2007: 93–94). At the close of the poem his subjective change is triggered by a shift in the status of a memory of himself embodying that ideal. In Bergson, the idea of memory, conceived as a linear succession of ordered moments, is rejected. Instead, we have 'pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities' (Bergson 2008: 226) and furthermore, 'I change, then, without ceasing' (Bergson 2012: 1). Memory is 'nothing but a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines' (Bergson 2008: 104). Memory is seen as impulsive and heterogeneous. I can offer the following visualization based on Bergson's descriptions: think of a pipette dropping coloured ink onto a white tile, one on top

of the other, each drop is coloured differently and represents a moment in time, as they overlap the initial droplet and its colour is obscured, but it also effects the colouring of the droplets that overlap it, and is effected by them. The resultant pool of colour, widening and becoming ever more opaque, is what Gawain delves into, moving through layers of memory when he recalls himself swaggering in the saddle and imagines how he will not be able to do this again due to his experiences at the Green Chapel.

[S]ign of my sin – I'll see it as such when I swagger in the saddle – a sad reminder that the frailty of his flesh is man's biggest fault, how the touch of filth taints his tender frame. When my pulse races with passion and pride one look at this love-lace will lessen my ardour.

(Armitage 2007: 111)⁴

Memory is not a hermetically sealed iconic fragment, but is malleable and thus changed by Gawain's present experience as he is changed by his recollection of that moment in the present.

RECONFIGURATION: DEEP TIME AS A CONTEXT FOR DURATION

For Van Gennepe the monstrous guardian (I assert the GK is such a figure) guarantees the 'spiritual passing' (Van Gennepe 1960: 21) which is effectively the subjective change of Gawain, who I assert is in the mode of 'neophyte' (initiate). According to Van Gennepe, a 'neophyte' is one undergoing rites of passage, or threshold experience between distinct phases, or status positions, for example. In the case of the Green Chapel, this is achieved in the maximum tension of impending death, prompting self-reflection and the activation of memory. In contrast, Malcolm Quinn describes 'institutional automata [...] lacking a condition in the present because their members project their will into the future according to the rules that were established in the past' (Malcolm Quinn 2017: 43); this describes the normative habits of perception such as that McPhee critiqued 'human ego sketched on paper and framed in straight lines' (McPhee 1981: 15). At the close of the poem, Gawain, pictured in *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain* (Figure 2) trudging through the temporal landscape, is acquiring, a 'condition in the present'. The process can be elaborated by recalling Bergson's concept of flux and duration which undermines linear clock time and any understanding based on it. Instead, there is a call to the present moment. 'To be conscious, at least in the sense in which the finite individual is conscious, is just to be in time', explains Bergson (Bergson 2012: 526). This call implies what is explicit in Quinn's thought. Gawain is taken out of automata time by his encounter with the GK and brought into duration, into subjective time. Gawain's perception is affected, and automatic action is interrupted by thought. In Bergson, we also see a caution against what can be described as the self-acted-out as a received subject position, such as that Gawain has assumed in relation to chivalry, as Bergson explains 'we "are acted" rather than act ourselves' (Bergson 2008: 231–32) becoming puppets for pre-conceived notions, in this case of masculinity and martial power.

Having the compositional organization of the aforementioned film posters in mind (a vulnerable and unconvincing central figure surrounded by a juxtaposition of distinct spaces with an ominous destination looming above) I looked to the original text to inform *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain*. Observing that the poem shifts between high detail and schematic description

4. Regarding the role of memory here, it stands to reason that Gawain has swaggered in the saddle before, in a way in which he was fully identified with himself as a heroic figure, therefore he is remembering that and understanding that any attempt to do so again is impossible since his idea of that image (that memory) is now altered and affects him differently.

of the land, I wanted to represent that in painting. I achieved an initial ground for the surrounding landscape by pouring paint onto the canvas, closing and opening it like a large Rorschach test and then working over the resultant stain to form mountains, rivers and trees while maintaining something of the chance occurrence and randomness of the initial gesture.

GREEN CHAPEL: EERIE SPACE FOR A WEIRD MONSTER

In *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain* (Figure 3), the Green Chapel is a semi-abstract triangle sitting in the distance as an ominous destination for the youth Gawain; visible in *The Green Chapel* (Figure 5) is an attempt to represent the eerie liminality of that space at a much closer range. Taking a cue from the aforementioned description in the poem, I wanted a uterine interior, but where entrances and exits were uncertain. The initial cavity depicted leads to a back wall lit by eerily green light from an unseen source in the hope of retaining a sense of the unknown. In SGGK, Gawain hears a frightening sound, later distinguishable as the sharpening of a blade. As he approaches the Green Chapel, 'a blood chilling noise [...] like the scream of a scythe being ground on a stone' (Armitage 2007: 101). Feeling discomfort, Gawain protests that he is being made to wait; 'emerge this moment and he needs to be fast – it's now or it's never' (2007: 102). The voice of the GK is heard to say 'abide' (a command to wait with religious connotations). That exchange is particularly relevant to Gawain's subjectivity and personal agency as I have conceived of it. In the remote setting of the Green Chapel, outside of the conditioning of courtly interiors and away from the influence and intervention of any other authority, he is in the present, in such a place as a result of his own will and without any audience for what is about to happen. The result is an acute sense of himself in space, his mortality and tension in the moment. His protest to get it over with (he is awaiting his own beheading) is counterintuitive, to my mind it seems to say, I have come from a dead state (the controlled life at court) and wish to return to another (actual death). In that sense the command to 'abide' from the GK is the break between those predictable states of stultifying comfort and strikes me as a command to remain present. Thinking of the GK as a tester of men and portent at the opening of SGGK and his subsequent (initial) absence from the scene of Gawain's approach to the chapel, I was reminded of a painting by Rembrandt, *Belshassar's Feast* (1636–38), which depicts a divine hand writing on the wall of the horrified king Belshassar. 'Hebrew script: "Mene, mene tekel upharsim" [...] the Jewish prophet Daniel was brought in. He told the King that the meaning was clear and that there was no escape: "You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting"' (see The National Gallery 2022: n.pag.).

In the original medieval codex, the Pearl manuscript (held at the British Library) which houses SGGK with the other poems of the anonymous author, the story of Belshassar's Feast and the writing on the wall is referenced and accompanied by an illustration 'a centrepiece that reflects in its primary images the dual nature of manuscript textuality: the act of production (a hand with stylus) on the one hand, and the act of consumption (Daniel reading the mysterious script) on the other' (Reichardt 1997: 125–27). This textual link and my prior knowledge of the Rembrandt image helped to resolve my painting, with the addition of the green hand writing, the word abide (in its middle English spelling, abyde) on the rock face at the entrance to the cavity. The implied criticality of this addition (with its iterations in the bible story, the

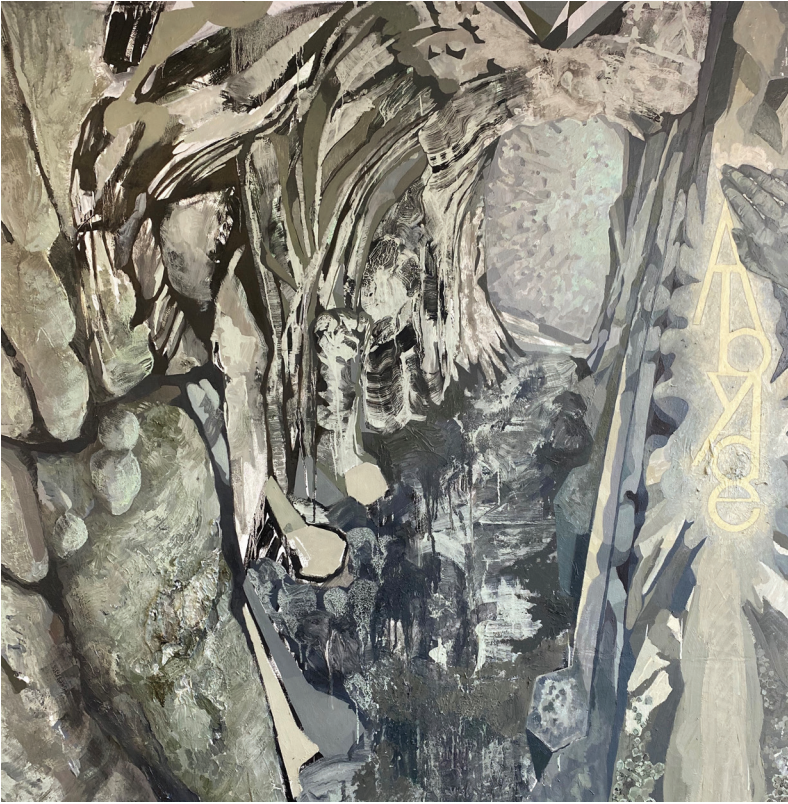


Figure 5: Michael Eden, *The Green Chapel*, 2021. Oil on canvas. 2 m × 2 m.
© M. H. Eden.

codex and the painting as well as the saying, *the writing is on the wall*) relates to the function of the monstrous guardian (Van Gennepe 1960: 21). The liminal space weakens the subject's psychic commitment to normative behaviour (being the same); the monster is prompted to actual change. The GK emerges in my practice as a partial manifestation (a hand, a head) rather than a fully realized figure, an attempt to remain on the line between absence and presence.

CONFLATION, FIGURE AND SPACE: REPRESENTING THE GK

Taking these filmic and theoretical explorations into account, I searched for a way to represent the monstrous figure of the GK. As the creature struck me as an interrupting force, I was drawn to the idea of a three-dimensional object, a sculpture which literally intrudes into the viewer's physical space. Imagining always that it was the maximum point of otherness and inhumanity that I was keen to represent, that being where the severed head of the giant green man is evidently un-dead, still animated and thus undefeated. This led me to imagine from early on the finished piece being displayed on the floor recalling where it falls after Gawain has cleaved through the neck and after the 'king's men' have kicked it along 'as it clatters past' (Armitage 2007: 23) in hasty mocking. That moment of disrespect is in great contrast to the dumbfounded silence of the

established knights when the GK looked at them each in the face and they sat like statues, waiting for another to accept his challenge.

Because of the challenge to the court, Auguste Rodin's *Head of Saint John the Baptist* (1887) struck me as a fitting artistic antecedent (see Astor 2007). The severed head of the Baptist served as a symbol of rebuke to the corruption of Herod's court. Moreover, Rodin's humanistic aesthetic 'a sympathy for human frailty, aspirations, fears, conflicts, joys, sorrows. Rodin's [...] expression of eternal tragedy' (Elsen 1958: 250) allowed me to think about drawing out sympathetic aspects of the GK in his role of tester and redeemer. While I did not delude myself that I would achieve such a level of skill – 'Rodin was superior in the interpretation of physical beauty and of psychic unrest' (Goris 1957: 11) – I nevertheless felt that emulating Rodin's methods would elevate my own.

Rodin depicts the saint's head narratively in time rather than as a traditional bust, as in he presents a fragment of an inferred narrative. It is as if the head has been placed on the platter following beheading and brought to Salome as per her demand, lying on its side where it slumped, the flesh of the neck indicating the wound. This activation of the biblical account of the saint's beheading and the representation of the head as it may have been in the moment of presentation to Salome was attractive given the GK's connection to time in my thesis. Rodin was known to work with a solid lump of malleable clay (see Victoria and Albert Museum 2021a), in concentrated bursts of energy, often observing a model and revising as he proceeded.

Following this as best I could, I sculpted the head of the GK, first deciding on one-third larger than life size, then modelling and forming by hand the general shape of the head and wounded neck from a large solid lump of grey clay. Lacking a suitable model, I kept images of the saint to hand including Rodin's representation as well as, *St John the Baptist* (1457) by Donatello (see Victoria and Albert Museum 2021b). The text SGGK describes a fierce yet well-formed figure with a 'handsome head' (Armitage 2007: 23), a full beard, and noble bearing. I wanted the hair to be wild and the expression to be difficult to parse, holding in my mind an image of quizzical staring eyes, thick features and an agape mouth (a reference to horror). Working with the adaptable medium meant that adjustments could be continuously made until the object was acceptable. The colour was painstakingly selected before modelling, as I was convinced that the wrong green would undermine any finished piece and the seriousness that I had decided was necessary to make the artefact successful. The glaze I selected is matt and in natural light appears very dark, the colour referencing, to my mind, damp moss that grows on rocks and bark; greenness is the most obvious way that the GK is linked to nature.

Additionally, to inform the expression I obtained an image of Caradoc, *Caractacus at the Tribunal of Claudius at Rome* (1792) (see British Museum 2022). This etching by Andrew Birrell depicts the defiant first-century chieftain of the Catuvellanui (Celtic nation) delivering a speech to the Roman senate following his capture. Caradoc's speech celebrated his stubborn defiance of their authority and surprisingly saved his life (see print| British Museum 2022). Caradoc is depicted as a fierce, wild-eyed prince challenging a supposedly superior court; this helped with the intimidating aspect of the monster's expression (see Figures 6, 7 and 9). In both the example of Caradoc and *Saint John the Baptist*, an outsider (and individual) challenges the power of a supposedly superior authority, the former the court of the Roman Emperor Claudius and the latter the court of Herod Antipas (King Herod). I had intended the GK's representation to emphasize form, time and the touch of the artist.

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Figure 6: Michael Eden, Detail of Work in Progress, 2020. Wet clay. © M. H. Eden.



Figure 7: Michael Eden, Detail of Left Profile, 2020. Wet clay. © M. H. Eden.



Figure 8: Michael Eden, *Showing the Break*, 2020. Fired ceramic. © M. H. Eden.

However, the most beneficial occurrence was a chance result of the firing process; unlike Rodin who often had casts made by technicians of his work, I opted to hollow the original sculpture somewhat and fire it. During the firing, the sculpture broke dramatically, and in so doing, it formed a cavity. Initially disappointed that the wounded neck was obliterated, I came to see the trace of the break as a record of contingent unpredictable time into the sculpture, while the cavity made reference to the Green Chapel entrance, also producing pleasing fault lines around the cranium which further made reference to rough landscape features by revealing the textures of the material under the surface (Figure 8). The appropriation of chance (or failure) helped produce a conflation ‘complete, morphed, sensation for the viewer’ (Smith 2017: n.pag.) between the figurative and the spatial. I would not have had the confidence to claim this occurrence as a legitimate aspect of the work if not for the academic influences and intention (developed as a result) for the artefact to embody an aspect of contingent time. The accident for example in that respect was a superior gesture to, but complemented, my decision to present an inferred moment in a narrative and to use an expressive sculpture register in the making of the head. To take ownership of this occurrence, I decided on the red silk to indicate the blood of the knight and to emphasize the drama of the moment represented (Figure 10).

Such an outcome, an ‘artefact’ that at least in the mind of the artist makes claims to ‘embody’ certain knowledge (recalling Mäkelä 2007: 157), is a conclusion of sorts. A response to the texts that have informed it, and an indicator of the artist’s ability to employ the necessary processes to realize it. The extra information that accompanies the pictures of the artwork, as aforementioned, is not an attempt to fix meaning, but to place the object in a dialogue or constellation of ideas enriched by the accompanying paintings that belong to the same thematic body of work.

I have tried to expose as fully as possible the inspirations inclusive of theory, film and artworks that have made it possible for me to make sense of and respond creatively to a complex composite monster.



Figure 9: Michael Eden, *Left Profile After Firing*, 2020. © M. H. Eden.



Figure 10: Michael Eden, *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight*, 2020. Fired ceramic and red silk. © M. H. Eden.

A monster that has in turn allowed me to better understand those ideas. These two directions of adaptation and the uncertain or confused locus of what begat what are an aspect of making as research. In this case the scars of an unintended chance occurrence which undermined plans and intentions felt subsequently apt. I submit *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight* (2020) as a speculative, creative conclusion on the ambiguous monster.

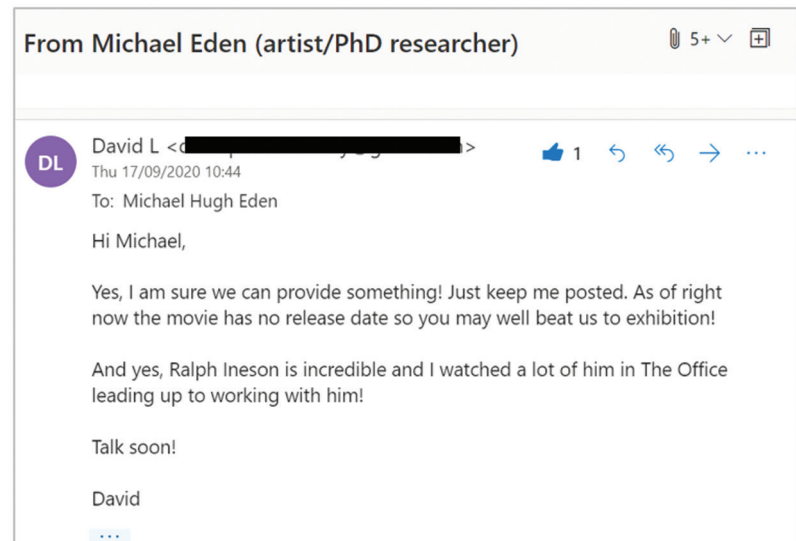
APPENDIX 1

Correspondence from director David Patrick Lowery on 28 February 2022 confirming the content of an Instagram message he sent in 2021.



APPENDIX 2

Correspondence from David Lowery 2020.



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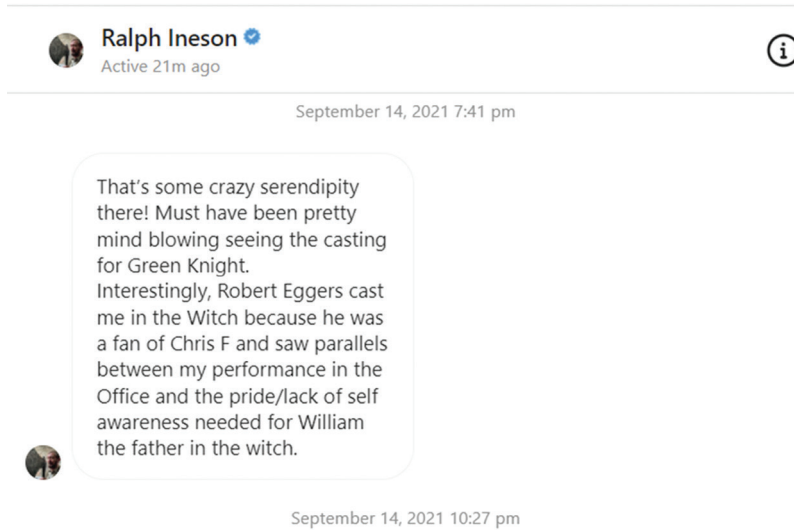
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APPENDIX 3

Correspondence from Ralph Ineson in 2021 via Instagram.



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