

Audio Monsters: Cosmic Horror and Inhuman Beings in *The Magnus Archives*¹

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Abstract: The following analysis aims to showcase the ways in which the podcast *The Magnus Archives* (2016–2021) incorporates various elements of cosmic horror storytelling and the tradition of horror radio drama to portray the subject of monstrosity and becoming inhuman. The article presents the origins of audio drama that influenced the creation of modern-day podcast fiction and its role in constructing a recognisable image of a monster further developed in the realm of podcasting. Through combining the modern technical possibilities of aural production with a cosmic horror narrative, *The Magnus Archives* offers a contemporary approach to inhumanity. The podcast follows the Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute and his team who uncover the hidden truths about the dangers of the world they live in while becoming intertwined with the evil forces they seek to defeat. Throughout the story, the characters face various interpersonal conflicts that show the physical and psychological changes resulting from their experience with supernatural entities. These discoveries lead the Archival team to the forces of power beyond their comprehension that challenge the notion of what makes one human, ultimately leading them to confront their morality. By constructing a narrative that places the characters in situations characterised by extreme conditions, the podcast encourages the listeners to challenge their own beliefs and uncertainties. Due to its modern approach to the technical possibilities of audio drama, *The Magnus Archives* provides a story that offers an interaction between the tradition of horror storytelling and the modern existential view of monstrosity which explores the subject of survival and choice.

Keywords: horror podcast, cosmic horror, audio drama, monsters, existentialism

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Introduction

The history of the relationship between cosmic horror and audio drama is one that can be considered as interconnected. Cosmic horror's beginnings are commonly associated with the writings of H. P. Lovecraft which depict monsters beyond human understanding. Ralickas (2007, 364) describes cosmic horror as "that fear and awe we feel when confronted by phenomena beyond our comprehension". This notion reflects the impressions of early radio when the format was still developing. The rise of cosmic horror coincides with the emergence and subsequent popularity of radio and radio drama as a medium, both of which later became an inspiration for horror podcasts. As such many modern horror podcasts combine the elements of traditional horror radio dramas with current technological possibilities to create stories both relatable to modern audiences and accessible on streaming platforms all around the world. An example of such fusion is the podcast *The Magnus Archives* (2016–2021). Written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J. Newall, the podcast tells the story of a fictional institution dedicated to the research concerning supernatural experiences and events. Functioning outside of the governmental structure, the Magnus Institute conducts interviews with those who came into contact with supernatural creatures and collects items that seem to be affected by paranormal forces. The main objective of the Institute, however, is to sustain the patron of the organisation – an evil representation of the endless pursuit of knowledge. This purpose is deliberately hidden from the workers to trap them under a contract that cannot be terminated. The podcast follows Jonathan Sims, the Head Archivist, and his team as they record statements, navigate the mysteries surrounding the Institute, and face the question of what makes one a monster. Through the implementation of sound effects and the discussion surrounding the complexity of choice, *The Magnus Archives* showcases the modern horror approach to humanity and monstrosity as a spectrum rather than opposing ideas.

Monsters of the past and the present

When the tradition of radio drama first began to emerge, horror stories evoke the interest of the audience. Due to the nature of horror storytelling, the radio was often seen as the superior format as it was able to convey mystery through the usage of sound effects and the lack of visual cues (Cantril and Allport 1935, 232).

The popularity of aural horror continued to rise as the radio entered its golden era. According to Pavlik (2017, 1) the Golden Age of radio in the United States is considered to have lasted “[f]rom the 1920s to the 1950s”, while Chignell (2019, 1) recognises the years between 1920 and 1965 as the time of the golden era of radio in the United Kingdom. As a global phenomenon, the radio connected people across the ocean as a source of entertainment for people of all ages. Similarly, the interest in horror was shared by people regardless of gender or age and due to that “[i]n some homes [...] crime and horror programs were strictly rationed or entirely forbidden, and in other settings, the family listened together for mutual assurance” (Barfield 1996, 158). During this time the radio offered a variety of horror programming often inspired by classic Gothic novels such as the adaptation of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) directed by Orson Welles in 1938 or Suspense’s 1952 adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Although the monsters depicted in radio drama differed in their origins and personalities, there was a tendency towards portraying an image of a monster as an evil force causing destruction and existing outside the natural order.

Then podcast culture arose in the early 2000s, the pop culture image of a monster had undergone a variety of changes. Due to the fact that multi-layered approaches in fiction were steadily increasing, the figure of a monster became more humanised compared to previous depictions (Erle and Hendry 2020, 1). At the same time the format of podcasting was adapting new approaches to storytelling supported by the rise of streaming services and the accessibility of recording equipment (Roose 2014). As the medium has changed, so has its approach to horror. Bottomley (2015, 183) highlights *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–present) as the podcast that brought back radio drama into the consciousness of contemporary audiences by implementing “scripted, dramatized serial narrative that is written, performed, and produced to be heard” common for oral storytelling. The podcast is focused on the character of a radio host – Cecil Gershwin Palmer – as he informs his listeners about different, commonly paranormal, events taking place in a small town of Night Vale. Hancock (2018, 38) recognises that for some the domestication of horror within the community of Night Vale residents offers “the comforting semblance of a wished-for home”, showing a new perception of fear and the supernatural visible in modern media. Owing to its incorporation of humour and music, *Welcome to Night Vale* has since proved influential in the scope of horror podcasts.

While radio-inspired programming experienced a revival, cosmic horror gained new popularity due to audio possibilities of storytelling. Littles (2023,

147) notes the audience possesses “a desire to have such intimate connections with horror”, which can be fulfilled by interacting with horror audio media. As the relationship between cosmic horror and audio drama is one that allows both forms to thrive due to the lack of visual representation, the aural format is used to further the mystery of horror characteristic for its cosmic imagery. Cosmic horror entities and monsters can therefore retain their incomprehensible nature by only appearing through sound. This approach results in every individual listener having to imagine the visual expression of characters present in the narrative instead of relying on a provided image. The lack of observed image has been noted to be a strength of audio horror (McMurtry 2015, 50). In view of this dynamic, cosmic horror encompasses this capability as it invites abstract conceptualizations of monstrosity impossible to visualise. The role of a monster, therefore, is to function as an extension of internal fear connected to the loss of power, rather than existing as a separate entity.

One of the most popular aspects of cosmic horror storytelling is the way in which unknown forces impact one’s identity. The idea of the convergence between human nature and monstrous cosmic powers has been depicted by H. P. Lovecraft as an impossible battle. Lovecraft’s characters struggle with their desires to uncover the mysteries of their reality while becoming overtaken by the power they are unable to understand and defeat despite their correlation with humankind. Describing the supposed appearance of Cthulhu, Miller (2011, 126–127) states that “here is a thing as alien as any extraterrestrial visitor from across the unfathomable distances of deep space, yet as human as ourselves”. As Miller explains, this relationship between the alien and the human helps to combine the fear of intellectual inferiority of human beings and the bodily discomfort of exploring the physical form beyond human recognition.

Similarly to *The Magnus Archives*, Lovecraft’s leading characters are often scholars who wish to broaden humanity’s knowledge. *At The Mountains of Madness* (1936) depicts an expedition that discovers a civilization of species called shoggoths, who pose a danger to humanity. The novella showcases the dark side of the pursuit of knowledge and becomes a warning to future researchers. As pointed out by Kneale (2007, 112), Antarctica was yet to experience an intensified research interest and so to Lovecraft and the contemporary reader it would appear as a mysterious land, furthering the suspension of disbelief and showing the ways in which knowledge becomes a dangerous and corrupting force capable of altering one’s identity, causing madness in the process. The podcast

approaches the subject of ancient beings through the introduction of the Entities – immortal forces controlling the world from the shadows. While Lovecraftian beings tend to be present in a singular space, the forces of *The Magnus Archives* are ever present for those aware of them. Through their powers, the Entities shape reality according to their will.

The power of affecting one's psyche is one commonly explored in Lovecraftian writings. *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928) portrays human lack of agency when confronted with ancient forces that possess power beyond comprehension and the possible reactions to being presented with it. The short story's protagonist – Francis Wayland Thurston reacts to the information with curiosity and attempts to research the origins of the stories he had come across. He contacts various other investigators and a victim of a mysterious creature named Gustaf Johansen. Johansen's recollection of the encounter with Cthulhu leads Thurston to fear for his own life as he realises he may become another victim. This desire to escape the monster is contrasted with the cult of The Great Ones, which hopes for the release of Cthulhu and worships his existence. While discussing the role of identity in the works of Lovecraft, Ralickas (2007, 365) divides the possible outcomes of contact with the cosmic horror into three categories:

With its identity and the foundations of its culture destroyed, the subject who experiences cosmic horror always succumbs to one of three comparably dreadful fates, judging from the standpoint of a balanced, rational mind: insanity, death, or the embracing of its miscegenated and no longer human condition.

The examples mentioned in the previous point represent these notions, as the members of the Antarctica expedition are either killed in time of its duration or return changed. Having become terrified of the consequences of their curiosity, they are no longer capable of behaving in the same way they used to. The cult of Cthulhu and Thorton's research methods show the similarity between accepting the unknown powers and losing oneself in fear as both approaches can be considered insanity. This idea of limited possible outcomes functions as the basis for the plot and character development throughout the events depicted in *The Magnus Archives*, as within the podcast the monstrous Entities controlling the world are capable of changing the physical form of the characters as well as their psyche. Thus, the identity of the characters is affected by the forces they cannot

control and the extended contact with the powers leads either to madness, death or to loss of humanity. The notion of becoming inhuman is explored through the character of Jonathan Sims who becomes a servant to one of the Entities and the patron of the Institute – the Eye.

Identity and agency in the realm of cosmic horror podcast

The worship of the monstrous unknown is one of the leading themes of *The Magnus Archives*. Through the usage of existential framework the podcast explores a variety of characters that may be regarded as immoral or monstrous without being classified as traditional monsters. As such *The Magnus Archives* offers an exploration of the characters who become mad upon the contact with the horror, those who die in their pursuit, and the ones who become a part of the system themselves. According to one of the characters – Gerard Keay (MAG 111, 23: 52–25: 58), within the world of the podcast there are fourteen Entities that survive by being the fears of all living creatures. The Entities are divided based on the characteristics of the particular fear they seek and embody. One of the Entities depicted in the podcast is the embodiment of the fear of insanity referred to as The Spiral (MAG 111, 26: 30–26: 38). Those who encounter it often lose their identity and either become its servants or struggle with their sense of reality. One example is a creature known as The Distortion that merged with a young researcher called Michael Shelley, thus creating an amalgamation of a monster that embodies lying and manipulation, and a human being who slowly loses his sanity and ceases to exist as an individual. When The Distortion chooses Helen Richardson as its next victim, the identity of Michael is erased and replaced by Helen's. Although Helen appears to be capable of withstanding The Distortion's influence, it is later shown that the distinction between the two has disappeared.

In addition to monsters and the Entities, which can be categorised as typical cosmic horror monsters that use humanity in order to sustain themselves, the podcast features a selection of their worshippers with powers bestowed upon them referred to as the Avatars. The Avatars possess a limited scope of powers in exchange for their loyalty towards an Entity. One of the first Avatars introduced in the series is Mike Crew who is the servant of The Vast. As the Vast manifests the fear of heights, Mike is able to manipulate his victim's perception of space to simulate falling, inducing emotional distress in the process (MAG 091, 3: 32–3: 43). At the same time, he is able to live alongside regular people without causing

harm if he so desires. This example shows that the Avatars exist on the boundary between what is considered to be a human being and what is seen as a monster. While they are capable of aimless destruction, the Avatars differ from monsters in the traditional understanding due to their human form. Although their bodies may undergo changes often related to their powers, many of them remain relatively physically unchanged, such as Mike, whose only distinctive feature is a scar from his childhood before he made the choice to devote himself to The Vast. The seemingly human form of the character provides a contrast with his psychological state as he enjoys trapping people in environments that terrify them and make them realise their own insignificance within the universe. The behaviour exhibited by Mike resembles that of a traditional monster due to the fact that his actions function as entertainment rather than a requirement for survival.

The presence of the Avatars furthers the discussion surrounding the subject of monstrosity as it foregrounds an existential dimension of life and its meaning, especially when taking into consideration the subject of agency and of their behaviour towards the Entities and the harm they cause. The character of Jonathan encompasses the intricacies of choice in the face of horror. While his life has been shaped by the forces outside his control, in order to satisfy his personal need for knowledge, Jonathan consistently chooses curiosity even when it causes harm to himself and others. Despite that he attempts to retain his humanity and is willing to sacrifice himself in order to save others from suffering. As the protagonist and one of the most powerful figures within the realm of the podcast, Jonathan represents an image of an existential struggle:

Existentialists like to say that man is in anguish. This is what they mean: a man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility. (Sartre 2007, 25)

Jonathan's life during and after his internal change into the Avatar is marked by suffering. If he refuses to satisfy his patron, he will likely die of starvation, but if he follows his instincts, he will hurt innocent people. Despite his attempts to remain human, he can no longer return to his previous state before becoming marked by the powers. At the same time, Jonathan does not want to embrace

the life of a monster. As the Archivist, he feels responsibility for his crew: their safety and humanity even when he prioritises his job over their wishes.

The contrast between his behaviour and inner convictions is noticeable both in the beginning of the podcast and in its latter parts when his power grows stronger. This change is communicated to the audience through the usage of static in the background. In the instances when Jonathan uses his power of forcing people to tell him their story, the listeners can hear rising static which varies in intensity. At first the static appears when Jonathan reads old statements collected by his predecessor. After gaining control over his power, it can be regularly heard in conversations when Jonathan forces others to answer his questions. The sound symbolises Jonathan's internal development and his slow loss of humanity. During season three when Jonathan asks Elias, the Head of the Magnus Institute, whether he is human, Jonathan receives an answer which challenges his understanding of human nature and encourages the audience to reanalyze the common perception of being human:

[W]hat does human even mean? I mean, really? You still bleed, you can still die. And your will is still your own, mostly. That's more than can be said for a lot of the 'real' humans out there. (MAG 092, 19: 53–20: 05)

To Elias, whose real identity is Jonah Magnus – the creator of the Institute and virtually an immortal being, physical wounds and death are one of the aspects separating humans from higher beings considered monstrous. Importantly, he seems less preoccupied with the subject of free will. While for Jonathan the ability to make a choice is what constitutes the basis of his identity, Elias has already given up his free will in order to receive power from the Eye. His response suggests that being human does not mean having the ability to make a choice. This approach provides a different perspective than the one established by Jonathan and functions as a possible mode of humanising the characters in the podcast regardless of their alignment with the evil forces.

The discussion of choice remains a vital part of the story in the subsequent seasons as throughout the latter part of the series Jonathan struggles with losing his humanity and becoming the 'other'. In his view, the psychological and physical changes he is undergoing locate him in the direct opposition to human beings. The notion that by losing humanity, one becomes an opposing force is

referred to by Cunningham (2020, 486) as the state of being “anti-human”. This idea is shared by Jonathan as he struggles to accept his position between his understanding of human nature and of monstrousness. He believes that by giving up his humanity, he becomes a threat to humanity as a whole and wishes to escape this system despite the unwillingness to reject the lifestyle the job of the Archivist requires. By confronting the fear and desire regarding his state multiple times over the course of the series, Jonathan offers a different approach to the cosmic horror narrative. This continuous internal journey encourages the listeners to view the existential threat of the unknown corrupting one’s morality as an extension of human nature rather than a separate entity.

The subject of identity within the realm of horror reaches its culmination in the last season of the series which depicts the consequences of The Change. The Change, which functions as the beginning of the apocalypse, is brought by Jonathan while he is controlled by Jonah Magnus. The Change is meant to be the end of the world controlled by humanity and the commencement of the new era led by the Entities taking over the world and torturing all humanity. The event and its repercussions resemble the one discussed by Pip-pin (1999, 86) in relation to the role and the structure of the biblical Book of the Apocalypse:

In the Apocalypse desire is linked with horror; there is a certain joyous response to the destruction and gory details [...]. The narrator is fixated and obsessed with the details of the horrible events. The world has never known such violence and terror.

After the inception of the apocalypse, Jonathan is tasked with telling the stories of the people who are being tortured by the Entities and the Avatars. His descriptions offer details accompanied by sound effects, such as worms moving in the ground (MAG 166, 19: 57–21: 40) or a crowd laughing at a person being tortured (MAG 172, 10: 15–10: 17), which showcase the extent of the horror that overtakes the world. Due to this new role, Jonathan can be compared to the biblical narrator of the Apocalypse, a chronicler of the horrifying. Undertaking this responsibility leads to Jonathan’s psychological distress. Nonetheless, he is unable to reject his role as his physical self is sustained by the fear of others. Due to his negative self-perception Jonathan becomes increasingly self-destructive.

Yet despite that, inducing the apocalypse leads Jonathan to have a mixture of feelings which include an awe that could be related to the concept of the sublime. It has to be noted that whether he felt joy or was only being a subject of control by the higher power cannot be deduced from either the podcast or the official transcription as it is purposely concealed from the audience through the ambiguous usage of voice acting and sound.

While discussing the interaction between the audience and the apocalyptic imagery, Pippin (1999, 97) points out that this combination carries strong emotional influence by comparing it to a “bomb threat” that causes fear just by being mentioned as a possibility whether confirmed or not; the audience, therefore, reacts to the idea itself and begins to find discomfort in the narrative as “[a]pocalyptic horror connects with the most fearful emotions and heightens the sense that the end is near” (Pippin 1999, 103). The placement of the apocalypse as the last installment of the series functions as the final test for the characters’ resolve: whether they reject Jonathan due to his inhuman status or decide to accept his new identity in the world ruled by the monsters beyond understanding or control. When confronted with the possible end of humanity, the characters opt to work together despite their differences, reluctantly accepting Jonathan’s inhumanity. They elect to preserve their own world and doom another universe by relocating the Entities. The characters are aware that this act of choice could possibly be deemed as immoral due to its potential harm to others, but despite that they choose to prioritise their own survival of their own planet. In the end the distinction between being human and inhuman emerges as a complex notion as it can no longer be established based on the possibility of harm. The series, therefore, concludes with a realization that although in the face of cosmic horror there is no such thing as a solution that saves everyone, one can still choose to become responsible for protecting others even when changed into the ‘other’. This resolution shows that modern day cosmic horror fiction attempts to depict the relationship between human beings and monsters as a spectrum rather than polar opposites.

Throughout the series, Jonathan has multiple opportunities to give up on humanity and in the final season he is offered this choice once again. Despite that, he strives to protect his world and is willing to sacrifice himself in order to achieve this objective. In the end, Jonathan remains a complicated character. Through his internal development, the audience is offered a multi-layered depiction of his existential struggle contrasted with the joyful violence exhibited by many of the other Avatars and Entities. While by the end of the podcast he

is certainly inhuman, Jonathan never turns into a traditional monster placed in opposition to humankind. Within the realm of the podcast, the characters are judged by their actions rather than their physical state. Even though The Entities function as a monstrous cosmic force, they only appear in mentions, not in the direct confrontation with the characters. It is the Avatars who resemble traditional monsters in the proclivity for violence and their rejection of human morality. To become an Avatar one has to make the decision to serve the power, thus bringing the subject of choice into the forefront of the discussion surrounding the image of a modern monster. When listening to the podcast it is seldom possible for the listener to distinguish the human characters from the Avatars based on the voice alone. Some, such as The Distortion, are denoted by sound effects, but the majority of the Avatars are audibly indistinguishable from the human characters. This approach to character portrayal centers evil is the matter of choice rather than an inherent state of being. The characters, therefore, become monstrous not when they transform into an inhuman being, but when they inflict direct violence upon others and reject the possibility of redemption.

Conclusions

The development of podcasts as a narrative horror form has its origins in the legacy of radio drama. The format of a cosmic horror podcast allows *The Magnus Archives* to explore the subject of humanity and how one becomes a monster as a spectrum instead of the opposing forces. Throughout the story, the podcast explores the themes of identity, choice, and their interconnection in the context of the cosmic horror genre. The characters of the podcast make decisions which shape the progression of the story and exemplify their agency while also falling victim to the forces beyond their control. By introducing the element of choice in their descent into a state between remaining human and turning into a monster, *The Magnus Archives* shows the role of agency in forming one's identity and its importance when confronting a power beyond comprehension. The notion of becoming inhuman is depicted through the character of Jonathan Sims, who represents the existential approach towards the subject of an internal supernatural change: he is psychologically conflicted and never fully chooses either side, thus making him an example of a being in-between. The subject of choice is further shown by the aural portrayal of the characters possessing inhuman capabilities, as the majority of them are indistinguishable from the human characters. By implementing sound

to accentuate this ambiguity, *The Magnus Archives* places the listeners' focus on the actions of the characters, rather than their physical or vocal characteristics. Together, these elements provide a study of monstrosity in relation to the past and the present images of evil. The existential portrayal of inhumanity in *The Magnus Archives* corresponds to modern horror sensibilities and provides a cosmic horror tale which continues to captivate the audiences all around the world.

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