

Unveiling Existential Dread in Cosmic Horror:
A Comparative Study of *At the Mountains of Madness*, *The Thing*, *The Mist*, and *Prometheus*

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Unveiling Existential Dread in Cosmic Horror:

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For centuries, darkness has fascinated humankind. Yet, the darkness is, at once, humanity's oldest and deepest fear, harboring things beyond our comprehension, and has hence birthed a myriad of shadowy and suspenseful tales of horror for as long as man has lived (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* 14). Brimming with recognizable elements of the early legends and fables, modern horror is, nonetheless, much more than a mere ghost story, as it delves into a variety of monstrous creatures, the battle of good versus evil, and perhaps most importantly, the inherent fear within the human species (Haining vii-viii). Horror is thus, to put it in the words of Mary Shelley in her introduction to *Frankenstein*, a genre that should "speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror. One to make the reader dread to look around. To curdle the blood and quicken the beatings of the heart" (5). With the purpose of eliciting a certain affect within the reader or viewer, a truly horrific tale can only be experienced through emotions that touch the bare core of a human being, such as fear and terror; for, horror, in fact, does not horrify unless an audience has been personally touched (King, *Danse Macabre* 12).

Through the years, the horror genre has become significantly fragmented, demonstrating sheer diversity by developing and evolving numerous subgenres, and thus illustrating that within horror a large range of different forms can be identified (Cherry 2-4). Given the diverse nature of the horror genre, it becomes interesting to investigate one of its most prominent subgenres, namely Cosmic Horror, strongly associated with Howard Phillips Lovecraft, and further explore the existential dread linked with said subgenre, affecting both characters and audience on a psychological level. As such, with the intention of investigating the distinct characteristics of the genres, horror and cosmic horror, the following research question arises: in what way has the genre of cosmic horror kept its relevance and how do the philosophies of Cosmicism and Existentialism play into said relevance? In order to undertake this research question the study will be conducting a comparative reading of a selection of works that includes: *At the Mountains of Madness* by H. P. Lovecraft (1936), *The Mist* by Stephen King (1980), *The Thing*, directed by John Carpenter (1982), and lastly, *Prometheus*, directed by Ridley Scott (2012).

This selection of works has been made on the basis of their points of resemblance, which include not only their genres but also the specific themes they share, thus making them ideal subjects for comparison. The fictions in comparison hold significant intrigue in terms of their social relevance, and especially when considering them within the context of modern

age anthropocentrism; for these fictional works serve as poignant reminders of the vastness of the universe, highlighting the minuscule and inconsequential nature of humanity within it. The belief, deeply embedded in most of humanity, that humans are the paramount and pivotal beings in the cosmos is effectively contested by the aforementioned literature; engaging with these works, readers and viewers may thus find themselves deeply affected, experiencing a level of introspection that leads them to question their own existence and position within the universe. Cosmic horror is, in various ways, a genre that moves beyond the 'traditional' horrors, as it centralizes on the psychological impact of both characters and audience, rather than its psychical effect. In several respects, cosmic horror hence serves as a catalyst for challenging and reevaluating the commonly held notions of human superiority and centrality, exploring profound psychological themes such as the fragility of the human mind and the contemplation of human existence. As a result, the genre is ideal when investigating how absurdity and unfathomable creatures affect the human psyche and ideas of anthropocentrism, additionally inspecting how the genre continues to maintain its relevance in terms of confronting existential and societal fears.

The thesis will take its starting point in a comparative study of the chosen materials to approach the aforementioned research question, employing both literary and film analytical methods as tools for establishing the analysis. These methods will, however, only be used to the extent that seems relevant in connection with the shared thematics and applied in fusion with the paper's theoretical approach. The theories applied in the paper consist of a brief introduction to the Gothic origin as a means of understanding how horror developed and later evolved. In this respect, focus also lies on one of the stock features of gothic, the sublime, as the emotions produced by this concept are highly applicable to the works of both horror and cosmic horror. The sublime is furthermore similar to the existential emotion of dread, seeing that it too relies on awe-awakening feelings which essentially overwhelm the mind, allowing it to slip out of conventional understanding. Hereafter, the history, characteristics, effects, and figures of horror will be presented to demonstrate some commonly used elements of this genre and simultaneously how its development gave way to the subgenre, cosmic horror. The main elements of cosmic horror and its appertaining philosophy, cosmicism, is subsequently introduced, which in turn will help to understand how this specific genre operates and creates dread. Finally, the theory of existentialism will be clarified, however, only to the extent of covering the existential aspects existing within the cosmic horror genre, with an emphasis on the element of dread and its definition according to three key philosophical thinkers; Søren Kierkegaard, Sean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger.

Following the theoretical framework, the analysis will proceed by examining the selected works, commencing with an exploration of how dread is established through the themes of atmosphere and setting. As cosmic horror relies immensely on the establishment of an atmosphere of tension and unease among both characters and audience, it becomes essential to examine the ways in which these narrative devices contribute to the tension and unease generated. Thereafter, the uniqueness of the monsters/creatures in the works will be studied, concentrating on the effect of the mystery behind these entities and why they, within the cosmic genre, are often left to the imagination. Hence, the physical threat these monsters pose in the given works can be used to assess how these entities create cosmic terror by essentially residing somewhere outside of the horror tradition, following, instead, the characteristics of cosmic, or Lovecraftian, horror. As horror in general relies considerably on the creation of suspenseful sequences within both literature and film in order to obtain the desired effect of fear in its audience, an identification of those instances will also be made. By determining this accumulation of tension and anticipation, a visceral response of the readers/viewers will be identified in order to once again demonstrate the effect of horror aesthetics, but also to explore the next segment, namely an analysis that centers on the psychological aftermath of the emotion of existential dread. This exploration will then aim attention at the madness which existential dread may evoke in the characters and audience, ultimately combining cosmic terror with existentialism, and the underlying struggle for finding meaning and purpose in human existence, when encountering unfathomable horrors. Lastly, a discussion of the paradox of horror will be made, aiming to uncover the paradoxical appeal of the genre and its enduring relevance. Elaborating hereupon, the discussion will furthermore aim attention at the way in which the horror genre serves as a mirror for social anxieties, thus emphasizing its role as a medium for existential speculation and reflection. Such a discussion will then contribute to a better understanding of the intense emotions of the cosmic horror genre and its continuing captivation of its audience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While this paper has proven to be the first study that conducts a comparison of this specific collection of works in relation to the genre of cosmic horror and its psychological impact on audiences, it is worth noting that previous studies have also explored various aspects concerning this subject. This section will therefore consist of a selection of these studies in order to consider their contributions and findings, as well, in connection to the approach chosen for this specific thesis

In “Weird Cinema and the Aesthetics of Dread”, Brian R. Hauser argues that Lovecraft’s *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, which defines the theory of cosmic horror and the appertaining philosophy cosmicism, can be applied to “any artistic medium with the capacity to deliver the all-important sensation of dread with a seriousness of tone and at least a hint of the supernatural” (235). This specific way of writing horror fiction is thereby as relevant in the case of motion pictures as it is in literature, according to Hauser, which is why his research delves into the aesthetics of weird cinema and analyzes examples of dread within it (236). When using the term ‘Lovecraftian’ to describe certain films, Hauser asserts that it creates an ubiquitous, however varied, use of the term, which often leads to confusion and disagreement among scholars. Some might describe a film as Lovecraftian when recognizable elements of plot, character, objects, and/or settings are included from actual stories by Lovecraft, while others name films as Lovecraftian by the mere presence of a tentacle; others might use the term to illustrate the style or mood characterized by Lovecraft’s writings, or let Lovecraftian denote cosmic horror, wherein the narrators often have a tendency to endure madness at the realization of human insignificance. However, this approach to the term is, according to Hauser, limiting the use of the weird to only include Lovecraft’s own stories, which ultimately excludes a large amount of material that is perhaps more suitable for a Lovecraftian analysis than, in fact, tales written by Lovecraft himself (238).

As an example of how one can apply the theory of cosmic horror to other works besides Lovecraft’s own, David McWilliam offers a study that centers on a comparison between *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Prometheus*, focusing on the commonalities and distinctions in regard to how both works challenge humanity’s faith in God and science (532). McWilliam defines the genre of cosmic horror to be “a nihilistic view of the universe that, if accepted, threatens to unravel human epistemology as currently understood [because the genre] posits that scientific advances do not offer the prospect of a progressive future but risk revealing our insignificance and powerlessness on a cosmic scale” (531). Cosmic horror, according to McWilliam, is thus a genre that essentially questions humankind’s anthropocentric understanding of the universe.

In his analysis of the two works, McWilliam declares that the narrative of *Prometheus*, albeit bearing numerous similarities to *At the Mountains of Madness*, moves beyond Lovecraft’s novella in terms of setting and the creatures which the humans discover in these surroundings. The setting is portrayed to be even more remote and inhospitable from civilization than the Antarctic surroundings, while the extraterrestrial beings, the Engineers, regard humans as an experiment connected to an inscrutable alien plan, rather than simply

unwanted, accidental creations (531-532). Based on this analysis, McWilliam proclaims *Prometheus* to be an exploration of a nihilistic version of posthumanism merged with the genre of cosmic horror, as “the film unveils a universe in which the values of humans and humanism are attacked on a number of fronts” (536). To support his findings, McWilliam presents several examples from the film and compares them to sections from *At the Mountains of Madness*, which, in turn, suggest that the humans in *Prometheus* are the product of posthuman nihilistic creation, essentially a scientific experiment, that has either failed or is an ongoing process (536). These examples also show how both works correspond to the genre of cosmic horror by juxtaposing the Old Ones with the Engineers, as both stories imply that the alien beings were overthrown by their own creations (536-537). As previously mentioned, McWilliam does, however, accentuate that *Prometheus* furthers the Lovecraftian elements of cosmic horror by inverting the indescribable and mysterious factor of which Lovecraft was a supporter. Whereas the Old Ones in *At the Mountains of Madness* are described more typically as Lovecraftian monsters, having sublime and enigmatic forms, the Engineers are made recognizable, yet still disturbingly unknowable, when subjected to the scientists’ gaze in the scene where Shaw and Ford examine the decapitated head of the alien. Additionally, McWilliam compares the black substance, causing both mutating contagion in animals and humans alike, turning them into strong predatory creatures, to Lovecraft’s Shoggoths, seeing that both organisms are difficult to taxonomize due to their heterogeneous shape and the fact that they generate some form of testament to their creators’ scientific prowess. By comparing these works, McWilliam hence contends that *Prometheus* belongs within the tradition of cosmic horror rather than the genre of science fiction, since the plot is simply disregarded, and focus lies on establishing a given sensation through the mysterious motives of the Engineers and the incomprehensible organism they have created (537-539).

McWilliam does, nonetheless, highlight one aspect of *Prometheus* that differs from the traditional elements of cosmic horror, as Shaw, opposed to Dyer and Danforth, is not driven to the brink of madness by the revelations this exploration has unveiled, and nor does she flee from the dangerous creatures which she faces. Whereas characters like Holloway and Weyland succumb to nihilism when realizing that they are utterly insignificant to their creators, McWilliam maintains that Shaw holds onto the hope of finding answers to the fundamental questions regarding human existence (542). *Prometheus* thereby weakens the anthropocentric beliefs of human superiority, as the film shows that humans are neither free beings evolved by evolution nor products of an almighty God; rather, they are, they are

reduced to mere components in a vast and incomprehensible cosmic system “that [gesture] towards a nightmarish post-species future” (545).

In the context of analyzing *Prometheus*, Edmund Cueva brings forth an in-depth exploration of the film, in which he contests that it “offers a complicated and multifaceted narrative on the origin of humans and their place in the universe through the stories of Prometheus and Pandora and Adam and Eve” (183). Cueva thus presents how the *Alien* prequel can be juxtaposed with the book of Genesis, and myths from Greek mythology, to purposely demonstrate the film’s search for human origin and purpose of existence. In his study, Cueva analyzes various scenes depicting the film’s quest in finding the source and creator of human life, centralizing on how these scenes, in fact, echo aforementioned religious myths and stories. He exemplifies this by comparing the opening scene of *Prometheus* to a mixture of the biblical story of creation and the Promethean myth, as the Engineer’s decomposing body, that spawns the human genome, can be interpreted as the same form of ritualistic self-sacrifice as seen in both of these religious and pagan stories (184). Another example is accentuated when the hologram of the expedition’s financial backer, Peter Weyland, is portrayed, as Cueva correlates Weyland’s vision of becoming immortal, i.e. close to a divine entity, with the myth of Prometheus stealing fire from the Greek Gods and giving it to humankind. Both the myth and Weyland’s desire effectively concern the aspect of equalizing the balance of power between humans and Gods (185). Lastly, the film also depicts the search for knowledge; a form of knowledge that essentially is prohibited, like the forbidden fruit in Eden which Adam and Eve ultimately eat, thereby defying God, which Cueva compares to the sufferings of the female scientist, Shaw, for example, in her gory birthing of an alien creature. Shaw is thus, according to Cueva, punished for wanting to know the source of her own origin, and can be interpreted as a combination of Pandora and Eve, taking on the role of mother and creator, similar to how Pandora unleashed a myriad of evils on Earth, and how Eve was the mother of humanity, birthing a human lineage (189). In its essence, Cueva’s study thereby highlights the religious and mythological imagery of *Prometheus*, showing certain critics of the film that it, in fact, contains a nuanced perspective on human existence.

Cueva’s contributions to the field gives way to another study that focuses on cosmic horror analysis concerning motion pictures, more specifically, the article “The Thing in the Ice: The Weird in John Carpenter’s *The Thing*”. As the title indicates, Michael Brown examines the horror film from 1982, illustrating its close alignment with the cosmic horror genre, and suggests that the filmic creature or ‘thing’ challenges human comprehension and

knowledge by illustrating a paradoxical form of absence as well as excess (47). Through Brown's research on the acknowledgments of *The Thing*, he demonstrates that the film has always been situated within the category of the traditional motion pictures, portraying aliens from outer space. Yet, he argues that the film might not necessarily enter into such clear-cut distinctions of stark opposition between human and alien, if *The Thing* is approached by a frame of cosmic horror, or what he defines as the weird. This alternative reading of the film thus considers what characteristics of the monster of *The Thing* that compel humankind to confront the incomprehensible that inevitably surrounds them (48).

Brown's article thereby values the importance of the film's creature by exploring the unknowability of the universe; a theme he renders present through an analysis of *The Thing*, especially directed at two cinematic strategies, i.e. setting and special effects. For example, considering the setting, Brown proposes that the Antarctic surroundings are instrumental for the establishment of weird realism, presenting itself as one of the elements within Lovecraft's way of thinking, which posits that "[r]eality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it" (Harman qtd. in Brown 50). The desolate and ice-covered landscape should hence form a conception of an 'alien space', wherein individuals would consider the world to be beyond comprehension (54). Furthermore, Brown argues that *The Thing* is a film that operates in the mode of cosmic horror, which he bases on the scenes wherein special effects illustrate the bodily transformation, autopsy, and hybridity of species, as these sequences not only show the creature's excess of grotesque canine snouts, human torsos, and flailing tendrils, but also the absence of a body due to the thing's metamorphic nature (51-53). *The Thing* is therefore, as stated by Brown, unlike the traditional stories of aliens versus humans, because it withholds elements of cosmic horror and rejects the notion of returning its human characters to a state of normalcy, or rather their understanding of the world. Instead, it permanently unravels their minds through the depiction of a creature that essentially is incomprehensible to such a degree that it defeats human thought (49).

In addition to the studies of the cinematic works, and in connection with the base of this thesis, it also becomes relevant to direct attention to the selected literature authored by two prominent horror writers, Lovecraft and King, respectively. Such a study can be found in Alissa Burger's extensive research exploring Lovecraft's influence on King, where she, in particular, focuses on the echoes of Lovecraft in King's novella, *The Mist* (78). Burger initiates her study by comparing *Supernatural Horror in Literature* to King's nonfiction, *Danse Macabre*, stating that *Danse Macabre*, in several ways, can be seen as a continuation

of Lovecraft's essay that basically outlined the developments and achievements within the horror genre. Both of these works begin by delving into the genre's historical foundation, before considering contemporary writers of the genre, and, lastly, laying out their definitions of different types of horror. Similar to how Lovecraft's conception of horror included a clear delineation between the internal and the external, King outlines his understanding of the genre through three separate levels; terror, horror, and revulsion. These levels demonstrate the imaginative effectiveness, the physical reaction, and lastly the grossed-out function of horror (79-80). By exploring both works of Lovecraft and King, Burger thereby determines that *The Mist* tabs into "this Lovecraftian mythos of cosmic terror and the Great Old Ones" (85) and is effectively combining the internal, psychological horror and the external, cosmic terror, with that of terror, horror, and revulsion (86).

This exploration has therefore led Burger to the conclusion that King has used the model of Lovecraft's fiction as a vehicle for writing *The Mist*. King's novella bears, for example, resemblance to the cosmic horror genre by illustrating the external threat of the mist, and the internal claustrophobia and insanity that appear when humanity is trapped and threatened within a confined setting like the supermarket (88). Burger exemplifies this by stating that the characters in *The Mist* are faced with a no-win situation, where an increasing number of the store's occupants prefer a nihilistic way out of the madness through substance abuse, suicide, and insanity. The only real survivors are those who dare venture out of the supermarket alongside Drayton and his son, yet their safety and survival are far from secure, seeing that the foggy surroundings remain an imminent threat (88). While *The Mist* bears numerous similarities to Lovecraft's cosmic horror, portraying monsters that are beyond reason and understanding, and ending the story having given only a glimpse of the unknown terrors within the mist, Burger does, however, highlight that King might not be as pessimistic as Lovecraft, as illustrated in his writings (89). To this, Burger emphasizes the final words of the narrator, Drayton, namely "Hartford" (King, *The Mist* 181) and "hope" (181), thus deducing that King opts for an optimistic finale, no matter the extent of the odds stacked against the characters (Burger 89). As declared by Burger:

King's optimism and fundamental belief in the goodness of humanity is in dramatic opposition to Lovecraft's cosmic indifferentism; while Lovecraft's mythos argues that the human race is inconsequential in the face of unassailable cosmic horrors, King argues that hope and love in spite of those horrors are the only things that really matter. (90)

This hopeful optimism, which Burger so clearly discloses in her analysis, is simultaneously presented in the study "Hope and Fear in Stephen King's *The Mist*" conducted by Robi

Syarip and Fatma Hetami. In their exploration of this specific fiction, they discover a binary opposition of hope and fear in the novella; an opposition they essentially analyze with the purpose of explaining how society can be consumed and changed during chaotic events similar to the one occurring in the supermarket in Bridgton, Maine (Syarip and Hetami 1-2). Based on the findings of this study, it becomes apparent that Drayton, in particular, represents hope throughout the story, as he, even in dangerous and life-threatening situations, seems to convey a sense of safety and calmness, whereas the zealot, Mrs. Carmody, in contrast, spreads utter fear and panic by her relentlessly propagating notions of evil and impending doom (4-5). Syarip and Hetami do, nonetheless, acknowledge that the usage of both hope and fear mainly depends on the nature of the event, as the binary opposition shows how these emotions are connected with each other. In some instances, hope might create a better solution than fear to a specific chaotic event, and in another situation, it can become an approach that has the opposite effect. The same terms can be applied to fear as well, which demonstrates how hope and fear play significant roles when changing the life of people and society, as individuals will have different perceptions of dealing with a problem or situation (13).

Having identified some of the contributions within the field of study that centers on cosmic horror and the selected works in question, it also becomes important to recognize other findings concerning the existential aspects which this paper explores, such as the emotion of dread. Dread appears as both a philosophical term and an element in the genre of cosmic horror, thereby making previous studies regarding this subject a valuable facet to consider. In the essay “Horror and Art-Dread”, Cynthia Freeland adopts Noël Carroll’s suggestion that dread should have its own theory, and differentiates dread from horror. Horror tends to be a response to a certain object and includes strong repulsion and disgust, yet there is a likeness to horror and dread, as both emotions involve recoiling with terror (Freeland 191). Freeland hence defines dread as an extensive fear of a threat that is unidentifiable, powerful, but also “unnerving because it is deeply abhorrent to reason” (191), which essentially corresponds to Brian R. Hauser’s explanation of dread and the necessity for it, when formulating weird horror, or cosmic horror. Hauser characterizes dread as “the general apprehensiveness produced by the anticipation of some as-yet-unseen doom. Dread is quiet, slow, and inexorable” (Hauser 240). The source of dread should, whether it be a specific situation or entity, not be immediately graspable according to the well-known laws of the universe (240).

What seems to demarcate Freeland's theory on dread is that the emotion involves a sense of unease or awe, because it is a combination of unsettling fear and elements of profundity. Therefore, dread also has a variety of religious overtones, or the feeling human beings get when encountering divinity, as the contact with something vast and overwhelming can produce what is known as the sublime (Freeland 192). The emotion can thus simultaneously be related to an object or situation in which humans face something inexplicable and overwhelming that leaves the mind 'thunder-struck'. Dread is hence, according to Freeland, "frightening, vague, and profound" (192), just as the sublime (192).

Following her definition, Freeland also relates the emotion of dread to the philosophy of existentialism, stating that:

Existentialists regard [...] dread as a kind of philosophical emotion, a fundamental response to aspects of our human condition. [...]. Dread in a movie may stem from a sense of threat posed by an evil agent, whether resurrected corpses, a witch, or visitors from outer space. In both movies and life, dread may also be existential, registering fear not of some malign agents but of precisely the reverse—that the world has no ruling agents and that we humans are alone in a world that fails to satisfy our expectations for purpose, meaning, and justice. (192)

This connection between the genre of horror and the philosophy of existentialism, which Freeland briefly mentions in her essay, is, however, lacking written material of exploration, according to Stuart Hanscomb's article "Existentialism and Art-Horror". Here, Hanscomb aims to show that horror and existentialism share a range of important features, and that studies within this field can contribute to a better understanding of both the genre and the philosophy (1).

Hanscomb builds his study upon Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*, focusing particularly on his perspective regarding the essential qualities that monsters within the horror genre typically possess in order to effectively affect an audience. Highlighted by Hanscomb, Carroll deems the monsters interstitial or impure, as they are entities that are not entirely alien to individuals but fall between familiar categories, falling, for example, between the categories of the living and the dead, as seen in Frankenstein's monster (2-3). Additionally, the monsters must, of course, frighten the horror audience, but there is also a tendency to associate and describe the monsters in terms of filth, deterioration, slime, etc., to display a being both dangerous as well as disgusting (3). The effect of horror, or the emotions the audience encounter, i.e. fear, anxiety, and disgust, should simultaneously parallel those of the characters in the given fiction, which, in other words, means that whenever a character is feeling repulsed, fearsome, or anxious by the presence of a monster, the audience should

experience the same exact emotions (4-5). These qualities, the interstitial nature of the monsters, and their disgusting as well as fearsome appearances, should, as argued by Hanscomb, present the relationship between horror and the existentialist writings of particularly Jean-Paul Sartre. This is exemplified in Sartre's *Nausea*, as Roquetin's existential crisis resembles that of a horror story when he discovers that the underlying cause to his nausea is the superfluity of objects, meaning that these objects somehow overflow the traditional categorization which humans dictate. These objects are in a sense inexplicable and without real purpose, leading Roquetin to the realization that life is essentially meaningless, or absurd, and that the world is "transformed into a kind of horror" (8). By correlating Sartre's horrifying images and metaphors of his early philosophy on nausea, Hanscomb proves that a commonality between horror and existentialism does, in fact, exist, stating that both the genre of horror and the philosophy of existentialism deal with phenomena that disturb human individuals by defying familiar categories (6).

Considering the aforementioned findings, this paper challenges Brian R. Hauser's assertion that elements of cosmic horror can only be applied to stories authored by Lovecraft, while also defining cosmic horror as a genre rather than a term. As this thesis primarily centers around the exploration of how the characteristics of cosmic horror can be identified not only in Lovecraftian literature, but also in other literature and films that similarly embody the principles of cosmic horror, Hauser's claim is hence contested. There is, nonetheless, one aspect of Hauser's study with which this paper concurs; by using Lovecraft's own criteria for the genre of cosmic horror, as stated in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, one can discover previously unknown aspects of what Hauser refers to as weird cinema, and what this paper identifies as cosmic horror.

The comparison of *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Prometheus* conducted by David McWilliam is at the same time an exploration which this paper grants as relevant and extremely important to the field of study; mainly because this paper conducts a similar study, although alternatively focusing on these works in unison with *The Mist* and *The Thing*, but also because McWilliam comes to the conclusion that each of his examined works can be characterized as an example of cosmic horror, which proves this thesis to be fruitful and contributory. As mentioned earlier in regard to the paper's social relevance, it is intriguing to note that McWilliam shares the belief that cosmic horror works can challenge humanity's deeply ingrained anthropocentric worldview, as fiction, like the selected works explored in this thesis, inspires contemplation about the inherent insignificance of humans in the face of cosmic forces.

In regard to Edmund Cueva's study, wherein religious and mythological stories are highlighted in comparison with *Prometheus*, certain analytical similarities can be found, as one cannot explore this film without associating it with the Greek myth of Prometheus; not only because the film bears the same title as the story, but also due to the fact that it delves into equal aspects of human existence and a 'forbidden' quest for knowledge. While some of Cueva's parallels are irrelevant for this paper, his exploration still validates as an in-depth analysis that proves *Prometheus* to withhold a variation of perspectives concerning human creation and their creators, to which acknowledgement is in order.

Following Cueva, Michael Brown's article explores a work that is also examined in this thesis, namely *The Thing*, in connection with cosmic horror, or what Brown refers to as the weird. Brown's study is directed mostly at the cinematic strategies of the film's setting and special effects, proposing that these elements are what illustrate the very essence of the weird in Carpenter's film. While this paper agrees with Brown's analysis, it, nevertheless, descends deeper into the cosmic horror aspects of *The Thing*, focusing not only on the Antarctic setting and the monster's horrific features, but also on the psychological and existential effect these aspects have on the characters, as well as the viewers.

Similarly, this thesis acknowledges the commonalities between Lovecraft and King, as argued by Alissa Burger in her research paper, although concentrating predominantly on the conception of horror as illustrated in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Burger's clear delineation of the differences between Lovecraft's pessimism, or indifferentism, and King's optimism can also be concurred with, since this paper similarly relies on such a conclusion. Syarip and Hetami's discovery of the binary opposition existing in *The Mist* further confirms this distinction, as they explain how Drayton, in particular, acts as a hopeful protagonist that essentially brings safety and calmness to the other characters in the story.

In terms of the existential aspects, Cynthia Freeland's argument, stating that dread is different from emotions of horror and fear, is also recognized by this paper, and becomes particularly relevant in connection with the genre of cosmic horror, as it verifies another effect of the works within this genre. By relating dread to both the concept of the sublime and existentialism, Freeland also verifies this thesis, thus making such a study possible. The same thing goes for Stuart Hanscomb's article, as he is not only basing his arguments on equivalent theory as proposed by Carroll, but also relates the genre of horror to an existential thinker like Sartre. The difference is, however, that this study correlates the subgenre of cosmic horror to that of three existential thinkers' definition of dread, in order to reveal the effect it has on characters and audience alike.

SUMMARIES OF THE SELECTED WORKS

H. P. Lovecraft's At the Mountains of Madness (1936)

Taking place in the 1930s, *At the Mountains of Madness* tells the story of William Dyer and the rest of his scientific expedition team on an exploration of the remote and frozen Antarctic. Yet, upon discovering unknown lifeforms, Dyer and his team lose contact with a small section of the research group, which leads to a gruesome discovery: the death of several lost scientists and their dogs, with the exception of one dog and one man, still missing. In the hope of unearthing the mysteries related to this terrible event, Dyer and his graduate student, Danforth, identify an ancient city in which they uncover the history of the Old Ones and their genetically engineered servants, the Shoggoths, by examining carvings and murals illustrated on the buildings. Although the two scientists are utterly horrified by their findings and in a constant state of fear, their curiosity urges them forward, ultimately leading them to find the missing person and the animal, lifeless. The tale ends by Dyer and Danforth fleeing the scene, as an amorphous and shapeshifting creature, i.e. the Shoggoth, pursues them. While the two scientists escape, Danforth becomes mad at the last glimpse of the Antarctic scenery, leaving the reader wondering what lies beyond those mountains of madness.

Stephen King's The Mist (1980)

Published in 1980, *The Mist* is a horror novella, depicting the story of David Drayton, his son Billy, and their neighbor Brent Norton, who take refuge in a supermarket with a group of local citizens after a mysterious mist engulfs the town in the wake of a storm, teeming with bizarre and hostile creatures not of this world. As the situation worsens, the group is not only at physical risk from the creatures, but is also facing the psychological stress of being trapped and the conflicts that arise among them. One of these conflicts is led by a religious extremist, Mrs. Carmody, who succeeds in convincing a few members of the group that the mist is God's vengeance for their sins, insisting that human sacrifices are required. In the end, Drayton manages to escape with his son and a few others, driving aimlessly through the mist of monsters, which share the appearances of spiders and squids, leaving the reader to imagine what might happen next.

John Carpenter's The Thing (1982)

Based on John W. Campbell Jr.'s novella, *Who Goes There* (1938), *The Thing* tells the story of a group of American research scientists who, during an exploration in Antarctica, is alerted by a number of disturbances after a stray dog is let into the base. Upon closer examination, the group discovers that the seemingly harmless dog is actually a parasitic, shape-shifting extraterrestrial life-form that assimilates its victims; a revelation that triggers a wave of distrust and paranoia among the group, as they must figure out who among them have fallen prey to the alien creature, and how to prevent it from spreading to, and infecting, the outside world. As the group's numbers grow smaller, the remains of the crew set out to destroy the camp completely in an attempt to eradicate the alien. Notwithstanding the near-complete destruction of the camp, the two surviving crew members, Childs and MacReady, continue to suspect one another for potential infection, resulting in an ambiguous conclusion as to whether or not the alien has been defeated.

Ridley Scott's Prometheus (2012)

Set in the late 21st century, *Prometheus* depicts a crew of human scientists and the android, David, on a mission to discover the origin of humanity by exploring the moon, LV-223. Once there, the team discovers an alien species called the Engineers and their invention, an infectious black liquid, which causes horrific mutations when absorbed. Initially believing that they set out to uncover the human creators, their Gods, and the world they reside in, the scientists soon realize that the moon on which *Prometheus*, the spaceship, has landed, is much closer to hell than heaven. The team encounters a series of dangerous creatures that ultimately infect some of the humans with the black pathogen, from which both death, mutation, and even alien pregnancy follow; all of which, upon later revelation, is for the mere reason of discovering the secret to eternal life. For it is revealed that the mission had been set with the intention of preventing Peter Weyland, the head of the Weyland Corporation, from dying of old age, but upon awakening an Engineer, the scientists learn that the alien, too, has a hidden agenda, namely to release the black mutagen upon Earth and destroy all of humanity. Finding that their Engineers are actually hostile toward the race they birthed, the entire crew, except the female scientist, Shaw, and the severed parts of the android, David, is ultimately killed, preventing the creature from accomplishing its plans, thus leaving the ending open with many unanswered questions and mysteries to be solved.

THEORY

The materials with which this paper is concerned share a number of obvious similarities that make them relevant for thematic comparison. However, in order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the given works, a frame of theory becomes essential.

This section consists of a general theoretic overview: first, a short definition of the gothic genre and its stock features, focusing specifically on the sublime, as provided by Fred Botting; second, a focus on the development from the gothic tradition to the horror genre will be presented, as well as an introduction to the effect, characteristics, and figures of the genre, using Noël Carroll's horror philosophy and Brigid Cherry's horror film guidebook. In connection with the latter, the genre of cosmic horror, or Lovecraftian horror, will be explained, which is a subgenre of horror associated with Howard Phillips Lovecraft, additionally focusing on the related literary philosophy of cosmicism. Lastly, the theoretical approach will conclude with an introduction to the philosophy of existentialism, more specifically on the concept of dread, as specified by Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, being that it is a central element within the genre of cosmic horror. All of these theories will offer an applicable basis and provide specific terminology, which will be applied throughout the thesis.

The Gothic Tale and Its Origin

The history of the gothic tradition begins in the 18th century and signified "the lack of reason, morality, and beauty of feudal beliefs, customs, and works" (Botting, "In Gothic Darkly" 13). Gothic thus symbolized a barbarous, medieval, and supernatural past that was diametrically opposed to the processes of political, social, and economic upheaval happening in the Era of the Enlightenment, and signified instead a lack of reason and morality (13-14). The genre challenged the rational thoughts that came with this industrial and urbanized period and focused more on the effects of extreme emotions, such as terror and wonder that purposely exceeded human comprehension (Botting, *Gothic* 1-3). Fictional works of gothic were thereby imbued with irrationality and dark themed romanticism and attempted to deal with the uncertainties brought forth by enlightened thinking, while simultaneously trying to "reconstruct the divine mysteries that reason had begun to dismantle" (23) by producing imaginative, unrestrained and passionate tales with a specter of stock features that all contribute to evocating emotions of terror (1-3). It was, nevertheless, first in connection with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), considered the first gothic tale, that the genre became acknowledged as a critical term within literary theory (13-14).

Gothic fiction, in its bare essence, is, according to Fred Botting, meant to imbue its readers with emotionality of a specific kind, which he outlines as follows:

Gothic produced emotional effects on its readers rather than developing a rational and properly cultivated response. Exciting rather than informing, it chilled their blood, delighted their superstitious fancies and fed uncultivated appetites for marvellous and strange events, instead of instructing readers with moral lessons that inculcated decent and tasteful attitudes to literature and life. (*Gothic* 4)

The sole prerequisite for any gothic fiction is thus evoking a sense of terror in its readers by producing tales filled with darkness, mystery, and supernatural forces exceeding beyond human reason (1-3). The emotions often associated with gothic fiction are, however, quite ambivalent due to the fact that objects of terror and horror should provoke disgust and recoil, yet simultaneously engage the reader's interest by fascinating and attracting them (9). In order to fulfill these emotional expectations, gothic productions use certain literary devices typical of the genre. These devices, i.e. gloomy and suspenseful atmospheres, characters of both the supernatural and humankind, transgression of boundaries, and lastly settings of medieval edifices, all contribute to the arousal of dread and shock in the readers by returning a past filled with myths, legends, folklore and medieval tales upon the present. Gothic writing also soon became associated with wildness and imaginative frenzy, untamed by reason and unrestrained by enlightened thinking, particularly by encompassing the aesthetic notion of the sublime (2-3).

The Sublime

The concept of the sublime has several uses, as it can be applied to edifices and locations, such as cathedrals and mountainous landscapes as well as a thought, a heroic deed, or a mode of expression. The sublime can, however, also describe a state of mind (Shaw 1). The feeling of the sublime is in broad terms both overwhelming and something one cannot resist, thus making it materialize "whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, [or] whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear" (2). The sublime is therefore closely linked to the gothic genre since each has a common interest: the arousal of excessive emotions through presentations of sensational and terrifying storylines (Botting, *Gothic* 3-4). Throughout the 18th century, the sublime became beauty's contrast, specifically through depictions of the natural scenery. What once was considered ugly blemishes, mountainous landscapes in particular, based on their disfiguring proportions, began to be regarded as pleasing to the eye, evoking intense and uplifting

emotions of wonder, awe, horror, and even joy in the viewer. The sublime hence constituted a metaphysical force that could not be contained within human comprehension, unlike objects of beauty, which could, in fact, be processed by the rational mind. These emotions, which met the individual subject when confronted by the sublime, also gave way to the thought of one's own extinction and offered allusions of an experience of divine power (38-39). The sublime therefore offers a "feeling of shock that comes from the realization that the human being is such an insignificant figure in the landscape of nature, the cosmos of God" (Cherry 89), and can be connected to darkness, decay, and pain, rather than pleasure and beauty (89).

Through these literary devices, such as the sublime, the gothic genre offered narratives "designed to quicken readers' pulses in terrified expectation" (Botting, *Gothic* 44); still, it is important to mention that the notion of what constitutes original gothic writing is continuously debated. For instance, writers like Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Matthew Lewis are all defined as early gothic writers, albeit they operated differently within the gothic genre and its stock features (Punter 1). Gothic is thus a hybrid genre that incorporates and transforms other literary forms as well as develops and changes its own conventions in relation to time and new modes of writing (Botting, *Gothic* 14). Hereby, the gothic genre transmuted starting with Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and the supernatural gothic and formed a similar, yet different, genre, namely horror (Carroll 4).

The Horror Genre

As stated previously, the horror genre derives from the English Gothic novel, but it is also rooted in the German 'Schauer-roman' and the French 'roman noir' (Carroll 4). In that sense, horror is a genre of modernity, since its first appearance dates back to the 18th century, precisely like the gothic tale. The supernatural gothic was especially important in the evolution of the horror genre, as authors of this certain category operate through sudden shocks and supernatural features in order to achieve the desired effect; a sudden wrenching of the mind from skepticism to horror-struck belief. Horror is therefore fairly connected to the features of the gothic tradition since both genres function through emotions marked by fear and terror (4). This connection is, nonetheless, also what often causes many to confuse horror with gothic and believe the two genres to be one and the same, especially since every appraised supernatural gothic writing brought forth the genre of horror, and, moreover, unfolded the genre to span across numerous artforms and media (4-12).

In the 1820s, horror stories began to be adapted for the stage, but during the period between the 1820s to the 1870s, the creation of horror fiction was overshadowed by the

realist novel of the Victorian Age and deteriorated into a dreary state. However, horror continued to be written amid this time and was, among other things, kept alive by publishing short fictions in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (5). This period also marked a certain shift in tales of horror, as the “physical fright, expressed through numerous outward miseries and villainous actions” (Fisher IV 177) changed into that of physiological fear (177). In the time span from the 1870s to the 1920s, the horror tale revived and major accomplishments within the genre were produced, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), which is still, to this day, considered a classic. After World War I ended in 1918, the horror genre took to the cinema and caused significant growth in the film industry, thereby maintaining an audience with a taste for the horrific and fearsome up until this day (Carroll 5-6).

In terms of identifying literature and film as works of horror, a certain criterion must be fulfilled, namely the ability to raise an affect in the reader or viewer. The horror genre is thus named from the affect it is intended to promote and is designed to provoke emotions that are too fearsome to be deemed anything other than horrific (Carroll 14-15). The bare essence of horror is therefore that of fear and terror, manifested by the dread of unknown forces (Tymn xi). This is also signified in the etymology of the word ‘horror’, as it derives from the Latin ‘horrore’, meaning ‘to stand on end’ (the sense of hair standing on end), and the old French ‘orror’, connoting to bristle or shudder (Carroll 24).

It is, however, according to Brigid Cherry, rather difficult to define the horror genre by a set of characteristics, formulaic plots, and an identifiable visual style, since the works differ in several aspects. Some works differentiate in time periods and the presence of the supernatural and monsters, while others portray gore and violence or simply rely on a creepy atmosphere. Others function through explicit details, whereas some merely hint at the horrible sights before changing the scenery. Many forms of horror also differ in point of view and/or in themes and the main plot, which, as stated by Cherry, is because genres, like horror, are never fixed entities; rather, they tend to evolve, transform, and hybridize over time to offer their audience new perspectives on certain themes (Cherry 1-2). As well, it can be challenging to identify literature and film as works of horror, since people have subjective opinions about what frightens them and thus what constitutes horror (15).

One way of distinguishing horror from stories of the gothic genre is by the usage of monsters and other supernatural (or science fictional) entities. Monsters inhabit all sorts of stories; myths, fairy tales, and legends, but the way in which the characters of these stories regard the monsters differs widely. The characters of the fantastic tale consider their monsters to be part of the story world or the fantastical universe, whilst the characters in a horror story

view the monsters as disturbances to the natural order and abnormal in their appearances. Monsters are, however, not a sole prerequisite of the horror genre, yet the emotional reaction from the audience is; a reaction that should ideally run parallel to that of the characters, though, only in aspects where the characters in question comprise reactions, such as shuddering, nausea, shrinking, paralysis screaming and/or revulsion (Carroll 16-17). As exemplified in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein becomes repulsed by his own creation's dreadful figure and is filled with "breathless horror and disgust" (47) upon viewing the creature, thus structuring the audience's emotional reception to possibly regard the monsters with the same set of feelings as a character such as the crazed scientist. The emotions of the audience are hence supposed to mirror those of the characters, by assessing the horror elements with powerful physical responses of not only fear but also visceral disgust (Carroll 17-22). Carroll emphasizes that there is a tendency in horror stories "to describe the monsters in terms of and to associate them with filth, decay, deterioration, slime, and so on. The monster in horror fiction, that is, is not only lethal but—and this is of utmost significance—also disgusting" (22). In order to perceive a monster as belonging within a horror narrative, the characters as well as the audience should therefore exhibit features of fear and disgust, essentially identifying the horrible creatures as impure and unclean (22). This is perfectly exemplified by Carroll, as he states:

[Monsters] are putrid or moldering things, or they hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead or rotting flesh, or chemical waste, or are associated with vermin, disease, or crawling things. They are not only quite dangerous but they also make one's skin creep. Characters regard them not only with fear but with loathing, with a combination of terror and disgust. (23)

Within the same context, Carroll admits that merely attributing 'impurity' to a monster may be insufficient when explaining the emotional response that horror is supposed to elicit. Hence, he expands his theory by correlating this impurity with the transgression of cultural categorization (31). This leads to him theorizing that "an *object* or *being* is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless" (32, emphasis in original); a fact he demonstrates by mentioning some of the interstitial monsters existing in the horror genre, for example, werewolves, seeing that such creatures blur the traditional distinction between human and animal, and, of course, a more frequent occurring distinction between life and death, as illustrated by monsters like zombies, vampires, and mummies, that essentially are interstitial, being both dead and alive (32). One composition for constructing such terrible monsters is thus by fusion of these contradictory categories, as it becomes a way

for individuals to categorize these impure monsters as ‘un-natural’. The monsters are therefore not only physically but also cognitively threatening, since they violate the conceptual scheme of nature, rendering the characters who encounter them insane, mad, or otherwise deranged by their inexplicability (34, 43).

Another key element within the horror genre is suspense; an element that is not unique to horror but is, however, an integral part of the genre, as it contributes to evoking certain emotions in the reader/viewer and drawing them into the story (128-129). In horror fiction, “[s]uspense arises when a well-structured question—with neatly opposed alternatives—emerges from the narrative and calls forth what was earlier referred to as a simple answering scene (or event)” (137), or as exemplified by Carroll, when the heroine tied to the train tracks, with a locomotive approaching rapidly, raises the question of whether or not she will be saved or crushed. Narrative suspense is nevertheless not only about the anticipation of an actual outcome, as suspense also forms when the question that emerges from previous scenes and/or events has two possible opposed answers, which are either classified as moral or probable. There are therefore two possible outcomes for the heroine tied to the tracks: one; the moral outcome, her rescue, the unlikely scenario, and two; the evil outcome, her destruction, the probable scenario.

Suspense is also easily generated in the horror genre, especially since the monster of every popular horror fiction generally has the upper hand from either being irredeemably evil, immensely powerful, operating in secrecy, or having another obvious advantage over the humans they encounter (137-139). A suspenseful framework is thus an essential element within works of horror, seeing that the arousal of suspense also gives way to the predominant aim of the genre, namely to evoke emotions of disgust, unease, and most importantly, fear.

Horror hence has some recurring characteristics which contribute to the genre being able to maintain its popularity and frightening effect, but at the same time, it is also in a constant state of flux. Therefore, the genre of horror must invent new approaches to scare, shock, revolt, and otherwise horrify its audience, which can be accomplished through the use of subgenres, formed with the purpose of demonstrating new ways to petrify an audience of the horror tale. One such subgenre can be found in cosmic horror.

Cosmic Horror

Cosmic horror, also referred to as Lovecraftian horror, is a subgenre of horror fiction, focusing “on the fear we feel when we are confronted by phenomena that [are] beyond our ability to comprehend” (Hawes). The genre is closely associated with Howard Phillips

Lovecraft, an American author who achieved his literary acclaim primarily after his death in 1937. Today, he is widely acknowledged as one of the most significant writers of weird fiction (“Lovecraftian Cosmicism”).

In 1927, Lovecraft published his influential essay, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, in which he established that “[t]he oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is that of the unknown” (12). Through this, Lovecraft argues that the roots of cosmic horror are deeply ancient, revealing that it can be found in various eras and cultures, manifesting “as an ingredient of the earliest folklore of all races, and is crystallised in the most archaic ballads, chronicles, and sacred writings” (17). Lovecraft’s work was initially considered part of another obscure horror subgenre known as ‘weird fiction’, which is a speculative fiction that dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, reinterpreting the traditional antagonists of horror fiction, such as spirits, vampires, and witches (Blackwood). The weird fiction itself, then, is an extension of gothic horror, using ghouls from the classic genre, however, making them even weirder. Lovecraft was greatly influenced by the authors Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Machen, and Clark Ashton Smith, all of whom have become widely recognized as the pioneers of weird fiction; nonetheless, as Lovecraft’s style flourished, it was evident that his work was different from others associated with the weird fiction genre, which inspired the development of cosmic horror, or Lovecraftian horror (Blackwood). As opposed to weird fiction, which emphasizes the supernatural with touches of fantasy and folklore throughout, cosmic horror is concerned with the fragility of man’s sanity and humanity’s utter pointlessness in the grand scheme of cosmos (Blackwood).

Centering on humanity’s fear of the unknown, cosmic horror thus presents a psychologically different and unique perspective on fear, which sets it apart from other genres, with external similarities, that rely solely on physical fear (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* 15). This fear of the unknown is the foundation upon which Lovecraft’s Mythos was created, and is the main ingredient needed to create powerful cosmic horror. As Lovecraft writes:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (15)

In his explanation, he argues that while these conventional horrors may exist, they do not embody the true essence of cosmic horror, as it is the overall atmosphere that holds the utmost significance; “for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation” (15-16). Thus, if a weird story relies on natural explanations to rationalize the depicted horrors, it cannot be considered a genuine tale of cosmic fear; instead, Lovecraft explains that:

The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim [...] the more completely and unifiedly a story conveys this atmosphere, the better it is as a work of art in the given medium. (16)

According to Lovecraft, a true tale of cosmic horror therefore evokes awe, or cosmic fear, and is defined by its capacity to create a disquieting and unsettling atmosphere, instilling a sense of dread and an enduring sense of the undefined horror that seems to lurk in the deepest corners of the cosmos; in that sense, the quality is not only a defining characteristic of the genre, but also essential to it.

For Lovecraft, cosmic fear is a potent combination of fear, moral revulsion, and awe. As he explains: “When to this sense of fear and evil the inevitable fascination of wonder and curiosity is superadded, there is born a composite of keen emotions and imaginative provocation whose vitality must of necessity endure as long as the human race itself” (14). The instinctive fear of the unknown, with which humanity seems to have been born, thus verges on awe. Consequently, the allure of the cosmic horror genre lies in its ability to elicit a feeling of reverence that validates a fundamental human belief about the world, i.e. it harbors vast mysterious forces (Carroll 162). The genre of supernatural horror therefore provides humanity with an avenue to sustain their instinctual feeling of awe and wonder toward the universe, by enabling them to emotionally connect with the enigmatic and inexplicable forces that exist beyond our understanding. Lovecraft did not provide a clear justification for the significance of sustaining the sense of awe or cosmic fear that arises through the genre; however, in his analysis of the subject, Noël Carroll suggests that Lovecraft might have viewed it as a crucial aspect of human nature, i.e. “to respond humanly to the world” (162), or, that Lovecraft may have believed that this feeling served as a necessary antidote to the dehumanizing impact of materialistic sophistication (162).

Regardless, it is apparent that the draw toward Lovecraftian horror stems from its capacity to instill fear through the use of disturbingly abnormal elements, tapping into an

innate and primitive human intuition about the nature of the world. So, although fear in itself may be unpleasant and instinctively avoided, the fear induced by cosmic horror transcends mere fear and instead evokes a sense of awe, with a visionary quality that is deeply felt and considered essential. Thus, as explained by Carroll, “cosmic fear or awe, if there is such a thing, could be desirable in a way that fear *simpliciter* is not” (163, emphasis in original). As a result, we are drawn to the unnatural in horror as it grants us access to a sense of cosmic fear that aligns with our primal, human perceptions of the world. Ergo, cosmic horror is not pursued for its own sake, but is rather sought after specifically for the state that it evokes in those who experience it. In fact, Lovecraft seems to believe that weird fiction provides a similar experience to that of religion, as well as a corresponding response to counteract positivistic worldviews (163).

For a story to be categorized as cosmic horror, it needs to, at least to a certain degree, include several fundamental elements. First of all, the protagonist is typically portrayed as being socially isolated, either by choice or due to societal rejection; to compensate for this deficiency, however, they often possess academic excellence or an intense sense of purpose (Blackwood). Second, another vital element is the ‘unknown’ and the fear thereof, which is the idea that “beneath the thin veneer of our perceived reality there exists something that defies all semblance of logic and rationale, that which is antithetical to our learning of the universe and its dimensions” (Blackwood). For this reason, Lovecraft recognized that providing precise descriptions of his creations would diminish the terror they instill. Hence, many of Lovecraft’s descriptions of deities, with the exception of certain corporeal deities like Cthulhu, remain intentionally vague and enigmatic, a factor contributing to the ongoing effectiveness of his horror literature (Blackwood). This aspect of the genre weaves perfectly into the next element, which is the fragility of sanity. When confronted with ancient, unfathomable horrors and vastly superior consciousness beyond human comprehension, Lovecraftian protagonists are often driven to the brink of madness. Essentially, this is tied to humanity’s perception of its importance in the universe; as we are confronted with the realization of our insignificance in the vast expanse of infinity, our minds struggle to comprehend, leading to further fragility of our sanity (Blackwood). According to Lovecraft, the only defense humanity has against death or insanity is “our inability to correlate all known facts into a cohesive and understandable whole” (Hawes). In that way, cosmic horror makes the readers accept their insignificance in the cosmos, which is often done through knowledge that is so unsettling that it induces insanity in the characters who encounter it. Lovecraft’s writing illustrates and manifests this, as his characters, despite being

distinguished by realism and intellect, which sets them apart from ordinary people, inevitably succumb to the cosmic terror that arises from the knowledge that “[w]e are hopelessly outclassed by the universe [and that] the universe will ultimately win” (Hawes). This leads to another element, or theme, of the genre, that is anti-anthropocentrism, which refers to the rejection of the belief that humankind is the central and most significant element of existence. Within cosmic horror, humanity’s existence is thus regarded as comparable to that of a grain of sand in an endless abyss, as there, beyond the surface of our observable reality, exists something much much superior, and very detrimental, to the human mind (Blackwood). In that sense, the genre challenges humanity’s notion of significance, rationality, and centrality within the cosmos, which, in turn, leads to feelings of existential dread, as humans are made aware of the fact that they are cosmically and hopelessly inconsequential.

Thus, the cosmic horror genre provides its readers with a unique and terrifying glimpse into the vast, unfathomable universe. It challenges us to confront and reflect upon our own mortality, our relevance, and the limits of our knowledge, by exploring themes of cosmic insignificance, existential dread, and the limits of human comprehension. However, to fully comprehend the genre’s themes, ideas, and enduring appeal, the following section will delve deeper into the philosophy of cosmicism.

Cosmicism

Cosmicism is a literary philosophy and a non-anthropocentric view of the world developed by Lovecraft, which centers on the insignificance of humanity and its doings in the vastness of the cosmic, thereby making it central to the genre of cosmic horror (“The Dark Philosophy”). The philosophy is essentially based around the fact that humanism is an illusion, as it challenges the idea of human centrality in the cosmos, focusing around the instinctive unease experienced when humanity realizes their powerlessness in the vast, indifferent universe by which we are surrounded (Wiley). Though not confined to Lovecraft’s fiction alone, this is the reality with which his tales are founded, as he similarly states in a letter from 1927:

Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form—and the local human passions and conditions and standards—are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. (Joshi 244)

Through this, Lovecraft asserts that from a cosmic viewpoint, human emotions, thoughts, and anthropocentric perspectives hold no significance, given humanity's relatively minuscule position in terms of both time and space (244). Moreover, this viewpoint refutes the notion and/or existence of a deity with sentimental rule over mankind, and maintains that humanity, as a collective, is merely too insignificant and inconspicuous in the immense cosmos to merit any notice from the unfathomable entities that dwell beyond our realm of imagination (Wiley). This perspective is furthermore reflected in the opening paragraph of Lovecraft's tale *The Call of Cthulu* (1926), wherein the protagonist states that:

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. (36)

Through this, it becomes evident that Lovecraft viewed the prospect of humanity uncovering its own insignificance as a foreboding threat on the horizon, prompted by scientific advancement. In an essay from 1922, Lovecraft further reveals that he started developing the idea of cosmicism from the age of thirteen, after he, from his self-taught studies in astronomy, had been led to the understanding that humanity and morality have no cosmic significance (Joshi 60). Moreover, Lovecraft's foray into astronomy led him to believe that humanity is likely alone in the universe, or, at the very least, lacks the means to establish contact with extraterrestrial civilizations (60).

Though cosmicism shares some characteristics with existential nihilism, it nevertheless differs from it. While nihilistic concepts, such as the belief in the meaninglessness of human existence and values, bear resemblance to cosmicism, cosmicism differs in its emphasis on the insignificance of humanity and its endeavors, as opposed to rejecting a greater purpose altogether ("Lovecraftian Cosmicism"). Due to Lovecraft's rather bleak outlook on life, cosmicism may hence come across as nihilistic and exceedingly pessimistic; however, Lovecraft perceived himself not as a pessimist or an optimist, but rather as a 'cosmic' indifferentist, which is a theme frequently expressed in his fiction ("Lovecraftian Cosmicism"). Things might matter to humanity on a human scale, i.e., for instance, our values, history and consciousnesses, however these things are simply of no significance on a larger, cosmic scale. Through his fictional universes, Lovecraft therefore gave rise to a

myriad of formidable extraterrestrial creatures and cosmic forces, serving as symbols for the vastness of our ignorance about the universe; entities that emerge from the depths of the unknown, and having mere accidental relations with human beings, in what way these, in other words, “are not so much malevolent as they are indifferent toward humanity” (“Lovecraftian Cosmicism”). In that way, it can, however, be argued that by embodying this cosmic indifferentism, portraying the universe as a vast, uncaring, and ultimately indifferent place, enabled Lovecraft to, in a paradoxical way, construct some sort of meaning through the ‘absence of meaning’ (“Lovecraftian Cosmicism”).

Essentially, cosmicism is a philosophy that emphasizes the insignificance of humanity in the face of the vast, indifferent cosmos, suggesting that the universe is largely indifferent to human existence. Through the fear and dread of the unknown, cosmicism can additionally be tied to existentialism, since both deal with fundamental questions about the nature of existence and the human condition. In the following section, several perspectives on existential dread will be examined in more detail.

Existentialism and Dread

A key element within the genre of cosmic horror and its philosophy, cosmicism, is that it bears the mark of a certain philosophical movement, namely existentialism. It therefore becomes pertinent to outline and understand certain principles of this specific philosophy, such as existential dread, since this philosophical term is recognizable within works of cosmic horror.

The philosophy of existentialism dates back to the deep, existential thinkers of the 19th and 20th century, most commonly from Europe, thus considering the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, and the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, as the precursors of the movement. Existentialism is, however, rather difficult to define, as there are several representative thinkers, all bearing widely divergent views within this exact philosophy (Crowell). At its core, existentialism is the philosophy of existence, thus signifying that humans choose their own fate, determine their own existence, and are solely responsible for the choices they make in the world. This is especially evident in Sartre’s well-known phrase: “*existence* comes before *essence*” (Sartre, *Existentialism & Humanism* 27, emphasis in original), meaning that the human being is “nothing else but that which he [or she] makes of himself” (30). Hence, existentialists focus on the freedom and action of the individual, and thus rebel against the notion that human beings embody predetermined personalities and fates (Gravil 7-8). This freedom is, however, also what brings forth key

concerns of most existential philosophers, such as existential dread, sometimes also mentioned as anxiety, angst or even nausea.

The notion of existential dread begins with Kierkegaard, who believed that dread was inherent within human beings and should be highly associated with the concept of freedom. Kierkegaard states: “dread is the dizziness of freedom” (55), thereby clarifying that dread occurs when the individual is in a state of dizziness, or feels perplexed, by their own freedom (55). As a firm believer of Christianity, Kierkegaard also relates the concept of dread to the original sin portrayed in the book of Genesis, where Adam chooses to eat an apple from the forbidden tree in Eden, thus suggesting that the first experience of dread occurred at the same time as the first sin came into the world, or rather the first evil act. Since the concept of good and evil was unknown to Adam prior to him eating the apple, Kierkegaard explains that dread emerges with God’s prohibition, as Adam now realizes that he has the freedom to choose to either defy or obey the command of God (27-40). The dread which Adam experiences is therefore not deriving from fear of an external threat, i.e. the punishment of God, but is rather stemming from the dawning awareness of his own freedom or the possibility of being able to choose for himself (“The Concept of Anxiety” 90). Kierkegaard also firmly believes that dread can lead to humans losing themselves if it is ignored, yet, it can, through faith in God, be overcome (“Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) Danish” 2). However, whereas Kierkegaard takes a monotheistic approach to existentialism and the concept of dread, Martin Heidegger elaborates upon this notion in a somewhat different manner, describing anxiety or dread as a mood that discloses the human being (Anderson 00:00-00:21).

Dread is often considered a state of mind or related to a psychological disorder from which some people suffer, yet Heidegger regards it as a fundamental mood through which human beings are able to discover themselves as individuals (Anderson 00:00-00:25). In his magnum opus, *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger explains this by the use of the German word, ‘Dasein’, meaning existence or ‘being-there’, which should not be understood as the biological human being, but rather as “a way of life shared by members of some community” (Haugeland 423, emphasis in original). Heidegger also draws an analogy to language in order to fully comprehend his concept of ‘Dasein’, stating that as with languages, which are communally shared ways of speaking, ‘Dasein’ should be considered “a communally shared way of living of a certain specific sort—namely, one that embodies an understanding of being” (423). It is thus, according to Heidegger, only human beings who are able to exist or be and reflect upon what life means (Wheeler).

As a human being, one is hence able to ask certain questions concerning who one is as a person, and why one is present in the world; this ability is rooted in what Heidegger describes as situatedness, signifying that humans are never separated entirely from their environment, but are constantly embedded in it, while reflecting. This is where anxiety comes into Heidegger's existential thoughts because anxiety discloses what he refers to as 'nothingness', which appears in situations whenever one reflects on existence, when a familiar word suddenly seems unfamiliar, or when a well-known place unexpectedly appears rather bizarre. In these situations, the human being is jolted out of their habitual way of living and is confronted with the fact that being in the world entails freedom (Anderson 01:45-03:42). Anxiety thereby appears in certain contexts, but Heidegger also points out that the mode of anxiety is constant, albeit in a dormant state, because human beings are always free in relation to their environment and are able to reflect on their existence. Anxiety is therefore an experience of no longer feeling at home in the world or feeling what the German language describes as 'Unheimlichkeit' (unhomeliness/uncanniness), which can only occur if one actually did feel at home in the first place and recognizes how the homeliness felt before (Anderson 04:07-05:37). The feeling of nothingness and freedom that brings forth anxiety should, nevertheless, not be thought of as negative as it develops the self, or, in other terms, the individual being. Individuals thus become able to reflect on certain points in time and recognize that they have the ability to choose or act differently, by realizing that the limited set of options given, in a choice or situation, are not their only options. The individual can thereby choose; either to do nothing or to do something else entirely, because he/she essentially has the freedom to actively do so (05:38-06:50).

Ideas of anxiety, dread, and angst are also relevant to the French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, who refers to the term 'nausea' to describe a feeling of existential dread or profound disgust that an individual might experience when confronted with the meaninglessness or absurdity of life. The term appears in Sartre's famous novel of the same name, *Nausea* (1938), in which the nauseated protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, becomes increasingly disgusted by his own existence, as he struggles to stomach reality. Hence, Roquentin's experience with the absurdity of life is manifested through the bodily sensation of nausea, which "begins as a peculiar revulsion for physical objects and other people, leading to feelings of disgust and isolation, and culminates in the realization that all things, himself included, are '*de trop*' (superfluous or 'too much')" (Kerr 68, emphasis in original), "or in the way" (76). As the story progresses, Roquentin discovers that existence is disgusting, meaningless, horrifying, and inconvenient; an existence that extends to mankind,

who he comes to refer to as ‘de trop’ or in the way: “We were a heap of living creatures, irritated, embarrassed at ourselves, we hadn’t the slightest reason to be there, none of us, each one, confused, vaguely alarmed, felt in the way in relation to the others” (Sartre, *Nausea* 121). In addition, this brings him to the problem of his own existence, as he declares:

I—soft and weak, obscene, digesting, juggling with dismal thoughts—I too, was *In the way* [...] I dreamed vaguely of killing myself to wipe out at least one of these superfluous lives. But even my death would have been *In the way*. *In the way*, my corpse, my blood on these stones [...] I was *In the way* for eternity. (121, emphasis in original)

Hence, Roquentin identifies that his nausea stems from the realization that existence is inherently meaningless and lacking in any essential purpose or necessity, causing him to feel disgusted and displaced, and ultimately leads him to a profound sense of hopelessness: “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance” (124). For Sartre, the term nausea thus becomes his way of explaining a type of existential crisis, or dread, felt as a deep-seated disgust, disorientation, and despair that arises when one confronts the sheer contingency and absurdity of existence.

For all three existential philosophers, dread is frequently contrasted with the emotional response, fear. In the account of Kierkegaard, dread is objectless, whereas fear is directed toward a particular object or even situation, i.e. a known source of why the exact emotion arises. Without an object or cause, dread is thereby some sort of existential nothingness, appearing as “anxiety ‘over nothing’” (Michelman 26).

Heidegger elaborates on this notion, proclaiming that it is illogical to use the term ‘dread’ to describe the fear of a particular object or situation, such as finding a job after college or confronting a spider; one can, nonetheless, fear it and flee from it, but by stating that one dreads it, the individual is basically dreading nothing. Having the previous examples in mind, ‘nothing’ is thus determining whether or not an individual obtains a job after college or succeeds in killing the spider; one can have several factors that make it more likely, but human beings are essentially just dreading that they are free; free to choose for themselves and thereby also entirely responsible for the choices they make (Anderson 07:31-10:21).

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre acknowledges what Kierkegaard proposed; that there is in fact a distinction between fear and dread, although Sartre uses the word ‘anguish’ instead, but like Heidegger, he too adds to the contrast. For Sartre, fear is something external, for example an object from without, whereas anguish or dread is internal, something that is born within the individual (220). Sartre further characterizes this distinction through an example of standing atop a tall precipice without any guardrail. In this situation

the height of the precipice provokes fear, as there are several future possibilities of an individual's life being changed externally, for example by slippery stones or the collapse of the ground underneath, and the individual will react by pushing away the threatening situation by paying closer attention to the ground or keeping a safe distance from the edge. However, because such future possibilities do exist within the consciousness of the human being, Sartre states that vertigo, a form of anguish, arises when the individual atop of the precipice realizes that he or she has the freedom to jump into the abyss, thereby grasping or coming to a state of awareness that there is absolutely nothing that prevents this individual from choosing suicide. Anguish is thus the consciousness of being one's own future, as it has the effect of showing several horrific possibilities, such as plunging into certain death (220-224). From the three philosophical viewpoints it can therefore be stated that the concept of dread, in existentialism, is closely interwoven with freedom and that it differs greatly from the emotion of fear; yet, it is also closely related to it, since both concepts often appear alongside each other, albeit in different manners. Dread is, nevertheless, not only limited to the philosophy of existentialism, seeing that it is considered to be a basic element within genres of horror, specifically cosmic horror, where it often appears as something "deeply abhorrent to reason" (Freeland 191). By focusing on the human existence and that each individual is responsible for creating meaning in life, existentialism becomes an important aspect to analyze in connection with the cosmic horror genre's key elements, as dread may challenge the human ability to exist. The philosophy additionally proves to be perfectly suitable for exploring the psychological overtones of cosmic horror, as it provides a frame for comprehending existential aspects, such as dread or anxiety, that appear when mankind is faced with a universe that essentially is indifferent to human existence.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Based on the theoretical framework presented above, the following section will consist of a comparative analysis of the selected works, centralizing on how these materials can be classified within the genre of horror, and more specifically within the cosmic horror genre. The analysis is thus divided into individual themes, as this enables a detailed textual examination of the content, and additionally serves to answer how literature and film can affect an audience through the use of incomprehensible phenomena and existential dread.

Atmospheric Dread in At the Mountains of Madness and The Mist

A prominent feature of the cosmic horror genre is, as previously stated, a compelling emphasis on “[a] certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces” (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* 15). Hence, the mood of a cosmic horror tale, encompassing the setting and atmosphere, is rooted in the fear of that which is unknowable, indescribable, and incomprehensible; a theme evident in the texts examined in this paper. Since setting and atmosphere are established differently in literature and film, however, the first section will center on *At the Mountains of Madness* and *The Mist*, while the second will focus on *Prometheus* and *The Thing*. Finally, all four works will be compared, highlighting both their commonalities and distinctions.

In the domain of cosmic horror, establishing the appropriate setting and atmosphere is crucial for eliciting cosmic dread. As Lovecraft emphasizes, true cosmic dread stems not so much from plot intricacies, or horrific monsters, but rather from that which is unknown to us; in fact, it is our capacity to imagine the terrors that lie in the darkest corner of the Earth, or the universe, that truly evokes cosmic dread (107). Both *At the Mountains of Madness* and *The Mist* feature mysterious and ominous atmospheres which effectively evoke eeriness and horror, by emphasizing themes of isolation, otherworldliness, and unknown terrors.

H. P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* presents the harsh, unrelenting, and barren Antarctic terrain as a terrifying entity, soon to be revealed to conceal malevolent and ancient forces within its icy and uncharted territories. Upon their arrival at the “great unknown continent” (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 6), Dyer and his crew are struck with awe by the massive, snow-clad mountains with which they are greeted, asserting how he continuously feels vastly enchanted by “the curious atmospheric effects [...] these including a strikingly vivid mirage—the first [he] had ever seen—in which distant bergs became the battlements of unimaginable cosmic castles” (6). Through this quote, it becomes evident how the sublimity of the mountainous landscape materializes in Dyer in the sense of awe and wonder, as he feels captivated by its mystique and the grandeur of the natural world. However, subsequently, he describes the very same environment as a “cryptic world of frozen death” (6) by which he emphasizes the harshness and the dangers of the Antarctic, and thereby establishes a menacing and foreboding atmosphere for the rest of the narrative. This is also highlighted by the sense of emptiness and isolation present in the novella, which conveys both a sense of otherworldliness and a sense of danger, respectively. Dyer describes the sublime nature of the landscape in the following way:

I could not help feeling that they were evil things—mountains of madness whose farther slopes looked out over some accursed ultimate abyss. That seething, half-luminous cloud-background held ineffable suggestions of a vague, ethereal beyondness far more than terrestrially spatial; and gave appalling reminders of the utter remoteness, separateness, desolation, and aeon-long death of this untrodden and unfathomed austral world. (28)

The exploration of icy wastelands is again Lovecraft's means for conveying the sublime; the characters are awed by the vast, seemingly endless expanses of snow and ice, while the mountains provide a background that appears otherworldly and ethereal. Moreover, this description reinforces the sense of loneliness and isolation the characters encounter in the mountainous landscape, implying that the setting is entirely uninhabited. As well, this inspires feelings of fear and dread, since the speaker, too, feels overwhelmed by the sense of the unknown and the prospect of encountering something horrific and dangerous in such a strange and unfamiliar place, which then instills similar feelings in the reader.

Ultimately, Antarctica, described as a "land of mystery" (13), serves as a symbol of the unknown and the obscure, and holds great significance for its duality as both a real place and an imaginary one (Timss 15). This idea is underscored by the author of *At the End of the Earth: How Polar Ice and Imagination Shape the World*, G. L. Brackett, who affirms that: "The poles [...] have been touchstones for our sense of place in the world. Their mystery was a driving force behind their discovery and exploration and that mystery [...] continues to be essential to our relationship with them today" (20). In that sense, the Antarctic's enigmatic nature both throughout history and in present times makes it an ideal backdrop for speculative accounts of bizarre, unearthly experiences and revelations in literature and film alike, as seen in both *At the Mountains of Madness*, *Prometheus*, and *The Thing*. While the Antarctic setting initially attracted the scientists of *At the Mountains of Madness* to the continent, it, however, takes on a new and more terrifying meaning as the plot unfolds, their discoveries become apparent, and they encounter unearthly experiences which, for some, lead to their demise. Thus, the atmosphere of the Antarctic shifts from one of mystery and wonder to that of horror and madness, as the intimidating and hostile atmosphere of Antarctica turns on them, and it becomes clear that the unknowability of the continent should have acted as a warning rather than an invitation. Through that process, the isolation and hostility of the environment contribute to a sense of alienation, unease, and terror, which is only further exacerbated by the strange and otherworldly creatures the explorers come to encounter.

Upon encountering the immense ancient city behind the mountain range, Dyer and Danforth are astonished, and the sight is increasingly disturbing to them. As Dyer discovers

the city, and the mural history of Old Ones, he senses horror and confusion due to him no longer knowing his home, i.e. the Earth, disclaiming that “to account for such things was frankly beyond me” (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 41) and that they “were unable to speak [as they] indeed stare[d] across the momentous divide and over the unsampled secrets of an elder and utterly alien earth, [crying] out in mixed awe, wonder, terror, and disbelief in [their] own senses” (42). Prior to his expedition to Antarctica, Dyer had felt at home on Earth, and, due to his background as a geologist, had perceived himself well-informed and knowledgeable about its nature. Discovering the prehistoric city, however, destroys his sense of safety alongside his perception of Earth, making him face not only the immediate threat of the aliens but also the loss of his sanity and rationality at his discovery, describing how he feels persistently haunted by “the sight of this dead antarctic world” (43). Once again, it is possible to relate his experiences to that of the sublime, evident in the way in which Dyer continuously struggles to account for “the incredible, unhuman massiveness” (43) and the “monstrous sights” (42) around him, which, to him, is so shocking and abnormal that they defy explanation within the known laws of nature. Struggling to explain and rationalize his surroundings makes Dyer feel anxious, as he fails to express, and comprehend, the uncanny wrongness of everything around him: “[S]omething about the ridgy, barrel-shaped designs stirred up oddly vague, hateful, and confusing semi-remembrances in both Danforth and me” (46). Having only experienced constructions and architecture built by humans, he feels wrong about these buildings not built for human purposes; telling, for instance, about oversized doors, oddly arranged rooms, and insufficient lighting (53-56). Hence, these architectural details, among others, indicate to Dyer that this place was not intended for him nor his species: “There was something vaguely but deeply unhuman in all the contours, dimensions, proportions, decorations, and constructional nuances of the blasphemously archaic stonework” (53-54). At the same time, this mysterious, inhuman, and sublime atmosphere thus enriches the feelings of dread and anxious anticipation at their discovery, and reinforces the feelings of desolation and cruelty associated with the vast and mysterious snow-clad world.

In contrast to the Antarctic setting of *At the Mountains of Madness*, Stephen King’s *The Mist* takes place in a small town in Maine, hence resulting in a setting that is far more mundane and familiar in comparison. However, as the town is consumed by a dense and mysterious fog, the environment becomes one of uncertainty, dread, and death, as the novella “bears the unmistakable stamp of Lovecraftian inspiration” (Burger 80). After discovering the

mist, Drayton is puzzled by it, as it slowly and ominously creeps along the lake, seemingly defying all natural laws:

It was very very white. The only thing I can compare it to would be fresh-fallen snow lying in dazzling contrast to the deep-blue brilliance of the winter sky. But snow reflects hundreds and hundreds of diamond points in the sun, and this particular fogbank, although bright and clean-looking, did not sparkle. In spite of what Steff had said, mist isn't uncommon on clear days, but when there's a lot of it, the suspended moisture almost always causes a rainbow. But there was no rainbow here. The unease was back, tugging at me. (King, *The Mist* 21)

Immediately, the mist acquires a sinister quality and tension and anxiety fill the air. This highlights the sense of the unknown that dominates the cosmic horror genre, as the mist alienates the otherwise familiar setting by defying Drayton's expectations, moving unnaturally, and acting unlike any weather he has ever seen. In response to the unfamiliarity of the strange mist, Drayton asserts that it is unnatural, proclaiming that "[n]othing in nature is that even; man is the inventor of straight edges" (31). Thus, Drayton's fear stems from his inability to explain the events unfolding around him, and, even on a sensory level, the mist dampens his perception, making it increasingly difficult for him to comprehend his surroundings. The vacuity of the mist also provides fertile ground for Drayton's anxieties about the unknown to proliferate, allowing him to imagine all sorts of dreadful possibilities beyond it. This naturally accompanies Stephen King's assertion of the effectiveness of the unseen horror, proclaiming that "it's what the mind sees that makes these stories quintessential tales of terror" (*Danse Macabre* 22). People's imaginations can fill in the details in the most horrifying and wicked ways possible, making the unknown more frightening than the known; for, as stated by Alissa Burger in her study on H. P. Lovecraft and Stephen King, "[e]ffective terror banks on possibility, on the unseen and unrealized, trading in the creepy and disturbing to get under the skin and into the psyche of its reader or viewer (80). This also becomes apparent around the end of the novella, as Drayton struggles to explain what he experiences in the mist:

Something came; again, that is all I can say for sure. It may have been the fact that the mist only allowed us to glimpse things briefly, but I think just as likely that there are certain things that your brain simply disallows. There are things of such darkness and horror - just, I suppose, as there are things of such beauty - that they will not fit through the puny human doors of perception. (177)

From the very beginning of and throughout the novella, this shroud of mystery and ambiguity consequently creates a sense of dread, mystery, and foreboding, as neither the readers nor characters are able to predict what the mist will reveal.

As the mist fully embraces the environment and lingers on, it starts to transform the once-familiar environment into something otherworldly and eerie. The dangers of the outside isolates the civilians in the confined area of the shop, limiting their ability to interact with the outside world; neither the radio nor electricity is working, which creates an absence that only adds to the sense of isolation and helplessness, as they are left in the dark about the situation outside. Since the majority of the story takes place within the grocery store, becoming a makeshift shelter for the characters trapped inside, the atmosphere quickly transforms into one of claustrophobia, loneliness, and confinement, as the setting increasingly darkens by the idea of death awaiting on the outside, in the mist, limiting their resources and making any attempt of escape seem futile. Said confinement makes Drayton express feelings of loneliness, stating that he “felt more isolated, more simply alone, than ever in [his] life (147). Again, this adds to the overall sense of angst and frustration, as the characters are trapped against their will due to the deadliness of the outside forces, and additionally adds to the feelings of hopelessness and vulnerability. Thus, the confines of the supermarket become at once a sanctuary and a prison, offering refuge from the dangers of the outside world, but at the same time trapping them within its walls, unable to escape or fully comprehend the situation; an aspect of the story which can be correlated to a statement of King who, in an interview of *The Mist*, equates life with that of a prison (“Stephen King & Frank Darabont Talk About The Mist” 00:24-01:00).

An atmosphere of desperation and fear is yet another constant, as the characters persistently are reminded of the dangers that lie beyond the walls of the supermarket, and their lack of comprehension thereof. The mist itself is a constant source of unease, as its presence brings forth a menacing atmosphere of dread and paranoia, leaving the characters unsure of their situation, which feeds into their anxieties and their sense of impending doom. The moment at which Drayton is forced to confront the possible unknown forces hidden in the outside mist, his feelings of fear and unease are particularly striking:

There was a sound. A soft sliding sound. It stopped, then started again with a stealthy little bump. Everything inside me went loose. I regressed magically to four years of age. That sound wasn't coming from the market. It was coming from behind me. From outside. Where the mist was. Something that was slipping and sliding and scraping over the cinderblocks. And, maybe, looking for a way in. (King, *The Mist* 58)

The intense fear and unease which Drayton experiences in his hiding from the mist, explaining how he feels vulnerable and helpless in the face of unknown forces outside, thus capture the intense atmosphere of dread and uncertainty that permeates the story, as the

characters are forced to confront the unknown and their deepest fears of the outside. Also, operating upon our innate fear of the unknown, King's use of sensory details to evoke fear and unease in the readers is a powerful tool that engages readers on a deeper level; rather than directly showing that which lives in the mist, King focuses on the readers' sensory systems in order to create an atmosphere of both suspense, mystery, and dread. For instance, as evident in the abovementioned quote, focus maintains on the sounds which Drayton hears, causing him, as well as the readers, to visualize the outside horrors in their own imagination, rather than having the true nature of the horrors directly explained. Another example could be through descriptions of the mist as 'acrid' and 'unnatural' smelling (146), in which King not only establishes a literary image for the reader but additionally evokes the olfactory sense in the reader's mind, making them feel as were they present, experiencing the mist's foul odor. In this way, the sensory descriptiveness helps create a more immersive experience for the reader, heightening the sense of endangerment and uncertainty which permeates *The Mist*; by King's avoidance of explicit description of the unknown evil that lurks in the mist, it is left to the readers' imaginations to fill in the gaps with their own anxieties.

Set in the setting of a mundane small city society, *The Mist* lacks the fantastic and awe-awakening sublimity of the mountainous landscape that is described, for instance, in Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the sublime materializes in *The Mist* in alternative ways, in that the familiar environment is transformed into a vast and blurring mist of mystery, concealing all that once was. The novella describes the mist as dense and "incredibly thick" (64), severely restricting visibility to a mere view of "seven or ten feet ahead" (172), thereby intensifying feelings of claustrophobia and making navigation a challenging task. Further, the surrounding mist is described as impenetrable to the extent that it swallows up everything outside, effectively leading Drayton to declare that the world outside slowly dissolves under its influence (160). In that way, it can be argued that the conquering mist distorts the once familiar landscape, transforming the familiar landmarks, buildings, and, essentially, the very nature of the environment into distorted versions; a distortion further compounded by the presence of strange and otherworldly shadows that inhabit the prevailing mist, creating a "steadily mounting atmosphere of unease" (46). The surrounding mist, with its vastness, power, and enigmatic character, can thereby be perceived as sublime and awe-inspiring, as it belittles and confines human agency, yet intrigues them by its mystery. In Drayton's description of a woman being submerged in the mist, he demonstrates that humanity has no power against the alien environment: "We watched the fog overlay her and make her insubstantial, not a human being anymore but a pencil-ink

sketch of a human being done on the world's whitest paper" (55). This is furthermore strengthened by him later stating that people "did not so much disappear into the fog as become invisible [...] You were not really impressed with the unnatural density of the mist until you saw people swallowed up in a space of seconds" (106). In describing the mist overlaying a human victim, making them, as quoted, insubstantial and invisible, is a powerful evocation of the sublime, as the mist is portrayed with overwhelming powers to transform reality, and to cause death by reducing the humans to mere shadows of their former selves. The sudden disappearance and belittlement of the victims additionally show how vulnerable and perishable humanity is in comparison to the vast power that is the mist, symbolizing the sublimity of the outside forces, in the face of their new, obscured reality. In this way, the experience of the mist appears as exceedingly overwhelming for the characters, and the readers alike, and the inexplicability of its obscure nature similarly reinforces this effect of being overwhelmed by defying rational explanation.

Atmospheric Dread in The Thing and Prometheus

While literature is captivating in its ability to use vivid descriptive language to create atmospheric settings, films offer another intriguing dimension in their portrayal of surroundings and ability to evoke a sense of dread. This section therefore centralizes upon the ways in which John Carpenter's *The Thing* and Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* create a sense of dread by use of cinematic techniques to shape horrific atmospheres and environments, establishing cosmic fear in their audiences.

Similar to the literary setting of Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, the setting of *The Thing* is located in Antarctica, where a group of scientists are conducting research at an isolated facility in the remote, desolate, and unforgiving landscape of ice and snow. The Antarctic environment by which they find themselves surrounded is vast and harsh, which, parallel to both *At the Mountains of Madness*, *The Mist*, and, additionally, *Prometheus*, reinforces the sense of isolation and confinement. Already within the opening shots of the film, the audience is presented with extreme long shots that demonstrate the vastness and isolation of the setting, and equivalently the size of a helicopter in comparison, hence illustrating the inferior nature of humanity in relation to it (Carpenter 00:02:39-00:03:40). These extreme long shots which dominate especially the beginning of the film, establishing the setting and atmosphere, do, nonetheless, remain throughout *The Thing* as a constant reminder of the expanse of the Antarctic world. As similarly seen in the other works, with the unfolding of the story, the immensity of the setting comes to symbolize the harboring of

mysteries, as it provides a blank canvas for the imagination to run wild, prompting the characters, and the viewers alike, to imagine the sorts of horrors that could be disguised in the great unknown. In that sense, the dramatic camera shots work well to convey a sense of the great powers at work, demonstrating to the viewer their insignificance in terms of size compared to the sublime mountainous landscape and its magnitude. The several instances of panoramic extreme long shots of the Antarctic expanse, as well, emphasize the desolation of the environment, bringing to light the grandeur of the environment while also preserving the sense that the group is completely isolated amid the vast nothingness of Antarctica (00:16:12-00:16:31). The framing of the landscape thereby enforces the already existing sublimity it beholds, as it, in this instance, is shown in an overwhelming yet alluring manner, thus appearing as possibly awe-inspiring to the viewers and the characters.

In his chapter, *Desolate Frontiers in the Films of John Carpenter*, Kendall R. Phillips discusses the geographic logic which underlines much of Carpenter's filmic work, maintaining that his "films are filled with forbidden places and secluded locations, populated by [...] malevolent forces" (123). In accordance with the aforementioned analysis, Phillips mentions that Carpenter's films tend to take place in isolated locales, where the frontier is presented as a liminal space between civilized society and the dangerous uncivilized wilderness, and, in this sense, "serves as Carpenters vision of horror" (123-124); that is, at one end of the frontier reside the strictures of civilization, and at the other end, the embodiment of that which has been repressed and now seeks to reemerge (124). Nevertheless, it is evident that this specific interpretation of the frontier narrative does not propound a new idea, for "[a]s the imaginative border between the known and the unknown, the frontier subject has provided a bridge to the gothic domain" (Mogen et al. 13). The film illustrates a stark division between the known and the unknown, where the research station represents the former and the uncharted terrain symbolizes the latter, associated with peril and enigma. As discussed previously, the contrast is primarily a function of the immensity and surrealism of the Antarctic landscape, disparaging humanity in both size and agency. However, the division also stems from the strange and desolate environment in which they find themselves, as evidenced, for example, by the pervasive darkness that blankets the outdoor area at night. Due to this, the characters are forced to use flashlights or torches to navigate, resulting in feelings of claustrophobia and trepidation toward the unknown (Carpenter 00:26:16). By using this gloomy setting, the film exploits humanity's fear of the dark, as maintained by Lovecraft, and our tendency to associate uncertainty with danger, "thus making any of an unknown world a world of peril and evil possibilities" (*Supernatural*

Horror in Literature 107). As a result, the intense darkness that dominates the surroundings at night has a profound effect on the characters, giving them a sense of vulnerability and claustrophobia. Additionally, it adds to the film's mood and atmosphere, seeing that the darkness conceals any potential threats lurking in the shadows, thus creating a sense of dread and impending doom; furthermore, this highlights the accentuation of tension and fear for both characters and the audience, eagerly awaiting the next terrifying revelation.

On the subject of isolation and isolated locales, it is furthermore relevant to shed light on the paranoia that arises among the American scientists in the face of the terrors and isolation of the Antarctic, essentially creating a pervading atmosphere of dread and pessimism throughout *The Thing*. Besides the sense of isolation on account of the vast wasteland in which they find themselves stationed, the radio has been out of contact for weeks, and as chaos eventually engulfs Station 4, all transportation options end up being compromised. Also, after learning that their closest neighbors, the Norwegians, have fallen prey to the alien imitator, paranoia spreads among the Americans as they realize that they are left alone, threatened by an alien that can appear as one of them, which, as a result, turns them on each other. Each of these factors contributes to a strong feeling of isolation, but also one of helplessness and hopelessness, resulting in a sense of tragedy and impending doom with little hope of overcoming the aliens. As stated by Phillips:

The men of Station 4 are on the very edges of human civilization, and it is here that they meet the invading forces from beyond. In this place, the foe is not a figure of lawless primitivism but instead a kind of counter-settlement. The alien thing is a pioneer, although a pioneer encroaching into the territory the humans had long assumed was theirs—and now they are the ones being pushed out (134).

Strongly marked by the characteristics of the cosmic horror genre, an arid wasteland of bitter snowscape thus isolates the scientists, and forces beyond their control besiege them; however, the ensuing siege is not their fault, as they are simply innocents trapped in a violent frontier environment without real knowledge of its consequences.

As similarly touched upon in the analysis of the atmosphere and setting of Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, Michael Brown comments on the idea that Antarctica has been viewed as alien, monstrous, and anti-human since the beginning of European exploration (52). In this context, the setting of the research facility in the heart of the Antarctic expanse is in keeping with the spatialization of unexplored frontiers associated with the horror genre. For this reason, Brown moreover proposes that the setting of *The Thing* is everything but incidental, and “is in fact instrumental to creating a weird realism, whereby the imagining of

the Antarctic as already an ‘alien space’ invites us to consider the world around us” (54). In essence, he goes as far as to propose that the Antarctic setting in *The Thing* can be interpreted metonymically as the vast expanse of outer space, bringing in a statement of Carpenter, mentioning that “[w]hat’s scary about the movie is not that it’s big and action-filled, but it’s small and there’s nothing out there but this blowing blackness and storm and cold and right next to you maybe a creature. That’s the creepiness of the story” (qtd. in Brown 56). As previously discussed, the vast expanse of the Antarctic setting acts as a harbor for secrets and mysteries, while Brown further contends that the swirling blackness of the Antarctic background “rehearses humankind’s confrontation with the black depths of an unhuman universe” (56). In that sense, the Antarctic setting and its, as portrayed by the film, dreadful and eerie atmosphere, evokes a cosmic sensation in the characters and viewers alike, as it prompts contemplation of the boundless potential of the unknown and the unexplored, and the mysteries yet to be unveiled.

In analyzing works of cosmic horror, it becomes evident that feelings of isolation or claustrophobia are of high significance in building atmospheric dread and tension. As discussed previously in this section, the sense of isolation is dictated by the predominant vastness of the unknown, as the research station is located in a desolate and inhospitable environment, surrounded by nothing but miles of snow and ice. As the radio signal has failed, the station has been completely isolated from the outside world, leaving the scientists trapped in the small, confined space of the camp when the situation worsens. Moreover, as for the station itself it is claustrophobic and cramped, with narrow hallways, tight spaces, and a labyrinthine layout that enhance the sense of feeling trapped. When things start going awry, several traveling shots in the hallway are experienced in first-person point of view, where the viewer gets a unique understanding of the horrifying confinement of the living space in the face of danger. These shots come forth as very dramatic and shaken, as the camera almost feels handheld, creating for the viewers the experience of being there themselves (Carpenter 00:52:39-00:52:46). Equal to the hallways, the living quarters are small and crowded, with barely enough space for the scientists to move around, let alone defend themselves against the threatening alien (00:15:06-00:15:44). The lack of space within the camp therefore creates a sense of helplessness and desperation among the characters, as they struggle to survive in the hostile environment with no means of escape, thus further solidifying the dreadful atmosphere of entrapment and isolation.

As the enigmatic alien infiltrates and invades the scientist’s home and sanctuary, i.e. Station 4, the boundaries and sense of security are breached, which amplifies the feeling of

claustrophobia among the camp's inhabitants. In that sense, the horrors of the unknown have transgressed the protectiveness of the home, and have, in turn, vanished the border between the known and the unknown. In his study of human responses to isolated landscapes, Yi-Fu Tuan differentiates between three categories of space. The first concept is the 'homeplace' which is a protected area for human residence, such as the station. The homeplace is then immediately enclosed by the 'home space' which is a less protected, yet still familiar place that acts as a safeguard against the external 'alien space' - a location consistently perceived as threatening, yet also one of great fascination as it can be "overpoweringly beautiful or sublime" (140). In the case of polar regions such as the Antarctic, the concept of the home space that is the buffer zone, however, vanishes, meaning that the "homeplace is the hut and immediately beyond is alien space, an expanse of whiteness reaching out in all directions to seemingly nowhere" (154). In that sense, the safety of the homeplace, or, as is the case of *The Thing*, the research station, is suddenly compromised due to its geographical location, leaving it vulnerable and exposed to the threat posed by the alien space. These notions of space are both interesting and relevant in understanding the setting of *The Thing* in that the blurring of the line between homeplace and alien space becomes evident through "the fear of personal endangerment that comes when the places in which [we] feel safest are somehow opened up and the unknown let in" (Ziegler qtd. in Brown 55). In *The Thing*, the confinement and safety of the homeplace is therefore eliminated as a result of the alien invading the camp, hence making the already confined place feel even more claustrophobic, as this no longer acts as a sanctuary from external threats but is threatening in itself. However, it is not merely the scientists' home that has been infiltrated, leading to dread and claustrophobia, but also their sense of safety and trust in each other and the familiar, owing to the imitating nature of the alien. The familiar has, in many ways, transformed into something drastically unfamiliar, ultimately feeding into the existent dreadful atmosphere, and similarly enforcing the prevailing sense of isolation, vulnerability, and claustrophobia posed by the geographical location of the research expedition, and the terrific forces it inhabits.

Among the four works, *Prometheus* is the only one that is set in space rather than on Earth. More specifically, the film takes place on LV-223; a moon located after the crew stumbled upon a series of ancient cave paintings discovered around the world, seeming to illustrate a starmap guiding them there. Having traveled through the depths of space for more than two years, the crew finally sets foot in an environment that is otherworldly and beyond compare. Being so far away from home, and essentially confined to their spacecraft, can be argued to bring forth feelings of both desolation, isolation, and, possibly, feelings of

loneliness among the members of the crew, as they are greeted by the stark emptiness of the moon's surroundings; a barren, silent, and inhospitable place, with a harsh, uninviting, and unforgiving landscape. This bleak and depressing environment can, in several ways, be viewed as a forewarning against the misery the crew will endure on their cosmic voyage; however, blinded by their search for origin, they continue to accept these conditions as an invitation, refusing to acknowledge them as a warning.

The landscape of moon LV-223 is in many respects rather intimidating for the crew. First, as their ship enters the moon, long extreme shots present them being surrounded by a large, awe-inspiring mountainous landscape, shrouded in mist and clouds which gives it an almost mystical quality (Scott 00:24:12-00:24:30). Moreover, during the voyage, one of the crew members mentions that one mountain in particular resembles Mount Everest, or rather that the mountain makes Mount Everest look like its little brother, giving an idea of how incredibly sublime and spectacular the setting truly is (00:23:55-00:23:59). However, while the mountains are beautiful, they also serve as reminders of the dangers and isolation of the environment, as they dwarf the characters and their spaceship, making them seem absolutely tiny compared to the vast expanse of land. The film's mountainous setting is thus both awe-inspiring and intimidating, in what way it emphasizes the high stakes and perilous nature of the characters' mission. In addition, it can be contended that the expansive terrain not only diminishes the humans due to its sheer magnitude, but also because its environment is extremely hostile, essentially rendering it toxic to humankind. Through examination of the the moon's atmosphere, the crew finds that the air contains "71 percent nitrogen [...] twenty-one percent oxygen, [and] traces of argon gas" (00:23:34-00:23:39); according to one scientist onboard, breathing the air would therefore resemble breathing through an exhaust pipe, meaning a human could only sustain its conditions for two minutes without a spacesuit (00:23:43-00:23:49). Hence, the crew becomes aware of the atmosphere's inability to support human life and that they will have to seek protection to be able to fare in the alien conditions. Literally as well as symbolically, the moon poses an immeasurable threat to humankind in its design, being highly inhospitable to humans, but also poses as a foreshadowing in the foreboding nature of its character, paving the way for understanding the information not meant for human eyes. In that sense, the moon rejects humankind in more ways than simply physically, as its harsh, threatening, and rather uninviting conditions serve as warnings against the knowledge and terror that await the crew. This is additionally experienced by the gruesome storms that seem to ravage the planet, which, at once, create a dramatic and menacing atmosphere of dread and danger, and moreover force the crew to retreat back to the

safety of their spaceship, as the storms prove to be too dangerous and toxic for them to be withstood by humans. A perfect example of this occurs during their first expedition to what is later discovered to be a spaceship, when they are forced to leave immediately before a storm of “200 kilometer winds of airborne silica and enough static to fry [their] suit” (00:41:13-00:41:17) hits. When the crew departs the alien spaceship, the framing is zoomed completely out in an extreme long shot, highlighting the majestic sublimity of the storm that is emerging. An eerie traveling shot follows, moving up from the small vehicles to the vast mountain range, showing a skull-resembling rock at the top of the mountain, which vanishes under the dense storm in a matter of seconds (00:42:20-00:42:26). In its resemblance of a human skull, it reminds humanity of their mortality and frailty, as the rock is swallowed up by the storm, illustrating that humans alone cannot withstand the storm; yet, this is additionally another way of creating a foreboding feeling in the viewer, knowing that the same grim storm is about to strike the characters too. Immediately following this event, another majestic extreme long shot materializes, once again capturing the grandeur of the immense storm, which appears to move almost in slow motion to create tension and dread, as the characters race against time (00:42:42-00:42:45). Thus, in several respects, the moon harbors a strong sublime character, which not only undermines the humans who cannot thrive in the harsh and perilous environment without assistance, but also essentially rejects them altogether, diminishing them owing to the fragility of their existence.

A central theme of mystery runs throughout the film, established by the setting and atmosphere. This is especially apparent in the way the characters constantly encounter new and strange phenomena which they cannot explain, creating a sense of the unknown that adds to the overall tension and suspense of the film. As discussed above, the moon LV-233 is completely unknown to man and, as a result, remains a mystery due to its lack of exploration and study. While adding to the mystique and intrigue of the moon, this also creates tension and uncertainty, since the crew finds themselves isolated on an alien moon, far from Earth’s comforts and familiarity. The uncertainty of being stranded on an entirely unfamiliar moon thereby exacerbates the sense of isolation and dread, as the crew, with limited knowledge of the place, is left to speculate about the dangers and mysteries that may lie ahead, causing further apprehension and unease among them. However, this uncertainty can also be considered a source of fascination and curiosity; similar to humanity’s interest in the unknown of Antarctica, humanity’s interest in the mysteries of the heavens is and has always been universal and persistent (NASA). As asserted by NASA, “[h]umans are driven to explore the unknown, discover new worlds, push the boundaries of our scientific and

technical limits, and then push further” (NASA), hence reflecting humanity’s curiosity and awe for the unknown, the undiscovered, and, specifically, for the exploration of space. This fascination with the unknown aspects of space is strongly reflected both by the narrative of *Prometheus* and its characters, who have an intense fascination and awe toward experiencing and uncovering the mysteries of the newly discovered moon, and perhaps the origins of humanity. In this way, the strange moon at the same time inspires feelings of isolation, dread, fascination, and awe, all of which have a connection to the sublime, which can be defined in Edmund Burke’s classic definition as “anything that is great, infinite, or unknown” (qtd. in Wiegandt 274). Amid the uncertainty of the setting, the crew thus experiences a mixture of exhilaration and dread, as they strive to explore the unknown regardless of its potential danger; a testament to humanity’s unrelenting thirst for discovery and exploration, whether it be of the moon or space in general. As such, the crew’s experience on the moon illustrates the complex and contradictory nature of the sublime, which can elicit terror and intrigue in equal measure.

In addition to evoking both dread and fascination in characters and audiences, uncertainty can, however, also exacerbate the loneliness and claustrophobia that already exist at the strange moon, as similarly evidenced by the other works addressed in this paper. As previously mentioned, the characters’ imagination can be sparked by the uncertainty and unknowability of the moon, instilling in them a sense of fear and dread as they contemplate the potential dangers hidden deep within the obscure place, essentially heightening the increasing sense of isolation and confinement as well. This is for instance apparent as the crew in the process of investigating the strange and unfamiliar confines of the alien spaceship is forced to rely on the illumination of their provided flashlights to navigate through its dark and mysterious interiors (Scott 00:30:24-00:30:50). The dimly lit interior of the alien structures thus both heightens the sense of confinement and disorientation experienced by the characters and the audience, additionally adding a feeling of unease while keeping everyone on their toes. Also, being confined in an unknown, alien environment coupled with limited visibility creates a sense of vulnerability for the characters, who, along with the audience, are unable to see what lurks in the shadows, adding an element of tension and anticipation to the situation and overall atmosphere. Therefore, the uncertainty inherent in exploring the alien moon, and in the meeting with the unknown, inhabits different emotions; the experience can, on the one hand, be thrilling and terrifying, as it, in many respects, emphasizes the fragility, vulnerability, and isolation of humans, while on the other hand, it can evoke a sense of

wonder and awe by its vastness and mystery. As such, uncertainty is a powerful tool for creating an atmosphere of tension, dread, and intrigue.

Comparing the Atmospheric Dread within the Four Works

Based on the analysis above of atmosphere and setting, it appears that all of the selected works are concerned with discovery, mystery, and the fear of the unknown; all themes adhering to the cosmic horror genre. All of the stories are set in remote, isolated locations where the human race is no longer dominant, thus making the setting atmospheric and eerie, and imbuing the story with a sense of dread and tension. Both Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* and Carpenter's *The Thing* are set in remote Antarctica, a vast and inhospitable wilderness largely unexplored, resulting in a setting characterized by cold, desolation, and oppression, which adds to the sense of isolation and terror. In both settings, an atmosphere of mystery and paranoia is present; however, while the characters in Lovecraft's novella experience paranoia as a result of the sense of something sinister lurking in the shadows, the paranoia in *The Thing* results more from isolation and mistrust among characters, who begin to suspect one another of the alien's infection. In a like manner, Scott's *Prometheus* takes place remotely, yet on a moon far out in space; here, the setting is fantastic, with both impressive and oppressive landscapes and structures that hint at a civilization far more advanced than that of Earth. A sense of wonder and curiosity pervades this setting, as the characters explore the unknown; however, dread and fear also creep in, as the moon's secrets are gradually unveiled. As for the setting of King's *The Mist*, it is neither set in Antarctica nor far out in space, but rather in a small town in Maine. Nevertheless, the familiar and secure location soon becomes unfamiliar and nightmarish, with a thick fog obscuring everything, creating tension and claustrophobia for the characters, who are trapped inside a supermarket with an unknown threat looming outside. Thus, all four works are strongly centered around the idea of some unknown dangers, in what way they tap into the human fear of the unknown, as evidenced by Lovecraft. The enigmatic vagueness shrouding these works could be misconstrued as a form of imprecise description, but, rather, it aptly conforms to the cosmic horror genre by instilling a sense of cosmic terror in the audience as well as characters, since a large part of the interpretation is left to their imagination. The elements of mystery and imagination are hence powerful factors in creating a menacing atmosphere within these selected works, and serve to create both a sense of dread and tension among characters and audience members alike, resulting in a memorable and unique horror experience.

The Cosmic Creatures

Across genres, certain elements remain consistent precisely because they continue to be effective in generating the intended response from both readers and viewers. Particularly in the genres of gothic and horror, one such element can be the terrible monsters, often characterized as malevolent and grotesque. These monsters contribute to establishing fright and terror within an audience, as well as add to the overall menacing atmosphere. However, as with all genre developments, cosmic horror resides somewhere outside of the regular horror tradition in regards to the monstrous presence, being that the creatures are far from modernized ghosts, werewolves, or vampires, but something else entirely; instead, they are, in the words of China Miéville, “*sui generis*” (xiv, emphasis in original), or in other words, unique. The following section will explore the uniqueness of these cosmic monsters, while also considering how they are presented in the selected works, the mystery they pose, and how they impact both characters and audiences.

The selected works have several similarities when it comes to the monsters, or extraterrestrials, represented, one example being the way they emerge in both appearance and demeanor. Beginning with Ridley Scott’s *Prometheus*, the monster is presented from the early onset of the film, where a humanoid alien drinks from a liquid, causing its body to dissolve into a gushing waterfall (Scott 00:03:06-00:04:36). In an extreme close-up shot of the alien’s strands of DNA, which blacken and wither, the camera shows how the disintegration develops a new cellular life form, i.e. the human species (00:03:08-00:05:07). This scene is, nevertheless, still proposing a mystery to the viewers, as the actions of the alien are yet to be explained. The introductory sequence of *Prometheus* is thereby raising more questions than it actually answers, which is a common denominator for all the material in question, and also, a characteristic of the cosmic horror genre. The aliens, later known by the name, Engineers, are depicted with seemingly similar features to that of a human, yet, at the same time, otherworldly in appearance due to their pallid skin, darkened eyes, highly vascularized body, and elongated limbs and heads, which make them rather unsettling and monstrous in size compared to a regular person (01:38:23-01:39:30).

In that sense, the Engineers are the closest creatures, dealt with in this paper, to somewhat bear resemblance to a human, whereas the monster in Carpenter’s *The Thing* introduces itself in the form of man’s best friend, a dog. The familiar animal is, nonetheless, capable of shapeshifting into different forms, thereby mimicking the appearance and behavior of other organisms; a process wherein the creature’s true shape is horrifically visualized. This

becomes visible in the scene where the campsite's dogs settle for the night in their joint enclosure, suddenly aware that the creature they lie beside is no animal at all, but an otherworldly monster with writhing tendrils, slimy flesh, and no discernible head or limbs, as it is constantly morphing into a disturbing image of its victims (Carpenter 00:28:45-00:32:26). Thus, Carroll's theory of horror is reflected in the monster in *The Thing*; a terrifying creature that provokes disgust and repulsion not simply in characters but also in viewers. This sensory effect is also created by use of tactile sensations, a special effect aroused through sights and sounds, such as a slime covered monster or the wet stickiness of blood, because these textures are perceived as repellant and something that ultimately horrifies the viewer (Cherry 80-81). Though, it is the mutational aspect of the monster that essentially makes it belong within the genre of cosmic horror, since its constantly changing nature establishes the creature's extraterrestrial origin and its incomprehensibility.

The familiar appearance of seemingly harmless beings, turning malicious in *The Thing*, is also an element that recurs frequently within the genre of horror, thus making the monsters uncanny entities; familiar in appearance, yet unfamiliar behind their disguised exterior. In *The Mist*, King employs this familiarity by referencing recognizable animal characteristics to the myriad of creatures existing in the heavy fog banks surrounding the small town of Bridgton, Maine. The creatures in the mist are, in that sense, illustrated as monsters with typical features of animals, like slithering tentacles of an octopus with "rows of suckers on the underside" (King, *The Mist* 64), bulbous eyes and wings similar to a house fly (113), leathery wings of a bat or bird (114), and the cobweb producing abilities of a spider (149). Although the creatures are described with familiar features, they are still presented as indescribable and otherworldly; a fact which Drayton notes in his characterization of the bizarre-looking spiders: "It was no ordinary earthly spider blown up to horror-movie size; it was something totally different, perhaps not really a spider at all" (152). The monsters in *The Mist* can thereby be classified within the cosmic horror genre, as these unknown entities are defying the logic and rationale of the human mind, almost leaving the story's protagonist, Drayton, without any semblance of sanity, if it were not for the thought of his son, Billy (152). Still, there are several creatures in the novella whose details are left to the reader's imagination, only providing small hints as to size, silhouette, and color (177-178).

These implicit descriptions of the monsters are also a classic element of the genre, and something which Lovecraft himself employs in *At the Mountain of Madness*. In the novella, the readers are only introduced to the creatures through vague details, portraying The Old Ones, extraterrestrial specimens discovered under the Antarctic ice, as eight feet tall beings

with grayish skin, star-shaped heads covered with wiry of cilia in various prismatic colors, membranous wings, and flexible tentacles or tendrils instead of arms (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 20); a description reported as if it were an anatomy lesson in biology class, stated in little detail, leaving a vague image to be completed by the imagination of the reader. Similar to The Old Ones, the Shoggoths' appearance is only hinted at, as the frightful monsters are depicted as "terrible, indescribable thing[s] vaster than any subway train—[...] shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming as pustules of greenish light" (97). The horror of these creatures is therefore only achieved through enigmatic illustrations, because Lovecraft believed that precise descriptions of beings, such as The Old Ones and the Shoggoths, would diminish the cosmic dread they instill in the audience. Thus, the Shoggoths' uncontrollable and formless nature makes them one of the story's most intimidating forces, ultimately defying human comprehension (Timms 20).

However, China Miéville asserts that Lovecraft's monsters contain a paradox, since, at the time, his cosmic approach to horror and its creatures was new and unique, and yet he also introduced these monsters as primal mythical monsters in the *Necronomicon*; a book of Lovecraft's own invention, supposed to refer to a body of folklore and literature, that in fact does not exist. By using the fictional *Necronomicon* to present the creatures as part of an ancient and obscure tradition, Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* also becomes a continuation of the gothic tradition, as the text is presented with elements of history and the return of the past, thus tapping into "traditional" horror, particularly that of the gothic genre (Miéville xv-xvi). The monsters of *At the Mountains of Madness* are hence original in their appearances, though simultaneously honoring some of the key elements within the conventional horror genre.

The Mysterious Presence

Based on the similarities of the monsters' appearances and demeanors, it becomes obvious that a certain mystery surrounds each one of them, due to their vague descriptions and the fact that the monstrous presences raise unanswered questions about their origin and intent toward the human race; an enigma that ultimately challenges human reason and establishes a sense of intense dread in encountering these cosmic creatures.

As exemplified in *The Thing*, upon searching the Norwegian campsite, filled with burned remnants of mutated bodies and a giant ice bed, indicating an excavation from the snow, the researchers begin to feel a sense of unease regardless of them attempting to

rationalize the find, explaining it away as a fossil of some animal remains buried in the ice (Carpenter 00:17:32-00:22:20). Nevertheless, it is not until the researchers encounter the horrifically altered dog that feelings of dread and terror arise immensely, as the scene is established through several reaction shots that portray the characters in a state of shock and fear (00:31:32-00:31:36). In this scene, the monster, depicted as a slime-covered entity that transforms into its victims through shooting tendrils in a leech-like manner, can, according to Stephen Prince in his essay “Dread, Taboo, and *The Thing*”, be perceived as:

[A] form of cosmic pollution, an entity existing outside the accepted categories that give shape to human life and knowledge. Its very existence challenges the ontology separating human from nonhuman, solid from liquid, edible from inedible. It threatens to erase the distinctions and, in doing so, to erase the bounded human world. (126)

The creature, in other words, dwells in a disturbing, unclear intermediate ground, where it is only identifiable as a ‘thing’, though otherwise impossible to classify owing to its defiling and malignant exterior (125), essentially transcending human rationality and sanity and leaves characters and viewers overwhelmed by sudden realizations of their insignificance. The creature in *The Thing* thereby poses a giant threat to the entire research team, and while the most natural reaction would be to flee the frightening thing, some of the characters resort to an aggressive stance against the alien, acting in accordance with their survival instinct when confronting the horrid being. The resistance does, nevertheless, not change the fact that the discovery of the shape-shifting nature of the monster brings about a sense of paranoia, tension, and suspicion among the men at the campsite, suddenly unsure of who to trust.

According to Kendall R. Phillips in his discussion of the wilderness, he regards its function as a disorienting and threatening force that drives civilization back, with wild entities that “appear dangerous and lawless [and] threaten not only the lives of the heroes but also the very fabric of social order that constitutes civilization” (136). Hence, the threat posed to the characters by the shapeshifting entity, emerging from the wilderness of Antarctica, goes beyond physical harm, as its existence also threatens society as a whole, challenging civilization and its values, which reinforces the fear of the unknown and undiscovered throughout the film. *The Thing* employs instances of psychological horror, centering around the conflicts that arise when paranoia, danger, and fear penetrate the human psyche (Khairy). This, in turn, proves how the film adheres to the cosmic horror genre, having central themes that concern themselves with the fragility of man’s sanity upon encountering and fearing the unknown, and not least being threatened by it. The thing in Carpenter’s film thus remains

intentionally vague and mysterious, which simultaneously makes it defy any rational human thought, since its unsettling presence cannot be explained, nor comprehended. The enigmatic entity is, however, also frightful due to the visualization of gore and blood created via certain special effects, as exemplified in the scene where the crew members attempt to revive the geologist, Vance Norris, unaware that he has been assimilated by the creature. Being both occupied with framing the saving of the man, and staying focused on MacReady holding explosives to safeguard himself against the crew's newfound suspicion toward him, the film uses a shock cut, as the abdominal region of Norris suddenly opens, showing a mouthlike entry with razor-sharp teeth, devouring the arms of Dr. Copper in the process of administering CPR (Carpenter 01:13:07-01:15:54). Through this form of cutting technique, the film establishes "a sudden, violent eruption or peak moment" (Cherry 85) in the narrative, which most often makes the viewers jump or exhibit other physical effects and/or disturbances (85).

Comparable to the grotesque and transforming thing in Carpenter's film, *Prometheus* too relies on a mutational element to evoke dread in the audience, particularly by introducing the infectious pathogen created by the Engineers. This black substance causes several alterations to the characters ingesting it, as shown in the scene where Fifield and Millburn, the two scientists left behind during an exploration of the moon LV-223, encounter snake-like creatures. The creatures, mutated earthworms exposed to the organic, black liquid, attack the scientists with exceptional strength, as they constrict and break Millburn's arm, showing the exposed bone and the twisted angle of the limb in a gruesome manner. Fifield then manages to cut the head off the creature, causing its acidic blood to spray all over his helmet, melting it, while the creature regenerates its head and crawls into Millburn's suit, ultimately killing him by entering his mouth (Scott 01:02:15-01:04:17). Later, the crew discovers how Fifield, infected by the creatures, has equally become a monstrous being with unfathomable powers and a disfigured exterior, marked by corrosive scars and with the seek to attack and kill every member onboard *Prometheus* (01:25:07-01:26:09). In this way, the liquid-created creatures evoke physical fear in the audience through gore and violence, and can be claimed to be designed with the intention of eliciting certain emotions in the viewer; i.e. emotions that run parallel with the characters, such as Fifield and Millburn, exhibiting powerful physical responses of fear, shock, and anxiety. Upon seeing these attacks and the associated bloodshed, the audience should be filled with the aforementioned emotions, thereby mirroring how Fifield and Millburn are terror-stricken during the confrontation.

Another example of such creation, fabricated by the alien substance, is also seen when the android, David, intentionally infects Holloway, one of the expedition's leading scientists, uttering the words: "Big things have small beginnings" (00:51:55-00:51:57). As David only has one particular objective in mind, i.e. to harness and utilize the Engineers' technological developments to aid his maker, Mr. Weyland, he essentially has no moral conscience that prohibits him from using Holloway as an experimental subject. However, in doing so, he unknowingly creates a series of horrific events, as Holloway, during sexual intercourse with Shaw, impregnates the seemingly infertile woman with an alien fetus, and is later killed to avoid further infection among the crew of *Prometheus*. The fetus, growing abnormally fast inside Shaw and causing her excruciating pain, is eventually extracted through a surgical med-pod in the most macabre manner. In this scene, Shaw is shown to be profusely sweating due to the pain and the dreadful experience of having a foreign and rapidly moving creature underneath her skin. Her abdominal region is then cut open and a tentacled being similar to an octopus is extracted. Upon viewing the creature, the camera establishes a reaction shot, displaying how the female scientist is in a state of utter shock at the sight before her, recoiling with fear and revulsion as the monster breaches the placenta, spraying blood and bodily fluids all over (01:21:26-01:24:02). This reaction is illustrating the proper way for the audience to react to this tentacled creature, because the emotional response of the character, Shaw, provides an example. The appropriate reaction of the viewer should thus converge to that of the character, essentially assessing the monster as abhorrent and dreadful.

The black substance, infecting the characters in different manners, can therefore be perceived as a biological weapon, developed with a singular purpose that is the mass destruction of humankind. The real mystery in *Prometheus* hence resides in the film's alien species, the Engineers, and why they wish to end human existence with the contagious pathogen, despite having created mankind in the first place (Snyder). The vastness of these otherworldly beings, and their foreign yet highly advanced capabilities, is thereby what makes them belong within the cosmic horror genre. Presented as godlike entities, the Engineers inspire awe in the researchers, who believe they are mankind's true Gods, thus making them realize that mankind is just a small, insignificant speck within an unfathomable universe.

Prometheus, however, still leaves many questions unanswered and hints at a greater mythology of the depicted creatures, seeing that the film is a prequel to the *Alien*-franchise. Yet, the very same mysterious aspects of the film make it rather comparable to Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*. As in the plot of *Prometheus*, Lovecraft's novella equally

describes a scientific expedition, where discoveries suggest that life on Earth is, in fact, created by extraterrestrial colonizers. As stated by David McWilliam, both stories destabilize Darwinian theories of evolution through natural selection and blur them with a secret history of alien intelligent design (531-532). The history of these alien species is also obtained in an analogous manner, seeing that Shaw and Holloway discover the Engineers' location through several archaic murals depicted around the world, while Dyer and Danforth too unearth their knowledge of the Old Ones via murals and carvings in the ancient city. The film and the novella thus operate through a mysterious narrative, where alien creatures are believed to have constructed the human race, as illustrated in the writings of Lovecraft, maintaining that: "They were the great Old Ones that had filtered down from the stars when earth was young—the beings whose substance an alien evolution had shaped, and whose powers were such as this planet had never bred" (*At the Mountains of Madness* 57).

Lovecraft, nevertheless, takes this enigmatic perspective to a new level in his writing, as all information regarding the actions and intentions of these creatures is only vaguely indicated to the audience. There is no malicious plan of destroying all mankind, as in *Prometheus*, or an instinct of self-preservation and assimilation as in *The Thing*, which, at the same time, is exactly what makes the monsters in *At the Mountains of Madness* fascinating. Lovecraft diverts from providing precise descriptions of the monsters, as he believes that precise illustrations of appearances and behaviors will fail to evoke emotions of dread in the reader, explaining why he opts for sustaining the unresolved mystery which, in turn, leaves the readers to ponder. This is especially evident in the way Dyer tries to recall and describe the horrific findings at Lake's campsite, but fails to provide much detail, as his mind, incapable of comprehending these monsters and their actions, "let[s] hints stand for actual facts and ineluctable deductions" (35). Instead, he repeats his thoughts of the eerie atmosphere, yet again mentioning "the wind-ravaged terrain, the damaged shelters, the disarranged machinery, the varied uneasiness of [the] dogs" (35), thus leaving the creature's appearances and the danger they pose to the imagination of the characters and the readers. Hence, it is the imaginative representations of the monsters that generate emotions of dread and terror. The mysterious nature and the incomprehensibility of these monsters are therefore what differentiates them from the typical evil beings, as seen in film classics like *Jaws* (1975) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). Here, the terror-instilling moment is quickly established through a clear depiction of the lurking beasts, which prevents dread from arising because the exact horror is already shown to the viewers, leaving no horrors to the imagination.

As opposed to the creatures in *The Thing*, *Prometheus*, and *At the Mountains of Madness*, *The Mist* differentiates in certain aspects, considering that the central mystery of the novella is itemized as a weather phenomenon, although encompassing monsters, just as horrific and dangerous. In several respects, the sudden appearance of the mist and its origin pose as the central enigma in King's novella; a mystery only conjectured at, but never fully answered. As the mist is "eating up the blue sky and the fresh black hootop with equal ease" (King, *The Mist* 48-49), and essentially enveloping all of Bridgton in darkness, different speculative thoughts come to mind among the people at the supermarket. Some assume the mist to be originating from a polluted cloud of dangerous chemicals, or believe it to be the will of God, while others, especially Drayton, are haunted by the thought of an unknown governmental project in Shaymore called the Arrowhead Project, and suspect the facility to be responsible for the far-reaching whiteness and the monsters creeping within it (24, 121).

Similar to the heavy fog banks surrounding the small town in Maine, the creatures residing in the mist also present a large mystery to the novella's characters as well as to the reader, with characteristics mostly remaining in the dark, hidden by the obscure surroundings. Albeit illustrated with typical features of various animal species, a lot is still described in a cosmic scale, being altered in size, appearance, and abilities, or simply just vaguely specified, resulting in them being perceived as far more dangerous and incomprehensible for the human mind. For example, after encountering the tentacled being in the storage area, the monster, described as a squid-like creature, still puzzles Drayton and Ollie, as evidenced in Drayton's questioning: "*What were those tentacles hooked to?*" (73, emphasis in original). Relying on the cosmic horror genre's fundamental elements, such as vague and enigmatic representations of unknown entities, King instills great terror in his characters and readers, essentially disregarding any logical thinking one might possess when entering clouded surroundings. This is also evident in the way the story's narrator, Drayton, lacks the capability to describe one of the monsters outside, as it leaves him so utterly horror-struck that he actually begins to doubt whether or not he had screamed at the mere sight of it. He only manages to define the creature, big enough in size to make the plated glass windows of the store shiver, as "a flying thing" (114), clearly maintaining that any description beyond that would be unclear and possibly unmanageable (114). Drayton is thereby experiencing feelings of awe when confronted with the creature, seeing that his mind slips out of its conventional understanding and into a place where words fail and all comparisons disappear. These uncanny and obscure monsters, and their actions toward the people in the supermarket, fall within the very essence of the cosmic horror genre, as they, with their abnormal appearances, disturb the natural

order, breaching an ordinary world with unnatural and fearsome powers beyond human comprehension. The creatures additionally establish a certain sense of anxiety in the novella that puts humanity to the test when trapped in claustrophobic surroundings and confronted with external threats of the cosmic unknown. In this manner, the characters of *The Mist* undergo the same type of dreadful emotions as the characters in *The Thing*, as they too discover, during the confrontation with these monsters, that they have no real chance of salvation (Burger 88). On this basis, it becomes clear that the monsters in *The Mist* belong within the scope of Lovecraft's cosmic creations, as their vague and incomprehensible exteriors contribute to their fearsome effectiveness; yet, as written in the novella, it is the mist itself that remains the biggest mystery and threat to the characters: "It wasn't so much the monstrous creatures that lurked in the mist; [...] It was the mist itself that sapped the strength and robbed the will" (King, *The Mist* 162). The obscure and uncertain circumstances this mist conveys are thereby perceived to be far more dangerous than the monsters residing in it, as they, in fact, can be killed, whereas the foggy surroundings never seem to disappear; an element, which, as the quote indicates, deprives people of their mental and physical spirit.

Encountering the Cosmic

As established above, it is the menacing existence of the monsters and their mysterious nature that help form emotions of dread in the characters and audience. Still, there are other elements of these monstrous creatures that allow for the desired effect of cosmic horror to be possible. One of them is the monsters' godlike appearances, often based on their superior and supernatural abilities, which are so awe-inspiring that when encountering them humans are driven to madness by the mere sight. Such creatures can be found in Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, where the Old Ones, in particular, are described by Lake in recorded reports, as uncanny resemblances of "certain monsters of primal myth, especially fabled Elder Things in *Necronomicon*" (19, emphasis in original). The fact that the creatures in the novella are compared to and given the same prominence as the mythical beings of Lovecraft's fictional body of folklore and mythical tales shows how they are to be perceived as powerful deities, incomprehensible, and superior to the human race. This is exemplified when Dyer and Danforth uncover the truth about the beings detected in the ice:

[T]he builders of the city were wise and old, and had left certain traces in rocks even then laid down well-nigh a thousand million years... rocks laid down before the true life of earth had advanced beyond plastic groups of cells... rocks laid down before the true life of earth had existed at all. They were the makers and enslavers of that life, and above all doubt the

originals of the fiendish elder myths which things like Pnakotic Manuscripts and the *Necronomicon* affrightedly hint about. (57, emphasis in original)

Through this quote, the superiority of the Old Ones becomes particularly visible, as the masonry of the building signifies that the creatures' existence predates that of humans and that they essentially are the creators of the world, and, in fact, the original monsters on which future mythical stories were based. In addition, the alien beings also possess scientific and mechanical knowledge that far surpasses that of mankind, which is evident by them creating ideal slaves, inventing strange devices, and having the ability to traverse space on their membranous wings (56-60). The Old Ones are thereby, as envisioned by Lake upon his discovery, beings "of considerably advanced evolution" (11), yet, still capable of extinction, overpowered by the same monstrous creatures they once gave life (97).

While the Old Ones materialize as divine entities with unfathomable knowledge, reaching far beyond human comprehension, the Shoggoths are depicted as monstrous creatures, capable of committing horrific actions. The story of these Shoggoths is learned over the course of the novella; bred by the Old Ones to be beasts of burden (Miéville xxiii). However, over time, the Shoggoths' intelligence and size developed, resulting in a rebellious confrontation, where their makers were left brutally mauled and decapitated (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 90-91). Upon finding these torn and mangled bodies of the extraterrestrial beings discovered in the ancient city, Dyer and Danforth are shocked into mute, motionless statues, experiencing emotions of dread so vast that their minds fail to form basic thoughts (91-92). The terror, which these monsters instill in the characters, is thus of sublime quality, making Dyer and Danforth feel overwhelmed by a sense of dread that is incapable of human comprehension. Having "understood the quality of cosmic fear to its uttermost depths" (91), the two protagonists become aware that the monster, capable of such diabolical acts, is a threat to their survival and the existence of the entire human race, should it choose to leave the Antarctic setting.

Yet, in contrast to the endings of *The Thing* and *Prometheus*, where the main characters are fighting for their lives, performing heroic deeds to prevent the creatures from annihilating or mutating humanity, Dyer and Danforth simply flee the scene. This is, according to Miéville, because Lovecraft's horror regards realization over traditional horror's usage of intrusion of frightening forces, stating that the real horror lies within acknowledging the fact that the world is implacably bleak (xiii). This also corresponds with Lovecraft's philosophy of cosmicism, focused on the dread humans experience when realizing they hold

no real significance in the universe, as beings like the Old Ones and the Shoggoths serve as symbols that state how little meaning humankind is essentially regarded with. The accidental encounter with these sublime entities is thereby what triggers Dyer and Danforth to acknowledge their own insignificance, as they are left haunted by the horrors they have just witnessed, only surviving out of utter instinct (95-96). Danforth is particularly affected by the previous encounter, displaying signs of madness by chanting hysterically and later shrieking at an unknown sight when looking back upon the mountainous peaks holding the ancient city (96, 100). Here, the writings of Lovecraft merely hint at the horror, which causes Danforth's breakdown, thus evoking dread through the installment of a terrifying atmosphere, rather than establishing another monster to disturb the natural order, and simultaneously leaves the ending open for the readers to interpret.

Corresponding to the way in which the scientists behold the Old Ones as godlike creatures in *At the Mountains of Madness*, *Prometheus* also illustrates a certain awe-struck admiration toward the Engineers. Upon uncovering a specimen of their bodies, Shaw and David, especially, are seen to be curious and hell-bent on unearthing their secrets, each with a different objective, nevertheless. As Shaw later in the storyline determines that the genetic material of the Engineers predates that of humans, it is established that mankind stems from these creatures (Scott 00:57:45-00:57:49). This, as well, evokes a sense of divine presence, as the knowledge and technical advancements of the Engineers suggest that these are species of a higher level than humans. With the discoveries at the beginning of the film, the Engineers are thus regarded with respect and fascination rather than fear, as both Weyland and Shaw hope that they will provide them with answers to the fundamental questions about human existence (McWilliam 535). In the search for knowledge, it, nonetheless, becomes clear that humanity does hold some significance to the Engineers, "but only as a stage in a merciless experiment" (532). The alien species are consequently becoming a threat to all of human existence, as they, instead of taking the role of an absolute, transcendent being, are found to be more like vengeful Gods with no explanatory sequence that gives reason for their evil motives regarding the human race. The Engineers are, as proclaimed by Shaw in the film, "carrying death, and [...] headed for Earth" (Scott 01:43:16-01:43:19); thus possessing a plan of destruction, but withholding the reason for humanity to be perceived as unwanted entities, created only to be destroyed years later. One can, nevertheless, still deem *Prometheus* a work within the cosmic horror genre, even though humans are reputed as slightly relevant to the Engineers, because they essentially function as a means to an end, disoriented by the unfolding plan of the alien, which the characters unwittingly restarts (McWilliam 539). In his

essay “Tentacles and Teeth: The Lovecraftian Being in Popular Culture”, Mark Jones agrees with this statement, as he highlights how *Prometheus*, albeit working within its own mythos (the *Alien* series), enhances and makes the Lovecraftian aura more explicit in the film. This is, according to Jones, because the film identifies humanity “as a genetic construct, probably only produced as food for a similarly genetically manipulated biological weapon, and as unloved by its creator as the earlier product of a modern Prometheus” (241). Humanity is so to speak put in its place by an impassive alien force that appears vast and superior in comparison (241).

The indifferent attitude shown by the creatures of *Prometheus* toward the characters, and mankind in general, is exemplified when David awakens the last surviving Engineer, and is met with mere disdain and hostility from the creature. Through an attempt at communication, the monster also clearly demonstrates how it perceives its creations, i.e. the humans, as inferior, since the Engineer ultimately tears the android’s head from its body with brutal force, and bashes Weyland to death with it (Scott 01:37:57-01:39:46). The Engineers are then not only profoundly intelligent and able to create life, but also express physical strength at a superior level.

The creatures’ inventions, particularly the organic pathogen, however, pose the biggest threat to human existence and cause severe mayhem on the spaceship. Among these chaotic circumstances, desperate measures are taken to ensure no further infection, which is arguably another way that the characters are driven to a state of madness. This is exemplified when Holloway’s infection causes his mutation to rapidly increase, showing how his veins and eyes turn black from the ingested liquid, making his features correspond to a hideous version of an Engineer. The terror instilled in the characters upon viewing his alteration affects them to such a degree that they have to resort to drastic methods in order to prevent the unknown effects of the mutagen from spreading. In fear of her own life and the crew members aboard the spaceship, Vickers therefore incinerates Holloway’s body; an action, that leaves her utterly shocked and speechless, displaying how the unknown forces and their capabilities disturb human reactions on a deep psychological level, making them temporarily insane and suddenly able to end one another (01:15:13-01:17:03). Hence, the choice made by Vickers demonstrates how curiosity and the desire of obtaining scientific knowledge beyond human comprehension can lead to destruction and existential dread, as the characters discover that there are larger forces present in the universe, and that mankind is severely outclassed by them. Believing that they can control as well as learn from these alien creatures, and thus gain an explanation to one of humanity’s largest unanswered questions

regarding its origin, *Prometheus* illustrates the mere essence of cosmic horror by reminding everyone, characters, and viewers alike, of their insignificance in a large-scale cosmos.

In relation to the superiority and madness-inducing incomprehensibility of the monsters in *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Prometheus*, *The Thing* portrays an unclassifiable entity with paranormal abilities that makes it threatening in both an epistemological and material way. The monstrous thing is parallel to that of a parasitic virus, which is oddly similar to the black mutagen created by the Engineers, since these threats seek to find host organisms to overpower, mutate, and destroy (Prince 126). At the same time, the monster in *The Thing* also resembles the characteristics of the Shoggoth in *At the Mountains of Madness*, pictured as a creature of:

Formless protoplasm able to mock and reflect all forms and organs and processes—viscous agglutinations of bubbling cells—rubbery fifteen-foot spheroids infinitely plastic and ductile—slaves of suggestion, builders of cities—more and more sullen, more and more intelligent, more and more amphibious, more and more imitative! (Lovecraft 91)

Based on this description, it can be argued that Carpenter found some inspiration in Lovecraft's novella during the development of *The Thing*, although no evidence proves this to be true. One can, nevertheless, assert that 'the thing' and the Shoggoth share certain affinities, especially in terms of their ability to shapeshift and thus imitate other lifeforms perfectly while being amorphous when shown in true figure. The monster in *The Thing* is therefore superior to the humans due to its metamorphosing talent and a danger to all human existence if it escapes the solitary and vast surroundings of Antarctica. This is illustrated by Blair in the film, as he, through the use of computer simulation, calculates the epidemiological trajectory of the monster to be at 75 percent, meaning that there is a three-quarters probability that one or more men will be infected by the alien organism. Moreover, the simulation also shows that if the creature should be exposed to inhabited areas of the world, the entire population will succumb to its infection in 27,000 hours, or approximately 3 years (Carpenter 00:42:08-00:43:34). The large threat is thereby, according to Stephen Prince, clarified in epidemiological terms, hence again referencing to the monster as a disease that spreads with frightening relentlessness (123-130). Being a menace to not only the crew members at Outpost 31 but also a danger to civilization, *The Thing* draws on several elements from the cosmic horror genre, instilling dread in the characters as well as the audience by implementing a disturbingly abnormal creature, so frightening that it may fracture the human mind.

The fragility of the human world and their sanity is thus emphasized by a series of events in the film that demonstrate how easily the unknown and the fear thereof can breach through the thin veneer of the human psyche, and bring a person to the utmost brink of insanity. In the film, Blair is portrayed to be one of those characters, as he, shocked and petrified by the simulated data, suffers from what can best be described as a nervous breakdown. As a result of this maniacal state in which Blair finds himself, he decides to wreck all of the research station's technical equipment and vehicles of transportation, kill the rest of the dogs, and attack his fellow crew members to prevent any future infection. (Carpenter 00:51:34-00:54:55). By cutting out any future communication with the rest of the world and trying to deprive the thing of any future hosts, Blair believes his volatile and crazy actions to be justifiable, as said actions will serve a greater purpose, i.e. saving the world. Similar to *Prometheus*, it is then the monster's superiority over mankind that leads to human downfall, as the dread induced in Blair by this unknown and unfathomable horror causes him to act irrationally and homicidally. Also, Blair realizes that this monster surpasses mankind in every way, causing him further madness, as he suddenly realizes that humans, like himself and the rest of the team, are essentially insignificant compared to the larger and more powerful forces that loom across the universe.

Through the film's aspect of dread, which provokes a kind of uncontrollable madness in the characters, it additionally becomes important to highlight the ending of *The Thing*, following the destruction of the outpost and the enormous and grotesque creature lurking within. In this scene, Childs and MacReady reunite amid the remnants and the slowly fading flames from the previous explosion; a fight that has left them despondent and surrendered, frozen with cold, and utterly incapable of distinguishing friend from foe, having the past events of the film in mind (Carpenter 01:39:41-01:41:54). However, it is the dialog between the two men that clearly expresses how the constant terror and suspicion, brought to the station by the mutating creature, have drained and weakened them:

[Childs] 'Fire's got the temperature up all over the camp. Won't last long, though.'
 [MacReady] 'Neither will we.' [Childs] 'How will we make it?' [MacReady] 'Maybe we shouldn't.' [Childs] 'If you're worried about me...' [MacReady] 'I don't think we're in much shape to do anything about it.' [Childs] 'Well... what do we do?' [MacReady] 'Why don't we just... wait here for a little while? See what happens.' (01:40:57-01:41:54)

Lacking the will to confront the thing they believe each other to be, Childs and MacReady actually succumb to the cosmic terror this monster has instilled in them, thus believing themselves to be insignificant entities in the universe, not worthy of salvation.

On the basis of this section of the analysis, it becomes apparent that *At the Mountains of Madness*, *Prometheus* and *The Thing* share a large range of similarities pertaining to the human and monster encounter, and how this affects both the characters and audience. Still, one work is absent in this comparison, namely *The Mist*, which introduces its monsters as divine entities in a slightly different manner than the other titles. Instead of merely illustrating the superiority of the monster through powers such as shapeshifting, intellect, or technical advancement, *The Mist* indicates the godlike qualities of King's monsters through a common literary device; a foreboding dream. Visualized by Drayton at the night of the terrible, yet atmospherically fitting, storm, the day before the mist appears, he dreams as such:

I saw God walking across Harrison on the far side of the lake, a God so gigantic that above his waist He was lost in a clear blue sky. In the dream I could hear the rending crack and splinter of breaking trees as God stamped the woods into the shape of his footsteps. He was circling the lake, coming toward the Bridgton side, toward us, and all the houses and cottages and summer places were bursting into purple-white flame like lightning, and soon the smoke covered everything. The smoke covered everything like a mist. (King, *The Mist* 9)

The dream not only shows how King relates these creatures to that of Gods, using a description that renders them enormous in strength and size, while also detailing that with the presence of this monstrous God, a dangerous and mysterious mist will soon follow, thus creating a foreboding effect for the readers to interpret. This effect is also enhanced by the unease and anxiety which Drayton experiences anterior to a casual trip to the local supermarket, suddenly wanting his wife, Stephanie, to come along for no apparent reason, or making up several excuses that will delay leaving the house (31-32). The foreboding presence coupled with the rapid expansion of the mist thereby accentuates the events that are yet to come in the novella, introducing the horrific monsters as beings unparalleled to any other.

At first, there are, however, many people doubting these creatures' existence, especially Norton, who refuses to enter the storage area to see the tentacle that is left behind from a previous attack (78-83). Norton's mind is, so to speak, not capable of comprehending this monstrous presence, already viewed by Drayton and Ollie, as he, overwhelmed by fear, would rather remain in denial than come to terms with the fact that somewhere out there creatures of unfathomable horror reside. The obscure and dangerous presences of these uncanny monsters additionally shock the people at the market to a degree of mortal terror, as proclaimed by Mrs. Turman (110), or turn them frantically crazed by the mere sight. Illustrated in the same manner as Lovecraft would characterize his monsters, words simply cannot contain or adequately express what Drayton and the other characters have just

witnessed, nor can they explain the horrors that remain unseen, hidden in the mist (Burger 87). With the coming of the mist, King delineates how the besieged occupants of the market are driven to the brink of madness by the monsters and the increasing death surrounding them. This is further emphasized through the point of view of Drayton, trying to characterize the mental state of some of the worst cases of insanity-induced people:

Oh yes - there were also six or seven people who had gone crazy. Crazy isn't the best word; perhaps I just cannot think of the proper one. But there were people who had lapsed into a complete stupor without benefit of beer, wine, or pills. They stared at you with blank and shiny doorknob eyes. The hard cement of reality had come apart in some unimaginable earthquake, and these poor devils had fallen through. (King, *The Mist* 121-122)

The dread evoked in these people, induced by the incomprehensibility of these horrid beings, has hence aroused a mode of mania, corresponding to the way in which other works of cosmic horror introduce fearsome monsters in such effective manner that they ultimately disregard all semblance and rationale. The threatening monsters present in *The Mist* thus defy all human comprehension, much similar to the creatures existing in both *Prometheus*, *The Thing*, and *At the Mountains of Madness*.

At the end of the novella, after barely escaping the supermarket with their lives intact, and having encountered yet another gigantic and indescribable being, Drayton is brought to reflect upon the limits of human perception, stating that:

[T]here are certain things [and beings] your brain simply disallows. There are things of such darkness and horror - just, I suppose, as there are things of such great beauty - that they will not fit through the puny human doors of perception. (177)

The arrival of the mist and its monsters has therefore remade the world and produced a new reality, which those who have survived must contend with in a constant state of dread, because the terror and powers of these otherworldly creatures remain beyond human comprehension. The surviving humans are hence threatened in every way possible, as they, outclassed by the unknown, prove to be utterly insignificant in a limitless cosmos (Burger 87).

Ergo, from the analysis above, it can be concluded that the monsters portrayed in the selected works share characteristics of both uniqueness and mystery, corresponding to the fundamental elements of the cosmic horror genre. The monsters, some illustrated with uncanny features of animals, are also depicted with vague descriptions, which, in turn, surrounds them with an enigma that challenges human rationale and provokes dread in the characters as well as the readers/viewers. In this way, these creatures' mystifying nature

separates them from more conventional evil beings, as the terror that they instill gradually creeps around the audience rather than being established immediately. However, while comparing these works it becomes apparent that *The Mist*, in some instances, diverges slightly from the other titles, since its greatest threat emerges in the form of a weather phenomenon, although with indications of monsters, just as dread-evoking and unfathomable. Through the monster versus human encounter, the monsters appear as godlike entities, highly superior to mankind by means of supernatural abilities. This superiority makes the humans awe-struck upon encountering the beings, yet simultaneously affected by the dread they instill, essentially becoming maddened by the mere sight of these terrifying creatures as well as aware of their own insignificance in the universe.

Having established how the selected works evoke emotions of cosmic terror through depictions of eerie settings, menacing atmospheres, and fearsome monsters, a further examination of the suspense occurring within is equally important. This helps to determine the effect narrative devices may have on an audience, as well as demonstrating why people remain interested in horror and subgenres like cosmic horror.

The Arousal of Horrific Suspense

The effectiveness of horror stories in captivating an audience depends in large part on the ability to generate suspense. For this reason, an accumulation of tension is equally essential for effective results in the horror genre. Hence, this section identifies the suspenseful elements in the selected works, demonstrating how horror aesthetics inspire terror, dread, and excitement in an audience.

When examining Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, it becomes clear that the monstrous presence develops over time, as neither the Old Ones nor the shapeless Shoggoths are introduced together with the characters, their occupations, or the reason for their expedition to Antarctica. Therefore, the monsters are left to the imagination of the readers, creating an enigma that is only revealed through the discovery of the frightful Shoggoth and the decapitated specimens of the Great Old Ones near the end of the story. As a result of this mysterious and sinister effect, readers are also left wondering whether Dyer and Danforth will be able to identify the source, or identity, of the creatures, and if they will be able to locate the missing crew member and animal. With this lingering suspense, mostly created by the isolated setting and the eerie atmosphere, the audience is thus sustained as well as entertained by anticipating what is yet to come; or, in other words, which terrible creature the novella has yet to reveal. With a gradual discovery of these monsters and a strong, long-

lasting accumulation of tension, one could argue that *At the Mountains of Madness* corresponds to the true essence of cosmic horror, as the novella refrains from describing the monster's fearsome features, and, instead, focuses on establishing an anticipatory atmosphere and a certain conception of the uneasiness these monsters withhold.

The ending is, however, rather special, since the encounter with the monster neither ends in a great debacle or fight, but more specifically in a suspenseful sequence of frantic flight in order to escape the dreadful creature and the danger it poses. As the discoverers, i.e. Dyer and Danforth, are pursued by the monster, the suspenseful chase contributes to the establishment of dread instilled in the two protagonists, seeing that they are so utterly overwhelmed that pure human instincts take over, and any sign of confrontation is disregarded. Any recollections of the surroundings when fleeing back their trail are also, as explained by Dyer, only consisting of "dream-fragments involving no memory of volition, details, or physical exertion" (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 97), which also highlights how the suspenseful tension of the chase affects the characters with cosmic fear. Besides affecting the characters, it can also be argued that the suspenseful encounter with the Shoggoth could arouse certain emotions of horrific excitement in the readers, considering that the narrative raises a question with neatly opposed alternatives, and simultaneously calls forth an answering scene. By establishing this question/answer nexus of whether Dyer and Danforth will be able to survive and escape the Shoggoth, the plot thereby creates a fearsome thrill in the readers, as the narrative puts forth a possible outcome dominated by evil, and an outcome of the most likely kind. The novella therefore adds a certain amount of suspenseful tension to the story, which leaves the readers in a form of horrific excitement, thus entrancing the audience with the fearsome aspects of cosmic horror.

Identical to Lovecraft's novella, *The Mist* also establishes the presence of the obscure fog banks and the monsters within in a gradual manner, revealing only the monsters' superior capabilities when the besieged occupants at the supermarket encounter them in the most suspenseful moments of the stories, and realize, too late, that they, in fact, are deadly entities. King's novella does, however, form suspense prior to the discovery of the monsters, seeing that a stranger stumbles into the store and announces: "'Something in the fog! [...] *Something in the fog took John Lee and I heard him screaming!*'" (King, *The Mist* 45, emphasis in original). At this point, the people at the market are not yet aware of the danger that inhabits the mist, nor do they have any proof of the monsters' existence, which results in the creation of suspense. This form of suspense is not only affecting the characters, but the readers as well, since the stranger creates a fearsome and uncomfortable tension by claiming that

something bizarre and out of this world exists in the mist. King thereby creates a suspenseful buildup that essentially leads to more thrilling actions, which in turn will keep the audience further captivated and terrified.

The establishment of suspense in *The Mist* also differentiates slightly from *At the Mountains of Madness* when describing climactic passages, as several details pertaining to the attack are illustrated vividly by King, whereas Lovecraft prefers to glide briefly over these specifics, and focus solely on creating an awe-inspiring sensation of dread. This is exemplified in the novella's fourth chapter wherein a tentacled creature is accidentally let inside the storage area (64). Here, King profoundly describes how Norm, the store's bag boy, is desperately calling for help while the creature eats him alive, and how Drayton expresses his feelings the moment in which tentacles brush past him (66-67), to display an intense sense of suspense in the narration. The suspenseful element thereby generates the thrill and excitement of what is to come, and which characters the monster is likely to attack next.

Following this horrific event, Draton and Ollie must convince the others in the supermarket that there are indeed unfathomable and deadly creatures lurking in the mist. Drayton decides that Brent Norton should be the first person to whom he discloses this terrible, newfound information. However, as Drayton tells him all about "what had come in... and finally, what had gone out, screaming" (79), Norton refuses to even consider it to be a possibility, let alone believe it, announcing that it must be some sort of controversial joke (79-80). This skepticism exhibited from Norton is thus rooted in his fear of the unknown, which is why he, when Drayton tries to convince him of the harsh reality which they find themselves in, begins to berate not only Drayton, but also the rest of the locals for trying to humiliate an out-of-towner like himself (80-81). In that sense, Drayton goes so far in his endeavors to convince Norton and the others in the market of the creature's existence that he literally tries to drag his neighbor back to the storage area to witness the tentacle left behind from the previous attack (82). Failing to convince the one person, who Drayton believes could essentially bring calmness to the crowd, he continues his efforts by telling the occupants the same exact story he told Norton. This leads to further doubts of whether or not it is Ollie and Drayton's consumption of alcohol that is impacting their imagination, or if death truly awaits outside the supermarket doors. Such drama, this act of reasoning creates, thus primes the audience for the suspenseful passages of the novella, wherein the monster is actually illustrated and in action (Carroll 102). One can therefore argue that the tentacled monster, albeit being depicted in only one sequence in the novella, is readying the readers for any future scenes where a human-versus-creature encounter occurs.

The climactic encounter with the monsters, is, in this instance, rather dissimilar from *At the Mountains of Madness*. Firstly, because it, unlike Lovecraft's novella, culminates in a great debacle, where innocent people are killed in the most horrific ways, and, secondly, because there is more than one encounter present in the story. One of the more intense confrontational aspects of *The Mist* is exemplified in the novella's concluding confrontation in which a large group, including Drayton and his son, manages to escape the confinement of the store, the fanatical Mrs. Carmody, and her followers, and, most importantly, the monsters of the mist. However, the successful escape has its costs, as exemplified when Ollie Weeks is dismembered and killed by a creature with gigantic claws, or when Hattie Turman, Billy's babysitter, is coated in corrosive cobwebs (King, *The Mist* 168-169). This encounter can therefore neither be categorized as victorious nor unsuccessful, as some of the people do, in fact, manage to escape, although into an environment that is still enclosed with deadly monsters. One could thus argue that this either leaves the ending open for the audience to interpret, or indicates that a sequel will follow. As a result of the detailed descriptions of these horrific encounters with the monstrous entities, the story essentially employs several suspenseful elements, focusing on the narrator's emotions as he experiences these unnerving battles that will leave the novella's audience utterly frightened, yet eager to find out what lies ahead.

Carpenter's *The Thing* exhibits the same gradual introduction of the monster, thus reflecting the common characteristic among these works of cosmic horror. The film score in *The Thing* dominates several scenes with its eerie and unsettling pulsating electronic sound, featuring a recurring four-note motif that contributes to the suspenseful and unsettling atmosphere which pervades the film. This is particularly apparent during the first encounter with the shape-shifter extraterrestrial, masquerading as a dog, as it is seen running from a helicopter across the snowy grounds (Carpenter 00:03:51-00:08:27). During this sequence, the viewers are unaware of the dog's true identity as a malevolent extraterrestrial, as well as the reason for its pursuit; nonetheless, the sinister soundtrack intensifies the suspense and creates an air of ominous anticipation, causing the viewers to feel uneasy. As a result, the soundtrack plays a significant role in enhancing the viewer's experience by creating a sense of impending danger, tension, and suspense, not only setting the tone for the chase scene, but also keeping the audience on their toes throughout the entire movie. In this sense, the alien is established slowly and unknowingly as its true identity is concealed, but due to the menacing score that accompanies its introduction, the audience are alerted to the fact that something about it is amiss, thereby increasing the tension and dread. Essentially, the characters, as well

as the viewers, are following different types of evidence in their gradual discovery of the creature; the viewers exclusively by the non-diegetic sound of the foreboding score, and characters as they discover the wrecked remains of the Norwegian campsite. The evidence therefore gradually leads the characters and viewers to the truth of the alien, building suspense and tension that creates a menacing atmosphere as the mystery is slowly unraveled.

As opposed to the other works, what appears to distinguish *The Thing* is that the creature appears several times after the crew's initial encounter with it, but never in the same form, as it is changing in shape, size, and character with each passing glimpse from the camera. In essence, this adds to the suspense and paranoia of the film, as both characters and viewers are continuously uncertain as to who is infected. An example of this can be seen when the body of Vance Norris is overtaken by the monster, a fact that neither the viewers nor the characters were previously aware of. During this scene, a part of the continuously mutating monster escapes by assuming an insect-like appearance and morphing into a distorted image of Norris' face, thus presenting the audience with yet another version of the terrifying creature (01:15:57-01:18:05).

Carpenter's film also matches King's *The Mist* in several respects, since there are numerous monster encounters present, as well as grim and often gory deaths of the characters. It seems, however, that what distinguishes *The Thing* from the *The Mist* is that the characters actually choose to battle the monster rather than simply fleeing to survive it, and only fighting back when necessary. Here, one can especially highlight the film's central turning point, where MacReady, the last man standing, confronts the unfathomable being, now gigantic in size due to the abundance of absorptions it has managed to complete (01:38:02-01:39:08). In this sequence, suspense is created in the viewer, as the question of whether or not MacReady makes it out alive arises. The suspense is therefore not only about the anticipation of an actual outcome, but more about two opposed questions that emerge, the moral and the probable. A moral outcome may be implied by MacReady's escape from the monster by blowing up the entire camp; however, similar to *The Mist*, the ending of *The Thing* suggests that the alien may not be entirely eradicated. This is demonstrated by the way in which Childs and MacReady still suspect each other of assimilation, essentially keeping the finale open for a sequel or further imaginative interpretation from the viewers, and additionally furthering the suspense and sense of dread.

Inconsistent with the similarities that up until now have been established in the selected works, *Prometheus* proves to differentiate as the monstrous presence is introduced from the mere beginning of the story, through a flashback sequence of how humanity have

been created by extraterrestrial life (Scott 00:02:59-00:05:00). The flashback scene does, however, not explain what purpose these aliens, or Engineers, have in the story, nor to which degree they will be implemented, thus still maintaining a mystery for the readers to speculate upon. Nevertheless, it does captivate the focus of the audience, as the framing of these aforementioned questions will lead the viewers to seek out the answers by following the rest of the story.

The true discovery of these Engineers is thereby only transpiring at the end of the film, when an Engineer is awoken, and all the horrible mutational aspects and deaths have occurred. One can, nonetheless, contend that a revelation of these alien species already happens when the scientists locate the decapitated specimen during their initial exploration of the moon, and realize that humans, in fact, stem from these creatures. Still, there is a sense of mystery surrounding the moon and these extraterrestrial beings, which leads to an unpredictable and suspenseful atmosphere throughout the film.

While *Prometheus* delivers a suspenseful and mysterious plotline, most of the tension is depicted in either the events leading up to the human mutations or the confrontational scenes, wherein the monsters are encountered, whether it be in the form of altered humans, infected by the pathogen, the other creatures created by the Engineers' invention, or the Engineer itself. One such event that precedes a mutation is seen when David purposely infects Holloway with the black substance (00:52:05-00:53:56). The suspense is, in this instance, created through audible effects, as the attentive viewer will notice the sound of the drop from David's finger entering Holloway's glass, without the camera filming it. These audio cues are used in several examples in the film to imply that something suspenseful and frightening is about to occur, or to construct an uncertainty in the audience about how the preceding events will unfold. The audio, however, is not the only benefit of motion pictures, as visual cues can function on an equally effective level when illustrating horrifically thrilling scenarios, which is exemplified when Holloway detects a small worm in his eyeball, as the first sign of his incipient mutation (01:04:38-01:05:08). Through such prompting scenes, the plot plants an anticipatory excitement in the audience, because these cues prepare them for terrifying situations, which can ultimately evoke emotions of shock, disgust, and/or fear in the viewers.

What appears to demarcate *Prometheus* is that most of the monster versus human encounters appear before the last surviving Engineer is awoken. As an example, one can highlight the scene wherein Shaw is forced to conduct emergency surgery on herself to remove a fast-developing alien from within her body. This sequence is perhaps one of the

most memorable, not only because of the bloody and gory details, but also due to the reaction exhibited by Shaw, as the creature starts squirming to get out from the claw that is retaining it (01:21:25-01:24:31). The suspenseful scenes, affecting the viewers with shock, disgust, and most importantly fear, are thereby occurring before the true identity of the monster is revealed.

However, the film's concluding confrontation between Shaw and the last surviving Engineer, enraged by how the humans manage to prevent it from exterminating Earth with the mutagen, represents the film's culminating climax. In this example, Shaw is warned by David a few seconds before she is attacked by the Engineer, whom she fights off by releasing another foul beast upon it; in fact, the same creature which she birthed, that, over time, has developed rapidly both in size and strength (01:49:54-01:52:08). Shaw's last-chance countermeasure is therefore displayed at the moment she screams out "die!" (01:50:50), while simultaneously pushing the button to the door that releases a gigantic octopus-looking creature on the alien she once believed to be amiable and inviting. *Prometheus* thus builds suspenseful tension in the audience by creating a question that revolves around whether or not Shaw will make it out alive, and, at the same time, leaving the ending open for interpretation.

Whereas this section has focused on how the establishment of suspenseful elements in the selected works evoke a visceral response in the audience, the next segment intends to delve into the psychological effects cosmic horror has on the readers/viewers. For as suspense intensifies, mostly during confrontational situations, the tension can transform into the existential emotion of dread, as the level of uncertainty and unease heightens.

Navigating The Abyss of Existential Horrors

As previously established, cosmic horror represents a genre that seeks to expose the darkest depths of the human psyche through the inexplicable. Yet cosmic horror is not merely a matter of terrifying creatures or gory violence, but rather of the existential dread that comes with the realization that our lives may be insignificant in the face of the universe. Hence, while the previous sections of analysis have largely focused on the effect of the physical horror present in these works, the following section will examine the psychological horror and existential dread that result from the characters' struggle for meaning and purpose in the face of overwhelming, unfathomable terror.

Each of the selected works presents a unique take on cosmic horror and its intersection with existentialism; from the claustrophobic confines of a supermarket in *The*

Mist, to the ancient ruins in *At the Mountains of Madness*, to the isolated research station in *The Thing*, and the faraway moon in *Prometheus*, each of which provides an opportunity to explore the limits of human knowledge, experience, and sanity, and thus the terror that goes beyond the monsters and gore that often categorize the horror genre. Throughout the following section, the works will therefore be examined in terms of how they grapple with existential dread, further examining how their characters struggle to make sense of their existence in hostile and/or indifferent environments. Considering the striking similarities in plot themes between *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Prometheus* these will be analyzed in a side by side manner, whereas *The Mist* and *The Thing* will be examined separately.

Existential Horrors, Anti-anthropocentrism, and Mythology in At the Mountains of Madness and Prometheus

Based on the above analysis, it can be maintained that the horror found within the selected works is caused by the characters' reactions to the obscure and unfathomable entities that they encounter, inflicting terror on the audience as well. However, it is important to note that besides the immediate reactions the characters experience, there is a psychological and traumatizing aftermath for those who survive; for cosmic horror delves beyond physical horror and probes a type of fear that transcends external horrific elements, impacting both characters and readers on an internal, psychological level. As such, the characters are subject to psychological effects stemming from an awareness of their own insignificance and inability to comprehend the horrors at hand, ultimately leading to a sense of dread and anxiety toward their own existence.

In *At the Mountains of Madness*, the characters experience a notable amount of psychological horror, stemming from multiple sources. As discussed previously, they are subjected to the effects of isolation and confinement in an inhospitable environment far removed from their familiar surroundings, creating an atmosphere of dread and anticipation. Nonetheless, the disconcerting discoveries made by the characters during their investigation of the ancient city are what appear to have the most deteriorating effect on the mental state of the protagonist, ultimately intensifying the reader's sense of psychological terror as well. The compromised mental state of William Dyer is evident already at the outset of the story, where he articulates his intent to prevent future expeditions to Antarctica by detailing the unimaginable horrors that had shaken both himself and his team:

I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why. It is altogether against my will that I tell my reasons for opposing this contemplated invasion of the Antarctic—with its vast fossil-hunt and its wholesale boring and melting of the ancient ice-cap—and I am the more reluctant because my warning may be in vain. Doubt of the real facts, as I must reveal them, is inevitable; yet if I suppressed what will seem extravagant and incredible there would be nothing left. The hitherto withheld photographs, both ordinary and aerial, will count in my favour; for they are damnably vivid and graphic. Still, they will be doubted because of the great lengths to which clever fakery can be carried. The ink drawings, of course, will be jeered at as obvious impostures; notwithstanding a strangeness of technique which art experts ought to remark and puzzle over. (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 3)

This paragraph employs foreshadowing to generate suspense by hinting at forthcoming events; however, the first-person narration also heightens the horror of the story by providing the reader with an insight into the psychological trauma Dyer seems to have endured during a previous expedition. In psychological horror, first-person narration is essentially an important tool, as it “most readily permits the reader to identify with the character” (Todorov 84). Also, by allowing the reader access to the inner thoughts and feelings of the protagonist, in this case Dyer, the reader can then experience the character’s mental state firsthand and observe it deteriorate over time, providing a deeper understanding of the character’s motivations and fears.

Earlier in the analysis, it has been determined that the horror is at its height when the wilderness, or the unfamiliar, invades the familiar and threatens it. As a consequence, everything once known and familiar become erased, as the characters in *At the Mountains of Madness*, and essentially the other works too, face extraterrestrial creatures whose mere existence not only undermines their rationality but also challenges their established beliefs, values, and ideas of significance. In this context, the mountains in *At the Mountains of Madness* hold a strong symbolic value, as they represent the threshold between different states of consciousness. Dyer himself characterizes the mountains as “stark, nightmare spires marked by the pylons of a frightful gateway into forbidden spheres of dream, and complex gulfs of remote time, space, and ultra-dimensionality” (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 28). This description underscores the notion that the mountains represent a crossing into a realm beyond the familiar boundaries of human experience, and similarly by using words such as ‘nightmare’, ‘frightful’, and ‘forbidden’ accentuates the odds at stake and the terror that results from transgressing this threshold. Once an individual has transgressed the boundary into the unknown and the terrifying, that person begins to lose his or her grasp on what humanity deem sanity in a state of normal awareness. In that sense, the mountains serve as a powerful symbol of the limits of human knowledge and the dangers of crossing into

realms beyond our understanding. This is apparent within the novella, as Dyer and Danforth cross the mountains and thus the boundary of their sanity and rationality, causing them to cry out “in mixed awe, wonder, and terror” (42) as they are confronted by a sublime and inexplicable ancient world and later extraterrestrial creatures, erasing everything they once knew and believed in. Similarly, the descent to the distant moon LV-223 in *Prometheus* poses as the transcending of the boundary between two different consciousnesses. In contrast to *At the Mountains of Madness*, the transcendence of the boundary in *Prometheus* is, however, predetermined earlier in the film, as the archeologists, Shaw and Holloway, discover the vestiges of an early civilisation and, possibly, the answer to the meaning of life itself. The transcendence thus forms the notion of moving from one state of consciousness, enabling humanity to understand its insignificance on the cosmic scale.

Within the confines of the Antarctic setting in *At the Mountains of Madness*, humanity’s understanding of themselves in the world seems rather anthropocentric. Dyer describes throughout the novella, and in particular at the beginning of the story, how it appears as being almost at the peak of humanity’s competence by voyaging to the harshest place on Earth; the instruments and their ingenuity, the perfection of the ship, the aircrafts used, and the general equipment are all chronicled as being at the most advanced stage of human ability. Thereby, Lovecraft asserts that humanity is the most advanced species on Earth, establishing a form of human supremacy: humanity is there to force nature into submission in the most unforgiving place on Earth. This aspect of anthropocentrism is similarly apparent within *Prometheus*, since its portrayal of the crew members as highly intelligent and technologically advanced exemplifies the belief in human superiority, along with sophisticated science instruments, cutting-edge robotics, and state-of-the-art spaceships that emphasize humanity’s progress and reinforce the notion that humans are at the summit of evolution. Also, the fact that Shaw and Holloway immediately recognize the cave writings as an invitation for humanity is a way of them placing themselves and humanity in a pivotal position, assuming that the Engineers hold the answers to mankind’s existence. This assumption therefore stems from an anthropocentric worldview, which places humanity at the center of the universe and assumes that all other creatures exist exclusively to benefit humans. Moreover, Peter Weyland juxtaposes humanity with God in his opening speech to the expedition, referencing the myth of Prometheus: “The Titan, Prometheus, wanted to give mankind equal footing with the gods, and for that he was cast from Olympus. Well, my friends, the time has finally come for his return” (Scott 00:17:07-00:17:20); in that sense, Weyland draws an analogy between humanity and the mythological figure Prometheus, who

defied the gods by giving mankind fire, or, in other words, knowledge, for which he was punished. By aligning humanity with Prometheus, it accentuates the theme of anthropocentrism further, by positioning humans as aspirational creatures striving for godlike status and abilities, and indicates an inherent belief in human exceptionalism by emphasizing humanity's desire to transcend its limitations and achieve equal status with the gods. Nonetheless, by referencing this myth, the film also hints to the potential consequences of human arrogance and overreach, suggesting that, as Prometheus suffered punishment for his defiance, the characters will suffer dire consequences for their relentless pursuit of knowledge and presumption that gods should be challenged. The notion of anthropocentrism is, however, quickly undermined within both works, as Lovecraft introduces the fossilized Old Ones, whom the characters conclude have roamed the Earth's lands millions, if not billions, of years prior to humanity, and the characters of *Prometheus* become acquainted with the Engineers, whose DNA they discover to share. The introduction of an alien race more advanced and evolutionary ahead of humanity hence makes the notion of anthropocentrism pale; a point underscored by Lovecraft throughout the novella as the culture and societal nature of the Old Ones are established, making the efforts of humanity though thousands of years present as insignificant.

The differences between humanity and the Old Ones are naturally highlighted in the novella, although Lovecraft, too, accentuates their similarities. Dyer, however, focuses mainly on the inhuman understanding of the Old Ones that the scientists develop, noting the inhuman, animalistic, quasi-botanic physiognomy of these aliens: "The Cyclopean massiveness and gigantism of everything about us became curiously oppressive; and there was something vaguely but deeply unhuman in all the contours, dimensions, proportions, decorations, and constructional nuances of the blasphemously archaic stonework" (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 29). Noting the enormous scale of everything, stating their superiority, shifts the anthropocentric world view to that of a non-anthropocentric one; this creates the impression of humanity as miniscule and insignificant - not only in size but in relevance as well. Throughout the story, humanity's relevance and power dwindle as information is gained about the Old Ones and their megalithic city, effectively reducing humanity's position in the world in terms of the mental image of Dyer and Danforth. The lack of repositioning in relation to physical attributes is immediately corrected by the Old Ones disposing of the research team in the beginning, and, furthermore, by the Shoggoth hunting Dyer and Danforth subsequently. This demotes humanity in its positioning at the top of the hierarchy of the natural world; with Dyer and Danforth suddenly finding themselves as

the hunted despite their technological capabilities degrades the idea of humanity as the apex predator. In relation to the notion of humanity's decentralization of themselves in their anthropocentric worldview, Sebastian Schuller argues that the veritable existence of such creatures in a world, where humanity is unable to comprehend their existence, poses a threat to the anthropocene:

In such a reading, the Lovecraftian monster serves as the un-representable, the objective-in-itself, which is beyond human imagination or perception, but still exists, decentralising the human position within the universe. The Lovecraftian monster, the object of horror in his stories, is, so to speak, an arche-fossil that has come to life, opening up an anti- or, more accurately, a nonhuman vista of reality. (110)

The quasi-incomprehensibility of the Old Ones - and to a higher degree the later introduced Shoggoths - poses an indescribable threat to the researchers. The lack of ability to efficaciously interpret the existence of such creatures leaves Dyer, Danforth, and the rest of the research team in a situation void of meaning; viz., their inability to decipher the physical attributes of the Old Ones and the Shoggoths leaves them in a state of existential confusion, as they “[c]annot yet assign [them] positively to animal or vegetable kingdom” (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 21), showcasing the confusion with their fossilized find. Regardless of their inability to fully comprehend their foes, Lovecraft underscores their limited understanding of the creatures to that of the olfactory senses in that the characters seem to describe every encounter with them by that of smell. The only cause of disgust is the “pungent and offensive odour” (23) which oozes out of the creatures and is ostensibly offensive to the dogs.

In continuation of their inability to categorize the Old Ones, the characters find it rather impossible to categorize and let alone describe the monstrous Shoggoths, as they state that they are “shapeless entities composed of viscous jelly which looked like an agglutination of bubbles” and are able to form “their tough plasticity into various useful temporary limbs and organs” (63). The indescribability and inhuman characteristics that are uncategorizable to the characters, who live in an anthropocentric world, thus immediately show to cripple their “consciousness so completely” (94); further, this lack of categorization and understandability of the Shoggoths “fill [...] Danforth and [Dyer] with horror and loathing” (63). This, however, relates strongly to Carroll's notion of loathing and nausea, asserting that these sensations arising in characters, and readers alike, are caused by “categorical [...] interstitial[ity], categorical [...] contradict[i]ons, incomplete[ness], or formless[ness]” (32). This notion of loathing thus arises as a consequence of the characters' inability to place the creatures in

familiar categories, leading to the physical as well as existential nausea, i.e. the realization of the characters' apparent meaninglessness of life, as according to Sartre.

Unable to fully comprehend the creatures they encounter, the characters' sudden shift of focalization, that change from that of an anthropocentric world to that of an unknown, alien world, seems, as mentioned, evident. The novella, nevertheless, ends with Danforth experiencing something so incredibly incomprehensible to the human psyche that he ostensibly goes insane from it:

Imagination, knowing how vividly distant scenes can sometimes be reflected, refracted, and magnified by such layers of restless cloud, might easily have supplied the rest—and, of course, Danforth did not hint any of these specific horrors till after his memory had had a chance to draw on his bygone reading. He could never have seen so much in one instantaneous glance. (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 101-102)

Lovecraft alludes to the fact that Danforth could have experienced something that he had previously read about in his “bygone reading”, as he had been the only one “who ha[d] ever dared go completely through that worm-riddled copy of the *Necronomicon*” (101, emphasis in original). The horror which Danforth is confronted with by the end of the novella is, according to Chia Yi Lee in “On *At the Mountains of Madness* - Enveloping the Cosmic Horror”, “the horror of horror that lied not only beyond the rim of human comprehension, but even beyond the comprehension of all the cosmic other” (21). The madness displayed by Danforth at the end can therefore be interpreted as the natural reaction to a concept so fully incomprehensible to the human psyche that the instinctive reaction to it would be insanity, i.e. a shattering of the horizons of understanding in relation to the anthropocentric worldview. Lee explains that “following from this radical horror would be madness only, of which Danforth is one manifestation, a madness one can never escape because there is no-(such-)thing one can escape from” (22-23), meaning that the existential dread in the face of cosmic horror and the indifference of one's own existence appears inescapable.

The inability to fully comprehend the creatures in continuation of the sudden shift of setting, i.e. the transcendence of the Antarctic land to that of beyond the Mountains of Madness, translates to a question of existence with the characters. This relates to Heidegger's definition of ‘Dasein’ in that he understands life and the state of being as “a communally shared way of living of a certain specific sort—namely, one that embodies an understanding of being” (423); the apparent feeling of nothingness experienced by Dyer and Danforth at the end of the story can hence be interpreted as a form of existential dread as according to Heidegger. The characters' inability to successfully reflect on their own existence due to their

discovery of the Old Ones and the Shoggoths thus causes their familiar world to seem unfamiliar and bizarre to them. Similarly, in *Prometheus*, their search for the makers of humanity leads them directly to the body of a deceased alien, humanoid figure. The sudden realization and apparent inexplicability of the situation leaves the geologists of the mission, Fifield and Millburn, in a state of confusion and fear, as they immediately wish to return to the ship, creating a distance to the creature that has changed their world to that of the unfamiliar (Scott 00:37:28). In her article “The Gift of Creation in *Prometheus*,” Bogna Starczewska notes the distinct Sartrean existential question that the film poses:

Sartre’s take on existentialism can be used as a solution for a desperate yearning to know one’s purpose in the world and the very reason why the human race was created in the first place. The lack of an answer on behalf of the Engineer indicates that it is absolutely crucial for humankind to find the meaning and purpose of existence independently and individually. (36)

A dramatic change has occurred in the world view and existence of both the characters in the film and Lovecraft’s novella; as such, their previous notions of the world have been altered in the sense that their origin, and, in fact, their mere existence, has been questioned, resulting in existential despair.

Said existential confusion and dread is tightly interwoven with the notion of the creation myth of various mythologies in *Prometheus*. In the film, Shaw bases her presence with the mission on her and her father’s faith; having believed in God her entire life, she is willing to stretch her imagination to that of an alien God. Edmund Cueva notes, in “Ridley Scott’s *Prometheus* and the Human Pandora,” that the film is loosely based on the myths of Prometheus, Pandora, and that of the Genesis creation narrative: myths chronicling the creation of humans and their fall from grace in the eyes of superior beings, i.e. their creators (183-185). As noted by Cueva, “[t]he archaeologists call the creators ‘the Engineers’ because they want to prove that these life forms engineered humans into existence” (185), presenting the extraterrestrial race as nigh godlike beings. This is furthermore accentuated by the opening scene, in which one of the Engineers, on what appears to be primordial Earth, sacrifices himself in an echoing of “Prometheus’ ‘ritualistic act of self-sacrifice’ and the self-sacrifice ritual established by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper” (Caeners qtd. in Cueva 184). The utilization of theistic portrayals of said Engineers lends the film, in conjunction with its title, the notion of the creationist myths of various religions and mythologies, thus leading to the interpretation of the characters’ encounter with their creators resulting in existential dread.

As previously established, Kierkegaard maintains that existential dread arrives in the form of ‘dizziness’, meaning that dread is the result of total freedom in humans. Kierkegaard furthermore correlates existential dread with the original sin in Christianity, arguing that dread derives from the prohibition of God and the apparent freedom that follows the disobeying of God. In relation to *Prometheus*, the mission team searches for the Engineers, eventually discovering their abandoned ship, and serendipitously finding a single Engineer in hypersleep. Upon waking him up, they notice the hatred he has for humans, eventually attacking and killing most of them. Having discovered humanity’s entire descendance from this race of extraterrestrial beings, uncovering their animosity toward their own creations, Shaw is naturally distraught by it; the antagonism of their creators can be interpreted as an intertextual reference to that of the creation myth, retelling the story of God’s wrath. Sean A. Guynes has translated the Proto-Indo-European dialogue between the lone Engineer and David in a deleted scene from the film, concluding with Weyland stating: “You see this man. My company built [David] from nothing, I was the one who did it. And did it in my image, so it... For [David] to be perfect. So [he] won’t fail. I deserve this because you... You and I are superior. We are creators. We are gods... And the gods never die” (189). The apparent blasphemous assertion of Weyland’s superiority, as well as his search for more, mirrors that of the creation myth, establishing the transgression and enabling the Engineer’s wrath. Stephanie A. Smith notes that the mission crew, “‘like the myth of Prometheus, ‘like the biblical Eve,’ seeks forbidden knowledge and ‘is punished’” (qtd. in Cueva 189). Shaw, afterwards, seems visually distraught, as it can be interpreted that the transgression of their creator’s prohibitions in search of freedom has, according to Kierkegaard, led to the inevitable existential dread. However, having previously removed the cross around her neck - an action symbolic of her estrangement from her religion with the discovery of the Engineers - Shaw seemingly chooses to ignore the fact of their creation, once again turning to her faith by putting on the cross again (Scott 01:54:06-01:54:34).

The film, additionally, juxtaposes the existential dread of Weyland and Shaw with that of David’s in a seemingly ironic manner. This is shown in the dialogue between Holloway and David, a human and its creation, mirroring the ostensible relationship between the Engineers and their own creation: David, who himself is a thinking, living being, although without ‘a soul’, wishes, as his creators, to understand the purpose of his own existence. After engaging in a conversation with Holloway, following their discovery of the supposed extinction of the Engineers, learning about Holloway’s wish for “answers, why they even made [humans] in the first place” (00:52:47-00:52:50), David attempts to analogize the

question of their existence by using that of his own as a point of departure, to which Holloway bluntly replies: “We made you ‘cause we could” (00:52:57-00:52:59).

An element of cosmicism becomes noticeable regarding the discernible animosity toward the crew upon the awakening of the Engineer, as their search for meaning and answers to their questions appears significantly inconsequential to the Engineer, accentuating the insignificance of the most substantial question in human history to that of a superior being. Furthermore, their existence thus becomes threatened by his hand as he wishes to exterminate them, underscoring the Engineer’s disdain and indifference toward human existence, not to mention his lack of regard for their own creations. This serves as the focal point of the film’s cosmic endeavor in that their anthropocentric worldview - focusing solely on the question of their own existence in the cosmos - is being demonstrated as insignificant. In both *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Prometheus*, it therefore becomes evident that, as the stories progress, the character’s anthropocentric perspective is flawed, and as is the notion of human supremacy. As a result, both works encourage audiences to consider the consequences of anthropocentrism and the risks associated with human-centered thinking, in accordance with Lovecraft’s ideas of cosmicism.

Existential Horrors and Religious Faith in The Mist

In spite of *The Mist*’s small town setting, it nevertheless addresses the fear of the unknown, existential dread, and the fragile nature of human existence. Whereas the other works have depicted worlds far from the familiarity of civilization, *The Mist* portrays a reality in which civilization is contaminated by the unfamiliar, in effect turning civilization, or that once known, into a wilderness. In this way, the mist itself represents the concept of the unknown, as it engulfs the town and traps a group of residents in a grocery store, forcing them to confront their deepest fears and anxieties, and leading them to a sense of existential despair. Considering the setting and atmosphere discussed previously, Drayton finds it challenging to explain both the presence of and the unease he feels as the mist slowly and inevitably creeps across the lake. Due to his knowledge of storms, Drayton quickly labels it unnatural, arguing that it violates the expectations and conditions of the world it inhabits; thus, the mist not only defies the laws of nature, but also the characters’ existing knowledge of the world, thereby representing the vast and unknowable world in which the characters live. In a literal sense, the mist therefore serves as a barrier that obscures people’s perception of reality, hindering their ability to interact with the world; it diminishes their senses, leaving them feeling isolated and vulnerable in environments they once regarded as secure and familiar. Hence,

the mist itself is a symbol of the creeping horror of the unknown and the uncontrollable, representing the darkness that lies at the edge of human understanding; for as the characters are confronted with the realization that their accustomed lives, rules, structures, and ideas of significance have been disrupted, they struggle to survive in the face of overwhelming danger and uncertainty, questioning the very nature of existence and their place in the world.

The mist itself, however, is not the only phenomenon that is inexplicable to the characters, as the creatures it contains prove to be just as bizarre and enigmatic. Like the unnaturalness of the mist, the monsters violate the expected knowledge of the world, threatening not merely the characters physically but also psychologically. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that these are deemed obscure and inexplicable from a human perspective, which, as previously stated, is evident through Drayton's inability to describe the nature of monsters he encounters, thereby heightening their terrifying presence. This can be correlated with the interstitial nature of the creatures of *The Mist*, as these defy both comprehension and imagination of the characters:

[I]t was no ordinary earthly spider blown up to horror-movie size; it was something totally different, perhaps not really a spider at all. [...] Looking at this nightmare, so like the death-black spiders brooding over their dead flies and bugs in the shadows of our boathouse, I felt my mind trying to tear completely loose from its moorings. I believe now that it was only the thought of Billy that allowed me to keep any semblance of sanity. I was making some sound. Laughing. Crying. Screaming. I don't know. (King, *The Mist* 152)

Due to the confrontation with, and lack of comprehension of, both the mist and its absurd monsters, the characters show an increasing amount of unease and nervousness throughout, and additionally describe instances in which they feel sickened by their situation (117). These are all emotions that can be tied to Sartre's notion of nausea, which is experienced through the overwhelming sense of existential dread by the absurdity and hopelessness of their new reality and, essentially, by the confrontation of the unknowability and meaninglessness of human existence. The characters find themselves confined by the inexplicable mist, cut off from the rest of the world: a claustrophobic situation, which, at one hand, mirrors the sense of confinement and disorientation that can evoke feelings of 'nausea' due to the limited freedom; however, at the other hand, being excluded from their former world and at the loss of their previous rationality and comprehensibility, the characters are now stuck in a new existence and state of consciousness, confronted by a, in Lovecraft's words, forbidden knowledge that upends their previous understanding of the world and their significance within it. In grappling with their own insignificance, the fragility of human existence, and the lack of rational explanations behind the events unfolding around them, the characters can

thereby be claimed to undergo a range of emotions characterized by existential unease and profound questioning. This emotional state resonates with Sartre's concept of nausea, as vividly portrayed by Drayton when he describes the giant insects crawling all over the building of the supermarket "like maggots on a piece of meat" (113), in which moment he identifies himself and the rest of the people at the supermarket as prey to these extraterrestrial creatures, which triggers in him an unpleasant imaginary image, causing him to remark that "what chicken [he] had managed to eat now want[ed] to come up" (113). The thought of his own and humanity's insignificance thus nauseates Drayton, as does the prospect of the balance of life being disrupted, since the traditional food chain, a delicate balance that sustains life as we know it, has flipped, reversing the roles and making the former predators, i.e. the humans, prey.

The newfound knowledge and reality, however, do not only cause nausea in the characters of the novella, but also lead to great madness. This is due to several reasons: one of them being the mere existence and irrationality of the incomprehensible creatures, the other being the situation that said creatures have confined and refrained the characters to. Due to these extreme and stressful conditions, the characters are pushed beyond the limit of their humanity, meaning that they must find new ways to cope with the horrors they face. For some, this results in them indulging in their basic instincts, such as reaching for alcohol or satisfying their sexual urges, as well as abdicating the rules that govern social interaction, as they are seen stealing from the supermarket, while arguing and bickering with one another, thus violating the rules of politeness that are commonly applied in most social settings. The narrative therefore illustrates how severe situations may lead characters to abandon the rules and conventions that govern their lives, gradually losing their sense of humanity and rationality amid increasingly violent and perplexing threats. Signs of madness, and essentially defeat, are, however, apparent in other ways too. During their confinement in the supermarket, Drayton describes a situation in which about six or seven people seem to have lost touch with reality and have fallen into a state of detachment and/or indifference:

Crazy isn't the best word; perhaps I just can't think of the proper one. But there were these people who had lapsed into a complete stupor without benefit of beer, wine, or pills. They stared at you with blank and shiny doorknob eyes. The hard cement of reality had come apart in some unimaginable earthquake, and these poor devils had fallen through. (121-122)

In comparing their eyes to the appearance of doorknobs, shiny and blank, Drayton suggests that these individuals have become numb and incapable of interacting with the world around

them, owing to a profound psychological breakdown that has completely deprived them of any sense of emotion or awareness. Moreover, he describes how the 'hard cement of reality' appears to have crumbled, a metaphor implying that these individuals have lost their grip on the normal, shared reality and have, instead, fallen through its cracks; this leaves them in a state of confusion and detachment from the world, disconnecting them from it and leaving them isolated. For Drayton himself, existential madness manifests itself differently, however; for instead of disconnecting from the world, he behaves rather irrationally and hysterically at certain situations. This is expressed, for example, the moment at which Drayton witnesses the killing of Norm: "I got laughing. I got laughing, except my laughter and Norm's screams sounded about the same" (65-66). In the midst of such a horrific and dreadful situation, Drayton is unable to comprehend his own thoughts and emotions, making his reaction rather perplexing and unexpected, as he is found grinning. In this case, it is important to understand that his laughter should not be interpreted as a sign of callousness or insensitivity, but rather as a reflection of his mental struggle in comprehending and processing the absurdity and the unfathomable horrors of the situation. Nevertheless, while it can be argued that Drayton's reaction is an instinctive response to the incomprehensible and overwhelming nature of the events unfolding before him, or a defense mechanism, as a way of distancing himself by creating a psychological barrier between himself and the unimaginable, his response is ultimately rather irrational and indicative of the existential madness he is undergoing as a consequence of his observations.

Religious fanaticism emerges as another indication of madness and irrationality in *The Mist*, amid the overwhelming sense of existential horror. This aspect of the novella is strongly related to the character of Mrs. Carmody, who, prior to the mist's arrival, was of little significance other than her strangeness; however, as events unfold, she becomes instrumental in challenging people's preconceptions of the unusual and serves as the sole voice willing to provide an explanation for the strange occurrences. Within this context, Mrs. Carmody can be interpreted in two ways; both as a consequence of the profound existential dread the characters face, evident in her rather erratic and deranged behavior, yet paradoxically, she also serves as a sort of refuge, offering a fragile thread of rationality and thus solace to those desperately in search of meaning in the midst of their incomprehensible and irrational newfound reality. Immediately upon the mist's arrival, Mrs. Carmody warns of its danger, and instructs everyone to stay away from it; however, as the situation worsens and gets increasingly absurd, so does her behavior: "'Death!' she cried, and those who had been laughing quickly sobered. [...] She grinned, skull-like above her canary outfit. 'It's the end, I

tell you. The end of everything. It's the Last Times. The moving finger has writ, not in fire, but in lines of mist. The earth has opened and spewed forth its abominations" (85). In this instance, her harsh judgment and radical behavior are likely to have been motivated by the existential dread, which she and the others feel when confronted by the mist and its awe-inspiring creatures, leading her to believe that the mist is the manifestation of a divine force that has unleashed horrors on the world in punishment for humanity's sins: "We have been scourged with whips and scorpions! We have been punished for delving into secrets forbidden by God of old!" (163). This overwhelming sensation of dread is also what eventually leads her to such a strong state of madness that she is driven to cry out for expiation, which, according to her, must be attained through human sacrifice. The descent into madness of Mrs. Carmody is thus indicative of the psychological toll incurred by encountering these cosmic horrors, since her inability to comprehend their existence and the reality of the situation triggers a breakdown in her sanity, leading her to embrace and advocate radical ideologies and violent acts. As such, she delves into the deep-seated fears of the unknown and incomprehensible, which foster in her a strong sense of cosmic fear and further inspires her to believe in humanity's insignificance. This results in her advocating for the sacrifice of human lives, and thus emphasizing humanity's ultimate insignificance in the face of cosmic forces. Consequently, her character illustrates the fragility of the human mind in the face of the unknown and forces beyond its comprehension, and the devastating consequences thereof; a fragility that is further revealed by the several suicides in the novella, which appear to be the result of the characters "running out of hope" (148).

This idea of the fragility and incomprehensibility of the human mind, as well as the hopelessness of mankind in the face of obscure, superior, and unfathomable extraterrestrials, defying everything mankind has ever known, can effectively be correlated with Kierkegaard's belief that "dread is the dizziness of freedom" (55). In that sense, these characters can be claimed to be both dizzyed by their newfound knowledge of the world and their existence, and perhaps perplexed by their freedom within it; for freedom, as well, comes with great responsibilities and the fear of making bad decisions. Hence, they experience the dizziness of freedom as they grapple with the uncertainty of their decisions, fearing that every choice they make may have dire consequences. By realizing their own insignificance and the existential dread of their own mortality and existence, the characters are thus perplexed in their pursuit of meaning; a sense of meaning that some of the characters seem to seek from Mrs. Carmody, as explained in the novella: "[I]f people are frightened badly enough for long enough, they'll turn to anyone that promises a solution" (King, *The Mist* 143). Others, nonetheless, fail

entirely and instead resort to suicide (157). Therefore, rather than monsters, fear itself may be the most menacing hidden killer in *The Mist*, as evidenced by the existential dread endured by the characters.

Continuing with the religious undertones of the novella, Drayton views their situation somewhat differently, however. In the very beginning of *The Mist*, Drayton describes the mist creeping across the lake in an almost godlike manner, mirroring the dream he describes having had just a day earlier:

I had a dream that I saw God walking across Harrison on the far side of the lake, a God so gigantic that above his waist He was lost in a clear blue sky. In the dream I could hear the rending crack and splinter of breaking trees as God stamped the woods into the shape of His footsteps. He was circling the lake, coming toward the Bridgton side, toward us, and all the houses and cottages and summer places were bursting into purple-white flame like lighting, and soon the smoke covered everything. The smoke covered everything like a mist. (9)

As such, he associates the mist, or the idea of it, with God, emphasizing not only its significance, but also his relationship to it, i.e. his inferiority. From the outset, it is thus evident that Drayton feels intimidated by the mist, rendering it both heavenly, divine, and awe-inspiring. While Drayton acknowledges his emotions and inferiority to the mist, he nevertheless behaves differently than, for instance, Mrs. Carmody and her religious followers. For despite the fact that Drayton too, as discussed previously, is occasionally driven insane by the unfathomable horrors, absurdity, and hopelessness of their circumstances, resulting in profound existential despair fueled by cosmic fear, one can still argue that he somehow manages to transcend his existential dread by trying to accept his new reality and persevere in the face of adversity. This is exemplified by Drayton succeeding in maintaining a sense of hope despite his psychological struggles, and how he steadfastly forges ahead; a determination evident in his resolute decision to eventually leave the supermarket, even in the face of the perilous dangers lurking outside of it. In spite of the overwhelming horrors and existential despair he faces, he thus persists throughout the rest of the novella, essentially ending it with him successfully reaching a distant radio signal that gives him yet another link to hope (180-181). As mentioned, this aspect of his character may therefore be interpreted as an indication that he has both acknowledged and accepted his new reality, aligning with the philosophical perspective of Sartre i.e. humans are who they choose to become, and that they have the power to define themselves through their choices, and, in doing so, to regain their sanity. By recognizing the futility of his circumstances and accepting his own and humanity's vulnerability in the face of cosmic forces, Drayton thus undergoes a transformative process; he no longer resists or denies the harsh reality surrounding him but

rather confronts it, understanding that his existence holds no inherent superiority or significance. Rather than succumbing to madness or surrendering to despair, he thereby embraces the truth of his new reality, defines himself anew within it, and regains a semblance of sanity. Additionally, this transformation, or development of the self, can be related to the thoughts of Heidegger, who views this as a positive aspect of dread, since individuals, or a character such as Drayton, come to recognize their freedom of choice.

Existential Horrors, Moral Dilemmas, and Dehumanization in The Thing

Turning toward Carpenter's *The Thing*, there is, as already established, a severe sensation of paranoia and mistrust among the members of the research team at Outpost 31, heightened by the claustrophobic confinements of the Antarctic setting and an alien threat of unknown origin. This breakdown of the social camaraderie is, nevertheless, according to Stephen Prince's analysis of *The Thing*, foregrounded by the film's opening scenes (124–125). For example, the scene in which MacReady is depicted as an antisocial loner, drinking liquor and getting angry, when he is defeated in a computerized chess-game (Carpenter 00:05:19-00:06:11), or when Bennings and Nauls have a subtly aggressive confrontation over the volume of the radio playing at the station, as one demands that it ought to be turned down, while the other refuses (00:14:58-00:15:19). These tense situations thereby indicate the disintegration that is to come, when the internal social conditions of the station are broken down by a formless monster that essentially ruptures and destroys the already established community (Prince 124-125). The familiar surroundings at the research station which the team has been accustomed to and grown partly bored of, as illustrated by Windows dozing off when manding the radio equipment (Carpenter 00:24:50-00:24:56) and Palmer smoking weed and watching porn in his room (00:26:24-00:26:55), are thus suddenly transgressed by an unfamiliar danger leaving the characters vulnerable and anxious, when their usual everyday is disturbed. This transgression coupled with the tense atmosphere at the station simultaneously gives way to the establishment of dread among the characters, since these individuals are suddenly threatened by the unknown and unfathomable, forcing them to confront their own existence in situations that entail life and death.

In the face of these circumstances certain moral dilemmas arise, as the characters are forced to make rapid, yet difficult, choices to ensure not only their own survival, but the survival of the entire human population, too. This is exemplified in the scene depicting Bennings being absorbed by remnants of the creature brought back from the Norwegian campsite, being the first confirmed transformation displayed on screen (00:46:59-00:47:24).

As visualized in the scene, the crew members encircle Bennings, or the nearly finished imitation of him that still possesses deformed tendril-looking hands; but, as they stand before it, their expressions show how saddened and morally conflicted they are of the task placed before them (00:48:06-00:48:48). The men know that they must immolate the creature in order to secure themselves, yet they, and especially MacReady, hesitate until he utters the words: “it isn’t Bennings” (00:48:16) aloud, as to reassure the others as well as himself that it is, in fact, morally correct to annihilate the monster. The moral dilemmas concerning the difficult choices which the characters must make, when faced with dread due to the imitative creature that has infiltrated their familiar grounds, can hence be correlated with the core of existential philosophy, seeing that they, by making these difficult and conflicting choices, become masters of their own fate.

However, while the characters are essentially determining their own existence in this instance, the weight of freedom can also have more concerning implications, resulting in an existential response of dread, when the responsibility that comes with making these difficult choices becomes too overwhelming. When confronting the monster of *The Thing*, the characters are forced to confront their own mortality and the fragility of their existence, thus suddenly realizing that they are indifferent specks in the universe in comparison with the unfathomable threat before them. This can be correlated to Heidegger’s theory, as he argues that human existence is characterized by a form of anxiety that arises whenever the individual reflects on his/hers own existence and becomes overwhelmed by the fact that being in the world equals freedom. Being faced with this mimicking creature ultimately produces an existential form of anxiety or dread among them, as the uncertainty that surrounds this creature, and the mistrust it presents, makes the characters in the film reflectant on their own existence, and the possibility of their annihilation.

In the same context, characters, such as MacReady, who is seen exterminating most of the assimilated crew members at the station by fire, could easily lose certain identity aspects, as they unwillingly need to resort to dehumanizing actions such as violence and killing. As a result of not being able to differentiate friend from foe, MacReady and other characters essentially blur the boundaries between what is right and what is wrong, since actions such as those aforementioned keep them alive, although they may also negatively affect their empathic abilities. MacReady is, for example, not portrayed as a guilty and broken character, but rather as strong-willed and angry, leading one to think that his anxiety for the unfathomable beast could in some ways dehumanize him. The struggle of identifying the imitated from the real thus complicates defining one’s own identity, since this confusion

hinders the characters from establishing a sense of self. One could also argue that MacReady shows certain signs of madness, especially in the film's ending sequence, as he, subsequently to the final encounter with the monster, is characterized as a hopeless and despairing individual, defeated by the aftermath of all the terrifying situations he had to endure in order to stay alive. In this moment, he suddenly realizes how lost and defeated he is, regardless of the presumed death of the monster; for presently, he has to live with the meaninglessness of life, his choices, and the newfound knowledge of being just an inconsequential entity in a vast and infinite cosmos.

These insanity-induced aspects of *The Thing* can additionally be compared to *The Mist*, seeing that King's religious character, Mrs. Carmody and Carpenter's crazed scientist, Blair, are exhibiting similar irrational and insane behaviors, when trying to cope with the overwhelming emotions that this existential horror brings forth. Whereas Mrs. Carmody seeks refuge in expiation and blood sacrifice, embracing a form of fanatic religion to grapple with the psychological impact the obscure mist has on her, Blair, instead, resorts to logic and common knowledge, thus destroying every piece of equipment that could aid the monster in its search for civilized areas of population. However, by doing so, he is subjected to a kind of madness, where he no longer can recognize his fellow crew members, suspecting them all of assimilation. His madness even escalates to a point where he, besides going berserk with an ax on the station's radio equipment, fires several shots at the other men in their attempt of calming him down (00:52:27- 00:54:55). Blair's sudden insanity is, of course, brought on by a simulation of the thing's global infestation time; a scientific conclusion that ultimately leaves Blair in a frantic state of existential dread, as his fear of the end of the world exceeds all. As a result, Blair gives in to these cosmic fears which the thing's incomprehensibility fosters, essentially illustrating that his mind has been impacted by the fragility of human existence.

It is therefore the monstrous presence, or alien organism, that causes the greatest violation of the familiar world and evokes dread in the characters, as it not only presents the characters with a physical threat, but a psychological one as well. The thing is, as previously analyzed, unexplainable due to its shapeshifting abilities that allow it to mimic its victims to perfection; an ability that causes bafflement in the characters, as they are faced with a creature outside the scope of human comprehension. This incomprehension can be related to Carroll's perception of what makes monsters horrifying; for as MacReady and Blair bring back a monstrous body from the Norwegian campsite and conduct a postmortem examination of the specimen, they uncover a creature that can be described as non other than impure, or

more precisely, as interstitial (00:23:05-00:26:12). Albeit describing the monster with what appears to be “a normal set of internal organs” (00:25:45-00:25:49), the immediate close-up of the monstrous two-headed creature suggests otherwise.

In the same context, the monster’s grotesque and repellent details, displayed through disturbing visual effects whenever it appears as a formless entity of heads and limbs, may also affect the characters and audience psychologically; being both covered in slime and equally foul to the bystanders of the station, due to its abhorrent representation and the fumigating odor stemming from the shapeless mass. The repulsive aura of the monster is also vividly illuminated when the camera travels along each character, demonstrating how they are sickened by the creature before them; some even coughs at the horrible smell, while others nearly gags at the sight (00:23:22-00:24:46). To corroborate this argument, Prince also delivers an explanation of the monster’s features, by way of analyzing the same exact sequence. Here, he characterizes the autopsied monster as a two-faced, grimacing Janus, appearing insane and being “neither human nor nonhuman, [as it] occupies a disturbing, unclear intermediate place” (125). Prince’s account on the subject hence corresponds to the theory laid out by Carroll, considering that the thing cannot be categorized within familiar categories, but is, instead, defined as an entity that contradicts these categories. By disrupting the conceptual scheme of nature, displaying a creature that is cognitively unfathomable for the characters, these are thus affected by a sense of dread that leaves them distrustful and utterly anxious about each other. This can also be related to Sartre’s concept of nausea, as the characters in *The Thing* experience the same kind of displacement and confusion as Roquentin, when encountering the alien, because it essentially makes them realize how absurd or meaningless their reality is. The presence of this extraterrestrial creature thereby creates a form of existential anxiety or dread among the characters, which arises as they are confronted with something unfathomable, beyond their comprehension, in quite the same manner as Roquentin becomes aware that the familiar world he once found comforting is now meaningless and insignificant. In other words, they are, because of this unfathomable threat, realizing that their existence is inherently meaningless, thus losing hope in a reality of bleakness.

One can also claim that by being deeply distressed by this monster and its unimaginable abilities, the characters end up losing themselves; a possibility which Kierkegaard firmly believed that dread could cause, when human beings are confronted with overwhelming aspects of life, such as the ability to make individual choices. However, Brian R. Hauser emphasizes that, in *The Thing*, “it is not the immediate danger that accounts for the

aesthetic effect of dread. That effect comes about as a result of the audience's consideration of the implications of the obscure threat" (243). Hauser hence argues that it is not only the various disgusting manifestations of the monster that provokes dread, but rather a fleeting fear of the creature itself. Instead, existential dread or anxiety arises by the deeply unsettling conclusions one must draw, when considering Blair's computer-simulated model of the organism's ability to infect the entirety of humanity and create billions of imitations. Dread is therefore, in this case, "an intense but quiet anticipatory kind of cinematic fear in which [the audience] both feel *for the endangered character* and fearfully expect a threatening outcome that promises to be shocking and/or horrifying to [them]" (Hanich qtd. in Hauser 242, emphasis in original). This differentiation of fear and dread, which Hauser so clearly outlines, can also coincide with how the existential philosophy contrasts these emotional responses. Both Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre essentially agree that fear can be directed at an object or situation, for example a monster such as the thing, whereas dread is objectless and internal, arising as the characters are confronted with the unknown, and are thus forced to make choices that ultimately could end in their demise, or worse, their assimilation. One can therefore interpret the existential dread, emerging from the characters in *The Thing*, as an emotion that arises when the individuals realize that they, in fact, have the freedom to choose how to shape their own lives, even amid horrible and life-threatening events, such as the possible annihilation of the entire world. As such, they must decide who to trust, which measures to take to defend themselves, and, lastly, how to defeat the creature once and for all.

As established in the analysis above, the existential emotion of dread does, in fact, arise, when encountering both the physical and psychological terrors of horror. This leads to a further discussion about the appeal of the horror genre, delving into the existing paradox within said genre, and, moreover, to discussing the way in which horror reflects the cultural anxieties of human beings, thereby holding a significant relevance in a societal context.

A DISCUSSION OF THE PARADOX OF HORROR AND THE GENRE'S ROLE IN REGARD TO CULTURAL ANXIETIES

As demonstrated in the paper's analysis, all of these selections are classified as examples of cosmic horror, with the ability of evoking existential emotions in the audience, based on Carroll's claim that the audience's reactions should run parallel with those of the characters. Nevertheless, this also prompts a discussion of the underlying motivations that drive audiences to willingly subject themselves to such horrors through fiction. The following section will therefore consist of an exposition on the paradox of horror, focusing on the

paradoxical appeal of the genre and hence the question of why it remains relevant. Furthermore, the discussion will concentrate on horror's role as a way to reflect societal anxieties, highlighting the way it serves as a vehicle for existential speculation and reflection.

In connection with the horror genre and its subgenres, a certain question arises while contemplating the relationship between the genre and its audience: how can horror be appealing when it entails aspects one would ordinarily seek to avert? This is a question which many scholars have sought to answer, including Noël Carroll in his *Philosophy of Horror*, in which he maintains that there is something paradoxical about the genre of horror, as it attracts large numbers of viewers and readers, who deem it pleasurable to engage with fictions that essentially illustrate the repulsive, distressing, and fearsome. The paradox thereby amounts to the question of how horror manages to attract people while simultaneously evoking visceral reactions in them (Carroll 159-160).

In Carroll's attempt to solve this conundrum, he initially seeks out an explanation in Lovecraft's criteria for supernatural horror, and its effects of cosmic fear, to gain a general account of the appeal of horror. According to Lovecraft, supernatural horror evokes an exhilarating but instinctive mixture of fear, moral revulsion, and wonder, otherwise characterized by this paper as dread. Furthermore, he claims that mankind is born with an instinctive fear of the unknown, which is closely adjoined with sublime feelings of awe. Therefore, the intrigue of supernatural horror, or cosmic horror, is due to it provoking this sense of awe in its audience and additionally confirms in them "a deep-seated human conviction about the world, viz., that it contains vast unknown forces" (162). The essence of Lovecraft's theory is, according to Carroll, that fiction of cosmic horror thus attracts an audience because it recognizes an already existent intuition about the nature of reality; this can, for example, be related to existential questions revolving around the human existence in a vast and infinite universe, and/or imaginary explorations of the unknown and unfathomable. Carroll, however, finds that this appeal can be interpreted in two ways: in an objective or subjective manner. The first interpretation suggests that fiction of cosmic horror could allow an expansion of one's imagination and thereby an exploration of otherworldly things, which would normally remain outside the scope of one's imagination or thinking. The other interpretation focuses on "the *instinctual feeling* of awe about the unknown" (162, emphasis in original); a way of accentuating the emotional experience of the genre (162). While Carroll is unsure which interpretation Lovecraft had in mind when developing his theory, he nevertheless concludes that cosmic horror may be appealing because it offers the emotion of awe, or cosmic fear, that essentially transcends fear (162-163); an emotion that can be

correlated with that of a religious experience and challenges a desiccating, positivistic worldview, i.e. a purely rational worldview. It is for these reasons that the horror-devotee seeks out supernatural or cosmic horror, as defined by Lovecraft, and pursues its effects (163).

In the case of this thesis, the aspect of the cosmic horror genre, being deemed pleasurable because of its awe-inducing effects, is relevant to consider, seeing that an examination of a selected group of works within the genre has established that emotions of dread and awe heavily affect the characters, instilling similar emotions within the audience as well. Carroll's considerations regarding this paradox also align with several other details, particularly that dread differs from the emotion of fear, and can be easily paralleled with the overwhelming and incomprehensible sensation of the sublime, thus proving that cosmic horror does, in fact, have a psychological effect on a reader/viewer. Therefore, it makes sense to say that cosmic horror is sought out for the emotion it produces in the audience, since it allows individuals, who are receptively inclined to the genre and the imaginary world it offers, to explore literatures and films that have the potential for evoking awe-awakening emotions and providing an audience with alternative worldviews. However, one could argue that cosmic horror not only should be pursued for its psychological effect of dread, but also for the excitement and philosophical contemplations it offers the audience.

Carroll offers another consideration of the aforementioned paradox, as he, in an effort to include all forms of horror, argues that the narrative structure of the genre can contribute to this appealing sensation among audiences, for "it may be wrong to ask only what [it] is about the monster that gives [one] pleasure; for the interest and pleasure [one] take[s] in the monster and its disclosure may rather be a function of the way it figures in a larger narrative structure" (179). According to Carroll, the horror story is thus, to a large extent, driven explicitly by the curiosity of the audience; a curiosity centered most often around the origin, identity, purpose, and powers of the monster(s) in the given stories. Monsters are, therefore, in the words of Carroll:

[P]erfect vehicle[s] for engendering this kind of curiosity and for supporting the drama of proof, because monsters are [...] impossible beings. They arouse interest and attention through being putatively inexplicable or highly unusual vis-à-vis our standing cultural categories, thereby instilling a desire to learn and to know about them. And since they are outside of (justifiably) prevailing definitions of what is, they understandably prompt a need for proof (or the fiction of proof) in the face of skepticism. Monsters are, then, natural subjects for curiosity, and they straightforwardly warrant the ratiocinative energies the plot lavish upon them. (182)

While there is a common desire for knowledge and curiosity fulfillment in all narratives, horror fiction is, nevertheless, a special variation, because it contains elements of the unknowable, for instance exemplified by the monsters; something which essentially cannot exist, nor have the properties that they have, without breaking the structure of the human conceptual scheme (182). Carroll's emphasis on the monsters and the suspense they create within a narrative structure thereby suggests that the pleasure derived from horror fiction and from the source of the audience's interest resides in "[t]he disclosure of the existence of the horrific being and [...] its properties" (184). This interpretation depends, first and foremost, on the cognitive pleasure of an audience, as he claims that the basic appeal of all forms of horror derives from disclosing unknown and impossible creatures, and hence fulfilling one's curiosity about the unknown and inexplicable. Thus, while the monsters of horror can be said to terrify an audience by inducing fear and repulsion in them, it is also important to note that these monsters can, alternatively, evoke positive feelings of awe and fascination by their inexplicable nature, and might, in that sense, intrigue audiences, since they stimulate their curiosity for the unknown and the unraveling of its mysteries.

In a similar context, Cynthia Freeland explores the concept she refers to as art-dread, in which she questions why the experience of dread, typically considered painful and unpleasant, can paradoxically be an enjoyable experience. By questioning this, Freeland focuses on a particular emotion aroused in the genre's audience, i.e. through the "encounter with something terrible or unsettling that is also deep, obscure, and difficult to comprehend" (193), as a means to explore the ways in which that experience remains appealing to an audience. She outlines this by suggesting that fictions that evoke dread are enjoyable because they help human beings ponder and respond emotionally to natural and deep-rooted worries about the nature of the world. As both an example and in support of her claim, Freeland mentions the book of Job in the Old Testament; a story where an upright man, living a prosperous life, still maintains his faith in God through numerous horrendous sufferings, and ends up losing all of his possessions, everyone he holds dear, and finally, his health, in a series of enemy attacks and bizarre meteorological strikes caused by Satan. The story of Job can in a way be recognized as that of a horror story, illustrating the way in which humans experience and address evil and suffering (193-194); for Job is essentially experiencing "an acute sense of human powerlessness and insignificance in the control of a scary being who boasts of his own powers but will not explain himself" (194). With the example from the Old Testament in mind, Freeland argues that some examples of dread in horror films (and most

likely also horror literature) express a desire to understand the existential questions of the human place in the universe (194).

From Freeland's account of dread, and why it appears to be appealing to an audience, one can thus discuss whether horror, and specifically cosmic horror, can actually help an audience to confront the challenging existential questions of existence. From one point of view it could perhaps foster introspective reflections in regard to one's own beliefs and perspectives, and could possibly challenge the immensely embedded notion of anthropocentrism in the modern age, ultimately changing and broadening that perspective to something else entirely and less human-centered. As cosmic horror focuses immensely on the psychological impact on both characters and audience, evoking a sense of existential dread or anxiety in the face of inexplicable horrors that essentially render human existence insignificant, one could suggest that it somehow also might further an audience to reevaluate the anthropocentric beliefs ingrained in them due to cultural and societal norms. Yet, in this regard, it is similarly relevant to point to the fact that this aspect of the genre could have a negative effect, however, as both horror and cosmic horror do, in fact, focus on fearsome and dread-inducing themes; thus engaging in a reflection regarding human existence and humanity's place within the universe could generate a profound sense of unease and anxiety within the audience. Moreover, given that the cosmic horror genre, in particular, tackles large existential questions that often lack definitive answers, the audience may also experience frustration stemming from the unresolved topics at hand.

In addition to this discussion, Stuart Hanscomb offers an exploration of the relationship between existentialism and the horror genre, proposing two hypotheses that could help to outline why the genre remains appealing, notwithstanding its paradox. The initial hypothesis suggests that the fascination of the horror genre can be attributed, in part, to human curiosity, and similarly humanity's everlasting search for understanding its own ontology. So, albeit existential questions about human existence can arouse anxiousness, these can, at the same time, be perceived as an interest and a curiosity about life. However, this hypothesis raises an additional question based around the fact of why horror should be preferred as opposed to genres such as science fiction and fantasy. In his attempt to answer this question, Hanscomb highlights the close association between horror and existentialism with focus on the presence of fear and disgust (15). In his words, "horror is closer to the truth of [the human] existence than [...] science fiction or fantasy. [One] often look[s] for truth in art, even if it makes [one] uncomfortable" (15). This aspect brings him to explain his second hypothesis, suggesting that part of horror's appeal can be explained on the basis of its "partial

expression and exploration of repressed, undeveloped or forgotten existential sensitivities” (15). Instead of tolerating these negative emotions which horror produces, Hanscomb offers another explanation, stating that horror might also allow its audience to delve into the “‘integrated’ existential-psychological benefits [of] art-horror” (15). Horror can thus, in Hanscomb’s opinion, be used as a medium for an exploration of the existential emotions that may arise when viewing or reading a film or novel about horrific monsters, as it allows individuals to confront and engage such feelings in a controlled, imaginary context. By confronting emotions evoked by horror, such as a profound sense of anxiety or dread, it can not only motivate individuals to avoid such emotions in the real world, as they seek out the roots and implications of what makes these emotions elusive and hard to grasp, but also relieve them of a build-up of existential pressure through some form of expression that has been weighing them down (15-16). When facing such emotionality through horror/cosmic horror fiction, one can thereby choose, more often, to occupy oneself in the many facets of the genre, and thus remain fascinated and intrigued by it, which could also help to explain the common appeal of such genres. However, one could also mention that the genres of horror and cosmic horror are not the only channels through which an audience can confront existential emotions, as there are, in fact, other perspectives to be found, and other genres to survey; for example, science fiction or dystopia, where similar existential themes are explored and illustrated. Another valuable point, which none of these aforementioned scholars have considered so far, is that horror’s appeal might also be fairly simple; perhaps people merely enjoy and appreciate horror and all its shades for the thrill and excitement it brings.

Finally, one can also consider Katerina Bantinaki’s proposal of fear as a positive emotion which she argues can explain the attraction to horror. Fear is thereby to be regarded “as an overall *positive* emotion, that is, an emotion toward which the subject has a positive stance and thus enjoys experiencing, leaving it open whether the emotional experience is also affectively pleasurable or affectively painful” (Bantinaki 383, emphasis in original). Bantinaki hence suggests that the appeal of horror is to be found in the emotional engagement with fictions of the genre, because the pleasure it brings is supposedly effective enough to disregard and/or compensate for the emotional side effects the audience might experience after having encountered such creatures through literature or films (383-384). While most of the solutions considered in this discussion up until now have been from an integrated perspective, i.e. a focus on the emotional affect horror elicits, those perspectives have solely been directed at the negative effect it brings forth, such as fear and dread, to which Bantinaki

makes a different claim: that fear, experienced through the horror genre, can, in fact, be a positive and enjoyable emotion (389). This, she explains, can only occur when “the benefits and rewards that the subject gains from the overall experience surpass the risks” (389) and that the context in which fear is experienced is controlled as well as risk-free (389). The benefits derived from an encounter with horror fiction can, as exemplified by Bantinaki, consist of the management of one’s own reactions to fear, such as bodily responses, thoughts, and behavioral expressions. Individuals are thus given an opportunity to confront or learn how to cope with fear in a safe and controlled environment, namely through fictional works of horror. This confrontation or management of fear can lead to the following benefits, as outlined by Bantinaki:

[W]e learn to control our fear feelings and display mastery over our reactions to frightening stimuli; to direct our thoughts—often aided by the narrative—to aspects of the situation that counter the fear (for instance, to the weak traits of the ‘monster’ or to the resources that a protagonist has to confront it); or when the challenge is overwhelming, to manage it by seeking comfort in peers. The experience, that is, affords us a chance to understand and learn to master our responses to fear and even to test the limits of our endurance to frightening stimuli; it can thus alter or reinforce our perception of self-efficacy and make us more fit in coping with fear in real-life risky situations. Perhaps (against what the modern culture of fear instructs) we need the challenges that fear-eliciting situations provide, especially when we can experience them in small, controllable doses, so as to become more able to deal with fear when it matters most. (390)

Another benefit of the exposure to frightening stimuli could also have a desensitization effect, as Bantinaki postulates that humans, in some cases, are not as susceptible to their fears and phobias when exposed to them in an imaginary setting. However, this can simultaneously have the opposite effect, where such intense fears might be expanded or reinforced. This benefit is therefore dependent on whether or not the given audience remains critically active toward fictions of horror (390). Lastly, Bantinaki stresses the rewards of experiencing fear as a positive emotion by comparing it to that of children’s risk play, i.e. when they engage in fearsome tree climbing, or other forms of play that involve a liability of physical injury, because the individual experience of fear when exposed to horror elicits a similar sense of stimulatory thrill and excitement that makes the experience highly invigorating (389-390). Bantinaki then concludes that by perceiving an intense emotion, such as fear, as pleasurable, it offers a way to master one’s own fears and phobias, and not only as a physical discomfort.

In connection with this thesis, Bantinaki’s explorations on horror’s appeal can be considered extremely valuable, because she mentions briefly that the experience of other stimuli might as well be beneficial and rewarding in the same manner as fear (390). While

Bantinaki uses the experience of disgust, also associated with the horror genre, as an example, one could also argue that the emotion of existential dread could, in fact, be perceived as a positive emotion. Dread as a positive emotion would still entail negative aspects of human fragility and serve as a reminder of one's uncertainty and insignificance in the universe, but this feeling could, if experienced in a controlled and safe context, i.e. fiction, also lead to self-reflection, personal transformation, or even freedom, if one were to confront the emotion of dread and the existential questions that arise due to it. However, as with fear, if it becomes too overwhelming or one is incapable of breaking free from its negative hold, thereby instilling new fears or reinforcing existing ones, then the audience will remain in a state of psychological distress when experiencing the emotion of dread, or will be deprived of the opportunity of personal growth and freedom.

When emphasizing the appeal of horror, it furthermore becomes interesting to consider their role as explorations of societal fears, seeing that “[t]he science fiction and horror genres have often been read as manifestation of the prevailing fears and anxieties of the cultural moments in which they are made” (McSweeney 228). In particular, horror is enormously valuable for unraveling social anxieties, according to Brigid Cherry, who explains that the genre “is always ready to address the fears of the audience, these being fuelled by events and concerns on an international and national level” (11). Considering this, it is relevant to acknowledge how the horror genre functions as a representation of the collective subconscious of its time and, in this respect, how it provides a framework for society to confront its deepest existential fears and the fundamental questions that define them.

In his article, “Culture, Evil, and Horror”, Paul Santilli argues that horror extends beyond being a fleeting emotion triggered by fictionalized monstrous entities, and is, rather, an intrinsic and “enduring feature of our being in the world. It is a basic mood and orientation, or *Stimmung*, with respect to existence” (179, emphasis in original). In this context, he draws a parallel to Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*, emphasizing that:

When Marlow echoes the famous last word of Kurtz [...]—‘The horror! The horror!’—Conrad's narration makes it clear that the horror lies not in Kurtz's own heart, but in the very depths of reality itself. Indeed the distinction between a subjective feeling and objective monstrosity collapses in those words: ‘The dusk’, writes Conrad, ‘was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. ‘The horror! The horror!’ It is not as though Conrad is referring to a something, a particular item in the world that horrifies; rather, it is being itself that is the horror.’ (179)

Thus, Santilli develops the idea of horror “as a *phenomenon of being*” (179, emphasis in original). As such, he argues that the aesthetic encounters with horror, such as literature or film, are based upon more fundamental ontological experiences, making art-horror the reflection of the societal and fundamental horrors of everyday life (179). By examining existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Heidegger, it hence becomes clear that the existential dread, or horror, they contemplate in their theories resonates within the works discussed in this paper. The manifestation of existential themes, however, extends beyond the characters’ reactions to their confrontation with, for instance, ideas of insignificance and anti-anthropocentrism in the face of greater, cosmic forces, as it is also manifested through a dreadful and unsettling atmosphere all together, thereby intensifying the emotional impact on readers as well as creating a feeling of dread and anticipation throughout.

For centuries, this existential dread was subdued by religion, which gave answers to the bigger questions of life. These questions have persisted throughout history and are still a large part of the societal anxieties that exist in this day and age. The question of meaning in the grand scheme of the universe is one that has been challenged by religion and philosophers alike for centuries, often conflicting with each other on the subject; Karl Marx famously stated that “[religion] is the opium of the people” (i), establishing the idea of religion existing for the purpose of calming people over the existential dread and societal angst. With the Enlightenment came science, thus making it able to answer many of the hitherto unanswered questions of life, leading Friedrich Nietzsche - an adherent of the sciences as a means to understand - to ascertain in the late 19th century that “God is dead! He remains dead! And we have killed him!” (120). By this statement, Nietzsche underscored that “the belief in Christian God ha[d] become unbelievable! (199), determining the obsolescence of a God in the face of science. The most obvious example of this dichotomy between science and faith appears in *Prometheus*, as Shaw is initially driven by her faith in order to find answers; however, when later faced with the cosmic horror of her own existence, she wavers in it. The general idea of religion as an explanation for the large questions in life, too, appears evident in the notion of the Prometheus myth being used as a foundation from which the film has sprung, i.e. the film bases itself on the myth of humanity’s creation in Greek mythology by the hands of the Titan, Prometheus, which only underscores the idea of the interwoven nature of religion and the meaning of life in relation to these works.

Whereas science, in an increasingly atheist world, is yet to fully answer these questions, the role of these works becomes evident. The escapist nature of a science-fictional work of horror, utilizing the philosophy of existentialism and cosmicism to somewhat give

meaning to a seemingly meaningless idea, does not merely serve as means of entertainment, but, additionally, function as a medium through which the reader can reflect upon one's own existence. In that sense, these works of science fiction horror lead their audience through a world of existentialist horror through which the audience can reflect upon their own existence based on the experiences had by the characters in them. Thus, the existential angst and horror experienced by the characters in the fiction make impressions upon the audience, which, moreover, lead to the experience of reflection of one's own existential position in a cosmic indifferent universe, i.e. the audience can reflect on their own insignificance in the face of the insignificance of the characters. Despite being fictional, the works explore concepts of human insignificance and the unfathomable nature of the universe, leaving an impact on the audience. In this sense, the exploration of the genre, the selected works, and the existential themes within them, may serve as opportunities for individuals to reflect on their place in an unknown and mysterious universe, and further enable them to speculate upon and confront societal anxieties through introspection, as they are prompted to reevaluate their perspectives. In several respects, speculating upon one's existence and insignificance through the cosmic horror genre thereby allows individuals to explore and experiment with their fear and existential dread in a controlled and non-threatening environment. As a result, while cosmic horror may not provide a traditional cathartic release, it can, however, be seen as a catalyst for philosophical and existential reflection, serving as an avenue for speculation and experimenting with existential questions and the emotions related thereto.

In light of Nietzsche's assertion of a 'dead God' in correspondence with religion as "the opium of the people," offering solace in the face of the uncertainties of life, it raises the question of the relevance of these works of fiction in an enlightened, modern society - specifically when considering the reflective nature of them. In an increasingly atheist world, where said opium has been left for dead, the role previously held by religion has been assumed by other entities, for instance science as well as works of speculative fiction. Humanity has pondered the question of its own existence and its own place in the universe since the dawn of time, eventually finding an answer in the belief of an almighty being having created them in his/her own image; now, however, the idea of a philosophical evaluation of humanity's existence has become hegemonic in contemporary society. Examining horror through this lens, it hence becomes intriguing to note that while the genre indeed can be said to reflect contemporary societal fears, it also serves as a vehicle for speculating upon one's own existence and the fundamental questions of life. This is particularly evident in respect to cosmic horror, which, as a genre, challenges not only

humanity's perceptions of existence, but also allows for an exploration of both individual and societal notions of anthropocentrism. This allows the genre to become an instrument for experimenting with our understanding of existence and society's perception of humanity's role in the universe.

In all, this discussion offers a series of interesting and convincing explanations as to why horror, and in particular, cosmic horror, is appealing to an audience, regardless of its paradoxical nature, and moreover reflects upon the fact that these genres still withhold influential relevance in modern day society. Literature and film, including the selected works analyzed in this paper, can hence function as a medium for the contemplation of human existence and other existential questions that may emerge from the cultural anxieties of mankind, while simultaneously appeal to an audience by addressing human fears and limitations through a depiction of monstrous entities that disregard the natural order. However, when interpreting such explanations and reflections, there is a tendency among scholars to attempt to solve discrepancies such as this paradox, because it essentially challenges humanity's desire for order. As a species, humans seem to have an innate desire for contemplation, thus attempting to dissect everything that fascinates them, such as the unknown and incomprehensible, because these aspects remain a mystery to the human mind and understanding of the world. Therefore many of the sources discussed in the section above undertake the question of how this paradox can be answered, rather than, possibly, viewing the genre's ambiguity as the central and most appealing aspect. For the appeal of the horror genre might not lie within a solution to its paradox, but perhaps in the paradox itself, as part of the attraction possibly exists in the exploration of the unknown, the inexplicable, and most importantly the emotional reactions such works of horror stimulate in the audience.

CONCLUSION

Humanity's fear of the dark and the unknown has served as a prominent inspiration for horror fiction, ultimately giving rise to the cosmic horror genre. For centuries, authors have exploited this fear by creating spine-chilling cosmic horror stories that explore the mystery beyond human comprehension, impacting readers both physically and psychologically through anti-anthropocentric themes and ideas of human insignificance. By evoking such controversial themes, cosmic horror makes for an interesting examination of existential dread within fiction, considering how the genre proves to be relevant socially and culturally, being connected with cosmicism and existentialism.

Gothic horror is useful in understanding the development of modern horror, considering its history and stock features, used for inciting emotionality, terror, and challenging rationality. One of these stock features is the concept of the sublime, which is an intense experience of awe, fear, and fascination that transcends ordinary understanding or perception; an emotion strongly associated with cosmic horror. Through the horror theory provided by Noël Carroll, it becomes apparent that the genre's primary goal is to elicit emotion. This is accomplished through the implementation of filthy and loathsome monsters, interstitial in nature, and then through the character reactions to them, instructing the audience in how to react to the horrors presented to them, i.e. with fear and disgust, and additionally through the use of suspense to create tension. As a horror subgenre, cosmic horror, and its associated philosophy of cosmicism, holds significant intrigue by tapping into humanity's primal fear of the unfathomable, challenging the notions of existence and significance. Focusing on cosmic horror's ability to evoke dread and horrific emotions, it then becomes interesting to delve into the philosophy of existentialism, seeing that both the genre of cosmic horror and the philosophy have certain principles in common, particularly the notion of dread. Through Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre's perspectives on existential dread, also referred to as anxiety, angst, or even nausea, it is clear that these philosophical insights are closely interwoven with the aspect of freedom, and that dread varies from the emotion of fear. Whereas fear has a determined object or situation, i.e. a known source of the emotion, dread proves to be objectless or, in other words, a form of existential nothingness. The definitions of dread therefore serve as ideal frames for this study, as they help clarify the emotions that arise when humanity is faced with unfathomable horrors and ideas related to their insignificant existence.

When analyzing the four works, it becomes evident that an atmosphere filled with dread and anticipation of unknown, dangerous forces is of utmost significance when establishing the effects of cosmic horror. This is predominantly done through enigmatic, remote, and unknown settings that inspire in a sense of dread and otherworldliness, keeping characters as well as audiences on their toes. In both *At the Mountains of Madness* and *The Thing*, the setting of Antarctica stands as a symbol of the unknown and obscure, serving as an ideal backdrop for speculative fiction throughout history due to its aura of uncharted territory and undiscovered wonders. The same holds true for *Prometheus*, except its setting is located on a foreign moon in a distant space rather than on Earth; for, similarly, the universe has always held fascination as an unknown and undiscovered realm. While such settings hold fascination and wonder initially, the atmospheres soon shift to ones of horror and madness,

with the scientists learning that the unknowability of the settings should have served as warnings instead of invitations. Also, the sublimity of the settings, as evidenced by the immense and hostile environment of the uncharted territories and, for Antarctica and moon LV-233, sublime and awe-striking mountain ranges that belittle the scientists not only in size but also in comprehension, further intensifies the dread of their situation. As for the scientists in *At The Mountains of Madness* and *Prometheus* in particular, they end up discovering the remains of prehistoric civilizations that ultimately destroy their rationality, sanity, and sense of safety in the world, rendering their existence, or at least their idea of it, meaningless. These discoveries, as well with the hostile and intimidating nature of the settings, effectively heighten the prevailing atmospheres of alienation, unease, claustrophobia, and terror. King's *The Mist*, in contrast, takes place in the mundane setting of Maine; however, this setting turns into a living nightmare as it is enveloped by an otherworldly mist, harboring cosmic forces. In that sense, *The Mist* lacks the same sense of sublime as, for instance, in *Prometheus*, but nevertheless evokes awe through its vast and obscure mist, bringing both tension, unease, and life-threatening monsters which exceed all rational understanding. In conclusion, the antagonistic, overwhelming, and awe-inspiring settings of the four works collectively contribute to terrifying atmospheres heavily influenced by the sense of the unknown and unfathomable, resulting in profound dread in characters and audiences alike.

Within cosmic horror, an additional way of intensifying a sense of dread and an overall menacing atmosphere is to implement obscure, otherworldly, and incomprehensible monsters, complemented by negative character attitudes toward said monsters to inspire emotions of disgust and apprehension. This is accomplished in all of the works: in *Prometheus* by the so-called Engineers, the creators of mankind and superior both in intelligence, advancement, and physicality, and by their invention, the pathogen, infecting and attacking the scientists with bizarre strength and hostility; in *The Thing* by the mysterious, shapeshifting alien, creating a profound amount of paranoia owing to its disguising ability; in *At the Mountains of Madness* by the Old Ones, and later on the Shoggoths, whose incomprehensibility and mere existences seem mind-fracturing to the characters; and lastly, in *The Mist* by absurd creatures that are, nevertheless, described in terms of typical animal features, albeit cosmic and otherworldly in size, appearances, and abilities. A crucial point about *The Mist*, however, is that it is the mysterious mist itself that poses the greatest threat to the characters. In the four works respectively, the incomprehensibility and superiority of the monsters make the characters terrified and awe-struck upon encountering them, simultaneously instilling existential dread and madness in

them. The terror-inducing incomprehensibility of the monsters can essentially be attributed to two factors: one, the mere existence of the monsters, challenging and lessening humankind in both value and significance; and two, the uncategorizable and mysterious nature of monsters, along with their disruption of the natural order, which threatens human rationality and knowledge. Due to these factors, the monsters can be credited with adhering to the fundamentals of cosmic horror, thereby differentiating them from more conventional evil beings by not only being physically threatening but psychologically, existentially, and anthropocentrically as well, reminding mankind of their insignificance in a large-scale cosmos.

A crucial element of the horror genre proves to be its ability to build suspense, which is another means of arousing fear, dread, and excitement in an audience. By analyzing the works, it is apparent that the settings and their accompanying eerie atmospheres successfully establish suspense and tension within their narratives. Nonetheless, the gradual and enigmatic disclosure of the monsters is the essential means of building tension, since the audience must determine the monsters by help of their imagination, which, in many ways, makes the unknown, or the ideas of it, more frightening than the known. This aspect is additionally tied to the vague and ambiguous descriptions of the monsters observed in the novellas, as well as the mutating creature in *The Thing*, ultimately yielding similar effects in terms of creating tension and suspense. In contrast to the other works, *Prometheus* introduces an Engineer in a flashback within the introductory scenes of the film, however its existence and purpose remain obscure. Thus, the moon and extraterrestrial beings remain mysterious, creating suspense throughout the film. As for the films, suspense is further amplified by the implementation of audible and visual techniques, as evidenced by menacing film scores and gory effects, complemented by shocking character reactions that essentially guide the audience's response.

Inducing psychological and existential horror is, in fact, the predominant objective of the cosmic horror genre. Hence, exploring and challenging the fragility of human sanity is central to the works, as the characters grapple with existential dread and struggle to find meaning in the midst of unfathomable and indifferent otherworldly forces, affecting viewers and readers alike. The descent into madness is primarily caused by characters venturing into realms beyond comprehension, acquiring forbidden knowledge that reveals the existence of cosmic forces and mankind's insignificance. The works are replete with anti-anthropocentrism, in that the characters are forced to let go of their human-centered ideas of the world, leading to a profound degree of existential madness as they cannot comprehend

nor rationalize their changed reality. Moreover, the mere interstitiality of these cosmic entities is dread- and insanity-inducing to the characters, who, due to their incomprehensibility, render them highly impure and disgusting, an aspect with strong associations to Sartre's concept of nausea. Focusing on the existential dread in analysis of the works, it becomes apparent that the genre of cosmic horror is intricately connected to existentialism. This proves true, for instance, in relation to Kierkegaard's assertion that existential dread manifests in the form of dizziness, which can be recognized in the way the characters experience dread and unease, as their established notions of the world are refuted, leading them to existential despair and highlighting the fragility of the human mind. The theory put forth by Heidegger also holds relevance, for as the characters are forced to reflect on their existence, they too become aware of their inherent freedom, which, according to Heidegger, is dread-inducing due to the choices and uncertainties the characters must confront. Some of the characters, however, manage to reestablish themselves through their faith in God, a proposed solution according to Kierkegaard, or by their acceptance of their newfound reality in alignment with the philosophical perspective of Sartre, proclaiming that humans are who they choose to become, aspects evident in both *Prometheus* and *The Mist*.

Reading and working with horror presents an opportunity to reflect on the paradoxical nature of the genre, focusing on its relevance and the fact that audiences willingly subject themselves to horror and cosmic horror, despite the terror and dread they experience. This discussion holds different factors: according to Lovecraft, cosmic horror may evoke an emotion of awe that transcends fear in a positive manner, as it relates to a primal, instinctual human intuition of the world. In addition, the genre's dread-inducing qualities may allow the audience to experience a sense of the sublime, facilitating alternative worldviews and philosophical reflection. Its appeal may also stem from its ability to arouse curiosity, since its monsters are unusual and, indeed, impossible as a matter of cultural convention, thereby provoking a desire for understanding and demystification among audiences. As existentialism reveals, mankind has a natural tendency to reflect on their place in the world, which leads to horror fiction as a method for reflecting on and responding emotionally to natural and deep-rooted fears. While this is true, it is important to note, however, that cosmic horror also has the potential to cause negative effects, since the material deals with large existential questions often lacking definitive answers, which could cause frustration among the audience as the topics remain unresolved. Yet, the experience of cosmic horror fiction may also be a means of confronting and engaging with one's existential fears and phobias in a controlled,

imagined environment, as well as to release potential existential pressures since this experience may have a transformative effect.

Moreover, a large part of the horror genre's relevance lies in its ability to reflect societal fears. In examining cosmic horror through the prism of existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Heidegger, there is a striking correspondence between the existential dread they contemplate in their philosophical thinking and the existential dread within the works examined in this paper. In this respect, it can be concluded that, in a modern and predominantly secular world, fiction is a means of confronting and speculating upon one's existence and being in the world, since religion has ceased to be the opium of the masses. Therefore, when an audience observes the existential dilemmas and overwhelming dread experienced by the characters, it may leave a profound impression on them; this, in turn, leads to their own contemplation about the nature of existence and the unknowability of the universe, making the cosmic horror genre a vehicle for existential reflection. In discussing the allure of the horror genre, and cosmic horror in particular, it is hence apparent that numerous interpretations exist to explain its appeal, notwithstanding its paradox. Nonetheless, in conclusion, this paper contends that rather than explaining away the paradox, the genre's allure may lie in the paradox itself; that is, in exploring the inexplicable.

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ABSTRACT

The genre of horror has captivated humankind for centuries, giving rise to various subgenres, one of them being the cosmic horror genre, closely associated with H.P. Lovecraft. This study seeks to explore the distinct characteristics of the genres, horror and cosmic horror, specifically centering on the way in which cosmic horror has kept its relevance and how its interconnectedness with the philosophies of cosmicism and existentialism play into this relevance. The exploration will be conducted through a comparative analysis of four selected works: Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, John Carpenter's *The Thing*, Stephen King's *The Mist*, and Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*. In order to analyze these works, a brief definition of the gothic genre is provided, emphasizing the sublime as a stock feature. Thereafter, the basic elements of the horror genre are outlined, centering on its changeable nature, the characteristics of its monsters, and its ability in terms of building suspense. Following this, cosmic horror is defined with a specific focus on the genre's main elements, with an additional introduction to its appertaining philosophy, cosmicism. Lastly, the philosophy of existentialism is presented through the perspectives of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, underlining the existential emotion of dread, and its contrast with fear. By applying these theories to the comparative analysis of the selected works, it is evident that dread is established in both the characters and the audience through a depiction of eerie atmospheres, different, but sublime settings, and, lastly, the incomprehensible monsters that ultimately disrupt the natural order of each fictional world. Horror and cosmic horror rely immensely on suspenseful build-up, hence the accumulation of tension serves as a valuable element for evoking an effect within an audience, as well as continuing to guide the response of the reader/viewer in the desired direction. As cosmic horror aims to instill psychological and existential terrors in both characters and audience, the philosophy of existentialism proves to be intricately connected to the genre. Hence, the theories of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre demonstrate their relevance in connection with fictions of cosmic horror, as these perspectives validate an ideal alignment between the genre and the philosophy. In working with horror, and cosmic horror, a discussion of the paradoxical nature of the genre and its continuing relevance is also found essential, since several scholars have attempted to find a solution to the paradox, focusing on why horror remains both relevant and appealing regardless of the terror it induces. However, rather than resolving this ambiguity of horror, the true allure possibly lies within its paradox, as an attempt at answering the immense fascination and appeal of the genre.