

Inanimate Speech from Lovecraft to Žižek

Apple Z. Igrek  
*Seattle University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

### Recommended Citation

Igrek, Apple Z "Inanimate Speech from Lovecraft to Žižek." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.4 (2011): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1781>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 13 Issue 4 (December 2011) Article 9****Apple Z. Igrek,****"Inanimate Speech from Lovecraft to Žižek"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss4/9>>

---

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.4 (2011)**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss4/>>

---

**Abstract:** In his article "Inanimate Speech from Lovecraft to Žižek" Apple Z. Igrek explores an influential line of reasoning associated with our contemporary loss of the Real. The argument describes how the contingencies and nuances of social life have been reduced to an operational, friction-free, and homogeneous realm of signs. Slavoj Žižek contends that our inherently traumatic relationship with the Other is being foreclosed and replaced by an omnipresent technological screen of virtual communication. The danger of this shift, identified as the "digital break," is that it facilitates an extraordinary form of divine violence which strikes back at the social system originally intended to eradicate all things abnormal and destructive. Drawing on H.P. Lovecraft's horror fiction, Igrek proposes another way of thinking through these interrelated motifs of technology, fear, social media, and abject otherness. Instead of presuming a virtual demarcation between radical ambivalence and its all-encompassing, catastrophic assimilation, Igrek suggests that the predominant conceptualization of this so-called rupture is fraught with inconsistencies.

## Apple Z. IGREK

### Inanimate Speech from Lovecraft to Žižek

The view that contemporary forms of power and communication have transformed our everyday activities and relationships with the result that we can no longer distinguish what is real from what is fake or artificial, is widespread. A variety of philosophers and cultural critics, from Georges Bataille and Ernest Becker to Michel Foucault and Slavoj Žižek, have argued, in some fashion or another, that the modern quest for biopolitical control and perpetual consumption lends itself to catastrophic tendencies. Our problem is that we live in an age of hyperbolic positivity, which is to say that the inherent tension or opposition within meaning has been reduced, or is on the way to being reduced, to a seamless exchange of meaningless information (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 82-83). In this process through which we exclude from ourselves "every essential possibility of secrecy and every link between responsibility and the keeping of a secret," Jacques Derrida sees the "inevitable passage" from democracy to oppression (*The Gift of Death* 34). Žižek makes a similar claim in *The Plague of Fantasies* when he writes that we are currently dominated by an invisible spectral frame, one whose fetishization of power is defined by its unlikely disappearance: "the postmodern transparency of the process of production is false in so far as it obfuscates the immaterial virtual order which effectively runs the show" (103). The transparency of power, in other words, has simply become a more effective means of disguising the truth of the matter, which is that we are more highly regulated and disciplined than ever before. The appropriate response to this atonal world of immaterial delusion, as Žižek proposes in his *In Defense of Lost Causes*, is to expose its underlying secret tonality (31). While the basic argument manifests itself in a number of ways, depending upon the methodological approach of each author, it can always be identified by an apocalyptic tone coupled with a romantic appeal to the heterogeneous Other. While this is not a return to exteriority in itself, something which can be perceived apart from the limits and rules of everyday social life, there is still an assumption that some forms of experience are more open to the outside than others.

The first moment of this catastrophic line of thought gestures toward its own ambivalence. The apocalyptic romantic reminds us, and rightfully so, that human experience is forever torn between life and death, rationality and irrationality, as well as the human and the inhuman. As George Bataille writes in *Erotism*, there is something infinite buried deep within us, something which we can never fully integrate into our systems of control and mastery: "There is in nature and there subsists in man a movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order. We are generally unable to grasp it" (40). We cannot grasp the movement which subsists within us precisely because it is self-contradictory, and although we directly and immediately participate in its boundless effervescence, we do so only by way of a fragmentary perspective. If this paradox of atheistic mysticism pervades and constitutes us in our very essence, if the finite self and the infinite other are necessarily bound together, then we simply cannot escape the radical ambivalence which defines us: "If this is 'incoherent', then existence is incoherence. In Bataille's terms, existence is 'ambiguous' in the way the sacred is ambiguous, or 'equivocal' in the way culture itself is equivocal" (Connor 100). More than fifty years later, Žižek speaks of subjectivity and desire in these same terms of an underlying radical gap or incoherence. The very ontological Thing which upsets and disturbs us most is furthermore exactly that which sustains the symbolic density of subjective existence (*Plague*, 49). Drawing from the terminology of both Immanuel Kant and Jacques Lacan, Žižek distinguishes reality from the Real by showing how human perception creates a relationship with the unknowable, with the traumatic Thing-in-itself, by way of a negative magnitude (or the *objet petit a*); that is to say, by transforming the unrepresentable abyss of nothingness into a phenomenological object which concretely embodies the very lack which it covers over and represses. In this sense, from Bataille to Žižek, the foundations of social and linguistic meaning are often traced back to an enigmatic experience of contingency which shows itself to be irreducible to the systems of meaning for which it is responsible (128-29)

None of this suggests, however, that the radical contingency of human experience is attainable in a pure form. Bataille was always aware of the limitations of a return to unrestrained energy or nature, and thus warned in the preface to his *Accursed Share* that "real life ... knows nothing of purely produc-

tive expenditure; in actuality, it knows nothing of purely nonproductive expenditure either" (12). Expenditure, for Bataille, was construed as a violent, dazzling release of energy and resources from the narrowly defined interests of a rational economy. But rational thinking and utilitarian interests should not and cannot be entirely ignored. In fact, as Peter Tracey Connor argues, it is only the imaginary system of thinking which can overcome its own limitations: "Bataille was committed to the life of mind, and to thinking, for thinking alone can lead to what he calls 'violent thinking'" (158). The violent, excessive ambivalence of life which haunts us in our everyday habitual modes of thought cannot be reached or experienced independently of those same ritualistic restrictions. Žižek argues along similar lines: we are certainly able to transcend our artificial environments and linguistic systems, but only when we focus upon something fixed, an ideological constant which frames our return to the traumatic Real. In this vein, he quotes what he describes as a racist and sexist joke about Italian men who cannot perform sexually until their lovers whisper into their ears what they've been doing with other men (*The Plague* 65). The truth disguised and revealed by the myth of this joke is that emotional and physical contact, even for lovers, is never sustained on its own without some modicum of phantasmic support. Žižek's point here follows the Lacanian notion of the ego and how it emerges in the context of alienation, by means of its identification with an exterior, fixed mirror-image. The phatasmic, symbolic support which facilitates pleasure and ecstasy is thus an extension of the immobile structures of self-consciousness without which we could never transcend ourselves in moments of intersubjective *jouissance*. It is in fact this version of dialectical materialism which allows Žižek to maneuver around the false antitheses of realism and idealism. His conception of the Real, or the "immediate," is itself always already mediated by the human symbolic process, even as it bends and skews it: "the Real as 'impossible' is precisely the excess of 'immediacy' which cannot be 'reified' in a fetish, the unfathomable X which, although nowhere present, curves/distorts any space of symbolic representation" (*The Plague* 98). Grounding human existence and desire in the pathological Real, Žižek is thus able to resist the fantasies of symbolization without thereby eradicating their paradoxical necessity.

Nevertheless, the apocalyptic romantics tend to privilege a *distinctive* encounter with the ambivalent Thing which sustains our symbolic density. This encounter has been described as a kind of exposure, opening, transgression, event, reversal, passionate experience, rupture, decision, and so forth. Bataille himself spoke of transgression as a movement of self-sacrifice, in which we confusedly mix opposites: "Here life is mingled with death, but death is simultaneously a sign of life, a way into the infinite" (*Erotism* 91). The experience of transgression is therefore the apex of sacrificial ambivalence. Following Bataille's path, Foucault observed that transgression incessantly crosses a limit in which it discovers its entire trajectory, while it nonetheless forces that limit to "face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes" (*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* 34). The sovereign moment is exceptional in being open to the other, in bringing together opposites, and heightening our awareness of death. This is clearly an extraordinary experience, one which is opposed to everyday sentiments of disgust and *ressentiment*. It is thus a primordial affirmation: "Nothing is more alien to this experience than the demonic character who, true to his nature, 'denies everything.' Transgression opens onto a scintillating and constantly affirmed world" (37). Peter Tracey Connor, also echoing Bataille, contends that the man of servile sentimentality fears his ultimate meaninglessness and takes refuge in projects and delusions; whereas the sovereign person avows "the ambiguous attraction-repulsion that the spectacle of immense crimes provokes in us" (141). Using the language of exoticism, strange attractors, and the secret of the Other, Jean Baudrillard defends a similar kind of affirmation. It involves, as much for Baudrillard as Bataille and Foucault before him, the disappearance of the subject in a world which moves beyond the positive and useful. Once again a distinction is made, and it is much better to open oneself to sacrifice and nothingness than to remain trapped by the progressive dialectics of truth, reason, and self-awareness: "I have lost any trace of desire of my own. I answer only to something non-human — something inscribed not within me but solely in the objective and arbitrary vicissitudes of the world's signs" (*The Transparency of Evil* 173). What is objective, in this sense, is essentially the otherness of what cannot be reduced to familiarity or mirror-like representations. Similar to Žižek's pathological Real, the objective, inhuman Other as a strange attractor is the antagonism from which the subject draws life and energy without thus being reconciled to it.

The question I explore is whether this distinction between one kind of opening and another is viable. As already put forth, according to this predominant line of catastrophic thinking, it is the affirmation of radical ambivalence vis-à-vis an absolute outside which needs to be distinguished from everyday modes of indifference, repression, and homogeneity. The tension between the inside and the outside, the limit and the infinite, should be maintained rather than domesticated and absorbed into structures of perpetual simulation. But at the same time, as noted above, there is no pure access to the Thing-in-itself, and our exposure to it is always already marked by calculative rules of self-interest and language. Hence, the theoretical and practical divisions made between sovereign and servile forms of ambivalence are questionable, and it is far from inconceivable that the paradoxes of transgression are no greater than those of normalcy or rule-bound behavior – not as long as the latter are themselves *a priori* susceptible to what they putatively exclude. Nevertheless, an influential body of thought, shared by more than one methodological tradition, argues in favor of these divisions and warns against their practical, everyday solidification in modern and postmodern societies.

Žižek contends that the virtual has always played a significant role in communication and subjectivity. As already indicated above, the sexual is never purely sexual: quoting Lacan extensively, Žižek reiterates the point that man's virility, for example, is sustained only by means of the "absent-virtual Phallus" (*The Plague* 151). Likewise a judge requires his insignia to exert "real" authority. Our symbolic institutions and phantasmic narratives, which belong to the realm of the virtual, are absolutely necessary in the performance of real, concrete activities. If a distinction is to be made, then, between our intrinsic, everyday ambivalence – which lays the groundwork for transgressive practices – and the simulacrum which puts an end to that ambivalence, it is crucial for these writers to explain this historical development. Žižek himself refers to it as the "digital break" whereby all distances are suspended and our relationships to real bodily others, to our neighbors, is replaced by screen specters (*The Plague* 154). In this sense, it follows that the real presence of the Other, in contemporary digital society, is quickly disappearing. Paul Virilio, whom Žižek cites, makes nearly the same argument, albeit in different theoretical terms. The shift from the symbolic to the simulacrum, or what he also calls endocolonization, mass psychosis, and temporal compression, is now taking place because of the transformation of multi-media technologies which renders everything instantaneously accessible, with neither obstacles nor blind spots. Hence, our fundamental experience of time is changing so that chronological succession – involving the past, the present, and the future – is replaced with an immersive tele-presence (*The Information Bomb* 118). Everything, it would appear, is subsumed by the virtual: the presence of the Other, the duration of time, the reality of an outside world, the singularity of a person, and so forth *ad infinitum*. Baudrillard defines this postmodern evolution most succinctly when he writes, "There is no separation any longer, no empty space, no absence: you enter the screen and the visual image unhindered. ... You slip on your own life like a data suit" (*Screened Out* 177). If there is indeed a division between symbolic and simulated forms of traumatic ambivalence, whereby the possibility of transgression develops out of the former as opposed to the latter, then the digital break will be defined as the virtual assimilation of the gap or separation which Virilio, Žižek, and Baudrillard have all associated, in one way or another, with our symbolic underpinnings. To the extent that human desire reflects this gap between the noumenal Thing-in-itself and its sublimated representation, it follows for Žižek and others that postmodern ideology is the ubiquitous collapse of these otherwise antithetical poles. The uncanny, oscillating imbalance pervading all of human experience is in this way covered over and excluded in the very process of its contemporary, ideological assimilation.

Having elaborated a complex relationship between our exclusionary practices and the radical, systematic closure of social reality which follows in their wake, the majority of these thinkers also trace these modern and postmodern developments to a globalized politics of fear and domination. In some of his final lectures, Derrida spoke of the impossible "making-known" of a traumatic event such as the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, and how our attempts to archive the event in today's media landscape is intimately connected to a multi-faceted politics of exploitation and fear: "In all cases it has to do with knowing how to cause fear, knowing how to terrorize by making known. And this terror, on both sides of the front, is undeniably effective, real, concrete" (*The Beast and the Sovereign* 39). In our desire to make sense of an impossible event through endlessly repeated images and the process of making-known, we succumb to the politics of terror which penetrates the lives of

all those individuals who are captivated by its omnipresent spectacle. This applies to all such events. Speaking of another catastrophic tragedy, the explosion of the space shuttle *Columbia*, Virilio contends that we are besieged by our own satellites and media such that the "City-World is now doubled with the looping of terrorizing images in a 'state of siege' of the viewer's mind" (*City* 85). When we speak of the role of media and technology in terms of cultural consequences, and how they maintain a firm, trance-like grip on the postmodern subject's perception of reality, we are thus describing, according to Žižek, Derrida, and Virilio, a critical break with any previous formations of symbolic, repressive power.

Foucault elucidated the historical origins of this power in great detail and more exhaustively than anyone else. In *Discipline and Punish*, he writes that every society has imposed constraints and regulations on the human body, but that the eighteenth century initiated new "projects of docility" (136). At this historical juncture, the scale of control became more subtle and detailed, applied itself directly to the forces and movements of the body, and exercised a new mode of power without interruption. The new disciplinary technologies were distinguished by their meticulous, all-pervasive subjectification of human individuals. The dream of modern power was therefore to expose all of our behavior and consciousness to the homogenizing techniques of control, knowledge, and surveillance: "The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly" (173). And such an omnipresent gaze fights back against the mortality, ambivalence, and confusion of life which is deeply embedded within all of us: "Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of 'contagions', of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder" (198). It should also be said that for Foucault, as well as for Baudrillard and Virilio, the cultural amplification of fear and domination made possible by dint of these new techniques of power was hardly confined to the modern penitentiary; networks of coercion have subsequently made their way into all of society, such that the predominant problem today arises from "the steep rise in the use of these mechanisms of normalization and the wide-ranging powers which, through the proliferation of new disciplines, they bring with them" (306). We therefore observe how our contemporary landscape of power and deception can be traced back to eighteenth-century Enlightenment reforms throughout a variety of institutions, while still constituting an extraordinary break in terms of the ubiquitous infiltration of these mechanisms in all aspects of life.

As argued previously, there is constitutive gap shared by language and its other; and thus, as Žižek reminds us in his recent book *Violence*, it is the nature of symbolization to violently impose its rules upon the strange unity of the world around us: "[Language] dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it" (61). This objective form of violence, which Žižek contrasts with more visible and obvious forms of brutality (1-2), cannot be extirpated from our everyday, nearly invisible background of human perception. Indeed, the delusional attempt to do so leads to another form of objective violence which Žižek labels "systemic." Akin to Baudrillard's simulacrum or Foucault's disciplinary networks, systemic violence neutralizes the inherent ambiguities and tensions associated with our symbolic structures of discourse. The "liberal communists" of the world (an epithet used to describe today's leading capitalists, such as Bill Gates and Georges Soros) are dismayed by poverty and fundamentalist terrorism, but fail to see, according to Žižek, that they directly implement the very conditions of systemic violence which thereupon sustain the globalized status quo (36-37). Ironically, it is their liberal tolerance of others which puts them on an obsessive path of neutralization, whereby the most disconcerting aspects of concrete, genuine intersubjectivity are rendered perfectly harmless. In this post-political world of administration and pragmatic economics, we are motivated by a calculus of generic happiness and blind optimism such that, as we have already seen with Foucault and Virilio, our pleasant affability is increasingly overshadowed by a totalizing expansion of neurotic phobias: "fear of immigrants, fear of crime, fear of godless sexual depravity, fear of the excessive state itself, with its burden of high taxation, fear of ecological catastrophe, fear of harassment" (40-41). It is, paradoxically, the modern subject's attempt to cleanse intersubjective relationships of everything dark and impure, to implement a new globalized version of economics and communication which overcomes our backward, ignorant traits of intolerance and mutual suspicion, it is this very attempt to rectify our deep-seated alienation which reinforces it all the more.

Extrapolating from the first stages of immanent malaise and catastrophe, several prominent writers over the last century have predicted an impending global disaster. It is telling that Freud ends *Civilization and Its Discontents* with the gloomy observation that men have acquired such control over the forces of nature "that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man" (112). Bataille confirms the same self-destructive tendency in our attempts to subordinate energy to a restricted economy with finite goals: "[I]f the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically" (*The Accursed Share* 21). Making nearly the same argument, Ernest Becker warns against our cultural tendency to outwit death, to devote ourselves exclusively to the symbolization of life, by virtue of the "immortality myths" affirmed and propagated in a particular society: "and the price for this kind of ambition is to make the earth an even more eager graveyard than it naturally is" (*Escape from Evil* 96). Much like Becker, Baudrillard writes in *The Vital Illusion* that we humans dream of transcending death — and everything corporeal — at the risk of falling back into our original entropic state of primordial nothingness (18). Foucault re-frames this paradox in terms of biopower, noting that the same regulatory techniques and bodies of knowledge which are intended to preserve life go beyond themselves in the development of atomic power and creating viruses which have devastating global consequences (*Society Must Be Defended* 253-54). Foucault's solution to this apparent contradiction in the deployment of biopower, which simultaneously protects and endangers the life of large populations, is to highlight the racist underpinnings of modern states and societies: "When you have a normalizing society, you have a power which is, at least superficially, in the first instance, or in the first line a biopower, and racism is the indispensable precondition that allows someone to be killed, that allows others to be killed" (256).

Hence, if the new administrative powers over life and utility seemingly reduce our exposure to death, illness, and madness, that is not to suggest that we are any more secure from precisely those phenomena which are considered to be most threatening; and in fact it is racism which facilitates the ever looming possibility of massive conflicts and catastrophes. As with Freud, Bataille, and Becker before them, Foucault and Baudrillard observe a causal connection between contemporary society's tendency to dissociate life from death — to promote the totalization of life at the expense of losing our primordial awareness of the vague and desolate — and that which follows in the wake of our reifying practices, namely, a violent, explosive breaking point of the system which otherwise transcends human mortality. Whether it is deemed a "general accident" in Virilio or "divine violence" in Žižek (the latter variation being embraced by Žižek as a corrective to our unjust systemic foundations of mere life, it is certain that for each of these writers there are significant repercussions for the one-sided repudiation of ambivalence. If there is still hope, it is not the hope of dialectical perfection; but rather, as Derrida puts forth in an essay defending Bataille, we must find our way back to a unique, asymmetrical relationship in which life and death, the subject and its sacrifice, are united together in a sovereign moment which disrupts the omnipresent subjugation of an administrative discourse and politics. My contention, however, is that the affirmation of this rupture is no different, metaphysically or ethically speaking, from its systematized domestication. The limit of discourse to which Derrida alludes, if it is indeed susceptible to an irruption uncovering something existing beyond human finitude, beyond instrumental rationality and cultural homogeneity, will therefore always be exposed to that which it superficially represses. What is so perfectly haunting apropos of the outside, and whatever stimulates us from beyond ourselves, is that there are no degrees of closeness or distance according to which we should affirm that we are more or less aware of our sovereignty in comparison to others. H.P. Lovecraft, more obsessively than anyone since Edgar Allen Poe, depicts for us this primeval connection between ourselves and what exists, in a vague and hostile form, at all points of convergence along the limit of human awareness. In his short story "The Tomb," the narrator immediately shares his thoughts on perception, indicating that the demarcation between our real and unreal selves is quite precarious, and that a broader perspective shows us "that all things appear as they do only by virtue of the delicate individual physical and mental media through which we are made conscious of them" (*The Tomb and Other Tales* 7). That which lies in wait for us, at the bottom of the oceans and buried in serpentine tunnels beneath the earth's surface, can only ever be imagined according to symbols and metaphors which ineluctably fall short in their representations. But they only fall short insofar as they themselves are exposed to a "thing," or the Thing-in-itself, which has no limit — and thus pen-

etrates all limits at every level of discourse, habit, gesture, cultural awareness, mediated technology and communication, and so forth. If we can neither enclose nor culturally assimilate what is outside, the strange attractor about which Baudrillard speaks so highly, this can only be because it touches us everywhere at once. In this fashion Lovecraft's main characters inevitably find themselves lost in a world where the recognizable and familiar becomes mixed with something unknown, unfamiliar, and yet all-pervasive. One such person, while under the influence of a hypnotic machine created by a disturbed friend of his, bears witness to a shadowy chaos of sights and sounds in which the unusual is superimposed upon his ordinary perceptions: "Indescribable shapes both alive and otherwise were mixed in disgusting disarray, and close to every known thing were whole worlds of alien, unknown entities. It likewise seemed that all the known things entered into the composition of other unknown things, and vice versa" (*The Lurking Fear and Other Stories* 64). In Lovecraft's world, we can never fully grasp what is unknown, as there is always a remainder, but for precisely this reason we cannot go beyond it or escape it, as it will always bear down upon us in a multitude of frightful, nameless shapes.

Despite his mystical outlook, the above considerations brace us for Lovecraft's dream-infested hybrid of bizarre and anthropomorphic metaphors. One of his characters, Jervas Dudley, confesses that his "rather original ideas regarding life and death had caused [him] to associate the cold clay with the breathing body in a vague fashion" ("The Tomb" 10). In "The Festival," black gravestones are analogously described as rising up "ghoulishly through the snow like the decayed fingernails of a gigantic corpse" (*The Tomb and Other Tales* 19). In both examples the frightful ambiguity shared between life and death, the animate and the inanimate, is made disturbingly clear. Lovecraft certainly applies this concept of ambiguity to a wide range of phenomena. In the same story the protagonist meets a mysterious old man whose face has the appearance of a mask, and at one point it is dislodged "from what should have been his head" (26). But in a later story the main character, Kenton Stanfield, relies upon various forms of technological devices, such as an oxygen mask, to survive on Venus where he and his company are exploring for crystals, thereby suggesting an uncanny resemblance between what we imagine as human and what typically shocks us as monstrous or inhuman. The same method is to be found in his sundry descriptions of jewelry, statues, paintings, architecture, monuments, and temples: in each case the natural and the contrived are united together in a kind of self-referential symbolism. In "The Shadow over Innsmouth," faint sounds of the unseen are heard coming out of boarded-up, seemingly deserted houses; while in "The Call of Cthulhu," a young art student dreams of "Cyclopean cities of titan blocks and sky-flung monoliths" (*H.P. Lovecraft Tales* 171), below which, from an indeterminate location, emanates an indescribable voice or sensation which in fact may not be a voice at all. The image of Cthulhu, an immortal alien temporarily buried in that Cyclopean masonry, is carved into a clay bas-relief when the student dreams of those monstrous cities, implying for us, by the end of the story, a subconscious form of communication taking place by means of that same grotesque, scaly, unworldly image. The idea that Lovecraft is once again infusing something inanimate and objective, in this case the artistic, subconscious rendering of Cthulhu, with something else living or at least partially alive, is reinforced by his description of another image of Cthulhu – that of a statuette or cult fetish – as being "abnormally life-like" (176). Moreover, the great temple where he continues to live is a place of burial, a kind of tomb from which he sends out thoughts to the living inhabitants of earth. It is thus not at all certain if we can sharply, methodically distinguish the living from the dead, or the humans from the aliens, in Lovecraft's tales. Reflecting upon this theme of communication from beyond life, from beyond the realm of signs and objects, it becomes exceedingly difficult to extricate the material representation of absolute exteriority from the enigmatic source out of which that representation arises.

It should not be presumed, however, that those pictorial and architectural representations exist externally to ourselves in the objective universe of pure discourse. If this were the case, then it would be accurate to claim, as many do, that those images are subject to a historical process of reification in which they are separated from their social and material conditions. In Lovecraft, the images associated with sculptures, paintings, and architecture are deeply interwoven with the subject's impression of an overwhelming, incommensurable outside. The outside, which is both tangible and intangible, exists beyond us as well as within us: for Lovecraft it is the infinite, abject exteriority of nature as well as the traumatic opacity of inner experience. Thus, what appears to us in symbolic form participates in these



two irreconcilable realms, the exterior and the interior, without reducing one to the other in various modes of simplified deception. What appears to be solely human or symbolic is invariably immersed in a broader set of illimitable circumstances. In "The Festival," a staircase winds its way down from a trap-door of a church to a crypt below the church and then to the shores of an abyss from which an oily river flows out of "the blackest gulfs of immemorial ocean" (*The Tomb and Other Tales* 23). What is truly fascinating is the protagonist's subtle description of his descent into this inner world of consciousness and exteriority: "It was a silent, shocking descent, and I observed after a horrible interval that the walls and steps were changing in nature, as if chiselled out of the solid rock" (23). The continuity shared by the mundane and the infinite abyss is undoubtedly exemplified through this visual metaphor of the winding, spiral staircase. In "The Strange High House in the Mist," an ancient house is observed at the peak of an inaccessible cliff which appears to be one with the firmament. The only door to this house was to be found on the side facing the empty sky, thus once again intimating a strange connection between what is artificial and its silent, infinite aspect – where "aspect" should be understood in all of its overlapping meanings (an appearance, component, bearing, exposure, interpretation, etc.). Perhaps more explicitly, in "The Evil Clergyman," a man who witnesses a surreal confrontation between a nervous, grave-looking man and a group of clerics finds himself surprisingly transformed afterward. While the spectacle takes place in a haze of events which seemed to have transpired in the past, the persecuted clergyman glides toward the bystander and exerts a strange influence over him. At the last moment the protagonist escapes and returns to his normal state of existence, except for the fact, as he soon learns when looking at himself in the reflection of a mirror, that he himself has taken on the appearance of the evil clergyman (*H.P. Lovecraft Tales* 138-39). Likewise, in the short story "The Outsider," an individual who is born in a fantastical setting beneath the earth, in what he assumes to be a castle replete with dark passages and crumbling corridors, learns of his true condition after climbing a black tower leading to an unknown realm in the distant expanse above his wretched birthplace. Entering into a majestic ivied castle on the surface of this new realm, a group of revelers immediately disperse in screaming disarray and boundless fear. The outsider nervously looks about him to locate what might be lurking nearby, and soon approaches an abnormal-looking entity in which he beholds "in full, frightful vividness the inconceivable, indescribable, and unmentionable monstrosity which had by its simple appearance changed a merry company to a herd of delirious fugitives" (*H.P. Lovecraft Tales* 112). Tragically, the abomination is his own reflection in a mirror as he learns after reaching out to the foul-smelling, abhorrent thing from another world only to touch the smooth, polished surface of a reflecting glass. Hence, in both of these stories, as well as many others, the image of an inscrutable reality is immediately comprehended as an aspect or component of oneself. Exposed to the representation of absolute exteriority, to that which we can never inscribe within a closed system of values, we nonetheless directly observe in the mediation of imagery and visual metaphors an empty amalgamation of life buried deep within its own reflection.

The last statement is paradoxical but not therefore inaccurate or implausible. What cannot be fully portrayed in Lovecraft's fiction, the monstrous secrets and wonders of an archaic life, is at the same time an immediate reality. The paradox, of course, is that the infinite (or what Lovecraft refers to as the obscure, forbidden, unmentionable) resides both beyond and within the concrete finitude of human conceptions. In this way it is transcendent as well as immanent, precisely insofar as it pervades all things without thereby being reduced to any particular aspect or manifestation. What does seem implausible, however, is that there might be degrees of immanence through which we could measure our proximity to what is absolutely Other. It is often argued, as elaborated in this essay, that our basic, constitutive relation to the outside has been foreclosed by the homogenizing techniques of modern and postmodern power. If, however, we begin to question the distinction between servility and sovereignty, or the symbolic and the simulacrum, as laid out by several apocalyptic romantics, we will also need to rethink how the radical, infinite Other has been put to use in political and philosophical debates. The argument defended here is that the causal connection between a general, all-encompassing catastrophe and our fetishistic disavowal, or sterilized assimilation, of something infinitely sublime, accursed, and nameless is a hyperbolic position in need of rigorous scrutiny. That is not to say that "specific" modes of repression or scapegoating are non-existent, as that would be ludicrous. The argument, as outlined and discussed in the body of this paper, rejects only the broad claims of systemic violence and homogeneity — but not the evidence of violent hate or antagonism

arising out of nuanced historical encounters (in which the other, for example, is sexually, ethnically, or religiously marginalized). There is a significant difference between these two phenomena, as the first is dubious while the second has been empirically verified.

Many have assumed that this distinction stems from a pragmatic or diacritical approach, as one reads in the works of Jürgen Habermas and Richard Kearney. While there is some truth to this, the comparison only goes so far. Kearney, for example, writes in his critique of radical deconstruction that if the Other is infinitely Other, to the extent that our categories of sameness and difference share nothing in common, then we have undercut our philosophical ability to formulate an ethical or political position. But this in itself does not imply the irrelevance of our relationship to the very "thing" which transcends our narrative tendencies. There need not be only two viable choices, a dynamic hermeneutic relationship with the Other or no connection at all. It could be, as intimated throughout Lovecraft's works, that the inside and the outside overlap even as we find ourselves infinitely surpassed by the form of exteriority which permeates us in every possible way. This acknowledgement is not an easy one to make, as it suggests something impenetrable about ourselves; but it is more promising, ethically and politically speaking, than the misguided notion that a certain kind of proper relationship with the unknown will harness its heterogeneity and thereby avert impending catastrophe. Further inquiry along these lines, far from putting an end to the need for ethical dialogue or self-transformation, would at least remind us that there is always a limit to our historicizing propensities.

### Works Cited

- Bataille, Georges. *Consumption*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1998.
- Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. Trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1962.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Screened Out*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 2002.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Transparency of Evil*. Trans. James Benedict. London: Verso, 2002.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Vital Illusion*. Ed. Julia Witwer. New York: Columbia UP, 2000.
- Becker, Ernest. *Escape from Evil*. New York: The Free Press, 1975.
- Connor, Peter Tracey. *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2000.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Willis. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980.
- Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended*. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961.
- Lovecraft, H.P. *H.P. Lovecraft Tales*. New York: The Library of America, 2005.
- Lovecraft, H.P. *The Lurking Fear and Other Stories*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1971.
- Lovecraft, H.P. *The Tomb and Other Tales*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1965.
- Virilio, Paul. *City of Panic*. Trans. Julie Rose. Oxford, Berg, 2007.
- Virilio, Paul. *The Information Bomb*. London: Verso, 2005.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London: Verso, 2009.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence*. New York: Picador, 2008.

Author's profile: Apple Z. Igrek teaches philosophy at Seattle University. His fields of interests in research include cultural studies, media theory, and horror fiction. Igrek's recent publications include "To and from Derrida's Sediment and Spirit of Signs," *Journal of Comparative and Continental Philosophy* (2010) and "The Metaphysics of Death in Bataille and Baudrillard," *Review Journal of Political Philosophy* (2009). E-mail: <[igreka@seattleu.edu](mailto:igreka@seattleu.edu)>