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Cthulhu Mythos: History of H.P. Lovecraft's Monstrous Presence in Popular Culture*

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to analyse various forms of the so-called Cthulhu Mythos and describe specific shifts in reception and reflexion of H.P. Lovecraft's legacy in contemporary culture. The opening part of the paper introduces H.P. Lovecraft as the author of weird fiction, cosmic horror and the philosophy of cosmicism, and corrects common misconceptions regarding the Cthulhu Mythos. Then, the semiotic versioning of three versions of the Cthulhu Mythos is explained and all three versions are further analysed. Version 1.0 of the Mythos includes Lovecraft's legacy, works of the authors from the Lovecraft Circle, but also August Derleth's interpretations of cosmic horror and works of the next generation of authors that emerged after Lovecraft's death or were discovered and guided by Derleth. It's a complex set of terminology, ideas, philosophies, plot devices and narratological specifications that is, as is further explained, wrongly interpreted as a fictional mythology. Version 2.0 includes all the works created under the label of 'Lovecraftian' or 'cosmic' horror, all transmedia adaptations, influences, and pop cultural additions where the influence of the original Mythos can be traced and is either explicitly admitted or just implied. Finally, Cthulhu Mythos 3.0 is a version of the Mythos that acknowledges the existence of the previous versions, yet approaches them through a specific self-reflective, self-critical lens and is more focused on intertextual play and metacommentaries on these previous versions than on expanding them.

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Introduction

Research conducted in the past decades has proven that Lovecraft's ideas have been an inspiration to or a part of popular culture throughout the whole 20th century and well until now: be it in literature, cinema, music, comics, video games, board games, specialized merchandise or any other medium or cultural form. The notion of 'Lovecraftian' has become a popular stamp marking a specific style, tone, or atmosphere of individual cultural texts.

This paper is divided into several parts. The first one analyses H.P. Lovecraft, his literary aims and legacy, as well as the problematic worldviews he has expressed and even promoted in his works. This is followed by multiple sections, each focusing on a specific variant of Cthulhu Mythos that has emerged throughout the course of its existence under specific conditions and in specific (pop) cultural context. As will be explained further, each of these variants — or iterations — of the Mythos is aware of its predecessor, but uses different aesthetic, develops its own philosophical approach, and tries to answer a different set of questions.

The first part of these sections deals with Cthulhu Mythos 1.0. It focuses on the first of two questions — what is 'Lovecraftian,' and analyses this term from several points of view. It provides a historical analysis that includes a deeper analysis of the Cthulhu Mythos as a cultural and literary phenomenon.

The second section analyses Cthulhu Mythos 2.0. It provides a brief overview of how Cthulhu Mythos developed into a pop cultural phenomenon. Further, the question of how contemporary Lovecraftian cultural texts approach and use the original texts of the Cthulhu Mythos is explored, and how 'Lovecraftian' can be defined as an aesthetic category and a specific subgenre of horror.

The third part of the paper then focuses on Cthulhu Mythos 3.0 as a specific category of pop cultural texts. It begins with a definition of this new term, and follows with an analysis of several texts that, as I aim to prove, represent this new 'version' of the Mythos, and reflect on negative aspects of Lovecraft's legacy in a specific way.

Majority of chosen texts were published in 2015 or later. This year can be considered a major point in the history of the relationship between Lovecraft's presence in popular culture and social-cultural awareness and criticism. It was marked by the fact that in 2011, several influential speculative fiction authors (e.g. Nnedi Okorafor and China Miéville, 2011¹) expressed concern about receiving the World Fantasy Award which had had the form of Lovecraft's bust for years. The reasoning behind this act was the refusal to accept an award that promotes a writer

¹ N. Okorafor, 'Lovecraft's Racism & the World Fantasy Award Statuette, with Comments from China Miéville', Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog, 14.12.2011, <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2011/12/lovecrafts-racism-world-fantasy-award.html> (accessed: 27.01.2023).

known for his racism, antisemitism, and xenophobia. The discussion in the following years led to the decision to make 2015 the last year with the award bearing Lovecraft's semblance.

H.P. Lovecraft: Cosmic Horrors and Earthly Phobias

The popularity of Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890–1937), the author most famous for his legacy of cosmic horror, is on the rise. The mark of his monsters, indescribable beings, non-Euclidean geometry, and the philosophy of anti-anthropocentrism can be found across all genres and artistic forms.

On the primary level, the key elements of cosmic or Lovecraftian horror include: inhuman monsters from another dimensions that either try to penetrate into the reality of the human world, or are already in this world, but hidden; secret societies or cults; forbidden knowledge about the long forgotten or unspoken history of our world or the aforementioned entities that these groups are trying to uncover, preserve or use to their advantage; various grimoires, tomes and scripts that preserve this knowledge; main characters, often solitary scholars, that are confronted with these elements and either paralyzed by the revelation or driven insane.

It is on the secondary level where the philosophical aspects of Lovecraft's works show. The confrontation of the main characters of his stories with something radically different, with Other, brings out several aspects of cosmicism, Lovecraft's literary philosophy.

[S]ome 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.²

Lovecraft's famous introductory words from *The Call of Cthulhu* hint on one of those aspects — that human understanding of the world is incomplete, limited by our senses, skills, and technologies. The idea of millennia of human knowledge and existence being confronted with something radically new and different was best articulated in Lovecraft's other stories as well — be it *In the Mountains of Madness*, *From Beyond* or others. This was further developed through the notion of indescribable, to human senses incomprehensible monsters that cross the laws and boundaries of human world and can only be described by imperfect comparisons. As Harman states: 'Lovecraft's prose generates a gap between reality and its accessibility to us.'³

It is this realization that we, humans, do not know enough and that if we knew, we wouldn't be able to comprehend it anyway — combined with the third element, anti-anthropocentrism — that constitutes the foundation of cosmic horror. The realization that there are things beyond human understanding (both in

² H.P. Lovecraft, *The Complete Fiction*, New York 2011, p. 355.

³ G. Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, Winchester 2012, p. 38.

terms of accessibility and comprehension), emphasized by encounters with monstrous, otherworldly beings that are indifferent towards humankind, is supposed to spark fear. It is a specific kind of fear that Lovecraft intends to invoke, because it is based more on rational realization of a seemingly scientific fact than on the emotion coming from the encounter with a monster itself.

Even though Lovecraft himself sometimes calls these fictional beings ‘gods’ in some stories, Münchow⁴ provides several counterpoints that prove the anti-mythical nature of Lovecraft’s work and claims that his ‘myths’ do not function as narratives explaining the world, are not of allegorical nature etc. Based on these claims, following arguments can be given that summarize Lovecraft’s approach:

- Lovecraft’s beings are indifferent towards humankind; they bear no good or evil intentions;

- there is no classical hierarchy of these beings except for proclaiming Azaoth the ranked being;

- these beings are material; despite the human inability to comprehend them, they are not allegorical;

- the true origin, nature or intentions of these beings are not revealed — there are very few stories that expand the topic;

- these ‘deities’ do not communicate with humans; their only interaction with human world is of destructive nature;

- if Lovecraft mentions other deities with more traditional characteristics (that are, moreover, benevolent towards humankind), they are not shown as powerful enough. Fritz Leiber⁵ pointed it out: ‘In *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* they are pictured as relatively weak and feeble, symbols of the ultimate weakness of even mankind’s traditions and dreams.’

As Price further explains: ‘Extradimensional and extraterrestrial entities are called “gods and devils” by humans *who cannot understand them* and so either worship their greatness or exorcise their threat to human security and peace of mind by calling them devils.’⁶ This explanation of Lovecraft’s ideas is reflected in Münchow’s abovementioned characteristics — these beings are indifferent to humankind and the fact that we associate them with forces of Good or Evil is just our way to make them relatable to our ontological experience with this world and our understanding of it.

However, the fear that Lovecraft tried to spark in his readers was not only of philosophical nature — his stories include a great number of autobiographical

⁴ T. Münchow, ‘Transgressing the Myth — H.P. Lovecraft’s Philosophy of Life and Its Narrative Execution: An Essay’, *Disputatio Philosophica: International Journal on Philosophy and Religion*, 19, 2017, no. 1, pp. 39–49.

⁵ F. Leiber, Jr., ‘A Literary Copernicus’, [in:] D. Schweitzer, *Discovering H.P. Lovecraft*, San Bernardino 2001, p. 10.

⁶ R.M. Price, ‘Lovecraft’s “Artificial Mythology”’, [in:] *An Epicure in the Terrible*, eds. D.E. Schulz, S.T. Joshi, New York 2011, p. 259.

references to his political and cultural views, mainly of xenophobic, racist, and antisemitic nature.

Roots of Lovecraft's xenophobia can be found, according to Klinger, in his 'peculiar upbringing, combined with his family's tenuous social position in Rhode Island society,'⁷ which means mostly an environment of old-time aristocratic ideology and ethnical homogeneity. As Lovecraft himself wrote in a letter to Rheinhart Kleiner,⁸ he hadn't seen a Jew until he was 14 years old because his family lived among white New Englanders back then.

However, the presence of 'hook-nosed, swarthy, guttural-voiced aliens'⁹ was not the only thing that Lovecraft despised. As his wife Sonia Greene later wrote, Lovecraft was hateful towards any other race or ethnic group and his strong opposition towards their presence in his life showed extremely explicitly during his two-year stay in New York. As Greene claimed, whenever Lovecraft was forced to meet people of non-white heritage in the streets:

he became livid with rage at the foreign elements he would see in large number, especially at noon-time, in the streets of New York City, and I would try to calm his outbursts by saying: 'You don't have to love them; but hating them so outrageously can't do any good.' It was then that he said: 'It is more important to know what to hate than it is to know what to love.'¹⁰

Lovecraft was not any less radical when it came to African-American-centred racism. One of the earliest and probably most explicit expressions of it can be found in his 1912 poem called *On the Creation of Niggers*: 'A beast [gods] wrought, in semi-human figure, // Fill'd it with vice, and call'd the thing a NIGGER.'¹¹

It could be considered a paradox that despite his open hatred towards so many groups of people, Lovecraft married a Russian Jew (S. Greene) and was a friend of a Jew as well (poet Samuel Loveman). However, as Klinger explains, he was able to tolerate them 'because, in his view, they had essentially given up their alienness, assimilating into the white population. Blacks, of course, could not readily do this, and so seemed to have earned his permanent censure.'¹²

Multiple mentions of such ideas and opinions can be found scattered all across Lovecraft's writings. From the often cited description of Red Hook in New York, where Lovecraft mentions 'Syrian, Spanish, Italian and negro elements impinging upon one another...'¹³ to the 'nautical-looking negro'¹⁴ from *The Call of Cthulhu*,

⁷ L.S. Klinger, *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*, New York 2014, p. lxvi.

⁸ S.T. Joshi, D.E. Schultz, *Lord of a Visible World: An Autobiography in Letters*, New York 2019, p. 90.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ S.H. Greene, 'Letter to Scott, Winfield Townley', 1948, Brown University Library Digital Repository, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:417616/> (accessed: 31.01.2023).

¹¹ H.P. Lovecraft, 'On the Creation of Niggers', 1912, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:425397/> (accessed: 31.01.2023).

¹² L.S. Klinger, *The New Annotated H. P. Lovecraft*, p. lxvi.

¹³ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Complete Fiction*, p. 317.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 356.

to his strong resentment of miscegenation on which the whole *The Shadow over Innsmouth* is based, Lovecraft's personal worldviews penetrated his fiction quite explicitly.

However, as is argued further, these aspects were rarely considered or discussed during the era of Cthulhu Mythos 1.0 and 2.0.

Cthulhu Mythos — Semiotic Versioning of a Fictional Shared Universe

The following sections of this paper will focus on three different iterations of the Cthulhu Mythos in the history of popular culture. As the numeral suffix implies, the terminology created for these iterations — Cthulhu Mythos 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0 — was inspired by a very common programming practice called 'semiotic versioning' or 'semver.' It can be broadly described as the process of marking various versions of a specific software that differ in functions, aesthetic, mechanisms etc. with a three-digit code¹⁵ — which, as this study aims to prove, is exactly what has been happening with the Cthulhu Mythos since it was created.

Within this frame, it is possible to describe these Mythos iterations as follows: Cthulhu Mythos 1.0 includes authors and their works from the early, original era of the Mythos. This includes Lovecraft's legacy, works of the authors from the Lovecraft Circle, but also August Derleth's interpretations of cosmic horror and works of the next generation of authors that emerged after Lovecraft's death or were discovered and guided by Derleth. It's a complex set of terminology, ideas, philosophies, plot devices and narratological specifications that is, as is further explained, wrongly interpreted as a fictional mythology. Questions of what a myth (or mythology) is, what is this Mythos' structure, what is its philosophy, and what should the canonized version of Cthulhu Mythos look like can be considered the main issues of this version of Mythos.

Cthulhu Mythos 2.0 then, is to be understood as a 'pop cultural myth.' As Malíček explains: '[pop cultural myths] are, in their core, a pop cultural artefact with its own reception code, their extensions are all other reflections of that artefact that consensually express something crucial about the artefact itself and, simultaneously, put it into broader pop cultural contexts.'¹⁶ What is important to note is, that under 'other reflections' Malíček understands those reflections that come not only from the artefact's author, but from the recipients as well, hence creating a polyfunctional semiotic web of meanings.

¹⁵ The formula for this code is generally expressed as X. Y. Z, where number X marks the major changes in software, Y marks minor changes, and Z marks patches. Semantic versioning was originally authored by programmer Tom Preston-Werner. See 'Semantic Versioning Specification (SemVer)', Semantic Versioning 2.0.0., <https://semver.org/> (accessed: 30.01.2023).

¹⁶ J. Malíček, *Popkultúra: návod na použitie*, Nitra 2012, p. 36. Translation: J.P.

In the case of the Cthulhu Mythos, this means that version 2.0 includes all the works created under the label of 'Lovecraftian' or 'cosmic' horror, all transmedia adaptations, influences, and pop cultural additions where the influence of the original Mythos can be traced and is either explicitly admitted or just implied. The main questions that version 2.0 deals with are: how to enjoy it the best? What parts of the first Mythos to use in a new reiteration and how? How to reference Cthulhu Mythos 1.0 and other parts of Mythos 2.0?

Finally, Cthulhu Mythos 3.0 is a version of the Mythos that acknowledges the existence of the previous versions, yet approaches them through a specific self-reflective, self-critical lens and is more focused on intertextual play and meta-commentaries on these previous versions than on expanding them. In the light of the contemporary social and cultural movements, the third version of the Cthulhu Mythos focuses on questions like: how to think about Cthulhu Mythos anew? What to do with the negative legacy? How to enjoy Lovecraft's legacy without guilt?

Cthulhu Mythos 1.0: History and Structure

Despite the popular understanding of what can be called the Cthulhu Mythos 1.0 as a concise and/or structured mythology, it is necessary to stress that this concept is very loosely structured, but cannot be considered a mythology. On the contrary, it is what Schultz¹⁷ calls an 'antimythology.' If myths are to be understood as 'religious narratives that transcend the possibilities of common experience and that express any given culture's literal or metaphorical understanding of various aspects of reality,'¹⁸ then it can be claimed that the Cthulhu Mythos does not fulfil this function — even more, that it subverts this function of a myth.

That is why Price calls it 'artificial mythology'¹⁹ and, in Lovecraftian scholarship, the term 'pseudomythology' is used more often (see Joshi, 2013; Klinger, 2014). As Joshi²⁰ further suggests, Lovecraft's pseudomythology should not be seen as a specific mythological structure, but rather should be considered 'a series of plot devices meant to facilitate the expression of [the cosmicism] philosophy,' implying that Mythos was never even meant to function as a static concept with internal coherence and set rules.

In the broader sense then (and in contemporary pop cultural understanding), the Cthulhu Mythos can be described as a collection of stories, plot devices and specific terminology that includes (or comes from) Lovecraft's creations and works

¹⁷ D.E. Schultz, 'From Microcosm to Macrocosm: The Growth of Lovecraft's Cosmic Vision', [in:] *An Epicure in the Terrible*, p. 209.

¹⁸ D. Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, Oxford 2005, p. xi.

¹⁹ R.M. Price, 'Lovecraft's "Artificial Mythology"', p. 257.

²⁰ S.T. Joshi, *A Subtler Magick: The Writings and Philosophy of H.P. Lovecraft*, New York 2016, p. 138.

as well as those of his contemporaries, friends, and members of the so called Lovecraft Circle — a group of writers publishing in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*. According to Tibbets,²¹ the core members of this group were Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, Robert H. Barlow, Donald Wandrei, Robert Bloch and August Derleth. The last member to be added, then, is Robert E. Howard, creator of Conan the Barbarian (and other sword & sorcery and Mythos stories) and Lovecraft's close friend.

However, as the term Cthulhu Mythos suggests, it was still Lovecraft's work that constituted the foundations of the whole concept: Cthulhu is the name of one Lovecraft's fictional entities, probably the most popular one even nowadays. When it comes to mythology, on the other hand, the term Mythos did not come from Lovecraft but from August Derleth. As Schultz notes: 'The earliest reference to the "Cthulhu Mythology" in print is found following Lovecraft's death in Derleth's article'²² from 1937.

Lovecraft's own understanding of his creation was different — 'he never spoke seriously about any mythology or pseudomythology.'²³ This is confirmed by Lovecraft's own words in his letter to Derleth from 16 May 1931, where he replies to Derleth's suggestion to call Lovecraft's theogony The Mythology of Hastur.²⁴ Lovecraft wrote: 'It's not a bad idea to call this Cthulhuism & Yog-Sothothery of mine "The Mythology of Hastur" — although it was really from Machen & Dun-sany & others rather than through the Bierce-Chambers line, that I picked up my gradually developing hash of theogony — or daimonogeny.'²⁵

As Schultz²⁶ writes, Lovecraft never agreed to use any of these terms officially, nor did he use other mentions than 'pseudomythology' or 'pseudomyth' in his correspondence. This information is especially important when the contemporary pop cultural concept of Cthulhu Mythos is analysed — it is often understood as a unified set of genre traditions, official hierarchy, and a canonized set of stories. What is overlooked, however, is the internal schism that is connected with August Derleth's interpretation of Lovecraft's philosophy.

The first formally described internal inconsistency comes from 1972, when Richard L. Tierney²⁷ pointed out differences between Lovecraft's and Derleth's

²¹ J.C. Tibbets, *The Gothic Imagination: Conversations on Fantasy, Horror and Science Fiction in Media*, New York 2011.

²² D.E. Schultz, 'Who Needs the "Cthulhu Mythos"?', *Lovecraft Studies* 5, 1986, no. 2, p. 46.

²³ L.S. Klinger, *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*, p. lxii.

²⁴ Named after Hastur, the invention of Richard W. Chambers from his book *The King in Yellow* (1895) — it carries two meanings: Hastur is both a deity and a place.

²⁵ *Essential Solitude: The Letters of H.P. Lovecraft and August Derleth*, eds. S.T. Joshi, D.E. Schultz, New York 2013, p. 336.

²⁶ D.E. Schultz, 'Who Needs the "Cthulhu Mythos"?'.

²⁷ The article is now available online on the webpage of the fanzine's editors. See literature for R.L. Tierney, 'The Derleth Mythos', *Nightscares*, 9.04.2004, <http://www.epberglund.com/RGttCM/nightscares/NS04/hplnf3.htm> (accessed: 29.01.2023).

understanding of the Mythos. Furthermore, Joshi claims that the first notion of the 'Lovecraft Mythos' — as the opposite of Cthulhu Mythos (resp. Derleth Mythos) came from him and Donald Burleson in 1982. He states that they 'adopted the term "Lovecraft Mythos" [...] as a means of distinguishing it from "Cthulhu Mythos," since that term had presumably become corrupted by Derleth's repeated misinterpretations of Lovecraft's pseudomythology.'²⁸

Joshi later proceeded to confirm and expand on Tierney's ideas and named three main errors in Derleth's understanding of the original Mythos. Derleth's interpretations claimed: '1) that Lovecraft's "gods" are elementals; 2) that the "gods" can be differentiated between "Elder Gods," who represent the forces of good, and the "Old Ones," who are the forces of evil; and 3) that the mythos as a whole is philosophically akin to Christianity.'²⁹

Apart from the philosophical and narratological differences in understanding Lovecraft's legacy, another issue that Cthulhu Mythos faced was the question of which stories were supposed to be a part of it, and what criteria the selection was based on. One of the most significant attempts to categorize the stories and set up a list of criteria came from Lin Carter in 1972: 'To be considered part of the Cthulhu Mythos, a story must share the background lore given in earlier stories, and must build upon this basis by presenting us with yet more information. [...] the mere mention of a Mythos name in an otherwise self-contained story cannot be taken as a proof that the tale belongs to the Mythos.'³⁰

It is noteworthy to mention that, based on these criteria, Carter excluded several stories written by Lovecraft from the Mythos as well, i.e. *The Colour Out of Space* that is now considered one of the most popular of Lovecraft's stories, has been an object of various adaptations and a source of inspiration. The fact that the inconsistency of the Cthulhu Mythos canon in this form was also noticed by Schultz approximately 14 years later hints on the continuous lack of consensus regarding the issue:

In the nearly fifty years what the term has been in existence, there has been no consensus as to what stories are part of the 'Mythos,' nor has there been a clear idea of why some stories should belong to it and others should not, especially in the case of the work of Lovecraft himself.³¹

To conclude, the first iteration of the Cthulhu Mythos — the Cthulhu Mythos 1.0 — is a chronologically specific concept that represents the foundation of the whole pop cultural phenomenon. Yet, the term is rather an umbrella term that includes two ideological tendencies and, thus, two kinds of 'Mythos' — the Lovecraft Mythos that could be marked as version 1.0, and the Derleth Mythos which could

²⁸ S.T. Joshi, *A Subtler Magick*, p. 136.

²⁹ S.T. Joshi, *I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H.P. Lovecraft*, New York 2013, pp. 798–799.

³⁰ L. Carter, *Lovecraft: A Look Behind the "Cthulhu Mythos"*, New York 1972, p. 58.

³¹ D.E. Schultz, 'Who Needs the "Cthulhu Mythos"?', pp. 47–48.

be marked as version 1.1, since it differs in philosophical approach and specific aspects of the mythology (structure, origin, moral tendencies).

This internal incoherence, then, prevents the holistic understanding of the concept and requires detailed information and knowledge about wider context. It has also failed to deliver a satisfying answer to questions of which texts are canonical for Cthulhu Mythos 1.0 and what is the structure of it (if there is any). Neither does it deal with those elements of Lovecraft's stories that come from the previous generation of authors who were Lovecraft's inspiration (e.g. Richard W. Chambers, E.A. Poe, Lord Dunsany, or Ambrose Bierce).

The authors and contemporaries of both Lovecraft and Derleth Mythos have, moreover, understood its (pseudo)mythical nature in different ways which led to multiple misinterpretations in the second half of the 20th century, especially within popular culture. However, despite its flaws, its specific mode of creation provided necessary basic outlines to the question of what 'Lovecraftian' means: the cosmic horror, the fear of the unknown, moral ambiguity, anti-anthropocentric ideas, and vast cosmos.

Cthulhu Mythos 2.0: Expansion and Selection

Despite the fact that the second iteration of the Cthulhu Mythos still exists and expands across various media and art forms, two main groups of contributions to the Cthulhu Mythos 2.0 can be specified: remediations of primary texts and original 'Lovecraftian' texts.

In case of remediations, Klinger's list³² of various adaptations and other remediations of Lovecraft's works shows that the tendency to cross the line of literature and use another medium goes back to 1945, when the first radio play *The Dunwich Horror* aired. In 1950, the first comic book story appeared — *Experiment... in Death* (written by Al Feldstein, art by Jack Kamen), inspired by the short story *Herbert West: Reanimator*, and the first movie adaptations came as soon as 1963 (*The Haunted Palace*, dir. R. Corman, inspired by *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*).

All of these works can be considered adaptations of Lovecraft's original texts, which means "a transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium"³³ without any major change in the original meanings. Another closely related group of media texts, then, are those focusing on life of H.P. Lovecraft.

While there are probably no films that would depict Lovecraft's life through a story, several documentaries have been made — e. g. *The Strange Case of Howard*

³² L.S. Klinger, *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*, pp. 827–834.

³³ I.O. Rajewski, 'Intermediality, Intertextuality and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality', *Intermedialités* 2005, no. 6, p. 51.

Phillips Lovecraft (2007, dir. P.M. Bernard) and a more popular *Lovecraft: Fear of the Unknown* (2008, dir. F.H. Woodward) that features inputs from John Carpenter, Neil Gaiman and other popular artists. Multiple comics (resp. graphic novels) have been written as well,³⁴ but, similarly, none of them captures Lovecraft's life either partially or in its whole. On the contrary, several comics/graphic novels use Lovecraft as a fictional character that encounters some of his creations.

In comparison, the other group of media artifacts — the original 'Lovecraftian' texts — is far bigger, more variable, and includes more media types (video games, board games, TV shows, animation etc.), fan works, and even social gatherings. Therefore, in order to bring more clarity into the analysis, two pairs of opposite labels are proposed that can be used to identify the way a piece of media can be understood as 'Lovecraftian.'

1. EXPLICIT versus IMPLICIT CONNECTION to the Cthulhu Mythos 1.0 (via terminology, plot devices, tropes, narratological elements);
2. Focus on, and the use of PHILOSOPHY of cosmicism versus LORE of the Mythos in specific pieces of media.³⁵

In case of the first point, the scale between explicit and implicit use of the Cthulhu Mythos 1.0 terminology and elements can range from direct use of original storyworlds and tropes to create an original work. This approach was used in the video game *Call of Cthulhu: The Dark Corners of the Earth* (2005, Bethesda Softworks — Ubisoft). It tells the story of Jack Walters, a mentally unstable private detective, who comes to Innsmouth to investigate a murder. The inspiration by Lovecraft's novella *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* is explicit — apart from the toponym, the game is set in 1920s and allows the player to meet fish-like inhabitants of the town (including a hotel owner and a bus driver), get the local outcast drunk and listen to his scary story about water creatures visiting the inhabitants at night, explore the building of the Dagon's church and much more — all in the gloomy atmosphere of the town's semi-abandoned streets.

The opposite, implicit approach can be seen in the recent movie *Underwater* (2000, dir. W. Eubank), where characters, workers at an underwater industrial station, are trying to survive attacks of unknown creatures in the hostile environment of the bottom of the ocean. There are no direct references to the Mythos, but its aesthetic is clearly recognizable: the heroes are forced to operate in a vast, hostile environment (ocean), they face something they have never seen before (the aggressive creatures), and, in the end, encounter a monster that is beyond their understanding — it is too old and too alien for them to recognize it, too large to be their fair opponent (its greatness changes their way of understanding humankind), and

³⁴ E.g. A. Nikolavich, Gervasio-Aon-Lee, *H.P. Lovecraft: He Who Wrote in the Darkness. A Graphic Novel*, New York 2018.

³⁵ If expressed in a graphic manner, a Cartesian coordinate plane can be formed with each of the pairs representing two poles of the x and y axis.

it's visually similar to Lovecraft's Cthulhu.³⁶ The affectivity of this atmosphere evokes emotions very similar to those of the reader of the Mythos stories: anxiety, sense of their own smallness, fear of the greatness.

In case of the second point, the scale between the focus on and use of the philosophy of philosophy and its aspects and various elements of the Cthulhu Mythos lore can be seen also in terms of the 'more conservative' understanding of Lovecraft Mythos versus the 'more benevolent' concept of Derleth Mythos that operates more freely with the philosophy of the Mythos, does not focus on canon and is open to either add elements to or exclude them from the hierarchy of the pseudo-mythology. Moreover, it is an interesting detail that this scale divides media artifacts into two groups: the passive media (literature, film, television) tend to work more with the philosophy of cosmicism (or with the meanings) and focus on representing Lovecraft's original ideas, aesthetic, and atmosphere, while the interactive media (board games, video games) are more prone to work with the Mythos lore (the signifiers as carriers of the meanings) as a set of interesting ideas that can be used outside its original context in a new way.

When put to practice, the contemporary literary works in the genre of cosmic or Lovecraftian horror can be understood as those operating with the philosophical pole of this scale — the whole genre aims to carry on Lovecraft's literary legacy and uses plot devices, themes, and terminology to communicate the ideas of the fear of the unknown, anti-anthropocentrism, and horrors beyond human comprehension. On the other hand, a video game such as *Cthulhu Saves the World* (2010, Zeboyd Games) does use the lore, but does not pursue the representation of cosmicism for the sake of entertainment.

It is, however, symptomatic for video games to lean more towards the lore than the philosophy, be it consciously or by the manner of their functionality — the need to translate Lovecraftian imagery and philosophy into numbers and computable formulas on which games are based, will always bring 'the cosmic horror of Lovecraft's mythos into continual collision with a rule-bound rationalist and pseudo realist world.'³⁷

It is clear that this frame for analysing Cthulhu Mythos 2.0 is neither universally applicable, nor able to cover the growing variety of pop cultural media artifacts that are being created on daily basis. One of such artifacts is the TV series *Willow* (2023, Disney+), a sequel to the 1980s fantasy film *Willow* (1988, dir. R. Howard). While the show's characters and storyline are compliant with the

³⁶ The identity of the creature was confirmed by the director of the film after the visuals of the monster were released. Source: P. Cavanaugh, 'Underwater Director Confirms the Film's H.P. Lovecraft Connections', ComicBook, 17.01.2020, <https://comicbook.com/horror/news/underwater-ending-explained-monster-lovecraft-cthulhu/> (accessed: 31.01.2023).

³⁷ M. Jones, 'Tentacles and Teeth: The Lovecraftian Being in Popular Culture', [in:] *New Critical Essays on H.P. Lovecraft*, ed. D. Simmons, New York 2013, p. 229.

events from the film, the show expands its diegetic world and adds its own mythology that is heavily influenced by Cthulhu Mythos.

The show's legend tells the story of an evil being, the Wyrn, that feeds on the world's magic, dwells in darkness and awaits its time, only to be awaked by a cult of followers and their ancient chants. When the characters encounter this creature, they enter other dimensions; other than that, they use spells like 'fungi yuggoth,' come across ruins of ancient cities in the desert, speak Pnakotic language and befriend a character with the surname Hastur.

However, all these notions exist in a diegetic world of its own, that has no connection to Lovecraft or any iteration of the Cthulhu Mythos other than that these tropes were used, and that they were used to create the atmosphere similar to cosmic horror. With this knowledge, is it now better to claim that the show is implicit, yet relying on both philosophy and the lore, or is it more fitting to label it as explicitly connected to the Mythos, yet with a bigger emphasis on the lore than on philosophy?

In conclusion, it is certain that media artifacts with combined approaches such as *Willow* will continue to appear, and that the scheme that was proposed above will have to undergo a revision; yet it is safe to proclaim that its current form does clarify some problematic aspects of the Mythos, and that it can aid in the understanding of Cthulhu Mythos 3.0.

Cthulhu Mythos 3.0: Self-Reference and Subversive Approach

While the pop cultural Cthulhu Mythos 2.0 uses both Lovecraft and Derleth Mythos to its advantage, operates with their elements freely, interchangeably, and uses them to create original works, pastiches, parodies, and other artistic forms, the third iteration of Cthulhu Mythos is selective and significantly more self-reflective.

Cthulhu Mythos 3.0 specifically focuses on Lovecraft — his life, his work, his legacy — in order to deal with the prejudices he as a person expressed in his correspondence, life, and various published texts. The self-awareness of this version of the Mythos stems from the social pressure of the readers of the original Cthulhu Mythos stories, and from their call for reaction, explanation, or change in how Lovecraft and Cthulhu Mythos are presented (with his prejudices and world-views ignored, left out etc.).

The subversive nature of Cthulhu Mythos 3.0 shows in comparison with the previous iterations of the Mythos. While the first Mythos struggles with its canon and structure, Mythos 3.0 focuses strictly on Lovecraft Mythos — especially on Lovecraft's work and life. Where Cthulhu Mythos 2.0 uses various elements of its predecessor freely, expands the intertextual web of meanings and explores possibilities of various genres, art forms and self-expression, Cthulhu Mythos 3.0 creates

a metacommentary and uses tools and elements of its predecessors to reflect on its own history. These specifications can then be summarized in following points:

1. Elements of extratextual (ontological) reality become a part of the fictional narrative.
2. Lovecraft's worldviews and prejudices are a crucial part of the new narrative.
3. Everything that Lovecraft avoided in his stories — sexuality, female characters, miscegenation etc — becomes an explicit element of the new narrative.
4. Cthulhu Mythos 3.0 uses its own semiotic code to criticize unacceptable elements of itself/its legacy.

These arguments can be supported by examples from four popular media artifacts: Paul La Farge's novel *The Night Ocean* (2017), the graphic novel trilogy *The Courtyard*, *Neonomicon* and *Providence* by Alan Moore and Jacen Burrows (2003–2017), Richard Corben's graphic novel *Rat God* (2015) and Matt Ruff's novel *Lovecraft Country* (2015).

As per point 1, in most cases, this applies to biographical aspects of the Lovecraft Mythos. In La Farge's novel, Lovecraft's relationship with Robert Barlow changes from a close friendship to a homoerotic romance. In *Providence*, Moore depicts the events after Lovecraft's death — Barlow's loss of access to Lovecraft's manuscripts, Derleth's and Wandrei's effort to collect them, and Moore even includes the contemporary Lovecraftian scholar S.T. Joshi into the story. Richard Corben makes Lovecraft the main hero of his *Rat God*, and Ruff mentions Lovecraft as a racist writer, whose stories help the main hero to orient in the events of the novel.

In this manner, the line between real and fictional blurs — not for the first time, but with the intention to assign these elements specific meanings of socially- and culturally-critical nature. Now the people, who were once authors, become characters and experience their own creations in new stories — 'they exist in a complex dialogue with the original stories.'³⁸

Points 2 and 3 mark the most significant change in how Cthulhu Mythos approaches Lovecraft-person. What has previously been ignored or left out, has now come to the spotlight of the narrative — racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, anxiety and so on. La Farge names the issues explicitly and the impact is even bigger as he lets Samuel Loveman, a Jewish writer and yet another real-person-turned-fictional-character, proclaim them: 'Lovecraft had hated the Jews, black people, Asians, Arabs. He had despised women.'³⁹

Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*, on the other hand, is less direct in its expression, but makes racism its main theme — the story is set in the 1950s American era of racial segregation and Jim Crow laws, and the main characters/narrators of the stories are African Americans. In comparison, Moore and Burrows rely on visual language, then, and represent the issues in explicit ways — the hybrid inhabitants

³⁸ C. Murray, K. Corstorphine, 'Co(s)mic Horror', [in:] *New Critical Essays on H.P. Lovecraft*, ed. D. Simmons, New York 2013, p. 187.

³⁹ P. La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, London 2017, p. 20.

of Innsmouth as well as violent sexual encounters or race-targeting violence. As Murray and Corstorphine note: 'Moore and Burrows unravel a dark, violent tale that revises the Cthulhu Mythos.'⁴⁰

And, finally, Corben proposes another creative solution when he practically 'punishes' his main hero, the real-turned-fictional Lovecraft, by making him African American with almost caricaturized features, and lets him reveal that his love interest is of mixed Jewish origin.

The fourth point, then, describes not the intention, but the means of how the Cthulhu Mythos 3.0 wants to achieve its goals: despite the subversive social-cultural commentary and meta-level of narrative structure, these stories still try to keep the tradition of Lovecraftian horror and bring a cosmic story.

The Night Ocean is a mystery thriller about a writer who goes on a desperate hunt for sensation, trying to uncover a hidden part of Lovecraft's and Barlow's past. It's not a horror story per se, but the element of mystification, of ill obsession and mystery is significant and allows the reader to experience the depth of Lovecraft's phobias through the main character. *Rat God* copies the structure of a Lovecraftian story especially tightly — a solitary scholar is forced to spend a night in a secluded village inhabited by genetically deformed, rat-like people, then becomes a part of a ritual sacrifice to a monster living underground, and when he escapes and returns to the safety of civilized society, he reveals the truth about his lover and his own family curse.

Matt Ruff uses yet a different approach: his novel is divided into several short stories that either thematize an element typical for Lovecraft's work (interdimensional travel, occult societies, bloody rituals) or refer to his life (the discovery of planet Pluto which inspired Lovecraft to create the fictional planet Yuggoth).

Finally, Moore and Burrows decided for the most holistic approach. Their graphic novels trilogy can be considered a meta-Mythos: their characters become a part of Lovecraft's most popular stories (e.g. *The Dunwich Horror* or *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*), they meet Lovecraft himself, and at the same time explore the forbidden knowledge that references works of other authors from Lovecraft Circle or the previous generation of writers (R.W. Chambers, A. Bierce).

All of these stories further show how the original plot devices and philosophy of cosmic horror have changed in the third version of the Cthulhu Mythos. The monsters are no longer simple devices to spark a specific kind of threat — they have become ordinary monsters that easily fall into either group of Noel Carroll's monster typology⁴¹ and are often overshadowed by human monstrosity. The object of fear has changed as well — it is not the outside that is to be feared, but the inside, human mind, and conscience — which leads to the biggest change in the philosophy of Cthulhu Mythos 3.0: it has become anthropocentric again.

⁴⁰ C. Murray, K. Corstorphine, 'Co(s)mic Horror', p. 185.

⁴¹ N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of Heart*, Milton Park 1990.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to present three versions of the Cthulhu Mythos that still — in their specific way — heavily influence contemporary popular culture. While none of them can be considered ‘dead’ or invalid, they are closely tied to the historical period when they emerged: Cthulhu Mythos 1.0 tried to become a new, revolutionary mythology based on the ideas of cosmic horror and cosmicism; it has provided popular culture with core stories, terminology, ideology and plot devices that are present in media artifacts even nowadays.

Version 2.0 was a pop cultural myth — is, to be precise, because it’s still expanding — and was created by two-way interaction between the authors and the recipients of the artifacts. This is not a mythology in the classical meaning of the word, but the reception practice of the audience is just as valid an element of the Mythos as is the freed, liberal use of both Lovecraft and Derleth Mythos by the authors.

Cthulhu Mythos 3.0 is, then probably the smallest iteration of the Mythos so far, but has done the most significant ideological turn — from anti-anthropocentric to anthropocentric, from the fear of the outside and unknown to the fear of (our) inside and known, from expansion outwards to self-reflection and subversion of its own rules.

Especially sections dedicated to Cthulhu Mythos 2.0 and 3.0 then propose ways how to navigate these two iterations of the Mythos or offer tools to help in a deeper analysis. I acknowledge their unfinished, open-to-change state and look forward to research them further.

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