

## Lovecraftian Monsters of Nautical Horror in William Eubank's *Underwater*

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The drastic changes brought to our lives due to the presence of a mere virus, COVID19, have made us reflect on the fragility of our claimed position as rulers of the planet's surface. Such role is so relative that, when we focus on the oceanic depths, human's apparent supremacy on the rest of the planet has not even been claimed. Though some technological advances have allowed us to reach corners at the bottom of the ocean in recent decades, we have found them to be dark areas under tons of water where it becomes rather complicated to leave permanent marks of our presence; thus abyssal depths remain some of the ultimate frontiers for humanity to dominate. On this maritime obscure stage, William Eubank's film, *Underwater* (2020) relies on Lovecraftian aquatic monsters to address concerns about the exploitation of nature in the Anthropocene. Eubank's monsters are inspired on Cthulhu and the Deep Ones; both of them are submarine entities that emerge from oceanic depths to bring impressions of absolute horror in Lovecraft's fiction. The intention of this paper is to approach Eubank's film under a Nautical Horror lens and scrutinize the director's appropriation of said grotesque monsters to share his view of humanity as a species with a very limited role not only in maritime depths but in the whole planet as well.

In horror narratives, characters who confront monsters experience two stages of horror. First is the distressing experience that comes when facing the irruption of the monstrous entity. The second is an even more devastating stage: the irrefutable existence of the monster forces the human viewer to accept that our planet contains more than we could possibly know. In *Underwater*, Emily Haversham illustrates through her experience the occurrence of these two moments of horror in a nautical scenario. The horror she undergoes stems from the immediate threat to survive amidst the hostilities of unknown forces of wilderness located in the abysmal oceanic depths, and the resulting realisation that we are not alone, nor in control. The film presents the viewer with a scenario in a close future in the twenty-first century where the "World's Deepest Drill" (01.32): *Kepler Station* is part of a network of new and abandoned drilling facilities at the bottom of the Mariana Trench at an average depth of nearly seven miles. Said network is

apparently hit by an earthquake that makes it urgent for survivors to leave the place. A mechanical engineer, Norah Price, leads a group of other two drill workers who manage their way through corridors partially blocked with debris; on their way, they meet with the station captain, who stayed after he made escape pods left with survivors who could make their way to the pod bay; they are also joined in a control room by Emily, a biologist, and her boyfriend, another engineer, who confirm to the others that any attempt to contact the surface is impossible. So far, a mere natural event has left an extremely expensive facility useless and out of reach. The survivors' condition confirms that even the most advanced human-made construction is prone to collapse when affected by a natural disaster. No matter what expertise the different crew members possess, when the technology providing the artificial conditions to survive at the bottom of the ocean fails, everyone faces a hopeless condition. Every year around the world, we witness the occurrence of similar experiences given to the presence of tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes. More recently, there is the affectation over human activities in general produced by COVID 19 that still seems to extend for a bit longer after having hit us for around a year or longer depending on the place.

Regarding our relationship to Nature, Timothy Clark identifies the existence of an “enlightenment project of the ‘conquest of nature’” (7) which consolidates the exploitation and devastation of the environment without any consideration “based on the view that humanity is separate from and superior to it” (23). The first two decades of the twenty-first century show an ocean where the manipulation of natural resources for our own benefit is more evident than ever before. *Tian Industries*, the fictional name behind the owners of the drilling facility in the film, represents the fact that humanity has forgotten to think of itself and all other beings on the planet as what Timothy Morton calls a “mesh” (39), which extends to all living entities. Into such mesh, all creatures coexist in a complex network of interlaced links of mutual relationships that emphasise their differences and brings them together. Morton's view finds echo in Donna Haraway's proposal on “tentacular thinking” (33) which refers to the interconnectedness of life that rules all organic interactions on Earth. The result of our artificial separation from this network led to the end of the Holocene and the current Anthropocene, a geological epoch marked by significant human activity as we have witnessed from The Industrial Revolution. Actually, in *Underwater*, Norah alludes to the fact that we have turned the oceans into targets for our attempts to objectify and exploit our surroundings: “I used to love the ocean. It was like a giant petri dish.” (1-07.46) The result of this transformation is the end of all dialogue between humanity and Nature.

Although Nature is indifferent towards us unless threatened by our presence, we behave towards it as if we were facing an opponent with selfish intentions similar to ours, and thus start a violent competition (Hamilton 40). This competition means that the survival of nonhuman entities is more in danger every day as well as our own existence, which requires more technification that increases our isolation from all other forms of life. In the film, as the credits are presented, the viewer is first shown excerpts from blueprints, internal reports and newspapers that emphasize the dangers to human well-being after long stays in *Tian Industries*' facilities. Besides, some "newly discovered deep sea species" (02.36) as well as the dismissal of "Rumors of strange sightings at drill site" (01.52) are mentioned in these documents. It is not only that humans are irrupting in the habitat of nonhuman entities never before bothered by our presence, but also that our own bodies and minds are put at risk by being forced into long stays of confinement in the abyssal depths. The first shot following the opening credits is a vertical one that emphasizes the sense of sublime depth by coming from an intermediate point in the ocean depths to the sea bottom where the drilling station is located. Despite the impressive sight of the station, through the film, pods and atmospheric diving suits easily prove prone to damage by unexpected situations from natural origin. This reinforces the feelings of hopelessness and horror when humans move into scenarios where recent technology becomes essential to guarantee our survival and the presence of monsters tests its reliability.

When the encounter with monsters is connected with environmental concerns, some critics have applied the term "ecohorror" for those texts in which the damage made by humans to ecology is responsible for an attack on humanity from natural forces (see Tidwell as well as Rust and Soles). Building on these ideas, my intention here is to discuss *Underwater* as pertaining to a significant subset of ecohorror: Nautical Horror. In it, the striking threat from Nature originates specifically in aquatic contexts, such as oceans and waterways, as well as more liminal spaces, including shores, islands, and ships. Nautical Horror borrows a sublime maritime background from the Gothic and combines it with a horrifying and devastating encounter with the monstrous nonhuman. Resonances of this sublime oceanic obscurity are crucial in Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth". Both stories illustrate the struggle for survival against threatening monsters from maritime abyssal environments that oppose human will and understanding. The undeniable existence of these creatures forces Lovecraft's protagonists to accept that the world around them is vaster than the artificial limits we have imposed on it. In both

stories, the narrators unveil hideous knowledge that makes impossible for them to consider the position of humanity on the planet as safe. On one hand, Francis Wayland Thurston, the narrator in “The Call of Cthulhu,” describes Cthulhu’s body as a grotesque combination of characteristics belonging to many different species combined in the same body: “A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful.” (Lovecraft 127) Even before realizing the threat that Cthulhu represents for humankind, this grotesque combination is identified as abnormal by Thurston from the very first moment he sees it.

The grotesque body bases its power on the confluence of alien parts that “by combining disparate and even logically incompatible elements, undermines the myth of corporeal unity insistently promoted by Western thought.” (Connelly 190) By doing so, it reminds us that we live in a scenario of flux where consistency is but an illusion. When the grotesque confronts us, it denounces how arbitrary our classificatory systems are: “The grotesque insults our need for order, for classification, matching and grouping; it violates a sense of appropriate categories.” (Edwards and Rune 29) The law categorizes the contestant grotesque body as a monstrous one that points at the limits of the permissible. The departure from the norm does not essentially need to be a physical one, since “deviant behavior can serve to emphasize or exaggerate monstrosity”. (47) In “The Call of Cthulhu,” Thurston collects different accounts connected with versions of the sculpture that depicts Cthulhu’s body; all of them are linked to the presence of humans who behave aberrantly according to the standards of Western civilization. In fact, the crew encountered on the Pacific by Johansen and the rest of his companions on the *Emma* show such a “peculiarly abominable quality about them which made their destruction seem almost a duty” (Lovecraft 152).

Similarly, Robert Olmstead, the narrator of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” urges the government to act and eradicate the abnormal beings populating Innsmouth. In his first encounter with an Innsmouthian, he experiences “a wave of spontaneous aversion” (Lovecraft 584) after facing a being whose “oddities certainly did not look Asiatic, Polynesian, Levantine or negroid” (585). He later learns that the grotesque combination of humanoid, reptile and frog characteristics in the bodies of Innsmouthians are the result of miscegenation between humans and the Deep Ones, “fish-like frogs or froglike fishes” (602), that populate the bottom of the ocean. In both of Lovecraft’s stories, the creature that becomes grotesque to the human eye is an entity with a life that seems eternal in comparison to that of humans; this characteristic is enough to consider both

Cthulhu and the Deep ones as having much better chances of survival on Earth than those in the hands of humanity.

In the two stories by Lovecraft it is the unrestrainable curiosity of his narrators what leads them into the discovering the existence of grotesque monsters that challenge the idea of human supremacy on the planet. Likewise, scientific curiosity is responsible for having provided the technology that allowed the construction of *Tian Industries*' drilling station in Eubank's film. The human interest in mineral extraction expressed by their activity is what provokes a violent response from hideous creatures. The attack from the ocean and its creatures against our presence on ships, islands, or the coast would be labelled as a violent irruption of horrifying proportions from a human standpoint. Nevertheless, from the perspective located in the sea and its creatures, it is us, humans, who are the intruders that have disturbed and polluted the place they inhabit. From the very moment we turned to rivers and seas to satisfy our excessive need for natural resources, our presence on and under the water has left marks of erosion and pollutants that have become much more evident in the last two centuries. In fact, the human tendency to leave disposals all around its presence is illustrated in the film when the group of survivors find traces of human trash floating in a flooded tunnel.

*Underwater* presents two elements I suggest essential for a text of Nautical Horror: first, of course, it must have an aquatic background—in this case, the Mariana Trench; and second, the presence of one or more monstrous creatures that awaken an annihilating fear in the human characters who encounter them. In an interview with Mr. H Reviews, Eubank confirms that the huge creature appearing in the final minutes of the film is inspired on Cthulhu and that the beings emerging from its body are Lovecraftian inspired as well. These latter anthropomorphic-aquatic creatures chase Emily, Norah and the other survivors all along their escape attempt. The similarities between them and the amphibians described in Lovecraft's "Dagon" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth" are obvious; Eubank strikes his audience with hybrid beings of humanoid appearance but with traces of frogs and fish. As it occurs to Robert Olmstead in the second part of his narrative when he is chased by monstrous hybrid beings as he attempts to escape from Innsmouth, Emily and the others are struck not only by the transgression of boundaries evidenced in these monsters' bodies but by their relentless violence. It is also their attack on human presence what scares the group of survivors who find it extremely difficult to defend from them. As for their giant cthulhian leader, this creature seems to coordinate the whole attack on the human intruders

in the abyss, just as in “The Shadow over Innsmouth” Cthulhu’s leadership is alluded when the narrator foretells that the Deep Ones will “rise again for the tribute Great Cthulhu craved” (Lovecraft 641).

The attack from the creatures in the film makes anthropocentric attempts to claim supremacy over the oceanic depth fail despite the existence of revolutionary technology. Throughout the plot, Emily experiences a gradual understanding of the fact that the damage suffered by the station and its crew is the result of humanity’s irruption in a habitat they can only access by artificially imposing their presence on it. In “The Call of Cthulhu,” the academic mind of the narrator is the one realizing that the advance of sciences “will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and our frightful position therein that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.” (Lovecraft 124) Similarly, it is Emily, the biologist, who realizes the disaster in *Kepler Station* is the result of the abuse of technology used to take the human greed for minerals to a dangerous stage. Her contemplating a mural evoking the interaction between merfolk and humans, right before the team starts their escape route (23.24), seems to trigger her reflection on the fact that oceanic waters have always been an alien realm belonging to nonhumans. Later on, after one of the survivors died due to a technical failure and another has just been killed by the unstoppable force of an aquatic creature, she claims:

We did this.

We drilled the bottom of the ocean.

We took too much, and now she’s taking back.

We’re not supposed to be down here. (53.00)

The “she” Emily refers to is Nature, the whole set of nonhuman forces we have separated ourselves from through a process of many centuries. She has comprehended that there has been no earthquake, nor unexplainable attacks from the creatures; their continuous violence against humans and their drilling stations is their response to the human irruption in their own habitat. Moreover, it is only from a human perspective that their bodies are grotesque. From their own perspective, humans are the intruders who have altered the sea bottom with their industrial drilling. In the end, *Underwater* is a Nautical Horror proposal that goes beyond shattering our assumptions of human dominion over oceanic waters. It also undermines our faith in technology and progression as the ways to grant our claimed supremacy on the Earth. Having analyzed the

devastating portrayal of humanity's extractionism of Nature in Eubank's film, this paper is intended to encourage others to explore similar manifestations of Nautical Horror experiences that can be scrutinized as reflections upon the consequences and dangers of our attempts to appropriate the Earth for our exclusive purposes and benefit, especially in times like the present when a mere virus has proven we are not in absolute control, not even on mainland.

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