

## Star Signs

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The universe's rate of expansion is accelerating, as the latest revision of the cosmological Big Bang proposes, with the moth-like stars not only eventually flickering out but also being dragged faster and faster apart by some—as yet—inscrutable dark tide. Communication and interaction between the cosmic citizenry and all the buzz of astronomical information are inexorably diminishing to an unqualified zero. Everything will ultimately—with the most harrowing sense of finality in that adverb—disperse into an inert and absolute cold, silent darkness. Even the most nihilistic avowals of absurdism seem barely a match for this prospect of cosmic extinction. 'We are', as the narrator of one of John Updike's last valedictory and sullenly autumnal short stories puts it, 'riding a pointless explosion to nowhere'.<sup>1</sup> Even if scheduled for an unthinkably remote future (but not an incalculable one), can we not help but take this cosmic predicament personally? Is it just a matter of metaphysical hubris to insist we feel ruefully demoralised by this cosmic fate, as if our own individual or even species finitude wasn't cruel enough?

After all, what we could call modern science (since Galileo, since Darwin, since Lyell, including Hawking, Wheeler, Penrose and so forth) has accustomed us to psychologically tolerate those deep and vast epochs of time and space across which are accrued geological, meteorological, evolutionary and astronomical data and their mathematical progression far beyond the span of any single lifetime. But as Updike's narrator laments, he has now been robbed of any sense of eternity, even if it's one that he'd already come to begrudgingly accept didn't include himself as an individual. Now, we're not even getting that desperate 'new age' consolation that our personal death is just a transit to other non-human biological or atomic assemblages, other ecologies, or other data uploads. Cemeteries—even the mass graves of a pitilessly corpse-grinding earth—may not be inert places of death but rather zones of other teeming forms of life and energy, microbial and molecular. But even the afterlife of cemeteries doesn't survive this cosmic whimpering end. Nothing does: whether as a genomic archive, as an uploaded consciousness, or as AI. In the face of this inevitable annihilation, Updike's terminal narrator has nothing much left than to peevishly grumble about the entropic freefall of his social and sexual life.

But there's no such grumbling resignation in Michaela Gleave's likewise fatalistic utterances. Being reminded that 'WE ARE MADE OF STARDUST' through an announcement in neon, planted astride the top floor of an urban façade, seems a reassuring prompt to keep the faith, as if it

might be pronounced by some benevolent broadcasting agency at the end of the world. Viewed through the lens of the cosmology it cites, it's a utopian epitaph. Yet also—viewed through the postmodern conceptual signage of Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and Martin Creed, which it also defers to—it crowns the building like a corporate slogan. Elsewhere, etched in reflective plastic film covering a display window in a pedestrian arcade, the words 'OCEANIC FEELING' might invoke the arcane psychoanalytic and psychic term describing an ecstatic intuition of eternity, but at its scale of advertising rhetoric it more effortlessly simulates a promotional campaign for a wellness brand.<sup>2</sup> But there's no product for sale behind the sign, just as the invocation of stardust turns on and off with a power switch. It's the façade of Hollywood or Las Vegas stardust. Let's not mistake these for camp trivialisations of cosmic conceits. Their rhetorical irony instead suggests a problematic ambiguity with the optimism they try to voice, acknowledging the annihilation of identity entailed in the euphoria that these slogans promise.

The gnomic neon aphorism 'FEAR EATS THE SOUL' is the title of a politically charged 1973 Rainer Werner Fassbinder movie. But as the words climb into an eye-catching luminous arc over a desolate industrial-gothic setting at Hobart's Dark Mofu festival, they leave that reference far behind to become the giant maw of a fairground entrance to nightmare alley. And, also, the yawning gape of a sawtooth trap. What kind of manic ride or sinister sideshow could this histrionic warning advertise? A cautionary emblem writ large and lonely against a black sky, the sign looks as if it were the ghastly but perversely alluring remnant of an abandoned fun park, a gateway to the twilight zone. And like the Cheshire cat's disembodied smile, it delineates the open grimacing mouth of Luna Park but without the clown face: a hell-mouth consuming its Dante, emblazoned with a motto that may as well declare 'abandon all hope, ye who enter here'.<sup>3</sup> The soul will indeed be eaten.

The incandescent signs in Gleave's dark skies don't always need to spell out words. Sixty-three black and white illustrations in *Under One Sun* (2017) chart different planetary configurations in concentric circles, drawn from an astronomical almanac, in their orbit around the sun. Each graph displays the planet's positions as they were on the calendar dates of sixty-three recorded massacres of indigenous peoples in Australia, listed in Wikipedia. With a caustic wit, the diagrams are arranged in rows on the wall to look like targets on a shooting range, peppered with bullet holes. But they also oddly resemble anachronistic schoolbook imagery of the atom as a nucleus encircled by charged electrons: as if this schematic kind of illustration were as outdated, as historically lost, as the incidents it records.<sup>4</sup> The solar system

seems to have this inventory of human violence inscribed within it like an archaic text, a history that is in effect written in the stars.

That title, *Under One Sun*, suggests a sort of commonality of planetary and of human fate. A communal solidarity. But the commonality here entails the recognition of collective guilt for—in the timescales of modern science—events beyond one’s own lifetime; and yet it also imputes a cosmic or at least solar culpability.<sup>5</sup> The sun, our bright star and Lucifer, is the bullseye of this dark prospect; and its criminal mastermind. Astronomy veers into astrology, as the planets not only commemorate these disasters but also appear to predict them, forming a pattern that seems designed or prescribed and not just descriptive. The music of the spheres becomes a death toll. That’s a grim poetic twist. But there’s something more twisted, with a Möbius-like warp of fantasy and fact, that can be coaxed out of this work. Even with the codebreaker that reveals the correlation of astronomical and vicious colonial history, one can’t help but imagine another, even stranger, arcane significance to these diagrams. As if we were glimpsing the enigmatic glyphs of a hidden and ancient language. Should we suspect a secret, esoteric knowledge camouflaged within these eerie astral cyphers? Or are these, even more ominously, the dashboard dials of an alien observatory, a control panel locked onto time settings that indifferently determine events in terrestrial and human history?

Gleave’s neon and pyrotechnical messaging are telegraphic broadcasts into the night, like the beam of a lighthouse scanning the horizon just in case there may be a vessel out there, transiting that oceanic feeling, and that will spot this reassuring or reminder signal.<sup>6</sup> But I’d say the horizon is also being surveyed with more purpose than this. Think of the cryptic intoning of those cult-like choirs garbed as anonymous monks or wizards in phosphorescent cowls who perform *A Galaxy of Suns* (2016-ongoing). This is a choral work that depends specifically on the geolocation of the performers matched to the rising or setting of stars along an arc of the horizon. Each singer’s utterance is prompted by single electronic reference tones heard only by them for eight seconds in their hidden earbuds, which they then duplicate vocally. Those reference tones are generated by the program of a smart-phone app that searches a database of 118, 000 stars to identify the stars appearing or disappearing along the choir’s horizon during the performance. The vocal range is measured against the temperature of the star: base notes are matched to red, slow burning stars and the soprano register to hot blue ones. The timbre and sonority of the voices may be human, but the rhythm, pitch and duration are all determined by the non-human motion of the sidereal sky. We might approach this as a posthuman musical composition in which the stars, the choir, the rare metals in the phone, the slivery costumes, the Bluetooth signal, the electrical impulses of

the search engine, the vibrations in the audience's inner ear are all materials meeting halfway in the universe, copulating as companion species in an affective engagement, issuing sounds of rapture without meaning.

That's a charming thought, indeed rapturous. But it's haunted by the suspicion that the performers could also be mediums channeling the dead in a séance or shamans promoting the gods in a trance; or, even more ominously again, oracular ventriloquist dolls staging thrown voices from unearthly—extraterrestrial—sources. It's hard not to hear in this hypnoid chanting by a group of initiates the unsettling, untranslatable solemnity of an alien message—a signal of welcome, of warning or an augury—inscribed in the rotation of the stars. After all, so many science fiction movies portray first contact as being heralded with a musical phrase (mysteriously beautiful, bafflingly complex or menacingly terse: these are legacies of a utopian modernist avowal of music as a universal language).<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this signal is comparable to the double-take that astronomers had when hearing the vigorous, regular strobe-like beat in the first radio-astronomical detection of a pulsar. For a brief moment they felt they were hearing the emissions from a remote extraterrestrial beacon, flashing every 1.3 seconds as if this were a code. Yet what they were hearing was just as extraordinary: the radio flares of a new type of star, discovered in the deepest reaches of space.<sup>8</sup>

Michaela Gleave's art is not short of cosmic ambition as it sweeps out into an accelerating universe to catch this flare, plucking at what Yeats called in melancholic longing 'golden apples of the sun'.<sup>9</sup> Whether sparkling, flaming, reflecting, beaming, strobing—the materials of her installations and performances can't stop emitting signs of life. Even when they also signal death or an alien unknown.

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<sup>1</sup> John Updike, 'The Accelerating Expansion of the Universe', *Harpers Magazine*, October 2004, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'oceanic feeling' was coined by literary mystic Romain Rolland in his 1923 correspondence with Sigmund Freud, who then in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) diagnosed the sensation as a mode of infantile regression to—or vestigial sensation of—a stage in which the ego is not yet differentiated from the mother's body or from the milieu of other objects in the world. In Rolland's usage (from Vedantic sources), the ecstasy the term petitions results from a submersion of ego subjectivity into a collective state, which later manifests in Rolland's taste for Stalinist communism with the flavor of a religious mystical conviction.

<sup>3</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, Canto III, 9. The words are inscribed over the portal to the vestibule of Hell.

<sup>4</sup> The comparison is anachronistic because they resemble the diagrammatic atomic structure sketched by Ernest Rutherford in 1911 of electron particles orbiting a massive nucleus, as if held at their radiuses by a kind of planetary gravitational velocity. Just by the way, in the revolutionary developments of quantum mechanics through the 1920s the particle image of the electron in orbit shifted into Louis de Broglie's standing wave model of 1924 and Erwin Schrödinger's wave function equation of 1926. Max Born in the same year proposed that wave as an array of probabilities. Werner Heisenberg calculated the array as a mathematical matrix charting the electron as a quantum state or cloud of probabilistic values (quantum jumps) between energy and angular momentum: which is much harder, if not impossible (according to Heisenberg, in a notorious attack on Schrödinger), to graphically visualise. The solar system diagram

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however, because of its conceptual accessibility, remained for much of the century an elementary educational tool in physics. That graphic model also persisted in the popular imagination as nostalgia for a classical harmony (and ultimate equivalence) between microcosm and macrocosm, epitomised in the closing scene of the 1957 sci-fi movie *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (directed by Jack Arnold) when, as the protagonist (victim to a mutation caused by radioactive contamination) shrinks down to atomic scale, the camera zooms out (like the zoom in the Eames's film *Powers of Ten*, 1968-1977) into a sequence of dissolves through a solar system to a spiral nebula. In this apotheosis, the protagonist waxes, 'The unbelievably small and the unbelievable vast eventually meet like the closing of a gigantic circle...All this vast majesty of creation, it had to mean something...To God there is no zero'. A trace of that cosmic deism is present in the graphic inspiration for Gleave's *Under One Sun*, although perhaps more parodic than as a profession of faith.

<sup>5</sup> Gleave says that the title of *Under One Sun* came from Max Dupain's famous photograph, *The Sunbaker* (1937): the hero-shot of interwar white Australian youthful and well-built athletic masculine sensuality, ironically posed and scaled in the frame as a somnolent if sweltering giant with a sculptural patina of bronze, and as unconscious of his providential world of beach and surf as a narcoleptic cat is, basking in the sun. Although that figure retreats into the documentary background of Gleave's process, it haunts the work as the universalized eugenic culprit of the crime scenes inventoried in these charts.

<sup>6</sup> The astronomer's gaze is a mirror to the lighthouse beam: a gaze into sublime distances of space as well as time which peculiarly requires geographic isolation from the world's polluting noise or light and which, contrary to its objectivity as the pursuit of knowledge, also is a form of pure voyeuristic subjectivity. The predicament of the lone subjectivity of the astronomer stargazing by technical artifice into deep time as well as deep space was alluded to in Gleave's *Our Frozen Moment* (2012) in which, garbed like monks beneath anonymous black wet weather hoods and cloaks, the audience circumnavigated a bare, raised arena in a darkened vault-like chamber that was lashed by an artificial rainstorm, a storm turned ironically into a simulation of ancient solar ritual. The rain drops—lit by a strobe flash timed to the torrent—appeared to be glimmering and captured in a moment, hanging motionless in the dark shapeless void, incandescing like distant stars—but within the lightning blink of a god-like eye that was performing its primordial act of creation: let there be light...if only for a fraction of a second. In a moment that was an effect of theatrical darkness and the artifice of the storm (an appropriate tumult for a sublime encounter), the viewer's subjective vision was captured and captivated by a staged starlight.

<sup>7</sup> The most celebrated example would be the five tones used to communicate with the aliens in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), (in solfège: re, me, do, do, so with the second do an octave lower), composed by John Williams. The octave-spanning three notes trumpeted at the opening of Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* used in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) are indelibly identified as the ecstatic and prophetic fanfare for alien contact. The piercing radio emission from the 'black monolith' that sends to astronauts on their odyssey remains an unintelligible signal, 'its purpose and origin unknown' as the script declares, but would still constitute a mode of musical interface between species. That unnerving horn-like bellow emitted by the Martian tripods in Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005), fabricated by sound designer Michael Babcock synthesising the didgeridoo with the djembe (an African drum), serves its communicative purpose as a threatening bestial war cry, reminiscent of the triumphal roar of T-Rex in Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993). Gleave's celestial choir could well be placed in the genealogy of these sonic overtures for sky gods or alien visitation.

<sup>8</sup> The first pulsar, given the uninspiring title of PSR B1919+21, was detected in 1967 by PhD student Jocelyn Bell Burnell at the far more inspiringly named Interplanetary Scintillation Array in Cambridge, UK. The radio period of 1.3373 seconds and regular burst of 0.04 seconds seemed initially too regular to be a natural radio emission, and it was nicknamed by Bell Burnell and her colleagues as LGM-1, the acronym for 'little green men'. The astronomer Thomas Gold and astrophysicist Fred Hoyle demonstrated that this stellar object was a rotating neutron star emitting electromagnetic radiation at its two poles. It has to be mentioned that Bell Burnell was iniquitously overlooked when the 1974 Nobel Prize was awarded for research into pulsars.

<sup>9</sup> William Butler Yeats, 'The Song of Wandering Aengus'.