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William Brown and
David H. Fleming
THE SQUID CINEMA
FROM HELL:
KINOTEUTHIS
INFERNALIS AND
THE EMERGENCE OF
CHTHULUMEDIA

Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

The multiple and eclectic argument of *Squid Cinema from Hell* is made clear in the formal approach to this sprawling tentacular body of work. William Brown and David H. Fleming connect a vast assemblage of media archaeology, film analysis, philosophical argument, scientific theory and nature writing, fed through a Lovecraftian literary style which generates a work remarkable in its scope. The book contains eight chapters—the number eight observed running through a number of the

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book's case studies—signalling the eight legs of an octopus. Drawing on scientific and literary descriptions of squids and octopuses, William Brown and David H. Fleming use the fact that the octopus has multiple brains as a cue for the guiding logic of their chapters: there is a central brain that can guide the overarching logic of the whole organism, or book, but equally the individual legs/tentacles of the octopus are capable of their own independent thought.² In the opening chapter of the book, Brown and Fleming advise that these chapters can be read in any order, including the sequential ordering suggested by the contents page—the book is “vertiginous, but nevertheless [sic] purposefully patterned to invert and willfully pervert our hardwired preferences for vertebrate thinking.”³ Rather than moving towards a “singular truth,” truth can only ever be “multiple, tentacular, and weird.”⁴

Just so, across the chapters, Brown and Fleming address an assortment of media phenomena to illustrate that we are now in the cthulucene, which designates an era defined by the end of the human. Chapter 3, “Encounters with a 4DX Kino-Kraken,” argues that the apparatus of 4DX cinema—disorienting the audience using a nozzle that emits spray at the audience—replicates the way in which the *kinoteuthis infernalis* squid confuses its prey. This line of thinking is continued in Chapter 4, in which Scarlett Johansson is used as an example of an “Actorly Squid:” a floating pleasurable image that is used to seduce the audience while endorsing a less than savoury agenda. That is, the actions at the centre of Johansson's films (like *Ghost in the Shell*, Rupert Saunders, 2017) ultimately “do violence, rape minds, and bring war” while “delivering pleasurable opiate-like sensations to the viewer's nervous system.”⁵ Chapter 6, “The Erotic Ecstasy of Cthulhu,” shows us a different kind of Cthulhu, in which viewers are provided with ecstatic images of annihilation by tentacular others. *The Untamed/La región salvaje* (Amat Escalante, 2016) and *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-wook, 2016) are analysed alongside other examples of erotic cinema in which humans copulate with an alien tentacled creature and/or have the octopus or squid as a motif of sexual desire. These films indicate, ultimately, the way in which the sexual power of a “dark universe” threatens “to dissolve us, hence our ecstasy, or the weird, orgasmic pleasure and sublime pain that is felt by those who come into contact with the Cthulhu-like monster of *The Untamed*.”⁶ Chapter 7 blends speculative realism, scientific theory and media history to argue that cinema is the attempt to “bottle light,” and the contemporary obsession with social media is indeed a means of “becoming cinematic.”⁷ Conversely, Brown and Fleming endorse darkness as a means of moving beyond or outside the stasis of a light used to embalm the human: “darkness . . . stands outside of time, sensing not just here and the present, but sensing here and

² William Brown and David H. Fleming, *The Squid Cinema from Hell: Kinoteuthis Infernalis and Emergence of Cthulumedial* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 20.

³ Brown and Fleming, 28.

⁴ Brown and Fleming, 28.

⁵ Brown and Fleming, 125.

⁶ Brown and Fleming, 149.

⁷ Brown and Fleming, 175.

there, the past, the present, and the future.”⁸ Finally, Chapter 8 focuses on the temporal dimension of the chthulucene, arguing that *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016) encourages us to view the world with a “dark contact lens,” in which the film’s protagonist, Banks (Amy Adams) is provided with a perspective that exemplifies the argument made in the previous chapter.⁹

The softness of Brown and Fleming’s argument is its suppleness, and there is an inevitable ambiguity that is the consequence of this method. There are perhaps as many Chthulus as there are tentacles on an octopus (“humans are afraid of capital-Cthulhu, just as we are afraid of the planetary-cataclysm-Cthulhu”¹⁰), and just like the octopus, each tentacle-Chthulu seems to operate both independently, but equally part of a centralised brain structure that brings the argument-organism together (as Brown and Fleming write at the book’s conclusion: “for this is an academic text, after all).”¹¹ It is when these tentacle-Chthulus come together that ambiguity can surface, such as when they suggest that we might approach capitalism as a “soft, tentacular, and mucosal otherness that we might also learn to love.”¹² Chthulu as an ethical injunction to love the Other, rather than perpetuate cycles of phallic domination, here meets Cthulhu-as-capital. A temporal looping occurs in which humans are the creators-of-capitalism (i.e., in which we are capable of changing it) while simultaneously existing as a product-of-capitalism. Which tentacle wins out over the centralised-brain argument here?

Brown and Fleming make clear that Cthulhu and the chthulucene are made up of a number of humans and nonhumans, as well as a number of political possibilities. Cthulhu is the embodiment of capital that uses cinema as a chromatophoric disguise to hide its alien form in the manner of the *kinoteuthis infernalis* squid, a perpetuation of the patriarchal mores of dominance and hegemony over women and people of colour, a monster that signals the end of humanity as we move from the Anthropocene to the chthulucene, as well as—which is where the book ends up—a call to turn to darkness as we embrace the certainty of death in order to live a life worth living with Others: a blackness that permeates and exceeds the speed of a light that illuminates our cinematic lives. This book brings media theory up to date with the latest theories in posthumanism, by connecting recent work in the fields of speculative realism, new materialism, critical race theory and feminism with the digital formats that construct our media landscape. *The Squid Cinema from Hell* is both a rebooted apparatus theory of contemporary media and an ethics of living at the end of the human. ◻

⁸ Brown and Fleming, 180.

⁹ Brown and Fleming, 200.

¹⁰ Brown and Fleming, 262.

¹¹ Brown and Fleming, 262.

¹² Brown and Fleming, 264.