

Slime ethics: Lovecraft and becoming-alien

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„Cthuloid ethics is essential for accelerating the emergence and encounter with the radical Outside. Cthuloid ethics can be characterized by the question ‘what happens next?’ when it is posed by the other side or the radical outsider rather than the human and its faculties.”

Reza Negarestani, Cyclonopedia

Introduction

In recent years H.P. Lovecraft gathered a lot of interest from modern philosophers, most visibly in the writings of Graham Harman and other speculative realists like Reza Negarestani or Eugene Thacker. His writings were also, perhaps unexpectedly, taken up by queer and feminist theorists like Patricia MacCormack or Donna Haraway. It could be argued that this influence became set in stone with the collection of critical essays called „The Age of Lovecraft” published by Minnesota University Press in 2016. What is often overlooked is that this recent venture comes years after Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari summoned the spirit of Lovecraft in their groundbreaking *A Thousand Plateaus* back in 1972¹. Why this renaissance then? What would make one claim that, given that almost a century has passed since his death, we live in the age of Lovecraft?

The reason stems from more than just academic legitimisation given to the writer in 2005 when Library of America published a collection of his stories. We return to Lovecraft because our world seems to increasingly resemble the universe as he saw it in his weird tales. Influenced by the theories of atomism and mechanistic materialism Lovecraft came to describe a universe that is devoid of any notions of intelligent design and ruled by mechanisms outside of human understanding². The human being is then reduced to a mere coincidence in the workings of the universe, stripped of any grandiose illusions as to the meaning of his existence.

But in Lovecraft’s case this is not merely the nihilism that pervaded the atmosphere of his times. His own brand of cosmic indifferentism purports an ontological meaninglessness that is derived out of maddening knowledge brought by modern science, that makes the human existence equal to the existence of the non-human and inseparably links them. The descent into madness of his characters is often provoked by an increasing realisation of their own unimportance, but also by

¹ This being omitted is especially baffling since all philosophers I previously mentioned could be, without too much of a stretch, described as post-deleuzian.

² S.T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, Wildside Press, 2003

the recognition of what happens beneath the world they directly experience, of the entangled workings of the universe that they cannot comprehend. Here the incomprehensible knowledge becomes the source of horror, whether in the experience of the universe at large or in the encounter with one of the cthuloid entities. This is also where I intend to look for a kind of ethics that deals both with the inhuman and the human Other, the ethics of slime.

But before we go further I need to acknowledge the uncomfortable facets of Lovecraft's personality. It is common knowledge by now that the writer from Providence was, in fact, a racist, a misogynist and a xenophobe, to say the least. Even though some literary scholars tried to show that his disgust was fuelled by repressed issues of gender and sexuality their work is largely said to be much too speculative. Neither is his change of mind late into his life enough to redeem his years of hatred that his work is inseparable from. With that in mind I have to say prior to going further that this article is by no means apologetic towards his political views. We would do well to remember Barthes' claim that the author is dead and the meaning of art is out of his hands. What I will attempt here is a subversive reading of Lovecraft as prose against Lovecraft as a person, extricating the ethical from the aesthetic.

The Other as alien

Consider the two following descriptions that Lovecraft's characters give of their encounters with the creatures of the Cthulhu mythos:

„It was everywhere — a gelatin — a slime — yet it had shapes, a thousand shapes of horror beyond all memory.

There were eyes — and a blemish. It was the pit — the maelstrom — the ultimate abomination.”³

„It was a terrible, indescribable thing vaster than any subway train — a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and un-forming as pustules of greenish light all over the tunnel-filling front that bore down upon us, crushing the frantic penguins and slithering over the glistening floor that it and its kind had swept so evilly free of all litter.”⁴

This is the usual way in which the alien creatures are described in Lovecraft's tales. The protagonists struggle to find words to describe their shapes, unable to grasp their multidimensional form because of the limited human perception stuck in its limited realm. The experience of

³ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Unnamable* in: H.P. Lovecraft, ed. S.T. Joshi, *Dagon and other Macabre Tales*, Arkham House Publishers, 1987

⁴ H.P. Lovecraft, *At The Mountains of Madness*, in: H.P. Lovecraft, ed. S.T. Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft: The Complete Fiction*, Barnes & Noble, 2011

encountering the unknown is maddening, the self undergoes a severe trauma of being invaded by the Other, human or not. The traumatic incisions open the self to flows of the radical Outside which drives the protagonists insane because the ego is unable to sustain itself after being opened to folds of the world previously unknown.

The creature itself is only the spark that reveals the world as consisting of what was previously unknown. As Deleuze and Guattari rightly point out “Lovecraft’s hero encounters strange animals, but he finally reaches the ultimate regions of a Continuum inhabited by unnameable waves and unfindable particles”⁵. The security system of the human self is breached, this crucial system that was mercifully keeping it from the contact with the Outside as exemplified by the opening passage of *The Call of Cthulhu*: „*The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.*”⁶

This should be seen as an assault on reason and rationality that Lovecraft undertakes. Let Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* remind us that the production of knowledge is the production of power. Then let’s return to Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s claim in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the reason of Enlightenment served that same power, all the way up to the total subsumption of life under capital. The „placid island of ignorance” is not created by natural means, but socially construed by regimes of rationality that decide what should be exorcised by reason, forever doomed to being unrecognised. By opening the gates to what lies in the Outside the illusion of omniscient reason is shattered and other forms of subjectivity emerge, forms unrecognisable under regimes of rationality.

This is perhaps why Lovecraft seemed valuable to Deleuze and Guattari. Their project of ethics is an ethics of becoming, of sorcery that casts aside fixed forms of being. The sorcerer in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s thought serves as a figure that rather than stopping at fixed states moves towards creative experimentation⁷. The sorcerer voluntarily lends himself to the flows of becoming in a schizoid move towards freedom from the restrictions of reason. Such a system of ethics goes against a system of ethics that flaunts acceptance as it’s goal. Acceptance merely reduces the Other to forms that can fit into the existing regimes of reason. Sorcery says that it’s not enough and moves towards the Other, becomes the Other. The schizophrenic self allows the flows of the Outside to

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013

⁶ H.P. Lovecraft, *Call of Cthulhu*, in: H.P. Lovecraft, ed. S.T. Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft: The Complete Fiction*, Barnes & Noble, 2011

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013

invade it, it fragments itself voluntarily creating a Body-without-Organs. But beware, Deleuze and Guattari say, because a fully realised Body-without-Organs is nothing but empty madness.

Here we return to the insanity experienced by Lovecraft's characters. "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown", to quote the writer⁸. This fear of the unknown drags his characters into insanity as they go deeper into the realm of the mythic creatures. The sorcerer has to be wary of becoming a fully realised Body-without-Organs, lest he goes mad. That means that there is always a barrier to our becoming-Other that cannot be crossed without descending into madness. What follows from that is that the Other cannot ever be fully experienced. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak brilliantly shows that in her famous essay „*Can the subaltern speak?*” where she argues that the Other cannot ever be fully understood and therefore we cannot construe a true representation of the Other. There is always an element of alterity to the Other and it is that alterity that we should not squash under the regimes of reason because reason will never be enough to understand it.

The inhuman as equal

The other issue of ethics that stems from Lovecraft's world of weird tales in that of the relation between the human and the inhuman. If the mechanistic world is aimless and ruled by random occurrences it doesn't merely mean the existence of humanity is devoid of meaning. Consider this poem that opens one of his stories:

*“I have seen the dark universe yawning,
Where the black planets roll without aim—
Where they roll in their horror unheeded,
Without knowledge or luster or name.”⁹*

The planets are just as aimless as we are, even if when compared to them we are nothing but mere ants in terms of scale. Of course the meaninglessness of all existence could easily be subjugated to an egoistical worldview, but in the reverse of that lies the Cthuloid ethics of Reza Negarestani¹⁰. Such a worldview equalises the human with the inhuman, stripping humanity of the special rights it attributed to itself through the legacy of Cartesian divide of the body and soul. This

⁸ H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, in: H.P. Lovecraft, ed. S.T. Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft: The Complete Fiction*, Barnes & Noble, 2011

⁹ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Whisperer in Darkness*, in: H.P. Lovecraft, ed. S.T. Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft: The Complete Fiction*, Barnes & Noble, 2011

¹⁰ Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, re.press, 2008

is also why speculative realism rushed to pick Lovecraft as its patron saint as a philosophy that equalizes the right to Being outside of strictly human experience.

Reza Negarestani will claim that „[a] polytical ethics [are] necessary for replacing or undermining planetary politico-economical and religious systems.”¹¹ The change from *poli-* to *poly-* is what makes the ethics of the Outside valuable. Let us not forget that modern readings of ancient political philosophy often forget that the polis was largely a closed society of chosen ones that stood on the backs of slave labor. The prefix *poly-* serves to equalise the value that not only differing human subjectivities have, but also to allow for an ethical consideration of the experience of the inhuman as opposed to current systems that privilege, for no good reason, the human faculties of reasoning. Why is there no good reason for privileging the human? Ray Brassier answers that mercilessly - the world existed before us and will exist after us and thought cannot and will not be able to comprehend the world without itself¹². This is the limit of the Kantian thought that gives existence to what is perceived by reason. The existence of reason is going to be extinguished even if it takes as long as waiting for the heat death of the universe. Universe which won't care and will still be there, as aimless in its death as it was in its life.

The ethics of our relation to the inhuman that could stem from this view were already proposed beautifully by Donna Haraway in her term of Cthulucene that challenges the somewhat established Anthropocene: „[H]uman beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the Earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this Earth are the main story.”¹³ Humanity never had any special rights to its existence and in the cosmic scale of time it arrived a lot later than the inhuman which underwent countless transformations during all of our inexistence. We are but a byproduct of one such transformation, irreversibly linked to all the rest of our world, no matter the grand illusions our consciousness would want us to believe. As such by approaching the inhuman as equal we care for the part of us that we unjustly exiled. Only by welcoming it again by ethics of equality of being can we survive. If not the unacknowledged inhuman parts of us that circulate in us, such as bacteria, will go on perfectly fine without us. Either way - the cosmos won't care.

Welcoming the abject

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

¹³ Donna Haraway, *Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene*, e-flux journal, 2016 (<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/> Data dostępu: 30 Maja 2017)

Why did I choose the term „slime ethics” for this work? Let us consider the definition of slime as by Merriam-Webster internet dictionary: 1) soft moist earth or clay; especially: viscous mud 2) a viscous, glutinous, or gelatinous substance: such as a mucous or mucoid secretion of various animals (such as slugs and catfishes). The word *gelatinous* should remind us of one of the Lovecraft’s passages quoted earlier that described the alien creatures of his mythos. Slime is constantly flowing, solid enough to take forms, but never enough to stay the same way. In our minds it lies on the boundary between alive and lifeless, being as uncomfortably biological as it seems not to be at times. Most unsettling perhaps is the recognition that such substances are a part of our being. In that it fits Julia Kristeva’s category of the abject as that which severs the boundary between the subject and the object¹⁴. Slime ethics are ethics aimed at doing exactly that, welcoming the abject/alien and surrendering to it’s flows, becoming it.

To go back to the question of „why now?” we should answer that it’s far too late, but late is better than never. We live in an increasingly complicated world and our increasing knowledge of it destroys our species pretensions to special treatment by showing to us how the inhuman/human dichotomy was always false to begin with. We should cast aside such false assumptions as nothing but limiting regimes of reason and instead of merely accepting become the Other to such a degree as we can. Perhaps what such ethics require is the surpassing of the human bound by false morality that is always construed as a relation of power, as Nietzsche rightly saw¹⁵. Whether human or not we are all aliens.

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Colombia University Press, 1982

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Oxford University Press, 2009