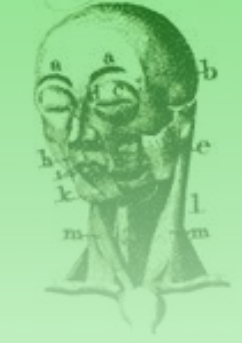


Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Horror & Science

ESSAYS ON THE HORROR
GENRE, SKEPTICISM, &
SCIENTOLOGY

JASON COLAVITO



Horror & Science

Essays on the Horror Genre, Skepticism, and Scientology

By Jason Colavito

ALSO BY JASON COLAVITO

The Cult of Alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture (Prometheus, 2005)

Knowing Fear: Science, Knowledge, and the Development of the Horror Genre (McFarland, 2008)

"A Hideous Bit of Morbidity": An Anthology of Horror Criticism from the Enlightenment to World War I (McFarland, 2009)

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Introduction

FOR NEARLY THREE CENTURIES, the horror genre has offered a running commentary on the role of science in our society. Whether this takes the form of mad scientists like Victor Frankenstein or Dr. Moreau or unclassifiable monsters that defy human reason like Ambrose Bierce's *Damned Thing* or the extraterrestrial blasphemies of H. P. Lovecraft, horror stories show us that the light of knowledge does not always illuminate the darkest corners of our world, or our souls.

My book *Knowing Fear: Science, Knowledge, and the Development of the Horror Genre* (McFarland, 2008) explores the intimate relationship between science and horror stories. The following collection of essays examines some of the odder corners of the intersection of reason and fear, including professional skeptics who condemn horror fiction as dangerous, radical theorists who misused horror ideas to claim aliens visited the ancient earth, and the thematic connections between H. P. Lovecraft's ancient extraterrestrial gods and the cosmology of Scientology.

The Need to Know: Science and Scientism in Horror Literature

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN IS PERHAPS the epitome of the mad scientist, recklessly seeking to become the modern Prometheus and appropriate for himself some of the powers that Nature delegated to her God. From his dark laboratory Frankenstein sought to transform dead flesh into a living, man-made creation, life beholden not to God but to man alone. This frightened even the scientist himself who confessed that “often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion” (Shelley 39). In that sentence the reader sees a contradictory attitude toward science and knowledge which permeates horror literature. The pursuit of knowledge is intoxicating, desirable, and ultimately terrifying. Science and knowledge can only bring horror when they step outside their proper place and infringe on areas best left to other agents.

The origins of this mad scientist seem to stretch back far in time, at least to Christopher Marlowe’s written version of the Dr. Faustus folk tale. The doctor sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for knowledge (and therefore power), but his knowledge leads only to tragedy as he is dragged to Hell and the Chorus exhorts the audience “[o]nly to wonder at unlawful things/Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits/To practice more than heavenly power permits”

(Marlowe 56). Even at this early date we can see that the powers of science are perceived as evil, an affront to God and heavenly power. Yet by the 18th century, Goethe was able to reverse the ending of the story and allow Faustus (now Faust) to enter Heaven, though only through the power of irrational Love. Faust's knowledge still condemns him to Hell; only by embracing the irrational can he save his soul.

Noel Carroll proposes that this basic story of the transgressive scientists is one of a handful of basic plots of the horror story. Calling it the "Overreacher Plot," Carroll says the protagonist seeks out forbidden knowledge, releases its power, and must deal with the consequences. The warning is clear: do not go beyond accepted boundaries (Carroll 57). Carroll further says that the other major plotline related to this is the "Discovery Plot" wherein the protagonists discover the existence of something that defies common knowledge and must expend their energy both vanquishing the horror and proving to others that the horror existed: "Such a plot celebrates the existence of things beyond the common knowledge" (Carroll 57).

But perhaps these plots are not entirely opposites. Both are overly concerned with knowledge as a source of horror, and both seem to reflect the same ambivalent attitude toward the power of science that permeates modern thought. It seems that the core issue at stake in the horror story is the issue of science versus scientism. The former is a way of learning through experimentation, theorization, and testing. The latter is a dogmatic acceptance that what is known is all that can be known, and the accepted way of knowing is the only way to know. In a philosophical sense, horror tales seem to face a very post-modern struggle: the battle between positivism (scientism) and pure science. In most cases, scientism fails, though science often wins.

Historian Jacques Barzun recognizes scientism as a major theme in Western Civilization, and he provides the clearest explanation of why it produces a profound disappointment and backlash like the one evident in horror art:

The clue to the fallacy of scientism is this: geometry (in all senses of the word) is an abstraction from experience; it could not live without the work of the human mind on what it encounters in the world. Hence the realm of abstraction, useful and far from unreal, is thin and bare and poorer than the world it is drawn from. It is therefore an idle dream to think of someday getting along without direct dealings with what the abstraction leaves untouched. (Barzun 218)

The ultimate result is a profound disconnect in modern life, a feeling that humanity is disconnected from the world and from the path to true knowledge. This in essence is the origins of Carroll's idea of knowledge as the predominant theme of horror.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a perfect example of the difference between science and scientism. In the novel, Dr. Seward, the consummate scientist (in both senses), cannot at first believe that vampires or real or that Lucy is subject to their attack. In fact, when his dogmatic acceptance of scientism is questioned by Van Helsing's other ways of knowing, Seward tells his diary: "I am beginning to wonder if my long habit of life amongst the insane is beginning to tell upon my own brain" (Stoker 130). The fact of the matter is that Van Helsing is a consummate man of science, for his titles and degrees confirm that. So how can one rectify this with his belief in the supernatural? One can simply because Van Helsing is pursuing knowledge without the handicap of dogma. He is free to accept vampires because he has tested and confirmed they existed, not because he has refused to accept them for violating some deeply held belief about the workings of the universe.

Thus in *Dracula* is science and progress and the Victorian ideal triumphant even as the traditional scientific establishment is powerless to protect against the vampire threat. Only by embracing knowledge in its purest sense are the scientific advances like typewriters, steam-engines, and telegraphs transformed into tools to fight against evil.

But this struggle is not without cost. Susan Navarette argues that death and self-negation are the ultimate result of knowledge in Victorian horror fiction, just as pure impersonal objectivity is the stated goal of pure science (112). In this, she echoes Buddhist teachings, which hold that perfect atonement (at-*one*-ment) brings perfect knowledge and thus the immolation of the self into the bliss that is Nirvana. So in *Dracula*, all of the triumphant characters who defeat the vampire also lose something of themselves in the process. They have gained knowledge, but as the final “Note” makes clear, Harker’s new son has melded the men together so that their identities cease to be distinct (as though they ever were): “His bundle of names links all our little band of men together” (Stoker 365).

Similarly, Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* produces the same result. The ultimate result of the scientist Jekyll’s quest is his own self-negation. He takes the potion in order to free himself from Victorian restraints, but having ventured outside the bounds of acceptable science, like Faustus before him, he is destroyed. Thus he conforms to Carroll’s Overreacher Plot while also confirming Navarette’s science-as-negation theory. In the end, Jekyll gives himself over to the demon Hyde, his “true hour of death,” and Hyde, too, takes it upon himself to destroy the results of positivism gone awry (Stevenson 103).

Yet even in this Victorian matrix we can see the seeds of the science-scientism struggle to come. Jekyll cloaks his actions in the language of science, justifying his actions purely in terms of the positivist and of scientific theory. He represents not the true pursuit of knowledge so much as the attempt of the believer in scientism to push the boundaries of science into those areas where it has no right to be. The human mind, it seems to argue, is no place for science to probe its instruments and potions. In Jekyll’s theory that there are multiple areas in the human mind, we see the origins of modern theories that hold that the human mind as creator of the laws of science can never successfully employ them to explore itself. Jekyll confesses that he does not know

how many parts man truly is; in this he presages the post-modernists who hold that knowledge is personal and fragmentary, that there is no one knowledge but many, and that science is but one method among many.

Later, H. P. Lovecraft would carry these themes still further, pushing science beyond space and time and making knowledge not just a path to self-negation but the ultimate source of horror itself. In such stories as “Call of Cthulhu,” Lovecraft posits a universe of pure science, where the rule of materialism prevails, and there is no place for supernatural saviors or ultimate good. In his stories, the seeker after forbidden knowledge inevitably goes mad from the revelation. As he ghost-wrote for William Lumley in “The Diary of Alonzo Typer”:

Truly there are terrible and primal arcana of Earth which had better be left unknown and unevoked; dread secrets which have nothing to do with man, and which man may learn only in exchange for peace and sanity; cryptic truths which make the knower evermore an alien among his kind, and cause him to walk the earth alone. (Lovecraft *Horror* 314-315)

But there is a corollary to this sad view of the world, one which demands that the seeker look for this knowledge at any price. From “The Whisperer in Darkness”:

To shake off the maddening and wearying limitations of time and space and natural law—to be linked with the vast *outside*—to come close to the nighted and abysmal secrets of the infinite and ultimate—surely such a thing was worth the risk of one’s life, soul, and sanity! (Lovecraft *Fiction* 699)

It is a Nietzschean logic at work. Quite simply, if the universe is godless and material, then there is no ultimate purpose to being, no

comforting figure in the sky. The horror of this revelation can be mitigated, however, by seeking out a pure knowledge of the universe even at the expense of the self. Like the Victorian immolation-by-science, Lovecraft's protagonists are compelled to seek out this knowledge even though it must inevitably result in the destruction of one's sense of self. The narrators of "Haunter of the Dark" or "Shadow Over Innsmouth" have no choice but to seek their inevitable destruction, just as Oedipus must; for the pursuit of this knowledge is the only structure and purpose that can animate a life lived in a material universe abandoned by the fictional gods that once populated humanities dreams. To attain perfect knowledge is to rebuke the dark dogma of scientism that believes that all that is known is all that can be known, and it is to make for oneself the epiphany that the heavens deny and death mocks.

But of course, the Nietzschean philosophy presented in Lovecraft could never become the philosophy of the masses because its demand for the abandonment of self to the blind forces of the universe is a price that few are willing to pay. Instead, the tension between science and scientism came to be caricatured as a battle between believers and non-believers. As Allen Grove maintains, horror stories evolved a narrative structure that relied on a battle between skeptics and believers: "The narrative energy and terror of these stories depends upon the tension between the skeptical, rational character and those forces that defy his reason. Ghost stories often appear self-conscious of their own skeptical audiences as they dramatize the empiricist's conversion to a 'believer'" (Grove).

In fact, Grove indirectly confirms that the battle is not really between faith and doubt but between science (as a method of learning) and scientism. He confirms that the skeptical character is almost always one who believes that a concession to the supernatural is tantamount to a renunciation of positivism (Grove). This is exactly the problem of scientism, and it is a problem that Richard Matheson begins to deal with

in his 1971 novel *Hell House*. In that book, the scientist character seems to follow the path of science, but is in fact on the path of scientism. His world-view is entirely material, accepting psychic powers and even ghosts as logical extensions of known phenomena. He denies that consciousness exists after death, and he believes in the absolute power of Science to save the world. He also is full of the self-satisfied conceit of the positivist: “Perhaps [he thought] someday the Reversor would occupy a place of honor in the Smithsonian Institution. He smiled sardonically” (Matheson 238). The irony of the book’s battle between science and scientism is that the positivist’s Reversor does its job even while the materialist theories that underpin it are presumably proved wrong by subsequent events.

And so the battle between science as a way to know and scientism as a dogmatic belief system becomes lost in a straw man argument about the conflict between science and faith. Books like *The Exorcist* seem at first to be a battle between faith and doubt, but they are in fact about another battle. In *The Exorcist*, Damien Karras seems to be torn between science and faith, and we are to believe, as the author William Peter Blatty does, that faith somehow triumphs over science when the dying Karras stares at “nothing in this world” (Blatty 374). But on closer examination, we can see that the battle was between the pure materialist believers in scientism who denied that demons could exist and thus treated Reagan’s problem with cruel and incorrect medicines and those who followed the path of true, unencumbered knowledge. Karras represents a true science that followed evidence where it led and came to a conclusion based upon reasoning, tests, and proof. If that science happened to lead to supernatural conclusion, so be it: it could not be discounted *prima facie* as impossible. Like his Victorian predecessors (in both senses) Karras too suffers self-immolation and the loss of his individual spirit before the objective reality of pure knowledge. The lesson is clear: the price of understanding is the loss of self, but it is also a boon that must be sought in order to

know even if it is but for a moment. It is as close to an epiphany that the modern world can offer.

But while pure inquiry among endless possibilities may be the ideal of science, as science ascended to world dominance over the years, it inevitably crystallized into scientism. Satisfied with its ability to kill off the monsters of classic horror, science instead became the monster lurking behind the scenes of horror. It is the all-powerful monster that destroys lives and souls. In works like Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* or innumerable science-fiction horror stories, it is the workings of science itself that form the horror of the story. Like Victor Frankenstein back in 1818, scientists who clone animals, make artificial life, and genetically alter lifeforms often look back and say, "often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation" (Shelley 39). Science is a way to know and will always be, but the scientism that it yielded will not stay; and when it has passed on, so too will the stories of men (and a few women) who abuse knowledge and unleash what Lovecraft's prose-poem to the mad-scientist Nyarlathotep and his technological wonders deemed "midnights of rotting creation" (Lovecraft *Fiction* 123).

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Oh the Horror! Why Skeptics Should Embrace the Supernatural in Fiction

FOR AS LONG AS THERE have been stories of the supernatural, some who heard them believed that the menacing creatures depicted in them really existed. There have also always been skeptics who doubted the reality of the supernatural monsters. Mythological creatures like satyrs and centaurs were once thought to live in the uncharted forests beyond civilization's reach. Ghosts have been a continuous presence in humanity's imaginary lives, and even today fictional creatures like Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster, and space aliens in flying saucers have their die-hard adherents.

These stories were told and retold as non-fiction, but at the end of the Enlightenment a new type of fiction emerged: the tale of supernatural terror. Unlike the purveyors of myths and legends, the authors of these stories knew they were writing fiction. Critics, though, claimed such stories were dangerous, especially for women and children, who may come to believe in superstitious claims. In 1833 one writer claimed:

Those fictious [sic] narratives so commonly told in nurseries, called ghost stories, or other horrible recitals of the same kind, are decidedly injurious under all circumstances. I know that children in the habit of hearing these follies, grow up fearful, and in some measure in want of moral courage; they become more or less superstitious, and lack resolution; a person,

however strong in mind naturally, cannot wholly divest himself of the paralyzing effect of these injurious influences inculcated in his youthful days, even when he attains mature age. (Rendel 219)

This righteous indignation continues today, with skeptics and scientists arguing that depictions of the supernatural on television and in movies lead to belief in pseudoscience and the paranormal. For example, *Skeptic's Dictionary* editor Robert Todd Carroll suggested that an increase in the belief that ghosts communicate through tape recorders, radios, and televisions was partially attributable to the 2005 movie *White Noise*. Science writer Chris Mooney complained that television programs with supernatural themes “shill for religion and the paranormal,” while science journalist Matt Nisbet argued that science fiction and fantasy films “attack reason, sell transcendental fantasies, and undermine appreciation for science and progress.” There is frequent concern for the welfare of children, as when the science communication expert Glenn Sparks reported that supernatural-themed television was especially dangerous for teenagers (“Professor”).

The horror genre, however, is more than a vehicle for reproducing superstition. A brief examination of the origins and development of the horror genre before World War II demonstrates that supernatural horror transcends simple-minded repudiations of science and is, in fact, a subtle and important critique of science and rationalism, one that skeptics can benefit from by approaching it with an open mind.

Origins

Gothic horror is the name usually given to a group of novels and stories composed between 1764 and 1820 that used supernatural elements and spooky settings to generate an atmosphere of terror. The first Gothic novel was Horace Walpole's 1764 *The Castle of Otranto*,

the story of a usurper whose control of his domain is undone by the appearance of a powerful ghost. Other well-known works of Gothic horror include Ann Radcliffe's 1794 *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Matthew Lewis's 1796 *The Monk*, and of course the 1818 classic by Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*.

These novels, and countless others like them, were products of the Romantic Movement, the great backlash against the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Gothic writers turned to the supernatural as a critique of rationalism and an expression of the emotional truths the Romantics sought to explore. However, Gothic horror had a suitably rational basis, provided by the statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke. In his widely read and influential 1756 work *A Philosophic Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke had laid down the aesthetic basis for the horror genre, arguing that fear was the quickest and most direct way of experiencing the sublime:

No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. ... Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terrour be endued with greatness of dimensions or not. ... Indeed, terrour is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime. (38)

For writers like Walpole or Lewis, the supernatural was a way of reaching the sublime by purposely employing concepts that could serve no other useful purpose. When critics attacked Lewis's ghostly 1797 play *The Castle Spectre* for depicting a ghost where the common folk could see it, Lewis responded with an angry afterward to the published text of the play:

Against *my Spectre* many objections have been urged: one of them I think rather curious. She ought not to appear, because the belief in Ghosts no longer exists! In my opinion, that is the very reason why she may be produced without danger; for there is now no fear of increasing the influence of superstition, or strengthening the prejudices of the weak-minded. (198)

In other words, educated audiences knew ghosts are not real, so their use was to represent the irrational and the emotional — to be symbols, and to be fun. Ann Radcliffe took a different path and ended her works with a revelation that the alleged “ghost” in the story was the product of human or natural agency. However, as belief in ghosts and the supernatural became more widespread among the middle and upper classes during the 19th century, horror fiction responded in ways interesting and relevant to skeptics and historians of science.

Skeptics & Believers in Fact & Fiction

During the 19th century, many scholars and critics agreed that belief in ghosts was widespread and something needed to be done about it. In 1823 the publisher Rudolph Ackermann produced a series of didactic short stories under the title *Ghost Stories: Collected with Particular View to Counteract the Vulgar Belief in Ghosts and Apparitions, and to Promote a Rational Estimate of the Nature of Phenomena Commonly Considered as Supernatural*. These stories revealed natural or human explanations for the ghosts, as Ackermann explained:

The best way to dissipate the inbred horror of supernatural phantoms, which almost all persons derive from nursery tales or other sources of causeless terror in early life, is to show by example how possible it is to impress upon ignorant or

credulous persons the firm belief that they beheld a ghost, when in point of fact no ghost is there. (6)

Two decades later, Catherine Crowe's 1848 *The Night-Side of Nature* did just the reverse, presenting ghost stories of dubious quality as true-life accounts of the supernatural. The book is frequently credited with helping spark the rage for Spiritualism, the belief that the shades of the dead can be contacted by mediums who communicate with the spirit realm. Scientists and believers clashed over the reality of the supernatural, and the debate extended into horror fiction. One of the earliest examples of this was Sir Walter Scott's 1828 "The Tapestry Chamber," which became the template for the Victorian ghost story. In it, a "complete sceptic" puts up a soldier in a haunted room, where the soldier experiences an apparition of the ghost, converting the skeptic to belief in the supernatural when faced with this evidence.

From this story forward, few ghost stories, or horror stories of any kind, would be complete without the requisite skeptic who stood by, ready for conversion, or what the satirical magazine *Punch* once called the "the Inquiring, Sceptical, Incredulous Noodle" who "must never be absent from the *dramatis personæ*" of the horror story (B.W. 327). Such Noodles could be found everywhere: in Fitz-James O'Brien's 1859 "What Was It?," Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*, in Robert Hichens's 1900 "How Love Came to Professor Guildea," and in the scientist-scholar heroes of Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and H. P. Lovecraft.

Though it goes without saying that in these tales of horror the skeptic is confronted with supernatural or other entities that extend beyond the limits of known science, it is not a foregone conclusion that these stories promote belief in the supernatural, as a cursory reading might suggest. Instead, there is something more subtle happening here, as a few examples will show.

In many stories, the character of the skeptic represents close-minded dogmatism rather than true scientific inquiry, the truth of which is taken for granted. In *Dracula*, Dr. John Seward is a man of science, but he is powerless before the forces of the title vampire because his materialist philosophy has blinded him to the evidence of the reality of the supernatural. By contrast, his mentor, Prof. Abraham Van Helsing, pursues the evidence where it leads, even into the darkened corners of the apparent supernatural. Far from repudiating science, *Dracula* supports the workings of science as Van Helsing struggles to understand the new phenomenon (the vampire), test theories, and reach conclusions. Only this non-dogmatic, open science can stop the vampire menace via free inquiry and experimentation.

Similarly, in “How Love Came to Professor Guildea” the skeptical scientist Guildea comes to embrace the supernatural — but not because he has been indoctrinated by Spiritualist true-believers. The story tells of a man of science besieged by an unseen entity that drives him to madness and death. His belief in the ghost, though, stems from scientific observation of one living in his own house, the reality of which he proves by ruling out all possible naturalistic explanations. Here, though, the story’s author, Robert Hichens, offers a special critique of science. While Guildea is a rational, emotionless scientist, the ghost is that of a mentally-impaired individual, devoid of reason and possessed only of emotion. In other words, symbolically Victorian science was being haunted by the Romantic irrational.

The scientist-scholars found in H. P. Lovecraft’s body of short stories and novellas (the so-called “Cthulhu Mythos”) represent the apex of the horror story’s battle between skeptic and believer. In Lovecraft, skeptics doubt the existence of the “Old Ones,” titanic, monstrous gods from prehistory which devoted cults still worship in secret. The heroes dismiss the old legends as ignorant hearsay and myth, but they discover the ultimate reality of these beings, which are in fact extraterrestrials who came to earth billions of years ago, part and parcel of a materialist,

mindless cosmos both grander and more indifferent to humanity than anyone could imagine. Once again, the implicit critique of science is not opposition to its methods but to the perception of science as dogmatism and doctrine.

Conclusion

Of course, a great deal of supernatural fiction is and has always been hackwork, but as I have tried to show, a significant portion of it offers a critique (*not* a repudiation) of science. Once seen in this light, horror literature takes on new meanings for skeptics and scientists. The message is not always what we skeptics want to hear, but we would do well to actively engage in a deeper reading of the themes and symbols present in supernatural fiction before attacking it for “injurious influences” on its audience.

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A Skeptic's Defense of Supernatural Television

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE twenty-first century, supernatural themed television seemed to be on the wane, especially as the most important supernatural shows, *The X-Files* (1993-2002) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) neared the end of their runs. However, like the undead in those programs, the supernatural could not be kept down. The supernatural took over U.S. television again in the wake of the success of ABC's *Lost* (2004-2010). Programs about psychic detectives, alien invaders, monster hunters, and mysterious creatures proliferated on American airwaves, and a wary public braced for a science fiction renaissance rivaling only crime-based television in the number of prime time hours devoted to it. By the time of this writing, the supernatural not only was a mainstay of network and cable television, but arguably second only to crime in the number of hours devoted to exploring the paranormal in both fact and fiction.

In the early days of this invasion of paranormal programming, during the 2005-2006 television season, the unprecedented number of supernatural programs prompted immediate cries from television critics that the shows' monsters were television's way to explore the aftermath of the War on Terror. Skeptics countered that the success of otherworldly shows indicated that broadcasting had slipped back into a

quagmire of irrationalism, posing a danger to America and civilization as we know it.

Purdue University communications professor Glenn Sparks sent out a press release warning that the fall 2005 television shows “could encourage people who can least afford it to start spending money on psychics.” Though Sparks noted that supernatural programs can be highly entertaining, Sparks also warned that teenagers were susceptible to the shows’ influence, and he said “networks should consider posting disclaimers about the reality of the shows” (“Professor”).

Many skeptics who issue dire warnings about the influence of the supernatural on television, or who oppose televised supernatural fiction entirely, often engage in uncritical and fallacious thinking that undercuts their rationalist message. Attacking these television shows, or even the idea of supernatural fiction in general, risks insulting the audience skeptics wish to reach, and it suggests an elitist, condescending attitude that continues to give skeptics a bad name.

British television critic Ian Bell was particularly scathing in his review of NBC’s *Medium* (2005-2011), a drama about a psychic consultant, based in part on alleged real-life psychic Allison DuBois, calling the show “hogwash”: “In my world,” Bell wrote, “there is a real and growing problem caused by the bizarre things ordinary Americans are, apparently, prepared to believe.” He did, concede, though, that “it’s only TV.” *Skeptical Inquirer*’s Joe Nickell also blasted the show because it “shamelessly touted” DuBois as though she were actually able to psychically solve crimes (16-19).

Let us begin by dispensing with the caveats. First, *Medium*, along with another show of that era, *Ghost Whisperer* (2005-2010) (with which it was briefly paired on CBS’s Friday night lineup), are both based on supposedly true stories. Skeptics are right to attack these programs for falsely claiming some kind of truth. Second, many of these shows are not very good — based on their merits as drama, not as science. Others are excellent, like *Lost* and the CW’s *Supernatural*

(2005-) — which in its first seasons was probably the purest and best-made horror series on network television, at least before it gave itself over to angels and Christian mythology. But too many skeptical critics question the very right of fictional programs to include supernatural elements, as though their existence were an affront to science and reason.

Here's the problem:

First, such complaints fuel the image that skeptics are priests in the temple of reason condescending to average Americans (and to fellow skeptics who enjoy supernatural fiction). It gives the appearance that skeptics believe viewers of these programs are ignorant, stupid, or too enthralled by the flashing pictures on the idiot box to differentiate between news and drama. It is one thing to point out that such things are not “real”, another to appear to tell viewers they are less worthy than the austere rationalists who would never indulge in irrational entertainment.

Second, the reasoning behind these criticisms is flawed. Supernatural dramas, the argument goes, shouldn't exist because the supernatural is unreal. But, then, what is the purpose of fiction? All fiction is inherently unreal, as it is stories of things that did not happen. If the only appropriate topics for fiction are things that are possible, then why does fiction exist at all? If we condemn storytelling to the realm of the real, then storytelling is robbed of the very elements that make it more than simply history—the ability to manipulate time and space and the possible and impossible to create compelling stories that reach toward higher truth. If *Lost* does this and *Medium* does not, this is where critical discernment—not scientific condemnation—come into play.

Lastly—and my personal pet peeve—is that the skeptical criticism only extends to shows that trend toward horror and not pure science fiction. Obviously this is because many skeptics are scientists and have an affinity for sci-fi, but in the realm of what is real and what is

science fact, extraterrestrials, warp drives, and galaxies far, far away are every bit as unproven as Gothic horrors. ET may be slightly more scientifically probable than ghosts, but neither is currently known to exist. And before critics complain that *Star Trek* never led anyone down the garden path, let's not forget the Heaven's Gate cult watched *Star Trek* religiously and hoped to beam up to the waiting aliens after their 1997 mass suicide. This proves only that disturbed people will fixate on whatever pop culture throws at them, supernatural or not.

It is possible for skeptics to watch and enjoy supernatural horror because since the dawn of time stories have always been about more than just the plausibility of their plots. The great horror author H.P. Lovecraft, himself an ardent materialist, atheist, and skeptic, loved supernatural horror and wrote the book on it—*Supernatural Horror in Literature*. He recognized the “genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale” against those who call for a “didactic literature to uplift the reader toward a suitable degree of smirking optimism” (21).

If a materialist like him could love a good ghost story, why can't we love *Supernatural*? After all, there is nothing inherently “better” about non-supernatural stories. Who among us can say that as preposterous as ghost whisperers are that they are any more preposterous than the plot of *The OC*, *24*, or *Chuck*? That's why they call it “fiction.”

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Charioteer of the Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and the Invention of Ancient Astronauts

THE IDEA THAT EXTRATERRESTRIALS served as humanity's earliest deities came to popular attention with Swiss author Erich von Däniken's 1968 best-seller *Chariots of the Gods* and the influential 1973 NBC documentary *In Search of Ancient Astronauts*, based on that book. But for people familiar with the science fiction magazines of the 1940s and 50s, von Däniken's "revolutionary" assertion held more than just a hint of other writings that claimed long before that the gods were not of this world. In fact, much of von Däniken's case perfectly parallels the work of a certain New England writer of horror stories, and the route from horror story to nonfiction best-seller bounces us from America to France to Switzerland.

Providence, Rhode Island author H.P. Lovecraft has been justly hailed as a master of the horror story, and his work claims a place beside Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King in the pantheon of the genre. Born into a wealthy family in 1890, Lovecraft's life was a series of reverses and declines as his family lost their fortune and his parents succumbed to madness. He was precocious and self-taught scholar who read voraciously and devoured as much literature as he could read. He read the novels of H.G. Wells, whose *War of the Worlds* told of the

coming of alien creatures to earth. He also read the eighteenth century Gothic masters of horror, and above all Edgar Allan Poe.

When he set about writing his own works, he began to blend the modern world of science fiction with his favorite tales of Gothic gloom. Lovecraft tried to bring the Gothic tale into the twentieth century, modernizing the trappings of ancient horror for a new century of science. Lovecraft published his work in pulp fiction magazines, notably *Weird Tales*, though some of his works were not published until after his death in 1937. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, science fiction and horror magazines reprinted Lovecraft's tales numerous times, and he became one of the most popular pulp authors.

Lovecraft's works banished the supernatural by recasting it in materialist terms. He took the idea of a pantheon of ancient gods and made them a group of aliens who descended to earth in the distant past.

Lovecraft summed up this startlingly original idea in his 1926 short story "The Call of Cthulhu." In the story, a young man puts together the pieces of an ancient puzzle and discovers the shocking truth about a monstrous race of alien creatures that served as gods to a strange cult:

There had been aeons when other Things ruled on the earth, and They had had great cities. Remains of Them [. . .] were still be found as Cyclopean stones on islands in the Pacific. They all died vast epochs of time before men came, but there were arts which could revive Them when the stars had come round again to the right positions in the cycle of eternity. They had, indeed, come themselves from the stars, and brought Their images with Them. (Lovecraft *Fiction* 367)

In just these few short sentences we see the root of the entire ancient astronaut hypothesis. The ancient gods or demons were aliens who descended to earth in primal times. They raised great stone cities

whose remains are the ancient ruins of today. Last, that the ancient sculptures depicted the aliens. All of these claims are to be found in von Däniken's *Chariots*:

These first men had tremendous respect for the space travelers. Because they came from somewhere absolutely unknown and then returned there again, they were the “gods” to them.... (52)

In advanced cultures of the past we find buildings that we cannot copy today with the most modern technical means. These stone masses are there; they cannot be argued away.... (73)

Another quite fantastic discovery was the Great Idol [of Tiwanaku]. . . Again we have the contradiction between the superb quality and precision of the hundreds of symbols all over the idol and the primitive technique used for the building housing it. (19)

In fact, only one of von Däniken's major claims is missing from the “Cthulhu” story, that the ancient gods created mankind in their own image. Lovecraft has an answer for that, too. In his 1931 novella *At the Mountains of Madness*, explorers find an incomparably old city in Antarctica, and the sculptures on the walls tell a horrifying story of how the Old Ones created Earth's life forms: “It was under the sea, at first for food and later for other purposes, that they first created earth life—using available substances according to long-known methods... It interested us to see in some of the very last and most decadent sculptures a shambling, primitive mammal, used sometimes for food and sometimes as an amusing buffoon by the land dwellers, whose vaguely simian and human foreshadowings were unmistakable” (Lovecraft *Fiction* 771).

But how did Lovecraft's ideas get into *Chariots of the Gods*? Von Däniken did not respond to requests for comment when first I asked (he would later state after the release of my book, *The Cult of Alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture* [Prometheus, 2005] that he had not read Lovecraft prior to writing *Chariots*), and the lack of English language literature about European science fiction has kept the connection vague until now. However, this is the indisputable path from Rhode Island to Switzerland:

The names of Lovecraft's alien gods, like Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, and Shub-Niggurath, began to crop up in other stories during Lovecraft's lifetime. Lovecraft himself started this practice by inserting these names, or variants on them, into stories he ghostwrote or revised for other authors. In his revision of Zelia Bishop's "The Mound," for example, Lovecraft slipped his alien god Cthulhu into the story under the variant name Tulu, giving magazine readers what they thought were independent stories featuring references to the same ancient gods. By the 1960s, several dozen authors were using elements of what came to be called "The Cthulhu Mythos" in stories they wrote for science fiction and horror magazines.

Lovecraftian fiction became increasingly popular in Europe, where the French embraced him as a bent genius, much as they embraced Edgar Allan Poe and would soon embrace Jerry Lewis. Lovecraft became especially popular with the French magazine *Planète*, which throughout the 1960s reprinted Lovecraft's stories in French translation.

Planète served as an important part of the French second science fiction period, a time when American pulp fiction became extremely popular in France following World War II (Slusser). French magazines both imitated and reprinted in translation the classic pulp stories of the American 1930s and 40s pulp magazines. *Planète's* editors held Lovecraft as their prophet, and their reprints of his stories helped to

popularize him and the Cthulhu Mythos in the French imagination. Lovecraft's longer fiction was published in French in a series of books.

Lovecraft's work had also inspired the editors of *Planète* to write a book, *Le Matin des Magiciens* (*The Morning of the Magicians*) a few years earlier, in 1960. The book, by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, first introduced Lovecraft's concept of alien gods as a nonfiction hypothesis, drawing on the same web of evidence Lovecraft had in creating his stories, primarily Theosophical literature (see my free eBook, *The Origins of the Space Gods*). The authors claimed that their study of religions around the world had led them to higher consciousnesses and to new revelations about the lost worlds of the past. Especially relevant to this is Part One: Vanished Civilizations, where they heap up evidence backing up Lovecraft's fictional claims about alien super-civilizations of the past.

Morning of the Magicians laid the foundation for all the lost civilizations books to follow, including *Chariots of the Gods*. As R.T. Gault comments, "It's all here, from the Piri Reis map to pyramidology. The authors are frankly fascinated by the idea that ancient peoples may have been more advanced in some of their technologies than we generally believe."

Von Däniken is known to have exploited this book as his major source. The bibliography of *Chariots* lists the book in its 1962 German translation: *Aufbruch ins dritte Jahrtausend* (155).

Now we have come all the way from Providence to Paris to the Swiss hotel where von Däniken wrote his book, and we can see how Lovecraft's brilliant fictional conceit became a very real pseudoscientific nonfiction.

Near the end of his life Lovecraft looked back on the growing body of alien god fiction that he and his friends had created: "This pooling of resources tends to build up quite a pseudo-convincing background of dark mythology, legendry, & bibliography—though of course, none of us has the least wish to actually mislead readers."

(“Quotes”). Sadly, he did his work too well, and generations have now been misled by such authors as von Däniken.

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Cthulhu vs. Xenu: The Case of H. P. Lovecraft and Scientology's Cosmology

IN THE FIRST MONTHS OF 2011, two stories in the news turned attention toward the Church of Scientology, the faith founded by science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard in 1952 and long rumored to involve secret teachings about space aliens who came to earth 75 million years ago. The first was a major article in the *New Yorker's* February 14 edition detailing alleged abuse and poor working conditions at the hands of the church and its leaders (Wright). The second was the rumor that film director Guillermo del Toro wanted the most famous Scientologist of all, Tom Cruise, to star in a big screen adaptation of H. P. Lovecraft's 1931 story of the discovery of an ancient extraterrestrial civilization, *At the Mountains of Madness*. While the *Mountains of Madness* movie project fell apart, interest in Scientology did not.

As some noted at the time of the Tom Cruise rumors, Scientology and Lovecraft share eerie parallels. Lovecraft's (fictional) extraterrestrials came to earth in the distant past and had a profound and largely dark influence on early humanity (see "Charioteer of the Gods," this volume), and this idea bears a resemblance to Operating Thetan Level III (OT-III), the (supposedly nonfictional) cosmological doctrine L. Ron Hubbard created circa 1967 for Scientology.

Lovecraft's version, to my mind, is the more subtle and convincing of the two.

It is a fact that Hubbard was a science fiction writer active in the same years that Lovecraft's stories were first published (the late 1930s—some Lovecraft tales were published after his 1937 death) and writing for the same types of pulp magazines in which Lovecraft's stories appeared. However, the two authors' outlets overlapped only at *Astounding Stories* (known after 1938 as *Astounding Science-Fiction*), the magazine that published *At the Mountains of Madness* in 1936. This story, however, includes the same type of cosmic sweep as Hubbard's cosmology, though both approach the concept in very different ways. Hubbard developed Dianetics (the precursor of Scientology) for *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1950, and science fiction luminaries such as L. Sprague de Camp and *Astounding* editor John W. Campbell were friends of Hubbard and also well-versed in Lovecraftian fiction.

I admit that in the past I have shied away from exploring the possible connections between Lovecraft and Scientology, both because of the church's infamous litigiousness and also because I had not studied the Scientology materials needed to make judgments. I should note here that I have no special knowledge of the secret doctrines of Scientology, and I do not know what the group teaches its followers beyond the publicly available information that has been widely reported since its disclosure during legal proceedings in the 1980s and 1990s. The 2011 *New Yorker* article reported what the court document and news accounts of the 1980s and 1990s had made public: that Hubbard claimed an ancient astronaut named Xenu (or Xemu), onetime president of a galactic confederation of overpopulated planets, came to earth 75 million years ago and buried a billion or more aliens beneath volcanoes and killed them with hydrogen bombs. Their souls (or thetans) are said to now infest human hosts, causing many problems—problems that only Scientology's "technology" can solve (Wright).

According to testimony from Warren McShane, the president of the Scientology subsidiary, the Religious Technology Center, in the case of *Religious Technology Center v. F.A.C.T.Net, Inc., et al.* (1995), this information, “the discussion of the — of the volcanoes, the explosions, the Galactic confederation 75 million years ago, and a gentleman by the name Xenu there. Those are not trade secrets.” Since this material is in the court records, it would seem to be fair game for analysis and criticism.

There are some superficial similarities between Lovecraft’s and Hubbard’s visions of our alien past. Both wrote that extraterrestrials came to earth tens of millions of years ago, and both wrote that earth had been a part of a galactic system of inhabited worlds before a cataclysm caused the aliens to retreat. Hubbard’s Galactic Confederation was something like a cosmic United Nations, while Lovecraft had a messier conception of a multiplicity of alien races treating earth as one planet among many to conquer and on which to spawn. Both authors also wrote about buried evidence of alien civilizations: in Hubbard’s case, alien implant or reporting stations at Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, a Martian station in the Pyrenees, and Xenu’s prison (“OT-III”; Miller 206); for Lovecraft, sunken or buried cities such as Cthulhu’s R’lyeh, the Old Ones’ Antarctic city, or the Great Race’s Australian metropolis. Hubbard’s Xenu is said to be “in an electronic mountain trap where he still is.” Of the other aliens, “‘They’ are gone,” Hubbard wrote (“OT-III”). Similarly, Cthulhu lives on, trapped in his undersea city of R’lyeh. Of the other aliens in Cthulhu’s retinue, “Those Old Ones were gone now, inside the earth and under the sea” (Lovecraft *Fiction* 366). The differences are also telling. Cthulhu is trapped (in the original version) by purely natural forces (later August Derleth would make Cthulhu the victim of cosmic punishment), while Xenu is imprisoned by his rebellious lieutenants, like Kronos placed in the Greek Tartarus at the hands of Zeus.

Additionally, both wrote about the ability of minds to travel millions or billions of years across time and millions or billions of miles across space for encounters with the aliens. For Lovecraft, this took several forms. In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” human brains were removed from their bodies and placed in metal canisters for interstellar travel. In “Through the Gates of the Silver Key,” Randolph Carter’s mind travelled from body to body across the planets and the eons, while in “The Shadow Out of Time,” Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee had his own mind traded with that of a member of the Great Race of Yith from 250 million years ago. The Great Race, of course, had learned to migrate from age to age by projecting their minds into other species’ bodies, rendering the Grace Race close to immortal. For Hubbard, the initiate into Scientology’s highest secrets is able to project his mind into the stars. According to David G. Bromley and Mitchell L. Bracey, Jr., the official Scientology doctrine is that the dead Hubbard lives on in bodiless form, researching spirituality on another planet (144), just as Randolph Carter’s mind visits the cosmic oneness that is Yog-Sothoth and studies magic in the body of a wizard on the planet Yaddith. Similarly, the Scientology “thetans” are also disembodied spirits who persist from age to age, like the roving minds of the Great Race. In both Lovecraft’s and Hubbard’s conceptions, this idea derives from nineteenth century occult ideas of astral projection, which Lovecraft encountered in such sources as Walter De Le Mare’s *The Return* (1910), while Hubbard was familiar with astral projection, having about the practice early in his career in the science fiction story “The Dangerous Dimension” (1938), which he described as an updated, science-fiction form of astral projection (“Golden Age”).

Both writers even had similar ideas about madness-inducing literary secrets. In “The Call of Cthulhu,” Lovecraft’s narrator describes the way madness results should anyone put together the pieces of the true history of aliens on earth, including hints from the *Necronomicon* and other written texts:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (Lovecraft *Fiction* 354)

In parallel, Hubbard claimed to Forrest J. Ackerman that his book *Excalibur* was so dangerous that those who read it committed suicide or went insane (“L. Ron Hubbard”). Hubbard himself said that he wrote the book after receiving a message from the stars when he “died” for eight minutes during a dental examination (Gardner 272), and the Church of Scientology claimed that four people who read the book went insane (Malko 39). Scientology would also declare that anyone who learned of Xenu without proper preparation would catch pneumonia and die (Rothstein 369). Such claims are unique neither to Lovecraft or Hubbard, though. In 1895, for example, Robert W. Chambers wrote of the fictional play *The King in Yellow*, which he said would cause madness should anyone read its final act.

However, Hubbard’s cosmic vision is very different in detail and in tone from that of Lovecraft. Lovecraft imagined a grand cosmos of a multiplicity of diverse aliens and incorporeal entities that were utterly inhuman and incomprehensible, that treat humans as elephants might treat earthworms. By contrast, Hubbard’s aliens are essentially human in all but name, possessed of human vices and motivations. Lovecraft’s cosmos is also much less dependent than Hubbard’s on the tropes of space opera and Golden Age science fiction (presuming, of

course, you take Hubbard's cosmology as a literary text rather than revelation).

While both writers actively worked to create a new mythology, they did so in very different ways. Lovecraft's artificial mythology was self-consciously fake, created for fun, and intended to create a deep background that presumably stood behind early fertility cults and shamanic faiths. Nor was the materialist, atheist Lovecraft shy about declaiming the falsity of his fake gods:

Regarding the dreaded *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred—I must confess that both the evil volume & the accursed author are fictitious creatures of my own—as are the malign entities of Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth, Nyarlathotep, Shub-Niggurath, &c. Tsathoggua & the *Book of Eibon* are inventions of Clark Ashton Smith, while Friedrich von Junzt & his monstrous *Unausprechlichen Kulte*n originated in the fertile brain of Robert E. Howard. For the fun of building up a convincing cycle of synthetic folklore, all of our gang frequently allude to the pet daemons of the others—thus Smith uses my Yog-Sothoth, while I use his Tsathoggua. Also, I sometimes insert a devil or two of my own in the tales I revise or ghost-write for professional clients. Thus our black pantheon acquires an extensive publicity & pseudo-authoritativeness it would not otherwise get. We never, however, try to put it across as an actual hoax; but always carefully explain to enquirers that it is 100% fiction. (Lovecraft “Letter”)

Hubbard, by contrast, meant his artificial mythology to be taken as truth. Like Lovecraft's black pantheon lurking behind classical mythology, Hubbard would claim that Christianity emerged when a “madman” discovered Xenu's 75 million-year-old “R6” implant within his soul around 600 BCE (Hubbard). This implant apparently included

images of God and the Devil, high technology, and crucifixions, inspiring the Christian faith six centuries later and leaving humans predisposed to accepting a (false) Christian message. In both cases, therefore, the aliens are the originators or manipulators of religious thought, with humans mistakenly worshipping entities that did not have their best interests in mind.

It would go far beyond the evidence to suggest Hubbard borrowed his cosmology from Lovecraft, but the core concepts of ancient aliens, buried civilizations, and mental transfer across time are all ideas that Lovecraft wrote about in stories that Hubbard almost certainly would have read years or decades before developing OT-III. Nevertheless, the reported revelations of OT-III are much more similar to Golden Age SF space opera projected into the past than anything Lovecraft would have written (Hubbard even called the Xenu story “very space opera” in his handwritten OT-III notes). It is, quite frankly, impossible to imagine Cthulhu engaging in palace politics the way Xenu’s lieutenants are said to have conspired against him. The closest parallel in Lovecraft is the war between the Old Ones of Antarctica and the spawn of Cthulhu in *At the Mountains of Madness*, but this takes much more of the form of a Darwinian survival of the fittest than a palace coup or even a Greek Titanomachy. It would seem that Hubbard’s ancient aliens are the direct result of needing the aliens to exist in the past to provide a creation story for Scientology rather than any actual interest in saying something profound about ancient history, while Lovecraft’s aliens have a immense prehistory because the enormity of time and the transience of humanity were two of Lovecraft’s major themes.

I previously established in *The Cult of Alien Gods* (Prometheus, 2005) and my eBook *Origin of the Space Gods* (2011) that Lovecraft was the primary force marrying Theosophy’s idea of planets inhabited by ascended masters and human souls waiting to be born (itself derived from medieval notions of planets as the seats of

various ranks of angels) to science fiction's non-spiritual extraterrestrials in order to create the modern myth of ancient astronauts. In this limited sense, later works like Scientology's OT-III (taken again as a literary text) can be thought of as influenced by the ancient astronaut myth Lovecraft developed in the 1920s and 1930s. However, the more accurate thing to say is that both Lovecraft and Hubbard drew on the heritage of nineteenth century scientific romances and occult speculation, creating similar end products from the same source material. (Both, for example, were influenced by occultism—Lovecraft through the works of Arthur Machen and thus the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, while Hubbard was involved with the Rosicrucians and Aleister Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis, either to infiltrate the orders as Scientology claims or to practice magic as Russell Miller argued [112-130].) That Lovecraft created his alien gods decades before Hubbard gives him priority in imagination.

It would be interesting to think that in some parallel world, a less scrupulous Lovecraft, had he lived past 1937, might have turned his artificial mythology into a profitable religion, leaving Hubbard's Xenu and friends to eke out an existence solely the pages of pulp fiction. Of course, in that world we would have dramatic exposés of the real origins of Cthulhu, and that would take all of the fun out of the Cthulhu Mythos.

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