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A TENTACULAR TERATOLOGY: THE ABCANNY MONSTROUS

Rob O'Connor

I

In 2011, British writer China Miéville was the guest of honour at the International Conference of the Fantastic in the Arts. His speech – entitled "On Monsters: Or, Nine or More (Monstrous) Not Cannies" – explored Miéville's ideas of the monstrous body through an interconnected series of critical flash-observations. Miéville explores the recognisable, psychoanalytical concept of the uncanny present in the contemporary monster motif before intertwining the canny with several imaginative prefixes to demonstrate the creativity of the monster as an exploration of corporeality and metaphorical expression for contemporary concerns. One of those critical ideas is the *ab*canny monstrous. In this article I investigate why the abcanny monster is a useful metaphorical tool to interrogate socio-political structures and concepts of the body from a non-anthropocentric perspective. Embracing Miéville's structure of critical vignettes, this article analyses the nature of the abcanny monster and its expression through a variety of tentacular forms. In so doing, I demonstrate how the tentacular is an effective motif for challenging twenty-first century, capitalist, anthropocentric values.

To highlight the kind of body to which he was referring, Miéville defines the abcanny monster in very clear terms as a Weird Fiction creation deliberately devoid of definition, mirroring the sense of indescribable cosmic awe associated with the Weird Fiction materiality of H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos and the tentacled monsters which are present within some of those narratives. For Miéville, the abcanny monstrous actively utilises elements of physicality and the corporeal which are devoid of understanding:

> The monsters of the abcanny are teratological expressions of that unrepresentable and unknowable, the evasive of meaning. Hence the enormous preponderance of shapeless, oozing gloopiness in the abcanny monstrous, the stress on formlessness, shapes that ostentatiously evade symbolic decoding by being all shapes and no shapes. (381)

The abcanny monster suggests a freedom from binary oppositions, an alternative physicality which can be utilised as a metaphorical canvas to illustrate and explore an inexplicable contemporary world and the ever-shifting state of our contemporary society on a variety of levels - whether it is the destabilising effects of capitalism, the chaos of revolutionary action, the intrusion of a pandemic which fractures all aspects of society, or the realisation that growing environmental disintegration

must force us to move away from anthropocentric thinking. Even though the abcanny body is devoid of binary associations, it is simultaneously suffused with symbolic power as it defies a socio-political system which is built on normalised capitalist parameters. Miéville embraces this metaphorical power of the abcanny monstrous: "These monsters mean, while they meta un-mean" (382).

This depiction of abcanny monsters is not a new thing. The Weird Fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries include monsters of this formless type. In *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin-de-Siècle* (2020), Emily Alder explores how Weird Fiction at the turn of the twentieth century reacted to the increasing ontological categorisation of scientific practice. Alder pinpoints the power of Weird Fiction to "offer radical new forms of knowledge—ecological, philosophical, and spiritual, for example—and model new sets of relations between selves and others" (3). Alder comments on the ability of Weird Fiction (and its associated teratology) to offer new ways of politically comprehending the world as both human and non-human; that "some explore alternative, enweirded, epistemological terrains that validate abcanny realities" (27). In other words, the formlessness of abcanny monsters encourages alternative versions of the world, for us to "imagine the world differently" (32).

Miéville refers to Weird Fiction as being "suffused with abness" following the renowned Weird Fiction writer William Hope Hodgson's use of the prefix *ab-* in many of his stories to help describe the nonhuman characters and his monstrous creations (381). In another essay "Weird Fiction" (2009), Miéville clearly understands this relationship between "revolutionary teratology" and Weird fiction's detachment from the return of the repressed witnessed in the uncanny:

> Paradigmatic is Weird fiction's obsession with the tentacle, a limb-type absent from European folklore and the traditional Gothic, and one which, after early proto-Weird iterations by Victor Hugo, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, viralled suddenly in Haute Weird fiction until it is now, in the post-Weird debris of fantastic horror, the default monstrous limb-type [...] the awe that Weird fiction attempts to invoke is a function of *lack* of recognition, rather than an uncanny resurgence, guilt-function, the return of a repressed. It is thus as much a break from as an heir to traditional Gothic. (512, original emphasis)

For Miéville, the monsters of Weird Fiction represent a break from Anglophonic folkloric (and Gothic) traditions, as represented by the indescribable biomass of the tentacle, which has a more recognisable historic association with Non-European and Asian folklore traditions.[1] The tentacle has shifted beyond being a symbol of Weird fiction's exploration of the greater cosmos. The growing re-interpretation of Lovecraftian weird fiction in recent decades has resulted in the tentacle saturating cultural media, making it a more knowable phenomenon of creative expression.[2] The tentacular has become the physical manifestation of a "*lack* of recognition." What is meant by *recognition* here is the ability to place the object into a contextual framework. If an object feels uncanny to the

observer, such a sensation is created through an acknowledgement that the object is simultaneously familiar, yet unfamiliar. Even though it is strange, it exists within a framework which we are able to comprehend – it is a human face, or body, or a recognisable surrounding or location. In contrast, the abcanny revels in the fact that it exists *outside* of our comprehension, either through being indescribable – completely uncategorisable in its construction – or explicit, violent rejection and repulsion.

The tentacular – due to its nature to be gloopy, to seemingly shapeshift and evade meaning – is imbued with abcanny qualities and effectively demonstrates this state of abcanny 'awe' due to its incomprehensible physiology, intrinsically connected with manifestations of body horror. Miéville posits in his essay "M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire" (2008) that the "spread of the tentacle" signals an "epochal shift" from the Gothic monster to the alterity of Weird culture (105). Just as Weird Fiction occupies the liminal space between mythological and realist interpretation of the world (in other words between science and fantastical horror), so too does the tentacular monster exist on the same theoretical spectrum, simultaneously representing the body of the 'other' (being different from our perception of 'self') and the body of the 'alien' (being unfamiliar and disturbing, from another world). The tentacle becomes a useful, metaphorical manifestation for a world where socio-political structures are constantly shifting, and can encourage the exposure of new ways of viewing, or even imagining a utopian end, or recrafting, of the capitalist, anthropocentric world in which we exist. However, this abcanny tentacular practice is not *confined* to physical tentacle-limbs. Other abcanny, tentacular functions include body horror hybridity, the actions of fungi and lichens (especially those of monstrous size and tenacity), and the creative interpretations of what we can call 'primordial blob monsters.' Such forms can also be interpreted as *tentacular*.

II

The tentacular leads us to consider the motif of the monster. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) the monster is an ideal vessel for examining the facets, fears, worries, and concerns of the society which created them: "The monstrous body is pure culture […] the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals', 'that which warns'" (4, original emphasis). As Bennet and Royle state in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2009): "Literature is, above all, about the human, about what it means to be human, and therefore about the non-human, about what it might mean not to be human" (254). The monster, therefore, is an effective figure for challenging anthropocentric viewpoints.

The effectiveness of the monster motif lies in its presentation of contradictory states of being, critically challenging the socially-perceived boundaries between 'self' and 'other,' as Margrit Shildrick claims in *Embodying the Monster* (2002):

> If we know what we are by what we are not, then the other, in its apparent separation and distinction, serves a positive function of securing the boundaries of the self. And yet time and again the monstrous cannot be confined to the place of the other; it is not simply alien, but arouses always the contradictory responses of denial *and* recognition, disgust *and* empathy, exclusion *and* identification. (17, original emphasis)

Monsters reflect all aspects of the human condition: not only do their physiological construction remind us of the repulsion we have towards our biological state, repressed or not, but they can also reflect the monstrous nature of our mentality and social structures. Noel Carroll describes the physicality of monsters in *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) as "fantastic biologies" which result from the linking of "different and opposed cultural categories" (50). Monsters are essentially dichotomous constructions exploring and pushing at the boundaries between conflicting distinctions, which in turn makes them appealing motifs. As Cohen states: "Because of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at a time of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes - as 'that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis'" (6). Monsters force the observer to reimagine their perception of the world by challenging our ontological ideals. In a time of drastic social, economic, political, and environmental crisis, the monster can metaphorically manifest these points of crisis whilst simultaneously presenting alternatives to the current dominance of anthropocentrism. The hybrid fusion we witness in monsters is a useful methodology for exploring, reassessing, and reconfiguring the Anthropocene, allowing us to imagine a shared existence between the human and the non-human which reflects the need to shift away from anthropocentric thought.

III

This is, therefore, a role the tentacular monstrous can occupy. The tentacle is biological, yes, but its writhing nature and gloopy shape-shifting form is on the edges of our recognition and challenges our ontological understanding, inviting alternative perceptions of the world – particularly the non-human – to be considered alongside more common anthropocentric values.

This aligns with Donna Haraway's definition of the Chthulucene posited in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). Haraway offers the Chthulucene as a means of expressing a possible new epoch, one focused on the importance of multispecies perspectives as a counterpoint to narratives of impending climatic and environmental collapse: "Specifically, unlike either the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet. We are at stake to each other" (55). Haraway is quick to discuss the connotations with Lovecraft's Cthulhu in the naming of her new epoch. She insists on her etymological grounding, referring to the "chthonic ones" – beings on earth, taken from the Greek root *khthōn*, meaning 'beneath the earth,' or subterranean. She stresses that her terminology is not derived from Lovecraft's monstrous creation but is equally playful with this association, recognising the role that the monster may inhabit in such narratives:

> Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair. Chthonic ones romp in multicritter humus but have no truck with the sky-gazing Homo. Chthonic ones are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters. They also demonstrate and perform consequences (2).

Haraway refers to both the octopus and the Greek goddess Medusa as avatars of this Chthulucene moment, showing that both the tentacular, abcanny bodies of the natural world and the monsters of our imagination are effective motifs to encourage non-anthropocentric, interspecies narratives. The tentacle invites us to re-evaluate the physical, to re-assess what we mean by 'body' and 'self.' It invites humankind to construct a new narrative, to gain a new understanding of our natural world and the earth on which we live. As Haraway highlights: "Myriad tentacles will be needed to tell the story of the Chthulucene" (31).

For Haraway, the tentacular – and its representation in speculative fictions – are the clearest metaphorical presentation of the core values of the Chthulucene. The tentacular expresses a movement away from anthropocentrism and towards a representation of existence in a world dealing with environmental and social uncertainty:

> The tentacular ones wrangle me in SF […] The tentacular ones make attachments and detachments; they make cuts and knots; they make a difference; they weave paths and consequences but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others. (31)

In these times of environmental concern, it is vital that we begin to understand how humans are intertwined with other species and non-human entities, to make "attachments" and "detachments" and form new pathways of connectedness. The hybridity of interspecies connectiveness is explicitly portrayed through the tentacular monstrous, the tentacle-limb providing an alternative methodology for perceiving the bodily form which moves away from traditional acceptance of the human form as dominant. The tentacular practices of abcanny monsters allows this inter-species exploration to be metaphorically expressed.

IV

Miéville (in "On Monsters") states that Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection is *not* the source of his use of the prefix *ab-* in his naming of the abcanny monstrous, that it is "not a *sine qua non* of the abcanny" and, instead, refers to "abnormal" (381). However, it is interesting to analyse the ontological deconstruction witnessed in Miéville's evaluation of the abcanny monster alongside the similar dissolving of boundaries witnessed through the theoretical spectrum of abjection put forward by Kristeva.

In *The Power of Horror* (1982) Kristeva jumps immediately into succinct and powerful definition, where the abject body is in direct opposition with the 'I.' Whereas the uncanny does bear some familiarity to the observer (its power lying in the familiar simultaneously being unfamiliar), the abject body is a much more violent interjection, "elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (5). Therefore, the abject is a failure of recognition from the perspective of the observer and, as a result, it is banished and repressed, our conscious mind unwilling to accept its existence. The abject is a disruption of physical boundaries, Kristeva's famous example of 'skin on milk' – "the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (2) – representing an *unnatural* disruption in *our* expectations of what the physical form of the milk should be. Both the physical normality (the rules and laws) of the milk and the psychological reaction of the drinker falls outside of our ontological worldview, forming the abject effect. This image becomes about the boundary that exists - a boundary which is fragile and easily broken, consumable, and dissolvable.

In *Abjection and Representation* (2019), Rina Arya articulates further on Kristeva's definition, describing the abject as being neither object nor subject:

> It exists in between these two states, where it cannot be discretely separated from the subject (as the object would be able to) and where it lurks object-like but without becoming an object. The non-object impresses on the subject's stability, causing the subject to feel vulnerable because its boundaries are under threat. (4)

Arya touches upon the theoretical concept of object-oriented ontology here and the importance of the boundary between human existence and non-human objects. Object-oriented ontology posits that objects exist independent of human perception; that they experience their existence away from our own species-centric definition of identity. While this article is not conducting an object-oriented analysis, it is worth noting that the abject body engages with this different orientation of perception.

Arya confirms that "fear of the other is central to abjection [...] we learn that the *object of the* other may be an external force, but that *the fear of this* other stems from within and is a deep-rooted fear of the other-in-the-self that we want to expel" (7, original emphasis). Our internal alienation is projected outwards onto the external world; or, to call on Kristeva's 'skin on milk' again, our internal fear of alienation is projected outwards onto the milk, it is not the 'I' which is abject, but the milk itself. The breakdown of boundaries seen within abjection taps into deep-rooted fears about internalised 'othering' of the self. Therefore, the theory of abjection runs parallel with Miéville's definition of the abcanny, both sharing an ability to shift ontological boundaries which creates a sense of 'otherness' ripe for metaphorical consideration; wherein lies the political power of the abject – that 'othering' is often associated and promoted through exclusionary political viewpoints.[3]

The existence of both weird and abcanny monsters is a deviation from our ideal conceptions of what a body actually *is*, forcing us to question and reconceptualise our own lived experience. The repulsion of body horror, achieved through graphic descriptions, pushes the perceptions of our physical bodies into the sphere of the abject. The most common examples involve incomprehensible body horror attachments or manifestations crafted from bodily fluids which are usually internalised, such as blood, semen, faeces, urine, menstrual blood *etcetera*. The abcanny monster is gloopy, slippery, shapeshifting – writhing, tentacular biomasses which clearly highlight our narrow ontological viewpoint. Abjection can have a role to play here: Mieville's description of the "oozing gloopiness" and "formlessness" of abcanny monsters aligns itself with the failure of recognition and the defying of ontological boundaries present in the abject.

V

If one adopts Miéville's description of the abcanny then the motif of the squid or cephalopod (represented by the tentacle) quickly establishes itself as an 'avatar of abcanniness,' its unique physiological ability to change form, colour, and shape reflecting most effectively this gloopy formlessness associated with abcanny teratology. However, the very nature of the tentacle causes us to question conventional narrative structures regarding teratological and ontological understanding. They exist on the limits of our recognition; they are *abcanny* forms. Miéville is intrigued by cephalopods and they constantly infiltrate his thoughts and work. In his essay "Alien Evasion" (2012) Miéville sums up the appeal of the cephalopod as a monstrous entity:

> Invisibility is nothing. An invisible thing in a landscape is just a landscape. The point of invisibility is to fail. A just glimpsed beast-shaped burr - now that catches the breath. The realisation that a vine is not a vine, but a limb, and that it's hunting: that sensory stutter is what gets you. (n.p.)

Miéville alludes to the alterity of cephalopods and their abject form: a natural existence that we do not want to reconcile; a form which makes us question our understanding of materiality and highlights our limited perception of biology. It is this alterity that makes tentacular beasts so appealing to genre writers: Lovecraft's Cthulhu, J. R. R. Tolkien's Watcher in the Water, Jules Verne's colossal squid in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) are all tangible examples of the horror of the tentacular, the unknown, and the 'other.' As Richard Ellis describes in *The Search of the Giant Squid* (1999): "There is probably no apparition more terrifying than a gigantic, saucer-eyed creature of the depths with writhing, snakelike, grasping tentacles, a huge gelatinous body, and the powerful beak of a humungous seagoing parrot. Even the man-eating shark pales by comparison to such a horror" (168). Tentacles best replicate the "just glimpsed beast-shaped burr" which Miéville references. They move swiftly: grasping, constricting, reaching. Their similarity to fingers imbues tentacles with a sense of uncanniness – an appendage that operates in a familiar manner yet is biologically different to our own. Our curiosity is piqued by the unnatural, by that which is uniquely different from us.

Miéville hints at a mythical origin for the cephalopod, referring to them existing out-of-time, "the lone survivor from an earlier world" (2012, n.p.). Miéville is communicating his desire to break away from Euro-centric folklore motifs – he is forming a new folklore for the cephalopod here as an entity which presents itself as something primordial, from the depths of another history or place. It is no wonder giant squid specimens caught or seen in the early days of maritime exploration were re-interpreted as mythical krakens. There was no benchmark by which to compare these specimens, leaving the imagination to interpret these unique entities, the mysterious disappearance of vessels suddenly explainable by imagining the attack of colossal specimens. The tentacular is more than a manifestation of monstrous uncanniness. It is an echo of a mythical past. It is physical but simultaneously unnameable, 'away,' 'outside,' or 'not of canniness.' *Ab*canny.

VI

Being *tentacular* is not just about the presence of an actual tentacle-like limb. Other entities and motifs can adopt elements of pervasive disruption associated with this interpretation of the tentacular. Sometimes these tentacular actions can be invasive too. In his book *Entangled Life* (2020), mycologist Merlin Sheldrake describes the tentacular world of fungi. Sheldrake reveals many astonishing statistics about the labyrinthine network created by fungi: their slippery forms; their "mycelial minds" (105-136); their mind-bending chemical interaction with the human brain (110-113); their ability to take over insect bodies and force them into unnatural activity for the benefit of the fungus itself (107-109;118-119). This kind of fungal mind-control can be seen in popular culture examples, such as M. R. Carey's novel *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014) or the world depicted in the popular videogame series *The Last of Us* (Part I in 2013 and Part II in 2020). In both of these examples, mankind has been decimated by mutated strains of *cordyceps* fungi which turns humans into zombie-like creatures. Not only is fungus being utilised as an abcanny motif to ask questions about the veracity of being human, but it is also being used as a methodology for blurring genre boundaries. Adler is also keen to highlight the application of fungi in earlier Weird Fiction, especially in the work of Hodgson: "malleable and liminal forms of cryptogams are used to produce monsters that blur the boundaries of animal and plant and of alive and notalive." (175). As Sheldrake reminds us: "In many instances – from lichens to the boundary-stretching behaviour of mycelium – fungi challenge our well-worn concepts of identity and individuality" (124). As a species, humans understand and use fungi for a variety of purposes, yet they remain mysterious to us.

The rhizomatic root systems of fungi are inherently tentacular and this makes them interesting motifs for fantastical constructs. The root network of fungi consists of tiny, tentacular hyphae able to shift direction towards food sources and change the structure of the network in response. However, this does not make fungi inherently abcanny – humanity has an ontological understanding of fungi and even though they are tentacular in nature they are not abcanny. However, their actions and the effects they have on their environments defy ontological perceptions in a similar fashion to other abcanny forms. If this is filtered through the lens of monstrous gigantification, then the results do become challenging to ontological perceptions. There are several examples of the fungal monstrous producing abcanny effects in genre fiction, most noticeably the work of Jeff VanderMeer, whose

"Ambergris" series (*City of Saints and Madmen* (2001), *Shriek: An Afterword* (2006), and *Finch* (2009)) feature the Grey Caps, a race of mushroom-like humanoid creatures. Fantastical fungi and spores also have a presence in VanderMeer's acclaimed novel *Annihilation* (2014). Area X, the mysterious world of the novel, is a wilderness that does not conform to normal laws of nature. When investigating the Tower (the region's most prominent feature) the science party leading the twelfth expedition into Area X discover writing on the walls of the mysterious building:

> At about shoulder height, perhaps five feet high, clinging to the wall of the tower, I saw what I first took to be dimly sparkling green vines progressing down into the darkness […] Then, as I stared, the "vines" resolved further, and I saw that they were words, in cursive, the letters raised about six inches off the wall. (23)

The protagonist, a biologist, posits that the writing is "a type of fungi, or other eukaryotic organism" (24). It becomes clear that this fungus is integral to the unique ecosystem of Area X, which contains multiple examples of abcanny bodies, such as human-hand-shaped creatures made from brain cells and moaning entities that resemble the discarded shells of horseshoe crabs but, on analysis, are revealed to once have been human too.[4] In *Annihilation*, it is fungi which has an active role in the creation of this abcanny landscape. As Timothy C. Baker suggests in *Writing Animals* (2019), Area X is an *oikeos tropos*: "a favourable place that allows for a new approach to interspecies relationality; at the same time, however, it defies understanding" (166). It is a strong example of the definition of the abcanny monstrous being explored here, with its blurring of interspecies boundaries and the questioning of humanity through indescribable constructions. Not only this, but Area X is also a setting which defies conventional interpretations of space – it does not behave as humans would conventionally expect. This invites us, as a reader, to reimagine non-anthropocentric methods for evaluating space, to build a new conceptual framework for our surrounding environments which incorporates utopian ideals of interspecies connectivity.

Fungi are a common feature in contemporary Science Fiction narratives too. In *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-present) the eponymous starship can jump instantaneously to anywhere due to an organic propulsion drive fuelled by astromycological spores. These spores form a navigable mycelial network that only organisms attuned to the rhizomatic nature of the spores can traverse. Indeed, the Discovery inadvertently finds itself crossing dimensions and experiencing alternative realities to their own, the mycelial network acting as a gateway to an abcanny realm of multiverse travel. Rhizomatic networks also play a key role in the novel *Rosewater* (2016, revised 2018), by Tade Thompson. *Rosewater* establishes a city of the same name in Nigeria where the presence of an alien entity called Wormwood produces incredible healing properties. Upon establishing roots, Wormwood spews forth microscopic alien spores, which creates a telepathic network known as the xenosphere. A few human 'sensitives' – such as the principal characters of Kaaro, Bicycle Girl and Eric – discover they can access the xenosphere and the more powerful they become within that 'bio-virtual' space the more they can manipulate it to their will and, by extension, challenge traditional

human perception of the world around them. This interspecies connection between human and fungi results in radically altered perceptions of time and space.

For both *Star Trek: Discovery* and *Rosewater* the spore networks only reach their full potential when intertwined with other species, producing abcanny monstrous bodies. In *Star Trek: Discovery*, the propulsion drive only works when the spores interact with the consciousness of another agent, biological material becoming fused with the spores, resulting in a living navigational system. For example, by joining with the spores, Chief Engineer Stamets slips out of recognisable categories of 'human.' By embracing the astro-mycelial network and becoming an abcanny body, Stamets becomes an important symbol, presenting an alternative conceptual framework created through interspecies connectivity. The abcanny monstrous here presents a new interpretation of what interspecies life *can* be. In *Rosewater*, the gloopiness of the tentacular, abcanny monstrous is more overt. As Kaaro and Bicycle Girl learn to navigate the xenosphere their powers grow stronger. The xenosphere becomes an abcanny landscape of vividly descriptive 'meat palaces,' of blood and flesh, of monstrous shape-shifting gryphons, and giant Rastafarian guardians. The tentacular spores create not only a network for transferring alien and human consciousness but also a canvas for creating fleshy, abcanny bodies, variations of human structures which are ontologically warped to defy logic and biological categorisation. Bicycle Girl is particularly interesting as she is later revealed to be a 'ghost' trapped within the xenosphere, appearing in the real world as an abcanny projection sustained by the tentacular, xenosphere spores. In these examples it is fungi that creates the abcanny monstrous; not directly, but through hybrid associations with other biological bodies or environments. The result is the crafting of new versions of the world for us to comprehend, a world freed from conceptual limitations.

VII

Some monsters do not directly incorporate the tentacle within their form but still embody the gloopy, *tentacular qualities* associated with the abcanny monstrous. The monster from the 1958 film *The Blob* may be simple in its conception, but its gelatinous body is all consuming, terrorising the citizens of small-town America after crash-landing on the Earth aboard a meteorite. As it consumes buildings and humans alike it grows bigger in size and turns a deeper, more vibrant, shade of red. This monster fits Miéville's definition of the abcanny monster perfectly; a shifting, oozing, uncategorisable mass that becomes tentacular in form. The Blob, at first glance, appears to be just a comical monstrous adversity for the film's protagonist, but as a metaphorical device it demonstrates a deeper meaning. As Juli L. Gittinger observes in *Personhood in Science Fiction* (2019), the chronological timing of the film means that it could be "interpreted as a metaphor for communism, the popular bogeyman of the 1950s in which it is set. As its sole purpose is to absorb and overwhelm everyone it encounters (growing bigger and redder), it highlighted fears about the 'red menace'" (188). Taken literally, the abcanny form of the Blob – with its shapeshifting, tentacular nature – signifies the political repression and the fear of communist influence on American society which had been prevalent during the heights of McCarthyism.

Figure 1: The Mind-Flayer from *Stranger Things*, Season Three. Image found at https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/the-11-best-things-about-stranger-things-3

The popular Netflix show *Stranger Things* (2016-present), some sixty years later, once again tapped into the abcanny symbolism depicted in *The Blob,* albeit in a gorier, body horror fashion. In Season Three, the show's principal monster and antagonist – the Mind Flayer – bridges across from the Upside Down to the real-world of 1980s Hawkins. As part of the process, the Mind Flayer goes through a transitional state, constructing a physical, monstrous body from random biological components it finds around the town, including bodies of rats and flayed victims lured by the brainwashed Billy.[5] The resulting monster is a perfect encapsulation of abcanny, body horror motifs. It is biological but beyond comprehension, its form shifting and collapsing in on itself, disappearing down drains and sliding menacingly through air vents. This is best shown when the Mind Flayer pursues Nancy and corners her in a locked room. It takes the powers of Eleven to save her, the Mind Flayer disappearing into the sewers in an oozing, primordial puddle of bloody gloop. Senior visual effects supervisor for *Stranger Things*, Paul Graff, commented on the abcanny construction of the Mind Flayer: "It's not a well-designed creature; it's a thrown-together, nasty, weird body parts creature so it should be limping. Maybe some of those limbs you see are completely dysfunctional and it's just dragging them behind him" (Bucksbaum, n.p.). Staff writer, Kate Trefy pushes the symbolism of this aesthetic even further, stating that "Puberty is disgusting and it's awful [...] Let's lean into that as much as we possibly can" (Bucksbaum, n.p.). They astutely liken the Mind Flayer's transitional gloopiness to the pubertal transformation which occurs not only in the teenage body but also within the chrysalis: the dissolving and reconfiguring of a body into a new, developed form. Considering that the principal characters in *Stranger Things* Season Three are going through teenage puberty – re-establishing their identities and dealing with new emotions they are yet to understand – the Mind Flayer represents their transitional state very effectively, albeit utilising abcanny body horror rather than more gentle motifs and symbolism.[6]

One final example to consider appears in VanderMeer's 2017 novel, *Borne*. Here, creatures have been engineered and set loose by the mysterious Company, resulting in the apocalyptic devastation of an unnamed city. These creatures include the giant bear Mord (standing skyscraper-tall amongst the ruins) and a myriad of insectile and mammalian creatures and fungi. The entity known as Borne is discovered in the fur of Mord by the human protagonist, Rachel, a scavenger searching for biotech amongst the ruins of the city. Initially, Borne is described as resembling "a half closed, stranded sea anemone," but as it increases in size, Borne's form fluctuates, initially becoming more plant-like in nature: "a sleek vase with rippling colors that strayed from purple toward deep blues and sea greens. Four vertical ridges slid up the sides of its warm and pulsating skin […] Much later, I realized it would have smelled different to someone else, might even had appeared in a different form" (3; 6). Borne's form quickly develops abcanny, cross-boundary characteristics: "The sides of Borne peeled back in segments to reveal delicate dark-green tendrils that even in their writhing protected the still hidden core" (18). Throughout the novel, Borne continues to grow in size, phase through different colours, and change from tentacular to human. Borne's physicality is gelatinous and shape-shifting, monstrously consuming flora and fauna, breaking them down into constituent parts to analyse and further comprehend the construction of biological entities. At the end of the novel, Borne manifests into its most abcanny form to fight Mord:

> A glowing purple vase shape, a silhouette rising that could have been some strange new building but was instead a living creature. Borne was failing as Mord, so now he would try his luck as himself. He rose and rose to a full height a little taller than Mord, the familiar tentacles shooting out, while below, at his base, I knew that he was anchored by cilia now each grown as large as me. (312)

In these final moments, Borne becomes a vision of abcanny interspecies monstrosity, plant and animal hybridity within a tentacular biomass of gargantuan proportions. The description of Borne resembling a building, interestingly brings man-made architecture into this abcanny hybridity. Comparisons between Borne and the monster in *The Blob* can be easily drawn, both writhing, gelatinous, consuming, and ever-growing. VanderMeer's novel is one of the most effective examples of the abcanny monstrous in contemporary fiction, playfully presenting encounters with non-human entities in order to realign the reader's anthropocentric ideals. Once again, what VanderMeer achieves in *Borne* is similar to *Annihilation*. In both texts, VanderMeer is utilising abcanny bodies to express a new way of conceptualising the world – one a world rich with interspecies connections and new biological networks. What is also important to remember is how in both of the worlds in which VanderMeer depicts these abcanny bodies are in opposition to destructive, capitalist forces: in *Borne,* this is the Company, whose bioengineering experiments have created this apocalyptic wasteland; in *Annihilation,* the abcanny landscape consumes the invaders of the science party sent into Area X by nefarious, government agency. It is by critically considering ontological boundaries that the abcanny can query and suggest a reassembling of socio-political structures.

VIII

In the depths of the Darwin Centre at the Natural History Museum lie the specimens that constitute the Spirit Collection tour.[7] After passing through airlocks you are presented with a room full of steel cabinets. There is a mechanically controlled chill in the air, a perfectly maintained temperature. The cabinets remain closed, except for two that have glass fronts, and only then is the fascination of these secret specimens revealed: a bat suspended in amber fluid; a nest of rats preserved in sealed jam jars; a freakish menagerie that you cannot stop looking at. And tentacles. Lots of tentacles, frozen in time, reaching for you. A nine-metre tank dominates the room, the cloudy yellow brine-Formalin slowly revealing its contents like a ghostly, abcanny God. Archie. *Architeuthis Dux*. The giant squid. A real-life Kraken.

Figure 2: Archie, the giant squid specimen at the Natural History Museum. Author's own photograph.

Archie truly is a sight to behold. Her head evokes images of Lovecraft's Cthulhu, rising from the depths. A mass of muscle and mantle. A tentacle lulls to one side, suckers on show, their chitin teeth eager to latch on to flesh. "Archie is a young specimen," we are told. "A teenager." The horror of a fully-sized adult certainly springs into your mind. Archie stretches most of the colossal tank, mesmerising in her grandeur. No wonder the mythology of the Kraken exists.

Figure 3: One of Archie's tentacles, detail of suckers. Author's own photograph.

The tour guide delights in talking about Archie's fans, stories of visitors and their reactions. They mention a man who talked about a book that depicts Archie being stolen. After visiting the Spirit Collection, re-reading the opening of China Miéville's novel *Kraken* (2010) conjures up a sense of déjà-vu. Following our tour guide, I am reminded of Miéville's cephalopod curator Billy Harrow, and his initial discovery of Archie's disappearance. It is easy to see how Miéville may have been inspired by his own visit to the collection. Indeed, he references the sights of the tank room accurately, marvelling at "ribbon-folded oarfish, an echidna, bottles of monkeys [...] tea-coloured crocodiles and deep-sea absurdities" as well as the historical significance of the Beagle jars (9). One's own wonderment at the sight of Archie is matched by Miéville, who remarks upon entering the room as breaching "a Schwarzschild radius of something not canny, and that cephalopod corpse was the singularity" (10). Miéville's description of Archie as "not canny" invites a consideration of the tentacular monster as a body which stretches beyond comprehension, something free from the restrictions of our normal perceptions of the teratological.

In "On Monsters", Miéville concludes the teratological exploration with one final hope: that monsters "Help just occasionally with thinking" and "become permanent parts of our conceptual arsenal, as it is for example my sincere aspirations that the abcanny does" (391). The growing presence and critical appreciation for the abcanny tentacular suggests that Mieville's hope is being realised. These brief critical flashes demonstrate how the tentacular, abcanny monster has many different forms in popular culture. From the hybrid body horror of the Mind Flayer to the gelatinous blob monster, the appendages of the cephalopod to the rhizomatic network of spores and fungi, the tentacular monster has the power to hold our attention, tap into our deepest fears regarding the 'self' and express something to us about interspecies dynamics and the chaotic networks of the contemporary moment.

Long live the tentacle, indeed. Welcome to the abcanny monstrous!

NOTES

1. Weird Fiction has interestingly created its own folklore around monsters and genre characteristics, such as the 'Cthulhu Mythos' to more contemporary iterations such as the roleplaying-game system *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) or video game *Bloodborne* (2015) that each develop a folkloric mythology around the narrative ideas and motifs of the Weird.

2. Popular culture examples of cephalopods and tentacles are far-reaching: from "Doc-Oc" in *Spiderman* to Squidward Tentacles in *Spongebob Squarepants* (1999 – present)*;* Professor Inkling in *Octonauts* (2010-present) to Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* (1989); the visiting aliens in *Arrival* (2016) to the kitsch cult classics *Deep Rising* (2008), *Mega Shark versus Giant Octopus* (2009), and *Sharktopus* (2010).

3. It is worth noting Georges Bataille's other interpretation of abjection put forward in his 1934 essay "Abjections and Miserable Forms" – that of 'social abjection' which is often used to describe marginalised social groups such as sex workers, convicts, spies or disavowed citizens, poor, or disabled people.

4. Even though Alex Garland's filmic adaptation (2018) compellingly depicts the weirdness of Area X, the abcanny bodies described in the novel are replaced with more *uncanny* images of people's bodies being consumed by plants, presented as floral statues.

5. In this respect the Mind Flayer is like the monster depicted in China Miéville's short story "Familiar," from the collection *Looking for Jake and Other Stories* (2005), a creature which assimilates the biological and man-made detritus it comes across, transforming into a large, abcanny beast which seeks out its creator.

6. The consideration of burgeoning sexual maturity suggested by the Mind Flayer links into the sexual connotations inherent within the motif of the tentacle. There is not room to develop this idea here but, for more on this, see Hannon 2009.

7. This description of the Spirit Collection is based upon my own experiences of the tour, Thursday 25th August 2016.

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