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## SUBLIME AND GROTESQUE: THE AESTHETIC DEVELOPMENT OF WEIRD FICTION IN THE WORK OF H. P. LOVECRAFT AND CHINA MIÉVILLE

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*Aprovado em 30 mar 2017.*

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**Abstract:** "Weird Fiction" is identifiable by its atmosphere of cosmic fear and unease which is produced through the sublime and the grotesque. H. P. Lovecraft's "Weird Fiction" invokes the sublime through other-worldly creatures that inspire awe and terror; beyond the grasp of limited human consciousness, they are both unfathomable and unspeakable. Cosmic fear is further heightened in Lovecraft's fiction through transgressive meldings of

human and animal bodies into grotesque creatures which refute the laws of nature and systems of classification by which humans understand their world. While the sublime and the grotesque remain crucial elements of recent “Weird Fiction”, China Miéville responds to Lovecraft’s oeuvre by exploring the loss of the sublime in the postmodern era and positioning the grotesque as, not only a cause for horror, but also a source of creative potential and rebellion. This essay compares *Kraken* (2010), in which Miéville playfully engages with the Cthulhu mythos, with four of Lovecraft’s most celebrated Weird stories, “Pickman’s Model” (1927), “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), *The Dunwich Horror* (1929) and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936). In both Lovecraft’s early and Miéville’s more recent “Weird Fiction”, the sublime and the grotesque play a significant role in creating the Weird aesthetic. However Miéville’s interrogation of the sublime as it appears in Lovecraft’s work, as well as his exploration of the technological grotesque and framing of the grotesque as an opportunity for self-empowerment and emancipation, marks his “Weird Fiction” as distinctly of its own time.

**Keywords:** H. P. Lovecraft; China Miéville; Weird Fiction; Sublime; Grotesque.

**Resumo:** “Weird Fiction” é identificável pela sua atmosfera de medo cósmico e inquietação que são produzidas pelo sublime e grotesco. “Weird Fiction” de H. P. Lovecraft invoca o sublime através de criaturas de outro mundo que inspiram admiração e medo; além da compreensão limitada da consciência humana, eles são incomensuráveis e indescritíveis. O medo cósmico é aumentado na ficção de Lovecraft através das fusões transgressivas dos corpos humanos e animais em criaturas grotescas que refutam as leis da natureza e sistemas de classificação pelos quais os humanos entendem seu mundo. Enquanto o sublime

e o grotesco permanecem, elementos cruciais da recente “Weird Fiction”, China Miéville responde a obra de Lovecraft explorando a perda do sublime na era pós-moderna e posicionando o grotesco, como não somente causa de horror, mas também como fonte de potencial criativo e rebelião. Este artigo compara *Kraken* (2010), no qual Miéville brinca com o mito de Cthulhu, com quatro das histórias “Weird” mais famosas de Lovecraft, “O Modelo de Pickman” (1927), “O Chamado de Cthulhu” (1928), “O Horror de Dunwich” (1929) e “A sombra de Innsmouth” (1936). Tanto na “Weird Fiction” inicial de Lovecraft quanto a mais recente de Miéville, o sublime e grotesco tem um papel significante na criação estética de “Weird”. Entretanto, o interrogatório do sublime de Miéville como aparece nas obras de Lovecraft, assim como a sua exploração do grotesco tecnológico e a concepção do grotesco como uma oportunidade para auto fortalecimento e emancipação, marca sua “Weird Fiction” distintamente de sua própria época.

**Palavras-chave:** H. P. Lovecraft; China Miéville; Weird Fiction; Sublime; Grotesco.

Weird Fiction is a mode of speculative literature that first gained popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. H. P. (Howard Phillips) Lovecraft (1890-1937) played a crucial role in developing the Weird mode in both his essays and fiction. In his essays, “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927) and “Notes on Weird Fiction” (1937). Lovecraft insists that an atmosphere of “cosmic fear” (1927, n.p.) is the defining feature of Weird Fiction. According to Lovecraft, a successful work of Weird Fiction will produce a “certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces” as if the reader is “listening for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and

entities on the known universe's utmost rim" (1927, n.p.). Recent theorists have similarly identified Weird Fiction by the atmosphere, sensation or affect it produces, noting in particular the "element of unease" in these stories (VANDERMEER, 2008, p.ix). This essay argues that the Weird affect is produced through the sublime and the grotesque, both of which remain central to recent Weird Fiction. Weird Fiction invokes the sublime by introducing the unknown and the unspeakable as a source of cosmic fear and interweaving it with the horror-inducing transformation of the known and familiar into something grotesque. In Lovecraft's fiction, the sublime is often experienced by human protagonists who react to previously-unknown supernatural beings with awe and terror, describing them as unspeakable or unfathomable, beyond the grasp of limited human consciousness. Meanwhile, the grotesque in Weird Fiction collapses "ontological categories that reason has considered essentially distinct, creating a spectacle of impossible fusions" (CSICSERY-RONAY, JR., 2008, p.7) that generate horror through their distortion or corruption of the natural. In both early and recent Weird Fiction, human protagonists are repeatedly rendered speechless by transgressive meldings of human and animal bodies, or humans and machines, which refute the laws of nature and the system of classification by which humans understand their world.

While the sublime and the grotesque remain crucial components of recent Weird Fiction, in this essay we argue that China Miéville responds to Lovecraft's oeuvre by exploring the loss of the sublime in the postmodern era and positioning the grotesque as, not only a cause for horror, but also a source of creative potential and rebellion. Like Lovecraft, Miéville has had a significant impact on

Weird Fiction through both his fiction and critical work. In addition to producing a chapter on “Weird Fiction” for *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (2009), Miéville was also one of the most vocal early proponents of the term New Weird, “a literary movement distinguished by a signal blend of horror and fantasy, predominantly urban locations, and a rejection of some of the more conservative traditions associated with the fantasy genre” (TRANTER, 2012, p.418). Despite subsequently distancing himself from the term, Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* (2000) has been celebrated as “the first commercially acceptable version of the New Weird” (VANDERMEER, 2008, p.xi) and he is the first author listed on the cover of the 2008 anthology of *The New Weird*. This essay analyses another of Miéville’s works of Weird Fiction, *Kraken: An Anatomy* (2010), a novel in which Miéville playfully engages with the Chthulu mythos, and we compare it to four of Lovecraft’s Weird stories: “Pickman’s Model” (1927), “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), *The Dunwich Horror* (1929) and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936). We argue that in both Lovecraft’s early and Miéville’s more recent Weird Fiction, the sublime and the grotesque play a significant role in creating the aesthetic that is the defining feature of the mode, but that their use in recent Weird Fiction responds to and reflects the significant changes that have occurred between the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

## THE SUBLIME

The Sublime is clearly recognisable in Lovecraft’s fiction; his terrible, awe-inspiring creatures emerging from “infinite cosmic spaces” (LOVECRAFT, 1937, n.p.) inspire a cosmic fear that evokes

the effects of the sublime as theorised by Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke. Both Burke, and later Kant, distinguish between the sublime and the beautiful, primarily by the responses they invoke. In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) Kant writes that the

beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness* (2007, p.244).

This limitlessness is a key element of the sublime in early Weird Fiction. As S. T. Joshi notes, Lovecraft's fiction is marked by "an awareness of the vast size of the known universe and a consequent appreciation of the relative insignificance of all human life when measured on the scale of cosmic infinity" (2004, p.78).

Kant goes on to explain that no object of nature is in itself sublime, only that it produces feelings of sublimity in the viewing subject. Such feelings are produced when the object observed appears to be so immense or beyond comprehension as to deny or negate reason. As Kant explains, the sublime "concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be aroused and called to mind by that very inadequacy itself" (2007, p.245). The inadequacy is the viewing subject's inability to comprehend and clearly articulate both the object observed and the sublime feelings aroused, as demonstrated by the inarticulate proclamations of Lovecraft's protagonists. Lovecraft's florid and verbose style has drawn criticism, but Miéville sees it as a "philosophy of militant adjectivalism" (2009, p.512) carefully

designed to capture the protagonists' futile attempts to articulate that which is inarticulable. He writes:

[T]he frenzied succession of adjectives in Lovecraft, alongside his regular insistence that whatever is being described is 'undescrivable,' is, in its hesitation, its obsessive qualification and stalling of the noun, an aesthetic deferral according to which the world is always-already unrepresentable, and can only be approached by an asymptotic succession of subjective pronouncements. (2009, p.511-512)

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), Burke makes explicit the feelings of terror that such an encounter can produce:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*, that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (2008, p.49)

The impossibility of clearly articulating, representing or categorising the sublime is part of what produces the protagonists' terror, their "profound sense of dread" (LOVECRAFT, 1927, n.p.). It is the unknown aspect, the uncertainty, which so unsettles the subject, producing an effect of powerlessness. In his analysis of science fiction, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. identifies the sublime as "a response to a shock of imaginative expansion, a complex recoil and recuperation of self-consciousness [not] coping with phenomena suddenly perceived to be too great to be comprehended" (2008, p.146). This definition applies equally to Lovecraft's Weird Fiction

which draws heavily on the tropes of science fiction, including its emphasis on scientific rationality and reason, and its interest in life beyond our known, familiar world. Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. suggests that the sublime “threaten[s] to make the human subject feel insignificant and powerless against manifestly superior natural order and power” (2008, p.188), power that exists beyond human experience and agency, indeed belittling it, so that the individual feels as if they are “ultimately drown[ed] in the oceanic magnitude and diversity of what can be perceived” (2008, p.188). In *Weird Fiction*, “superior natural order and power” (2008, p.188) often manifests in the supernatural creatures who seek access to and dominion over the human world. Supernatural, in regards to *Weird Fiction*, does not necessarily mean the manifestations of vampires, werewolves, dragons or other monsters popular in other speculative genres. Rather it is closer to Kant’s sublime, where the natural world, the physical universe, presents as overwhelming, beyond human control, awesome and threatening, hence ‘super’ natural, overabundant.

The overabundance and excess that surfaces in Lovecraft’s fiction is what evokes the sublime as his narrators try and fail to understand and categorise the supernatural threats with which they are faced. A futile desire to find a rational explanation for the unimaginable drives the narrators in Lovecraft’s stories, many of whom are devoted to chronicling and investigating once-unknown horrors that emerge in his fictional New England. In “The Call of Cthulhu,” the narrator’s investigations result in the discovery of a sailor’s diary, an inarticulate and terrified account of the man’s encounter with “the nightmare corpse-city of R’lyeh” (2005, p.192)



and its inhabitant, Cthulhu, a being with an aspect so terrible and overpowering that two men immediately die of fright upon observing it. Even before encountering Cthulhu himself, the sailors experience the sublime in response to the city which has emerged from the unknown depths of the ocean, a place beyond human comprehension and natural laws:

Johansen and his men were *awed* by the *cosmic majesty* of this dripping Babylon of elder daemons... at the *unbelievable size* of the greenish stone blocks, at the *dizzying height* of the great carven monolith, and at the *stupefying identity* of the *colossal* statues and bas-reliefs. (2005, p.192 – emphasis added)

Both the city's size and its construction deny human understanding and reason; another man who dreams of R'lyeh recalls "that the *geometry* of the dream-place he saw was abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours" (2005, p.192-193). The struggle to articulate the unspeakable becomes a total terrified paralysis of language when the sailors encounter Cthulhu: "The Thing cannot be described – there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order" (2005, p.194).

Cthulhu has been woken by his human devotees; he, in turn, is to summon even greater beings from space. Such beings, often called the Old Ones, the Deep Ones, or the Great Ones, recur in Lovecraft's stories as a source of cosmic fear. It is the immense and inexplicable nature of these beings who have arrived from space or other unknown voids, coupled with the threat they pose

to humanity, which induces feelings of the sublime in Lovecraft's narrators. As Miéville observes, in *Weird Fiction*, the sublime "is an off-handedly predatory unkenable, a bad numinous, manifesting often at a much closer scale, right up tentacular in your face, and casually apocalyptic" (2012, p.381). Faced with the threat of annihilation by powerful beings beyond human comprehension, many of Lovecraft's narrators end the stories in a state of hopeless despair. Even when the immediate threat has passed, the "sublime backwash" (MIÉVILLE, 2012, p.381) that knowledge of their existence creates results in a permanent state of sublime terror in the face of a universe and beings beyond human comprehension and control.

Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" is unusual in that the narrator's initial terror is eventually superseded by an eagerness to take his place among the inhuman beings who dwell in the depths of the ocean. Yet again, Lovecraft evokes the sublime through allusions to powerful beings, "The Deep Ones" (2005, p.653) who dwell in the unknowable and unreachable depths of Devil's Reef, a place of "unfathomed horror and inconceivable abnormality" (2005, p.637). Initially, the narrator is overcome by fear upon encountering these beings: "the bobbing heads and flailing arms were alien and aberrant in a way scarcely to be expressed or consciously formulated" (2005, p.638). However, when he discovers that he is in fact descended from such creatures and is physically transforming into one of them, the narrator decides that he and his similarly-afflicted cousin shall, "swim out to that brooding reef in the sea and dive down through black abysses to Cyclopean and many-columned Y'ha-nthlei, and in that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and

glory forever” (2005, p.653). His description of the black abysses housing Cyclopean edifices still evokes the sublime in its allusion to unknown, unexplored depths and cities of vast size, yet the terror with which he initially greeted such sublimity is diminished by the narrator’s development of an appearance and consciousness which is itself beyond the human and intimately connected to the alien, rendering it no longer unknown or beyond his comprehension.

In contrast, the narrator of *The Dunwich Horror* remains in a state of sublime terror, even after the immediate threat of the Old Ones, who seek to return to the human world where they once ruled, has been overcome following the death of one of their offspring and the banishment of his brother to another dimension. As they track the invisible monster, the offspring of one of the Old Ones and a human woman, following the path of destruction he has left in his wake, “Everyone seemed to feel himself in close proximity to phases of Nature and of being utterly forbidden, and wholly outside the sane experience of mankind” (2005, p.408). Even when they glimpse the momentarily visible figure, the paralysing effect of the sublime on the mind results in the inability of the characters to clearly articulate what they are seeing. Later in the story, as they are banishing the creature to the Old Ones’ dimension, the narrator wonders, “From what black wells of Acherontic fear or feeling, from what unplumbed gulfs of extra-cosmic consciousness or obscure, long-latent heredity, were those half-articulate thunder-croakings drawn?” (2005, p.411-412). Once again, Lovecraft carefully employs language to evoke the sublime, the “unplumbed gulfs” and “half-articulate thunder-croakings” signalling a limitless, unknowable and threatening consciousness.

Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. argues that recent science fiction writers increasingly seek to ironise the sense of awe that the sublime evokes (2008, p.155), a claim that equally applies to recent Weird Fiction published by writers such as Miéville, whose fiction draws upon a range of speculative modes and genres. In *Kraken*, Miéville's intertextual references to early Weird Fiction, and Lovecraft's fiction specifically, establishes him in knowing dialogue with the traditions and tropes of the mode. Similarly to Lovecraft's stories, *Kraken* is set in a fictional version of the writer's contemporary world, specifically in twenty-first century London, where a preserved specimen of a giant squid disappears, impossibly, from the Darwin Centre in the Natural Museum of History. Weird Fiction has been playfully described by critics as "the story of the rise of the tentacle" (VANDERMEER & VANDERMEER, 2011, p.xvi), and Miéville himself singles the tentacle out as the defining emblem of the Weird:

The spread of the tentacle – a limb-type with no Gothic or traditional precedents (in 'Western' aesthetics) – from a situation of near-total absence in Euro-American teratoculture up to the nineteenth century, to one of being the default monstrous appendage of today, signals the epochal shift to a Weird culture. (2011, n.p.)

In Lovecraft's fiction, the tentacle is used to evoke the incomprehensible otherness of creatures from beyond. In *The Dunwich Horror*, for instance, one of the half-breed offspring of the Old Ones has "a score of long greenish-grey tentacles with red sucking mouths" (2005, p.389) protruding from his abdomen, while his brother is "Bigger'n a barn... all made o' squirmin' ropes" (2005, p.409). The titular creature of "The Call of Cthulhu" similarly

features a “pulpy, tentacled head” (2005, p.169), its face “a mass of feelers” (2005, p.176). In *Kraken*, Miéville’s giant squid first evokes and then ironises and mourns the loss of the sublime effect that such a creature traditionally generated in early Weird Fiction.

Miéville initially establishes the sublime potential of the giant squid through his protagonist, Billy Harrow, who, until its disappearance, has worked at the Darwin Centre, preserving the specimen. Billy also serves as a tour guide, and he notes that despite the squid’s decaying aspect, visitors to the Museum still encounter the “absurdly massive tentacled sepia event” (2011, p.8) with the kind of awe and sense of other-worldliness traditionally associated with the sublime. After the theft, Billy discovers the London he thought he knew is in fact riddled with magical people and subcultures. He encounters a branch of the London police known as the Fundamentalist and Sect-Related Crime Unit who monitor various underground magical cults, and also becomes involved with the Krakenists, a cult who worship the giant squid as a god and believe Billy to be their prophet. Billy initially reacts with disbelief and a bemusement that foreshadows the loss of the sublime around which the narrative ultimately functions: “I’m being recruited by cops who tell me the Cthulhu cult might be after me” (2011, p.57). One of the cops, however, challenges Billy to open his mind to the sublime potential of the creature: “You going to tell me... you’ve got no sense of the bloody awesomeness of that thing?” (2011, p.51), and as Billy’s involvement with the Krakenists deepens, his dream visions of the giant squid evoke the kind of cosmic majesty and danger commonly associated with Lovecraft’s tentacled monsters:

He was back in the water ... not swimming but sinking, toward the godsquid he knew was there, tentacular fleshscape and the moon-sized eye that he never saw but knew, as if the core of the fucking planet was not searing metal but mollusc, as if what we fall toward when we fall, what the apple was heading for when Newton's head got in the way, was kraken. (2011, p.251)

The kraken's sublime potential is further established by the numerous groups and individuals who desperately seek the missing god in an effort to either avert the end of the world, which has been foretold to begin with the burning of the giant squid, or further their own personal quests for power. However Billy soon discovers that the giant squid is just one god among many, with various diverse cults celebrating their own divine figure and prophesying their own Armageddon. Although a Kantian or Burkean reading of the sublime can be applied to the awe that each god inspires in its followers, Miéville uses the "epidemic of eschatologies" (2011, p.53) to bring the godlike down to the everyday level and imbue it with a kitchness that contributes to the loss of the sublime. Even the leader of the Krakenist cult inadvertently undermines the sublime potential of the kraken and other London gods when he tells Billy:

Of course, they're all over, gods are. Theurgic vermin, those once worshipped or still worshipped in secret, those half worshipped, those feared and resented, petty divinities: they infect everybloodywhere. The ecosystems of godhead are fecund, because there's nothing and nowhere that can't generate the awe on which they graze. (2011, p.103)

His allusions to the gods as petty vermin and viruses contribute to the rapid erosion of the awe that the already-sceptical Billy

had momentarily experienced. Later in the novel, as he becomes increasingly familiar with London's supernatural underbelly, Billy reflects that his "awe had been greatest when he had not understood at all. The more they were clarified, the more the kitsch of the norms disappointed him" (2011, p.263).

This disappointment is also experienced by Vardy, a consultant for the Fundamentalist and Sect-Related Crime Unit, who, in the closing pages of the novel, is exposed as the narrative's chief villain who has used the stolen kraken as a diversion from his own attempted destruction of Charles Darwin's specimens which were stored in the same room. Vardy's attempted destruction of the specimens is an attempt to reboot the world's belief systems; he hopes that memory fire will magically erase the theory of evolution from history, restoring his own and humanity's faith in the Christian God. Vardy, who grew up in a born-again Christian religious sect, is haunted by the loss of, and nostalgia for, the sublime religious devotion which he recalls from his childhood:

Vardy's tragedy was that his faith had been defeated by the evidence, and he could not stop missing that faith... And that was unbearable to him... Vardy did not want to eradicate the idea of evolution: he wanted to rewind the fact of it. And with evolution – that key, that wedge, that wellspring – would all those other things follow, the drably vulgar contingent weak godlessness that had absolutely nothing going for it at all except, infuriatingly, its truth. (2011, p.497)

Vardy resents that the postmodern world, which is characterised by overwhelming diversity, fractured identities, and a proliferation, repetition and confusion of signs and meaning, has become

moribund in its petty everydayness. Moreover, Vardy expresses dismay that in the wake of scientific developments from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, everything is known and reasoned, that scientific truth has eroded religious faith, contaminating the idea of God and denying Vardy the sublime experience he so longs for.

Vardy's attempt to rewind the theory of evolution is averted, however, and London returns to its (ab)normal self, a city in which brief moments of sublime awe are quickly subverted by the plethora of petty, bickering cults and their gods. Thus Miéville ironises and problematises the sublime, which he recognises as a central element of Weird Fiction, suggesting that such a profound, awe-inspiring experience cannot be sustained in the postmodern world. Ultimately, then, as the following section will show, the Weird affect of *Kraken* owes more to the grotesque than the sublime. The grotesque also contributes to producing the cosmic fear that characterises Lovecraft's stories, but where Lovecraft uses the grotesque as an embodied hint of supernatural horrors that lie beyond human comprehension, Miéville updates his grotesque creatures to reflect the technologisation of the twentieth century and tempers his characters' horrified reactions to the grotesque with an acknowledgement of the freedom and opportunities that such challenges to the physical laws of nature may produce.

## THE GROTESQUE

In both early and more recent Weird Fiction, the grotesque is particularly evident in the way writers distort the familiar and turn it into an object of fascination and horror. The way the



grotesque is used in Weird Fiction, however, has shifted over time, with recent writers like Miéville seeking new ways of representing the grotesque by expanding its traditional forms. Early forms of the grotesque, as evident in Lovecraft's fiction, tended to be organically-based, an amalgamation and horrific parody of human and animal parts, whereas the grotesque in recent Weird Fiction reaches beyond the living flesh to incorporate the inanimate with the animate. If the intent of Weird Fiction is to produce unease and uncertainty, to disturb by corrupting the known and everyday, then the inclusion of the grotesque, with its inherent "skewing of logical or ontological categories" (HARPHAM, 1982, p.10), plays a central role. The grotesque is not one single thing, but rather the sum of its disparate parts, which are individually recognisable, but combined as a whole become unnameable; like the sublime, the grotesque results in the "paralysis of language" (HARPHAM, 1982, p.6). Traditional forms of the grotesque are readily recognisable in Lovecraft's stories, although without the parodic aspect, and work to produce images of people and beings corrupted and monstrous, inciting fear and horror by disrupting the natural order. By contrast, the grotesque in *Kraken* retains something of Mikhail Bakhtin's spirit of the grotesque. Grotesque the characters may be, but their grotesquerie also often serves a functional or even emancipatory purpose beyond the incitement of horror.

One of the earliest theorists of the grotesque, Bakhtin developed the concept in *Rabelais and His World* (1968), in which he analyses images of the grotesque in art and literature depicting the medieval carnival. A key part of Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque is exaggeration coupled with humour, and a temporary breakdown

of social hierarchy during the time of carnival. Bakhtin wrote that, "Carnival festivities and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them... based on laughter... were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials" (1984, p.5). They were occasions when the rules of the state were, to a certain extent, ignored, mocked and parodied. Bakhtin suggests that carnival offered "a completely different, nonofficial, extra ecclesiastical, and extra political aspect" (1984, p.6) of society and culture; not a spectacle staged for the entertainment of a non-participatory audience, but a celebration to be lived by the people, unconstrained by the laws of the everyday. During carnival, as with the grotesque, boundaries and hierarchies are broken, breached or contaminated. Like the laughter of carnival, the grotesque is also ambivalent, in that it is unfinished and uncontained. Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque is positive, life-affirming and communal, celebrating "a people who are continually growing and renewed" (1984, p.19). Thus, the grotesque is represented by excess, fecundity and overabundance. The other important aspect of the grotesque for Bakhtin is degradation, the "lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (1984, p.19-20). For Bakhtin, this is not necessarily about denigration or debasement, but an emphasis on contact with the earth that "swallows up" and gives birth at the same time (1984, p.21), hence the connection of the grotesque with the lower body, the stomach and genitals.

In later theory, the grotesque moves away from Bakhtin's parodic but celebratory concept to become something more monstrous and denigrated. Whilst Bakhtin's grotesque can be

seen as threatening through its exposure of the malleable nature of physical, social and political boundaries, it is tempered by the atmosphere of humour and carnival. Geoffrey Galt Harpham responds to Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982). Here, there is an emphasis on how known elements are fused to form something new, simultaneously disgusting and fascinating, but also inherently wrong as it disrupts the natural order of the world. The grotesque thing appears monstrous, not because it is ugly, but because its recognisable parts are corrupted by their proximity to things with which they do not belong, so that "the sense of the grotesque arises with the perception that something is illegitimately *in* something else" (HARPHAM, 1982, p.11). Such illegitimacy lacks the emancipatory spirit of Bakhtin's carnival and instead signals a wrongness, a corruption of the everyday.

The grotesque in early Weird Fiction aligns with Harpham's conception of the term, with the in-between-ness of its physical form and the categorical uncertainty it thus creates functioning as a cause for horror. Harpham writes that, "although the grotesque is more comfortable in hell than in heaven, its true home is the space between, in which perfectly formed shapes metamorphose into demons" (1982, p.7-8), blurring the boundaries between ideal forms. The grotesque is an interval, he suggests, in which we pause on a liminal tipping point; although we recognise a "number of different forms in the object, we have not yet developed a clear sense of the dominant principle that defines it" (1982, p.16), so find ourselves transfixed and unable to categorise or articulate what we encounter. Grotesqueries, Harpham writes:

[B]oth require and defeat definition: they are neither so regular and rhythmical that they settle easily into our categories, nor so unprecedented that we do not recognise them at all. They stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organising the world. (1982, p.3)

In Lovecraft's fiction, the recognition that the grotesque beings encountered do not belong within the sphere of the everyday as we commonly conceive it and, even more disturbingly, that they break down the hierarchical boundaries between humans and the animal Other, is a source of extreme horror.

In many of Lovecraft's stories, the supernatural beings encountered are perceived as both sublime and grotesque. As Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. observes, the two "are dynamically, dialectically related" (2008, p.147). Thus, on the one hand, Lovecraft uses the sublime to emphasise the awesome immensity of his Old Ones, Deep Ones or Great Ones, positioning them as beyond human comprehension and articulation, but he also employs the grotesque as an embodied allusion to the horrific nature of these beings which subvert human laws of nature, while again emphasising his human protagonists' inability to grasp, categorise and name what they see. In "The Call of Cthulhu," for example, Cthulhu himself is presented as a sublime source of cosmic fear, but the bas-relief representation of this creature emphasises his horrific grotesquery, as noted by the narrator: "If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing"

(2005, p.169). Cthulhu breaks the barriers between the categories of animal, myth and human, represented as “a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind” (2005, p.176). It is this grotesque image that the cult of human worshippers idolise.

Harpham writes that, “Primitives worship the taboo, but modern secular adults are so indebted to and dependent upon their discriminatory grids that they find the taboo mostly a source of anxiety, horror, astonishment, laughter, or revulsion” (1982, p.4). This distinction is maintained in “The Call of Cthulhu” where the followers of Cthulhu are depicted as backward, inbred and primitive, their own appearance and behaviour a reflection of the grotesquery of the being they worship:

There are vocal qualities peculiar to men, and vocal qualities peculiar to beasts; and it is terrible to hear the one when the source should yield the other. Animal fury and orgiastic licence here whipped themselves to daemonic heights by howls and squawking ecstasies that tore and reverberated through those nighted woods like pestilential tempests from the gulfs of hell. (2005, p.179)

The police who stumble across these worshippers are so overcome by the grotesquery of “this hybrid spawn” (2005, p.180) and the Cthulhu statuette they worship, that they physically reel, faint, and cry out in horror. They, like the narrator and the other modern men in the story, find Cthulhu’s image repulsive and terrifying; its corrupting influence is emphasised by its rendering of the cult members similarly monstrous and grotesque.

Again, in “Pickman’s Model,” the grotesque emerges both through the creatures who blur the boundaries of human and animal, and the human who celebrates such grotesquery. The artist, Pickman, revels in the grotesque, producing works described by the narrator as “daemonic portraiture” (2005, p.203). Most disturbing for the narrator is the human likeness which to varying degrees marks the creatures that are the subjects of Pickman’s art:

I began to see a hideous relationship in the faces of the human and non-human figures. He was, in all his gradations of morbidity between the frankly non-human and the degraded human, establishing a sardonic linkage and evolution. The dog-things were developed from mortals! (2005, p.204).

This human element signals the corrupt illegitimacy and confusion of hierarchy that Harpham describes. Even more repellent for the narrator, and the true source of horror, is his realisation that the creatures depicted by Pickman are real, not merely the phantasm of a disturbed mind. These creatures, with their, “bloodshot eyes, flat nose, and drooling lips... [their] scaly claws..., mould-caked body... [and] half-hooved feet” (2005, p.207) are monstrously grotesque, not just because of their form, but because they lack a physical and spiritual place in the known human world and are therefore an affront to the divine order, and suggestive of “spiritual corruption or weakness” (HARPHAM, 1982, p.6). The effects of corruption are evident in Pickman himself, though it is unclear whether his contact with the creatures has corrupted him, making him grotesque, or whether he was already corrupted and thus drawn to the creatures he paints out of a grotesque sense of affinity. Regardless, his admiration of the creatures is

portrayed to be as much a corruption of the natural order as the creatures' existence, rendering him a grotesque parody of the human: "Pickman repelled him more and more every day, and almost frightened him toward the last – [...] the fellow's features and expression were slowly developing in a way he didn't like; in a way that wasn't human" (2005, p.199).

As noted in the previous section, "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" differs from "Pickman's Model" and the rest of Lovecraft's corpus in that the ending of the story explores the attraction of the grotesque and stops short of condemning those who experience such attraction. Nevertheless, for much of the story, the grotesque is positioned as a source of horror, following a familiar pattern in Lovecraft's work. The inhabitants of Innsmouth are described by a resident of a nearby town as having "queer narrow heads with flat noses and bulgy, stary [sic] eyes that never seem to shut, and their skin ain't quite right. Rough and scabby, and the sides of their necks are all shrivelled or creased up" (2005, p.591). Whilst not yet truly grotesque, the people of Innsmouth do devolve into that state as they age. Their interbreeding with the frog people from the ocean begins to show as they grow older and become less human. The narrator describes the creatures thus:

I saw them in a limitless stream – flopping, hopping, croaking, bleating – surging inhumanly through the spectral moonlight in a grotesque, malignant saraband of fantastic nightmare [...] I think their predominant colour was a greyish-green, though they had white bellies. They were mostly shiny and slippery, but the ridges of their backs were scaly [...] their heads were the heads of fish, with prodigious bulging eyes that never closed. At the sides of their

necks were palpitating gills, and their long paws were webbed. (2005, p.646)

The narrator's realisation that the residents of Innsmouth are in varying stages of transforming into these creatures draws attention to the threatening mutability of the human body. Csicsery-Ronay Jr. notes that such mutability

makes the physical world an indeterminate and insecure place [...] Bodies are constantly reminded that they are not armoured containers, but rather invitations to opening and wounding, arenas of autonomous life-forms, diseases, mutations, intimate viruses. (2008, p.192)

When the narrator discovers that he is related to the people of Innsmouth and notices the first signs of his own physical transformation he is horrified, aghast at his hereditary inheritance which has stripped away any sense of his own secure and inviolate human identity. Interestingly, however, where some of his relatives kill themselves rather than accept their descent into the grotesque, the narrator gradually loses his sense of repulsion and eventually looks forward to a life and physical form he initially regarded as horrific. For him, the grotesque yields possibility and access to the sublime, harking back to Bakhtin's theory that the grotesque is fecund and renewing, generative of change and opportunity. It is an interesting deviation for Lovecraft to have his protagonist come to embrace the grotesque and to also avoid introducing other characters to condemn and express horror at this shift of perspective. It could be argued that the reader, who for the majority of the story has been encouraged to view the people of Innsmouth with a mixture of fear and repulsion, might



feel even greater horror at the realisation that the narrator with whom they have come to identify is devolving into a similar state of grotesquery. Nevertheless, Lovecraft's reluctance to overtly condemn the narrator's newfound desire for transformation leaves the ending of the story open to a more positive interpretation.

In *The Dunwich Horror*, the grotesque is allowed no such ambivalence. Wilbur Whateley and his invisible brother, like the narrator of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," are of mixed parentage, fathered by an Old One and tasked with opening the way into the human world for these supernatural beings. The description of their human mother as "a somewhat deformed, unattractive albino woman" (2005, p.374) with "misproportioned arms" (2005, p.376) again emphasises the corrupting nature of the grotesque. Once again it is unclear whether the Whateleys have become physically grotesque as a result of their communions with the Old Ones, or whether they have been drawn to each other by their shared grotesquery. Yet Lavinia is still recognisably human in a way that her half-breed sons are not. Upon his death, Wilbur is described as a thing composed of human, animal and alien parts, something so grotesque as to produce extreme otherness. A conglomeration of fur, tentacles, oddly-placed eyes, and limbs resembling a giant saurian, Wilbur evokes a link, grotesque to those humans who observe him, between the human, the alien, and prehistoric animals. The use of the grotesque in this story is typical of Lovecraft's Weird Fiction which produces cosmic fear through the convergence of the known and unknown without respect to humans' limited notions of reality. In Lovecraft's fiction, the grotesque, like the sublime, functions as a tool to induce horror and to demand that both his characters and his readers look outward,

beyond the familiarly human, into “the boundless and hideous unknown” (Lovecraft qtd. in JOSHI 2012, p.504).

Despite their supernatural origins, each of Lovecraft’s grotesque creatures is essentially organic. Miéville’s *Kraken* expands upon this conception of the grotesque by introducing the mechanical. Jeff VanderMeer observes that much of Miéville’s fiction displays “a fascination with permutations of the body” (2008, p.xi). In his New Crobuzon cycle (*Perdido Street Station*, *The Scar* and *Iron Council*) for instance, Miéville describes the Remade, humans who have been transformed into “organic and technological hybrids with machinery attachments or animal limbs” (Tranter, 2012, p.420) in punishment for committing a crime. Similarly, in *Kraken*, Miéville depicts a range of mechanical and organic hybrids, some of which are indeed cause for horror, while others reflect the shift in conceptions of the grotesque in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Csicsery-Ronay Jr. argues that the grotesque is the dominant sensibility of both modernism and postmodernism, with the key difference being that the “contrasts between ideal forms and anomalous deviations” (2002, p.72) in modernism are seen, in postmodernism, as normal. The organic monstrosities that feature in Lovecraft’s fiction are no longer necessarily shocking or horrifying and have been superseded by new forms of grotesqueness that incorporate the technological advances made since his time. Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. also argues that because of these advances, the grotesque has lost some of its ability to create shock or horror, as “the de-definition of forms is [now] an accepted aspect of social reality” (2002, p.74). Harpham explains that the grotesque “is now faced with a situation where the centre cannot, or does not choose to, hold; where nothing is incompatible

with anything else; and where the marginal is indistinguishable from the typical” (1982, p.xxi). Csicsery-Ronay Jr. therefore argues that the function of the grotesque in science fiction (and other related speculative genres), is no longer to horrify, but to destabilise our notion of how the world works, to “demonstrate the fluidity of the real” (2002, p.80) emphasise the “radically mutable” (2008, p.192) state of our bodies and the world, and highlight how easily boundaries can be transgressed.

Transgression is an integral part of the grotesque in *Kraken*, blurring the boundaries between human, animal and machine. The collapse of categories in the grotesque noted in Lovecraft is pushed even further in *Kraken*, where Miéville combines the mechanical with the biological as well as blurring the human/animal divide. Technological and cybernetic developments have expanded the parameters of the grotesque, bringing functionality to the forefront. In *Kraken* the human/machine boundary is breached in a number of instances, both voluntarily and otherwise, as when the Tattoo – a villain inscribed in ink on a man’s back – has another man transformed into a living radio:

There was a naked man on all fours. His lips fluttered. He had dials pushed into him, above each nipple. Unbleeding but extruding clearly from his body. It was from his open mouth that the radio sounds came. His lips moved to make the music, interference, the ghosts of other stations. (2011, p.73)

In this instance, not only are physical boundaries broken, but function too is transformed, as the Tattoo’s victim no longer speaks for himself, but becomes a mouthpiece transmitting signals. Billy

reacts to both the radio-man and the Tattoo himself with the kind of horror that usually greets the grotesque in Lovecraft's fiction. Following his initial shocked shout and instinctive urge to flee, Billy struggles to articulate the grotesque individuals who transgress every law of nature with which Billy, a scientist, is familiar: "*What did I see? ... What was that?*" (2011, p.83).

Nevertheless, other characters in the novel deliberately change themselves to suit their purposes, such as the magician, whose:

[L]eft eye was obscured by what she thought for a second was some complex Cyberdog-style hat-glasses combination, but was, she realised, without even a flinch or a twist of the lips, these days, the metal escutcheon of a keyhole from a door, soldered or sutured to the orbit of his eye. (2011, p.341)

The functionality of the grotesqueness, in this instance allowing the magician to see beneath the surface of whatever he is working on, dilutes the shock of it. Furthermore, because Billy's friend Marge is accustomed to a postmodern world that is already constantly changing, she easily adapts when individuals such as the magician challenge her notions of reality and the integrity of the organic human body. While still having the potential to produce anxiety in those uninitiated into London's magical underbelly, such individuals signal an expansion of the grotesque in recent Weird Fiction to also produce:

[A] certain ecstasy of liberation from the domination of cosmic authoritarianism [...] [and] from the normative mythologies of [...] embodiment that survived even in scientific materialism as long as scientists were unable (and unwilling) to

manipulate the sacred building blocks of living bodies. (CSICSERY-RONAY, JR. 2008, p.212-213)

A more traditional example of the organic grotesque in *Kraken* is the kraken-bit who, also deliberately, transform from human into something grotesque as they prepare to attack the arch-villain who has broken into their cult headquarters and killed most of their fellow worshippers:

One man was growing *Architeuthis* eyes, fierce black circles taking up each side of his head, squeezing his features between them. A woman bulged, her body become a muscular tube from which her limbs poked, absurd but strong. A woman streaked across the distance, jetted by her new siphon, moving through air as if it were water, her hair billowed by currents in the sea miles off. There was a man with arms raised to display blisters bursting and making themselves squid. Suckers, another with a wicked beak where he had had a mouth. (2011, p.463)

The kraken-bit recall Lovecraft's Weird corpus in which characters welcome or induce their grotesqueness in pursuit of a greater goal or personal gain, often seeking a closer connection to their god(s) or supernatural ancestors. In Lovecraft's fiction, with the exception perhaps of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," this desire is presented as abhorrent and unhuman. In *Kraken*, by contrast, the kraken-bit are perceived by Billy as heroic, since they know the transformation will likely kill them if they are not first killed in battle, but also as a little pathetic, desperate to make sense of the tragedy that has befallen their cult, and hopeful that through their transformation into the grotesque they will be granted sublime access to their god.

Thus, where the grotesque in Lovecraft's fiction acts primarily as a trigger for horror, in *Kraken* it functions in a number of ways, with a variety of characters becoming grotesque through their own actions and being rewarded with expanded possibilities for existence. Even when the transformation is the result of others' actions, the grotesque often has a recognisable purpose which makes it less inconceivable once the initial shock has passed. Despite the changes in the way the grotesque is depicted, it remains an important element in both early and recent Weird Fiction as, along with the sublime, it underpins the notion that the world is neither static nor completely knowable. By breaking and corrupting the boundaries of the everyday, the grotesque in Weird Fiction contributes to the uncertainty and unease that is central to the aesthetic of the mode.

## CONCLUSION

Recent Weird Fiction, while retaining the spirit and some of the key elements that produce the affect of the early Weird, is also distinctly of its own time. Both early and recent Weird Fiction, whether seriously or playfully, invoke the sublime, "a powerful expansion of quotidian awareness to the insight that the physical universe involves far more than anyone can imagine" (CSICSERY-RONAY, JR., 2008, p.146). The sublime in Lovecraft's fiction recalls Kant and Burke's theorisations of the term, his supernatural creatures inspiring awe in the subject through their inexplicable and overwhelming nature and revelation of the limitations of human knowledge. The sublime quality of Lovecraft's monsters reduces human beings and their known world to something small

and, if not insignificant, less significant than previously believed. In *Kraken*, however, Miéville questions whether such sublimity can be maintained in a postmodern world in which science undermines spiritual faith and ecstasy, and the proliferation of gods reduces them to kitsch familiarity.

Miéville's work, then, owes more to the grotesque than the sublime in its production of a more earthly sense of disorientation and unease. The grotesque is also a crucial element of Lovecraft's Weird Fiction where it contributes to the sense that the physical world is beyond human comprehension and offers a horrific embodied allusion to those sublime beings that cannot otherwise be represented. Yet, once again, Miéville extends the boundaries of the grotesque, moving beyond the organic hybrid as a source of horror to explore the technological grotesque and, drawing on Bakhtin's exploration of the emancipatory potential of the term, framing the grotesque as both a potential source of freedom from natural laws and opportunity for self-empowerment and transformation.

In conclusion, Lovecraft was one of the most influential writers of Weird Fiction. His fiction and essays together established the parameters of this speculative mode, prioritising the achievement of the Weird affect of cosmic fear which he produced in his own fiction through the sublime and the grotesque. Although Miéville writes across a wide range of speculative genres, his influence on recent Weird Fiction may ultimately prove to be just as significant. The author of several critical analyses of both early and New Weird Fiction, Miéville uses *Kraken* to engage in overt dialogue with Lovecraft's oeuvre, using, but also transforming the key elements that produce its central affect for a twenty-first century world and readership.