

# Monstrous and Haunted Media: H. P. Lovecraft and Early Twentieth-Century Communications Technology

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This paper examines the role of media technologies in the horror fiction of the American author H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937). Historical geographies of media must cover more than questions of the distribution and diffusion of media objects, or histories of media representations of space and place. Media forms are both *durable* and *portable*, extending and mediating social relations in time and space, and as such they allow us to explore histories of time-space experience. After exploring recent work on the closely intertwined histories of science and the occult in late nineteenth-century America and Europe, the discussion moves on to consider the particular case of those contemporaneous media technologies which became “haunted” almost as soon as they were invented. In many ways these hauntings echo earlier responses to the printed word, something which has been overlooked by historians of recent media. Developing these ideas I then suggest that media can be monstrous because monstrosity is centrally bound up with *representation*. Horrific and fantastic fictions lend themselves to explorations of these ideas because their narratives revolve around attempts to *witness* impossible things and to *prove* their existence, tasks which involve not only the human senses but those technologies designed to extend and improve them: the media. The remainder of the paper is comprised of close readings of several of Lovecraft’s stories which suggest that mediation allowed Lovecraft to reveal monstrosity but also to hold it at a distance, to hide and to distort it. In this way monstrosity is *produced* through mediation, not simply mediated by it.<sup>1</sup>

This (relatively short) paper concentrates on one particular reading of Lovecraft’s fiction, and in doing so it makes a number of sacrifices in the name of clarity and brevity. It is true that the historical-geographical context of this form of fictional monstrosity is relatively under-explored, though the paper is informed by historians who have tended to make these questions of context central to their analyses and is intended to contribute to ongoing explorations of questions of distance and communication associated with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernities.

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Secondly, while a piece of this length cannot hope to cover the emerging fields of haunting, spectrality, or horror criticism, its mix of theoretical sources – analytical philosophy, structuralism, and post-structuralism – might still appear rather unusual. The critics discussed here, however, seem to have a better grasp of the *workings* of the fantastic or horror than other more sophisticated philosophers (although Freud, a fairly knowledgeable reader of fantastic fictions, is missing from the paper principally because he would take the argument somewhere rather different).

Finally Lovecraft was clearly not the only, or even the first, author to address these issues through a consideration of emerging media. It seems fair to say, however, that he worked through these ideas more often, and in more depth, than many of his contemporaries, perhaps because his interests spanned both science and the supernatural. The paper also seeks to contribute to Lovecraft criticism by developing an argument about the central importance of space in his fiction. Elsewhere I have suggested that Lovecraft was strongly concerned with contact, and consequently with liminal sites; here I have chosen to focus on the ways in which this interest can also be read as a wider sense of *mediated connection*. In summary, the primary aim of this paper is not to relate Lovecraft's treatment of this theme to other theoretical or fictional works, but to develop and illustrate a novel argument by drawing upon one of the most significant writers of fantastic fiction in English.<sup>2</sup>

## Science and the occult

Recent historical work has brought to light the close relationship between scientific and magical ways of thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This relationship has come to be framed in terms of a *re-enchantment of modernity*, and Michael Saler provides an excellent critical overview of these arguments. He notes that while there is much disagreement about the definition of modernity, many have followed Max Weber in taking it to be disenchanted, assuming that rationalization, secularization and bureaucratization have stripped the modern world of its mystery, spiritual meaning and wonder. Saler describes three ways that historians have conceptualized enchantment. The "binary" position presumed that enchantment survived only as "the residual subordinate 'other' to modernity's rational, secular and progressive tenets," found only in the past or at the margins of the rational world (in the imaginaries of children, women, and the masses). The "dialectical" approach accuses modernity of being as irrational as earlier eras, full of spectres, fetishes and the damaging instrumental rationality of "enlightenment."<sup>3</sup>

More recently historians have taken an "antinomial" view, eliding distinctions between modern rationality and other ways of engaging with the world. Writing about the Victorian journalist and psychic investigator W. T. Stead, for example, Roger Luckhurst notes that "discussions of Stead have largely adopted the strategy of dividing the practitioner of New Journalism from the crackpot occultist." Holding these apparently rather

different interests together actually tells us more about Stead, not less:

Stead's apparently diverse interests in mass democracy, spirits and phantasms, an Empire-wide penny post, telepathy, imperial federation, new technology, astral travel, and popular science were less the result of personal foible than of a wider *episteme*, a network of knowledges in which the occult promised to make revelatory connections across the territory of late Victorian modernity, rather than a consolatory exit from it.<sup>4</sup>

David Livingstone's history of geographical thought takes a similar approach, dismissing "the folly of separating the 'mystical' and the 'scientific' when they are both present in the thought and writings of an individual or community." Livingstone notes that "the practice of geography in the late sixteenth century was as deeply entangled in the network of magic as the other sciences." Similarly Jane Bennet's call to "re-enchant" modernity urges us to pay attention to the wondrous in the everyday, rather than the exotic and distant. It is not that contemporary cities are becoming "postsecular," then, because they were never free of magic, belief, and superstition, as Steve Pile's recent work makes clear.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, the connections between science and the occult were clearest in the field of communications: in "haunted media."

## Haunted media

Following Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* and Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*, critics have explored haunting—the experience of absent presence—across a wide range of disciplines.<sup>6</sup> The idea that spaces can be haunted has also proved fruitful for Michel de Certeau, Julian Wolfreys, Brian Ladd, Karen Till, Steve Pile, Tim Edensor, and the contributors to a special issue of *Cultural Geographies* on "Spectral Geographies," amongst many others.<sup>7</sup> Some of these authors seem to suggest, however, that *space is haunted by time*, as landscapes carry and give up the mysterious traces of those who have gone before us. But space can be actively *haunting*, as well as haunted.

We have become so used to thinking that contemporary media collapse or annihilate space, as absolute and instant presence, that it seems counterintuitive to suggest that they can be haunting. However as media phenomenologist Shaun Moores reminds us, the media actually double or multiply place as they connect us to others who are not co-present in space and time: bringing the possibility of "relating instantaneously to a wide range of spatially remote others, as well as to any proximate others in the physical settings of media use."<sup>8</sup>

Social spaces containing media technologies—mobile and "static" telephones, televisions, computers connected to the internet, letters—are potentially open to other spaces distant in space and possibly in time. Nigel Thrift suggests that "apparitions...are the unintended consequences of the complexity of modern cities, cities in which multiple time-spaces are being produced, which overlap, interact, and interfere," and some of this

is a consequence of mediated interaction. Moores does not use the word “haunting” to discuss these multiple social spaces, but the eerie properties of mediation do seem to revolve around questions of presence and absence. Discussions of media borrow the language of the paranormal, with even Marshall McLuhan noting that “with the telephone, there occurs the extension of the ear and voice that is a kind of extra sensory perception.”<sup>9</sup>

These associations have a long history. Jeffrey Sconce points out that as “sound and image without material substance, the electronically mediated worlds of telecommunications often evoke the supernatural by creating virtual beings that appear to have no physical form.” They possess an “animating, at times occult, sense of ‘liveness’.” A fascination with communication developed in both occult and scientific fields in the middle of the nineteenth century. Samuel Morse sent his first official telegraph message in 1844, and in 1848 the Fox sisters received their first communications with the spirit world; “within this five-year period, the United States thus saw the advent of both the ‘electromagnetic’ and ‘spiritual’ telegraphs.” Friedrich Kittler goes even further:

the tapping specters of the spiritistic séances, with their messages from the realm of the dead, appeared quite promptly at the moment of the invention of the Morse alphabet in 1837. Promptly, photographic plates—even and especially with the camera shutter closed—provided images of ghosts or specters which, in their black-and-white fuzziness, only emphasized the moments of resemblance.<sup>10</sup>

Technology shades into spiritualism, science into the occult, until it seems pointless trying to separate them. Alexander Graham Bell’s assistant, Thomas A. Watson, the first person to receive a telephone message, was also a medium, and Bell later attended séances. Hearing voices could be a troubling thing; Avital Ronell notes that “the first outside call the telephone makes is to schizophrenia—a condition never wholly disconnected from the ever-doubling thing.” Thomas Edison and Guglielmo Marconi both tried to develop an electronic means for communicating with the dead through “wireless telegraphy.” Throughout these accounts women, the working classes, and those on the colonial margins were thought to be better occult communicators. As Deborah Dixon points out, the work of Sconce, Ronell, Luckhurst, Winters, Thurschwell and others on telecommunication and matters of spirit concern questions of distance and proximity: “Though these analyses do not set out to identify an emergent *spatial* imaginary at work in Victorian science, what is apparent from [this work] is a nineteenth-century fascination with the *modus operandi* of cultural transmission and communication.”<sup>11</sup>

However, while I do not want to suggest that there is something inately mysterious about mediated interaction, I think that Sconce and other commentators exaggerate the novelty of these modern haunted technologies. Returning, as Carolyn Marvin suggested, to a time “when technologies were new” shows that printed books once evoked this occult sense of

presence and absence. In 1722, for example, the Reverend Thomas Symmes of Charlestown, Massachusetts wrote that print was useful because it allowed the dead to speak to the living: "...many of the eminent Servants of God *being dead, yet speak unto us*; so many other worthy Persons, and especially...the Ministers of the Gospel are still blest with Opportunities of rendering their Usefulness more *extensive* and *durable*."<sup>12</sup>

The survival of spoken reading well into the modern era also had spectral associations. Reading out loud means acting as a medium for the author's words, as Michel de Certeau pointed out: "In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor." In Falmouth in 1757, Olaudah Equiano wondered about the nature of books:

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.<sup>13</sup>

While these mediated signs of absent presence seem to possess the potential to disturb across a wider range of forms than is usually recognized, these experiences clearly have specific histories and geographies. The remainder of this paper is dedicated to exploring one set of ways of thinking about haunted media; but first we must consider the relationship between mediation and monstrosity.

## Monstrosity

Monsters are usually thought of in terms of their shocking defiance of cultural categories, drawing on Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque, or on the crossings and cyborgs of actor-network theory. True monstrosity is impossible; we immediately tame and recuperate it, simply by naming it as monstrous. Yet it still evokes reactions in us—in a more general sense a monster is anything that evokes wonder, horror or revulsion. And like the occult and the irrational, monstrosity is a central part of modernity. Daston and Park's history of monstrosity between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries "is not punctuated by clearly distinguished epistemes or turning points but is instead undulatory, continuous, sometimes cyclical." So while revulsion became the most common response, this was not due to the disappearance of marvelous explanations and the rise of science.<sup>14</sup>

However while monsters might be *visibly* hybrid, less has been said about monstrosity as revelation, disclosure, and representation. Andrew N. Sharpe notes that "The term derives from the Latin word *monstrare* meaning to show forth or demonstrate," arguing that monstrosity must be *discursively produced*. And while teratology was the science of monsters,

teratoscopy turned this into divination: Daston and Park explain that “for Christians...the monster or prodigy was a sign of God’s just wrath,” showing both divine displeasure for past sins and a warning of impending punishment.<sup>15</sup>

The monster *meant* something, then, not only because of its hybrid nature but because of its sudden appearance. Critical writing on horror fictions has begun to develop the connections between this meaning of monstrosity and questions of representation. Noel Carroll makes it clear that “the point of the horror genre...is to exhibit, disclose, and manifest that which is, putatively in principle, unknown and unknowable”; these fictions concern themselves with the discovery of something hidden. Tzvetan Todorov suggested that fantastic fictions demonstrate a triple *hesitation*:

...the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described...this hesitation may also be experienced by a character...[and] the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text; he will reject allegorical as well as poetic interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

In many narratives this hesitation leads to competing arguments about the nature of the phenomena, and as Carroll points out this is done in a rational way: “where there is ‘fantastic hesitation’ there is likely to be not only a conflict of interpretations but a deliberation about this conflict in terms of a ratiocination, the drama of proof, and the play of competing hypotheses.” Similarly, Roger Salomon points out the centrality of “the problem of witnessing” in horror fictions: “how to naturalize such narrative enough to make it credible without limiting the implications of issues raised and thus explaining away the horror.” The monster must be revealed within a context realistic enough to make it stand out, but not so realistic that it ceases to evoke horror, wonder, or repulsion.<sup>17</sup>

To demonstrate that media can play a role in revealing monstrosity in horror narratives the paper now turns to the work of H. P. Lovecraft.

## H. P. Lovecraft

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) was an enormously influential American author and critic of horror and fantastic fiction. Lovecraft felt that the most powerful weird tales were those that stuck most closely to the conventions of realist fiction, and for this reason many of his stories leave the most shocking moment as late as possible, often to the last sentence or even word of a story. This is his solution to the “problem of witnessing”:

Inconceivable events and conditions have a special handicap to overcome and this can be accomplished only through the maintenance of a careful realism in every phase of the story except that touching on the one given marvel.<sup>18</sup>

In fact Lovecraft was a thoroughgoing materialist who resisted supernatural tropes and readings of his tales. He was implacably hostile to astrology, fortune-telling, and numerology, stating that “telepathy is another very doubtful thing”; he supported his friend Houdini’s exposure of fraudulent mediums. After castigating a correspondent, Nils Frome, for falling for “the irresponsible day-dreaming which clusters around the pseudo-science-fiction magazines,” Lovecraft goes on to say, “[D]on’t think that I’m not interested in fantastic speculations about the universe and life, even if I don’t believe them. Indeed, they are all the more interesting—like the shadowy dreams I write about in my weird stories—because I don’t believe them.”<sup>19</sup>

What did scare Lovecraft was the sublime terror of “deep time,” the enormous gulfs of time exposed by archaeology and geology, and the cosmic terror of the enormity of space.

I choose weird stories because they suit my inclination best—one of my strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis.<sup>20</sup>

Ken Hite suggests that Lovecraft, like Verne and Wells, was trying to remythologize—we might say re-enchant—the world while rejecting romanticism: “Lovecraft’s mythology attempts to answer the same questions about the universe, and provide the same cosmic thrills, as all mythologies, but Lovecraft insists...that the answers are grounded in geology, and biology, and paleontology....”<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps for this reason Lovecraft explored modern media within several of his stories as one part of his overarching interest in distance and revelation. Hite notes that the “thin-ness of boundaries, the lack of walls between the Mad and the True or the Sacred and the Profane (or, reductively, between the Anglo-Saxon and the Foreign), seems to be a huge meta-concern spanning all of Lovecraft’s work.”<sup>22</sup>

Lovecraft’s racism clearly shaped the way he thought about these boundaries, as I have discussed elsewhere, but it is worth thinking about this in a more general sense of contact and communication. Lovecraft’s “cursed artifacts,” Hite suggests, “all open the holder or viewer to the Outside, usually with unfortunate consequences.” These artifacts can be representations (sculpture, bas-relief, images, text, geometrical figures), architecture and built forms (doorways, houses), or technologies (drills and “resonators”).<sup>23</sup> These all represent connections with elsewhere, but the ways that media bring the distant closer have received less critical attention than Lovecraft’s more obvious thresholds.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the most common way of opening the way to the outside is through the book of forbidden knowledge; Lovecraft and his friends invented scores of these, of which the *Necronomicon* is only the most famous. In effect Lovecraft simply took literally the Reverend Symmes’s observation that dead authors “yet speak unto us.”

Once opened up, though, the monstrous must be witnessed and the “drama of proof” played out; problems of witnessing and proof drive many of Lovecraft’s narratives. Ken Hite notes that in “The Lurking Fear” (1923) Lovecraft “transposes the exposition as narration into exposition as narrative—rather than the *author* filling us in on the history...we have the protagonist read up on the Martenses, and we read over his shoulder, as it were.”<sup>25</sup> These “researcher-heroes” narrate their process of uncovering the truth, setting out their suspicions and fears and arguing about their hypotheses in the text. Often these narratives are effectively *transcriptions* of this process of revelation. However these narrators are often unreliable because they are still uncertain about what it is they saw, or cannot prove it. The story “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1935), which we will return to later, begins with the words “Bear in mind closely that I did not actually see any actual visual horror at the end.” Lovecraft’s monsters are often hard to see, or at least hard to see in a way that makes sense: invisible, disguised, formless, or otherwise ineffable. As a result the process of explanation is often incomplete, despite the efforts of the researcher-hero to get everything down on paper. In “The Haunter of the Dark” (1936) the hero writes to the very end: “Blake had prolonged his frenzied jottings to the last, and the broken-pointed pencil was found clutched in his spasmodically contracted right hand.” Despite these heroic efforts his final words are unclear: “I see it—coming here—hell-wind—titan blur—black wings—Yog-Sothoth save me—the three-lobed burning eye....”<sup>26</sup>

Other media allow Lovecraft’s narrators to represent monstrosity through sound, telepathic union and other forms of mediation. The remainder of the paper works through four kinds of mediated monstrosity in Lovecraft’s fiction—radio, telephone, phonogram, and wireless—mapping out an increasingly complex set of themes through the discussion of specific stories.

## Lovecraft’s media I: the “telepathic radio”

Lovecraft’s interest in connections to deep time and cosmic space can be seen in the role memory, dreams, telepathy and “possession” play in many of his stories. Connections are drawn between telegraphy, telephony and telepathy in one of his earliest published stories, “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” (1919). The narrator works at a mental hospital and is obsessed with the idea that thought is a kind of energy:

It had long been my belief that human thought consists basically of atomic or molecular motion, convertible into ether waves or radiant energy like heat, light and electricity. This belief had early led me to contemplate the possibility of telepathy or mental communication by means of suitable apparatus, and I had in my college days prepared a set of transmitting and receiving instruments somewhat similar to the cumbrous devices employed in wireless telegraphy at that crude, pre-radio period.<sup>27</sup>

This invention comes some time before 1900, which makes it contemporaneous with the first experiments in wireless telephony by Marconi, Popov and Tesla. The narrator becomes interested in an insane murderer called Joe Slater at the institution. While Slater is an uneducated Catskills “degenerate,” his dreams seem to be the product of a more intelligent, if alien, mind. The narrator determines to “read” Slater’s mind with his device.

I would fit the transmitter to his forehead and the receiver to my own, constantly making delicate adjustments for various hypothetical wave-lengths of intellectual energy. I had but little notion of how the thought-impressions would, if successfully conveyed, arouse an intelligent response in my brain, but I felt certain that I could detect and interpret them.<sup>28</sup>

It becomes clear that Slater is dying, and the narrator tries his “cosmic ‘radio’” one last time. It works and he sees and hears the fantastic things Slater is dreaming, though the reader is beginning to realise that Slater is merely the host for a superior alien being. He readjusts the “telepathic ‘radio’” and makes contact:

At this juncture my brain became aware of a steady external influence operating upon it. I closed my eyes to concentrate my thoughts more profoundly and was rewarded by the positive knowledge that *my long-sought mental message had come at last*. Each transmitted idea formed rapidly in my mind, and though no actual language was employed, my habitual association of conception and expression was so great that I seemed to be receiving the message in ordinary English.<sup>29</sup>

This story is very close to the myths of media presence explored by Sconce; “the telegraph and early wireless held the tantalizing promises of contacting the dead in the afterlife and aliens of other planets.” In his 1926 essay “The Materialist Today,” Lovecraft wrote “To the materialist, mind seems very clearly not a *thing*, but a *mode of motion or form of energy*.” Clearly this device allows telepathy through an analogy with telegraphy.<sup>30</sup>

In “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” the narrator’s “telepathic radio” allows him to make the entity trapped in Slater’s body visible, or rather it *gives it a voice*. Another technology, the phone, allowed for a more distanced witnessing.

## Lovecraft’s media II: the telephone

Though his family home did have a phone, Lovecraft disliked using it, perhaps because it facilitated social interaction. He sometimes emphasised the isolation of a particular place—like the titular town in “The Shadow over Innsmouth” (1936)—by cutting it off from the telephone network. Elsewhere, in “The Statement of Randolph Carter” (1920), the telephone takes center stage, acting as the means by which monstrosity is conveyed to the reader. The story takes the form of a statement to the

police by Randolph Carter concerning the disappearance of his friend Harley Warren in a cemetery in Florida.<sup>31</sup>

Warren enters a crypt below one of the tombs, asking Carter to remain on the surface; luckily they have brought a field telephone, so that they can still talk to one another. "I promise to keep you informed over the telephone of every move—you see I've enough wire here to reach to the center of the earth and back!" Carter says. "I was alone, yet bound to the unknown depths by those magic strands whose insulated surface lay green beneath the struggling beams of that waning crescent moon." Carter and Warren carry on a conversation over the field telephone, with Warren's part of it in italics to distinguish it from normal speech. Of course Warren discovers something horrible, and the line goes silent before a strange voice on the line tells Carter: "*YOU FOOL, WARREN IS DEAD!*" In "Statement" the telephone allows Lovecraft to present a version of "the problem of witnessing," revealing monstrosity by sound, not sight, and keeping it at a distance.<sup>32</sup>

Monstrosity is also witnessed by phone in "The Dunwich Horror" (1929), one of Lovecraft's most famous stories. Dunwich is a (fictional) backward and isolated community in rural New England and the horror takes the form of two unearthly "children" born to a local woman after she is visited by one of Lovecraft's godlike alien entities. The phone is used for instrumental uses, like summoning the doctor, but the truly monstrous moment comes when the scattered homes of the villagers are attacked by an invisible thing. The houses are connected by a party line, a common way of connecting people to the network at the time, so what is heard by one can be heard by all.

Thursday night began much like the others, but it ended less happily. The whippoorwills in the glen had screamed with such unusual persistence that many could not sleep, and about 3 A.M. all the party telephones rang tremulously. Those who took down their receivers heard a fright-mad voice shriek out, 'Help, oh, my Gawd!...' and some thought a crashing sound followed the breaking off of the exclamation. There was nothing more. No one dared do anything, and no one knew till morning whence the call came. Then those who had heard it called everyone on the line, and found that only the Fries did not reply.<sup>33</sup>

The invisible entity is revealed by sound, broadcast by the party line network (early uses of the telephone explored its potential as a broadcast system). Throughout the story the calling of the whippoorwills acts as a sign of impending doom, alerting the characters to the presence of the invisible entity, which is made visible toward the end when a strange powder is thrown over it. Like the party line these things allow for a *distant witnessing*. It is no coincidence that the end of the creature is narrated by a group of locals, who watch from a safe distance through a telescope—a device for making the distant seem closer. The monster is therefore only described second-hand, by observers watching at a distance.

A more complex use of media is evident in "The Thing on The

Doorstep" (1937), which includes telepathy, telegraphy, telephony, and writing. The story concerns Edward Derby, a luckless but well-heeled idler who marries Asenath Waite, the daughter of a man suspected of occult dabblings. Asenath seems to have an almost hypnotic power over her husband, even when they are far apart. Derby is outlining his fears about the marriage to the narrator when the latter sees this happen: "I wondered whether Asenath could possibly have divined his speech at a distance and cut him off through some unknown sort of telepathic mesmerism?" It soon becomes clear to the reader that this is a story about the transference of consciousness from one body to another. Asenath's father Ephraim has swapped bodies with his daughter and then killed her, so that he can cheat his own death; he has now learned to do the same trick with Derby. This parallels one of the recurring fictions of electronic presence identified by Sconce: "these media enable an uncanny form of disembodiment, allowing the communicating subject the ability, real or imagined, to leave the body and transport his or her consciousness to a distant destination."<sup>34</sup>

In desperation Derby kills Asenath/Ephraim, but Ephraim's "soul" survives; the switch is made months later and Derby ends up in Asenath's buried body. The denouement involves a mysterious phone call and an even stranger visitor:

It began with a telephone call just before midnight. I was the only one up, and sleepily took down the receiver in the library. No one seemed to be on the wire, and I was about to hang up and go to bed when my ear caught a very faint suspicion of sound at the other end. Was someone trying under great difficulties to talk? As I listened I thought I heard a sort of half-liquid bubbling noise—'glub...glub...glub'—which had an odd suggestion of inarticulate, unintelligible word and syllable divisions. I called 'Who is it?' But the only answer was 'glub...glub...glub-glub.' I could only assume that the noise was mechanical; but fancying that it might be a case of a broken instrument able to receive but not to send, I added, 'I can't hear you. Better hang up and try Information.' Immediately I heard the receiver go on the hook at the other end.<sup>35</sup>

Derby manages to animate Asenath's corpse and trudge to the narrator's door. The titular Thing on the Doorstep passes over a hand-written note that tells all: "I'm too far gone to talk—I couldn't manage to telephone—but I can still write." The story revolves around mediation, both Ephraim's body-hopping and Derby's increasingly desperate attempts to communicate his suspicions to the narrator and reader.<sup>36</sup>

### Lovecraft's media III: the phonogram

"The Whisperer in Darkness" (1931) weaves together a number of these themes, whilst introducing another form of media: the phonogram, invented by Edison in 1877. The story concerns Akeley, an amateur

folklorist who lives in the Vermont hills, and Wilmarth, a professor of literature. The two begin a correspondence about strange occurrences in the woods near Akeley's isolated house. Akeley sends Wilmarth letters, photos of traces left by the strange creatures they call "Mi-Go," transcripts of conversations between these things and their human accomplices, and finally a phonograph recording of those overheard exchanges. Exchanges between the two men start to go missing, and the Mi-Go's agents fake a telegram to reassure Wilmarth. Akeley's telephone wires are cut and he tells Wilmarth "wish I hadn't gotten to be such a hermit, so folks don't stop around as they used to." Eventually Akeley sends Wilmarth a typed letter offering to show him proof that the entities are there—but that they mean him no harm.<sup>37</sup>

The story narrates Salomon's "problem of witnessing" and Carroll's "drama of proof." Photography captures the traces left by the creatures, but when Akeley's dogs kill one of the Mi-Go, he finds that the body is made of something that can't be photographed: "when I developed the film *there wasn't anything visible except the woodshed.*" The wax cylinder that Akeley has used to make the sound recording works much better, so that sound is again the medium for witnessing monstrosity; the recording is "transcribed" in the text. The recording is described as being enormously powerful: "Those to whom I have since described the record profess to find nothing but cheap imposture or madness in it; but *could they have heard the accursed thing itself*, or read the bulk of Akeley's correspondence...I know they would think differently." The phonograph had become an important way of preserving sound by 1900, but it also possessed uncanny associations: Kittler pointed out that "one of the ten uses Edison predicted... for the recently invented phonograph was to preserve the 'last words of the dying.'"<sup>38</sup>

It is significant, then, that all of these witnessings have been made to disappear by the end of the story, "pictures, record-sounds, cylinder-and-machine sounds." As Ken Hite notes, "The seemingly clumsy morass of exposition is...part of the point. There's too much data, and it absolutely cannot be assembled into a coherent picture. If you doubt any of it, you must doubt all of it—and sure enough, it all vanishes, along with Akeley."<sup>39</sup>

Wilmarth is left with the knowledge of what has happened to Akeley—but no proof, beyond his own account.

## Lovecraft's media IV: wireless

My final example concerns Lovecraft's short novel *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), narrated by Dyer, Professor of Geology at Miskatonic University. Dyer's story concerns his university's expedition to Antarctica to drill for rock and fossil samples. He has kept the expedition's real discoveries secret, but the news that another group intends to explore the same area leads him to publish his story in an attempt to dissuade them. Wireless radio plays an important part throughout the novel, both for instrumental uses and as a way of generating public interest in the expedition;

eventually, however, the radio becomes a dangerous witness precisely *because* it reveals monstrosity.<sup>40</sup>

Like other Antarctic explorers, the wireless operators use the radio to report on their progress. "The public knows of the Miskatonic Expedition through our frequent wireless reports to the *Arkham Advertiser* and Associated Press," sent from the expedition's planes via the ship that brought them to Antarctica, the *Arkham*. "The ship's outfit, communicating with the outside world, was to convey press reports to the *Arkham Advertiser's* powerful wireless station on Kingsport Head, Massachusetts." Once a base camp has been set up, a sub-expedition is sent out with four planes. Lake, the leader of this group, discovers the enormous Mountains of the title, relaying the news by radio: "I could almost trace a note of subconscious alarm in his words—flashed across a glacial void of 700 miles." While radio is clearly essential to the expedition—connecting Dyer, Lake and the ship in "a three-cornered wireless talk"—these short bulletins, transcribed in the text, also emphasise Lake's party's isolation in this dangerous, mysterious terrain.<sup>41</sup>

Lake's group discover caves below the ice and rock and what seems to be a city in the mountains. The caves contain a jumble of bones from the Ordovician period to the Oligocene, including some specimens of a wholly unfamiliar nature, monstrous entities who are later dubbed "Old Ones." Lake's description of these Old Ones is very detailed, as China Miéville points out, but in the story it is relayed *from a good distance* by radio, effectively at one remove. This discovery is so startling that Dyer begins to censor the broadcasts meant for the outside world: "Just before retiring I dispatched a final message to the *Arkham* with instructions about toning down the day's news for the outside world, since the full details seemed radical enough to rouse a wave of incredulity until further substantiated."<sup>42</sup>

The there-ness of wireless, so useful for the organization and publicizing of the expedition, has become a problem.

Lake's camp is then cut off and cannot be raised on the radio; what can have destroyed the shortwave sets on the planes? Dyer sets off to find out, sending bulletins from the plane in flight to be relayed to the newspapers. "There came a point, though, when our sensations could not be conveyed in any words the press would understand, and a latter point when we had to adopt an actual rule of strict censorship." Witnessing has become a problem. Dyer and his companions eventually discover a vast city in the mountains that predates human life—and is not entirely deserted. During their exploration Dyer and Danforth, a graduate student, make sketches and take photographs. There is plenty of evidence to prove their story, but "the tremendous significance lies in what we dared not tell": "Danforth and I have closely guarded the pictures we took or drew on the super-plateau across the range, and the crumpled things we smoothed, studied in terror, and brought away in our pockets."<sup>43</sup>

In many of Lovecraft's stories, when proof *can* be found it is likely to be kept secret by their discoverers.

## Conclusions

It is clear that modern media played an important part in many of Lovecraft's stories, and it seems likely that this was not simply a consequence of his interest in science and technology. Mediation may well have offered Lovecraft another way of exploring the themes of communication that seem so central to his work. While his fictional creations are often hybrid, polluting and grotesque, they are also monstrous in what they reveal, in their becoming visible, tangible or audible. Modern media – the telegraph, telephone, phonogram and radio – offer a new set of solutions to the “problem of witnessing,” to the problem of crafting representations that are both credible and enchanting. However many of these stories also suggest that the immediacy and “there-ness” of media also create new problems for the author and reader. In *At The Mountains of Madness* wireless reports bring the Antarctic into American living rooms, but they must be censored to keep out the horrors the expedition discovers. Similarly, in “The Statement of Randolph Carter” and “The Dunwich Horror” modern media allow horrors to be witnessed – from a safe distance. This partial revelation of monstrosity within the text mirrors Lovecraft's writing, which tends to provide hesitant representations.

In conclusion, the relationships between media and monstrosity in this time and place turn out to be more complex and significant than they might at first appear. The development of these modern forms of media, alongside other cultural tropes of connection and communication – telepathy, spirit travel, the ouija board, and more – in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America seems to have offered Lovecraft and others a rich set of ways of thinking about distance and contact. Because these things all extend or alter human perception as well as interaction, they also allow for explorations of witnessing and proof, and of the ways in which these can be achieved at greater distances and made more durable in time through the creation of records of monstrosity. Monstrosity turns out to have many times and spaces, and it is interesting to speculate on the forms these relationships might take in other periods and sites.

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## Notes

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22. *Ibid.*, 30.
23. *Ibid.*, 21-22.
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25. Hite, *Tour*, 41, emphasis added.
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  36. *Ibid.*, 364.
  37. "Whisperer," 230.
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