

# William Brown and David H. Fleming. *The Squid Cinema From Hell: Kinoteuthis Infernalis and the Emergence of Chthulimedia.*

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

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William Brown and David H. Fleming's *The Squid Cinema from Hell* is an eight-chapter collaborative exploration of the tentacular nature of media as told from the perspective of ecocritical media studies. The most convincing sections of the generally strong text's argument are those in which ecology, biology, and those fields most invested in the viscous and slippery intersect. The text's authors tend to struggle as they do the very necessary work of addressing how these already-messy areas interact with the political stakes of media in terms of sexual violence, capitalist exploitation, and racial and imperial subjugation. That said, these parts of the text are messy out of necessity: to present a "clean," smooth, or otherwise *dry* approach to topics like tentacular rape or Lovecraft's racist legacy would, arguably, be disingenuous at best. That is to say that, even with its drawbacks, the element of *Squid Cinema* that is both most impressive and most daunting, is the way in which the form of the writing, method, and organization themselves mirror the topic or content. That is, for a text about cephalopods, *Squid Cinema* is decidedly tentacular.

Brown and Fleming draw on a number of theorists and scholars doing work

related to, in conversation with, and just to the side of, cephalopods, media, and their inherent interconnections. While it might be tempting to assume or even interpret the text as a catalogue of movies about and/or starring octopi and squid, Brown and Fleming quickly move away from this model—there is some listing in the introduction, but it is more necessary and foundational than rote—and towards the kind of work that other ecocritical theorists like Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and perhaps Karen Barrad and Jane Bennet set forth in their respective texts. That is, the project here is not one of media historiography or even an accounting of cephalopods through the ages. Rather, it is to think cephalopod-*ically*, to consider media in particular, and from there our onto-epistemological interactions with the world, through tentacular modalities. Where its most analogous counterpart, Haraway's *Making Kin in the Chthulucene* outright rejects the Lovecraftian approach to the tentacular by returning to the chthonic rather than to Cthulhu, *Squid Cinema* leaves open the possibility of engaging both primary meanings. Tentacles are a method, a mode, a theme; they are beastly and terrifying, and absolutely indispensable. This does

tend towards an early question as to the political stakes of the project (Haraway's rejection of Lovecraft establishes hers early on), but, ultimately, *Squid Cinema*'s project necessitates the openness that including otherwise-problematic material allows. That is to say that the question of politics may be posed in the introduction, but it is swiftly addressed as the text develops.

The text eases the reader into tentacular thinking with a background on the theories in anthropocentrism and the chthulucene. *Squid Cinema* additionally gives a good gloss and history of these subfields. In so doing, they trace a slightly different lineage of the chthulucene than Donna Haraway does. That is to say, beginning from media and the digital as tentacular, cephalopodic forms, and from there move to the world and onto-epistemological phenomenology more broadly, as opposed to working from the world and considering the digital/technological as one aspect of it. While the primary concrete metaphor in the text is the cephalopod, another apt structure that they open the text with is the diffusion of ink in (digital) water. Here, media and technology can be thought as having no distinct originary point, or that the moment of origin is somewhat beside the point of the project. The project, then, of thinking and *understanding* media/the world tentacularly, is itself a diffuse project that the authors move through and with fluidly. In this way, their note early in the introduction that the very language with which we understand the world is itself constructed, rigid, dichotomous, is well-taken as a critique of non- or anti-rhizomatic structures of thought.

The concepts of diffusion and the cephalopod-as-metaphor-and-method

hold up best with the premise of Chapter Five, "The Erotic Ecstasy of Cthulhu." The chapter grapples specifically with tentacular pornography in something of a return to Linda Williams' conception of body genres as horror, porn, and weepies. In clear connections oft overlooked within theoretical approaches to media studies, here the notion that media is somehow, for all of its dry rigidity, always varying degrees of soft, squishy, *wet* when it interacts with human bodies holds up as a clear linkage between the genres addressed in the book.

Beyond discussions of the wet and the slimy in *Squid Cinema*'s fifth chapter there are interesting inroads explored into the links between (bi/homo)sexuality, octopi, and the erotic, for example. This line of thinking, that is, thinking sexual attraction (and its intersections with gender identity) through cephalopods opens up tentacular approaches that far exceed the scope of this book's project. There may be significant utility, for example, to conceptualizing the erotic, specifically the oppressed and political erotic, *with* and *through* slimy, slippery, multivalent cephalopods.

Chapter Six, "Cosmic Light, Cosmic Darkness," like Chapter Two ("Pulp Fiction and the Media Archaeology of Space"), prioritizes a concept of the world as hyperobject in Tim Morton's sense of the term, in which hyperobjects are necessarily *sticky* (to return to the viscosity of the previous chapter). "Cosmic Light" begins from a biphilosophical rumination on the building blocks of the human species (human DNA, RNA, and their intersections with mollusks), and the authors quickly move into a cogent analysis of films whose content addresses the notion of perpetuity in the human genome. Be-

ginning with the films *Spring* (2014), *Évolution* (2015), and *Life* (2017), they usher the reader from the outskirts of space and the cephalopodic iterations therein to the volatility and viscosity of the corporeal body. After moving through a roughly sketched section on the connections between RNA editing and capital (in which a brief reference to *Altered Carbon* [2002, 2018-2020] makes an appearance), the chapter establishes its primary media texts or case studies. Both *Demonlover* (2002) and *Elle* (2016) center violation/sexual violence (especially rape) in ways that the authors link to hentai vis-a-vis what they subtitle “Digital Cthulhu.” This argument, which incorporates a nuanced understanding of how rape is always already about patriarchal power, rather than eroticism or *enjoyment*, is less stable in its incorporation of a critique of capital into its critique of patriarchy. This is not to say that the two are not intimately linked, but rather that these links are not sufficiently drawn out in the chapter.

Brown and Fleming begin Chapter Seven, “The Backwash of Becoming Cthulhu, Or, L $\infty$ py, Tentacular Time,” by positing the Earth itself as an interstitial space, a desert and a shore, between the lapping waves of the abyssal ocean, and the cosmic universe. From here, they engage with science fiction as a genre, primarily and originally through Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) and its later offspring in *Metropolis* (1927), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and *Solaris* (1972) to name a few films addressed. After spending some time on both direct Lovecraftian adaptations and related works (such as the offspring of Edgar Allen Poe and 1990s iterations of both

*Dracula* [1897; 1992] and *Frankenstein* [1818; 1994]) the chapter pivots to a singular consideration of *Arrival* (2015).

Utilizing a theoretical framework that includes Eugene Thacker for its Lovecraftian analysis and Deleuze, Bergson, Derrida, and Fermat among others for its temporal analysis, Brown and Fleming posit as third-synthesis cinema, C series cinema, and representative of  $\mathfrak{3}C$  time. For the first of these, the authors turn to Patricia Pisters’ use of Deleuzian temporal theory to outline the ways in which *Arrival* in particular represents a cinematic time of eternal return. From there, they move to a consideration of *Arrival* as operating in McTaggart’s C series time, or time that is ordered but directionless. Finally, Brown and Fleming posit that, by taking the film on its own terms, *Arrival* moves towards the emergence of an amalgamated temporality that takes both Deleuzian (via Pisters) and McTaggartian concepts of time seriously as integrated concepts. The most pressing subsection of the chapter, however, comes roughly in the middle of the chapter with an exploration of political interpretations of temporality. This brief analysis works with and through Deleuze and Foucault, and includes minor references to the work of Donna Haraway and Thomas Elsaesser.

Altogether, on a brief flip through *Squid Cinema* it is possible to get the impression that the text is a collection of films and theories that loosely connect to cephalopods strung together. Nothing could be further from the truth. While the text does have drawbacks (its handling of representations of rape in Chapter Six leaves much to be desired)<sup>1</sup> it is, altogether an excellent framework for how to look at cinema through a

cephalopodic lens *without* giving in to the fetishizing impulse that the authors see as endemic to many fields dealing in the hybridization of human/object/animal theories. That is to say, rather than imbue the cephalopod with characteristics of humanity or imagined inner worlds based on our own, the authors quite deftly deploy tentacular thinking to an analysis of cinema that always keeps an eye towards the political implications of cultural production. In this way, this text is especially useful in establishing an imaginative map of how to approach or engage with media in the winter of 2022, as the globe is deluged, over and over, with world-historic events that destabilize reality. Put differently, this is perhaps the best time for a text that destabilizes how we think of squid, cinema, time, being, and erotics to help imagine futures in an increasingly unstable world.

## Notes

1. In brief, Brown and Fleming tend towards an abstracted analysis of rape in cinema. Certainly, the pieces they chose for this section are complicated and ambiguous about the topic already, but the authors fail to consider the socio-political consequences of the very real trauma associated with sexual violence. They additionally somewhat neglect a gender analysis of rape and sexual violence that, while not strictly necessary for their argument, would greatly benefit the project as a whole.

## References

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