

**William Brown and David H. Fleming, *The Squid Cinema from Hell: Kinoteuthis Infernalis and the Emergence of Cthulumedica*.
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\$120.00.**

When I unlock my phone, my eyes immediately move towards my social media apps. I have a Facebook, twitter, Instagram, linked in, and academia.edu account. All of which present my identity in different ways. I use Facebook to communicate with family and friends. Twitter to follow celebrities I admire, Instagram for pictures of those close to me. This does not include the three separate email apps that clutter my phone's home screen. They are all each different arms jutting out from my phone reaching into my consciousness; changing me as I change it. Once I have received the appropriate dopamine response for which I was searching, I return the phone to my pocket for safekeeping. My phone never leaves my side. It is an extremity of me- a third arm- a tentacle that contains its own tentacles; all a part of me. This premise lays the foundation for William Brown and David H. Fleming's new book *The Squid Cinema From Hell: Kinoteuthis Infernalis and the Emergence of Cthulumedica*.

Squid Cinema is a book about the blurring of boundaries. Brown and Fleming lean heavily on Donna Haraway's concept of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Chthulucene (32). The Anthropocene refers to the era where anthropoids roamed the Earth, living amongst the animals and participating in the life cycle. The Capitalocene refers to the era in which Capitalism emerged and dominated the Earth. The Capitalocene is marked by an abundance of categories and possession. If someone can label something then it can be possessed. The Chthulucene (Haraway deliberately spells Chthulucene differently than Lovecraft's Cthulu in order to differentiate her Chthulucene as a return to the "chtonic" and not a direct referent to Lovecraft (32) is the era Haraway posits we are moving into. While Haraway tries to distance herself from Lovecraft, Brown and Fleming are not as opposed to Lovecraft's tentacular monster. The rise of Lovecraft's Cthulu creates a "radically other, nonhuman universe." Brown and Fleming's subject is a "horribly philosophical cinema of tentacles that touches us, and which pulls thought into dark, nonhuman realms, where many of the traditional boundaries, borders, and divisions no longer pertain" (33). For Brown and Fleming, the Chthulucene is an era marked by the human race losing its power and learning to live sustainably or ceasing to exist. Brown and Fleming explore how media is a metaphor for the Chthulucene, where boundaries dissolve into an interconnected web of tentacles, all working for the common survival of the whole.

Squid Cinema From Hell is Brown and Fleming's attempt to take Haraway's (and Fleussar's and a wide array of other philosopher's) ideas on the Chthulucene and apply it to media studies. This book at times reads as a list of every movie that has a cephalopod in it, but the book is much more than that. It is an attempt to "look at the contemporary media-drenched world from the perspective of/as if it were a cephalopodic universe" (1). In other words, this book is not simply a study of squids in cinema but a study of cinema through squids. Brown and Fleming examine the anatomy and nature of the cephalopod as a way to connect bridges to our media and culture, such as the cephalopods' ability to change their skin or live in darkness. The authors are trying to shift their perspective from an anthro-perspective to that of an animal, namely the squid. Only then can a move from to the Chthulucene occur. This is done through eight chapters including the extended introduction. It is not always evident how each chapter works together but by the end, it becomes clear that each chapter was working as an interconnected part of the completed whole.

Chapters 2, "Pulp Fiction and the Media Archaeology of Space," argues that cephalopods are media and media are cephalopods. The skin of a cephalopod acts as a display screen, connected to the brain/camera, displaying images for whatever purpose the scenario requires. Cephalopods can change the color of their skin for the purpose of attracting a mate or for camouflage (46). In a similar way, some televisions carry such powerful pixels that the screen will hide itself as a work of

art. Only when the time is appropriate will the screen reveal itself as a screen and not a painting (47). The screen becomes whatever the object choose to display to the viewer. Cinema is an intelligent being already camouflaging its message of the singularity to its viewers (50). Brown and Fleming expound on this point in Chapter 3, “Encounters with a 4DX Kino-Kraken.” They begin the chapter analyzing William Castle’s 1959 film *The Tingler*. The film is famous for Castle attaching machines that would shock certain audience members during the film, scaring them to the amusement of those surrounding them. *The Tingler*’s climax includes a scene where the monster is crawling through a cinema before entering the projection booth. A short clip is framed so the audience will believe that the titular creature is in their theater with the audience. The experience becomes four-dimensional. Brown and Fleming use this scene to suggest that the camera itself is a “fear machine” (86). The camera is always behind us, displaying an image before us. The audience lies in the liminal space between camera and image, becoming a part of the media. The boundary between media and audience dissolves as the media’s tentacles flatten and slither through our consciousness, dragging us into the deep.

Chapter 4, “Actorly Squid/Sets and Cephalopod Realism” is an examination of Scarlett Johansson and her filmography. Brown and Fleming use Johansson as an example for two reasons: 1. She is a megastar who is constantly in the public eye, and- 2. Her movies have a common theme of technological shape shifters. When we see Scarlett Johansson in a movie, we are aware that that is Scarlett Johansson. Yet, when she tweets or makes a public appearance, she is separate from the characters that she portrays in films. However, we still associate her with those characters. Brown and Fleming then point out the use of CGI and deep fakes in Johansson’s movies that digitally alter the actor on the screen. Thus the boundary between Johansson the actor, Johansson the person, Johansson the human, all begin to blur together. They are all tentacles jetting out from her being. They are all separate but all make up one being, thus complicating her identity in media and the public sphere. The whole of her being is made up of discernable parts. While Brown and Fleming use Johansson as an example, the chapter is an exercise in how boundaries blur between media and reality in various connection intersections. There is a fluidity between the actor’s roles, their public identity, and themselves.

Perhaps the strangest chapter in the book is chapter 5. “The Erotic Ecstasy of Cthulhu” examines the presence of squids and octopuses in sexual taboo media, the most famous of these being hentai tentacle porn. However, Brown and Fleming go further and examine sexual encounters with Cephalopods in media such as *the Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife* and *The Untamed* (2016). The chapter then analyzes the squid-eating scene in Park Chan-wook’s *Oldboy* (2003), a film where the protagonist unknowingly enters into an incestuous relationship. For Brown and Fleming, Cephalopods represent taboo sexual relationships. The slithering appendages of the cephalopod represents the breaking of boundaries of repressed society and entering a world of freedom (144). Yet, it is not just about accepting sexual taboos, but rather learning to see the world from the perspective of the cephalopods and experience orgasms as they do (149). That is to reject the constant search of perpetual youth and learn to embrace the joy of the Earth’s life cycle.

In the final three chapters of *Squid Cinema From Hell*, Brown and Fleming take on the task of moving us from the Anthropocene and Capitalocene to the Chthulucene. The foundation of this thought is based on biophilosophy arguing “no one really dies” since RNA is constantly recreated (154). Our bodies are made up of tentacle cells creating webs of networks, sharing information. Thus, our own bodies are an alien world of Cephalopods. “If a cell, thus, could think, it, too, would understand that all knowledge- all that it knows- is a result of tentacular interconnections, and that knowledge is not disembodied and ‘out there,’ but thoroughly embodied in a universe of entanglement” (157). This leads to Chapter 7, which is largely an analysis of the 2016 film *Arrival*. Brown and Fleming use the film to engage in a conversation about the tentacular nature of time. The protagonist’s ability to look forward and backwards in times leads into a discussion on the connected web of all things. The authors call for a universe where all things are entangled in a universal web. To destroy one tentacle is an attack on the entire being.

Brown and Fleming’s *Squid Cinema From Hell* is a mind-boggling, often confusing,

exploration of Cephalopods in media and media's nature as a cephalopod. The book is quite dense in post-humanist philosophy and aimed at scholars of media studies well versed in post-humanist conversations. While I think the book does its best to help those out who are not familiar with some of the foundations of Flusser and Haraway, there is a bit of a learning curve at the start. However, for those who dare to allow its tentacles to take hold, the authors have something quite profound to say. As I read this book, I was often struck with the thought that the Capitalocene is marked by labeling everything according to its perceived value. Under Capitalism, everything has a value assigned based on its ability to breed more capital. Everything is defined. The Chthulucene is about blurring those definitions and breaking down the borders. For Brown and Fleming, media shows that the Capitalocene is not sustainable and that a new era is on the horizon. The Capitalocene will collapse beneath itself or we will see the world in a new way, as Louise Banks does in *Arrival*. The end of Capitalocene is coming but it is not the end. Just as Lovecraft's Cthulu rises from the waters to mark the end of humanity, the Chthulucene rises from the depths of ourselves to announce a new era. An era marked by love and kindness. One that lives in sustainability with all things.

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