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Abstract

Malign by Design: Visualising Lovecraft and the Aesthetics of Monstrosity

Imagery holds a powerful place in the writing of H. P. Lovecraft. Many of his stories foreground the importance of the image as gateway to horrific revelation. Few scholars have yet addressed the conspicuous imagery associated with Lovecraft's work, his stated authorial reliance on a detailed visualisation process, (Lovecraft 1929), or the imagery his work engenders. This proposal embarks on addressing that omission, exploring the role and mechanisms underpinning Lovecraftian imagery. Lovecraft's own few sketches offer intriguing, direct glimpses of the author's ideation at work. Visual expressions of Lovecraftian horror by others proliferate. Whether in print, on screen or clothing, as plushies or figures, Lovecraftian aesthetics abound, really putting the cult in pop culture. These multiplying images are specular paratexts for Lovecraft's mythos, yet their very ocularity has narratological consequences which are often academically overlooked.

Jay (1994), notes that Western scholarly practice has long privileged the written over the visual. Newbury (2011) too, observes that images are academically undervalued and conventionally viewed as being of questionable intellectuality. He cogently points out that images are knowledge forms in their own right, sophisticated noetic propositions built on visual association and non-verbal components. This visualised knowledge can describe complex relational ideas not easily conveyed by language. Dake (2007) persuasively argues that imagery which utilises associative mentation processes, may offer knowledge generating potentials unavailable to the conventional, verbally-trained academic mind. Visual communication can convey subtle intellectual, affective and organisational ideas that are many-

layered and multidirectional, even expressing concepts which in textual form are often considered mutually exclusive.

Using an approach which synthesises horror theory, visual semiotics and on-going artistic Practice-as-Research Lovecraftian image-artefacts are anatomised, offering fascinating insights into the underpinning mechanisms and processes of visualising the indescribable and conveying the paradoxical alterity of the Lovecraft's creatures.

Keywords: Lovecraft, monster, horror, visual arts, concept design, cinematic arts, film, artistic research.

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Images and artefacts are a recurrent motif in Lovecraftian horror. From Pickman's Model to the tiaras of Innsmouth, from the sculptures of *At The Mountains of Madness* (1936), to the shocking statuettes of *The Call of Cthulhu* (1927), Lovecraft's many narratives are littered with Art.

Using *The Call of Cthulhu* as a lens and a practice-led research approach to explore, interrogate and perhaps visualise aspects of Lovecraft's writing through close readings of the text, this presentation hopes to highlight the important role that visuality plays in Lovecraft's horror. It seeks to examine art and artefact in Lovecraft's work to better understand his use of them as portals of experience which break down ontological boundaries and offer access to spaces, places and things outside human epistemologies.

Art, in its many forms, played a central role in Lovecraft's life (Lovecraft 1929), and imagery plays a highly significant role in Lovecraftian horror. Sederholm and Weinstock (2016) suggest that Lovecraft's horror is inseparable from its imagery. In this setting, his 1927 short story *The Call of Cthulhu*, probably needs no introduction. It tells the story of how the narrator uncovers a mysterious trail of clues which span the globe, uncovering a conspiracy which reveals horrific secrets and Humanity's cosmic insignificance. A series of visual encounters; a clay tablet, world-wide nightmare visions and sinister statues confer secret knowledge, leading to a mysterious island, ancient but recently resurfaced in the South Pacific, and a climactic encounter with the indescribably monstrous. Uncharacteristically for an adventurous tale in a 1920s pulp magazine mention is made of Cubism, Futurism, the Rhode Island School of Design and the

artists Sime and Angorola. Clearly, the visual arts are significant elements of the narrative matrix.

Lovecraft has a pre-disposition to the visual, seen in his emphasis on location, (Lovecraft 1930, 1933), his experience of ancient artefacts as embodiments of the dizzying expanse of deep time (Lovecraft 1930), and his writing practice of mental visualisation (Lovecraft 1929). His use of words like '*R'lyeh*,' or '*Cthulhu fhtagn*' remind us that written English possesses its own intrinsic visuality, with rhythmic arrangements of shapes and syllables which are contravened by Lovecraft's expressive nomenclature. Such Lovecraftian constructs shatter linguistic relationships and structures, and rupture, Jackson (2009) suggests, functional associations between sign and meaning.

Carefully placed uses of visual imagery recur across Lovecraft's oeuvre as objects, pictures or sights. These, when encountered, create cognitive paradigm shifts in the viewer, laying bare an implicit relationship between the acts of seeing and knowing, suturing witness to revelation. Lovecraft treats the visual as a non-verbal epistemological realm. Art, architecture and geometry offer knowledges beyond the confines of the verbal or written. This relationship is evident in Lovecraft's own sketches and drawings, which seem to serve as ideative explorations, external realisations of particular ideas and concepts, opportunities to formulate, observe, and increase understanding. Lovecraft repeatedly used imagery not just as object but as noetic proposition, the Art acting as visually-accessible knowledge, offering an almost unfiltered understanding to those who observe it. The power and effect of these artefacts on those around them, Weinstock (2016) suggests, is so great that they erode ontological boundaries, subverting distinctions between object and subject, the act of looking exposing the viewer to unimagined realms, to divergent epistemological

experiences, and to danger. This imagery offers forms of non-verbal cognitive engagement that can be costly, altering, and even contaminative.

Lovecraft writing repeatedly uses the communicative acts of image-making, telling and showing - of objects, images and even stories within stories - to reveal the borders of what Foucault (1989) characterised as the episteme, the implicit limits of the social construct of knowledge. The images, objects and sights in Lovecraft's work suggest the presence of knowledges and understandings which survive outside this construct, things which perhaps, like Wittgenstein's Tractatus 7 [1921], are linguistically inexpressible yet experientially powerful. Here silence does not imply ignorance, but rather the limits of language. In Lovecraft's, horror knowledge excluded from past and present epistemes survives in visual form. To Lovecraft, such understanding is transformative: once thought, it cannot be unthought. Vision and cognition are causally connected.

This articulation between vision and understanding has historic roots. The sensory dominance of sight in humans led Descartes to say;

'For if I say, I see, or I walk, therefore I am.' (Descartes, [1644],1989, p.5).

Kant [1781], cited vision as a means of directly intuited experience, and thought it key in the development of reason. Husserl [1913], asserted that sight was basic to rationality. Wittgenstein [1953], suggested that seeing, and particularly aspect-perception, was a synthetic experience, a form of understanding created by mechanisms and forces neither wholly within the image nor the viewer, but which come into being as a negotiated and sometimes shifting experience created between the two. Lovecraft was not alone in theorising that, to 'see,' was effectively, to know.

The relationship between observation and understanding perhaps achieves a unique balance in horror. Horror acts as a fulcrum between knowledge and mystery

mediated by the fantastic. It explores themes and territories that Todorov (1973), insists would be otherwise inaccessible. What may be the surest sign of horror, the Monster, relies in large part, on the unknown. Monsters exist in the indeterminate space on the fringes of knowledge, between the understandable and the confusing, the familiar and the alien, navigating the threshold of understanding. Yet, whilst Monsters may take unexpected, powerful, chimeric shapes, their forms and functions are defined by subtle systems with discernible limits and restrictions. Monsters perform most effectively at the shifting boundary of understanding, between the known and unknown. Too incomprehensible and they become unintelligible abstractions lacking potency and threat, too recognisable and they seem blandly mundane or even clownish. Enigma is a key part of monstrous power. Successful navigation of this hinterland of uncertainty necessitates careful design, balancing explicit and implicit concepts of the monstrous, of which visuality is a key aspect. Monsters are designer nightmares.

Etymology suggests that at some fundamental level visual signification relates design and monstrosity. Such association intimates that both design and monstrosity work within visual cognitive systems where they can be optically formulated, recognised and interpreted. Monsters are designed to be seen.

Horeck (2003), like Wittgenstein [1953], argues that looking is a participative rather than a passive act. Garforth (2012) too, argues that observation is far from a neutral objectivity, being instead an act that is 'dynamic and practiced.' Garforth notes that the implicit relationship between seeing and knowing has strong, well-established traditions in the literature of the sciences, where rhetorics linking the act of witnessing to intellectual revelation appear at every level.

Audi (2011), suggests that all acts of seeing carry aspectual perceptions; that when we see things, we see them as something, something which possesses particular,

visually detectable qualities. The optical data conveyed through size, texture, colour, behaviour and context means that we innately imbue that which we observe with both physical and affective qualities. Lovecraft's creations therefore exhibit their monstrous qualities in their very visuality, they behave or look monstrous and therefore are monstrous. We are perhaps justified for considering them so: their appearance is visual manifestation of the monstrum; an embodied portent, a warning.

Monsters are arguably at their most powerful when they are what MacLuhan [1964] described as 'cool media,' that is, when they are low-definition expressions of horror, creatures of uncertainty and suggestion. Such low-definition forms require our participation, our investment of attention, interpretation and imagination to fill in the gaps. Bruner (1986), observes that such implicatory structures 'force meaning performance' on the reader, encouraging readers to 'see' things that are actually never clearly outlined in the text. Well-designed Monsters make us creative collaborators; co-creators of horror. Lovecraft carefully builds suggestive, low-definition monsters involving us through a skilled use of association, allusion and analogy. He usually avoids narrative specificity by careful use of metaphor or even contradictory, polysemic statements. Hints and comparisons intermesh to outline a carefully-framed narrative void which invites decryption, diffuse yet full of terrifying potentiality. Lovecraft's textual indeterminacy make his creations both horrific and fascinating, and is perhaps why, in particular, images of Cthulhu abound. Each proliferating image answers the participative investments of different audiences within legions of fans. Gargantuan yet insubstantial, a coarse form housing a burning hierophantic intellect, Cthulhu is ambiguity incarnate. Such equivocality invites resolution, and representational responses are plentiful. In book Illustrations, posters, cups, cutlery and beanies, clothing, figures, bookends, statues and even furniture, Cthulhu abounds.

If seeing is knowing, can knowledge be deployed to create vision? Can Lovecraft's suggestive prose be analysed to gain a fresh vision, to perhaps better anatomise Cthulhu? If aesthetics is an organisational practice, a structuring of sensory information to accentuate particular qualities through emphasis, harmony or contrast, can it be applied to the horrific or monstrous? Carroll (1990) suggests a series of fantastic biologies of horror with aesthetic qualities which may guide us. Can aesthetics, cinematic practice-as-research and a close reading of *The Call of Cthulhu* be used to glimpse the aesthetics of monstrosity?

Lovecraft builds a scaffold of analogy which loosely implies Cthulhu's form. We are offered few direct clues in fleshing out this monstrous creature. Lovecraft suggests that Cthulhu is a fusion of forms: human caricature, dragon and octopus. Yet even in this sparse data there is much implicit information. These forms are all bilaterally symmetrical, something confirmed by Lovecraft's 1937 drawing. Bilateralism has profound effects on animal behaviour especially locomotion (Finnerty 2005). This morphology necessitates development of a head, grouping sensory and feeding mechanisms, indicative of a creature's developed genetic background. Associated with 99% of Earth's larger lifeforms, (Finnerty 2005) this morphology is so ubiquitous it might almost pass unnoticed. Here it gives form to formlessness, while serving a semiotic function, providing a template against which we can contextualise amorphous Cthulhu. A bilateral body makes visually and intellectually recognisable attributing them to being of agency and intent, creating a form onto which behaviours can be projected. The dragon, symbolically a creative or destructive force, fuses aspects of reptile and bat, and associated with fire and air. The human and dragon features are counterpointed by the mucoid, invertebrate predatory octopus. While Lovecraft describes Cthulhu's head variously as an octopus, squid, or a cuttle-fish, each of these cephalopods are

biologically distinct and have noticeably different shapes, suggesting this description is associative rather than specific.

As a biological bricolage combining mammal, reptile and invertebrate, Cthulhu evokes land, sea and air. Such crude portmanteau creatures are the monstrous norm in ancient mythology. The Sphinx of Thebes, or Asterios, Minotaur of Knossos exemplify the model (Hard 2004). Lovecraft elevates Cthulhu above these in a very literal way; by magnification. He makes it clear - Cthulhu is not made from earthly material. Cthulhu's mountainous size defies biological allometry suggesting the creature is made from non-biological matter. Cthulhu's gargantuan size achieves a dual effect; it pushes beyond the proportions of normality while also diminishing humanity to the relative size of insects. Humanity are there to be crushed. These struts provide an intriguing but scant armature for the Monster.

But this is not all Lovecraft offers. Scattered across the text are a multitude of other clues terms swept up in conveying the action, which Carroll might identify as horrific metonymy. These references convey a great deal, adding meat to Cthulhu's titanic skeleton. 'Poisonous.' 'Hateful.' 'Ravaging.' 'Befouled.' 'Accursed.' 'Loathsome.' 'Decay.' 'The stench of a thousand opened graves.' This litany of decay, depredation and death, morbid putrefaction, damage and contamination, suggests a hungering, abusive, deliquescing malignancy. These terms provide a vivid and venomous epidermis for the framework Lovecraft sketched out, putting the corpse in Cthulhu's corpulence.

With these noxious themes in mind, we might perhaps re-imagine a glimpse of the monstrous visage. Popular imagery predominantly favours a more reassuring binocular visage for Cthulhu, yet Lovecraft's own sketch hints at a skewed world-view seen through not two but six eyes. Using Lovecraft's many cues, we can understand Cthulhu's bloated humps and protruding belly to be what Bakhtin [1965], observed in

medieval carnivals; death itself, become pregnant. In view of this, the anthropomorphic octopus-like face alters. Associations with marine-life are abandoned, and Cthulhu's visage becomes a death's head. The powerful intellect that invades dreams and oppresses the sensitive, might be a bloated, exposed brain, burst by growth from its boney cradle. The wriggling facial tentacles can be reinterpreted as the heaving and writhing of titanic grave-worms or maggots.

This huge cypher, decaying, yet undying, embodies utter alterity and cosmic indifference to the human condition. Entombed in a city whose impossible proportions and angles dwarf humanity into the precarious role of scurrying vermin, we can glimpse a fresh vision of this gargantuan creature, one entirely representative of death.

Shrouded with mystery yet framed by familiarity, Cthulhu is bound by aesthetics and semiotics, navigating the threshold of understanding, inviting involvement and investment, and making us collaborators in horror. Lovecraft digs deep into the connections between seeing and knowing to suggest we are encountering something like nothing ever experienced before, a mountainous, cadaverous creature, whose every feature and action threaten extinction, a monster that will extinguish humanity as a mere nuisance. Through Cthulhu, Lovecraft explores the boundaries of being and thought, and situates humanity in a cosmos of horrific indifference. In that dire crucible, our arrogant complacency is burned away, uncovering our limitations, our physical and intellectual frailty. Cthulhu, like the violence and problems that beset our race, may lie dormant at times, but never truly dies. Poole (2014) reminds us that in studying monsters, we reveal ourselves, and that the meaning of the Monster implicitly but unavoidably raises questions about our deepest anxieties and what it actually means to be human.

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