I’m not sure that this is much of a ‘new direction’ in the study of ecohorror and the ecogothic. I’m going to be drawing on well-established ideas, of the uncanny, of the relationship between humans and nature, of the sublime and the awe-ful. In preparing this paper I have reconsidered some of my ideas, but that the notions are still in flux, so bear with me and maybe we can discuss these notions further.

What I had intended to talk to you about is the way that the English landscape can form a source of sublime horror, particularly through a shift in perception from the idyllic to the ominous. My original thoughts were about those, admittedly rare, scenes in which there is a shift from an individual or small group of people experiencing a pleasant day in the outdoors, when something shifts, and the environment itself becomes threatening, or maybe unwelcoming is a better way of phrasing it. The sensation that I was particularly thinking of was a sudden awareness of human insignificance in relation to the natural world. It is not that the landscape itself becomes personified, or actively aggressive, or that a threat within the landscape is revealed, but rather that the audience and the characters are given the sense of being apart from the natural world, and that the environment is unconcerned with their experiences, and even their existence.

My problem has been in finding, within what turned out to be the unexpectedly limited time available to me, the ideal clip to represent the sort of thing that I was thinking of.

Stephen Poliakoff’s Glorious 39 presents a scene that is very close. [Use clip from Amazon Video] But it begins with a pleasant picnic on high ground overlooking a clichéd, beautiful landscape of Southern England, a landscape of fields bounded by trees, demonstrating the way that the country has apparently been shaped by human activity, all
while the only humans around are our at-leisure protagonists. In other words, this is a countryside that has been shaped by the work of others, but that only the results of the work can now be seen. Most of the people drift away, leaving our main character to doze for a while in the sun. When she awakens, there is nothing that is obviously different about the environment, but there has been a shift. We as viewers are aware of the enormous emptiness of the landscape around her, particularly as we switch from a mid-shot, to a longer shot, to one where she is small and alone in the vast landscape. Sound-wise, there is no emotional guidance from music, and we are aware of the sounds of nature around her, particularly of the intensifying whoosh of the wind in the trees, but the sky is blue, the sunlight is golden and the birds are singing. This is an environment that does not care that a baby left with her while she slept has disappeared along with everyone else.

Something of a similar scene can be found in E.M. Forster’s ‘The Story of a Panic’, in which the narrator reports:

Then the terrible silence fell upon us again. I was now standing up and watching a cat’s-paw of wind that was running down one of the ridges opposite, turning the light green to dark as it travelled. A fanciful feeling of foreboding came over me; so I turned away, to find to my amazement, that all the others were also on their feet watching it too.

It is not possible to describe coherently what happened next: but I, for one, am not ashamed to confess that, though the fair blue sky was above me, and the green spring woods beneath me, and the kindest of friends around me, yet I became terribly frightened, more frightened than I ever wish to become again, frightened in a way I never have known either before or after. And in the eyes of the others, too, I saw blank, expressionless fear, while their mouths strove in vain to speak and their hands to gesticulate. Yet, all around us were prosperity, beauty and
peace, and all was motionless, save the cat’s-paw of wind, now travelling up the ridge on which we stood.


Again, we are presented with a sudden sense of fear within the environment, an environment that should be pleasant, but which carries a sense of dread. Admittedly, Forster presents the image of that ‘cat’s-paw of wind’ stirring the trees, moving towards the people, which could motivate a sense of approaching danger. And this is not an English landscape, but a foreign one, and I want to suggest that there is something particularly concerning about such a panic arising within the English countryside.

There is a similarity between Forster’s characters and the picnicking schoolgirls of Picnic at Hanging Rock. Peter Weir’s film version delivers a particularly haunting vision of the pleasures of these Edwardian schoolgirls, raised in a European-style boarding school seemingly dropped intact into the Australian landscape. They too share a picnic which offers pleasure, and urges drowsiness in the beauty and warmth of the countryside. Nothing changes about the light, or even in the attitude of most of the girls, but four of them are urged to climb Hanging Rock, as is one of the mistresses, and only one girl is seen again. But Weir’s film makes it clear that part of what is at work here is that the environment and the people in it are alien to each other; the haunting sounds of Georges Zamfir’s pan pipes signalling restfulness accompanied with a sense, particularly on original release, of unfamiliarity, particularly as the pan pipes are neither native Australian nor do they fit with the Anglo- and Francophile tendencies and backgrounds of the human characters. The displacement of space and time that is experienced, and that is marginally more explicit (but only marginally) in the original novel, suggests that the
environment and its invaders are rejecting each other, and the more ancient environment wins.

Similarly, Forster’s story is partly about a clash of cultures, about English people in the wrong place, or at least in a place that is not theirs. I also think about the opening of the early documentary-style horror film *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, which establishes the natural environment of the titular creek and its surrounding waterlands, before introducing the activities of humans within this environment. We are encouraged to appreciate the natural beauty, before being presented with the almost clichéd image of a blond-haired little boy running through cornfields as the sun begins to get lower in the sky. He is about some business, not running in fear. Then a weird animal howl from the woodlands that border the fields makes him stop, and turn to look around, and the unease settles in. But, again, here we are presented with invaders in a landscape that is not theirs, and we could talk about a sense that they are being rejected by nature, that it is pushing back at their encroachment. Only here the nature that is pushing back does so through the specific, material form of a sasquatch-type creature, a primeval inhabitant of the area, rather than through the mysterious absorption of the modern humans that is presented in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

But when we turn to the English countryside we are not dealing with the European as invader. This is a landscape that has been shaped by human hands for millennia, particularly when we talk about the landscape of Southern England, which is the one which is most often presented as representative of England and Englishness. This is a landscape of rolling, cultivated fields, scattered towns and villages, borders of woodland rather than forests. The element of age is in the age of human habitation rather than in the age of the environment; this is not the sublime landscape of the Lakes, the moors, or even the Fens, which present something untamed. And yet there are these scenes that twist the landscape and urge a sense of the human apartness from nature.
Consider this example, from one of the BBC *Ghost Story for Christmas* productions, ‘Lost Hearts’. [CLIP] The reason that this clip does not entirely fit with what I was looking for is that there is a shift in the Vaughan Williams music, a music itself associated with Englishness and the continuity of native English culture, to introduce a more ominous tone following the joyful introduction. There is also the sound of the voices, apparently in the trees, whispering warnings to the boy. But once again, we have the figure diminished in the landscape, dwarfed by an environment which may be shaped by people, but which is otherwise depopulated.

It is this sense of depopulation that is, I think, part of the cause of unease here. Landowners of the past may have had their land shaped so that the lives and habitations of their labourers were hidden from view, particularly in the landscape paintings which, as John Berger made clear for us, acted to signal ownership of and mastery over the land. However, in these films and programmes this absence of people speaks of the ultimate absence of people. It reminds me of the depopulated landscapes of the BBC’s postapocalyptic series *Survivors*, particularly the original 1970s version with its duller, grainier film image as opposed to the vibrant digital HD of the 2000s iteration. The end of human effort, of human activity, was emphasised by the absence of human presence, by the loneliness of the characters within the visual frame, where you might expect to see the hint of movement in the distance from traffic, or work in the fields, or planes in the sky.

Peter Hutchings has discussed what he termed the ‘uncanny landscape’, which is ‘suffused with a sense of profound and sometimes apocalyptic anxiety; it is also a landscape of a comprehensive dispossession and vacancy’ (Hutchings, 2004, p.29). It is a place where human activity is displaced, ultimately unimportant, where even the thousands of years of human alteration of the landscape make way to more ancient powers. In this landscape, Hutchings argues, the heritage drama’s identification of landscape with national identity is not only questioned, but it can disappear, as ‘This is not
a landscape where we find ourselves as modern national subjects; it is instead a landscape where that sense of identity is diminished or removed entirely' with the representation of human individual or social agency as ultimately powerless (Hutchings, 2004, p.29).

In particular, this can be seen to emphasise the temporary nature of any specific way of life, and the way that any perceived current stability only conceals long-standing, underlying dangers and powers. Roy Strong has claimed that Hardy’s depiction of the landscape in *The Return of the Native* ‘catches something fundamental in the English perception of their countryside: the primeval timelessness of the landscape’ (Strong, 2012, p. 156), which Hardy described as giving ‘ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New’ (Hardy, 1978, p. 56). The ‘dark heritage’ version of this feeling, to take up a term suggested by Helen Wheatley in her *Gothic Television*, is the sublime sensation that the rural landscape is not a reassuring indicator of permanence, nor a comforting example of man’s dominance over nature in the form of agriculture and planned parkland, but rather a symbol of the thin skin of civilisation which covers the deep and ancient horrors of the world.

As Billig argues, ‘A nation is more than an imagined community of people, for a place - a homeland - also has to be imagined' (1995, p.74). Landscape is intimately connected to notions of nation, as the nation is taken to be a combination of physical and cultural geography. It is the human connected to the physical location, often linking the characteristics associated with the geographical qualities of the nation, or the region, with the qualities that make up the particular national, or regional, identity. However, there are also the more ‘mystical’ associations that develop between particular landscapes and national identities.

In the case of England, one of the key landscape types is woodland, which is significant to a number of the adaptations considered here. The initial association of woodland with Englishness was practical, as English trees provided the wood to build the
fleet which protected England from invasion and spread its power around the world. This practical association grew to become more mystical, through legends of woodland outlaws and tales of the greenwood as refuge, or through ‘the theories of Richard Payne Knight, for whom “native woods” were “creation’s boast and pride”’ (Hayman, 2003, p. 95). The type of woodland became important; Richard Hayman records that ‘Ruskin identified a particularly English form of woodland, with “sunny glade, and various foliage, and dewy sward” quite distinct from the black forests of other nations.’ (Hayman, 2003, p. 95) In this way, not only was woodland made a central part of the idea of Englishness, but it was emphasised that there was a very specific expression of the natural world that was English.

But that is the woodland, which offers so many opportunities for concealment and revelation. Indeed, as M.R.James himself wrote in ‘A Vignette’, ‘To be sure, it is difficult, in anything like a grove, to be quite certain that nobody is making a screen out of a tree trunk and keeping it between you and him as he moves round it and you walk on’. But this again presupposes an inhabited landscape, even if the inhabitants are not human, and may not actually be alive.

So, as I must draw this ramble to a slightly unnerved close, I would like to propose that there is something even more important about the horrible loneliness of the open landscape. The vistas of the rolling fields of Southern England that are so often used to represent a bucolic Englishness, are, in their depopulated presentation, disquieting. I would suggest that this disquiet arises from the very fact that these landscapes have been used for so long and so successfully to represent an idyllic, comforting, rural England. The presentation of a lone character in a way that emphasises their loneliness within a natural environment where the sun continues to shine and the birds to sing emphasises that nature continues without us, that the vastness of nature does not care whether our individual actions succeed or fail. Nature was there before us, it will be there after us, and
particularly after each of us as individuals is gone. And that, I would suggest, is the sublime horror of the English countryside.