

H.P. Lovecraft's Conflict with Classical Philosophy and How It Influences Modern Literature and Aesthetics

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Abstract. This paper is going to do research on H.P. Lovecraft and his Cthulhu Literature. Since the beginning of the 20th century, a new genre of literature, permeated with weirdness, began to emerge. It was an evolution of the Gothic novel, yet it completely subverted it, it also had a profound impact on traditional philosophy by the acknowledgement of many scholars, transforming the cosmism and epistemology under the capitalistic world. The philosophy presented by Lovecraft shows extreme anti-rationality; his thought conflicts with the doctrines of Kant, and echoes the doctrines of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. And, just as it's identity at the beginning, Cthulhu literature has profoundly influenced all subsequent pop culture fields, including popular literature, music, role play games, and visual arts. Its influence is also unique, the core idea Cthulhu literature reveals is completely different from other fiction literary systems, and it has even been repeatedly paid tribute to by modern art works. This paper is going to explore the conflict between Lovecraft's idea and traditional philosophy, and how it impacted the following arts and aesthetics.

Keywords: Lovecraft, Cthulhu, philosophy, aesthetics, pop culture

1. Introduction

In his famous book Critique of Practical Reason, Immanuel Kant stated, "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe... the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." [1], And what is it in the starry heaven that made him feel admired? In the 19th century, a litterateur called Howard Phillips Lovecraft had a deeper perception of it; he denied the ideas of being rational and exploring the cosmic. He suggested a unique concept of cosmism and the impossibility of cognition. This paper is going to expound on his conflict with the classical philosophers like Kant. In addition, Lovecraft was more likely to be known as a writer of horror literature; his most famous work, the Cthulhu Mythos, was the key impression of his ideology. The paper is also going to do research on how Lovecraft influenced the later arts, including literature and visual art.

2. To talk about the cosmism of Lovecraft—how did his philosophy overturn the classical philosophy

Please be aware that this section is not aiming to churn over the philosophy in Cthulhu Mythos, but to explore the contradiction between it and classical philosophers, how it overturned the ideology under the guide of the 19th capitalism, and how did it echoed with modern philosophers.

Since 14th century, the Renaissance brought back people's will and confidence of exploring the universe, the Christian Church's dominance was gradually weakened, and the doctrines that people followed were later replaced one by one [2]. Till the 17th century, the Enlightenment derived a brand new concept, which is rationality. Even nowadays, the doctrines from the period of Enlightenment, for example, absolute rationality, progressivism, and materialism, are the mainstream ideology accepted by people. According to Theodoros Rakopoulos's statement, Lovecraft did not believe the cognition was hinged on human's rationality like the Enlightenment thinkers did, he felt that there must be beings that humans were not able to understand at all, this was reflected in all his novels and poems [3]. In my opinion, reason was essentially a term coined by scholars in the era of Enlightenment, but not a brand new concept. In a sense, it's just a play on words during the Enlightenment. Rationality is the objective understanding of things, and the foundation of it is human cognition. Therefore, we can actually say that the Aboriginal sorcery also represents rationality, because the primitives absolutely and devoutly adhere to the ancient gods and totems. They strictly follow religious teachings to understand the world and regulate themselves. Actually according to the Chinese scholar Yi Zhongtian's opinion, sorcery was the earliest science, this is truly the entirety of their cognition [4]. However, the introduction of a variable led to the birth of this new Enlightenment term: science. Descartes, Kant, and Nietzsche lived through the Science Revolution, and the information volume for them to understand the world was completely different from that of the Christian Bible, and also from that of the earlier, the versatile philosophers of ancient Greece, such as Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle. With the advent of the Age of Exploration, the world became smaller and smaller, and there were more and more things that could be explained, which gave rise to the Enlightenment and people started the process of physics and chemistry. People obviously had enough reasons to believe in rationality and the norms brought by morality. Lovecraft obviously did not agree with this view. He radically and forcefully subverts human fantasy of a moral utopia.

If we compare Kant and Lovecraft, former, the most representative figures of the Enlightenment and classical philosophy, latter, while a radical opponent of the rationalism advocated by the former, is not as incompatible as we would think. First, they had completely different perspectives on morality. In Practical Reason Critique, Kant believed that there is an objective morality in the world, derived from reason [1]. Based on this understanding, Anthony Kenny believed Kant sought to create a new discipline within the oldest and most chaotic metaphysics: the metaphysics of morality. Kant believed that the categorical imperative was the guiding principle of morality, objectively good, and a principle that all should abide by [5]. Lovecraft completely rejected this theory, his cosmism rejected the existence of objective morality in the universe, believing that morality was a limited expedient devised by humans for survival. When faced with otherness, such as the Great Old Ones he created, morality had no place. In his famous novel, the Call of Cthulhu, the awakening of this Great One delivers a fatal blow to the humans who witness him [6]. However, this was not the will of this being; it was simply an objective fact, devoid of any good or purpose. This is the difference between Lovecraft and other thinkers critical of moralism, they discuss the meaning of morality and its application in different situations, while Lovecraft directly denies the existence of morality itself. But Kant and Lovecraft shared some common ground regarding rationality. Kant

believed that human cognition comprises three components: perception, understanding, and reason. However, reason can only understand "phenomena", when exploring the world's finiteness, infinity, simplicity, and complexity, reason can lead human cognition into a state of contradiction. Kant called this phenomenon an antinomy. As one of the founders of rationalism, he firmly believed that reason cannot enable humans to understand "noumenon" [1]. Lovecraft went further; he completely denied the reality of the existing world. In his view, it is impossible for humans to understand the real world. Clearly, in his view, the existence of rationality is merely a false perception before humans encounter the absolute truth [7].

Science, as a variable, is constantly expanding. In many cases, it even exponentially alters productivity and information acquisition. To this day, human existence is inevitably accompanied by the growth of scientific capabilities. Therefore, we can conclude that the "rationality" championed by the Enlightenment inevitably underwent corresponding changes with the addition of science. In the early 20th century, Einstein's theory of relativity proved the nonexistence of Newton's concept of absolute space and time, as discussed in classical physics. Quantum mechanics subsequently proved the impossibility of Laplace's Demon, and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle transformed the course of physics. In this era, the "rationality" championed by the Enlightenment was unable to explain the emerging reality, and Lovecraft was deeply influenced. Lovecraft firmly believed that humanity's understanding of the universe was only a small part of what it was, and that the rest could not and should not be understood. The problem Lovecraft faced at this time was similar to that of earlier myths: they lacked sufficient information to explain the unknown. However, as a staunch mechanical materialist, Lovecraft reconstructed the very concept of "myth." The Cthulhu mythos no longer possessed the clear-cut system of gods and men of earlier Western mythology, but rather became fragmented and chaotic [8].

According to Giovanni Mariotti, against the backdrop of scientism, Lovecraft became a critic of religion, denying the purposefulness of existence [9]. His identification with science and his acceptance of chaos made him an atheist. Lovecraft himself is more appropriately described as an agnostic than an atheist, but he firmly identifies himself as the former. Based on the scientific developments of his time, he was confident that religious gods do not exist. Although he could not scientifically prove this, he always believed that it was precisely because of humanity's inherent ignorance that attempts to gain ultimate knowledge of anything were meaningless. In other words, he disagreed with the philosophical view that metaphysics has no answers in the universe, arguing that ultimate questions are beyond human comprehension in the objective physical world. In addition to religion and mythology, astronomy also profoundly influenced Lovecraft. He said,

"The most profound experiences of my life were the discovery of the Greek world in 1896, and the discovery of the world of countless suns and infinite space in 1902." This is why I mentioned the eras in which he lived above, because Lovecraft himself acknowledged the profound influence of physics [8]. Precisely because of this, his worldview was contradictory: he believed in the equal insignificance and vulnerability of human beings in the face of all reality, yet in his early years he was a racist. Darko Suvin thought, as a racist who excluded outsiders, he instead portrayed the primitive religions of non-white people in his literary works as a relatively correct understanding of the world [10]. Although an atheist, the literary characters he created were later regarded as gods. Lovecraft's philosophy, in fact, coexisted with science and logic, religion and superstition, and he consistently sought to use the former to explain the latter. Mariotti believed, Lovecraft's ideas resonated deeply with two other critics of classical philosophy, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and he himself acknowledged Nietzsche's profound influence. Nietzsche believed that the most arrogant moment in the cold universe was the birth of humanity in this star system [11]. Lovecraft's works are

filled with similar reflections on the insignificance of human life in the vast universe. He acknowledged the existence of fate but not purpose, contrary to religious teleology. He held that fate is determined by cause and effect, rooted in the inexorable laws of nature, which bind humanity to a meaningless yet inescapable destiny, "The only cosmic reality is unconscious, immutable fate—automatic, amoral, uncalculated necessity." Lovecraft believed that fate was scientific, completely different from the mythological concept of "providence." His rejection of mythology in favor of mechanical materialism led to what he called apathy, a rejection of both optimism and pessimism, because "both schools, in different ways, retain the primitive concept of conscious teleology." From this, we can infer that he believed that human existence is meaningless, which is more similar to Schopenhauer's philosophy than to Nietzsche's [9]. In his work *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer argued that "the world is my representation." He believed that the external world we perceive exists only as representation, far from being the world's essence. He argued that all the physical laws, chemical changes, and other phenomena we experience are merely the rationality we use to understand the representations of the world we create [12]. This theory clearly resonates with Lovecraft, who clearly believed that the world we perceive is far from its reality. However, according to Dr. Pingyuan Wen, Schopenhauer believed that both idealism, in which the subject dominates the object, that is, thought dominates consciousness, and materialism, in which the object determines the subject, that is, matter determines thought, are wrong [13]. This seems to conflict with Lovecraft, a mechanical materialist. I actually believe that Schopenhauer's criticism of materialism is consistent with Lovecraft's in some respects. Schopenhauer believed that the error of materialism lies in its starting point from external objects and taking them as its basis, assuming that the world is a material entity, independent of human will. He believed that since everything is discovered and categorized by language, it has been objectively endowed with meaning by the subject. In other words, he believed that without the subject who discovers the object, the object itself does not exist. Lovecraft firmly believed that the world we perceive is unreal, or at least that we do not fully understand it. This shows that he believed that the current world is indeed only a world understood by humans based on their own shallow understanding, which is not inconsistent with Schopenhauer's theory of world representation. Schopenhauer's criticism of idealism overlaps with Lovecraft's views even more clearly. He believed that the flaw of traditional idealism lies in its separation of object and subject, because the subject—humanity—is unable to understand objective things. This is clearly a core concept of Cthulhu literature and the source of what Lovecraft believes to be humanity's deepest emotion: fear. Schopenhauer thus established a philosophy that unified subject and object, ultimately concluding that the world is neither complete nor perfect; it remains merely a representation. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer quotes the ancient Indian sage Maya, arguing that the world is the veil of the deceitful god of ancient Indian philosophy, a veil that blinds humanity [12]. This bears a striking resemblance to Lovecraft's myths and deities. Schopenhauer's ancient Indian deceitful god, in my opinion, closely resembles Azathoth, the High God of Cthulhu Mythos who first be mentioned in *The Whisperer in Darkness*, the god of blindness and idiot [6]. The world was born from Azathoth's slumber, his sleep like the veil of Maya. However, after this slumber ends and humanity draws back the veil of the deceitful god, Schopenhauer and Lovecraft diverge. Lovecraft's deity would bring the collapse of physical laws, the annihilation of the spiritual world, and the end of civilization, while Schopenhauer proposed a "world as will", both agree that understanding the world lies beyond human reason. Schopenhauer believed that a beyond exists, a world that is not incomprehensible, and that humans can use intuition to find the essence of things, thereby building a bridge to that beyond. He felt that when phenomena, the self, and the thing-in-itself merge into one,

the will—the person's direct essence—emerges. Lovecraft clearly disagreed with this view. He always maintained that the world is unknowable, and even if someone were to reach the truth of things, it would not create a transcendental being, but would directly lead to endless madness.

I believe that Lovecraft can, to some extent, be considered a descendant of the Enlightenment, despite being born 200 years after its inception. And he was also a radical subversive. In the late Enlightenment, there were numerous critics of the movement, they raised numerous questions about rationalism, but the most subversive figure was Lovecraft. This article is by no means intended to suggest that Lovecraft possessed deeper thought or achieved greater academic distinction than other great philosophers, but rather that he was so unique that few before him had such a dark philosophical expression of the universe. I believe there are two factors that shaped his thinking: personal and contemporary. Lovecraft himself was deeply interested in astronomy and quantum mechanics. As a child, his first literary exposure was to Greek and Roman mythology, along with the horror novels his grandfather read to him. These had a profound influence on his later ideology [8]. The late 19th century to the early 20th century was also a time when capitalism began to reveal its huge problems and the world began to undergo great changes. The barbarity and cruelty of capitalism gave rise to its opposite socialism [14]. The rationalism and progressivism of the Enlightenment were essentially created to meet the moral needs of capitalist society. The class it satisfied was actually the capitalists. Lovecraft was a self-proclaimed superior racist, but objectively, his ideas were the product of the development of socialism. His socialist outlook developed into cosmism. He completely transcended contradictions of humanity, and unlike Schopenhauer, he did not believe that the tragedy of life is not the meaninglessness of existence, but the powerlessness in the face of incomprehensible things [9]. It was with this motivation that he wrote his own horror novels, achieving a status unprecedented in this field and emulated by countless subsequent authors. Even though he did not achieve a comparable influence during his lifetime, he had a profound subsequent influence on modern aesthetics [7]. His literary ideas and ideologies remain a subculture to this day, as his ideas cannot be verified in physics to this day, although they are also unfalsifiable. As a result, a unique type of literature has been formed that includes many fans and communities but has yet to become mainstream. This might because of the nature of horror literature is actually anti-capitalism, since its birth, so naturally it will not be widely accepted by the mainstream under the modern capitalist world that has occupied the world for about 400 years. And I am going to analyse the nature of horror literature and why it was anti-capitalism in the next section when we talk about the origin of Cthulhu Mythos.

3. Aesthetic influence on modern arts-analyze the profound and diverse impact of Lovecraft's aesthetics through case studies of influenced works in literature, film, and visual arts

3.1. The origin—what did Lovecraft reference when writing the Cthulhu Mythos

At the very beginning, did Cthulhu Mythos referenced or inspired by anything? Of course. We need to go back to his time and explore his works. In fact, Lovecraft's literary enlightenment can be traced back to Greece and Rome, the classical era. He believed, Greece and Rome created an extremely favorable environment for writers, within which they perfected the art and science of expression. He argued that classical writers achieved a standard of taste that surpassing all later styles. He also considered his own modern era, after the classical era, to be the most mature period of literature, simply because it was the most successful period in imitating classical literature [8]. We can see that Lovecraft held a pessimistic attitude towards the progress of civilization. It is hard to imagine that someone who believed that mankind achieved the highest artistic achievements in Greece and Rome

would believe that civilization is constantly progressing. Moreover, what he considered the most mature literary era, his own era, was just an imitation of classical literature. He also considered himself a pursuer of classical literature. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were an era of scientism, materialism, and liberalism, all of which Lovecraft subscribed to, but not the equally prevalent egalitarianism and economism. He also affirmed the pursuit of art, believing that only art with sufficient appreciation and adherence to traditional aesthetics was worthy of praise. He also criticized modern art, believing that the artistic styles of his time excessively abandoned tradition. He also rejected Karl Marx's socialism, believing that its redistribution of social resources for greater equality was barbaric. In a sense, Lovecraft's version of socialism was somewhat "fascist". Ideologically, Lovecraft was both a subversive, rejecting capitalism and the Enlightenment, and a conservative, affirming classical aesthetics and actively participating in the revival of the classics. This also led to Lovecraft's cosmism, which stemmed from his elitism and was inseparable from his racism. However, I believe his racism was not unchanging, as evidenced in his final years. He believed that the Anglo-Saxons, while noble, were also the root of all disasters [3]. This is very intriguing. In today's world, in the 21st century, the values are obviously anti-nationalist, but if we expand the perspective to all races on the earth, has human beings themselves become the new "racists"? In a sense, human beings also claim to be noble but are the root of all troubles. This has also become a deep core of Lovecraft's literature. I have mentioned his contradictions many times in the article. When he is a racist, he criticizes human beings for putting themselves at the center of the world. If Lovecraft had a faith, it could only be science. He deeply loved physics and delved deeply into it, incorporating the physics of the time into his own work. While Lovecraft's most profound influence on horror art is undoubtedly his Cthulhu Mythos, I believe it's not horror literature, but rather a work of fantasy, closely related to hard science fiction. Many of the ideas he embodied in his work have inspired countless subsequent science fiction novels. Of course, we can't overlook the most obvious influence: the horror novels his grandfather read to Lovecraft as a child, as well as the works of his contemporaries, such as the novels of Edgar Allan Poe, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Frankenstein* [15].

3.2. The uncanny—examples of works influenced by Cthulhu Mythos, and the conflict between Lovecraft's myth and some of the modern days' mainstream arts

Pop culture is certainly the area most influenced by Lovecraft, but at the same time it is also the most anti-Lovecraft. Lovecraft's most significant and profound influence is the uncanny in his works. He went further than his predecessors, explored the supernatural events that appear in his works as something completely detached from human cognition. The horror he created is more chaotic and aimed to cause physiological discomfort. If previous horror writers used eerie atmospheres and portrayals of the darkness of human nature to create terror, Lovecraft completely departs from this category. He made horror unconfrontable, a kind that cannot be faced within existing human ethics, because the greatest fear comes from the unknown. The embodiment of the unknown is the image of monsters in fantasy and science fiction works. We can see from the science fiction movie *Annihilation*, directed by Alex Garland. The images of creatures in this movie are chilling, such as a bear that can make human voices because it eats the human when she is crying and shouting, humans who turn into plants, and the alien creature that copies humans, which is very similar to Lovecraft's classic novel *The Colour Out of Space* [16]. However, the mainstream of modern art is actually influenced by Cthulhu more in terms of technology and techniques. In literature, it is rhetoric and description, in movies, it is special effects and photography, and in visual art, it is a design of chaos and disorder. But as I said before, Cthulhu culture is still a subculture

today. This is because its essentially anti-anthropocentric attitude cannot be widely guided by mainstream culture. So, where is the conflict between the supernatural image design in mainstream culture and Cthulhu? In my opinion, the genre represented by Lovecraft's Cthulhu designs monsters as a mixture of multiple elements, without any aesthetic sense, and they are indescribable. The most classic one is, of course, the eponymous Great Old One Cthulhu, which is a sea monster that combines an octopus and a dragon. Although the mainstream genres in the field of popular culture take completely opposite paths, this does not mean that there is no intersection between the two, where they absorb each other. The most typical anti-Cthulhu examples are Godzilla and Xenomorph, which represent 2 of the most outstanding monster designs of Japan and Hollywood respectively. The anti-Cthulhu nature of these monsters lies in their biological beauty. Godzilla's original design was based on dinosaurs. He was born from ancient creatures exposed to nuclear radiation. In essence, he was an image created for anti-war purposes. In later movies, whether in the Heisei period or Universal Pictures' Hollywood Godzilla, he gradually evolved into the guardian of the earth and became a hero [17]. In this design, we can see a sense of simplicity and order. If compared with the Outer God symbolizing the moon in *Bloodborne* by Hidetaka Miyazaki, which is a mixture of many creatures [18]. Both are top-level aesthetic designs. Godzilla is relatively simple in appearance, its beauty is reflected in the real-world resonance that the audience can find, whether it is for ancient creatures or anti-war thoughts. The Moon God is a pure chaotic embodiment for humans. Xenomorph is also a design with Cthulhu elements, and its approach to horror is very much in line with Lovecraft's "fear of the unknown". In the first *Alien* film, Ridley Scott didn't reveal the monster until around the 40-minute mark, undoubtedly creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and helplessness for both the audience and the characters. While beyond the filming techniques, the *Alien*'s design is anti-Cthulhu. Hans Ruedi Giger's creatures are required to be aesthetically charming and sexually suggestive. We can see that the Xenomorph's body is highly organized, a perfect war machine capable of self-proliferation. The subsequent film, *Prometheus*, furthers the *Alien* worldview, exploring the origins of humanity. This differs from the deliberate ambiguity of human creation in Cthulhu literature. In *Alien*, Scott intuitively describes the Engineer race, the creators of humanity and their creator, Deacon. This contrasts with the insignificance of humanity in Lovecraft's works; in *Alien*, humanity is given meaning [19].

The fear of the unknown is another creation that comes with this uncanny and has influenced countless later generations, and we can glimpse this contribution from many subsequent genre works. For example, the style of cyberpunk creates a kind of "cognitive alienation", as stated by Darko Suvin, and "dystopia" that is to some extent consistent with Cthulhu literature [10]. Their core is to criticize human desire for control. In Cthulhu literature, the object of criticism is the exploration of the universe and the unknown, while in cyberpunk, it is the capital that wants to gain absolute power. A less obvious example is the Dark Forest Law in *The Dark Forest*, the second book in Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* Trilogy, which is highly consistent with the cosmology of the Cthulhu mythology. In this science fiction work, Liu designed a cosmic sociology. This discipline has two axioms: "survival is the primary need of any civilization", and "civilizations continuously grow and expand, but the total matter in the universe remains constant". Based on this, two concepts are generated: the "chain of suspicion" and "technological explosion". This book believes that there is no possibility of communication between civilizations. The first thing to do when discovering the location of a civilization is to destroy the other party. Earth civilization survives in such a universe, and after understanding the laws of cosmic sociology, it fell into boundless fear [20]. The similarities between *The Three-Body Problem* and Cthulhu literature are

obvious. They both emphasize the insignificance of human beings in the universe, and the impossibility of communication between civilizations and between humans and gods.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I explore how Lovecraft's own philosophy, including his cosmicism, clashes with classical philosophers, and how it was influenced by and resonates with other philosophers of the same period. Lovecraft's cosmicism is also reflected in his literary works, forming a unique Cthulhu aesthetic. I also explore how this influences modern mainstream aesthetics, the conflicts it creates with mainstream aesthetics, and why it has failed to become mainstream culture.

My research has revealed that Lovecraft was primarily a mechanical materialist. He rejected the rationality guided by the Enlightenment and believed that good and evil existed in the world, according to human standards of judgment. This conflicted with Kant's ideas and broke with the intellectual tradition established since the Enlightenment. This theory evolved into cosmism, which held that humans are incapable of understanding the true nature of the world and are merely insignificant individuals within the universe. The meaning of existence lies beyond cognition. Due to space limitations, I cannot explore the meaning of existence as embodied in Cthulhu philosophy, a limitation of this article. He was also an anti-capitalist, opposing equality and freedom for all, progressivism, and economism inherent in a capitalist society. He was also a conflicted racist. While a socialist, he disagreed with Marx's socialism, preferring a more fascist version of National Socialism. While Lovecraft embodies the contradictory nature of human nature, he also embodies the consistency between thought and action that a scholar should possess. In his later years, he reflected on his own racism and remained a devoted believer in science. He also admired classical literature very much, and combined with his own aesthetic tendencies, he created the unique Cthulhu aesthetics, which directly or indirectly influenced most of the subsequent science fiction and fantasy works.

A limitation of this article is that it doesn't delve into the conflicts or resonances between Cthulhu literature and any specific work, focusing instead on theoretical research. I've always believed that people should understand the origins of existing aesthetics. Cthulhu philosophy and aesthetics have profoundly influenced all ideologies and artistic fields. Studying Cthulhu literature is essentially about recognizing an element that has permeated every aspect of society. It's also a form of philosophical inquiry. Lovecraft has influenced postmodern philosophy, and studying Cthulhu literature itself is essentially engaging in philosophical reflection.

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