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by Valentino Paccosi

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VALENTINO PACCOSI

Abstract

The beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise in popularity of Cthulhu, the most well-known among H. P. Lovecraft's creations. However, it seems that Cthulhu is undergoing a process of naturalization that is drastically reducing his "threat" level. His presence on items of merchandizing and in animated television shows appears to corroborate the theories of Fred Botting explaining how monsters are destined to be assimilated by the process of normalization. Building on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's theory that the monster "always escapes," this article demonstrates that Cthulhu partially escapes normalization. While Botting sees the re-readings of monsters as proof of their normalization, for Cohen this demonstrates how the monster maintains its otherness even in different contexts. With a close analysis of selected episodes from the animated television shows *The Real Ghostbusters* (1986-1991), *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* (2010-2013), and *South Park* (1997-present), I demonstrate how the apparent normalization of Cthulhu is a tool used by interpretive communities to produce a versatile and ready-to-use version of the monster. This specific version of Cthulhu has the function of making this unnameable monster easier to understand for the viewers and to use for the shows' creators, without completely erasing the more complex aspects of Cthulhu's monstrousness.

Keywords

Lovecraft; Cthulhu; animation; television shows; monstrousness; normalization

The monsters of H. P. Lovecraft's fictions are the embodiment of the unnameable, that which cannot be described or even comprehended by our human minds as too distant from our perception of reality. Yet the beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise in popularity of Cthulhu, the most well-known of Lovecraft's creations. Despite Cthulhu being an unnameable (but, paradoxically, not un-named) monster, his octopoid likeness has been reproduced over and over.¹ Not only has Cthulhu appeared on T-shirts, mugs, vinyl figures and other pieces of merchandise, but he has become the face of Lovecraft's fiction. Two of the most popular collections of Lovecraft's works on the market, *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales of H.P. Lovecraft* (2008), edited by Stephen Jones, and *The Complete Cthulhu Mythos Tales* (2016), edited by S.T. Joshi, present Cthulhu on their cover. The monster has also appeared in many roleplaying and board games, where he is often represented by plastic figurines and has been taxonomized in rule books. He also briefly appears at the end of the 2018 video game *Call of Cthulhu*. Moreover, during the 2016 United States presidential elections Cthulhu acquired a political meaning, becoming a recurring meme: "Why vote for the lesser

evil? Vote Cthulhu!" The Twitter account "Cthulhu for America" is also very active and has a huge number of followers.

Despite Cthulhu's popularity, filmmakers seem to be reticent about presenting the monster on the big screen. Cthulhu briefly appears as a stop-motion animated puppet at the end of *The Call of Cthulhu* (2005), an independent production adapting the novella of the same name into a silent film. However, no major film studio has portrayed Cthulhu on the screen, nor are there any plans to adapt Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928). Instead, the monster has been portrayed in several animated television shows. Animation holds an advantage over film when creating fantastic worlds and the depicting monsters, as these productions are less likely to face the same practical difficulties and restraints a film production may have. In this article I focus on the analysis of animated television shows from different decades and with different target audiences, taking into consideration selected episodes from the television shows *The Real Ghostbusters* (1986-1991), *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* (2010-2013) and *South Park* (1997-present).

It seems that Cthulhu, not unlike other famous monsters such as Dracula and Frankenstein's Creature, is undergoing a process of naturalization that is drastically reducing his threat level. His presence on items of merchandising and in animated television shows appears to corroborate the theories of Fred Botting regarding the contemporary use of monsters. Botting focuses his

¹ In this article I will refer to Cthulhu using the masculine third person singular pronoun as this is what was used in "The Call of Cthulhu," the first text in which the monster appears.

study on Frankenstein's Creature and concludes that the monster is destined to be assimilated by the process of naturalization. Basing his study on Roland Barthes's concepts of myth elaborated in the essay "Myth Today," Botting affirms that "the threatening Other is incorporated within safe and recognizable limits" (Botting 193). The monster ceases to represent our fears and is re-introduced into parodic narratives that defuses the monster's destructive power. The monster is then contained, and its monstrosity becomes a safe element that we can play with. In the words of Barthes: "The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he no longer threatens the security of the home" (*Mythologies* 180). The monster is emptied of all its threatening elements and becomes a character the public can laugh at. The examples presented by Botting regarding the normalization of the Creature confirm this theory: the film *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), together with countless television shows such as *The Munsters* (1964-1966) and *The Addams Family* (1964-1966), have significantly exploited the monster as a comedic element.

However, my aim is to demonstrate that Cthulhu partially escapes the normalization described by Botting, instead following some of the theses elaborated by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. What Cohen names "Thesis II: The Monster Always Escapes," fits perfectly with Cthulhu. Cohen highlights how the monster, after bringing havoc, vanishes only to reappear later (4). Cthulhu resonates with this description as he is, from his first appearance, a recurring threat that, cyclically, awakens and avoids defeat going back to sleep underneath the sea. Moreover, Cohen points out how the monster returns carrying different meanings: "each time to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event" (5). While Botting sees the re-readings of the Creature as proof of its naturalization, for Cohen this demonstrates how the monster maintains its otherness even in different contexts. While the appearance of Cthulhu in animated television shows seem to confirm that the monster can fit into multiple categories, in this case that of a television show formula and genre, I will demonstrate how these texts instead reaffirm Cthulhu's monstrosity.

Even more poignant for an unnameable monster like Cthulhu is Cohen's "Thesis III: The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis," which explains that the monster escapes as it refuses easy categorization (6). Monsters, Cohen comments, "are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" (6). This thesis goes against any attempt at normalizing the monstrous body, as such a process involves fitting the monster inside well-determined categories. Cthulhu can maintain his unnameable nature, despite being locked inside the limits of a television show, as this process is done by members of the interpretive community aware of his problematic nature. In so doing, the monster is stripped of his most problematic meanings and is simplified for a mainstream audience. Moreover, Cthulhu is often laughed at, becoming the focal point of various parodies. All the television shows taken into consideration in this article contain some degree of parody, another fundamental aspect that proves Cthulhu is being celebrated and not just normalized. Linda Hutcheon

explains that the transgression of literary and social norms found in popular media are "legalized by authority," as the agents behind the parody are people that care about the parodied material (81). The "authorities" in question for the discussed shows are the interpretive communities familiar with Cthulhu and Lovecraft's fiction. Thus, the laugh directed at Cthulhu is not destructive, but celebratory, as it presents the monster in a positive way, without eliding his core elements. I demonstrate how the unnameable nature of Cthulhu is never totally absent from the discussed texts, as this characteristic is a distinguishing element that differentiates Cthulhu from other monsters.

A partial normalization of Cthulhu may be necessary to make the monster more accessible to a larger audience. This process has many elements in common with that suggested by Chloé Germaine Buckley regarding the production of Gothic texts aimed at children. The episodes of *The Real Ghostbusters* and *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* have the function of offering a less complex, but not too different, version of Cthulhu, thus offering to the young audience a basic knowledge of the monster (Germaine Buckley 157). This provides an invitation into the interpretive community, as the young viewers may be intrigued by the themes of said animated shows and, later on, read Lovecraft's fictions and other Weird texts. Even *South Park*, despite being a show aimed at an adult audience, maintains some sort of faithfulness to the Lovecraftian texts, providing the necessary information about Cthulhu for those in the audience who are not familiar with the monster. Through a close analysis of the three aforementioned television shows I will demonstrate how the apparent normalization of Cthulhu is a tool used by interpretive communities to produce a versatile and ready-to-use version of the monster that still presents its key elements. This specific version of Cthulhu has the function of making this unnameable monster easier to understand for the viewers and to use for the shows' creators, without completely erasing the more complex aspects of Cthulhu's monstrosity.

The Origins of Cthulhu: "The Call of Cthulhu" and the Cthulhu Mythos

Before looking at the animated television shows featuring Cthulhu, I will analyze the text where he appears for the first time: "The Call of Cthulhu." In this short story, written by Lovecraft and published in 1928 in the magazine *Weird Tales*, the monster is presented as the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be: Cthulhu is the embodiment of the unnameable, that which cannot be understood nor described as it defies the general rules of nature. In "The Call of Cthulhu," the monster is mostly described indirectly, as he is depicted in a bas-relief and as an idol. The description of the former reads:

If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the *general outline* of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful. (Lovecraft 357, emphasis in original)

This description is a typical example of Lovecraft's style, which can be defined using the concept of the "writerly" expressed by

Barthes in *S/Z*. For Barthes, a writerly text is one in which the text needs to be actively produced by the reader. Those texts ask the reader to “write” the text while reading it, filling the narrative gaps (*S/Z* 4). The description of Cthulhu’s bas-relief is a good example of Lovecraft’s writerly passages: while the text is presented as describing the appearance of the monster, it is the reader’s task to figure out the meaning of what the text is only suggesting. In this passage, as in many others in Lovecraft’s fiction, the narrator suffers a language failure when talking about the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be. As Cthulhu does not belong to our world and reality, human language does not have the means for describing the monster. Thus, the narrator is forced to produce fragmented and “writerly” descriptions which are to be decoded by the readers.

Halfway through the short story it is revealed that Cthulhu is one of the Old Ones, a race of beings who have a completely different conception of space and time. This description of Cthulhu as one of the Old Ones is another element that adds to the alien nature of the monster: not only is his appearance confusing and disorienting, but his existence also causes a radical destruction of any anthropocentric vision of the universe. Thus, Cthulhu is the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be not only regarding his physical appearance, but also his ontological existence, as he is the absolute negation of all that we as human beings know and experience. Therefore, when characters encounter Cthulhu they are incapable of rationally processing this traumatic event and very often experience a loss of sanity, which is often reproduced in the language used by Lovecraft in his texts.

On the other hand, the sequence describing the awakening of Cthulhu presents some elements which are partially at odds with the writerly appearance of Lovecraft’s monsters. Here the extra-dimensional creature, in this case Cthulhu, not only has a physical form, but the readers are also able to witness its rampage:

After vigintillions of years great Cthulhu was loose again, and ravening for delight . . . Three men were swept up by the flabby claws before anybody turned . . . So only Briden and Johansen reached the boat, and pulled desperately for the Alert as the mountainous monstrosity flopped down the slimy stones and hesitated floundering at the edge of the water . . . the titan Thing from the stars slavered and gibbered like Polypheme cursing the fleeing ship of Odysseus. Then, bolder than the storied Cyclops, great Cthulhu slid greasily into the water and began to pursue with vast wave-raising strokes of cosmic potency. (Lovecraft 377)

It is almost impossible while reading these words to avoid thinking about other giant monsters such as Godzilla or King Kong rampaging through the cities and bringing havoc. Here Lovecraft loses the subtlety with which he described Cthulhu in the previous examples, as the sentence “Cthulhu was . . . ravening for delight” implies a personification of the feelings and actions of the monster. This sentence gives readers the impression that Cthulhu is moved by evil purposes, instead of being beyond the human ideas of good and evil. Moreover, the comparison with Polyphemus develops further the idea of the monster as an anthropomorphic figure, as the Cyclops is a giant man with one eye. Nevertheless, this simile not only reintroduces a mythic dimension to the figure of Cthulhu,

but also provides another indirect description of the monster. Moreover, despite the physical nature of this description, the body of Cthulhu is never described. Instead, the monster’s rampage is narrated using verbs and adverbs describing his actions. Thus, despite this passage being a slight departure from Lovecraft’s description of The-Thing-That-Should-Not-Be, the writerly nature of Cthulhu is not completely lost.

Nevertheless, Cthulhu, despite being an unnameable horror, has a precise form and shape, a characteristic that only a small number of Lovecraft’s creatures possess. In the second chapter of “The Call of Cthulhu,” the idol representing the monster is described with a list of expressionistic adjectives: “It represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind” (Lovecraft 362). Here the text presents a different strategy: the reader is given many detailed elements that, when put together, result in a figure that has a well-defined shape but is still profoundly alien. This kind of description is in line with what Graham Harman defines as “literary cubism,” which consist of describing a monster through the juxtaposition of minute details which are unrelated to each other (133). Moreover, this is not a direct representation of Cthulhu, but of his idol, which is just an image of the monster. Cthulhu is then quite unique among Lovecraft’s creatures, as he is writerly and unnameable, but at the same time has also a defined aspect. Cthulhu is the only truly recognizable monster in Lovecraft’s fiction, and this element has transformed him in a symbol of the author’s fiction and has given many interpretive communities a visually defined element to play with.

The second most influential reading of Cthulhu is a result of the fictions of August Derleth, a close friend of Lovecraft who, after his death, together with Donald Wandrei, founded Arkham House to publish Lovecraft’s works and his own. Derleth decided to use Cthulhu in his own short stories, even using the monster’s name in the titles of two of his most popular anthologies, *The Mask of Cthulhu* (1958) and *The Trail of Cthulhu* (1962). These anthologies, especially the latter, are extremely important regarding the development of the second reading of Cthulhu, the Extradimensional Evil. It would be inaccurate to say that Derleth is solely responsible for the development of this reading: he was a member of a very active interpretive community, composed of friends and disciples of Lovecraft that used elements of the author’s works in their own fictions. Nevertheless, without Derleth’s publications Lovecraft’s work would probably not be as popular as it is today. Moreover, Cthulhu would also be a very different kind of monster. In Derleth’s mythos cycle, the monster is the Extradimensional Evil: an otherness whose only goal is to regain his full strength and destroy our reality.

In the short essay titled “A Note on the Cthulhu Mythos,” published at the end of *The Trail of Cthulhu*, Derleth describes how at the centre of the mythos there is a battle of good versus evil which is very similar to that of the Christian religion (445). While Lovecraft’s creatures are totally alien and do not possess any human conception of good or evil, Derleth gets rid of this

moral ambiguity and defines the monsters of his fictions as pure evil. Derleth's fiction also takes one of the recurring tropes of Lovecraft's fiction, the list of odd and unpronounceable names of reality-defying beings and turns it into another element which brings the mythos closer to epic narratives. As this list is repeated with little or no variations throughout Derleth's fictions, and short descriptions such as "Great Cthulhu, the Water-Dweller; Yog-Sothoth, the All-in-One and One-in-All; Ithaqua, the Wind-waker" become something not dissimilar to the epithets of the gods of the Iliad and Odyssey (240). Evidently, Derleth attempts to include Cthulhu and the other extradimensional beings created by Lovecraft within a mythical frame, to create a modern Weird epic. Consequently, Cthulhu himself becomes something very different from the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be. He is not something that belongs to our reality, but this Extradimensional Evil has now a well-defined agenda: the destruction of humankind. In "The Call of Cthulhu" Cthulhu's goal is obscure and the destruction of humankind is totally incidental, as the monster is mostly described as being beyond any concept of morality. Instead, in Derleth's *The Trail of Cthulhu*, Cthulhu is an evil god of destruction, his alien body being the only element differentiating him from the Greek and Norse gods, or from the Christian Satan.

Positioning Cthulhu, the most recognizable among the unnameable Lovecraftian creatures, as the focal point of this modern epic had the consequence of reducing the monster's "writerly" qualities. Nevertheless, the most radical change in Derleth's works is that the encounter with Cthulhu no longer causes a loss of sanity due to his unnameable nature. This change is very subtle and it is necessary to look at the endings of "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Black Island," which concludes the anthology *The Trail of Cthulhu*, in order to understand its importance. Both short stories have a very similar outcome: Cthulhu is temporarily destroyed and put back to sleep in R'lyeh, waiting for his final awakening. A closer look at how the protagonists of the two short stories act before and after their encounter with Cthulhu reveals a radical difference between the two texts. In "The Call of Cthulhu" the sailor Johansen is the only one to survive the sudden appearance of Cthulhu. Nevertheless, the narrator does not celebrate the man as a hero, but presents him as another victim, haunted by the pure horror of the encounter. Johansen's mind is compromised by the sight of Cthulhu and the narrator suggests that his death, which happened mysteriously after his return, may have been a relief. In Derleth's "The Black Island" the protagonists are actively looking for the island of R'lyeh and they perfectly know how to deal with Cthulhu: they carefully plan ahead their mission, placing explosives on the island and, in the end, they even manage to destroy the monster with an atomic bomb. The awakening of the creature, despite being a frightening event, does not impede their actions, nor have any deep consequence on their psyche. These characters, opposite to the ones in Lovecraft's fictions, seem to be able to endure the sight of extra-dimensional beings. This is because Derleth's Cthulhu and the other Ancient Ones, while being adapted into an epic narrative, have partially lost their function as reality-defying creatures. All the changes employed by Derleth in his mythos not only have transformed Lovecraft's lore

into a sort of Horror/Fantasy epic but have also changed the horror they depict into that of absolute evil, which is very similar to that of Christian religion. The horror of Lovecraft's fictions is instead that of what cannot be comprehended, and it is completely devoid of any moral connotation. Thus, while the Extradimensional Evil of the mythos can be battled by the good heroes, the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be of Lovecraft's fictions not only cannot be stopped, but it cannot even be faced as radically alien for humankind.

Cthulhu in animated television shows: the normalization of a monster?

Derleth's *Cthulhu Mythos* had the important role of easing Cthulhu into popular fiction, but also started a further transformation in the life cycle of the monster. With Derleth, Cthulhu becomes the Extradimensional Evil, a malevolent god from another dimension. However, from the 1980s onward, Cthulhu becomes less and less unnameable. This process accelerates from the beginning of the twenty-first century, thanks to his appearance in popular media such as cartoons, graphic novels, and roleplaying games. Cthulhu is currently not nearly as universally recognizable as, for example, the Universal Studio monsters and his audience is still a relatively niche one. Nevertheless, Cthulhu has acquired a well-defined appearance and attributes in popular culture, slowly becoming the Octopoid Monster. Cthulhu's unnameable shape has instead crystallized in that of a bipedal dragon with an octopus head surrounded by writhing tentacles. The Octopoid Monster tends to have a solid and material body that can interact with our world, making Cthulhu a giant monster that happens to come from a sunken city in the remoteness of the ocean. Moreover, opposite to the previous reading, which saw Cthulhu as the Extradimensional Evil, the Octopoid Monster is, by default, neutral. With this adjective I want to highlight how the monster can now be evil (and most of the time is) but also cynical, majestic, benevolent, or even goofy.

The transformation of Cthulhu into the Octopoid Monster suggests a progressive normalization of the monster as proposed by Botting. However, through the analysis of selected episodes of *The Real Ghostbusters* (1986-1991), *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* (2010-2013), and *South Park* (1997-present) featuring Cthulhu, I will demonstrate that Cthulhu cannot be completely normalized. Despite being partially emptied of his monstrousness, Cthulhu is a monster that always escapes and continues to subtly escape any categorization, as Cohen proposes in his study.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the animated television shows it is necessary to highlight the difference among the target audiences of said shows. *The Real Ghostbusters*, even though it continues the adventures of the characters from the PG-rated film *Ghostbusters* (1984), is aimed at a young audience. It was originally broadcast on the United States channel ABC, usually together with other children-friendly shows. *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* was broadcast on *Cartoon Network* and it is again a show targeting a young audience. However, as the series is a reboot of the 1969 cartoon *Scooby-Doo, Where*

Are You?, the adult audience already familiar with the franchise may be drawn to the new show for nostalgic reasons. *South Park*, is instead specifically targeting an adult audience, as with all the other animated television shows broadcast on *Comedy Central*. Moreover, even the show's humorous opening disclaimer addresses the adult nature of its content: "The following program contains coarse language and due to its content it should not be viewed by anyone."

Case Study 1: *The Real Ghostbusters*

The "The Collect Call of Cthulhu" [*sic*] episode of the television show *The Real Ghostbusters*, broadcast in 1987, is one of the first animated television shows to feature Lovecraft's monster. The 1980s was a decade in which a few films inspired by Lovecraft's fictions were released in cinemas: among those, *Re-Animator* (1985), *From Beyond* (1986), and *The Unnamable* (1988). While none of these films depict Cthulhu, the animated show *The Real Ghostbusters* decided to use Cthulhu as the focal point of an episode.

Cthulhu's appearance in the episode is quite faithful to that of the idol described in Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu," despite having more tentacles attached to his body and being purple instead of the more conventional green. While Lovecraft is never mentioned, many elements of his fictions, such as the *Necronomicon*—the book of forbidden lore and the monstrous *Shoggoth*—are featured in the episode; moreover, a few characters are named after Lovecraftian authors such as Derleth and Clark Ashton Smith, so that the whole episode becomes a homage to Lovecraft and the mythos.

Peter Venkman, one of the *Ghostbusters*, describes Cthulhu in one of his humorous remarks to his colleagues: "Anything that looks like Godzilla wearing an octopus hat shouldn't be hard to find." At first this description seems to only ridicule Cthulhu, transforming him into a travesty of another iconic monster. However, this humorous description is interesting as it uses a well-known monster, Godzilla, to introduce the more obscure Cthulhu. In 1987, when "The Call of Cthulhu" was broadcast, Godzilla was a famous monster among Western viewers. Not only had many films depicting the giant lizard been exported from Japan, but the American animation studio *Hanna-Barbera* had produced the animated show *Godzilla* (1978-1980). In the animated series the monster was visually similar to the film counterpart. However, in the cartoon Godzilla fights against other monsters to save humankind. This is not dissimilar to the monster's role in films: while in *Godzilla* (1954) the giant lizard is a serious threat for the city of Tokyo, in *Destroy All Monsters* (1968) Godzilla is already fighting other monsters to save humanity. The association of Cthulhu to Godzilla then partially normalizes the former, transforming it into a well-recognizable and mostly-friendly giant monster. However, this does not mean that in *The Real Ghostbusters*' episode Cthulhu does not constitute a threat.

Although Cthulhu's appearance in *The Real Ghostbusters* does not have the same reality-shattering effect it has in Lovecraft's short story, there are some elements of the episode

that suggest Cthulhu is still far from being read as the Octopoid Monster. The *Ghostbusters*' standard procedure for dealing with ghostly creatures is to weaken them with the rays of their proton packs, then push them into a ghost trap which contains them for an unlimited period of time. However, the *Ghostbusters* are not capable of capturing Cthulhu like the other monsters of the show, as their proton packs are not strong enough to entrap the monster. Instead, they must wait for the chance of a lightning bolt to strike Cthulhu, then hit him with their rays. The *Ghostbusters* manage to do so, but they do not get to trap the monster: Cthulhu melts in a pile of goo, which then ascends to the darkened sky, disappearing. This unusual procedure makes Cthulhu stand out among the creatures fought by the *Ghostbusters*: despite being dealt with in the usual twenty-minute time frame of an episode, Cthulhu cannot be trapped and secured forever and, as in Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu," he is only temporarily stopped and not completely defeated. As Cohen notices, "the monster always escapes" (4). It is necessary to point out that even Godzilla, the monster Cthulhu is compared to in this episode, is a monster that always escapes. The giant lizard may have been partially normalized but, as Cthulhu, is never defeated and is ready to re-emerge from the depth of the ocean, not unlike Lovecraft's octopoid monster.

In this text, Cthulhu resists a complete normalization as the monster maintains a level of otherness. This Cthulhu cannot be the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be as he has lost his "writerly" element. However, in "The Collect Call of Cthulhu," the monster's reading is closer to that of the Extradimensional Evil than that of the Octopoid Monster, as it is strongly influenced by the elements of Derleth's *Cthulhu Mythos*. The episode becomes a tale of the mythos adapted for a children's show, capable of presenting some unique elements for its young viewers, without deviating too much from the reassuring formula of the show. Germaine Buckley explains how the animated films *Frankenweenie* (2012) and *ParaNorman* (2012) heavily reference previous texts; however, the audience's enjoyment of the films is not based on their knowledge of said "canonical" texts. Instead, the two animated films teach viewers about Gothic tropes and promote genre literacy (Germaine Buckley 157). "The Collect Call of Cthulhu" does the same for the Lovecraftian and Cthulhu: it unassumingly introduces the monster into the formula of the animated television show without damaging it, while giving the audience important information about Cthulhu. The episode shows how the grimoire called the *Necronomicon* is used to awaken Cthulhu; the monster emerges from the sea as in Lovecraft's tale and even defies some rules of the television shows (Cthulhu cannot be hit by the proton packs nor trapped by ghost traps). All these elements do not alienate the young viewers' attention, as the episode is in line with the other *The Real Ghostbusters*' episodes. Nevertheless, "The Collect Call of Cthulhu" introduces Cthulhu and his key elements to a new audience, without destroying Cthulhu's unnameable nature. Cthulhu becomes undoubtedly the monster of the week in the television show, but all the references to the mythos scattered through the episode make Cthulhu stand aside from the other monsters faced by the *Ghostbusters*. Cthulhu may be enclosed into a television show, but he nevertheless manages to escape unlike

any other monster.

Case Study 2: *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated*

In 2010 Cthulhu was featured in the *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* episode titled “The Shrieking Madness,” in which the literary creation of the fictional author H. P. Hatecraft, a monster called Char Gar Gothakon, is terrorizing a university campus. The name of the fictional author is an obvious reference to Lovecraft and the monster to Cthulhu. Moreover, the epithet of the Cthulhu-like creature is “the beast that hath no name,” a nod to Lovecraft’s short story “The Unnamable” and to the “writerly” nature of the author’s monster. From the very start, the episode makes fun of Lovecraft and his fans: Hatecraft is an eccentric writer who lives isolated in a mansion, surrounded by paintings of Octopoid Monsters, and the protagonists soon point out how Char Gar Gothakon cannot be the beast with no name as it clearly has one. The monster has a humanoid form, looking like a wizard wearing a long robe with a tentacular face. The monster is also very similar to an Illithid or Mind Flayer, a creature from the roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* that was clearly inspired by Cthulhu. The monster briefly appears through the episode, terrorizing students and, at the end of the episode, he even tries to kill Hatecraft. However, the protagonists manage to stop Char Gar Gothakon and, in the conventional *Scooby-Doo* formula, it is revealed that the monster is just a man in a costume. At a first glance, the representation of Cthulhu in this episode of *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* seems to be the most normalizing of the readings: the monster is reduced to a costume of an Octopoid Monster. Moreover, the motivation for the “culprit” to wear the costume and attack Hatecraft was that the author had publicly distanced himself from any responsibility regarding the attacks of Char Gar Gothakon, denying once and for all the monster’s existence. In the episode, the monster is completely deconstructed and his existence denied; nevertheless, this is only a superficial reading, as the episode can be read at different levels.

Having a fan impersonating the mock-Cthulhu, the show acknowledges that the monster now belongs to the interpretive community that is highly familiar with Lovecraft’s fictions and the monster acquires a life of his own, so much so he does not even need the authority of his creator, Hatecraft/Lovecraft, to continue existing. Moreover, in the episode the unmasking of the fake Char Gar Gothakon does not stop Hatecraft from using the monster for future novels. In the same way, the proliferating of various versions of the Octopoid Monster is not going to stop fans from going back to the previous readings of Cthulhu, as those readings do not exclude one another but can co-exist as they are all possible readings of the monster.

The most interesting of the possible readings of this episode of *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* is the one that takes into consideration the structure of the television show. The show is a reboot of the 1969 cartoon *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?* and as its predecessor features a group of teenagers investigating cases involving supposedly supernatural creatures, revealing at the end of each episode that the monster was in fact one of the suspects

wearing a costume. For each monster to be contained in the show’s formula, the monster needs to be normalized and reduced to a mere costume. However, it is necessary to point out how, except for the very ending of the show where the culprit is unmasked, for the rest of the episode each monster is believed to be real and some of the protagonists are often scared by them. The show often plays with young viewers’ suspension of disbelief and depicts the monsters doing extraordinary things which are at the end only briefly and unconvincingly explained. For example, Char Gar Gothakon can emit powerful sound waves capable of flipping cars over and is seen grabbing a student with his tentacles. Once unmasked, the student impersonating the monster explains that he conveniently followed some lessons in “sonic scream technology,” while his mysterious ability to grab people with tentacles is not even explained. Thus, despite Cthulhu being stripped of all his threatening elements at the end of the episode, for the most part of it he still maintains all his monstrous elements and is seen as a menace and an evil force. It is significant that the monster of the episode is named Char Gar Gothakon: while this monster is used to normalize and make a parody of Cthulhu, in the end it is Char Gar Gothakon, and not Cthulhu, to be revealed as being just a man in a costume. The monster created by Lovecraft still retains his monstrousness, but also shows his availability as a subject of different readings. Moreover, in the episode it is Char Gar Gothakon to be revealed as a fake, and not Cthulhu. Once again then, Cthulhu manages to escape, only to reappear somewhere else.

The monsters featured in the *Scooby-Doo* franchise are all inspired by creatures from literature, folklore or famous Horror films and they are easily recognizable. Thus, the inclusion of Cthulhu in this gallery of famous monsters is a further authorization of the monster’s role in popular culture. Moreover, this episode, as the one of *The Real Ghostbusters*, presents a simplified, but not less intriguing, version of Cthulhu, offering the young audience the chance to become familiar with the monster (Germaine Buckley 139). The function of “The Shrieking Madness” is not only pedagogical, as it is also a means to introduce new readers to elements and tropes of Weird fiction and the Lovecraftian mode. Germaine Buckley explains how the animated films *Frankenweenie* and *ParaNorman* do not require their audience to decode every citation but they “celebrate a broad and inclusive Gothic horror film aesthetic” (157). The same can be said for this episode of *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated*, which contains a vast number of reference and parodied elements from Lovecraft’s fictions. The adult viewers, who are a secondary but still important target audience of the show, are likely to possess the correct interpretive code to understand the reference presented in the episode. The young viewers, who are the primary target audience, are instead introduced to the Lovecraftian mode and to various elements of Weird fiction. The episode “The Shrieking Madness” does not require any previous interpretive code to be understood, and the young viewers can enjoy the show and, without being fully conscious of that, enjoy the Weird and Lovecraftian tropes. Thus, Char Gar Gothakon / Cthulhu is a monster in the large *Scooby-Doo* gallery of villains but can also become an element that drives those young viewers to a later approach to any Lovecraft-related text.

Case Study 3: *South Park*

In 2010 Cthulhu appeared again in an animated television show, *South Park*, in a story arc spread across three episodes titled, respectively, “Coon 2: Hindsight,” “Mysterion Rises,” and “Coon Vs Coon and Friends.” As the titles suggest, these episodes are not related to Lovecraft’s fictions nor the mythos but are mostly a spoof of superhero films. This mini-saga starts with the South Park kids dressed as peculiar superheroes, trying to fight crime in their own way. Meanwhile, a drilling vessel of a big oil company causes a massive oil leak in the ocean; in the attempt to fix it, the company drills again and again, but the damage escalates quickly, causing the opening of a portal to another dimension from which Lovecraftian monsters come out and devour people. With their last, disastrous drilling attempt, the oil company incredibly manages to release Cthulhu, who brings havoc along the United States coast.

The depiction of Cthulhu is again in line with that of Lovecraft’s idol in “The Call of Cthulhu” and perfectly matches that of the Octopoid Monster. Cthulhu appears as heavily normalized: his appearance is more anthropomorphic and less tentacular, with the monster having a pair of big, expressive eyes, and his behaviour is similar to that of King Kong, that is of a giant intelligent animal. The biggest difference between *The Real Ghostbusters* and *South Park* is that, while in the former Cthulhu’s awakening is the main focus, in the latter the monster is only used as an element in a very creative pastiche and, surprisingly, his role is only that of a supporting character. When the kids decide to ban The Coon (the alter-ego of Eric Cartman) from the superhero group due to his extremely selfish and violent behavior, Cartman is so angered with his peers that he decides to partner with Cthulhu to make the world a better place. The Coon’s plan is surprisingly successful, and the child ends up manipulating Cthulhu so that the monster kills and destroys everything Cartman hates.

South Park is a television show that often uses parody as part of its formula, referencing famous films, videogames, and even real-life events and trends. Thus, in its process of containment of Cthulhu into its structure, the show uses the monster for a very explicit parody. A whole sequence is a shot-by-shot parody of another animated film, *My Neighbour Totoro* written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki (1988): here The Coon is sitting on the belly of a sleepy Cthulhu, exactly as the little girl in the Japanese film sits on that of Totoro, a gigantic, fluffy, benevolent spirit of the woods. Then the monster flies through the sky, The Coon riding on his back. This scene and the montage that follows are accompanied by a cheerful song (whose music sounds extremely similar to the main theme of *My Neighbour Totoro*) that sings about how Cartman and his friend Cthulhu will make a world a better place, through murder and mass destruction. In *The Real Ghostbusters* episode Cthulhu was compared to another Japanese creature, Godzilla, to help introduce the monster to a new audience. Cthulhu here replaces the friendly Totoro to generate a hilarious parodic sequence. Obviously, for this parody to fully work, the audience needs to have some previous knowledge of both Cthulhu and Totoro. As noticed by Hutcheon, “parodic codes, after all, have to be shared for parody—as parody—to be comprehended” (93).

Viewers familiar with the film *My Neighbour Totoro* can grasp the deep irony of having Cthulhu and the even more evil The Coon / Cartman replacing the innocent characters of the Japanese film. However, while at first this parody seems to reduce Cthulhu to a pure object, there are a few elements that demonstrate *South Park* is instead paying homage to the monster.

An important element of parody Hutcheon notices is that “parody’s transgressions ultimately remain authorized—authorized by the very norm it seeks to subvert” (75). Hutcheon suggests that, no matter how the subject of parody seems to be derided and reduced to a mere object, the parody itself is sanctioned by members of an interpretive community that deeply care for the parodied content. In the case of *South Park*, the authors of the show are not deriding Cthulhu, but celebrating the monster. Thanks to the multiple references to Lovecraft’s fictions present in the three episodes taken into analysis, it is clear how the people behind the show possess a deep knowledge of Lovecraft’s source material. The show depicts Cthulhu’s cultists during their evocations, shows unnameable creatures similar to those described in Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* and Cthulhu’s extra dimensional realm is as nonsensical as Lovecraft’s non-Euclidean geometry. The team of creators behind *South Park* are part of the interpretive community that possesses a large knowledge of Lovecraft’s material and appreciates it. Thus, this parody cannot but be both benevolent and one that gently mocks Cthulhu, only to celebrate it.

In this parody Cthulhu also maintains important elements of his monstrousness. During the song montage Cthulhu is seen smashing religious buildings, crushing a van full of hippies and killing people, while The Coon laughs. Even if the contrast between the innocent song and the violent images is utilized for comedic purposes, it is undeniable that this version of Cthulhu is still the Extradimensional Evil. Cohen’s thesis that the monster always escapes is maintained, even though in quite a humorous way. Cthulhu is literally dragged back to his dimension by Mint-Berry Crunch, the kid with the most ridiculous superhero identity who incidentally discovers to be the only one with real superpowers. However, the monster is again only temporarily banished, and may find his way to our world in the future.

Moreover, while possessing the interpretive code for properly reading the references to *My Neighbour Totoro* may enhance the view of the episodes, viewers can still enjoy and laugh at it. The comedy comes from the clash between the cheerful and happy music and the evil deeds committed by Cthulhu, and any viewer can perceive that without having any knowledge of the Japanese film. The humor of the musical sequence, but also of the use of Cthulhu across the three episodes, can also be enjoyed by those viewers who do not have any previous knowledge of Cthulhu and Lovecraft’s fiction. *South Park* does not waste much exposition in explaining Cthulhu, but from the reactions of all the characters and the monster’s actions a viewer can easily understand that Cthulhu is supposed to be an evil monster from another dimension. The main difference between *South Park*’s use of Cthulhu is how the monster is integrated into the television show’s formula. *The Real Ghostbusters* uses Cthulhu to create a mythos story for children,

while *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* uses the monster and other elements from Lovecraft's fictions to create a mystery that is also a parody of the Weird fiction genre. *South Park*, compared to the other two animated shows, has a less restrictive formula that allows its writers a more creative approach. Cthulhu is positioned into a superhero-themed story arc, where the monster has a less prominent role. However, the show still finds a clever way to introduce the monster into its formula, having Cthulhu interacting with The Coon/Cartman. Cthulhu, the embodiment of absolute chaos, is slowly overshadowed by the evil nature of Cartman, who in the end becomes the true villain of the story arc. Having Cthulhu becoming the right-hand-man of the kid allows the show to use the monster to continue one of the recurring themes of its formula. Cthulhu is then only partially normalized to enhance the comedic side of the show, while retaining his monstrosity to highlight the higher evil of Cartman.

Conclusion

All the shows that I have analyzed, in different ways, present ready-to-use characters and situations. *The Real Ghostbusters* is based on a successful film and uses the same characters while expanding on their stories. *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* not only reboots the characters of the previous *Scooby-Doo* series, but uses tropes from the murder mystery genre and the haunted house films. *South Park* often uses real-life characters and other media properties in the service of parody and humor. Moreover, the show is in its twenty-second season and some of its characters, such as Cartman, have become iconic and carry with them some expectations regarding their behavior. These shows include Cthulhu in their own formal processes of simplification and repetition, thus producing a ready-to-use version of the monster that is easy to understand for their audiences and is also quite marketable. It would be a challenging task to introduce an unnameable monster like Cthulhu in a twenty-minute and often self-contained narration, while also trying to follow a well-established formula. A partially normalized version of Cthulhu offers a practical solution for the shows' creators, as the monster becomes an iconic character that can be used and re-used for multiple purposes. Cthulhu does not lose his origins of monstrosity and becomes recognizable enough for the viewers that are already familiar with him, but not too obscure for those who are new to the monster. The different versions of Cthulhu appearing in *The Real Ghostbusters*, *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated*, and *South Park* only partially normalize the monster, so that they can fit him into their formulas.

As demonstrated by the analysis of the three television shows, Cthulhu still retains part of his monstrosity. A comparison between the trajectory of another monster, already mentioned in this article, can help to better understand the fluctuation of Cthulhu's normalization. Godzilla first appears as a threat and metaphor of the atomic bomb in the film *Godzilla* (1954), only to slowly become one of humanity's ally in *Destroy All Monster* (1968), and in the animated series *Godzilla* (1978-1980). However, in *Godzilla 1985* (1984) the monster becomes again a menace for humanity, only to go back to be the only one

capable of stopping other terrible monsters in the 1990s and early 2000s. Even in recent years Godzilla seems to be going through different stages of normalization: it is a threat, but also an accidental savior in the American reboot *Godzilla* (2014), while in the Japanese *Shin Godzilla* (2016) the monster is an absolute menace. Lastly in *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019) Godzilla is now back fighting other giant creatures for the sake of humanity'. Cthulhu is then following a trajectory similar to that of Godzilla. His monstrosity is often reduced, sometimes even drastically, as in the graphic novel *Howard Lovecraft and the Frozen Kingdom* (2010) and its animated adaptation released in 2016, where Cthulhu becomes the pet and guardian of young Lovecraft. Not unlike Godzilla, Cthulhu always manages to escape and come back later in another text. However, while in a few films the giant lizard has been almost completely assimilated, Cthulhu resists a complete normalization. Despite possessing a defined shape, Cthulhu also contains elements of the unnameable, which makes this creature impossible to be fully comprehended and, thus, allows him to stand out among the other monsters. In the animated television shows analysed in this article Cthulhu is hunted, parodied, and manipulated, but his monstrosity never truly disappears.

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About the Author

Dr Valentino Paccosi was awarded his doctoral degree in English at Lancaster University, where he teaches Film Studies and English Literature. He is currently researching on the fictions of H. P. Lovecraft, their readings and their influence on different genres in contemporary media such as film, TV and graphic novels. He published the article ‘From Lovecraft to Hellboy: The Carnavalesque Face of the Lovecraftian’ on the 2017 issue titled *Global Fantastika* of the *Fantastika Journal*. He is working on the chapter titled ‘The Call of the Eldrazi: The Lovecraftian in *Magic: The Gathering*’, soon to be published in the book *Essays on Magic: The Gathering* by McFarland & Company.