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Facing the Monsters: Otherness in H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos and Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim* and *Hellboy*

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Abstract: What happens when we imagine the unimaginable? This article compares recent films inspired by H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos with that author's original early 20th century pulp horror stories. In Guillermo del Toro's films *Pacific Rim* and *Hellboy*, monsters that would have been obscured to protect Lovecraft's readers are now fully revealed for Hollywood audiences. Using the period-appropriate theories of Rudolf Otto on the *numinous* and Sigmund Freud on the *uncanny*, that share Lovecraft's troubled history with racist othering, I show how modern adaptations of Lovecraft's work invert central features of the mythos in order to turn tragedies into triumphs. The genres of Science Fiction and Horror have deep commitments to the theme of otherness, but in Lovecraft's works otherness is insurmountable. Today, Hollywood borrows the tropes of Lovecraftian horror but relies on bridging the gap between humanity and its monstrous others to reveal a higher humanity forged through difference and diversity. This suggests that otherness in modern science fiction is a means of reconciliation, a way for the monsters to be defeated rather than the source of terror as they were in Lovecraft's stories.

Keywords: science fiction; secularization; monsters; popular culture; horror; supernatural

1. Introduction

When happens when we encounter the unimaginable? Turning to the fiction of early 20th century author H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937) and recent films inspired by his body of work, known as the Cthulhu Mythos, this essay compares the ways in which popular culture represents monstrous others. Using the creatures in the films *Pacific Rim* (del Toro 2013) and *Hellboy* (del Toro 2004), both written and directed by Guillermo del Toro, we can see how Hollywood portrays humans encountering Lovecraftian monsters. What were once cautionary, tragic tales have become triumphal stories where humans become acceptable monsters or co-opt the monstrous to prevail. Nearly a century ago, Lovecraft's protagonists wished to erase the memory of their encounter with monstrous others. His stories were told by defeated survivors. Now we see the eponymous demon Hellboy celebrated as humanity's not-so-secret defender, and *Pacific Rim* showed humanity defeating an invasion of a Godzilla-like alien with giant fighting robots and alien-inspired consciousness-sharing technology. What does this change in narrative say about how genre fiction shapes public perception of the categories of sacred/secular or natural/supernatural?

The benefits of this contrast across time, medium, and genre are multiple. Rife with racism, sexism, and xenophobia, Lovecraft's works were also written during the age of Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), Max Weber (1881–1961), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), and Sigmund Freud (1956–1939). Religious studies, sociology, and psychology still struggle today with the homogeneity of our founding theorists. We cannot escape or excuse the cultural artifacts of the early 20th century, but to wrestle with them

today means seeing the racism embedded in their theories, especially in their mutual interest in the idea of otherness. Each man—and they were all white men—had something to say about what they believed was dangerous because it was unfamiliar or atypical. When we can see a common rhetorical fulcrum for constructing otherness, we should investigate. Something significant appears when we highlight contemporary stories and see that they discarded Lovecraft's reluctance to describe his monsters directly. Why did his characters wish to forget while ours get memorialized with their own comic books? I believe the answer has to do with the framing of otherness as threat or opportunity. The revealing of monsters and the monstrous moves the other from the abstract to the concrete, from implied to explicit. As I hope to show, this both makes and unmakes monstrous things. Lovecraft feared that neither science nor religion could overcome his horrors. Science and religion, both monstrous to Lovecraft, have now become infused with authority enough to save the day. The hope that humanity can remain ignorant of the world beyond our ordinary experiences has been replaced with the expectation that some brave humans will seek out such challenges. When our protagonists rise to the occasion, they are not crippled by madness. They have embraced the encounter with the other. This is the mark of heroes today: they turn tragedies into triumphs even though they do not escape unaltered.

If Hollywood's saccharine plot resolutions are one measure of confidence about removing monstrous obstacles, protagonists have also changed a great deal in the last century. Modern science fiction (hereafter SF) often relies on building relationships with the non-human, such as in the critically acclaimed film *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2016). In such works, we find a hope for reconciliation, an optimism that the aliens might reveal our true humanity and help us put our petty human differences behind us. This conforms broadly to a dominant strain of SF criticism expressed by Suvin (1979, 2014). Suvin proposed that SF as a genre used "cognitive estrangement" to show us that, "the world is not necessarily the way our present empirical valley happens to be" (2014, 1.2). Estrangement in SF pushes us to wonder why things are the way they are. The genre often hinges on such fictional estrangements to make readers question aspects of the world, but this also applies to SF protagonists. Who should be the hero? As Hollywood moves away from the kinds of racism and sexism embedded in Lovecraft's works, one consequence has been that its heroes—racially, sexually, and through gender—have become more diverse. SF has been a major force for this transformation, even as racism (Lavender 2011) and gender (Attebery 2002) remain problematic for the genre writ large. Monsters can no longer reasonably embody stereotypical racial, or gendered fears without a level of self-awareness that explicitly directs audiences to the dynamics at play. This explains, for instance, the horror film *Teeth* (Lichtenstein 2008) about sex and vagina dentata or Jordan Peele's horror film *Get Out* (Peele 2017) about enslavement and race. The veil has been lifted on formerly implicit human threats. Today, the monsters are truly non-human in the sense that we wish to frame them as monsters for their lack of humanity and not because they are non-human. This requires specificity. We must describe the monsters well enough that we can see how they might act humanely. That we run toward them rather than flee from them is the heart of issue. In other words, estrangement is present today to be overcome. It cannot be left to lurk as the source of terror. Lovecraft, by contrast, left his subjects oppressed by the weight of that lingering strangeness. Plot-wise, this has meant in practice that modern SF films privilege humanity uniting to overcome "small" known differences among humans to repel much larger ones represented by unknown alien others.

The category of the monster has a role to play in this movement across the known/unknown, too. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Cohen 1996) proposed in his "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)", monsters fundamentally embody difference and they portend an imminent "category-crisis", where what we know about the world is challenged. We can therefore often read category-breaking as the difference that fires and then re-forges the humanity of our heroes. Whether it is monsters in horror or SF, the crux of the value of these othering frames is that they focus our attention on the capabilities of our own species. This is the sentiment behind what Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster"

(Nietzsche [1886] 2003). The classic example of this is the treatment of Dr. Frankenstein's monster by the townsfolk in the 1931 film version of Mary Shelley's work, starring Boris Karloff as the monster (Whale 1931). We have believed for a long time that encountering what we think of as monstrous can incite us to become monsters (the bite of a vampire or werewolf, for instance), but seeing the townsfolk gather with pitchforks reveals who the monsters really are. That creature-feature, like its distant descendants *Hellboy* and *Pacific Rim*, reflects not only our capacity to become monsters as we challenge assumptions about the world, but also how the monstrous guides us to a fuller understanding of our (often disappointing) humanity.

There are thus two pressing issues. First, what happens when we face the monstrous rather than turn away from it as Lovecraft's characters did? Second, what do monstrous others in modern SF have to say about what makes us human? Lovecraft's original works provide the contrast we need to see how Del Toro's *Hellboy* and *Pacific Rim* belong to a different era. Though the shift in genre from printed speculative/weird/pulp/strange and horror to movie SF certainly bears considerable responsibility for the changes, the centrality of the encounter with the other remains. We now seek to confront our fears, and this underscores the enduring appeal of the unfamiliar, the foreign, and the monstrous. We accept that what seems incomprehensible to us in one moment can lead to our salvation in the next. We remain insatiably curious humans, but we are less anchored by our fear of the small unknowns that divide us in our humanity. Instead, the truly other has become a pivot for our world. Not, as Lovecraft proposed, by turning us toward insanity and madness, but rather as a catalyst for creating value from that which is beyond us and truly super-natural. Science and religion are thus not rejected but rather embraced as the frameworks by which modern creators like Guillermo del Toro find ways to express the benefits of otherness for expanding our common humanity.

2. Lovecraft and the Price of Experience

H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937) is more popular today than he was in his own lifetime. His brand of pulp horror is best seen in the 1928 story *The Call of Cthulhu*, which spawned a legion of adaptations and expansions of its mythology of the "elder gods" or "Great Old Ones". When Lovecraft's characters meet an elder god, they want to look away but cannot. They are transfixed by what they cannot rationalize. Moreover, faced with a non-rational experience, they go mad trying to understand it. Lovecraft "protects" his readers by presenting these moments indirectly as a story within a story, or simply by omission of detail. While any one of a dozen tales would demonstrate how Lovecraft protects us from these dangers, *The Call of Cthulhu* stands out for its directness on these issues. The opening lines of the tale are famous and worth citing in full:

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 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 [1917] 2014, p. 124)

The tale proceeds rapidly. Francis Wayland Thurston finds notes left by his grand-uncle about a small sculpture of the eponymous Cthulhu. The sculpture was created in a fit of dream-inspired madness by an art student and appears just like a statue found during a raid on a "voodoo" meeting of Cthulhu devotees in New Orleans. "They worshipped," Lovecraft's narrator explains, "the Great Old Ones who lived ages before there were any men." The tale reveals that, "mankind was absolutely not alone among the conscious things of earth, for shapes came out of the dark to visit the faithful few" (ibid., pp. 140–41).

This revelation may sound benign, but Lovecraft writes with a dense surface of emotional language to ensure his readers get the message about what we are really dealing with here. The shape of

the Old Ones was not matter. They were neither living nor dying. Inconceivable spells kept them trapped outside our world, but those spells were weakened by the devotion of humans who desired to bring the gods back. They thought and spoke in ways humanity could understand only in dreams. If the cult succeeded, “the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom” (Lovecraft [1917] 2014, p. 142). The Old Ones are defined largely in absentia and via negativa. There is a parade of adjectives to describe how characters *feel* when they discover details about the Old Ones, but the descriptions about the Old Ones themselves appear much less often. Thus, the art student made Thurston “see with terrible vividness” the city where Cthulhu sleeps, but the reader hears only of a “damp Cyclopean city of slimy green stone—whose *geometry . . . was all wrong*” (ibid., p. 145).

Though we may want more detail as readers, the narrator will not provide them. Instead, he wishes repeatedly for their erasure, even at the loss of his own life: “If Heaven ever wishes to grant me a boon, it will be a total effacing of the results of a mere chance which fixed my eye on a certain stray piece of shelf-paper,” where he found another image of Cthulhu. Or again, “When I think of the extent of all that brooding down there I almost wish to kill myself forthwith” (ibid., p. 153). This is, then, the lesson of the tales—too much knowledge is ruinous. “I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror,” Thurston says at the end of the tale, “and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me” (ibid., p. 157).

To summarize some of the pertinent Lovecraftian tropes present in the mythos: first, humanity is not alone in the universe and neither religion nor scientific progress are any match for the fact and scale of the horrors that we might uncover. Second, should we encounter this knowledge, it is not a call to action. We should wish no part of it because we will be forever altered and deeply regret our new grasp of things. Finally, Lovecraft presents these terrors through echoes, veils, and layers of obfuscation that protect us. It is narrative goodwill that saves the reader from being infected or polluted by this dangerous knowledge. This is a pattern seen again and again. Even in stories like *The Dunwich Horror*, where readers get considerably more description of the monsters than usual, Lovecraft wrote, “of their semblance can no man know *saving only in the features of those They have begotten on mankind*” (Lovecraft [1929] 2014, p. 359). They break our descriptive categories or, as the narrator explains in *The Whisperer in the Darkness*, they defy the “power of language” (Lovecraft [1931] 2014, p. 404). We need a frame of reference, but both scientific curiosity and religious zeal fail to live up to the challenge. The effect of trespassing in these unknown spaces beyond language is aptly described in *The Colour Out of Space* as “unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it”, or as “realms whose mere existence stuns the brain and numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied eyes” (Lovecraft [1927] 2014, p. 342). Protecting us from meeting the unimaginable monsters face-to-face (if they even have them) is sanity-saving work. Thus, we can stay inside Suvin’s cognitive valley, avoiding the terror-inducing estrangement of things that lie just beyond our parochial understanding of the world.

3. Theorizing Experience in Lovecraft through His Contemporaries

In significant ways, meeting an elder god or one of the unimaginably horrible deities from a primordial era sounds like the experience of the holy described by Rudolf Otto as *mysterium tremendum* in his 1917 work *The Idea of the Holy*. It is also not far from how Sigmund Freud presented the uncanny in his 1919 essay “The Uncanny”. Nor am I the first to argue that we should see obvious parallels between Otto or Freud and Lovecraft, as Saler (2012), Ingebretsen (1996), and others have written on the connections. What I add to the conversation is a recognition that the negative elements commonly ascribed to Lovecraft (i.e., his disdain for religion and his racism) are similarly embedded in the theories of the numinous and the uncanny. At the end, this helps situate all these works, the fictions and the theories, within on-going conversations about difference. Turning toward the monstrous in *Hellboy* and *Pacific Rim* lends diversity transformative power rather than terror. To see this, we must first look at the overlap between Lovecraft’s use of otherness and its presence within theories that help explain what

the encounter with the other is like. Otto and Freud serve not simply as period-appropriate guides to Lovecraft's era. Their theories seem fundamentally about Lovecraftian evocations or what Terry Heller has called "the marvelous tale of terror". In *The Delights of Terror*, Heller argues that Lovecraft's framing of protagonist and narrator invite readers, "to take seriously the implications of the world view at which the tale arrives" (Heller 1987, p. 49). Thus, the serious play of the stories is a mechanism for suspense, because it withholds as much as it reveals. As it is for Otto and Freud, what we know and do not (or cannot) know about the others in Lovecraft is part of the point.

The horror Lovecraft's characters experience when faced with the looming Great Old Ones is a lens that reflects the author's own insipid fears of immigrants, unfamiliar religious communities, people of color, and women. That monsters are culturally coded to reflect our fears is well-studied (Poole 2018; Asma 2009; Beal 2002). Like many works in SF and horror, Lovecraft projected these fears beyond humanity. They became proxies for the alienating and dehumanizing work of other-making that remains in his portrayal of non-males, non-whites, and non-Protestants. The brief but noxious uses of "voodoo" in *The Call of Cthulhu* are just some of many instances where Lovecraft frames morally-pure, white (presumably) Protestants as at-risk from colored bodies who are allied with the inscrutable monsters in the darkness. This should be a not-so-subtle reminder that Lovecraft's work suffers from an inescapable racism (Eli 2015). Nor can we attempt to ignore or excuse these features as period-content. They are integral and not incidental to the ways in which Lovecraft establishes the borders of the known and unknown, between "safe" people and knowledge and dangerous monsters and their immoral allies.

This sense of purity and danger, following the work of Douglas (2002), should remind us that preserving binaries (e.g., sanity/ignorance versus madness/knowledge or well-meaning narrators versus ill-intentioned Cthulhu devotees) is the work of recognizing the place of things in the world. "Our pollution behavior," she explains, "is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (p. 45). Within SF, afrofuturists, like Samuel R. Delaney, Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, and N.K. Jemisin, have written works which help expose the dehumanizing racial lenses of earlier works. In *Afrofuturism*, Ytasha L. Womack presents the movement's efforts as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation", which instrumentalizes and glorifies blackness to contravene dominant negative portraits of colored bodies (Womack 2013, p. 7). In other words, the afrofuturists were consciously overturning elements which Lovecraft had embedded explicitly (as in his choice of voodoo as the religion of Cthulhu cultists) or implicitly (by racializing Cthulhu's sympathizers but failing to mark the race of his protagonists).

As Tim Murphy argued persuasively in *Politics of the Spirit* (Murphy 2012), the logic of racial purity—which kinds of persons were truly pure and, by corollary, correctly religious—was also crucial to Otto's work. Religions were thus tested against an a priori religious category, one which culminated in the idealization of Christianity's rationalism. Otto's neologism, numinous, was the non-conceptual "creature-feeling" that arises due to an interaction with something "felt as objective and outside the self". It was the most basic of binaries between the self that perceives and the world that is perceived. When we read Lovecraft through Otto tempered by Murphy, we can expose the logic of a doubled purity. First, the category of self establishes the boundaries by which humans can count as fully human (for moral, religious, or racial motives). Next, the category of the world frames the known and rational as self-evident and pushes everything else into the realm of madness. This means that some humans are dangerous (often because they are framed as inhuman or subhuman), but the world is dangerous too when it turns out to be much different than we believed it to be. Lovecraft failed to represent humanity's diversity truthfully, but modern audiences now expect far more accurate reflections of our diversity and we are trying to leave such purity tests behind.

The numinous in Otto's theory is a source of such tests, because it appears on a hierarchical continuum from "a tranquil mood of deepest worship" to "intoxicated frenzy" and in "its wild and demonic forms . . . an almost grisly horror and shuddering" (Otto [1917] 1958, pp. 11–13). Lovecraft's work features all these modes, but the shorthand for the common experience of the numinous is

mysterium tremendum, which captures both its awe and majesty. The numinous as *tremendum* is an emotional state similar to but distinct from fear. Otto condescendingly described this as an emotion characteristic of “primitive religions”, in order to advance his ultimate claim that Christianity mastered the task of removing this primitive emotionalism in favor of logic and rational theology. Taming the frenzied rituals of indigenous or native peoples was the colonizer’s work through the missionary encounter with Christianity. Nevertheless, the emotion persisted even in Otto’s day as the core of “ghost stories”, or further still, the “unique ‘dread’ of the uncanny” (p. 16). These are precisely Lovecraft’s wheelhouse as a writer of pulp horror. For Otto, Christianity had filtered the experience of God into the mystical and creedal “holy, holy, holy”. Curated words replaced the raw experience of God’s power and might, full of glory. By contrast, and as we see in many of Lovecraft’s stories, direct encounters between the self and that which is “beyond measure” will hold our soul silent and shake us to our foundations. They cannot be turned into creeds. They cannot be colonized. Only the “ennobled” mysticism idealized by Otto had moved beyond such direct encounters (p. 17). Lovecraft’s and Otto’s primitives, as in the use of “voodoo” in the cult of Cthulhu, are set in contrast to modern, rational Christianity. In other words, for both men religious experience was meant to be logical, not emotional. This may have been less true in certain quarters of America amid the birth of Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century, but it certainly applied to the elite academies where Otto, Freud, Durkheim, and Weber were, as well as to New England and the Mid-Atlantic, where Lovecraft was writing.

We also know that Lovecraft’s *characters* experienced just such “daemonic dread” in their encounters with the Great Old Ones. They had an unfiltered experience of the uncanny—or if we were to follow Freud instead of Otto, we might say they were displaced from the sense of home they had in the world. This is a strong parallel for Suvin’s estrangement in SF, which we can find in Freud’s famous 1919 essay, where he described the uncanny as, “that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Freud [1919] 1955, p. 220). Incipient primitivism here is again poorly disguised in its racial overtones linking heightened emotion to a lack of civilization. For Freud, fear arises when we realize not only that what appears is the opposite of what is familiar to us now, but also that it is so assuredly unfamiliar that it appears as a “harbinger of death” (Freud [1919] 1955, p. 235). It is, in his psychoanalytic term, an “ego-disturbance”, where the very sense of ourselves in the world and our place is attacked. It is mortally polluting. The threat is more than just remembering that which we should have never known or best have forgotten. It is an existential crisis. We are not who we think we are. We do not live in the place we think we live. The moment when we see this clearly should drive us insane, because we realize we are really going nowhere and amount to nothing. Lovecraft agreed, even if he disagreed with the sexualization of most Freudian psychoanalysis (Joshi 2001, pp. 175–76).

This leaves us with the second half of Otto’s definition—the mystery of the majesty of the numinous—because there too the operative mechanics of rationalism lead to madness. The awe or *tremendum* is a recognition of our true humanity. We are insignificant worms in the face of awe-some super-natural realities. In order to think better of ourselves, Otto argued, we must not be overcome with emotion. The majesty is why we usually fail. It is our inability to rationalize or conceptualize these experiences. *Tremendum* is what we feel that we try to rationalize; *mysterium* is the non-conceptual nature of that which is experienced that cannot be rationalized. It is “wholly other” or “that which is alien to us, uncomprehended and unexplained” (Otto [1917] 1958, p. 26). Nor could we ever hope to understand it. It is “incommensurable” and makes us “recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb” (p. 28). We may survive a glimpse of the *tremendum* by forgetting, but the *mysterium* is inimical to our being. It erodes the categories with which we encounter the world. It must not be, we think, but it is. That paradox is not just polluting but obliterating. There can be no greater destruction for us.

The chilling frame of Lovecraft’s work shares much with Otto and Freud. Somewhere between our view of the world and the reality of the world there is a monstrous gap. Monstrous not only because the gap is where the monsters dwell (and into which we often place those humans we seek to make into monsters), but also because the gap behaves monstrously toward us, fragmenting us into us and them.

How can we avoid that fate? We cannot, says Lovecraft. At least, not with science or religion. None of our human tools can save us. Nor are we worth saving, because what is coming is beyond all measure. All “victories” are merely reprieves in the cosmic scale where a bill is coming due for our existence that we cannot pay. Whether we pay our debt for that terror to Freud based on the uncanny or to Otto because of the numinous, theorizing in Lovecraft’s age demanded rationalizing experiences that science could not explain and diminishing emotional outbursts which civilized religion had supposedly done away with. In this context, where Lovecraft’s works favor neither religion nor science, we are left instead with the terrifying reality which lurks just outside our attention. His stories stand as peepholes, distorted lenses for peering through a liminal threshold where our sanity is insulated from polluting and monstrous alternatives. As we shall see below, contemporary works continue to negotiate how we should present the unimaginable, but unlike Lovecraft, they operate not by creating sympathy for protagonists who suffer as they attempt to avoid the other and its provocations, but rather by celebrating the heroes that risk embracing it face-to-face. That is, by facing the monsters, we have abandoned the uncanny and the numinous that propelled not only the estrangement that produced Lovecraftian terror but also his treatment of monstrous others.

4. Lovecraft in Modernity: *Hellboy* and *Pacific Rim*

Given Lovecraft’s steadfast commitment to tragedy in personal and cosmic scales, when we turn to contemporary works inspired in part by the Cthulhu Mythos, we can see an immediate difference: we defeat the monsters. *Pacific Rim* and *Hellboy* share at least that much of Hollywood sensibility, where unlikely heroes rise to overcome evil plots and malicious monsters. In the hands of director Guillermo del Toro, whose oeuvre ranges from *The Devil’s Backbone* (2001) to *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006), *Crimson Peak* (2015), and his Academy Award Best Picture and Best Director winner *The Shape of Water* (2017), we see a frequent blend of SF, fantasy, and horror with strongly gothic sensibilities derived from Edgar Allen Poe and Lovecraft. As del Toro told Clark Collis for an *Entertainment Weekly* story about his failed efforts to bring Lovecraft’s novella *At the Mountains of Madness* to the big screen, as a child he became “absolutely obsessed with [Lovecraft]” (Collis 2012). In both *Pacific Rim* and *Hellboy* we see not only glimpses of this obsession, but clear evidence for the pervasive influence of Lovecraftian themes in modern genre fiction.

In *Pacific Rim*, an alien invasion film set in the early 21st century, the monsters enter our world through a subterranean crack (“the breach”) in the ocean floor. The genetically-designed foot soldiers of the alien army are reminiscent of the watery gods that lurk in the wrong geometries of the Cthulhu Mythos. They are also clearly visually modeled on Japanese *Kaiju* (strange beasts) made famous in the West with *Godzilla* (1954). The main characters defeat the hostile aliens thanks to some consciousness-sharing technology that lets two humans jointly control a giant Godzilla-sized fighting robot. Humanity survives, barely, by punching and kicking the monsters into submission. Closing the breach permanently, however, is a more delicate problem that begins with an attempt to understand the motives of the monstrous other. The scientists, taking their inspiration from the soldiers jointly operating the fighting robots, decide to share their consciousness with the aliens to get a tactical advantage. Though this inter-species reconnaissance works, it also sends the scientists a bit mad because it is clear the aliens are irreconcilably focused on destroying the Earth. It is evident in context that there can be no negotiation with the aliens, and only a suicide mission by the main characters has a chance of ending the world’s nightmare by sealing the breach. This has echoes of Lovecraftian madness in the face of what cannot be understood in human terms, but that is potentially indistinguishable from the problem of using an untested and fly-by-wire alien–human consciousness-sharing technology for the first time. Setting aside that in an era of inevitable Hollywood sequels the audience might suspect the victory will be short-lived, humanity nevertheless prevails over what were previously literally unimaginable horrors from the deep, incapable or unwilling to be swayed by human reason. Lovecraft would likely not have approved of the story’s positive resolution, even if its themes of unimaginable monsters from the deep resonate with many of the stories in his Cthulhu Mythos,

including *The Color Out of Space* as proto-invasion, and *The Whisperer in the Darkness* for its use of phonographic audio-recordings as technological intervention. In other words, *Pacific Rim* mixes Lovecraftian themes with modern Hollywood sensibilities. Much the same can be said for *Hellboy*.

The source material for del Toro's *Hellboy* is Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* (Mignola 2018) comic-book series (begun in 1994 and continuing through side-projects and adaptations today). Mignola is open about his affection for the Cthulhu Mythos (McConeghy 2014). The movie adaption of his comic book series opens with a quotation from the fictional *Des Vermis Mysteriis*, fragments of which were written by Robert Bloch as a grimoire for the lore of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos: "In the coldest regions of space, the monstrous entities Ogdru Jahad—the Seven Gods of Chaos—slumber in their crystal prison, waiting to reclaim Earth . . . and burn the heavens." In *Hellboy*, humanity is doomed from the start. During World War II, Russian mystic Grigori Rasputin, modeled on the historical figure but decidedly fictionalized, has convinced the Nazis that he can use the slumbering gods to turn the tide of the war against the Allies. Rasputin, as we might expect, has no ability to control the power he has invited into our world, and he is consumed when the monsters try to cross from their space into ours. Hellboy is a demon that slipped through the portal Rasputin created before it was destroyed. Guided and cultivated by the love of his adoptive father, Trevor Bruttenholm, Hellboy becomes a central hero in a secret war against the intrusion of dangerous supernatural things into our world. As Bruttenholm explains to a fresh-faced recruit joining the team later in the film, "there are things that go bump in the night . . . and we are the ones that bump back." Hellboy protects the border between the worlds, a literal guardian of a liminal threshold unknown to the public, who sees all such "bumps" as mere fiction.

Hellboy the movie relies on the super-natural prowess of its rag-tag team of humans and non-humans to defend the world. Hellboy the character is—and this is canon in Mignola's original comics—the beast of the Christian apocalypse. He is the "World Destroyer" who "was born to loose the Dragon" that would usher in the "death knell of man" (Weiner et al. 2008, p. 61). Hellboy rejects this destiny, and rather than become the vital key to Rasputin's apocalyptic plan, he foils the plot and saves the world. What is essential, however, is that the religious themes and scientism of the narrative are, at best, ambivalent forces. This is most obvious early in the film in their appropriation of the Nazis to precipitate the apocalypse. Rasputin's steampunk-styled technological devices allow him to open a portal to deep space using specialized occult knowledge. Science makes the religious possible in this moment, even as both will ultimately fail to induce the apocalypse Rasputin desires. Secularists, perhaps of Max Weber's era if not our own, might say science will save us from the gnostic religion represented by Rasputin, but *Hellboy* and the original Lovecraftian material reject this stance. Only supernatural good, Hellboy shaped into agent for humanity's morals and survival and not an unwitting pawn for the expected apocalypse, can overcome the machinations of foolish humans bent on the return of the gods. Rasputin's science is corrupt and Hellboy rejects his own religious destiny in order to save humanity. In this instance, a supernatural other saves the world by rejecting both forbidden science and religion. As humanity's defender, Hellboy finds his humanity and the means and motive to act against dangerous scientific and religious destinies.

What can be said of both *Pacific Rim* and *Hellboy* is that the source of humanity's salvation lies beyond humanity in encounters with monstrous others. This itself is an adaptation of the American monomyth outlined by Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence in *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Lawrence and Jewett 2002). There is trouble in paradise and a figure from the outside intervenes to save the day. *Hellboy* fights for humanity, but he is a literal demon and beast of the apocalypse. Alien technology makes humanity's victory possible in *Pacific Rim*, but the consciousness-sharing interface changes its operators by pushing their minds to the limit and the scientific study of the alien corpses creates a thriving black-market for xenobiological drugs. For Lovecraft, everything other is dangerous, but this cannot be said of either *Hellboy* or *Pacific Rim*. Hellboy acts where humanity cannot. In his fictional universe a legion of humans is certainly *willing* to try to overcome the risk of madness to stop supernatural threats, they just not are *able* to do so. He is dangerous and he is other, but he is our dangerous other. Gone are the divides we could see so clearly in *The Call of*

Cthulhu between the danger of what we feel (*tremendum*) and our inability to process what we have felt (*mysterium*). Hellboy's otherness gives him latitude not only to feel his way through supernatural territories, but to do so productively and heroically. Hellboy and the scientists in *Pacific Rim* make the other accessible, and through that exchange they make the strange familiar. Hellboy naturalizes both the threat—diminishing its otherness by being in-kind non-human but in-action humanity's protector—and rationalizes confronting the danger. Similarly, in the world of *Pacific Rim* the public has come to grips with the constant stream of alien incursions, and given the lack of diplomatic responses, the heroic characters rationalize the risks to close the breach even at the potential cost of their own lives. They literally stand in the gap as they try to destroy the passage the aliens are using to enter our world.

At the beginning of *Hellboy*, Hellboy's guardian Brüttenholm asks, "What is it that makes a man a man?" Hellboy's victory over Rasputin presumably secures his manhood, if not a recognizable humanity. Perhaps del Toro's choice to use this question as a framing device for the film is itself a kind of answer to the invocation at the outset of *The Call of Cthulhu*. If mercy was once humanity's ability to remain ignorant of itself, then in the modern era mercy has become a service provided by the great sacrifices made by individuals to keep the monsters at bay. Mercy and compassion from strangers are the heart of the monomyth that drives Hollywood, whereas the genre of horror is framed by the revelation that humanity's lack of those virtues knows no bounds. What secret knowledge would we bear to spare others? What illusions would we preserve to safeguard against the return of the Old Ones? In the worlds of *Hellboy* and *Pacific Rim*, we know the truly dangerous is not of this world and we see the future made possible through knowledge and heroic sacrifice. We do not expect our heroes to turn away like Lovecraft's protagonists in ignorance or madness, we expect them to bravely face their fears and stand in the monstrous gap on our behalf. That is the measure we use to judge our heroes' humanity.

In *Hellboy* and *Pacific Rim*, the expansion of humanity's sense of the "real" world help identify humanity's limits as well as providing opportunities to enhance our understanding of who counts as a human. Standing in the gap keeping the monsters at bay? This is how Hellboy develops his human-features and generates our empathy. We appreciate that not all monsters are dangerous—even if they might be different from us. Science and religion do not hold the answers and they are just as likely to be complicit as they are to be salvific. The lesson of *Pacific Rim* is less clear. Science plays a key role in defeating the invading monsters, but religion is nowhere to be found. What could our gods possibly say to the invading alien monsters? Through dissection, the scientists expand their knowledge of xenobiology, which allows them to develop new technologies for consciousness-sharing, but this is only a half-measure. It literally expands the category of what is possible for humanity, so that our world's saviors are hybrid consciousness-expanded heroes. We become more like the other as we use our newfound abilities to repel the invaders. In other words, encountering the other was determinative in both films. Without *Hellboy* Rasputin surely would have succeeded in helping the Seven Gods to return to burn the Earth. Without xenobiologically-derived technology, the people in *Pacific Rim* would have been overrun by Godzilla-sized monsters from the abyss. In both instances, the other moved humanity to resolve its crisis. The provocation of the other in modern film stands in stark contrast to Lovecraftian themes. The consequences of knowing and confronting the unknown were not madness and terror. Instead they were essential developments in the formation of the heroic character of the protagonists. The encounter with the other revealed differences that not only mattered, but ultimately saved the day.

5. Conclusions

Seeing the encounter with the other as a bridge to a broader, more diverse humanity is just one way to see the differences between modern SF/horror and Lovecraft's horror. The advantage of framing the conversation with Otto or Freud—both of which have challenging histories when it comes to race and sex—is that they reflect the kind of racial logic about otherness that Lovecraft embraced but modern films reject. Even as we continue today to frame the encounter with the other as awe-inspiring

or beyond reason, contemporary works are much less content to use aliens uncritically as proxies for human others. Films such as *District 9* (Blomkamp 2009), which explicitly used aliens in its discussion of refugeeism and immigration, are now framing the issues blatantly and asserting an implied position of moral authority that was previously hidden. The aliens reveal us to ourselves, just like monsters do. Modern SF and horror thus retain the appeal of the other to frame our humanity, while also expressing a disinclination to preserve the racial or purified logic of the past that often accompanies our understanding of the other. We turn ourselves into monsters and aliens not to discriminate, but to expose discrimination. Without the purist logic that dictated the plot points for Lovecraft's encounter with the other as polluting and mortifying to "good" humans, we have developed a new attitude about the impact of difference and otherness as beneficial and life-sustaining.

By obscuring the real horror of the world and its monsters from his readers and his protagonists, Lovecraft was not engaged in a project of religious restoration. He did not intend to enchant the world or keep its mystery, but rather to preserve the boundary of the safe known and hostile unknown by presenting the other as dangerous. If we turn to the safe theological core of a creedal mystery as for Otto, then we reproduce a dangerous hierarchy of good rational religion versus bad emotional religion. If we turn to psychology because it offers to repair our fractured sense of being at home in the world as for Freud, then we relegate religion to a source and not the answer for our distress. Worse still, we frame those humans supporting the Elder Gods as traitors led by fanaticism and cultish sensibilities. Even if we follow (Weber [1922] 2004) and turn to rationalization and the secularization thesis, which we might suspect could account for the turn to logic or at least away from superstition, we would still miss a fundamental shift in the way we address others from Lovecraft to del Toro. Weber's elevation of science over religion turned out to be fundamentally flawed (see Berger 1999 or Stark 1999), not least in our circumstances, because Lovecraft rejected both halves of that binary.

After all, we have Lovecraft in his own words arguing that his fiction would be useless if he believed in the supernatural realities he proposed. "The reason I *want* to write about circumventions of time, space, and natural law is that I *don't* believe in such," he wrote. "If I *believed* in the supernatural, I would not need to create the aesthetic illusion of belief" (Saler, p. 138). Ironic that his work has been responsible for an ever-growing canon of cultural objects that delight in the world being much more fantastic than we imagine. To reject religion may have made Lovecraft a secularist, but he also rejected science as our savior. He was left with little else than the supernatural—devoid of religious institutions—to be the source of that which is beyond logic, which likely led to his sprawling attempts to discuss what later became the Cthulhu Mythos. Recent developments in the study of philosophy of religion, however, have given us some traction in providing a third avenue beyond secular/religious. Responding to Taylor (2007) and other theorists of the secular, who have argued that secularity need not require disenchantment, Bradley B. Onishi proposed in *The Sacrality of the Secular* (Onishi 2018) that a "nonsecularist secularity" can work with and through religion to explain secular themes. Religion need not be rejected in favor of science. We can use either one as a lens with which to think about the world, without necessarily subscribing to them. Thus, Lovecraft did not have to reject both or pretend to embrace one (the supernatural) in order to demonstrate the poverty of the other (natural/rationalism). Each half of the equation is a way to interrogate the binary's construction. Rather than leave the binary behind today, we can continue to work through its engagement with otherness and find in that tension the value of what we do not yet know. From Lovecraft's work and the theories of his contemporaries, we see the power of the binary to repress, dismiss, and negatively categorize. Modern creative works do relatively better at humanizing the other and developing strategies for our exploration of the unknown.

Hellboy and *Pacific Rim* are therefore reflective of some of the undercurrents of modern cinema's relationship with presenting the unimaginable or utterly other as accessible. They embrace science as far as it can go and then leave it behind. They engage religion when appropriate to specific characters but do not rely upon it for definitive, global answers. Instead, it is the radical encounter with aliens, monsters, and the other that is formative and fundamental, just as it was for Lovecraft, Otto, and Freud. The uncanny and numinous are ways to think about what moves us. So, we can appreciate today how

such experiences lead to more inclusive visions of society rather than erecting rigid boundaries for segregating humans based on race, sex, gender, or religion. Nor is this merely having our cake and eating it too. Rather, like Lovecraft, we can recognize the appeal of the supernatural for articulating secular principles, a theme some analysts of popular culture have already explored (Ostwalt 2012). In this binary is a power of categorization that serves our common humanity by using the other to expand what we think of as properly human. Now we are free to keep both exotic science and unfamiliar religion if it suits us rather than jettisoning them both to preserve our sense of a familiar but rigidly black or white world. In those rare moments, this may help us see how facing the monsters can reveal our better selves, and maybe even help us save the world by fighting alongside the things that go bump in the night.

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