

SUMMA

Philosophy and Literary Theory

Re-placing the Semiotic Bar

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Ferdinand de Saussure argued that language should be thought of as a system of arbitrary and differential semiotic signs, which were each composed of a signifier (the psychological impression that sensing a sign makes) and a signified (a unit of cognition).¹ Jean Baudrillard critiqued de Saussure's signs by arguing that the semiotic bar, which divided the signifier from the signifieds, could no longer separate the two entities.² The goals of this paper are to examine Baudrillard's critique of the system of signs and to rebut it by re-placing the semiotic bar. Since this is fundamentally a textual question, I will facilitate the process by considering "The Call of Cthulhu" by H.P. Lovecraft.³

In the story, the ancient city of R'yleh, which is home to a race of extraterrestrials called the Great Old Ones, had been submerged for millennia, causing the powerful inhabitants to lay perpetually dormant. However, lore, and possibly telepathy, had motivated a cult of believers to try to free sleeping Cthulhu, the priest of R'yleh, from the underwater city.

A boatful of cultists set out in a yacht to find R'yleh, but their voyage was cut short when they attacked a schooner and the schooner's crew annihilated the cultists. A recent earthquake, however, had exposed

¹ F. de Saussure, 'Nature of the Linguistic Sign', in ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, trans. W. Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966, pp. 65–70.

² Baudrillard, J., *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S. Glasser, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

³ I chose to examine "The Call of Cthulhu" because the style and content of the story mirror the confusion and wildness of a post-structural mindset.

some of the pillars of R'yleh to the schooner's crew, and they decided to explore. In the process, they opened a gate, and Cthulhu escaped. At the sight of the monster, several crewmembers died, but two men, Johansen, and a crewmate, were able to retreat to the boat. Cthulhu pursued the fleeing sailors with great speed, so they turned around and rammed their ship through Cthulhu. Cthulhu burst, but he began to reform. The sailors escaped; Johansen made it all the way back to his home in Norway, where a collision with a man dressed as a sailor caused the Norwegian to collapse and die without a medical cause.

While this is happening, on the opposite side of the globe, the artist Wilcox dreamed of Cthulhu and, in a frenzy, brought a bas-relief depicting his dream to Professor Angell, an expert in ancient scripts. Angell, having previously seen a different statue of Cthulhu and having heard about the cult, began investigating, which led him to correlate Wilcox's delirium with several societal and environmental disturbances. Angell, however, also ran into a man dressed as a sailor and died in a similarly mysterious fashion. After Angell's death, the narrator, Thurston, found Angell's notes, prompting him to look into the matter. He discovered Johansen's story, which he relayed to the reader. At some unknown time, Thurston dies too without a known cause.

Clearly, at the center of the story is the motif of collapse: Angell and Johansen fall; Cthulhu bursts; the whole story is collapsed onto paper. Several critics have advocated that Lovecraft is attempting to depict the unimaginable by highlighting the shortfalls of language and narrative.^{4,5} Other theorists have argued that the motif of collapse is an assault on the very notion of subjectivity.^{6,7}

What all these explanations fail to account for is that the collapse in the story is generative. The deaths of Angell and Johansen lead to new discoveries. The collapse of Cthulhu leads to the reincarnation of Cthulhu. The very idea of destruction is put into question by the way the story is told, which is in a contra-temporal order and within a series of frames. Everything, including death and destruction, is recycled within

⁴ K. Matolcsy, 'The Monster-Text: Analogy and Metaphor in Lovecraft', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1/2, 2012, pp. 151-159.

⁵ C. Sederholm, 'What Screams are Made Of: Representing Cosmic Fear in H.P. Lovecraft's "Pickman's Model"', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2006, pp. 335-349.

⁶ C. Carrolles, 'H.P. Lovecraft's The Call of Cthulhu: an Intermedial Analysis of Its Graphic Adaptation'. *Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-15.

⁷ G. Harman, 'On the Horror of Phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl', *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, vol. 4, 2010, pp. 3-34.

other frames. Moreover, the frames do not even have a clear end because the first line of the short story creates a frame that seems to extend beyond the text, “(Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston).”⁸ It seems less and less like H.P. Lovecraft was writing about collapse as much as he was collapsing the idea of the collapse itself. In the story, Lovecraft also literally conveys this intention with a couplet, “That is not dead which can eternal lie, / And with strange aeons even death may die.”⁹

Within that couplet, the word “lie” appears to be paronomastic in its use. Throughout the story, the motifs of sleep and deception are closely related. Thurston is unable to sleep because he believes reality is illusory, “I shall never sleep calmly again when I think of the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life in time and in space.”¹⁰ Moreover, the ideas of death, another interpretation of “eternal lie,” and deceit are also closely tied. The narrator theorized about some “secret methods and poison needles” used to kill his uncle.¹¹ The existence of Cthulhu, the incarnation of death, was described as invoking “eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order.”¹²

Implicit within all these descriptions is the idea of a hidden and disturbing reality being exposed, making everything the characters have known illusory. However, the analogy that Lovecraft used to open the story implies not that what have known is less real than the Great Old Ones, but that the Great Old Ones are simply unknown:

We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of 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.¹³

How is it possible to reconcile the idea that reality is hidden, but that the hidden reality is no more real than its veil? The duplication and twisting of reality implied by this question were central to the ideas of Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*. At its core, Baudrillard’s book was

⁸ H. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, in S. Joshi (ed.), *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, New York, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 139.

⁹ Lovecraft, p. 156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹² *Ibid.*, 167.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

responding to the idea of signification, that a semiotic sign could stand in for a referent. Rather than thinking that the sign of an apple referred to an apple, he believed the sign of an apple pointed only to other signs, doubles which were all equally unreal. With regards to the Great Old Ones, this would mean that Cthulhu was no more real than its banal shroud, and it is the realization of this doubling that makes the character so terrified in “The Call of Cthulhu.” Baudrillard’s explanation works well at explaining the thoughts of Lovecraft, but why would Baudrillard believe this?

The starting point for his work was the semiotic sign, which is made up of two inextricably linked psychological parts, the signifier and the signified. The signifier, the mental state caused by hearing a word or seeing a sign, recalls the signified, the currency of thought. Baudrillard thought that this distinction was problematized by simulation, which he defines as “to feign to have what one doesn’t have.”¹⁴ A simulator makes a false claim to have access to reality when that is no longer possible. Baudrillard found a good example in a family he saw on TV, the Louds, whose lives were broadcast for a reality show. Baudrillard’s primary criticism of the Louds’ show was with the premise and the slogan of the show:

“They lived as if we were not there.” An absurd, paradoxical formula-neither true nor false: utopian. The “as if we were not there” is equal to “as if you were there.” [... it is] the pleasure of an excess of meaning, when the bar of the sign falls below the usual waterline of meaning: the nonsignifier is exalted by the camera angle. There one sees what the real never was (but “as if you were there”), without the distance that gives us perspectival space and depth vision (but “more real than nature”).¹⁵

Baudrillard believes that the Louds’ show lowered the semiotic bar to the point that much if not all of what was signifier had become signified because the Louds’ producers claimed to give you the signified (seeing the family’s life) while removing the act of signification (changing reality by watching). Without the act of signification, one no longer must perceive a sign to get the meaning. Instead, everything has collapsed to the point that the signified is already inside their head. Under de Saussure’s model, when we look at the screens of our televisions, the image is a signifier, which is exchanged, within our head, for the signified. The success of this exchange relies on a distance between the interpreting part of our minds and our television screens. Baudrillard was arguing that we have, however, lost this distance, so everything that is

¹⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

experienced or thought is composed of pure signifiers. Due to this removal of the act of signification, everything collapses into the viewer and into what is outside the viewer.

By a Baudrillardian account, the story consists of everything collapsing into something real, but more real than nature. The real Angell must die to be replaced by Angell's unfiltered thoughts written on paper. The same thing applies to Johansen. Even Cthulhu must be replaced by a more real Cthulhu. A strength of this interpretation is how well it can explain the strange introductory note, "(Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston)"¹⁶ because the whole story must be collapsed to make it more real than if the reader just randomly picked up some madman's ravings.

The issue with Baudrillard's ideas is not textual, but practical. Baudrillard thought that simulation batted the possibility for there to be substantive political change:

This anticipation, this precession, this short circuit, this confusion of the fact with its model (no more divergence of meaning, no more dialectical polarity, no more negative electricity, implosion of antagonistic poles), is what allows each time for all possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all true, in the sense that their truth is to be exchanged, in the image of the models from which they derive, in a generalized cycle.¹⁷

Baudrillard argued that the result of the simulation was that any ideological explanation of the world was able to account for any event, causing it to be impossible to look beyond the current ideology and make the world better. Therefore, it is important not just to accept simulation because it is successful at explaining "The Call of Cthulhu," but to try to restore signification.

If we accept Baudrillard's argument that the semiotic bar can no longer successfully divide a psychological signifier from a psychological signified, then it is important to look elsewhere for a signifier and a signified. The signifier and signified are inextricably linked but are entirely distinct. I propose that to restore signification, the best move is to look toward binary themes in the story. Specifically, I think we should consider the broad and opposing themes of the Self, that which is known, and the Other, that which cannot be known.¹⁸

¹⁶ Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", p. 139.

¹⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 17.

¹⁸ Themes like Self and Other are capitalized to distinguish them from semiotic signifiers.

It cannot simply work to say that the Self is the signifier and the Other is the signified because the signifier and signified must be two parts of a whole, not opposites. For this reason, I propose that the signifier be the Self and the Other and the signified be neither the Self nor the Other. Obviously, the semiotic bar between these two terms cannot be lost because they are logically necessarily distinct. Additionally, the signifier and the signified are linked together because they form a whole continuum; the Self and the Other are defined against a baseline of being unknown and the converse is obviously true.

Therefore, we have reproduced the signifier and signified relationship with regard to some themes. Nevertheless, if we have truly reinvigorated signification and re-placed the semiotic bar, then the sign that we have identified must have a referent. In other words, the movement between the Self and the Other and the not Self and the not Other must refer to something in the story. Under de Saussure's system of signs, each semiotic sign had multiple referents; the word scarf refers to many scarfs. Therefore, the thematic sign that we have identified likely also has many referents, so the most prudent thing to do seems to once again choose a vague and relevant theme such as Death.

By this understanding, we have produced a signifier and a signified that necessarily cannot be collapsed into each other. However, it is possible to move between them, and that motion would necessarily have to route through Death, so to the extent that Death is signaled by the movement between the signified and the signifier, Death makes sense as a referent. It seems like we have made the kind of sign that should be able to stand up to simulation necessarily.

So, what does this mean for our analysis of "The Call of Cthulhu?" How can we reclaim it using the new conception of the sign? We have already created a semiotic chain as a basis for the sign, but the terms of that sign turned out to be generic. I propose now that we consider the sign in relation to the story. It seems to me the next move to take is to return to the text for some of the literal deaths of the story and to consider how well our ideas of Death work at describing these deaths. We have already shown that the sign that we have constructed can operate without collapsing, but we need to what relationship it bears to the story:

Let us first consider the death of Professor Angell, which sets the whole plot in motion:

My knowledge of the thing began in the winter of 1926–27 with the death of [...] Angell. Professor Angell was widely known [...] The professor had been [...] falling suddenly

[...] after having been jostled by a nautical-looking negro [...] Physicians were unable to find any visible disorder, but concluded after perplexed debate that some obscure lesion of the heart, induced by the brisk ascent of so steep a hill by so elderly a man, was responsible for the end. At the time I saw no reason to dissent from this dictum, but latterly I am inclined to wonder – and more than wonder.¹⁹

By the accounts of the thematic sign, Death occurs as the collapse of the Self into the Other or vice versa begins to swing in the opposite direction. This seems like a paradigmatic shift from the living Self to the dead Other with his literal collapse marking his transition between the two. By this understanding, he Died twice; his first Death occurred upon contact with the sailor when he transitioned from the static point of a famous professor to neither Other nor Self. His second Death occurred upon his movement from being neither the Other nor the Self that his collapse brought to being a pure Other that his inexplicable death brought. It is worth noting that if he is ever Other, he is also Self. When he is famous and living, he holds the secret of his knowledge of Cthulhu, which makes him Other. When he is made Other by his death of an unknown cause, he is brought into the Self by the flexibility of medicine to explain the unexplainable. A similar explanation applies to the death of the sailor Johansen, who also held the secret of Cthulhu and was killed by a sailor.

Cthulhu's death presents an even more interesting case than Angell's:

There was a bursting as of an exploding bladder ... and then there was only a venomous seething astern; where [...] the scattered plasticity of that nameless sky-spawn was nebulously recombining in its hateful original form.²⁰

Cthulhu holds the position of the Other for the story until his death, which is brought about by the movement to a new position in which it is neither known nor unknown. It is Other because Cthulhu could never be understood, but it is given familiarity by the fact that he returns to the same form as before as if there is something set and understandable about his body. Its death matches its Death.

Let us consider the parenthetical note at the beginning of the first page of the story, "(Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston)."²¹ Obviously, this note states that

¹⁹ Lovecraft, p. 139.

²⁰ Ibid., 168.

²¹ Ibid., 139.

Thurston had died, but it did more than that. Stories have a weird role; it seems like whenever a text is thought of as a text it must hold the position of neither the Other nor the Self. A text is Other otherwise there is no point in reading because anything that can be gained from reading could be gained much more successfully through experiencing. Reading, at best, would be a lesser sort of experience. Meanwhile, the reader has direct access to what is read. The processing of reading occurs inside of the reader; what is read can be accessed like a thought or an experience. The parenthetical note that begins the story moves the story from the weird spot of not Other and not Self to pure Otherness as it becomes framed. It is someone else's story and as such, it can never be known to us. Even if we found the manuscript on an old table in Rhode Island and not among fiction pieces, it would be impossible to verify its truth as it has become permanently unknown. With the move to Otherness, we start an oscillation between Self, Other, and neither, which results in several Deaths and deaths within the story.

Now that we have taken some time to think about specific Deaths and deaths in the story, let us take a second to consider what Baudrillard wrote about Death for comparison to our results for Angell. This seems like a worthwhile task as it tells us how true our interpretation has been to Baudrillard's theory is. If we find that we are wildly deviating from what he wrote in our conclusion, either we made a mistake or he did. Baudrillard describes the hyperreal system in terms of death:

It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself - such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance.²²

Baudrillard here is positing that in the hyperreal system, it is required that an object dies to be resurrected. The real can no longer be left to exist because it must be collapsed and replaced as a sacrifice to prevent the whole collapse of the simulated system. In fact, this deletion is the kind of thing that our symbol of death can provide an elucidating explanation for. Nothing Other than myself (or even inside myself) can exist as a real object unknown by the hyperreal system, which must contain everything. Even my own existence as a Self is caught in the

²² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 140.

crossfire and killed by the collapse of perspectival space. Everything is shifted to a new space, where the Other and the Self do not make sense. This move marks the Death of the real.

In trying to make a sign for Death to reinvigorate Death, we might have forgotten that we have made a sign for Death. Let us conclude by considering exactly what we have found about Death. There are two positions, Other of Self, that a position can (or cannot) occupy. Holding any position puts her or him on the brink of Death. Backing away from the brink, crossing the semiotic bar is exactly what causes Death. In other words, the repulsion of Death is attractive.

Alternatively, a person could be not holding any position. Death comes to him or her as soon as s/he lands on any position. For him or her, Death is the act of lowering, of grounding. The attractions of stasis, which are what drew us to our project of rethinking the semiotic bar, are a drive toward Death. Staying up in the top half of the sign is the Baudrillardian strategy. It is successful at avoiding Death, but it has all the problems of infinite spiraling that we talked about earlier. If we started with a Baudrillardian reading, we would be stuck with the Baudrillardian problem, and deviation would be punished by Death. However, we started with a structuralist outlook, and as such, we are stuck on the bottom of the sign, standing at the edge of Death. This seems to be the only place to stand as we have cleared a space to operate without Death or the spiraling of a positionless reading.

The implications of re-placing the semiotic go well beyond attaining a deeper understanding of Lovecraft's work. First, I have addressed Baudrillard's argument that substantive political change is no longer possible by opening a space away from simulation by restoring signification. Second, restoring the semiotic bar has opened the possibility for a system of signs to once again be a viable model for meaning. An exploration of thematic signs as a semiotic system could potentially yield some interesting results.

The goal of this paper was to re-place the semiotic bar in "The Call of Cthulhu" to rebut Jean Baudrillard's critique of signs. We did this by reimagining the signifier and signified as logical permutations of themes rather than psychological entities. In doing this, we have found a model for signs that necessarily stand up to Baudrillard's criticism.

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