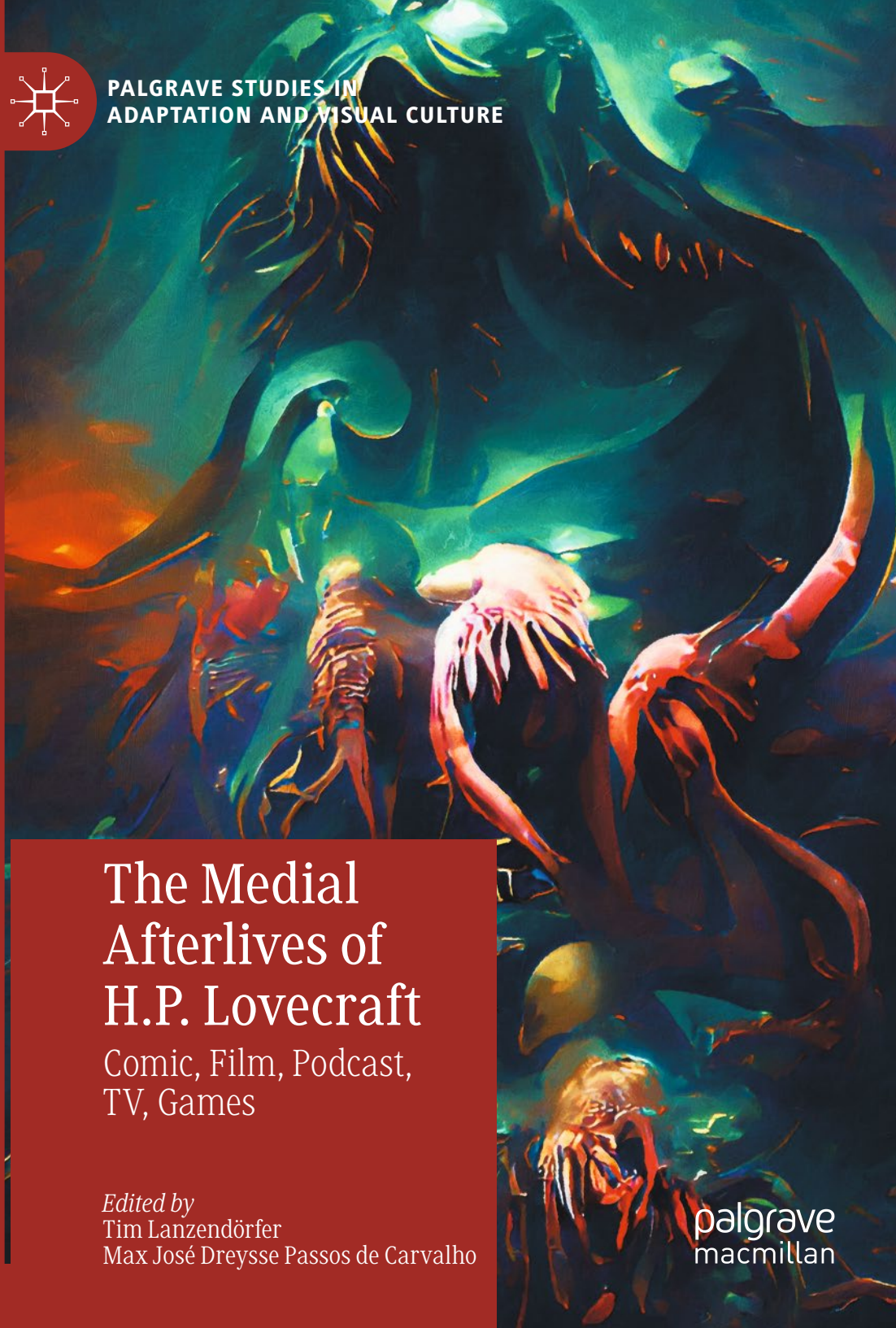

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN
ADAPTATION AND VISUAL CULTURE

The Medial Afterlives of H.P. Lovecraft

Comic, Film, Podcast, TV, Games

Edited by
Tim Lanzendörfer
Max José Dreysse Passos de Carvalho

palgrave
macmillan

Palgrave Studies in Adaptation and Visual Culture

This series addresses how adaptation functions as a principal mode of text production in visual culture. What makes the series distinctive is its focus on visual culture as both targets and sources for adaptations, and a vision to include media forms beyond film and television such as videogames, mobile applications, interactive fiction and film, print and nonprint media, and the avant-garde. As such, the series will contribute to an expansive understanding of adaptation as a central, but only one, form of a larger phenomenon within visual culture. Adaptations are texts that are not singular but complexly multiple, connecting them to other pervasive plural forms: sequels, series, genres, trilogies, authorial oeuvres, appropriations, remakes, reboots, cycles and franchises. This series especially welcomes studies that, in some form, treat the connection between adaptation and these other forms of multiplicity. We also welcome proposals that focus on aspects of theory that are relevant to the importance of adaptation as connected to various forms of visual culture.

Tim Lanzendörfer
Max José Dreysse Passos de Carvalho
Editors

The Medial Afterlives of H.P. Lovecraft

Comic, Film, Podcast, TV, Games

palgrave
macmillan

Editors
Tim Lanzendörfer
Goethe University Frankfurt
Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Max José Dreysse Passos de Carvalho
Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz
Mainz, Germany

ISSN 2634-629X ISSN 2634-6303 (electronic)
Palgrave Studies in Adaptation and Visual Culture
ISBN 978-3-031-13764-8 ISBN 978-3-031-13765-5 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13765-5

Cover illustration: Andrea Mazzocchetti / Alamy Stock Photo

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Preface and Acknowledgements

The Lovecraft Renaissance

The fiction of Howard Philipps Lovecraft has undergone both a popular and academic renaissance: his "standing among producers and consumers of genre fiction has undoubtedly been in the ascendancy" (Simmons 2013, 3) for a while. This is a change of some consequence. "Since the 1990s, Lovecraft's perceived status and reception history have shifted dramatically [… H]is reputation has moved from the margins of literary history toward increasing academic recognition" (Shapiro and Barnard 2017, 115). His canonization is marked best by the 2005 publication of some of his tales in the Library of America. Lovecraft previously existed in a kind of critical netherworld. Edmund Wilson first took note of his writing—somewhat negatively—in 1945, diagnosing Lovecraft's "cult" following (1950, 290). Through the 1970s, the publication of his letters by Arkham House Press helped publicize him as an important practitioner of pulp; the 1973 reissue of *Supernatural Horror in Literature* advanced his reputation as thinker of horror. Biographies followed, such as L. Sprague de Camp's in 1975, Donald R. Burleson's in 1990, and S.T. Joshi's in 1995. Joshi has done more than any other single champion of Lovecraft's to bring Lovecraft into currency, publishing numerous essays and essay collections. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Lovecraft also "enjoyed a high degree of visibility and cultural currency among comics readers" (Murray and Corstorphine 2013, 181). But interest in Lovecraft remained restricted to a "faithful hard core" (Simmons 2013, 3).

That it has expanded so thoroughly would have puzzled Lovecraft, who noted that the "object of weird fiction is purely and simply emotional release for the very small group of people whose active and restless imaginations revolt against the relentless tyranny of time, space and natural law" (1976, 157–158). Many more people may be looking for an outside to everyday tyrannies today than Lovecraft would have thought possible: he and his most famous creation, Cthulhu, have become staples of popular culture. Searching for "Lovecraft" on Amazon or Alibaba, or on Etsy, brings up T-shirts of all sorts, jewelry with Elder God imagery, Miskatonic University merchandize, Lovecraft creatures on pins, stickers, and ties, Cthulhu coffee cups, piggy banks, plush toys, a plush *Necronomicon*, and a notebook *Necronomicon* for penning your very own book of the dead—very much among other things. Lovecraft has become adjectival. If Stephen King is a filmic and literary "brand" (Brown 2018, 23–47), Lovecraft is more; he lends his name to an entire subgenre of horror, "Lovecraftian fiction," which is arguably only in part synonymous with weird fiction and cosmic horror. There has been significant publishing interest in Lovecraft pastiches and cosmic horror stories in the vein of Lovecraft—perhaps in part mobilized by the uncertainties of Lovecraft's copyright (see Wallace in this volume).

Lovecraft's contemporary reception occurs against the backdrop of the well-known fact that his legacy is hardly unproblematic. Lovecraft committed much racism to paper—most notoriously in his 1912 poem, "On the Creation of N******," but extending into his later fiction and letters. As S.T. Joshi notes, he "retained to the end of his days a belief in the biological inferiority of blacks" (2001, 358); he abhorred the "loathsome Asiatic hordes" (in Joshi and Schultz 2019, 180). If his views over the years changed in minor ways, Lovecraft always assumed white supremacy, indeed Anglo-Saxon supremacy, over the various Others that he saw around him, whether in Providence or New York. The public perception of his fundamental racism has shifted in the wake of his increasing popularity, though. A brief glance at the history of the World Fantasy Award may be instructive here. A somewhat creatively shaped bust of Lovecraft served as the award trophy from its inception in 1975. In 1984, Donald Wandrei, Lovecraft friend and correspondent, fantasy writer, and cofounder of Arkham House, refused the award, allegedly because he felt the bust was demeaningly misshapen as a representation of Lovecraft. Thirty years on, in 2011, writer Nnedi Okorafor, who had not previously known of Lovecraft's racism, blogged about her shock at discovering it upon

winning the prize, and inspired a petition to change the trophy, a change made in 2015 (see Flood 2015, Okorafor 2011). Over the course of a generation, the fundamental perception of Lovecraft as an icon has shifted seriously: but in the same time frame, his writing has come to much greater, and more general, prominence. In theorizing the "Lovecraftian," we bear this tension in mind. Gamergate and 4Chan have shown that fantasy fan- and subcultures are by no means free from the reactionary currents of their contemporary moment. Did Lovecraft's popularity explode *despite* his reactionary tendencies, or *because* of them? What does it mean to evoke his name in advertisements, on box- and cover art—and in the omnipresent adjective of the "Lovecraftian"? It is crucial we recognize that in the case of Lovecraft, the author is similarly popular as his texts are; if this were not the case, we probably would be discussing the Cthulhuesque here. Our goal then is to problematize his influence both as a writer and as a signifier, a project for which the study of adaptations seems particularly suited.

In this context, his style of writing becomes strikingly important, a style at times easy to mock. His fondness for words like "eldritch" or "cyclopean," his adverb-heavy sentences, and his tendency to tell rather than show can easily be amusing rather than terrifying. Just like his politics, these qualities remind us that the contemporary interest in Lovecraftian weird fiction may still be in need of some explanation. After all, the petition against the old trophy of the World Fantasy Awards calls Lovecraft not just "an avowed racist" but also "a terrible wordsmith" (Older 2014). How do we explain his, as of late, remarkable popularity among adaptors? This would have been a question of no little interest even to Lovecraft himself: as he wrote to Farnsworth Wright, "I really think an author ought to be able to have at least a censorship of anything that goes out under his name" (1976, 154). Lovecraft was an avid moviegoer and vocal critic, including, often, of adaptations, with a clear idea of what he wanted from a film made from a book. He noted of the Universal movie, *Frankenstein* (1933):

> I saw the cinema of 'Frankenstein', & was tremendously disappointed because no attempt was made to follow the story. However, there have been many worse films—& many parts of this one are really quite dramatic when they are viewed independently & without comparison to the episodes of the original novel. Generally speaking, the cinema always cheapens & degrades any literary material it gets hold of—especially anything in the least subtle or unusual. (in Joshi and Schultz 2007, 33)

Conversely, he felt that 20th Century Studio's *Les Miserables* (1935) adapted Hugo's novel "with remarkable vividness & fidelity," suggesting that "[w]hat defects there are […] are those of the nineteenth century author rather than those of the contemporary cinematographer" (275). For his own work, too, fidelity was the chief concern: he replied to Wright's asking him about the radio dramatization rights to "The Dreams in the Witch House," worrying that "what a popular dialogue-arranger could do to the atmosphere and artistic integrity of a seriously written story is appalling to contemplate! Indeed, it is not likely that any really finely wrought story—where so much depends on mood, and on nuances of description—could be changed to a drama without irreparable cheapening and the loss of all that gave it power" (1976, 154). He concluded, "when I reflect on how much the force of any carefully written story depends on atmospheric effects peculiar to the *original wording*, I really feel that demands for integrity of form are justified" (Lovecraft 1976, 155, original emphasis), uneasily accepting the monetary need for the sale of dramatization rights, but insisting on authorial oversight over the final product. Today, we have a market even for Lovecraft dildos. There are many examples of Lovecraft and Lovecraftian adaptation across media—the kind of adaptation that will be more familiar to most. This is the topic of this collection: Lovecraft's fiction and Lovecraftian fiction in film, TV series, podcasts, video games, board games, and comics, where Lovecraft's prominence may be even greater than the return to his stories.

We are interested in Lovecraft because of all we have just outlined: from Lovecraft's own concern with fidelity, which rings loudly in adaptation studies still, to the way his name becomes synonymous with media in which nothing that is "actually" from his work ever appears; the way the "terrible" style of his writing is or is not an essential part of Lovecraft, and how it militates against—or is helpful for?—cross-medial adaptation; the problem of coping with the ethically disturbing content of so much of his fiction; and the problem of understanding adaptation itself, and especially of a commercially newly again relevant, and happily barely copyrightable figure. "Lovecraftian," of course, is a problem: its boundaries are amorphous, its definition (formal? aesthetic? affective? thematic?) is unclear, not least because of the uneasy overlap between "cosmic" horror and the "Lovecraftian." Is Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) Lovecraftian—indeed, adaptation? Is the overtly Lovecraft-inspired point-and-click adventure *Gibbous* (2019), despite its similarly overt attempt at cuteness—or does the cuteness override whatever it is that is Lovecraftian (but if it does,

when does it?)? What is the work of adaptation in adapting Lovecraft, or the Lovecraftian? We hope this collection works towards useful answers to these questions, or at least better versions of the questions.

One final note: We, the editors, are white, cis-male, Western academics; we are sensitive to the limitations of our capacity to speak to the meaning and relevance of Lovecraft's racism, anti-Semitism, and misogyny. We have enjoined our contributors to consider these issues in their own work, but this collection does not foreground them. We hope that we cover, critique, and situate the problem of Lovecraft's hateful beliefs and their mediation in fiction where appropriate; we also believe in the need for more discussion. This book comes with an ongoing, web-based research project: *Adapting Lovecraft*, at adaptinglovecraft.com. We enjoin readers to discuss the book there, including whatever omissions we may have produced in it.

The Essays in This Volume

We have sought to be as expansive as possible in our conception of adaptation. Crossing so many medial boundaries, any collection like this one cannot but be a starting place only. We keep this section short: the chapters should speak for themselves. But we'd like to point out a few cross-connections here that readers may find useful. We have chosen to divide the collection into medial sections, but that sorting is already tenuous—several chapters address different media. Before these medial sections, we have placed a section on theory, where three opening chapters discuss conceptual questions: the editors' own theoretical chapter, and the chapters by Khachonkitkosol on adapting without the original and Wallace on copyright. This is important groundwork for all the later chapters. In the subsequent section on comics, Rebecca Janicker's essay discusses both a comics adaptation of "The Colour Out of Space" as well as Richard Stanley's 2019 film adaptation; and indeed, that story and its adaptations are in the foreground also of Shrabani Basu and Gerald Gibson's chapters, offering a series of viewpoints on adapting this particular—challenging—text in the subsequent section on film. In the comics section, Per Israelson continues to talk about Alan Moore's *Providence*, a text also picked up in Valentino Paccosi's chapter on festive hoaxes (largely in Lovecraftian film) later. Tom Shapira extensively discusses "At the Mountains of Madness" in the comics section, a text relevant also to Torben Quasdorf's discussion of the board game *Mountains of Madness*. In the Film and TV section,

Christina Knopf, Patrick Lang, and Dan Hassler-Forest all discuss Lovecraftian serials, but in widely different forms (children's cartoons versus versions of prestige television, one—*Lovecraft Country*—adapted from a Lovecraftian novel). Richard Hand and Justin Mullis address themselves to a new medium, the podcast, the first more generally, the latter with an emphasis on a particular adaptation, *The Lovecraft Investigations*. Kevin Flanagan opens the section on video games with a general appraisal of forms beyond the first person survival computer RPG, thoughts expanded on by Serenay Günal and Colleen Kennedy-Karpat by inclusion of the question of the author that seems so relevant especially with Lovecraft. Erada Adel Al-Mutairi and Tim Lanzendörfer by contrast foreground the CRPG and its awkward investment of the player with an agency at odds with Lovecraft's philosophy. Finally, Steffen Wöll and Amelie Rieß turn to the representation of race in board games. Together, the chapters provide a vista of the range of Lovecraft adaptation, its problems, opportunities, and meaning in the contemporary.

References

Brown, Simon. *Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018.

Flood, Alison. "HP Lovecraft Biographer Rages Against Ditching of Author as Fantasy Prize Emblem." *The Guardian*, November 11, 2015. Web.

Joshi, S.T. *A Dreamer and a Visionary: H.P. Lovecraft in His Time*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001.

Joshi, S.T., and David E. Schultz, eds. *Lord of a Visible World: An Autobiography in Letters*. New York: Hippocampus Press, 2019.

Lovecraft, H.P. *Selected Letters, 1932-1934*. Ed. August Derleth and James Turner. Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1976.

———. "Supernatural Horror in Literature." *H.P. Lovecraft: Collected Essays, Vol. 2: Literary Criticism*. Ed. S.T. Joshi. New York: Hippocampus Press, 2004. 82-135.

Murray, Chris, and Kevin Corstorphine. "Co(s)mic Horror." *New Critical Essays on H.P. Lovecraft*. Ed. David Simmons. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 157-191.

Okorafor, Nnedi. "Lovecraft's Racism & The World Fantasy Award Statuette, With Comments from China Miéville." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*, December 14, 2011. Web.

Older, Daniel José. "Make Octavia Butler the WFA Statue Instead of Lovecraft." 2014. *Change.org*. Web.

Shapiro, Stephen, and Philip Barnard. *Pentecostal Modernism: Lovecraft, Los Angeles, and World-Systems Culture*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Simmons, David. "Introduction: H.P. Lovecraft: The Outsider No More?" *New Critical Essays on H.P. Lovecraft*. Ed. David Simmons. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 1-10.

Wilson, Edmund. "Tales of the Marvellous and the Ridiculous." *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1950. 286-290.

Acknowledgements

We're indebted to a number of people who were helpful in the preparation of this collection. As editors, we need to thank our contributors for their sterling work in difficult times. The coronavirus pandemic began when work on this book started, and was still ongoing when it ended. Our globally dispersed contributors faced different challenges in this, but all of us had to contend with closed libraries and offices, challenges in our teaching, interruptions of our writing schedules, family emergencies, and loss. In the face of these obstacles, our contributors prevailed, and our gratitude is great.

We would also like to thank the series editors for the Palgrave Studies in Adaptation and Visual Culture series, Julie Grossman and R. Barton Palmer, for accepting this volume into their series; commissioning editor Lina Aboujieb for her unceasing support in preparing it, including helping out tremendously on difficult stretches; project coordinator Asma Azeezullah for untiring competence; the copyediting staff for their work on the manuscript. Lastly but by no means least, we thank the anonymous reviewers of the proposal for their supportive and helpful commentary.

Mabel Keßler was instrumental in seeing this manuscript into print in the best possible form, providing careful editing work and the talent for indexing both of which have made this an immeasurably better book.

Tim would like to thank the students in his seminar "Adapting Lovecraft," held in the summer of 2021 at Goethe University, whose members tried out many of the arguments brought forward in this volume, expanding and commenting on them, and adding their own work and thought to the project in spirit if not in measurable fact. Similarly,

thanks are due to the department of American Studies at Goethe University for being a home during the past two years. Greg Kelley, of the fabled if not outright mythical Nordost Research Archives, provided materials otherwise difficult to access, as well as an interested ear. Finally, Tim would like to thank his family again for letting him pursue this work: Anselma, Anton, and Marlene.

Max would like to thank members of the American Studies Working Group at Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany, whose discussions and arguments are echoed throughout this volume. Furthermore, he feels indebted to Oliver Scheiding, whose support and guidance made this project possible. Thanks are also due to Hermann Kron, who was responsible for sparking Max's interest in Lovecraft in the first place, and the Grabowski brothers, for ensuring that this interest never waned. Lastly, he too would like to thank his family: Anne, Miriam, Daniel, Lotti, Paul, Ella, Ursel, Diwi, Heidrun, Sofia, Mariana, Vera, Pedro, Niu, and all the others—without them, this pandemic would have been unbearable and this book would not have fructified.

Contents

Notes on Contributors

Erada Adel Almutairi is a King Abdulaziz University graduate for English Language and Literature. Her area of interests lies in the broad field of literary theory and cultural studies, which include intertextuality and influence in fictional works, media and culture, and globalization.

Shrabani Basu teaches English at Deshabandhu Mahavidyalaya, Chittaranjan, India. She has worked on cultural hybridity, marginalization, and performance in the Caribbean Anglophone context. Her article "The Foil and the Quicksand: the Image of the 'Veil' and the failure of Abjection in Iranian Diasporic Horror" was published in *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*. Her book on the gendered representation of Caribbean performance is forthcoming.

Max José Dreysse Passos de Carvalho is a graduate of Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz and postgraduate student at Goethe University, Frankfurt. He is a fellow of the German Academic Scholarship Foundation and his research interests center on critical theory, particularly as it pertains to board and video games.

Kevin M. Flanagan is Term Assistant Professor of English at George Mason University. He is the author of *War Representation in British Cinema and Television: From Suez to Thatcher, and Beyond* (2019) and has contributed essays to such journals as *Critical Quarterly*, *Framework*, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, and *Screen*.

Gerard Gibson is a PhD researcher at Ulster University with a BA (Hons) in Graphic Design and an MA in Film. His research combines

practice and theory and is focused on understanding space, place, and the material in film horror. His articles have appeared in the *Irish Gothic Journal* and he has co-edited an issue of *Refractory: Journal of Entertainment Media*.

Serenay Günal obtained her MA in Media and Visual Studies at Bilkent University. Her master's thesis titled "Authorship In Video Game Adaptations" displays her research interests, which encompass a range of topics including video games, adaptation, transmedia, and authorship.

Richard J. Hand is Professor of Media Practice at the University of East Anglia, UK. He has a particular interest in cross-media forms of popular culture, especially horror. He is the author of two monographs on horror radio *Terror on the Air: Horror Radio in America, 1931–52* (2006) and *Listen in Terror: British Horror Radio from the Advent of Broadcasting to the Digital Age* (2014) and is the founding co-editor of the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*.

Dan Hassler-Forest is Assistant Professor in the department of Media and Culture Studies at the University of Utrecht. He has written on science fiction, cultural studies, media theory, anti-capitalism and popular culture, and zombies. His most recent monograph is *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Politics: Transmedia World-building Beyond Capitalism* (2016).

Per Israelson did his doctoral work in the Research School of Cultural History at Stockholm University, focusing on the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic. In his postdoc project (2018–2021), he has investigated the collaborative creativity of contemporary, postdigital comics culture in Sweden and Norway. His research interests are media ecology, cybernetics, and posthumanist philosophy, particularly concerning comics and the genres of the fantastic.

Rebecca Janicker is Senior Lecturer in film and media studies at the University of Portsmouth, UK. She holds a PhD in American studies from the University of Nottingham in 2014. She is the author of *The Literary Haunted House: Lovecraft, Matheson, King and the Horror in Between* (2015) and the editor of *Reading "American Horror Story": Essays on the Television Franchise* (2017). Other book chapters and journal articles she has written focus on the fiction of Robert Bloch, Stephen King, Richard Matheson, and H. P. Lovecraft, as well as on horror in film, TV, and comics.

Colleen Kennedy-Karpat is an associate editor of the journal *Adaptation* and co-editor of the volume *Adaptation, Awards Culture, and the Value of Prestige* (2017), which appeared in the same series as this book. She holds a PhD in French from Rutgers University and she has spent more than a decade teaching film and media studies at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey.

Latthapol Khachonkitkosol is the legal name of Dion de Mandaroon. He holds a bachelor of science in Aerospace Engineering from Worcester Polytechnic Institute. His writings have appeared in *Read Journal*, *soi*, and *Din Deng*. He is currently working on a Thai translation of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.

Christina M. Knopf PhD, is Associate Professor in Communication and Media Studies at the State University of New York at Cortland. She is the author of *Politics in the Gutters: American Politicians and Elections in Comic Book Media* (2021) and is a contributing author to multiple volumes, including *The Politics of Horror* (2020) and *The Laughing Dead: The Comedy-Horror Film from* Bride of Frankenstein *to* Zombieland (2016).

Patrick J. Lang is a Screen and Media academic based in Adelaide, South Australia, at Flinders University. He has written previously on the post-9/11 television thriller and its complicated relationship and interplay with Western constructions of capitalism. His current research interests are multidisciplinary in approach and combine ideas surrounding genre, cultural theory, early digital esoterica, and emerging transmedia narratives. He has written and presented on film, television, video games, and popular music.

Tim Lanzendörfer is Heisenberg Research Professor in Literary Theory, Literary Studies, and Literary Studies Education at Goethe University Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Among his publications are *Books of the Dead: Reading the Zombie in Contemporary Literature* (2018) and the *Routledge Companion to the British and North American Literary Magazine* (2021). His latest monograph is *Utopian Pasts and Futures in the Contemporary American Novel* (2023).

Justin Mullis is a PhD candidate in American Cultural Studies at Bowling Green State University and he holds a master's degree in Religious Studies from UNC Charlotte where he has also taught. His recent published work includes essays in *Paranormal and Popular-Culture* (2019), *Arthur*

Machen: Critical Essays (2021), *Religion, Culture, and the Monstrous* (2021), and the forthcoming *Lovecraft and Theology*.

Valentino Paccosi was awarded his doctoral degree in English at Lancaster University, where he teaches and lectures in English Literature and Film Studies. His research interests include the receptions and adaptations of the fictions of H.P. Lovecraft and the evolution of horror tropes in contemporary media such as film, TV, and graphic novels. His articles have appeared in the *Studies in Gothic Fiction* and he is working on a chapter in the forthcoming *Essays on Magic: The Gathering*.

Torben Quasdorf is a board game enthusiast and researcher. Growing up in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s, he glimpsed the emergence of modern board game culture at an early age. Over the years, he became more and more intrigued by the variety and depth of play experiences contemporary board games have to offer. A friend's invitation to collaborate on a research article first prompted him to look at the subject from an academic perspective. Building on his education in literary studies and philosophy at University of Bamberg, his contributions are aiming at advancing our understanding of modern board games and their cultural significance.

Dibyakusum Ray teaches English, Philosophy, and Cultural Studies at the Indian Institute of Technology, Punjab, India. He has worked on the archaeology of concepts of "Other" and "Liminality," and their absorption in speculative/spectral literature. He is the author of *The Postcolonial Indian City: Policy, Politics and Evolution* (2022).

Amelie Rieß wrote her master's thesis on "Speciesism, the Human/Animal Binary, and the American Anti-Speciesist Movement's Struggle to Deconstruct Anthropocentric Binaries." Her research interests include literary theory, animal studies, as well as representations of gender, class, and consumerism in American popular culture.

Tom Shapira is a PhD student at the Tel Aviv University School of Cultural Studies. Tom is the author of *Curing the Postmodern Blues* (2013) and *The Lawman* (2020). His work has appeared in *The Ages of The Flash: Essays on the Fastest Man Alive* (2019) and in *Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump: Images from Literature and Visual Arts* (2019) among others.

Nathaniel R. Wallace is an independent scholar who holds a PhD from the Ohio University's Interdisciplinary Arts program in 2014. He wrote

his dissertation "H.P. Lovecraft's Literary 'Supernatural Horror' in Visual Culture" on visual adaptations of the author's work. Wallace has appeared at the Armitage Symposium at the biannual NecronomiCon in Providence, Rhode Island, for the past three events and previously contributed essays to *Lovecraftian Proceedings* No. 2, 3, and 4.

Steffen Wöll is postdoctoral fellow at Collaborative Research Center 1199 "Processes of Spatialization under the Global Condition" in Leipzig. He has published on various intersectional topics in American Studies, including spatial and racial hybridity in Lovecraftian fiction and postmodern figurations of zombies. Wöll is the author of *The West and the World* (2020).

List of Figures

PART I

Theory

CHAPTER 1

Lovecraft, the Lovecraftian, and Adaptation: Problems of Philosophy and Practice

Max José Dreysse Passos de Carvalho and Tim Lanzendörfer

Lovecraft and Lovecraftian adaptation are an instructive problem, with three main areas we feel it is necessary to touch on here, signaled by the trio of terms in our title. First, "Lovecraft," and especially here Lovecraft's fiction, is often reduced to a small canon and hypotext to so many adaptations despite principled debate about its suitability to adaptation in the first place. Second, the "Lovecraftian," a potentially unique concept which functions complicatedly as an allusion to a core of Lovecraft's fiction's most persistent figures and ideas, as a marketing tool, and as a malleable signifier. Thirdly, adaptation itself, a term with a complex range of meanings clustered around the core notion of moving a story across medial boundaries—even this minimal definition must come under scrutiny.

M. J. D. P. de Carvalho
Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Mainz, Germany

T. Lanzendörfer (✉)
Goethe University Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main, Germany
e-mail: tlanzend@em.uni-frankfurt.de

T. Lanzendörfer, M. J. Dreysse Passos de Carvalho (eds.), *The Medial Afterlives of H.P. Lovecraft*, Palgrave Studies in Adaptation and Visual Culture, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13765-5_1

Taking stock of the three key terms will be our first step here; in a second step, we want to suggest a possibility for framing Lovecraftian adaptation that, at least in part, takes its departure precisely from the possibly unique, certainly revelatory nature of adapting H.P. Lovecraft.

Problems of Practice: Lovecraft, the Lovecraftian, and Adaptation

Lovecraft's body of work is a fairly disparate corpus. Much of the critical and philosophical attention to Lovecraft has focused on a narrow set of texts, dubbed the "Great Texts" by Michel Houellebecq, the "absolute core" (28) of Lovecraft's creative endeavor.[1] Earlier texts than "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926) indeed frequently function somewhat differently from this set of stories. Graham Harman suggests that the canonical "Great Texts" "refer to one another to an unusual extent" (2012, vi), but perhaps more importantly, it is in the post-"Call" tales that Lovecraft most sustainedly developed what he called in "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (1927) the "literature of cosmic fear" (2004a, 84) and in a later essay explicitly dubbed "weird fiction" (175). It is this genre that is addressed by the adjectival form "Lovecraftian," and it is important to recognize the deep bond between a selected set of Lovecraft's work and the Lovecraftian, to see that even some of Lovecraft's own output is not particularly "Lovecraftian." It is vital not to understand this as an essentialization, but rather as a consequence of determinations about what the "Lovecraftian" about Lovecraft is in the first place. The "Lovecraftian" is, at one and the same time, a notoriously vague and exceptionally crucial term. Unlike other key figures in genre writing, Lovecraft adjectivally describes an entire subgenre of fiction: the terms "cosmic horror," "weird fiction," "Lovecraft's fiction" and "Lovecraftian fiction" are *to a degree* interchangeable (see for instance Lessard 2010; cf. Moreland 2018, 18–20). As Sean Moreland points out, "although Lovecraft […] popularized and re-defined cosmic horror" (2018, 14), he was not its originator, but his name and style is very much conflated with the form today, a sign of his outsized influence. Lovecraft's fiction is said to be marked by philosophical materialism, the belief that "all entity is material"—a denial of the supernatural so prevalent in horror fiction—and "causality is uniform to such a degree that free will is a myth" (Joshi 1990, 189). Lovecraft's stories are argued to examine the "encounter with the outside," read against an "interior that is retrospectively revealed to be a delusive envelope, a

sham" (Fisher 2016, 16). The "weird" is the recognition that "our conceptions […] must be inadequate" (15) to understand what the world really looks like, a "hypernaturalism—an expanded sense of what the material cosmos contains" (18). As Lovecraft himself framed it, weird fiction seeks to achieve the "illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which for ever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis" (2004b, 176). This has consequences for the form of Lovecraftian fiction. "Atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction" (177). Lovecraft's fiction attempts to achieve this by paying much greater attention to description rather than plot or characters. For the figures and types that populate Lovecraft's fiction, the revelations of the outside often lead to psychic collapse, to madness, even to death; but their fates are not of much importance. As Michel Houellebecq notes, in Lovecraft's fiction (certainly the "Great Texts") characters "sole function […] would be to perceive;" they have a "deliberate banality" to them that "contributes to reinforcing the compelling nature of Lovecraft's universe" (2008, 68). Mark Fisher suggests that Lovecraft needs his human characters "for much the same reason that a painter of a vast edifice might insert a standard human figure standing before it: to provide a sense of scale" (2016, 20–21). Condensed from close attention to a particular core of Lovecraft's fiction, in critical discourse the Lovecraftian emerges as both the product of Lovecraft's "best" fiction and as a way of determining what is Lovecraft's best fiction in the first place. At the same time, the Lovecraftian is also wider than cosmic horror and its philosophical premises. It does not just name a mode of fictional storytelling or reception: it also names attachment to the particular mythos now understood to have its genesis in Lovecraft's fiction: Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep, books of monstrous truths, Miskatonic University and Arkham, and above all, tentacles. These also appear at times, and in the right contexts, to suffice to name texts as Lovecraftian.

There is more to be said for the Lovecraftian as a more popular category. Importantly, in the context of adaptation, the philosophical grounds of the Lovecraftian have grounded most critical efforts at suggesting Lovecraft's inherent unsuitability for adaptation. Graham Harman suggests that Lovecraft's fiction is characterized by the "deliberate and skillful obstruction of all attempts to paraphrase" (2012, 9). Paraphrase already signals something like adaptation here, at least in part, namely where it literalizes what remains allusive, and incongruous, in Lovecraft's texts.

Petley (2007) and Menegaldo (2017, 2019) both point to the absence of "character[s] to identify with" (Menegaldo 2019, 58) as an obstacle (specifically to cinematic, or audiovisual, adaptation). They also highlight the "lengthy descriptive passages" and "convoluted syntax" (59) and the material's "philosophy of bleakest pessimism" (Petley 2007, 43), which are argued to be difficult to sell in a commercial medium (47). Jérôme Dutel, meanwhile, points to Lovecraft's first-person, unreliable and internally-focused narration as potential obstacles and at the very least as a matter for problematic choices in comics realization (2017, 231). Rebecca Janicker suggests that comics may in fact be best suited to adapting Lovecraft precisely because of the conjunction of the narrative features of Lovecraft's prose and the formal properties of comics (2015). These and many other discussions of Lovecraft adaptation recur to "fidelity criticism" (Leitch 2017, 3), the idea that adaptations should be "true to the spirit" of the original (MacCabe 2011, 7). As Bruhn, Gejlvik and Hanssen note, for adaptation studies fidelity was "a—perhaps even *the* central—question" (2013, 5). Discussion of Lovecraft and adaptation remains drawn to it despite its general supersession in adaptation theory. Petley's argument, for instance, draws on the notion of "fidelity to the particular spirit of Lovecraft" (2007, 44); Murray and Corstorphine suggest that we should take note of adaptations that address "the key concerns of Lovecraft's work as opposed to merely the surface ideas" (2013, 198); MacWilliam approvingly says of Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* that "[t]he plot bears numerous conceptual and narrative similarities to Lovecraft's novel *At the Mountains of Madness*" (2015, 531). Strikingly, here *Prometheus* "becomes" an adaptation by an interpretatively accessible fidelity to recognizably Lovecraftian topoi rather than his "surface ideas." To suggest that Lovecraft's lengthy descriptive passages are a problem in adapting Lovecraft to film is to suggest that the lengthy descriptive passages are something that should—in some form—be adapted to film, in order for the film to be a Lovecraft adaptation.

The complexity of adaptation after fidelity criticism is reflected in the sheer number of terms clustered around adaptation studies. As Robert Stam has pointed out, adaptation theory offers a "rich constellation of terms and tropes" to speak about what adaptation is: "translation, actualization, reading, critique, dialogization, cannibalization, transmutation, transfiguration, incarnation, transmogrification, transcoding, performance, signifying, rewriting, detournement" (2004, 4)—and this does not even exhaust the terms Stam himself also uses, including

"transformation" and "recycling" (5), or terms which other scholars have offered, such as "appropriation" (Sanders 2005) or "transfer" (McFarlane 1996)—in all cases, of some original, a hypotext, into a different medium. And complicating the issue still further, there are quite a few alternative ways of looking at the relationship between stories transposed across various media, and more especially so when the relationship between "original" and "adapation" is more tenuous, when no easily recognizable single hypotext exists. Transmedia theory invokes, for instance, the idea of "storyworlds" (Ryan and Thon 2014; Leavenworth 2014) shared by different texts; Paul Booth speaks of a "Lovecraft-inspired transmedia world" (2021, 97) that recognizably relates different medial texts; and Jason Whittaker talks more generally of "cross-media forms" (2017, 190). These frames are as expansive as they are limiting. Whittaker, for instance, excludes adaptations "proper"—from recognizable hypotexts—from his cross-media approach; Van Leavenworth suggests that the pixel-art video game adventure *Cthulhu Saves the World* does "not evoke the storyworld but merely allude[s] to details in Lovecraft's fictional legacy" (2014, 334), and so does not count as part of the storyworld. All this, while interesting, is too limiting, we think. With Johannes Fehrle, we take it that "we do not need to draw a line between transmedial clusters of connected texts that expand and adaptations that retell, a line that risks becoming pedantic and counterintuitive" (2019, 13).

Indeed, in some ways, we want to be more expansive, by highlighting the close conceptual proximity between ways of understanding adaptation, understanding the Lovecraftian, and framing Lovecraft's fiction. While descriptive of something—though what exactly remains usefully unclear—the ascription "Lovecraftian" situates a reading experience by naming it. In this sense, it is very much akin to adaptation, which is best understood as a reading practice. "[I]t is the audience who must experience the adaptation as an adaptation," Linda Hutcheon argues (2013, 172). Notwithstanding her attempts to also give definition to the "product and process" (187) of adaptation, where an adaptation is a "deliberate, announced, and extended revisitation of a particular work of art" (170) and an "acknowledged transposition […and a] creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging [as well as] an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (8), Hutcheon here recognizes that readers make adaptations, bringing their knowledge of previous iterations of a work, or its core ideas, to the text they read, view, play, or listen to. What gets adapted is what Linda Hutcheon calls a "heterocosm, literally