

## Gods of the Real: Lovecraftian Horror and Dialectical Materialism

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The work of H. P. Lovecraft has recently experienced a rise in prominence via the philosophical currents of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology. Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman, the founding fathers of both schools of thought respectively, argue that the human subject has no privileged position within the universe, but has to be situated within an egalitarian ontology, wherein the object-world is thought to exist in autonomy besides the subject-world.<sup>1</sup>

Speculative realism and object-oriented ontology both originated in the early 2000s and share a critique of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. Meillassoux ascribes to Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy what he calls a ‘correlationist’ worldview – that is, ‘the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other’.<sup>2</sup> In other words, knowledge is limited to the correlate of thought and being, within these philosophies, which means, following this line of critique, that we can only know objects in relation to other objects and to the (human) subject, while objects outside this correlate (the Kantian *Ding-an-sich*) are not accessible.<sup>3</sup> This resulted in privileging the human position, in various forms of anthropocentrism. Meillassoux and Harman negate the anthropocentric perspective and consequently reject correlationism in all forms. For them, objects are conceived as in retreat from anthropocentric, sensuous apprehension (and therefore unknown and ‘unknowable’ to and for us) and are thus endowed with the same ontological significance as human beings or objects of human cognition, which results in a radical decentralisation of humankind.<sup>4</sup>

Meillassoux, for instance, postulates that to think beyond human finitude is a philosophical imperative. In our world, we are inevitably exposed to objects or residues that are proofs of and, for a reality before and without us, arche-fossils’, as he terms them. These residues (meteors, for instance) are signs of a reality that has *existed* before the emergence of the human

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<sup>1</sup> See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 109-16; and Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2011), pp. 59-64.

<sup>2</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Meillassoux, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> See Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 62.

correlate, and thus indicate that non-human entities, even if they may be objects within the human correlate, are also objects for themselves, belonging to non-human realities.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the discovery of ‘arche-fossil[s]’, for Meillassoux, constitutes material proof of ‘the existence of ancestral reality’ that appears unthinkable, being beyond human phenomenology, and yet that must have existed independently of the emergence of thinking human bodies in time.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, it is clear why, in *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, Harman called H. P. Lovecraft the ‘poet laureate of object-oriented-ontology’<sup>7</sup>. Lovecraftian fiction, with its in- and superhuman monstrous entities, stresses man’s insignificance and the human inability to grasp cosmic reality completely, gesturing towards the existence of the un-representable and un-knowable as a feature and even central aspect of the human experience of reality.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the cosmic deities and monsters of Lovecraftian fiction can be read as literalisations of the arche-fossil *avant la lettre*. In consequence, as proponents of speculative realism tell us, Lovecraftian – cosmic – horror allows to rethink human exceptionalism from a non-philosophical perspective: the basic presumption of Lovecraftian horror is that entities beyond human understanding ruled the Earth (and are still ruling the universe) long before humankind arrived. Humankind is but an insignificant coincidence in a wide and dark universe, and not its centre. Hence, the rejection of anthropocentrism and the imagination of the significance of non-human realities, the cornerstone of anti-correlationist thinking, are central gestures of Lovecraft’s fiction and Lovecraftian horror. Through monstrous entities, as envisioned by Lovecraft, we are confronted with arche-fossils – that is, with the possibility of a world that is world but not for us. Hence, Lovecraftian horror can be understood, in the words of Eugene Thacker, as ‘a non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically’.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to Harman’s assimilation of Lovecraft to the philosophy of speculative realism, I argue in this essay that there is a *dialectical*-materialist unconscious lurking beneath the surface of Lovecraftian horror. I propose a re-reading of Lovecraft’s writings that does not relate cosmic horror to the obvious, superficial cosmicism to which Lovecraft himself adhered.

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<sup>5</sup> For Meillassoux, this is the central quality of science. Through mathematicising objects, it shows a ‘world capable of autonomy’, as the mathematicised objects ‘can be described *independently of their sensible qualities*, such as flavor, smell, heat, etc’ (*After Finitude*, p. 115).

<sup>6</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2012), p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Harman, *Weird Realism*, pp. 24-25, italics in original.

<sup>9</sup> Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy*, 2 vols (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2011), I, p. 9.

Cosmicism, as developed by Lovecraft throughout his fictional and non-fictional writings, decentres the anthropocentric perspective by assuming the essential insignificance of humanity and all human experience within a larger and void universe.<sup>10</sup> While many approaches, including Harman's re-interpretation, focus on the philosophical and/or political aspects of this worldview, I read the cosmicist content of Lovecraft's horror as, at one and the same time, a reflective *prosopopoeia* of regressive reactions against modernity, and an articulation of the emancipatory potentials confined within its scientific discourse. In this sense, my intervention challenges both Harman's interpretation of Lovecraftian fiction as anticipation of speculative realism and those approaches (presented for example by Michel Houellebecq) that focus only on the reactionary kernel of cosmicism in Lovecraft's writing.<sup>11</sup> As this essay demonstrates, the traits in Lovecraft's work that can be read as indicating that a regressive political worldview, and an engagement with speculative realism *avant la lettre*, contain moments that exceed the merely speculative and reactionary. Thus, I argue, there is an inherently dialectical moment within Lovecraft's fiction, that tends out of itself towards a dialectical-materialist reading and an emancipatory potency, one that is overlooked or neglected by prominent readers of Lovecraft, like Harman or Houellebecq.

### **'Une haine absolue du monde': The Regressive Foundations of Cosmic Horror**

It is a critical commonplace that cosmic horror has a decisively reactionary and oftentimes explicitly racist underside; for example, Houellebecq stresses this point in his seminal essay on Lovecraft.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, Houellebecq neither excuses Lovecraft's racism nor explains it away, in stark contrast to Lovecraft-scholars like S. T. Joshi: Joshi rejects the notion that racism was an inherent feature of Lovecraft's work, and maintains that the racist undertones of Lovecraft's writing are either due to misinterpretations of his work or, at worst, effects of the reactionary worldview that Lovecraft had as a young man (and changed in his later years).<sup>13</sup> From the point of view of established Lovecraft scholarship, Houellebecq's project must consequently appear as a heresy, insofar as the French author does not explain away Lovecraftian racism, but proposes

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<sup>10</sup> See Jeff Lacy and Steven J. Zani, 'The Negative Mystics of the Mechanistic Sublime: Walter Benjamin and Lovecraft's Cosmicism', *Lovecraft Annual*, 1 (2007), 67-70.

<sup>11</sup> See: Michel Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie* (Paris: Éditions de Rocher, 2005), pp. 131-33.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> See S. T. Joshi, 'Why Michel Houellebecq is Wrong about Lovecraft's Racism', *Lovecraft Annual*, 12 (2018), 43-45.

to read the reactionary and racist moment as central to the understanding of Lovecraft's cosmicism.<sup>14</sup>

He grounds his argumentation in a surprisingly conventional, biographical reading of 'The Horror at Red Hook' (1925), a story usually dismissed by critics as both poorly written and openly racist.<sup>15</sup> Houellebecq relates this story to Lovecraft's stay in New York City, where he lived for nearly two years (1924-26) with his wife, unable to integrate into a modern, capitalist city that by no means resembled the well-ordered, ossified New-England micro-cosmos he was used to.<sup>16</sup> Repelled by the free intercourse of different races and by a social context wherein his 'pure' ancestry had no meaning at all, Lovecraft composed 'The Horror at Red Hook', the plot of which centres around Inspector Malone's uncovering of a dark black-magic cult in a neighbourhood that is described as 'a maze of hybrid squalor', 'a babel of sound and filth'.<sup>17</sup> The sprawling life inhabiting the multicultural quarter of Red Hook is depicted as threatening the stability of society as a whole – a threat reflected by the destructive activities of an occult sect, who worships demon-like entities hiding in caverns beneath the city. As becomes clear in the following passage, a demonic vitalism is ascribed to both the demons beneath the city and their worshippers on the surface (who Lovecraft describes using a broad variety of racist slurs):

One can trace the relics of this former happiness in the trim shapes of the buildings, the occasional graceful churches, and the evidences of original art and background in bits of detail here and there – a worn flight of steps, a battered doorway, a wormy pair of decorative columns or pilasters, or a fragment of once green space with bent and rusted iron railing. The houses are generally in solid blocks, and now and then a many-windowed cupola arises to tell of days when the households of captains and ship-owners watched the sea. From this tangle of material and spiritual putrescence the blasphemies of an hundred dialects assail the sky. Hordes of prowlers reel shouting and singing along the lanes and thoroughfares, occasional furtive hands suddenly extinguish lights and pull down curtains, and swarthy, sin-pitted faces disappear from windows when visitors pick their way through.<sup>18</sup>

It is not the undead who interfere with the living here, but the living themselves who appear as undead and demonic. The social ideal as portrayed in this story exists only as a residue of the past, one that has since been subsumed by the 'blasphemies of an hundred dialects' and '[h]ordes

<sup>14</sup> Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft*, pp. 111-15.

<sup>15</sup> Lin Carter, *Lovecraft: A Look Behind the Cthulhu Mythos* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Houellebecq, pp. 133-36.

<sup>17</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, 'The Horror at Red Hook', in *The Tomb and Other Tales* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), pp. 70-93 (p. 74).

<sup>18</sup> Lovecraft, 'Red Hook', pp. 74-75.

of prowlers reel[ing] shouting and singing along the lanes'. The non-human entities acting as central objects of horror, along with their human, generally non-white devotees, are the ones endowed with agency. The conspiracies of their cult followers subvert and undermine society. The cultists and the multi-cultural quarter of Red Hook are presented as invested with a surplus of life; there is a permanent 'shouting and singing' to be heard in the streets and a 'hundred dialects assail the sky' over ground, while beneath the surface, monstrous beings brood over their dark plans. Meanwhile, the white, Anglo-Saxon society appears as past and bygone, memorialised by the decaying houses of the 'captains and ship-owners [that] watched the sea'. This memory 'of former happiness' is now literally inhabited by the multicultural and pluri-racial mass of people, and appears thus as a mortified and lost past. Moreover, the mere existence of the monstrous entities in the underground beneath New York, worshipped by the cultists, proves that the social order has always been unstable and endangered. The unity of an organic, white society appears, when set against the horror of the monstrous other, as a bloodless illusion that never truly existed. Consequently, Inspector Malone is not a white-supremacist hero who reinstalls harmony; instead, confronted with the horror beneath his city, he functions as a stereotypical Lovecraftian protagonist who can only passively register that the white society he stands for is already lost.

As this implies, 'The Horror at Red Hook' is structured around what is more or less a basic Lovecraftian plot, in which a protagonist, generally young and of WASP origin, accidentally discovers during more or less desultory research a dark mystery or sinister plot, engineered by nonhuman monsters, lurking at the very margin of our 'space-time'. In the course of events, the protagonist is confronted not only with the margins of reality but first and foremost with the margins of society. He finds himself in the 'backwaters' of New England, has to travel to half-deserted villages (like in 'The Dunwich Horror' (1929)), impoverished towns (like in 'Shadow Over Innsmouth' (1931)), or outright slums ('Pickman's Model' (1927)), where what awaits him is not merely cosmic monstrosities, but also the monstrosity of a society in the state of decline. Indeed, this decline – 'decay' and 'degeneration' are Lovecraft's favourite terms to relate to these settings<sup>19</sup> – is no mere coincidence, but indicative of the (soon-to-be-revealed) presence of the unnatural. The margins of society are marked by the disintegration of the demarcations

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<sup>19</sup> China Miéville, 'Introduction to *At the Mountains of Madness*', in Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, ed. by Joshi (New York: Modern Library, 2005), pp. xi-xxv (p. xxi).

between white and non-white, nationals and foreigners, and, in consequence, human and non-human, and by the occult agency of the monstrous presence of monstrous agents.

Houellebecq reads this fixation on disintegration as the core of Lovecraft's reactionary stance towards modernity.<sup>20</sup> Lovecraftian horror is first and foremost the horror of the decaying, white, Anglo-Saxon gentry, which has to register the decline of its quasi-aristocratic, solid, hierarchical lifestyle. It is the horror of modern life, of the dissolution of white supremacy and male identity through an all-encompassing circulation of commodities, human bodies, and cultures.<sup>21</sup> Yet this disintegration of 'all that is solid',<sup>22</sup> to use Marx's famous phrase, by modern capitalism is not to be separated from the disintegration of the organic and the non-organic, the human and the non-human in the Lovecraftian universe. The seemingly solid identity of Anglo-Saxon America therefore appears here as a mere historic contingency, undermined by dark forces of disintegration that undermine both social boundaries and the boundaries of human bodies themselves.

Crucially, however, as exemplified by 'The Horror at Red Hook', the social changes threatening society are presented in Lovecraft's work as mere expressions or results of the work of the non-human. It is not only the world of the gentleman that is dissolved; reality itself becomes unstable, allowing for the world to be considered from a non-human perspective as a mere point in a cold and dark universe.<sup>23</sup> Lovecraft's operation hence does not consist in a nostalgic return to a seemingly harmonic pre-modernity. Instead of opposing modernity and its

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<sup>20</sup> Although Lovecraft scholars like Kenneth W. Faig and Joshi argue that Lovecraft lost many of his Anglophile, white-supremacist views in his later life, it still cannot be denied that he maintained a racist worldview throughout most of his career and also, in his last years, declared himself an adherent of a 'fascist socialism'. See Faig and Joshi, 'H. P. Lovecraft: His Life and Work', in *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*, ed. by Joshi (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980), pp. 1-19 (pp. 14-15).

<sup>21</sup> Lovecraft himself supports such an interpretation in his poetological essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927). On the one hand, horror in literature appears here as a reflection of the social situation of a decaying class realising the dissolution of the social reality in which it emerged and existed. Its 'appeal' can only be felt by those who are 'detached from daily life', by which Lovecraft means readers who do not (and perhaps do not need to) participate in modern society. Thus he establishes horror as a sentiment of an elite that is decisively pre-modern, never mingling with the profane world of 'daily routine'. On the other hand, this elitist horror seems to constitute a non-synchronic interruption of his contemporaneity, which he sees as defined by 'rationalisation, reform, or Freudian analysis'; grounded in psychological or even biological traits, this modernity, for Lovecraft, allows traditional ideological formations – 'fancies' – to persist within the modern world in form of a simple negation: modernity is met with horror, in which the sentiment of a dissolved pre-modernity is preserved in the very moments of its disintegration (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Ben Abramson, 1945), pp. 104-06).

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*, trans. by Samuel Moore and Friedrich Engels, 3 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), I, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> Brian Johnson, 'Prehistories of Posthumanism: Cosmic Indifferentism, Alien Genesis, and Ecology from H. P. Lovecraft to Ridley Scott', in *The Age of Lovecraft*, ed. by Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp. 97-116 (p. 99).

positivistic rationalisations of life, Lovecraft embraces these forces as a means to decentralise radically the human experience.<sup>24</sup> While he may cling to his regressive and racist convictions, he nonetheless does not tell tales of race war or Aryan *Übermenschen*, but reduces his protagonists to mere spectators or, more often, victims who can only passively register the presence of cosmic entities beyond human imagination or resistance.<sup>25</sup> In ‘The Horror at Red Hook’, Inspector Malone at least discovers actively the dark secrets of the cult, but is unable to exorcise the monstrous underworld of his city once and for all. In later tales, like in ‘The Dreams in the Witch House’ (1932), this structural moment is radicalised. The protagonist, a student named Walter Gilman, is possessed by the undead witch Keziah Mason, who forces him to enter interdimensional spaces by using black magic.<sup>26</sup> Gilman is ultimately helpless to stop the demonic presence of the witch; he can only register the horrors of a wider cosmos and of the abysmal entities that inhabit it, without any agency of his own. And even though he manages to defeat the witch by the rather mundane means of a silver cross, he is brutally killed by Mason’s demonic familiar.<sup>27</sup> There is no final harmony possible in the dark cosmicism of Lovecraft.

Lovecraftian horror thus neither desires to return to premodern times nor to escape the distortions of modernity. Rather, it radicalises these distortions. The modern scientific worldview, as figured in these stories, disavows the reality of the simple, quiet life of the white gentleman, depicting such a life as always-already an impossibility, one that is threatened not only by historic, social transformations but by cosmic forces. The seemingly ordered harmony of a hierarchical human world is but an exception in the madness of relativistic space-time, as revealed to human brains by modern sciences, resulting in a cosmic horror that organises not only a reactionary revulsion to modernity but, as Houellebecq puts it, an absolute hatred of the world, or what he calls ‘[u]ne haine absolue du monde en général, aggravée d’un dégoût particulier pour le monde moderne. Voilà qui résume bien l’attitude de Lovecraft.’<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the political implications of cosmic horror are not to be restricted to simple racism and reactionary thought. While these features remain prominent within

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft*, pp. 67-73.

<sup>26</sup> See Lovecraft, ‘The Dreams in the Witch House’, in *At the Mountains of Madness and Other Tales of Terror*, ed. by August Derleth and Donald Wandrei (New York: Ballantine Books), pp. 149-53.

<sup>27</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Dreams in the Witch House’, pp. 175-77.

<sup>28</sup> Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft*, p. 65. This translates as ‘an absolute hatred of the world in general, aggravated by his disgust for the modern world in particular. This sums up the attitude of Lovecraft’ (trans. by Schuller).

Lovecraft's stories, they are connected to a radical nihilism that devaluates the very existence of humanity in its confrontation with the non-human Other. Thus, modernity is not simply negated; instead, exactly the moments that Lovecraft saw as defining moments of modernity – scientific development, capitalism, and burgeoning multiculturalism – are paradoxically employed in his work for aesthetic ends. The negated modernity appears as vivid object and subject of horror, while the glorified past is but a lifeless spectre; its proponents are reduced to spectators of the cosmic horror of decay and surplus life that is devouring their world. And, what is more, in the negation of modernity, the whole of human existence is decentred and negated as an irrelevancy in the wider cosmos.

### **Demonology of the Real**

This negation is only possible because Lovecraft's nihilism is anti-modern and yet informed by modern sciences. He himself makes this clear in a passage of *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), which might be termed his poetological essay on the history and contemporary possibilities of weird fiction. In it, Lovecraft argues explicitly against simple regressive reactions towards modernity, which seek to neglect modern sciences for the sake of an anachronistic preservation of the mystical and occult. Instead, he proposes to employ rationalism for the sake of a new, rationalised, materialistic horror. As he puts it,

For those who relish speculation regarding the future, the tale of supernatural horror provides an interesting field. Combated by a mounting wave of plodding realism, cynical flippancy, and sophisticated disillusionment, it is yet encouraged by a parallel tide of growing mysticism, as developed both through the fatigued reaction of 'occultists' and religious fundamentalists against materialistic discovery and through the stimulation of wonder and fancy by such enlarged vistas and broken barriers as modern science has given us with its intra-atomic chemistry, advancing astrophysics, doctrines of relativity, and probings into biology and human thought.<sup>29</sup>

Lovecraft's point of departure in this passage is the 'sophisticated disillusionment' brought about by the natural sciences, which have broken with a mystical apprehension of nature and, in consequence, with the ostensible harmony of pre-modern societies. These developments are paralleled first with the modern phenomenon of the rise of esotericism, a position for which

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<sup>29</sup> Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, pp. 105-06.

Lovecraft displayed little sympathy.<sup>30</sup> He figures it as a ‘fatigued reaction’ against modernity – a secondary, reactionary, and, in the end, anti-modern position. He himself does not subscribe to such forms, which he sees as simply and nostalgically reclaiming the past, but instead describes an alternative reaction to it. He argues that discoveries by modern sciences allow for an understanding of reality that proves the utter indifference of the universe towards human existence, and thus grant a new and decisively materialist ‘stimulation of wonder and fancy’.

The implications of this inhuman structure of being become most obvious in the case of ‘The Colour Out of Space’ (1927), particularly in the passage that runs as follows:

The colour, which resembled some of the bands in the meteor’s strange spectrum, was almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all. Its texture was glossy, and upon tapping it appeared to promise both brittleness and hollowness. One of the professors gave it a smart blow with a hammer, and it burst with a nervous little pop. Nothing was emitted, and all trace of the thing vanished with the puncturing.<sup>31</sup>

‘The Colour Out of Space’ is narrated from the perspective of a surveyor who examines the countryside near Arkham, where a reservoir is being planned. Over the course of his examinations, an old farmer reports an uncanny incident from forty years ago. A meteorite crashed on a farm, unleashing a horror which consumed all living things on the farm and finally killed the farmer, as well as his entire family. Right after the crash, scientists from the University of Arkham examined the meteorite, only to find a ‘colour’ at its core. This is, of course, a misleading description, since naming the thing a ‘colour’ is nothing but a mere approximation or analogy. Yet even that analogy is not upheld: the story never suggests what earthly colour inside of the meteorite might have resembled, or what material qualities the entity – the ‘colour’ – within the meteorite had. In general, it seems impossible to determine its essence, as ‘the thing’ disappears at the first contact with the professor’s hammer, just as probes transported later to a laboratory simply dissolve into nothingness, without revealing the nature of the ‘colour’. It is simply there, endowed with (ultimately fatal) agency. Its very presence causes mutations in the farmland. Organic life expires and human beings lose their mind. On the other hand, its motives, if it has any, are as unclear as its form and essence are. It is not even safe to assume that it acts

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<sup>30</sup> Philip A. Shreffler, *The H. P. Lovecraft Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Colour Out of Space’, in *The Best of H.P. Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre* (New York: Ballantine, 1982), pp. 193-217 (p. 198).

rationally, since it may just be a natural phenomenon, not a sentient agent. Nobody – neither scientists from the University of Arkham nor its victims – prove able to classify it within any metaphysical or scientific system. The ‘colour’ lacks representation in any discourse and any stable place within reality, appearing as an impossibility that exists in spite of its (literal) instability. In this sense, we could describe the ‘colour’ as an arche-typical arche-fossil. It presents us and its victims with the possibility of a world beyond the human correlate that nonetheless has significance for the human experience, and is endowed with an agency of its own.

While ‘the colour’ might be an extreme example of the typical non-human other in Lovecraftian tales, this characterisation nonetheless can also be applied to entities like Yog-Sothoth, Dagon, or Cthulhu. Far from being the familiar ghosts or ghouls of gothic novels, like Count Dracula, they cannot be integrated into a formally established metaphysical, folkloristic, or esoteric reference system. It is not clear what they really are – if they are material entities, or supernatural beings that do not obey natural laws. They appear as impossibilities within the world of the stories, negativities that deny any attempts to determine their nature. In fact, even their names, if they have any, do not really name them in the sense of a symbolic determination, as it is unclear, for instance, how properly to pronounce the name ‘Cthulhu’, which is open to all kinds of variations. In this sense, the monster of Lovecraftian horror is monstrous not because it is positioned as extraterrestrial or extra-dimensional (in some cases, like ‘Dagon’ (1917) or ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ (1931), the monstrous seems indeed native to Earth), but because it designates the indeterminable within the structure of reality. Reality and the symbolic order are not simply interrupted; the presence and pure existence of the monster within the realm of reality indicates that the structure of reality is broken in itself. The absolute negative, the indeterminable, appears as immanent to reality itself, rendering it, and therefore our own position within it, instable and irrational.

At this point, we could easily return to speculative realism. For example, as Isabella van Elferen proposes,

It is not hard to conceive of these cosmic eras as ancestral times in Meillassoux’s definition. Time and time again [...] the tireless scientists populating Lovecraft’s stories prove that these ancestral realities exist even though they never appear before the eyes of any observer. The scientists’ gathering of empirical evidence in order to chart the

ancestrality of the universes they are confronted with ties in with Meillassoux's mathematical paradigm, which similarly endeavors to calculate insight into the outside-human-perception.<sup>32</sup>

In such a reading, the Lovecraftian monster serves as the un-representable, the objective-in-itself, which is beyond human imagination or perception, but still exists, decentralising the human position within the universe. The Lovecraftian monster, the object of horror in his stories, is, so to speak, an arche-fossil that has come to life, opening up an anti- or, more accurately, a non-human vista of reality. In this sense, cosmic horror is understood as the consequence of an ontological consideration that anticipates speculative realism. The universe and being in itself are seen from a non-human point of view, rendering a reality thinkable in which humankind is but one (and rather irrelevant) point within interfering networks of non-human, objective agents.

Yet while this may hold true, the ontological point of cosmic horror cannot be reduced to speculation regarding the non-human – or, in other words, for Lovecraftian horror, to speculate about the realm of the non-human means always and decisively a *negation* of the human. Speculative materialism does not so much understand the dissolution of 'correlationism' – that is, as defined above, the observation of the world from the privileged point of view of the human subject – as a negation of human experience altogether, but rather constitutes modes of accepting the decentred position of humankind in parallel with various perceivable and non-perceivable phenomena. By contrast, Lovecraft's conception of horror puts the negation (of the human in itself) at the centre of reality. This becomes explicit in the introductory remarks to his famous short story 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1926), in which the narrator states that

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all of its content. 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. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.<sup>33</sup>

In this sense, Lovecraft is not so much a speculative realist *avant la lettre*, as Harman assumes. While it accepts, just like speculative realism after him, a non-human perspective, Lovecraftian

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<sup>32</sup> Isabella van Elferen, 'Hyper-Cacophony: Lovecraft, Speculative Realism, and Sonic Realism', in *The Age of Lovecraft*, pp.79-96 (p. 87).

<sup>33</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Call of Cthulhu', in *The Best of H. P. Lovecraft*, pp. 72-97 (p. 72).

horror focuses on the position of humanity within this perspective. The horror does not consist in the fact that there are ‘terrifying vistas’ of reality besides our human perception, but that these vistas reveal our ‘frightful position’ within the universe. This relates to the structure discussed above in relation to ‘The Horror of Red Hook’. It is not the presence of the monstrous entities beneath New York City that inspires horror; instead, the horror lies in the fact that the mere existence of the monstrous, and of the cult that worships it, reveals that the illusion of a harmonious, white society was always already distorted and consequently lost beyond salvation. On the one hand, the presence of the non-human does indeed distort an anthropocentric worldview. Confronted with the ‘deadly light’ of a modern scientific worldview revealing our insignificance, humanity is bound to flee ‘into the peace and safety of a new dark age’. But on the other hand, the non-human perspective cannot be subtracted from its social and political implications: Through the mechanisations of the non-human agents and their followers, the values and the stability of pre-modern, white-settler society are questioned, negated, and revealed to be but mere illusions.

This social aspect of Lovecraftian horror is apparent in ‘The Call of Cthulhu’. This short story, centred around the most popular Lovecraftian creation that has entered popular culture, the cephalopodan demi-god Cthulhu, is in itself a rather conventional Lovecraft tale, which presents scenarios similar to those described above. The protagonist, while examining the inheritance of his uncle, unravels step by step a cult made up of people of colour (introduced in a typical racist manner), worshipping the messiah-like figure of Cthulhu, preparing for his eventual return by undermining society, organising human sacrifices, and so on. In this story, the *topoi* of degeneration, the disintegration of civilised society, and the concomitant disintegration of reality are prominent and inspire fear in the protagonist, who must come to understand that, at the margins of his middle-class, urban society, brutish cults are threatening the world as he knows it with a nihilist destructive force. Yet the true subject of horror is not the power of the world conspiracy of the Cthulhu cultists, uncovered by the protagonist, nor is it the mere monster Cthulhu in itself. It is the realisation of the radical negation of human knowledge in and by Cthulhu’s existence. Cthulhu is not a mere demon that has no place within the world but still forms part of a metaphysical order; instead, it appears as an unnatural impossibility, which does

not cohere to any fixed (symbolic) order.<sup>34</sup> It is not possible to name what it really is, not even if he is made out of earthly matter. But nonetheless, much like the mysterious ‘colour’, it is there.

Confronted with Cthulhu, human subjects have to acknowledge two horrifying truths. First, they have no real place in the cosmic order. Second, the categories they rely on – like matter, time, and space – are revealed to be neither fixed nor stable. Cthulhu cannot be known or understood. As the account of Johansen (the only survivor of an unlucky ship’s crew that by accident landed on the shores R’lyeh, the city of Cthulhu that has risen temporarily out of the ocean) tells us, ‘The Thing’ ‘cannot be described – there is no language for such abysses of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order’.<sup>35</sup> Cthulhu is the absolute negation of our symbolic order and phenomenological capacity, but it is there nonetheless. And what is more, in the confrontation with this embodiment of the ‘black seas of infinity’, we may grasp a more complete understanding of reality.<sup>36</sup> Thus, to be in contact with Cthulhu means to encounter the negation as the essential centre of reality; or, to put it another way, it is only through its absolute negation that reality becomes perceivable as reality. In this sense, the demonic entities with which Lovecraft’s protagonists are confronted are neither intruders into a harmonic universe nor unnatural deviations from the cosmic order. They are the realisations not only of the limitation of human knowledge and subjectivity, but also and furthermore, of the negative core of human reality in itself. As the narrator realises in despair at the end of ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, “[I]oathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men’.<sup>37</sup>

In this account, counterintuitive as it may sound, Lovecraft’s fascination with non-Euclidian geometry coincides with the mode of modern scientific knowledge – at least if we follow Alexandre Koyré.<sup>38</sup> Koyré undertook to rethink modern science against and beyond the paradigm of positivism and empiricism. Positivism and empiricism both claim that science is a form of knowledge that is not grounded upon metaphysical speculation but emerges from the interaction of logical human reason with reality. This produces a (re-)affirmation of teleological conceptions of history. The emphasis on logic over all ‘bad’ metaphysics results in the

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<sup>34</sup> Johnson, ‘Prehistories of Posthumanism’, pp. 99-10.

<sup>35</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, p. 95.

<sup>36</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, p. 72.

<sup>37</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, p. 97.

<sup>38</sup> See Alexandre Koyré, *Études d’histoire de la pensée philosophique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), pp. 311-29.

postulation of a gradual historic unfolding of the object of science, knowledge of which is progressively perfected by the ‘savant’, the scientist.<sup>39</sup> Against this progressivist notion of modern sciences, Koyré describes the dialectical core of modern science by contrasting its truth procedures to Aristotelean (that is, pre-modern) physics.<sup>40</sup> For Aristoteles and pre-modern scientists – that is, sciences before the Enlightenment – the world had to be thought of as *automaton*, a set of phenomena appearing in a determinable, structural, and strictly speaking ‘regular’ manner.<sup>41</sup> In other words, reality is, for Aristotle and those who follow his ideas, only to be determined from a structural perspective. Reality is understood as *automaton*, an automatic mechanism that reproduces the same structural moments time and again, while everything that negates the structure is to be seen in simple opposition to it.<sup>42</sup> Reality and the real are, in this formulation, one and the same.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, modern science (that is, science after the advent of Enlightenment and capitalism that broke with the conception of the world as an automatic and harmonious whole) understands the distortion of reality as the only vantage point from which we can understand it. Reality is not real, but the interruption of reality is the real of our reality. That is to say, positive knowledge of the real of reality is impossible, as the real appears only in the negation of reality.<sup>44</sup>

This becomes obvious if we follow for one moment Koyré’s understanding of the structural logic behind an empirical experiment – specifically, the case of astronomical observations. The experimenter, in Koyré’s formulation, does not simply experience reality ‘as it is’, but first and foremost dehumanises themselves in the experiment, in the sense that reality is experienced, not by means of human organs alone, but with the help of instruments, like a telescope.<sup>45</sup> These instruments in turn are not only prostheses; they are material expressions of mathematical considerations. Constructing such instruments requires a pre-understanding of

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<sup>39</sup> Samo Tomšič, ‘Das Unmögliche der Mathematik: Koyré und Lacan’, in *Die Wirklichkeit des Realismus*, ed. by Veronika Thanner, Joseph Vogl, and Dorothea Walzer (München: Fink, 2018), pp. 277-93 (pp. 278-80).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Tomšič, ‘Das Unmögliche der Mathematik’, p. 281.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> This has to be read in context with the contemporary tradition of Lacanian Marxism. In short, Lacan’s point is that there is a gap within the symbolic order of our reality (language/body; form/matter; *phenomena/noumena*) that is not simply a transcendental limitation of our notion of reality (as Kantian discourses would have it), but rather constitutive of reality itself. This ‘gap’ is the real of reality that structures it, while it exists only as a gap (and not as proper content) that is part of reality itself. See Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London; New York: Verso, 2014), pp. 104-06.

<sup>44</sup> Koyré, *Études d’histoire philosophique*, pp. 311-29.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

what should be observed; this understanding is expressed by and in mathematical language. Hence, nature is not observed, as Aristotelean science would have it, but reality appears as predetermined by means of *mathemata*. For it is our mathematical interpretation of the world that determines the shape and functions of the instruments with which we can observe it, with the result that all our observations are effectuated in the end by mathematical considerations (a high-end telescope for instance does not simply ‘see’ something. Instead, it registers intensities of electromagnetic radiation that it interprets according to our mathematical understanding of the physical realm, which produces the images we may be familiar with). And, in a more abstract sense, this means that the symbolic order is not derived from the perception of the structures of nature, but through the symbolic, the scientific-mathematical discourse, that precedes the act of observation.<sup>46</sup> The subject of *modern* science therefore does not rely on the ‘natural’ experience of the world, like the subject of *pre-modern, Aristotelean* science, but on the mathematical interpretation of our world, that produces, when confronted with the empirical, ‘reality’. Our modes of knowing are implicated in the very production of reality.

The consequences of this interaction of the symbolic and material reality (subject and object, so to speak) are far reaching. First, the *automaton* as base of human knowledge is devaluated, as all regularities found through an experiment are experienced through the material application of *mathemata* in the experiment. The instruments of the experiment, conceived through the mathematical interpretation of our world, may show irregularities, revealing gaps within these interpretations, and thus result in new or amended mathematical approaches that produce in turn new instruments and make new experiments necessary. This means that no linear and immediate experience of the world in the experiment is possible (neither can the world be understood directly through mathematics), but every ‘empirical’ experience of the experiment is charged with the symbolic (of the *mathemata*) and thus broken in itself, as we experience the symbolic to be limited. The regular, that which meets the expectation (of the mathematical calculation), cannot expand scientific understanding, as it is already a result of it. Hence, the only way of expanding human knowledge is to look for the moments in which the expectations based on the mathematical discourse are not fulfilled. Only the impossible irregularity within reality allows the scientist to restructure and thus enhance the mathematical models of reality, leading to

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<sup>46</sup> Tomšič, ‘Das Unmögliche der Mathematik’, pp. 284-86.

a new symbolic, which again allows new observations, leading to new impossibilities.<sup>47</sup> Thus, modern science understands being as a dynamic process circling around the negation (of knowledge, of the symbolic). There is no positive knowledge, but scientific knowledge is precisely a process of constant negation of any positive knowledge. As Samo Tomšič claims, science posits the negation of reality as its real. The real of reality is the defect from reality.<sup>48</sup>

This, of course, is the original operation of dialectical materialism, which understands reality as the dynamic unity of the mutual negation of subject and object.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, modern science and dialectical materialism share a common ground or common structural logic. Both discern between reality and the real, and describe – in different terminologies of course – that the real is to be known only as negation of reality.<sup>50</sup> It is this immanent anti-Aristotelean logic of modern science and dialectical materialism that is repeated in Lovecraftian horror. Modern science breaks with the pre-modern mode of human knowledge, introducing radical negativity as the essential core of any scientific knowledge, just as the presence of the monster in Lovecraft's stories breaks the reality of his WASP-protagonists, forcing them to question their pre-modern worldviews. Fascinated by new insights brought forward by modern sciences,<sup>51</sup> Lovecraft constantly deploys allusions to modern sciences in his texts; from Riemannian (non-Euclidian) geometry (in 'Dreams in the Witch House'), through neurology ('From Beyond' (1934)), to Einsteinian relativity ('The Whisperer in Darkness' (1931)), he uses modern science as a means to devaluate human exceptionalism. Science, as the narrator of 'The Call of Cthulhu' states at the beginning of the story, reveals a new reality, in which humankind has lost its privileged position, and thus can serve, as Lovecraft himself theorises in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, as we have seen above, as a means to inspire a new, materialistic horror.

It is this use of scientific devaluation of the human position within the world that may align Lovecraft to speculative realism, as it breaks with anthropocentric 'correlationism'. But

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<sup>47</sup> Koyré, *Newtonian Studies* (London: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Tomšič, 'Das Unmögliche der Mathematik', pp. 289-90.

<sup>49</sup> In fact, Karl Marx criticised pre-dialectical materialism (especially Feuerbach) for sticking to a mere mechanist (that is, post-Kantian) worldview in which subject and object remained separated. In opposition to this, he laid the foundation for a dialectical-materialist notion of reality, which relies upon the idea of a processual unity of subject and object within their dynamic, mutual negation: 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively' (Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingston and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 422).

<sup>50</sup> Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious* (London; New York: Verso, 2015), pp. 50-55.

<sup>51</sup> See Fritz Leiber Jr., 'A Literary Copernicus', in: *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*, pp. 50-62 (p. 53).

Lovecraft is not content with simply imagining a non-human universe beyond human knowledge. Rather, he confronts his readers with a ‘scientific uncanny’.<sup>52</sup> The objects of his horror, monstrous as they are, are presented in a quasi-scientific manner. Lovecraft employs an oftentimes accurate taxonomic language to describe them (as happens for example in length in *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), where the ‘elder things’ are described with biological accuracy),<sup>53</sup> and relates their discovery to new scientific methods and models. Through scientific and rational observation, the impossibility and irrationality of the monstrous as well as of the entire reality are unearthed. It is not the occult, pre-modern, and irrational but the decisively modern, rational, and scientific worldview that opens up vistas of a reality, but, crucially, that reality is revealed to be irrational in its core.

From here, we can return to the dialectical core of modern science, discussed above. As we have seen, modern science is distinguished from Aristotelean science as it thinks reality from the vantage point of its inherent irregularities – of its negation (and not as an automatic structure). Just as capitalism and Enlightenment unravelled the ossified social structure of feudalism, modern science, as a product of Enlightenment, distorted reality, revealing the void as its real. Lovecraft, while deploring the destruction of the old certainties, applied nonetheless the modern mode of knowledge as his aesthetic principle. The monstrosity of the world of modern science and modernity by and large, which introduce the distortion into reality as its centrepiece, are translated in the horror of a universe of monstrosities that are undeterminable and yet there. Thus, Lovecraftian horror reproduces the mode of modern scientific knowledge by introducing monsters that designate an experience of the impossible within the structures of reality; it does so by describing and characterising them within or at least in regards to discourses of *modern* science. Furthermore, analogous to the discoveries of non-Aristotelean science outlined above, the intra-diegetic reality described in his fiction is distorted by the appearance of the monstrous. However, this distortion becomes a constitutive moment of reality, as the protagonists of his stories come to apprehend the frailty of their world and the indeterminate nature of reality when confronted with the indeterminable monstrosity of the non-human. In contrast to all forms of speculative-realist ontology, the negation of reality is revealed to be its real, just like in the dialectical mode of modern science. In this sense, it is not the supernatural in itself but the

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<sup>52</sup> Miéville, ‘Introduction’, p. xv.

<sup>53</sup> Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, pp. 19-22.

dialectical kernel of scientific knowledge that appears as the prime source of Lovecraft's 'materialist horror'.<sup>54</sup>

### **The Political Unconscious of Cosmic Horror**

The tendencies that I have been outlining can be related, as paradoxical as it may sound, to Lovecraft's reaction towards the impositions of modernity. Throughout this work, the liquidation of a hierarchical white-settler society through the emergence of capitalism is reflected as threatening decay, and connected with the liquidation of the organic and non-organic, the invasion of dark, monstrous forces, disrupting worldly harmony, as we have seen on the example of 'The Horror at Red Hook'. On the surface, this disruption gives rise to regressive ideologemes. Lovecraftian horror confronts modernity with a vitriolic mixture of reactionary thought and open racism, accompanied by an elitist disgust for the proletarian masses arising together with capitalism. As China Miéville has argued in his Introduction to *At the Mountains of Madness*, Lovecraftian horror is also the horror of the masses; their self-determined heterogeneity finds its image in the distorted, fluid, and shapeless body of the monster of cosmic horror.<sup>55</sup>

This becomes evident in *At the Mountain of Madness*. The short novel narrates the fate of an Antarctic expedition that by mere coincidence first discovers fossil relics of the 'Elder Beings' and then eventually also the ruins of their civilisation, which is millions of years old. While, for most of the novel, it seems evident that the 'Elder Beings' are the monsters of this story – some of them are revived by bad luck, and kill off (and maybe eat) part of the expedition team – it is later made clear that they themselves are but 'men of another age and another order of being' for whom the narrator feels contempt.<sup>56</sup> Their well-ordered society has been brought down by the rebellion of their slaves – shoggoths – who took over the city millions of years ago and brutally exterminated their former masters. The shoggoths – at least one of them – survived through the millennia, lurking beneath the lost city of the 'elder beings'; they finally kill even those last, revived specimens, to once and for all destroy the master race.

The uprising of the enslaved shoggoth masses has, as the researchers conclude from observing the preserved artworks in the city, not only resulted in the radical 'degeneration' of

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<sup>54</sup> Miéville, 'Introduction', p. xv.

<sup>55</sup> Miéville, p. xxiii.

<sup>56</sup> Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, pp. 30-33, 92.

civilisation; in addition, the unruly slave appears as the real monster to be feared, as a ‘thing that should not be’.<sup>57</sup> Described as ‘shapeless congeries of protoplasmatic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes’,<sup>58</sup> the shoggoths, as Miéville indicates, are emblems of the masses; they constitute ‘a mass presence, various, multicoloured, refusing to behave’.<sup>59</sup> Lovecraft himself compares them to a subway train – the symbol for modern, technological mass-transportation systems. Thus, the shoggoth, lacking any fixed shape, stands in for the emergence of the dissolutive forces of modernity, devaluing inherited traditions and positions, as well as literally embodying the proletarian masses, destroying the elitist culture of the exploring gentleman. The mortal fear experienced by the protagonists of *At the Mountains of Madness* when confronted with one shoggoth can therefore be read as Lovecraft’s own reactionary terror of the crumbling of the pre-modern, aristocratic order.

Yet, as we have seen in following Houellebecq’s reading of Lovecraft, the latter’s reactionary views are dialectical in themselves. The modern world of capitalism is met with disgust but this does not lead to an anti-modern denunciation of the *status quo* of modernity. Lovecraftian horror does not advocate a return to a nostalgic, harmonious, pre-modern society, but reveals that such a return is impossible. The distortion is already there; the monstrous presence of the void that decentres the human experience appears as the unavoidable real of reality; the entities that lurk in Lovecraft’s tales cannot be banned or exorcised. Consequently, the protagonists of Lovecraft’s stories appear as representations of male, upper-class, white society, fulfilling a social ideal to which Lovecraft adhered. Yet they are no defenders of the social order. Most of them lack any agency; Inspector Malone may still be able to stop at least the cult activities in monster-infested New York City, but the scientists of *At the Mountains of Madness* – one of Lovecraft’s mature works – are only able to register the horror, and escape with their bare lives. Like the majority of Lovecraft’s protagonists, they are only spectators and victims of vitalist forces beyond their imagination that cannot be controlled.

The proponents of the old order – such as the ‘Old Ones’ in *At the Mountains of Madness* – as well as those who are in line with a traditional understanding of reality, are therefore confronted with a surplus of life on the side of the monstrous. There is nothing to defend and no battle to be ultimately won in Lovecraftian fiction, as the kernel of its horror consists precisely in

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<sup>57</sup> Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, p. 96.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, p. 97; and Miéville, ‘Introduction’, p. xxiii.

the realisation of the vanity of clinging to tradition and the traditional order. This is the final horror that the expedition of *At the Mountains of Madness* has to face. They realise that they possess a similarity with the ‘Elder Beings’; these entities had a civilisation, were part of an successful, aristocratic culture, and the resurrected specimens even acted like curious researchers. Yet, in spite of all their success and their achievements, their society was finally doomed to collapse by the hands of the enslaved masses. Their rise appears as an inevitability, presaging the certain doom of the white, elitist society in the human realm. Lovecraft thus established a nihilistic perspective that disables any fantasies of realising a harmonic order, since human harmony is impossible within a dark universe that is in itself dis-harmonic and monstrous.

The stability of human society, and the ontological notions of reality upon which it is grounded, therefore appear as mere illusions. Nothing is left but a nihilistic worldview that stresses the vanity of human existence within the void of cosmic space-time – something that could be described as Lovecraft’s speculative realism *avant la lettre*. On the other hand, by reflecting these tendencies, Lovecraftian horror unconsciously also reflects the dialectical-materialist form inherent to modern sciences and the development of the whole capitalist formation.<sup>60</sup> While Lovecraft personally denounced Marxism,<sup>61</sup> we nevertheless catch a glimpse of dialectical materialism shining forth precisely within the reactionary moment of cosmic horror.

The perspective of cosmic horror is the perspective of modern science. In the presence of the cosmic, non-human other, the impossible appears as the real of reality, and reality therefore as incomplete – that is, as a dynamic process rather than a fixed structure. Cosmic horror thus reproduces the experience (in both senses) of modern science, constituting a non-human, dialectical notion of reality within the literary. While Lovecraft’s work espouses regressive convictions, cosmic horror breaks the limitations of a pre-modern (Aristotelean) worldview by

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<sup>60</sup> The consequence of this historic tendency is the implementation of dialectical materialism not only in political theory but as ontological foundation for a modern sciences; the reality of capitalism is the dynamic process of the circulation of commodities, leading, as Sohn-Rethel argues, to a science which reproduces this understanding, implementing the dynamic, dialectical negation of reality as the real of reality itself, which again opens up an emancipatory notion transcending the existing order of capitalism, and at the same time negating all regressive desires. See Alfred Sohn-Rethel, ‘Die Formcharaktere der zweiten Natur’, in *Das Unvermögen der Realität: Beiträge zu einer anderen materialistischen Ästhetik*, ed. by Gisela Dischner (Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, 1974), pp. 185-208 (pp. 198-201).

<sup>61</sup> See Paul Buhle, ‘Dystopia as Utopia: Howard Phillips Lovecraft and the Unknown Content of American Horror Literature’, in: *H.P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*, pp. 196-210 (pp. 204-05).

highlighting a scientific uncanny based in a dialectical-materialist understanding of reality. The monstrosity of Cthulhu and his cosmic cousins can therefore be read as reflecting the underlying monstrosities of capitalism – that is, the regressive monstrosities of racist, reactionary disgust, as well as the monstrous capacity of our time to think (and act) beyond the limits of a fixed reality. Consequently, reading Lovecraft only as a speculative realist is tantamount to pacifying Lovecraftian horror. While cosmic horror does indeed contain features that can be linked to speculative realism, it also displays a militant potential, as it is both the expression of an ultra-reactionary, racist, and nihilist stance towards modernity *and* an allusion to dialectical materialism, and thus a form of thought that is tied to an emancipatory, historic project.