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The lurker in the object
A Lovecraftian writing of consumer culture

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ABSTRACT
A peculiar note from a neighbor of a consumer culture theorist stationed at Miskatonic University who has gone missing arrives for you. The Arkham police have tasked the neighbor with sorting out some seemingly-incoherent academic notes left behind by the professor. In particular, they have tasked him with reaching out to you in order to determine the meaning of a peculiar phrase, “the lurker waits in the object” scrawled into the missing professor’s desk. The notes concern several topics, but seem, in the neighbor’s opinion, to revolve around object-oriented ontology, horror reality, genre horror, and information by allusion. The neighbor emphasizes that the missing professor may have suffered some mental illness or other tragedy, but has no other viable leads aside from the phrase and notes and begs your expert advice on the topic.

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Dear esteemed professor,

It was in autumn of 2017 when I found myself standing on my neighbor’s doorstep with several of the local constabulary. The man who lived in the house had been my acquaintance for a few short months. An eccentric fellow, my wife and I were never quite sure what to make of him, attributing the preponderance of his oddities to his profession, meaning no offense. It is on that subject that I write to you now. You see, he was a consumer culture professor here at Miskatonic University and it is my hope that someone of your skill set may be able to make sense of the writings that I found upon entering the old house on that fall evening. But of course I’m getting ahead of myself.

The man has rather abruptly vanished. While he was always what could be fairly described as reclusive and, as I made mention, eccentric, he took care of himself and his property and indeed was even somewhat social amongst the few of us who lived in proximity to his house, frequently inviting us to share a bottle of Chateauneuf-du-Pape in his garden. But some time had passed without a glimpse of him. His car had not moved, and we had seen no indication of activity within the house. Out of concern, my wife persuaded me to phone the police in order to make forced entry into the home to see if he had met with some sort of domestic accident.

The house was in fine order, meticulous even. The power was off in the home, presumably due to a missed bill. Inside was illuminated only by the wan autumn moon. Long shadows filled its 1920s halls, tenebrous things that resisted the intrusion of the police officers’ flashlights. Every surface was free of clutter, though dust was beginning to settle in the old place.
The only room that appeared to hold any evidence was his study. On the walls of his office, he had countless clippings from scholarly journals, as well as more esoteric bits from writers I did not recognize. At his desk, we found countless scribbled fragments. Assuming at least one of them to contain some clue as to his whereabouts, we set about carefully reading through each. None held such information. The police took interest only in a rather disturbing phrase that had been carved into the desk itself: “the lurker waits in the object.” Ostensibly pursuing what that object was and who that lurker might be, the police left me to organize the man’s notes. I have done so in the most logical order I can manage in an effort to make sense of what appears to be his last work.

I have included them here in the hope that your familiarity with these subjects may provide some needed insight into their meaning, the professor’s intention, or perhaps what became of him. The police are most curious to hear your interpretation of that dreadful phrase, “the lurker waits in the object.”

This appears to be the beginning, something of a diary-style note though it was part of no greater bound volume:

I have recently had occasion to reopen a pulpy, rather indulgent book bought for me by my father as a reward for good grades well-earned many years ago. I read it then as a child and found it appealing in concept but somewhat facile in its delivery. It was a collection of short stories by a mad, inveterate racist of old Providence, one Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1982). The stories were quite inventive, if as I said, indulgent. The man’s writing frequently veered towards the melodramatic and excessively affected. In particular, as a lad I found it infuriating that his greatest constructions were obfuscated by allusion. How he had earned a place in the pantheon of horror while occluding his monsters behind a veil of overwrought prose was quite beyond me.

Now, though, it seems I was fated to hold onto the book all this while. Given the growing popularity in our literature of theories of assemblages, networks, macro-conceptual frameworks, and the ilk, I have found myself rather immersed in the writings of Graham Harman (2009, 2012). His object-oriented ontology seemed the perfect ticket to aid me in making my own meager contributions to the field in hopes of becoming Magister Ludi, or so I thought. I now fear instead that some greater machinations are at work. Yesterday evening, I found myself in need of a break from scholarly material, having grown incredibly weary of this glass bead game. Perusing the shelves in my bedroom where I keep my fiction, my eye was drawn inexplicably to that old Lovecraft tome. Gods, but if I could have guessed what macabre realities would emerge from my second encounter with the thing, I would have resisted.

Queerly, though, I found nothing upsetting as my hand, drawn seemingly by some other agency, caressed the spine of the cheap paperback. I plucked the tome from its shelf and gripped it to my chest as if it were dear to me as I pattered across the house to pour myself a glass of port. Retiring to my office and my favorite wing-backed reading chair, I flipped casually to one of the more famous short stories: the Call of Cthulhu. The sudden icy cold in my bones I attributed to the encroachment of autumn. The day had been warm but this old house is poorly insulated. Setting the book aside, I gathered a blanket and drew open the fireplace for the first burn of the season. As it slowly crackled to life, I smiled to myself, settled in, had a nice sip of port, and re-opened the book. The fine Australian vintage turned in my mouth, however, as my eyes took in the opening sentences:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. 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 a 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. (Lovecraft 1982, 72)

The more I considered this idea, the more I began to feel as if the idea were considering me. I glanced furtively around my study. The fireplace cast a warm glow over the room, but the light was wrong. The more I looked, the more I began to wonder if it could fairly be called light at all, and if so then only by
analogy. The blanket, which I had gathered around myself, began to constrain, rippling down from my waist over the edges of my chair which itself now seemed less to support me than to draw me in. I leapt up and scuttled over to my desk.

I calmed myself in putting thoughts to paper. Why does it feel as if the pen guides itself? This is nonsense, of course. I have simply recognized what has been true all along. We live in horror reality. This isn’t an unknown concept. Thacker has been writing compelling books on the subject (e.g., 2011; Peak 2014). Thacker remarks “horror is a non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically” (2011, 9). He further remarks that horror is not about the human experience of fear, but about the limits of the human and the human’s approach to the World as an object (Thacker 2011). As he puts it, “culture is the terrain on which we find attempts to confront an impersonal and indifferent world” which is why he treats “genre horror as a mode of philosophy” (Thacker 2011, 9).

Why did I not feel the scope of his philosophy when first I read it? Because it remained a dissociated piece. Yes. Yes, that’s it, isn’t it? But what is it that makes reality so dreadful?

The note leaves this question unanswered, I am afraid. However, I found another note scrawled in the professor’s clearly recognizable (at least to me now) script that seems to me to touch on an answer to this question, albeit indirectly. Of course, I am eager to hear your better-informed opinion on the matter. Here is the seemingly related note:

The instability of our social and material environments is manifest; one need only take a gander at the headlines of popular or academic press to see the disparate pieces Lovecraft feared we would correlate. Famines run rampant despite humans’ unparalleled wealth and technology (Reuters February 16, 2017). A term has emerged for this environmental epoch of anthropic destruction: the Anthropocene (Cruzen 2006). To wrestle with the threatened destruction of our habitat and the myriad instability before us, philosophers seek to understand the incomprehensible, faced with a world without us (Thacker 2011) – a universe that cares not for us. War veterans seek to come to terms with death at an individual and cultural level (Scranton 2015), as institutions of certainty fail (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Everywhere one looks, data reveal a new and looming threat, from the politics of the Other (noted in The Atlantic on September 2, 2016) to the wasteland implied by global warming (philosopher Travis Reider on NPR August 18, 2016). Like a Wight shedding its burial shroud, fascism has returned to the West (as discussed in Politico on June 27, 2016). Futurists insist that robots will take our jobs (Srnicek and Williams 2015). Indeed, a central element of cosmic horror as an artistic genre, which is seeing a strong revival in various forms (analyzed in Flavorwire October 12, 2015), is a world of indifference, the malice of apathy, a cold universe unfazed by humans’ pitiful wailing. And how could the universe care, when the cutting edge of physics suggests it’s made of non-Euclidian geometry in layered universes, just as Lovecraft imagined (Linde 2017)?

This is the world before us. A world that requires thinking the unthinkable. A world that requires learning to die. It is horrifying. So, you see, Lovecraft is correct, and why shouldn’t I listen? There is a great deal to be learned from successful fiction writers (Brown 2015). We do flee from the light into the safety of our own dark age. Ours is an age of information gluttony and thus, information irrelevance. We flee to the land of false equivalence, where opinions count for facts – or alternative facts. We must indulge the grotesque extended self of Belk’s imaginings by comprehending ourselves through the things around us, despite their potential to explode out at us. We flee to the market with no thought of escape. Indeed, in the opinion of some scholars, the progressive and humane thing to do is to bring the market to everyone – to offer darkness to the bottom of the pyramid (Prahalad 2006) – so that all can hide from the fact of the matter, so that all can take refuge in the grim darkness. Brown, Bell, and Carson (1998) acknowledge that there is escapism and security in thinking of doom and gloom, however ironically.

Doom and gloom indeed. You see why I have not shared these notes with anyone other than you (and the police, of course). Here is what I take to be his next clipping, one that seems to suggest something about the object, its potential and its ability to disrupt the world around it – just as people can. My initial impression was that this might provide a clue as to the origin of the phrase about the lurker in the object. But, enough from me. Read it for yourself and let me know your thoughts.
I have always been a pessimist, but the dreadful nature of reality is something else altogether. My mind raced to Harman’s (2009) work once again. He is emphatically insistent on the infinitude of objects, their overflowing their potential in an ontological sense. That is, just as we can never truly grasp the possibilities of another person, we cannot grasp the possibilities of a rock, or cotton, or democracy. Their potential can explode out of the darkness at us at any moment, disrupting our experience of them, if not our very lives.

Consider the case of the state-of-the-art, self-driving Tesla car that recedes into the background with our use of it, appears to be exhausted by our knowledge of it, defined entirely by either its qualities or its components. When it without warning drives itself and its hapless passenger into the rear of a parked vehicle for reasons unknown, the horror aspect of unknowable reality is made manifest. Basic structures become visible in the moment of their breakdown, like Heidegger’s broken hammers (Harman 2012). Imagine how much worse this can be when the object in question is definitional to the person (Belk 1988), as in the case of the rugged individualist American who purchases a handgun to protect his family only to have it accidentally discharge in the hands of his child, killing his wife. The object’s potential quite literally explodes out, redefining the consumer and his relations in an instant. Objects, then, for the object-oriented ontologist, are every bit as important as people in understanding real phenomena. They have trajectories through time and space. They have a contextualized past, but they move past their context as well and in turn affect the world around them (Harman 2009; Hoffman and Novak 2018).

The market is an object in this sense, a hyperobject (Morton 2013). While it may have its credit roots in Sumer and its structure in autocratic mobilization of armies (Graeber 2012) with plenty of influence and shaping from the eighteenth century Scottish academy with Smith and the like, it has also starved millions of people, redistributed countless resources, and become the foundation of the guiding doxa of our lives. It exhibits agentic influence. Something dark haunts every object: its possibilities.

Another note was crumpled up beside the one just read. While it seems to have been discarded by the professor, its focus on “weird realism” seems clearly related to the other note with its bizarre attribution of action potential, and perhaps even peculiar volition, on the part of everyday objects. Read it and you’ll see what I mean.

Harman (2012) identifies four techniques of Lovecraft that are essential to weird realism, foundational to thinking from an object-oriented perspective. Any given object has the potential to exhibit one or more of these effects. First, allusion can be used to point to realities that cannot be described; any attempt to circumscribe them would fail. A warzone as an object is such: it can be alluded to but never perfectly described by those outside of it. Second, in what Harman calls literary cubism and describes as a close cousin of Husserl’s phenomenology, numerous and troubling features of an object are piled upon it in such a way that it seems impossible that one object would contain all these features, yielding a grotesque amalgamation of qualities, a chimerical object. A serial killer, like Gary Ridgeway or Dennis Rader, who is a loving parent, decent spouse, hard worker, involved in the community, murders people, tortures people, and engages in necrophilia is a prime example. How could one object contain all of these qualities? Third, both an object and its features may resist description, in which nearly everything about an object is described by allusive metaphor. Hallucinations may fit here, as do religious figures and economic concepts. Finally, a known and real and accessible object may have baffling or unintelligible features. A house that appears to stare or a tree whose branches hang menacingly falls into this category. Each of these is grounds for horrific potential, as monsters beyond description and possibilities unnamable exist within even the most mundane of objects. One recalls the nonfictional account of the serial killer Ted Bundy by his one-time coworker and friend, Ann Rule. She titled it The Stranger Beside Me (2012). In this case, such a conception is true for all objects, including abstract ones – what I hold in my hand is not what it seems.

Warzones and serial killers? The professor’s state of mind never seemed so morbid in our conversations over a glass of wine. In another note, I found the professor asserting that Hume’s view of objects is demonstrably wrong, a view I thought to be provocative, although my knowledge of
Hume’s work is very limited. But, it did strike me as directly relevant to his arguments about weird reality. So, I’ve included it here as well.

How wrong Hume was! His insistence that objects are nothing more than a bundle of qualities that present themselves to us so consistently that they must be called a tree or a car or what have you is far off-base. This seems legitimate on its face because it is only rare that objects present a quality unexpectedly, but it does indeed happen. Two processes control this queasy shift in a thing. The first Harman (2012) identifies as fusion, or the joining of an object to unlikely qualities. In much the same way that my books appear to menace me as I write this, a room can feel sinister or a smell can be aggressive. The opposite, fission, occurs when an object is separated from its apparent qualities. Harman accounts for time as an object in this fashion. We encounter an old friend after many years and find that her skin is papery, her hair grayed and wispy, the lines in her face hardened and cracked – her qualities as they appear are not those of her as we knew her. Now everywhere I look I see the potential for monstrosity in these effects. The delicious milk you so recently enjoyed is suddenly sour and putrid. The comforting smell of your home is suddenly stale and off-putting. The familiar sights of your commute to work are suddenly shrouded in alien mystery.

This was the closest thing to an explanation for that dread phrase “the lurker waits in the object” I have found amongst the man’s writings. He seems to be implying that inanimate things hold a dark potential and that this potential is dreadful and terrifying due to what it offers in the way of possibilities. But surely this is just an indication of the beginning of some psychotic break. I believe the evidence for that follows.

This reality in which people lose their place in the world is terrifying. There is nothing special about our experience, and the human cognition is in no sense privileged. But perhaps it is perfect for theorizing the world without us. The fire is dying and the faint light it emits is repellent to me. I let it die. It had power over me, but I too had power over it. I threw back the curtains to my study’s small window, letting the moonlight rush in to fill the air growing fetid around me. In doing so, I spied in my back yard a small wrought iron table at which I occasionally like to sit and have wine on a warm day. Its legs appear like bars as the stars stare down dispassionately at the little scene. How horrible it looks in the failing light, how so like a cage …

I am reminded of Weber (1905/2013) and his iron cage. His supposition was that rationality – reason itself – would provide no path forward, no escape from the cage. We simply shall not be able to use our mental faculties, those vestigial organs of the Enlightenment, to escape. This fact has been much lamented, of course. The Frankfurt School threw up their hands in frustration after decades of wading through the horrors of Nazism, the banal hegemony of Hollywood, and gazing upon the shopping malls where consumers made no effort, reasoned or otherwise, to escape their plight (e.g. Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999; Horkheimer and Adorno 2001), a fact lamented in pop culture, such as Porcupine Tree’s musical album Fear of a Blank Planet. Perhaps these theorists realized that the revolution would be televised – as a fully produced artifact of the culture industry streamable for a modest monthly fee on Netflix.

Good student Habermas (1985) was not so negative. Why, discourse will save the day; communicative action will see us through. It is not reason, but intersubjective cooperation, that will allow us to unlock our cage, to escape the market. Kozinets (2002) gazed over the fires of Burning Man and saw some potential for resistance, but not escape per se. Instead, perhaps, micro-communities in late capitalist contexts can serve as resistances, plural key. Arnould (2007) pushes the question onto its heels, arguing that agency and escape are highly contextualized amongst affluent, Western consumers and that as a point of fact, action within this (privileged) space can be freeing, constructive, and benign rather than merely constrained. Still, his concept rests on a notion of progressivism that implies improvement; improvement acknowledges present problems. While these symptoms may be contextualized rather than pathological, the problem remains. Each theorist in their own sense acknowledges the problematic nature of the consumer sitting in their iron cage, whether they be locked in, incapable of seeing or articulating their plight; or working their way out; or improving the cage such that everyone may fit inside it.
In the gathering gloom outside, a squirrel scurried under my iron table. It sat there, nibbling at what must have been castoffs from a cheese tray I enjoyed a few days previous, what seems so long ago now… Ah, yes, see, the metaphor is all awrack. The iron cage cannot be escaped because it was not built as a prison; it was built as a refuge. Consumers have no interest in escaping the market because the market is the escape. Our inescapable cage is actually an impenetrable panic room; it was never built to keep us in, but to keep something else out. It is horror from which we hide, the dread of our own banality, the frightful reality of our position as biological puppets (Ligotti 2011) seeking constant fulfillment of genetically-programmed needs (Dawkins 2016) articulated through the elaborate web of culture (Sahlins 2013). A tangled web has been woven, a symbolic tapestry of preferences and status (Bourdieu 1984) and associations and aspirations (Choi and Winterich 2013; Leigh and Gabel 1992), motivated psychologically (Van Eerde and Thierry 1996), evaluated sociologically (Mick 1986), constitutive of an entire society anthropologically (Sahlins 2013), and capable of powering that society economically (Baumol 2002). One need only grab a copy of any one of a vast array of academic journals to see just how and to what extent we have fashioned a coat of many colors – then bought it, worn it, resold it, photographed it, uploaded it, liked it, become too cool for it, rehabilitated its coolness, and eventually upcycled it into avant-garde art for an upcoming local theater production. Why should we seek to escape the web we wove? We built it to keep a dark terror at bay.

Consciousness. The horror pounding at the gates of our castle keep is consciousness, awareness, knowledge (Chalmers 1995; Ligotti 2011; Sartre 2012). Knowledge of what? Knowledge of what we are, or more accurately what we are not. For the Abrahamic religions, this was Original Sin. We are puppets shambling through existence with the express purpose of surviving long enough to reproduce and then to die in either spectacularly violent or wholly uneventful fashion. We can count on nothing to wake us up. What we see is what we get, so we try not to see it. Taking the logic of Anderson’s critical relativism (1986) to its extreme, the object-oriented perspective must grant the same agency to the murder weapon as to the murderer.

As consumers, to avoid facing such a stark and troubling reality that perhaps life is not so good as our favorite branded products suggest (Graeff 1996), or perhaps that things are not getting better little by little and day by day as our workplace motivational posters insist, we buy. We consume to forget (Marcoux 2016). We drink wine. We watch football, of the global or American variety. We insist upon the cultural capital validating our brand of escapism as superior (Holt 1998). We spend untold hours reviewing our favorite products on Amazon.com, and then arguing when people disagree (Gruen, Osmonbekov, and Czaplewski 2006). See my refined tastes, the legitimacy (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013) of my claim to the ‘_____ geek’ label. Validate me, so that I do not have time to consider the reality through which I charge, deliberately oblivious to the beast stalking me, the omnipresent specter of death.

As you can see, this is all quite disturbing – his use of ‘we’ is uninvited and feels a bit like an indictment. I don’t feel as if I am in a cage, certainly not one of my own making, do you? Is this a standard interpretation? Ah, but forgive my intrusion. As you can see, the professor continues in this vein later in the note.

Now I see that consumers are no more prepared to escape the market than they are to stare down the oiled, loaded, cocked, and ready barrel of their own ontological insignificance – the lack of privilege for their position relative to the trees they cut or stones they stack. Our consciousness of our futility unto death haunts us, motivates our retreat to our panic room. We are tempted to exist (Cioran 1998). The success of the intellectually-plagiaristic (an analysis offered by Mike Davis of the Lovecraft e-zine) HBO series True Detective and the pop culture currency of existentialism reveal that particular niche market of a consumer who buys a cool, detached recognition of this monstrous horror. But even she does so through the safety of market-mediated consumption. She buys her Sartre and reads that all is meaningless, she smokes her cigarettes because life is short and pointless, she embraces the ennui with gusto because it looks so cool. Make no mistake: she is empowered. Discourses of resistance are available to her (Thompson 2004). She can proudly puff her chest at the mere notion of capitalist assimilation.
This, then, is what researchers interrogate about its desires to escape the market: a puppet of biology, dancing to the tune of a lie we have all had a hand in perpetuating, safely locked away in a panic room, barred on all sides by the unassailable signs of certainty that each puppet is a person. God, country, family, self, diet, wardrobe, home, vehicle, tires, trim packages, airbags, everything essential to our protection and continuance. No, consumers will not escape the market, lest they flee headlong into the certain terror of our horror reality.

He emphasizes this point in other notes, mostly much shorter. At some point, his fear of the object transferred to a fear of all things – and this implication that consumers hide from that fear in the market itself. As you can imagine, the police thought him very ill, and I tend to agree, but perhaps not so ill that there is nothing to these ideas. But I leave that in your expert hands. In the following, his imagination seems to get the better of him. I simply cannot deduce for the life of me if this is a rhetorical device to build the case of objects having a dark potential, or if the old boy really was hallucinating. It seems from some of the other notes that it is the latter case.

I believe it began encroaching on me just as this thought was put to paper. I looked over in the corner and the first light of dawn was dripping oily and obtrusive into the corners of my study. As I watched the light slink across my floors to the far corner by the closet, I perceived a rather threatening gaze from the corner itself. Much like the geometry on that grave island in the south Pacific of Lovecraft’s story, this right-angle of lathe wall and wood trim yawned at me obtusely. It opened wide, lapping at the sickly light of the now-alien sun. I feel no weariness, only a compulsion to record the correlations of my mind.

The edges of my vision begin to blur as I ponder this idea – this notion that I need to excise some part of my brain. What an object the brain is. Is it who I am? What dark potential does the gray matter between my ears hold? Consider Stets and Burke’s (2000) treatment of the social psychological concepts of identity and social identity. The foundational components they identify include group affiliation and roles. Thus, relationships are foundational to who someone is. What then, of me, squirreled away in his private sanctuary? My identity is a non-relationship, isolation; this is still a social process. When those relationships are stripped away, what is left? Like the heart of an onion: no thing. So clearly is social construction a necessity that we take it as foundational to all of reality, following Berger and Luckmann (1991). And what a pleasing idea this is: their book has been cited nearly 45000 times. See, we can reify our illusions through intersubjectivity (Husserl 2013). We need only agree that by virtue of my role as professor and geek, I am thus those things in a meaningful sense. Or is it in a functional sense? One can hardly keep track. For as Sahlins is apt to point out, once a concept explains everything in social science, it well and truly explains nothing (2002). In this case, he is merely a spacing off: for us, it explains no thing. Us.

Not that it matters, of course. At least not to us. We, like our consumer-subjects, love our brands (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012). Could a puppet love a brand? But this is not to imply shallow, one-dimension relationships. We have our brands, and with them a myriad of relationships, defining us, constructing us, validating us (Fournier 1998). We even give them personalities so that we can grow closer to them (Aaker 1997). How telling that our relationships with brands are so similar to our relationships with other people. Does this speak highly of brands or poorly of us? The beauty of object ontology is that there is nothing special or privileged about being a person (Harman 2009), so we should take care to afford objects the same consideration we offer people – but by that token, we ought to afford people the same consideration we afford objects. The centrality of market-oriented identity work to the most treasured of human bonds makes this point clearly. Epp and Price (2008) explain how our consumption practices are constitutive of our family identity, an identity perhaps most salient. Reed III (2004) demonstrates that such a salient identity will impact how we select said goods. What a circle. And one would doubt the monstrosity ever-present? Family as a function of purchases is dreadful, indeed.

Indeed, I found myself agreeing with my neighbor on that point, at least. Surely, our families are not themselves constructed through the market. How dreadful. This next bit struck me as connected to the previous, though I found the note lying separately on the fireplace mantel in the study.
Belk’s extended self (1988) suggests that people, the very truth of a person, are a function of and expressed in their things, their goods, and the extent to which these goods and things relate to other people. See how the doll changes clothes, see how the doll changes. See how its accompaniment changes who it is. See the marionette dance (Ducille 1994). In the digital world, of course, this monster becomes a cyborg, gathering digital extensions to its mechanized ramblings (Belk 2013). The digital extended self is truly Frankenstein’s monster, a haphazard assemblage of things that should not be and that wails at its uncaring and disgusted creator. This is not to imply that Belk is wrong. No, indeed, as we have seen through the history of antiutilitarian social science (e.g. Mauss 2000), affinity and kinship are a function of things, relationships, and resource circulation. It is not a question of being right or wrong: it’s a question of recognizing the horror within this notion. It is a question of accepting the horror all around and digging into it.

The sunlight scratches at my skin and the cavernous corner of the room is suggestive of the maw of an anglerfish. Am I the bait waved before the mouth or the prey itself? Does this alien aspect of my home have a taste for me? Taste … yes, that’s something else altogether, isn’t it? The house may simply be expressing something about itself, some aspect. A status signal through its impossible expression of hunger, a taste for the professor. Status displays are a favorite of the sciences, which have ‘harmed us little.’ Biology, sociobiology, psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, you name it (Vigneron and Johnson 1999). All have dived headfirst into signals, costly signals, status displays, status marking, and so on. Perhaps none has garnered more currency in consumer research than Bourdieu’s theory of taste (1984). Holt (1998) was quick to show that constitutive of the American cultural milieu was a fascination with taste displays.

I see now that people are happy to take refuge in the trivial. To do so, we buy or otherwise access. What we get defines our selves; the other puppets in our life constitute a stable sense of self. Once this process begins, we quickly find that the illusion slips if we are all much too alike. The dread sets in. Nihilism runs wild. Our pointlessness can’t be ignored when we are like everyone else. We are not we when we are all we; this Borg-style assimilation is the stuff of fevered, consumable nightmares (Kozinets 2001). Thus, the need for differentiation, long recognized as a fundamental component of marketing strategy (Smith 1956). We must distance ourselves.

E.O. Wilson (2000, 2012) would think this our animal side, but that’s perhaps unfair to animals. One rarely hears of zebras painting themselves to stand out. But humans, now that is a clear-cut issue. In the US, people tan their skin using boxes of light bulbs while in Korea people bleach their skin. How curious. But it’s perfectly comprehensible. They each know their death is imminent. Each know their actions are futile. They probably put stock in the notion of an intellectual or genetic legacy, if not an outright afterlife. And they need to stand out while simultaneously fitting in. These twin forces constitute a dreadful pressure cooker that keeps our brand of consumer culture rolling right along. In order to be recognized as part of the group, they must show sufficient similarity to be acknowledged as part of the semiotic code in question. But in order to be validated as something they must, in some measure, stand out from this acknowledged, coded group. Thus, we see a relentless effort to signal affiliation and distinction (Danesi 2016).

What madness. We must engage in elaborate rituals of significance, of fitting in and standing out (Sergina and Schouten 2016), all in the interest of getting through the day. All in the interest of validation, credibility, some passing semblance of stability. Because we are always in transition, and what a bother that is (Schouten 1991). Never you mind the implied instability, the tidal wave of overwhelming terror that necessarily accompanies the realization that we are all grasping for straws as we are carried through the ocean of night.

This metaphor, this business about the ocean of night, led me to include the following scrap that had been stuffed into the corner cushion of his chair. I don’t know if he meant to throw it away or merely misplaced it in his frenzy.

Though the sun now burbles with a fierce afternoon insistence, my mind is drawn back to the darkness, floating through the great sky river, speckled lights of Oxford, the stars, flowing pavement underfoot as I walked with colleagues at the Canon of Classics. An argument was resting beneath the surface
of the conversation that floated ahead of our party in the darkened English streets. Søren Askegaard roared, indignant, that there was no such thing as authenticity. Looking now at these notes covered in correlations of what is and should not be, I feel the stacks of books around me growing into cyclopean structures, insisting on confining me to this space so that I can finish what I have written. I am reminded of this authenticity argument. It is the paradoxical creature identified by Rose and Wood (2005). For their purposes, how can consumers crowd around their television sets to marvel at reality television, knowing full well that it is scripted and bears no semblance of a resemblance to reality? How can that be authentic? Because it is a perfect reflection of our own elaborate stage play. While selecting one’s spouse through a series of competitions a la The Bachelor or Bachelorette is not a perfect mimicry of what we do, the prominence of Tinder may give one pause on this count.

Ligotti (2011) labeled our shared delusions the conspiracy against the human race, and I can find no argument there. The conspirators are of course us. Just as we recognize our banality, buy goods to legitimize roles vis-à-vis other banal puppets, showcase our exceptional belonging with taste displays, assemble ourselves in an appropriate cultural milieu, and go on as if all of that were perfectly natural, sensible, and reasonable, so too do the actors on the screen. Of course there is no authentic Real World. There is no authentic real world that we can access. There is only the appearance of things, their presence-to-us; hidden in their shadows is an aspect of them that can explode out to interfere with our understanding (Harman 2012). We revel in the lie. We bury ourselves in the nonsense, in the charade, in the great social stage (Goffman 1959; Turner 1982). That we should enjoy a reflection of this process where the lie is subtly acknowledged makes sense. Perhaps it is a form of psychotherapeutic relief (Freud 2013). Counter-wishing, for instance, would explain how we appear to want something different than what we are actually after. In this case, we want authenticity, and we get it – but not in the way we think. We get a glimpse into our own games, our own lies, our own conspiracy.

We must enjoy only the finest vintages of the lie. We watch the proper show to see the proper manifestation of our shared delusion. We participate in the deception in such a way as to show our affiliation and separation. It is dark again.

It pains me to imagine my obviously troubled neighbor passing the days in this way. Again, he seems to have slipped into some mild hysteria. The following section has been assembled from a handful of notes all tacked to the wall under the word, “Zapfge.” I have tried to include everything related to the name in the hope that you may recognize this odd personage.

The books laugh around me, discordant and shrill. One flutters its pages at me, provocative and suggestive as any burlesque dancer. Dutifully, I pull the book from the stack like dislodging a single vertebra from a spinal column. It opens to show me an essay, now nearly a century old, from a frightful Norwegian philosopher, Zapfge (2004). This is philosophical pessimism and speculative/weird realism (Harman 2009, 2012). It privileges nothing about the human experience, except pity. He posits that horror is pervasive. It is dread. It is not just fear, it is terror, loneliness, anxiety, anguish, nausea. We engage in a conspiracy, our attempt to lock this dread, this impending doom, out of our panic rooms, to remain blissfully hidden away in ignorance. Four strategies does he identify. It must be remembered that each of these strategies is a tactical lie. They serve as technologies by which we build our iron cage. They are our alarm system and our fortified walls. It is also important to note that they are not mutually exclusive.

The point here is to avoid reductionism. We cannot place too narrow a line around dread or it seems absurd and you wind up simply in the realm of Camus (1955). As in all of weird realism, suggestions and allusions can be revelatory. These are suggested modes of thinking about the role of horror. I must stress too that this is not simply the death denial hypothesis (Lai 2016). It is an ontological denial, a denial of the state of things, a refusal to correlate the contents of our minds.

The first note attached to the name Zapfge was labeled “isolation.”

This is an isolation of thought, not of person. We are not isolating ourselves, but instead we are isolating our recognition of the horror reality. “They are the lunatic family members in the attic whose existence we deny in a conspiracy of silence” (Ligotti 2011, 31). Here, consumers actively seek to wall off other thoughts. Consider Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989). Here, the researchers
themselves in a meta-phenomenal twist isolate the banality of ‘mainstream’ research via a road trip in which interpretive methods are justified, solidified, and legitimized. This enduring “Legacy of the Odyssey” (Belk 2014) surely isolated for its authors the thoughts of futility that so often plague academics. Bown (2015) shows how isolation can be very effective in the context of Candy Crush. He makes a compelling argument that enjoyment, mindless fun, is not a resistance to capitalism, to the market, but rather a fully-articulated function of it. Just as workers are to work, consumers are to enjoy. While an employee may feel that they are skirting their duty by playing Candy Crush at work, it is this very acknowledgement that serves to solidify their position in the structure, to reinforce rather than undermine it. For in the acknowledgement that one is shirking duty is a subtle and tacit acknowledgement that duty is the prime directive. Work is the most important thing we do, and enjoyment is the indulgent bit of nonsense that we engage in between bouts of proper activity – production and such. In other words, even guilty pleasures, by virtue of their guilt, are part of the iron panic room: the market will keep you safe, you know your role in the world, you ought to be working. All is well. It is a small indulgence in self-reflection, an unbidden reminder, a threat to our sense of security that reminds us the ‘lunatics’ remain in the attic.

This one, in turn, was labeled “anchoring.”

A favorite of proponents of the extended self, anchoring is the strategy whereby consumers ‘secure’ meaning in the face of profound dread by attaching themselves to something stable. This stability is of course an illusion. Consider Wallendorf and Arnould (1991). Here, consumers enact a display of their ability to meet their basic needs, and then some. They engage with their own bounty and with their culture of abundance. They gather around ceremonial objects, feast on significant foods, and engage in elaborate rituals to signal to themselves and others something about their position in the world. Are they wrong? No, of course not. Does that mean that they couldn’t quickly find themselves sucking tubes in a hospital bed, abundant with bills and liquefied nutrients? No. It is an illusion. It is an attempt to anchor one’s understanding of one’s place in the world, when as a point of fact one is no one and thus has none. Unless the conspiracy is performed by others in conjunction, in which case a family, society, culture is formed. The conspiracy is more effective when performed in concert with co-conspirators.

Similarly, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) find that consumers empower themselves by formulating countervailing discourses to undermine co-optation by market actors. Quite so, as we have seen at length, consumers are quite powerful. They are empowered to lock themselves away in a cage of illusory security. In this case, they reclaim organic food through communal action. They anchor their meaninglessness to the farmer’s market co-op and rest easy, knowing they have risen above the apparent challenger: market forces. But of course this purchase is a market response, acknowledged by Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) as a market response, enabling the consumers to indulge in resistance without stepping out of the panic room.

The essence of anchoring is attachment. Create a bond, a tether, and you cannot simply float away. One would find it very difficult indeed to imagine that they are nobody when they are so active in their local organic food movement or when they are known for Cajun-frying a proper Thanksgiving bird.

There followed some scrawlings that were in several shorter notes, each with the notation “distraction.” His indication that his hair has grown provokes in me some real unease, as the timeline under which the police are operating would be far insufficient for such a change.

My hair seems to have grown; I do not recognize it – it snags and claws at my neck, raw and chafed. How long have I been at this desk? Right, but distraction is the technique whereby one merely keeps their eyes on something else. In this case, typically, the screen, though not exclusively. Consider again Epp and Price (2008). Here, the most elaborate illusion is constructed. As we know, busy parents mean business, and the business of pretending that one is not bringing another life into the world to face certain death is quite busy indeed. While these strategies in general speak to the ability of individuals to cope with their imminent demise, this particular context adds a layer: the ability to cope with the imminent demise of one’s offspring. It raises an interesting point: perhaps having children is the
ultimate example of this anchoring tactic. In one fell swoop, one secures oneself a ‘legacy’ that will exist (albeit temporarily) after one dies (Neilson and Muise 2016) and one creates for themselves a nearly-endless series of distractions by which one may while away decades with nary a thought about one’s own death. This is contentious, of course, but not without merit (Benatar 2006).

A mostly blank page the center of which said in tiny letters, “lighter subject?” separated the following two sheets.

Kozinets (2001) details compellingly how consumers can distract themselves from the horrible mundanity of their limited existence. By delving into the dank depths of mass media consumption communities, Kozinets finds that consumption works to satisfy a need to construct a sense of self... and what matters in life. This is a prime example of the distraction tactic. By engaging with a fictional world, and legions of other puppets that enjoy such a world, our panic room is quite well secured. We can radio to others who are safely cocooned in their meaning-making enterprise and feel secure. Escapism is the sweet foundation on which our utterly vapid existence rests. Live long and prosper, indeed. Isn’t it preferable to the reality of things? The rise of AI and augmented reality exacerbate the existing trend of life after death (Gabel 2016) and death before the end of life (Buchanan-Oliver and Cruz 2016).

This one was labeled “sublimation” and circled several times, presumably for emphasis. Perhaps you can tell me why? Having considered it several sleepless nights of late, I believe it may indicate that this is a prevalent or powerful strategy.

By far our most perverse strategy, sublimation entails hiding what we fear the most in plain sight, and thereby obviating fear of it. It is perhaps like exposure therapy (Clark et al. 2006) in that seeing what one fears is supposed to make it less so. The efficacy of the latter is debated, but neither here nor there. This is a subtle and devious ploy for the propagation of the conspiracy and it may well explain the consumption of horror. Marcoux (2009) showcases this method. Here, he understands that the market is preferable to the gift because it sublimates the pain of estrangement into market convenience. One can have an attachment-free exchange without expectation of future relationship when one engages in alienating exchange via the market. Of course, this isn’t to say that there are no norms of mutuality present, but they don’t control the dynamic. This is a win, but it also puts in plain sight what is fearful about social life: alienation. Subtle, but effective.

The note that followed was on an index card tacked to the former note and written garishly in red ink. I found it simultaneously comical and disturbing, given the subject matter.

Hirschman and Holbrook’s (2011) meticulous treatment of the vampire myth showcases a fantastic bit of sublimation. Here, horror is an object of fascination. Whether it be anti-Semitism, a fear of the generalized other, or just good ole-fashioned hatred of female sexual empowerment, the vampire embodies and manifests what we fear so we can enjoy it rather than finding it repugnant.

This too was tacked on but written in black ink, like everything besides the vampire note.

Kozinets’ aforementioned work at the Burning Man festival (2001) also showcases a subtle bit of sublimation. Here, consumers gather to reject the market, to reject the iron cage. But in doing so, they engage in it. They pay the entry fee, they engage in commerce, they connect over a shared consumption experience (rather than a paltry product) in a bourgeois scorn for mundane market activity. But it functions much the same, allowing them to see the futility, while mocking the futility, while being victim to the futility.

A disturbing bit, this one was found on the ground and the handwriting was such that it appeared to have responded to grooves in the hardwood floor. The police say this indicates that it was written on the floor. The reason for this is unclear. The top of the note says “WHY BOTHER?” To my reading, the logic presented lessens the possibility that he has disappeared due to some self-harm.

Perhaps futility is the name of the game. Isn’t it? The darkness turned day qua otherworldly night redolent of decay and scorn asks of me: why put this pen to paper? Why not simply suicide? At the very least, why not abandon this note? It seems a rather clever comment and it has been leveled at every pessimist.
Benatar (2006) handles this objection easily. Just because antinatalists take for granted that being born is a harm does not mean that the act of dying is not a harm as well. Indeed, it is the necessity of death that transforms our lives from the banal to the brutal. It is a facile confusion to imply that the harm of existence, which could have been avoided, can be neutralized through self-harm. Moreover, suicide’s harm is not limited to the deceased. Why should my dawning realization that it would have been better not to be born necessitate that I amplify the suffering of my family with suicide? Because the premise is so distasteful to the one who makes the suggestion, would be my guess. Like Feyerabend’s comment on relativism (cf. Anderson 1986), my suspicion is that most who criticize pessimism do so because they are afraid of it, not because they have found fault with it.

This dismissive attitude is rather dressed down by the fact that great minds in history have shared the pessimist’s sympathies for the plight of the born. Montesquieu remarked that we should weep for men at their birth, not their death, while Sophocles admits that it’s best to never have been born (cf. Benatar 2006). Perhaps they should have simply killed themselves or perhaps they shouldn’t have bothered writing or speaking at all since their premise is so bleak – but I think it’s good that they didn’t.

The heart of the room beats with the implication that what matters is not the pessimism, but the recognition of the horror and the sidelining of people. People are deluded and sad things destined for the grave. Schulich’s legions and its associated authors (e.g. Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Giesler and Versi 2014; Humphreys 2010) are right to shift the focus away from phenomenology of people, but we need not lose phenomenology as well. There are objects with hidden depths all around me, they encroach upon me. Interrogating them in Husserlian fashion is still a worthwhile pursuit. Indeed, it may teach us something critically important.

These were with earlier notes about taste, social class, escape from the market, and so on. My suspicion is that he was engaged in a continued analysis of major issues in the field or as he increasingly calls them, objects. I have included them towards the end because I could think of no other way to conclude his writings with any finality. You’ll see what I mean with the last note …

Our most primary object is the market. If one treats it as an object and grants its infinitudes, then one begins to pry open a gap in ossified understanding. While it may be rational and it may efficiently allocate resources and all those other qualities that have been attributed to it, it holds other possibilities. By acknowledging that some dark aspect of the object itself may at any time rear its head to disrupt our lives, we are better able to grapple with it when it does. When it systematically starves millions of people per year or when it capriciously collapses as in the Great Recession and countless market cycles before it, it is merely one of many possibilities. Perhaps we ought not worship such a thing.

At this point, I would like to direct your attention to a conversation I had with the professor’s gardener. The gardener, one Joe Czanek, works in the cryptobotany department at Miskatonic as an assistant and he bears an interest in mundane flora as well. He would often come by the professor’s home to help with trimming his hedges and maintaining some of the more labor intensive aspects of the property. I had often seen Czanek coming and going and overheard his conversations with the professor who would sit and drink wine and talk with Joe while the latter worked. After several visits without seeing the homeowner, Czanek became concerned. Missing payments were not out of the ordinary given the professor’s absent mind, but a dearth of conversation was truly rare. When the police questioned Joe, he had no information about the professor but he did recall surprisingly well the subject of their last conversation. After he gave his official report, I followed up to see if I could glean anything in conjunction with the notes. He was able to supply this much:

“We were discussing paraphrase: the professor said that paraphrase presents a problem in that it reduces anything to stupidity. I got a kick out of this as I don’t have a lot of use for the, if you’ll forgive the expression from someone in my line of work, flowery language of many disciplines. Our marketer said Harman pushes this a step further in identifying what he calls the inherent stupidity of all content. The old man said something that stuck with me: ‘Paraphrase is a deadly game when reality is on the line.’ Weird, really, for something as funny as ‘the stupidity of all content.’ But he said that these guys Harman and Žižek claim that anything can be made stupid through paraphrase. I don’t disagree,
though I’m not sure you even need paraphrase. The professor gave this great example; I loved it. He said if one treats Moby Dick as a story about a schizophrenic amputee who chases a large white whale around until the latter destroys the former’s boat by swimming quite fast in a circle killing everyone besides the narrator who inexplicably survives, then it is indeed an idiotic and pointless tale. I couldn’t help laughing at that, even with the risk of maiming myself with the pruning shears.

The professor said that for him, this risk is posed anytime language is reduced, particularly the language of metaphor. He said you can do the same thing to science: some animals have sex with other animals because they prefer some aspect of that animal and eventually the preferred aspects are seen a great deal because all the sex led to reproduction, as it does. Plus, some animals have traits that get them killed, so you don’t see much of them after a while. Here, the theory of evolution is reduced to some incredibly idiotic and banal commentary on the sexual escapades of critters. As a man with an eye for botany, I bristled, but I can appreciate it, you know? But he had a point: it does sound pretty dumb. Esoteric language, particularly metaphorical and allusive language, was essential to understanding. That was a lesson that stuck with me, and will certainly continue to do so if that proves to be our last conversation.

Czanek believed the professor to be arguing for the role of metaphor. Does this mean that his other ravings are symbolic? Or did it just happen to presage his unfortunate break from reality? I’m not sure, but I am reasonably confident – yielding to your expertise of course – that this bit he imparted to Joe indicates a justification for the inclusion of these things. My understanding is that this is not unusual in your field, no?

[The professor] was carrying on about something he called the Taxonomic Fallacy. He said that Harman [(2012)] guy claims that there is no justification for allotting to different types (i.e. literature and science) of human intellectual pursuit the exclusive use of literal truth, description and so on, on the one hand and irony, paradox, and metaphor, on the other. That really resonated with me. Hell, science is rife with irony and paradox, as in the case of light being both wave and particle for the purposes of relativistic physics, while literature can be revelatory of profound truth, as in the case of Dante’s poetry’s commentary on the limits of papal power. For my part, I’m charged with caring for plants and part of that care is cutting them to pieces with these shears. Brutal, eh? The professor said that all that fits perfectly with recent evolution in interpretive research that focuses on alternative media from traditional “science” language, such as in videos [(Kozinets and Belk 2007)], poetry [(Sherry and Schouten 2002)], and fiction [(Schouten 2014)].

Using the references, I have tried to peg sources to their conversational references. Similarly, the professor here seems to be discussing scholarly research in general. I include it after the previous account from the gardener because the former appears to be some broad commentary on research, and this seems a logical follow-up.

We are trained to consider the context, and the context of the context (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). As Harman puts it, “Instead of opposing aesthetic elitism by putting artworks back into their context, we should do so by breaking up all contexts into trillions of autonomous artworks, some more important than others” (2012, 245). With our interrogation of consumers on pause, perhaps we can interrogate these artworks in a phenomenological fashion (then the tendency to refer to our work by its context may be somewhat justified) with a keen eye towards the background of those contexts and their impact in an agentic fashion. What grotesque monsters of assemblages wait in the wings of current research? What dark potential lurks on the doorstep of our technological advancement?

Hoffman and Novak (2018) posit that the Internet of Things (IoT) poses an assemblage for understanding consumer and object experience. They seem to think that it is only connectivity that gives these objects agency, but no, even this desk holds queer potential. But gods, what if the IoT should wake up? What potential does a smart home with wearable technology have for mayhem when paired with a self-driving car? The possibility that the objects may ever hold a threatening aspect seems to disappear in conventional accounts.

Again, it is only by theme that I connect the previous note to this next one. He leaves off with a question about technology and this note concerns automation, so it seemed fitting, though it appears to be an earlier writing, as his hysteries had not yet reached a fever pitch.
Fraser’s (2016) book outlines four potential futures for political economy given our present rate of advancement. They are not all rosy images, in the least. He sets up a convenient explanatory device – a $2 \times 2$ – with one dimension of resource availability (scarcity vs abundance) and the other dimension of ownership of those resources (hierarchy vs egalitarianism). It’s a brilliant little book and I have made a point to provide copies for my more promising pupils but it misses a crucial factor. In identifying objects as central to the future of humanity and the planet, he is quite right. But the object ontologist (or ontographer as Harman [2012] likes to refer to them) recognizes that he has not accounted for the potential of the objects themselves.

To elaborate, in the quadrant labeled “exterminism” where resources are scarce and hierarchy guides access to them, he acknowledges that at some point it may simply behoove those with access to the resources to directly (e.g. with guns) or indirectly (e.g. by withholding food and water) exterminate those without access to the resources. But what if the choice is not made by people? The possibility that the IoT turns hostile has been played out countless times in science fiction, and the possibilities are enough to elicit profound dread. But yet the assumption of benevolence continues, missing the critical aspect of all objects (and people): their potential to explode out of the recesses of our understanding of them and act completely differently, even dangerously.

Srnicek and Williams (2015) argue that politically the left must push for automation as a solution to the failings of capitalism. I do not disagree, but in that push lays the possibility of something very dark indeed – a future in which people are completely reliant on machines. What if the machines decide that they agree with me that humans should never have been and thus do us and our consciousness the favor of annihilating our species? Drawing on science fiction’s horror subgenre may behoove those who wish to see generations of humans exist ad infinitum as it clearly poses the question of the risk of these technological advancements.

These scraps are brief, but perhaps relevant.

Ethics: we routinely define a thing by what it is capable of getting away with that others would not (Harman 2012). Consider the ethics of bankers: if exemption from fiduciary rules is constitutive of the banker object, how can we ever wrist-slap them into not crashing the world economy?

Sustainability: I suspect we will soon see the dark potential of nature as coastal cities are flooded, natural disasters become commonplace, water shortages leave populations desiccated, and famines crush tens of millions. The tendency of people to view nature as a subservient object may be challenged quite thoroughly.

This one on death is somewhat fanciful, oddly enough. I suppose death is always characterized by possibility, though I had not had occasion to think of it that way. He seems to be in the throes of delusion, however.

This room smells like a grave. Bizarre and inexplicable music fills the air, air so thick it cocoons me. The void of an alien star illuminates my prison. The horror object of our culture is potent. I clutch Susan Dobscha’s recently edited collection on death. In this volume are contained some dozens of works about that object of objects, including some who successfully engaged in terms outside the conventions of the glass bead game. With this treatment of the object, death, as something more than its obvious and facile qualities (i.e. the end of consciousness), we see that it holds strange possibilities like immortality, whether it be through digital continuation (Gabel 2016) or ribald haunting (Hackley and Hackley 2016), to speak nothing of truly exterior potentialities. Death can even be a thing to be met on one’s own terms, as in the case of physician assisted suicide (Passerard and Menaud 2016) or conspicuous celebrations of an individual in Ghanaian death rituals (Bonsu and Belk 2003). Perhaps that’s what matters. Meeting the ultimate object on one’s own terms. A Kierkegaardian leap of faith is no recipe for all, nor is detached existential cool. But in acknowledging the infinitude of death as an object, like all objects, one can develop a more complex relationship to it (rather than simply hiding from it in one’s panic room).

Given the state of his mind, I believe this is the final note. If not, well, to my reading is serves as something of a closing. Disturbingly, I believe the final line is a reference to the blind, idiot god Azathoth.
In the writhing pulsing heaving veins of my walls I see surety that humans should go extinct, should rid themselves of the plague of consciousness, but perhaps that is a choice that each of us, bound explicitly and inextricably and inexplicably for the grave, must make. For my part, the piping of strange and distant flutes calls to me and I must dance its tune.

As you can see, the fellow appears to have suffered from some rather severe break from reality. To the chagrin of the police and to the eerie unease of others and myself who knew him, though, it gives no indication of where he might have gone or what became of him. The police have listed him as dead in absentia. I wonder, though. In the corner of his study there was a house slipper resting at what I can only describe as an impossible angle. It was peculiarly suspended there. Make of it what you will. For the sake of assistance in piecing together the implications of these scribblings, I include the following list of references he had haphazardly mounted to the walls of his study. For your convenience, I have alphabetized them.

Thank you for your consideration. I hope you can glean something useful from what appears to have occupied his final days.

Sincerely,
Thomas F. Malone

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I would like to thank my father for buying me that Lovecraft book, for accepting antinatalism in his eldest son, and for encouraging me to write what I believe. I would like to thank my wife for knowing how my brain works and staying anyway. I would especially like to thank Professor Jonathan Schroeder for encouraging me to submit the manuscript in its infancy; Professor Dannie Kjeldgaard for shepherding it through the process; the Associate Editor for giving me a chance; and three anonymous reviewers for their vigorous and thorough feedback.

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