

# *The Dulwich Horror*

H.P. Lovecraft and the Crisis in British Housing

Dean Kenning

A surreal illustration of a green, tentacle-headed creature with two long, dark, segmented horns. The creature has a muscular, humanoid body with long, sharp claws on its hands and feet. It is perched on a brick wall that is partially submerged in a dark, greenish-blue flood. The background shows a cityscape of brick buildings, also partially submerged, under a dark, starry sky. The overall mood is one of horror and desolation.



**THE CREEPING TERROR OF INSECURE DWELLING  
(FROM DUNWICH TO CHAVGANISTAN)**

'They's allus ben unseen things araound Dunwich –  
livin' things – as ain't human an' ain't good for human folks.'  
H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dunwich Horror*

'Perseus wore a magic cap down over his eyes and  
ears as a make-believe that there are no monsters.'  
Karl Marx, *Capital*

How are we to understand this bringing together of a cult author of Horror fiction, House To-Let signs in a South London suburb and the issue of the housing crisis in Britain today? To many on the surface the relation no doubt seems unlikely and arbitrary, a surreal juxtaposition of random ciphers. But when Dean proposed the project to me the relationship was only too immediate. I hope in this text to try and explain why. But already, before I even begin, I have the dreadful intuition that this 'obviousness' is beyond my powers of Reason to explain, that it may in fact be further testimony of the extent too which I have fallen under the delirious sway of the Great Old Ones and lost the thread of the 'real plot' yet again.

Time will tell. Let us see.

What I hope to try and communicate here is the overlap between the delusional mind-states experienced by the protagonists in H.P. Lovecraft's fictions and those experienced by people suffering from real psychological symptoms in their daily life, symptoms exacerbated by the deeply destabilizing emotional effects of precarious dwelling. Circumstances compel me to try and remain as objective and lucid as possible regarding the political-economic processes that have made the housing situation what it is today. I do this in order to get a fix on the 'real' factors that contribute to a range of psychological disorders that disproportionately effect those sectors of the population who find themselves at the sharp-end of the housing crisis, unable to secure a reasonable degree of existential security. Such people are unlikely to find themselves living in places like leafy Dulwich.

There is a great deal of academic research evidencing the causal relationship between homelessness and mental health problems in the UK but very little formal academic research has been made into the relationship between housing precarity<sup>1</sup> and mental health<sup>2</sup>. My knowledge and experience in this regard is primarily anecdotal and personal. Having lived in rented accommodation in London since coming here in 1987 I have experienced first-hand the stress of trying to maintain one's life here on low-waged, part-time work, trying to make unprofitable art, while base-level rents slip further and further out of reach and the council taxes and utilities bills get heavier<sup>3</sup>. The situation became much worse in the last ten years. Many

<sup>1</sup> The term 'precarity' has recently gained currency in the discourse of the anti-globalization movement. It is primarily used to describe the unstable and flexible employment patterns of low-level workers in post-industrial societies. But also it captures well the sense of a state of 'existential precariousness' that those forced to live in short-life, high-rent dwellings experience on a continual basis.

See 'Precarity' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precarity> [13/7/7], <http://www.eclecticaadv.net/spip.php?article6> [13/7/7], and 'BETWIXT: Between Integration and Exclusion A Comparative Study in Local Dynamics of Precarity and Resistance to exclusion in Urban Contexts' - Final report, August 2002. Edited by Daniel Bertaux, CNRS and EHESS, CEMS, Paris, France, Thomas P. Boje, Roskilde University, Denmark and Umeå University, Sweden and Susan McIntosh, Greater London Authority, London, United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> Some work on this area has been compiled in *The Journal of Social Issues* Vol. 59 No. 3 2003

<sup>3</sup> *The Residential Context of Health Issue*. Editors: Terry Hartig and Roderick J. Lawrence [http://www.spssi.org/2003\\_3.htm](http://www.spssi.org/2003_3.htm) [13/7/7]

Being a white, male, university-educated, single, able-bodied, and English speaking hardly makes me feel comfortable writing about the psychological effects of housing and employment insecurity in Britain today. However statistics suggest that single males are in fact some of the people most likely to experience severe mental illness and suicidal depression in relation to poor housing and employment insecurity.

In a personal correspondence between the author and Karen Woodall, Director of the Centre for Separated Families, she wrote:

of my closest friend's and colleagues have been forced to leave the capital for more affordable cities and countries. For better or for worse I have managed hang on by the skin of my teeth.

I could recount a catalogue of personal experiences during this time to represent the 'horrors' that the housing situation in London helps create. But I want to avoid that. Even by simply recounting these stories verbally to friends I feel the horror creeping back like the revenant of an earlier psychotic episode or the auratic prelude to a seizure. When one tells tales of horror the same memory-specific fear-toxins that you experienced in the initial situation are released into the blood stream. It's a psycho-chemical thing, a distinct quality of feeling, a taste in the blood that leads to a tangible change in the brain. Then the same remembered feelings start to grip your body, the return of the dread memory of being unsafe. Your mind starts to think the same anxious proto-delusional thoughts, paranoid thoughts, that no limit is secure, that you will never feel safe in the world, that the intruders are right outside, they are coming, the terrifying boundary transgressors. And even your own body has no safe limit. A marching numbness gradually takes hold of it. It feels like you are being hollowed out, that some THING is crawling into your skin, that THEY are already inside you. The idea of malign demonic entities seems to thrive in this uncanny quality of story-telling-induced psycho-physical returning to a state of being-in-terror<sup>4</sup>.

I worked hard to extricate myself from the power of these traumatic memories. And if it was difficult for me, whose experiences were not severe, how extreme must this terror be for those who have been seriously damaged by them<sup>5</sup>.

Suffice to say, the difficulty of finding secure, stable and affordable housing in London has been *the* most trying and difficult aspect of living here and one which I read clearly in the seething horrors crawling over Dean's signs.

### Lovecraft in New and Old England

Let's begin with the immediate coincidence of names upon which the show's title plays. Dunwich is a fictional small town nestling in the hills of a remote, imaginary region in Massachusetts and the setting for H.P. Lovecraft's short story *The Dunwich Horror*. The tale tells of how the witchcraft-stricken hills around the

<sup>4</sup>I am not sure that single mothers are actually the people who feel the pressure of the housing crisis most - in fact I think it is unmarried or unpartnered men be they black or white and across all of the socio economic scales. This is largely because as a single mother there is still a net to catch you if you fall or if you cannot even get a foot on the so called ladder - single mothers are still re-housed, despite having to wait for long periods of time on lists and live in B&B's and so on. Even in London - especially maybe in London - there are structures in place to help single mothers. Single men on the other hand have nothing - apart from St Martin in The Fields (where I often stand and watch the queue for night shelter) and Centrepoint.

A recent study by JRF showed that it is single men between the ages of 21 and 48 who are most likely to suffer homelessness - and kill themselves because of it - and its this group of people in our society that is most often overlooked because we assume still that men make all the money and have all of the power - but they don't - not by a long shot.

Men are often homeless because their relationship has ended, they are more often depressed and less likely to get help if they are - they drink more, take drugs more, have meaningless sex more often, are less able to recognise their own pain, are less likely to verbalise it, more likely to wind up drunk on the streets, being beaten up, robbed, thrown into cells, thrown out on the street, less likely to eat well if at all in some circumstances and, particularly in the case of men between the ages of 25 to 45 - they are more likely to experience serious mental health problems than any other group in the UK. And what is worse - men are stigmatised, brutalised and dehumanised when they are down and out - much more so than women, who are looked at more sympathetically by society than men - probably because of our gendered subjectivities which tell us that women are more vulnerable than men and somehow in this post feminist society - worth more than men.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>As I tune into this demonic-delusional memory current my flatmate comes downstairs into the kitchen where I am now writing. He has had a nightmare. This comes as no surprise. It is characteristic of this state of delirious terror that you believe you are unleashing psychic currents into your immediate environment. When I tune in to the 'dark fear' people around me tend to report disturbed sleep patterns. Is this delusional? I don't think so. In fact I firmly believe that psychic states are subliminally contagious. This is a difficult issue for those who suffer from them and I think it has a lot to do with the suicidal current associated with paranoid states. People experiencing extreme fear are aware that they are making people around them suffer the same fears, that they are the source of contagious psychic terror.

<sup>5</sup>It is to those who have experienced much greater terror than myself that this writing is dedicated.

### Abersham Road E8



### HALF-HUMAN SPAWN OF YOG-SOTHOTH

'Bigger'n a barn...all made o' squirmen' ropes...hull thing sort o' shaped like a hen's egg bigger'n anything with dozens o' legs like hogsheads that haff shut up when they step...nothin' solid abaout it-all like jelly, an' made o' sep'rit wrigglin' ropes pushed clost together...great bulgin' eyes all over it...ten or twenty maouths or trunks a-stikin' aout all along the sides, big as stove-pipes an all a-tossin' an openin' an' shuttin'...all grey, with kinder blue or purple rings...an Gawd in Heaven-that haff face on top...'

*'Oh, oh my Gawd, that haff face-that haff face on top of it...that face with the red eyes an crinkly albino hair, an' no chin, like the Whateleys...It was a octopus, centipede, spider kind o' thing, but they was a haff-shaped man's face on top of it, an' it looked like Wizard Whateley's only it was yards an' yards across...'*

*(The Dunwich Horror)*



## The Dulwich Horror

half-derelict hamlet become host to a 'blasphemously stupendous bulk of horror' summoned by the occult practices of Wilbur Whatley - the mutant child of a deformed Albino mother and unknown father - and how the monstrosity that he unleashed is finally banished from the region by Dr. Henry Armitage, head librarian of the Miskatonic University in the imaginary city of Arkham.

Dulwich, on the other hand, is a particularly desirable residential area in South London, famous for the preservation of traditional its village image, its prestigious private school for boys and for its wealthy and illustrious residents like Margaret Thatcher, Eddie George (ex-governor of the Bank of England) and, very briefly, Tom Cruise<sup>6</sup>. Dulwich is, in fact, a very long way from Dunwich. Most importantly it is, apparently, a 'real' place<sup>7</sup>.

So, despite the simple similarity of names, how can the creeping horrors of Lovecraft's weird fiction be related to a genteel suburbia in South London and the very real issue of Britain's current housing crisis?

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1890, the only son of a travelling jewellery salesman and a mother who could trace her lineage back to a founding Massachusetts family. A sickly child prodigy, Lovecraft's teenage years were lived reclusively with his mother, two aunts and grandfather after his father was institutionalised for insanity in 1893. After the death of his mother in 1919 Lovecraft began writing fantasy, horror and science fiction stories in earnest for pulp magazines like *Weird Tales* until his death 1937.

He is famous for having invented the genre of 'cosmic horror' in a series of inter-related stories founded on a complex, idiosyncratic pantheon of non-human entities and ancient esoteric lore known collectively as the *Cthulhu Mythos*. Relatively unknown in his own lifetime, Lovecraft has since garnered sufficient academic and literary attention to be considered one of the most important horror writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The *Cthulhu Mythos* (which he enthusiastically encouraged other writers to develop in their own work) is one the most enduring aspects of Lovecraft's work and one which has probably done most to carry his reputation over into contemporary popular culture and theory<sup>8</sup>. There has also been something of a revival of interest in Lovecraft of late due to the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death this year<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Dean explained to me that ever since reading *The Dunwich Horror* he had naturally associated Dulwich - of which he knew very little - with its New England near namesake, imagining it to be a fetid and cursed place, its population beset by atavistic degeneracy.

<sup>7</sup> In a personal email correspondence with the author dated 16/7/7 Alec Dippie wrote:

'It strikes me that in the connection between Dulwich and Dunwich two further places are omitted. Namely New York and London. Lovecraft wrote the 'Dunwich Horror' after returning to Providence (Dulwich) after two years in New York during which any mistaken ideas he retained about his relation to modernity were dispelled. It seems to me that the one thing that connects Lovecraft's ideas with a notional occupant of Dulwich is that they are both more or less genteel figures who would neither discuss sex or money at the dinner table. Their positions (social and economic) would remain whatever economic system was operant. Their sense of historic authority, their taste and sensitivities are uniquely theirs and the stately reserve which they choose to exhibit, they feel is rightfully due to them given that they feel their qualities would prevail over others in the marketplace of employment should they choose any field of occupational endeavor. They think that they are naturally superior to 'others'.

Perhaps the citizens of Dulwich aren't so much all like Lovecraft or have had their ideas tested so effectively. But (following Zizek) it is enough that residents believe that others who live in Dulwich carry the torch of a genteel and reserved Anglo Saxon authority in perpetuity. This is the 'character' of the neighborhood that one buys into when one moves there. One may even be 'modern' and beg to differ from these sentiments, but the differing is dependent on the inviolability and permanence of these predicates. It seems that these places are full of people who perpetually beg that they're not like the old fart that lives next door. The net result of these positionings is that 'Dulwich' is maintained (even by its 'detractors' who are always conceding its right to be autonomous from capitalism even as they differ from it) as the desperate disavowal of capitalism by its beneficiaries'.

<sup>8</sup> It was not in fact Lovecraft who invented the term or popularised the mythos. This is primarily the work of August Derleth (a member of the 'Lovecraft Circle' of horror writers) and S.T. Joshi, Lovecraft's biographer.

<sup>9</sup> For example the 'Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Theory' event organized by Mark Fisher at Goldsmith's college in April this year. Mark Fisher's K-Punk weblog gives a good indication of the theoretical currents that have brought Lovecraft into contemporary, critical-cultural focus (See <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/>)[13/7/7]

His stories are typically written from the perspective of a solitary male protagonist struggling to maintain his sanity (and the future of humanity) after discovering - while in pursuit of esoteric, antiquarian or scientific knowledge - a parallel universe inhabited by ancient, extra-terrestrial entities. Often the protagonist finds a cryptic or literal key which unlocks doors of perception onto impossible, imaginary dimensions populated by a seething array of incomprehensible monstrosities, non-human deities and sinister beings that threaten to engulf the human race.

Lovecraft was an avowed Anglophile considering himself the progeny of a pure Anglo-Saxon bloodline. It is therefore quite appropriate that the spawn of Lovecraft's weird imagination should find themselves crawling over the For Sale signs of this most quintessentially English suburb of London, one that was 'home' to the country's most patriotic of British Prime Ministers and the person who did most to lay the ideological and political-economic foundations for the current national housing crisis<sup>10</sup>.

Lovecraft was also an overt racist and elitist who was horrified at the idea of losing his assumed social and cultural superiority over others<sup>11</sup>. It is generally accepted by Lovecraft scholars that the Lovecraftian monstrosity that best incarnates his terror and revulsion with regard to the miscegenated and degenerate masses of modern America is a Shoggoth:

'A terrible, indescribable thing vaster than any subway train - a shapeless congerie of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and un-forming as pustules of greenish light all over the tunnel-filling front that bore down upon us, crushing the frantic penguins and slithering over the glistening floor that it and its kind had swept so evilly free of all litter'

H.P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*.

In a letter quoted in China Mieville's introduction to the above story Lovecraft describes the denizens of New York's Lower East Side:

'The organic things inhabiting that awful cesspool could not...be call'd human. They were monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal...slithering and oozing...in a fashion suggestive of nothing but infesting worms or deep-sea unnamabilities...I thought of some avenue of Cyclopean and unwholesome vats, crammed to the vomiting point with gangrenous vileness, and about to burst and inundate the world'

The fears informing Lovecraft's horror can clearly be read in counter-revolutionary terms and may well resonate with the kind of fears that inhabitants of places like Dulwich might feel in relationship to those people who live outside their safe environs. Dulwich represents the epitome of upper-middle class suburban dwelling in London the polar opposite of the so-called ASBO estates whose populations experience extreme economic deprivation and social marginalization<sup>12</sup>.

10 Lovecraft was a hide-bound Tory too until the Wall Street crash of 1929 after which his faith in laissez-faire capitalism ran out.  
11 The political and social dimension of Lovecraft's terrors have been discussed in many commentaries on his work. See for instance Houellebecq, Michel (2005) *H.P. Lovecraft - Against the World, Against Life*, McSweeney's, Believer Books.

12 The emergence of the 'Chav' as a contemporary folk-devil in the British media belies the real social factors that have given rise to a distinct new underclass in British society today. The politics of housing in the last 30 years have had an important role to play in this development. Despite a great deal of rhetorical Chav-bashing in the popular press there is woefully little serious political and social discussion of how the phenomena came into being. Notable exceptions are Keith Hayward and Majid Yar - 'The 'chav' phenomenon: Consumption, media and the construction of a new underclass' in *Crime, Media, Culture* 2006 2: 9-28 and Anoop Nayak's 'Displaced Masculinities: Chavs, Youth and Class in the Post-industrial City' in *Sociology*, Vol. 40, No. 5, 813-831 (2006). The Chavganistan of the title is a tabloid-speak pun associating the local anxieties about a new national underclass with the war-torn regions of the world from which many immigrants to Britain are escaping.

But there is another way of understanding 'dwelling in terror' that pertains more precisely to Dean's project. In the first instance property ownership is understood in terms of the distance it places between the occupant and their social inferiors, and the security that dwelling brings from potential invasion from the outside. But there is a more profound fear that comes from inside the economic substance of the building itself.

To live inside a house-as-commodity is not to be at home. It is instead to inhabit an object which is at the mercy of the irrational fluctuation of the economic system. 'To Let' signs signify that a property is currently 'on the market'. As such they advertise a house's temporary state of being-a-commodity, an empty dwelling looking for occupants. On the surface, when the house is sold or let, the sign is removed and the house seems to go back to being what it was intended to be; a secure dwelling place for its inhabitants, a 'home'.

From this perspective Marx's famous analysis of the mystery of the commodity under capitalism is perfectly apt. The house as a commodity on the market - like Marx's dancing table - seems to take on a life of its own, a life governed by forces just as cosmic, inhuman and blindly material as those that Lovecraft imagined animated the protean sub-altern masses<sup>13</sup>.

Lovecraft himself experienced an early bout of suicidal depression when, after the death of his grandfather, the family was forced to sell the family home in Providence. This was to be the first of a series of depressive-suicidal episodes in Lovecraft's life. Lovecraft had a period of severe mental illness later in his life between 1908 and 1914. Auto-biographical resonances of this event are echoed *The Dreams in the Witch House* in which the central character, Walter Gilman, a mathematics student, discovers in that the walls of his rooming house are in fact portals to another dimension.

### Precarity and the Faceless Horror of Capital

There are two distinct but related ways to think about 'housing crisis' generally. One is from a psychological-subjective perspective and the other from a historical-political one.

It is in view of the former that the immediate significance of Lovecraft's work is most resonant. It is at the level of the *Cthulhu Mythos* that I intuitively sense the rudiments of how a particular 'hyperstitional' mode of literary production (which coincides with a generalised set of mental symptoms associated with borderline psychotic mind-states) might be thought in more conventional political-economic terms<sup>14</sup>.

In paranoid-delusional mind states superficially distinct phenomena can suddenly acquire a terrifying and portentous correspondence betraying a deeper, infernal and unifying mechanism animating their apparent autonomy. By adopting a pseudo-delusional literary mode an author could easily plot a net of sinister

When newcomers arrive in the UK they are often housed in areas most adversely effected by inter-generational long-term unemployment.

13 Mark Fisher is probably the person currently most on the case here:

'To call capital a 'self-engendering monster' is not at all to speak metaphorically...one cannot reform capitalism, because, in a very real sense, capitalism is reform itself: a monster that is not only self-engendering, but also shoggothically protean in its perpetual reconstructions of itself. Yet ideology, as I've argued before, resides in the (apparent) discrepancy between belief and behaviour. At the level of cognition, people 'know perfectly well' that money is only a token, that commodities aren't alive, yet they behave 'as if' money is a real substantiality and that commodities are a natural force. Such activity is, needless to say, more than sufficient for the purposes of the replication of Capital. But where, here, is the properly fictional level? Does it reside with Capital or with the 'autonomous' individual? Perhaps the relationship between the two is exactly that of a fiction-within-a-fiction: the vast, planetary Science Fiction of Capital generates the implexed fiction of the psycho-biographical individual it feeds upon.'

Mark Fisher - 'Left Hyperstition I: The Fictions of Capital'

<http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/006950.html> [14/7/7]

14 See for example above and 'Heroines of Hyperstition'

<http://hyperstition.abstractdynamics.org/archives/005422.html> [17/7/7]

associations binding the imaginary Dunwich and the actual Dulwich, weaving them into an infernal meta-fictional embrace that would curse the inhabitants of the area to a plague of insane horrors.

I am however conscious that to take such an approach in this context would be negligent of the real social issues at stake. The lure of horror, weird fiction and the terrifying fantasy worlds they create can function as foils that allow us to avoid thinking about contemporary and local social reality in all its infuriating and baffling complexity.

In historical and political terms the housing crisis is generally characterised by high levels of homelessness; dramatic inflation of house prices (making it impossible for low-paid workers, single and young people to 'get on the property ladder'); an over-inflated rental market; and an increasing disparity between the demand and supply of housing stock. This disparity is due in part to general demographic trends such as an ageing population, increasing rates of divorce and single-parenthood and high levels of internal migration and international immigration. But the principle cause of the current housing crisis is the lack of affordable housing for people on low to no income that has been caused by a systematic anti-socialist housing policy on the part of the last two governments<sup>15</sup>.

Although the housing crisis is a national phenomena it is impacting London and the South East in distinct ways. It is here that the demand for property far outweighs the supply. London and South East experience the highest national levels of internal and overseas migration and London also has the highest national house price averages and rental costs.

The roots of the crisis are often traced back to the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act which created greenbelt sites around major cities upon which local councils were not permitted to build. But as Kevin Cahill shows in *Who Owns Britain?* there is a still deeper historical reality underpinning the establishment of the greenbelts: the ancient structure of aristocratic land ownership in Britain where 70% of the land is still owned by only 1% of the population. Some statistics from Cahill's book point to why the severe limitations on the land useable for housing has led to Britain having some of the most densely populated urban regions on the planet<sup>16</sup>.

In the last thirty years the crisis been exacerbated by changes brought about during the Thatcher (1979-90) and Blair (1997-07) premierships. The principle cause has been the 'right-to-buy' policy introduced by the Thatcher government in 1980 which enabled council tenants to buy their homes. This led to a significant increase in the home-owning population of the UK. By the time Thatcher left power in 1990 67% of the

<sup>15</sup> Estimates vary between 1 and 5 million new homes will need to be built in the next two decades to relieve the crisis. 'Lord Best, Director of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and author of the working paper, said: "We estimate that the difference between housing demand and supply will have widened into a yawning gap of 1.1 million homes in England alone by 2022: most of it in London and the South East. This genuinely shocking statistic shows why the time has come for policy makers to recognise that a plentiful supply of new and affordable homes is of the greatest importance for the nation's future health and prosperity.'" - 'Shortage of homes over next 20 years threatens deepening housing crisis'. <http://www.jrf.org.uk/pressroom/releases/190302.asp> [13/7/7]

<sup>16</sup> Here are some significant statistics from Cahill's book:

70% of the land is owned by 1% of the population.

Just 6,000 or so landowners -- mostly aristocrats, but also large institutions and the Crown -- own about 40 million acres, two thirds of the UK. The average Briton living in a privately owned property has to exist on 340 square yards.

Each home pays £550/ann. on average in council tax while each landowning home receives £12,169/ann. in subsidies.

60 million people live in 24 million "dwellings".

These 24 million dwellings sit on approx 4.4 million acres (7.7% of the land).

Average dwelling has 2.4 people in it.

77% of the population of 60 million (projected to be more in new census) live on only 5.8% of the land, about 3.5 million acres (total 60 million).

Agriculture only accounts for 3% of the economy.

Source: Cahill, Kevin (2001). *Who owns Britain?* Canongate Books: Edinburgh



## CTHULHU

If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings...

...vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind.

...awful squid-head with writhing feelers...

(*The Call of Cthulhu*)

## The Dulwich Horror

British adult population were home-owners. Between 1985 and 1989 house prices in London doubled and Council House rents increased by 40%<sup>17</sup>. As with so much of the transformations brought about by Thatcherism, the underlying ideological assumption behind the Council House sell-offs was that social welfare provisions can be better provided for by the free market than by the state and that people should be encouraged and enabled to realise their aspirational motivations to become autonomous, property-owning and self-interested share-holders in a corporate Britain.

As a consequence of Thatcherite housing policy between the late 70's and 1990 the amount of social housing built decreased from 170,000 to 35,000 per annum, a trend which has led to current critical disparity between supply and demand for housing in the UK<sup>18</sup>. Tony Blair leaves his ten year premiership with a far worse record on council housing than his Tory predecessor with only 4,000 council houses having been built during his time in office<sup>19</sup>. 89,500 homeless households now live in temporary accommodation in England, double the number in 1997<sup>20</sup>. It is estimated that 40% of children in London now live below the poverty line<sup>21</sup>.

The housing market peaked around 1990 then fell, after Black Wednesday, to mid 80's levels by the mid 90's. This is when the spectre of 'negative equity' and 're-possession' began to haunt the blue-sky horizons of the newly propertied working and middle classes. Since the mid 90's however average house prices and rents have increased incrementally to twice the level they were in 1990. House prices at the end of 2006 were 35% above the trend prices of the last 30 years<sup>22</sup>. Many commentators predict an inevitable property price crash in the near future which will be far more extreme than anything that has happened before<sup>23</sup>.

**Cynical Materialism and Terror of Insecure Dwelling**

Chapter 8 of S.T.Joshi's biography of Lovecraft describes the author as a 'cynical materialist'<sup>24</sup>. It is a description that could also describe the dominant post-Thatcherite ideology of mainstream British society today. Since the demise of a popular belief in the political effectiveness of Socialism, Neo-liberal ideology has managed convince the general population that it is best and most rational to let the free-market take care of the public health, welfare and housing needs of society as-a-whole. But the popular aspirational drive to get on the property ladder is not driven purely by enlightened, rational self-interest. It is driven equally by a profound fear of having no housing security and entering the downward spiral from precarity to social exclusion. In the face of a disintegrating National Health and welfare system, an ageing population, the decline of the nuclear family, and the devaluation of State pensions there is a profound generalised fear for the personal well-being of individuals and their families as they move into old age. Private property has become the principle means by which people ward off the fear of that future insecurity.

Dean's decision to deface the for sale signs with images of the creeping horrors from Lovecraft's fiction points to a lurking terror that hides behind the sunny surface of the London property system, a terror that is felt most acutely with regard to the state of one's relationship to the security of dwelling that property ownership

17 Thornley, Anthony (Ed.) (1992) *The crisis of London*. Routledge: London

18 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Housing\\_Act\\_1980](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Housing_Act_1980) [13/7/9]

19 There has been a dramatic u-turn on Labour's council house policy since Gordon Brown came to office. According to an article in today's Guardian Labour plan to abandon their ten year opposition to Council House building by creating 3 million new homes by 2020.

'Labour U-turn on council house building'. <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/homeaffairs/story/0,,2126165,00.html>

20 'Blair's legacy is deepening housing crisis'. <http://england.shelter.org.uk/home/home-8104.cfm> [14/7/7]

21 <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/downloads/files/scope.pdf>. [13/7/7]

22 Since 1997 house-price inflation has been exacerbated by the growth of Buy-to-Let property developers, a new class of urban landlords made up, in part, from the recently 'incorporated' working classes.

23 Andrew Gimson, 'The dream of home ownership must one day surely shatter'

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2006/09/15/do1501.xml&Sheet=/opinion/2006/09/15/ixopinion.html>

24 J.T.Joshi (2001) *A dreamer and a visionary: H.P. Lovecraft in his time*. Liverpool University Press; Liverpool

is ideally imagined to ensure.

What makes Dean's painting on For Sale signs so pertinent in this regard is the fact that he, like many artists working in London today - and particularly those who still believe in the critical-political function of art - he himself lives in constant state of housing and employment precarity. Despite a general tendency towards the professionalization of art practice in London over the last twenty years (one which is fundamentally in accord with the general anti-socialist Thatcherite ideology of self-interested, property owning, entrepreneurial micro-capitalism and blind faith in the market system) for most artists there is clearly an essentially unequal and contradictory structural-economic relationship between the people who buy art and the people who make it. For most 'up-and-coming' artists there is a marked difference between the degree of life-world precarity they experience and that of the people who end up buying their work. In simple terms in order to own art one must have somewhere to hang, exhibit or store it. Real property is the prerequisite for personal property.

Dean's project points to the creeping horror experienced when one encounters the non-human material drives that compel both the psychological states of individual subjects and socio-economic processes that 'govern' markets. What Dulwich is at one level for the artist, is an opportunity: to become the borough's own Lovecraft and represent to the inhabitants there the spectre that haunts the ideological constructs that keeps them (they hope) inviolable in their own bricks and mortar constructions. The artwork springing up on the 'for sale' signs is the intrusion into this psychic choreography of the absolute (im)materialism that is Capitalism.

Where there is Capitalism it is being said, there can be no home. When the bubble bursts the terrible incomprehensibility of the universe will creep in from every dimension. You won't be able to keep the nightmares out anymore.

Your house will be alive.

John Cussans 18/7/7