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The Cosmic Horror of Agency in The Magnus Archives

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The Cosmic Horror of Agency in *The Magnus Archives*

“To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once.”

(Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* 13)

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Introduction

What is fear and what effect does it have on a person? This question is surely at the heart of any work of horror in one shape or another. Still, the audio drama *The Magnus Archives* asks it outright, and proceeds to reiterate it many times over, during its two hundred episode run-time.¹ By focusing especially on the second part of that question, the podcast transforms from a simple series of horror stories into an exploration of character. This paper explores how this audio-drama stands out by engaging with conventions of horror narratives, cosmic horror conventions in particular, and instead changes these to centre character development and character agency.²

The Magnus Archives is a British semi-anthology audio-drama horror podcast that ran from 2015 until 2020 under Rusty Quill. It was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alex J. Newell. Initially, it ran on a very limited budget, evident in the small cast and a relative lack of soundscaping compared to later seasons. Additionally, both Sims and Newell have spoken about recording under blankets in a friend's house, during season one.³ Season five also saw production difficulties, as it was recorded and aired during the initial Covid-19 lockdown period of the UK in early 2020. It has won various awards including "Best Audio Drama or Fiction Podcast" from *Discover Pod Awards* in 2019, and "Best Audio" from *British Fantasy Awards* in 2021.

¹ Recently, a second series has been announced, with the title *The Magnus Protocol*.

² Throughout this paper, footnotes have been used to provide clarifications with regards to plot, as well as some additional information that would have otherwise been distracting in the main text..

³ At various points, hyperlinks to YouTube videos have been added to quotations of series' episodes, in order to keep from losing a layer of possible meaning. These links can be accessed by clicking on the blue-coloured in-text citations of the quotations.

The series follows Jonathan Sims,⁴ the newly minted head archivist of the Magnus Institute, a research institute for the paranormal and esoteric, as he tries to clean up the clutter that his predecessor left behind after she disappeared mysteriously. To do this, he is provided with three assistants, Sascha James, Tim Stoker, and Martin Blackwood.⁵ Every episode consists of Jon reading a statement which someone gave the institute about their experience with something supernatural out loud to a tape recorder. After the statement has concluded, Jon adds any research he and his team have been able to do into the validity of the assertions made by the statement. As he reads more statements, he slowly starts to understand that they are more connected than seemed at first glance, and that there may be more going on under the surface than he could have ever imagined.⁶

The work's niche popularity is evidence of a recent podcast-boom, which saw audio-narratives in the tradition of radio plays re-established as a medium for storytelling. The horror genre, especially, has seen a surge of popularity following shows like the post-apocalyptic *We're Alive* (2009-2014) and the surreal *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present), resulting in many new horror podcasts within the span of a few years (McCurtry 175). This reinvented form of auditory storytelling is a significantly different medium than either written text or film, allowing for new kinds of stories to be told. To bridge the gap left by a lack of images, audio drama has created soundscapes, filled with music, special effects and audio-positioning to place characters within an imagined space. As Leslie Grace McCurtry remarks, in *Revolution in the Echo Chamber*, "We do not have earlids and cannot block out

⁴ In the podcast, Jonathan's name is usually shortened to 'Jon' when said by other characters. Since this was initially only spoken, not written down, the audience defaulted to the spelling used above. Later transcripts distributed by Rusty Quill have spelled it as 'John', instead. This paper will maintain the first, without an 'h', because it seems to be the more widely used version.

⁵ Various characters who are affiliated with the Magnus Institute have last names that refer to well-known Horror authors. Other examples include Melanie King and Michael Shelley.

⁶ A more complete summary can be found in the Appendix.

disturbing content the way we can with visual stimuli” (64). The effect of this is twofold.

Firstly, with audio, a listener cannot momentarily stop reading or close their eyes to break the tension, but is at the mercy of the narrative’s pace. Secondly, while a listener is always listening they might not always pay attention to what they heard. Therefore, information and clues may be given in the soundscaping while the listener might not be aware of it.

Using this method, *The Magnus Archives* uses different sounds of static and tape squealing to indicate some supernatural interference.

Additionally, these audio-dramas are often serialised, with one or more episodes dropping every week. For a work of cosmic horror, like *The Magnus Archives*, this creates a divergence from the more common short-story format, and instead veers into something more akin to a soap opera or an epic fantasy novel series, with long overarching storylines that unfold over many hours of listening.

Cosmic horror, as it is understood in this paper, is a form of horror which was codified by H. P. Lovecraft and has been applied to works from other authors both before him and after. Examples of these include Algernon Blackwood and Arthur Aachen, but also Thomas Ligotti and Laird Barron (Stableford 78; Luckhurst 6). While Lovecraft originally used the term to describe the type of fear that his Weird fiction engaged in, it has since developed as its own subgenre of horror fiction that is not necessarily only found in Weird fiction or in the New Weird. Cosmic horror, then, as a type of horror, revolves around the fear that you are only an insignificant speck in the face of a universe that is so much larger and stranger than you could ever know (Wilson 15-24). In fact, the beings in such a world might be so large and strange that you are not even able to perceive them at first, until your mind has adjusted enough to translate what your eyes are actually registering. In *The Magnus Archives*, these beings are entities that exist out of humanity’s base fears, which

almost function as some kind of pantheon of evil gods which influence the world to elicit from humans their specific kinds of fears in order to feed on them. For example, two of the most important of these entities to the series' narrative are the Web, which represents the fear of manipulation, or of being controlled by something, and the Eye, the fear of being watched or scrutinised. Through these, *The Magnus Archives* is an exploration of the nature of fear itself.

For this reason, another aspect of cosmic horror which is important to the series is its tendency towards existentialism, which this paper shall predominantly engage with through works of Jean-Paul Sartre (*Being and Nothingness*, and "Existentialism is a Humanism"). By focussing so strongly on the insignificance of man in comparison to a large and scary universe, cosmic horror often finds itself grappling with an existential angst that leaves the characters to question their place within a world from which they have been displaced in favour of the monsters. *The Magnus Archives* similarly sees characters struggle with existential angst. However, crucially, the series does not displace humanity, but instead recentres it to be at the core of both the horror and the world itself. It does this by virtue of presenting its unknowable beings, the fear entities, as beholden to humans since they are created out of human emotion. Thus, in doing this, the series shifts the existential angst from a question of indifference to a question of agency. This human-centric, and therefore character-centric, version of cosmic horror is the focus of research of this paper.

The proceeding paper will explore how *The Magnus Archives'* mythos, in which malevolent entities feed on the fears of people, facilitates an exploration of how those fears impact character. By having its monsters be explicitly tied to fears from the mundane world, the series uses the style of cosmic horror to critique social structures like class and modern work culture and to look inwards at the anxieties of its characters. The characters'

emotional developments are reflected by their adversaries and by *TMA*'s season structure, as they grieve their loss of safety, autonomy, and their place among the mundane world. This highlights the protagonist's own struggle with existential questions centred around Sartre's ideas on free will, indicating an overarching theme of agency in which acting with authenticity is presented as a method of survival when faced with oppressive horror.

As such, this paper will analyse a different aspect of the series in each chapter. The first will consider how *TMA* fits, and does not fit within the established conventions of cosmic horror. Like cosmic horror, *TMA*'s horror revolves around otherworldly beings. These fear entities function as metaphors for societal phobic pressure points. Thus, *TMA* confronts cosmic horror's habit of affirming an assumed normal by engaging with societal critiques through these entities. Because the horror in *TMA* is a part of the mundane world, it uses cosmic horror themes to look inwards, externalising the anxieties of its characters.

The second chapter will analyse the structural set-up of the five seasons that make up the series, guided by an overlay of two interacting theories. Namely, each season correlates to both the Kübler-Ross grief model and the structure of a tragedy play. The interaction between these models show that Jon's curiosity is similar to a fatal flaw which pulls him deeper into horror, but which, itself, stems from fear. Secondly, the models foreground how the emotional development of the characters is reflected by the antagonists they encounter.

Finally, the third chapter will use concepts from Sartre's philosophies on existentialism to further study the inner worlds of the characters, especially that of the protagonist, Jon. When people become avatars or manifestations of an entity in *TMA*, this removes their ability to act independently. Therefore, losing your humanity translates to a loss of existential agency in the series. Bound to the Eye, Jon struggles with similar

existential questions concerning his humanity and guilt. The choices and fates of surrounding characters reveal that acting with authenticity is essential to surviving the entities and the fear they cause.

Chapter 1

Cosmic Horror as Mirror to Character

As laid out in the introduction, this chapter shall consider how *The Magnus Archives* sets itself apart from cosmic horror by envisioning the monstrous as something that has grown out of human fear and is irrevocably connected to and even dependent on humanity. This in contrast to Lovecraft's cosmic horror, which paints humanity as wholly insignificant in comparison to the grant and unknowable monstrous. The monsters in *TMA* are distinct because even within the mythos of the series they exist to elicit fear in the people they interact with. All supernatural things are all connected to nebulous entities which feed on different kinds of fear. By making an explicit distinction between different types of fear, *TMA* invites the listener to reflect on what such a fear truly means for the characters experiencing it.

This chapter shall first discuss the nature of these fear entities within the worldbuilding of the series. It goes on to consider the manner in which its episodic and auditory nature elaborate on the idea of fear presented by the series. Following this, the chapter will consider the fear entities in further detail by discussing the distinction between its core fear and the symbolism that it might manifest, which allow the series to consider societal phobic pressure points through recurring metaphors.

1.1 Fear Manifested

TMA falls within the subgenre of cosmic horror. This particular subgenre of horror originates from H. P. Lovecraft (Noys & Murphy 117). Lovecraft described this form of horror as part of

a tradition he termed Weird fiction, a group of writing that does not fit neatly into either science-fiction, fantasy, or even horror, but that instead has aspects of all of these genres (Luckhurst 6). The Weird has since developed to include writers such as Thomas Ligotti and Laird Barron (6). Roger Luckhurst says on the topic of Weird fiction that “the weird reveals the best iterations of itself in the way it disorients any simple route map through the territory” (2). Similarly, cosmic horror is a horror that disorients the normal world, and de-centres the human as a subject in favour of something other. One of the main characteristics of cosmic horror is its interest in a scope that is far beyond human comprehension, which is the case in many of Lovecraft’s own stories. This “other” in cosmic horror is so unknowable, that it is often even invisible to the mundane world until the beholder’s paradigm has been forcibly shifted to allow for its existence in their perception.

This unsettling of perception and the withholding of knowledge is a trait of cosmic horror that *TMA* definitely shares. Neither the audience nor the archivist will be told exactly what the monsters in the series truly are until halfway through the entire series, in episode 111, “Family Business.” In this episode, Jon is given the following explanation by the ghost of Gerard Keay:

These things, these forces, they are our fear. Deep fears. Primordial. Always looking for ways to grow and spread ... maybe they appeared out of nothing the first time something felt afraid. Maybe they’re older than that, and they just got inspired by all the things that we dread. Did they make themselves from our fears, or are they why we’re afraid? I really don’t know. ([ep. 111 “Family Business”](#))

This makes it clear that the world of the Magnus Archives revolves around fear. This is not just in the sense that it aims to elicit fear as a response in the reader, which it does of course, but moreover as an intrinsic part of the cosmology of its world. The tradition of

cosmic horror that *TMA* is a part of is steeped in this kind of world building, where fear builds as the characters start to realise how inescapable the supernatural is, and how much it has been interwoven with the mundane world. As previously mentioned, in these mundane worlds the supernatural is initially invisible. This is also because the viewer is enveloped by it, and because of that, is not capable of seeing these gods or aliens for what they are.

From Gerard's explanation it is apparent that fear has manifested itself into godlike forces or beings which feed on the fear they engender. Until this moment in the series, while this had been alluded to, this had not been revealed in its full scope to the characters. He goes on to explain that there are fourteen of these entities which all embody a different aspect of what people can be afraid of. These entities were grouped into fourteen distinct classifications by Robert Smirke. Because of this they are known as "Smirke's Fourteen." This group consists of the Eye, the Spiral, the Stranger, the Web, the Hunt, the Lonely, the Slaughter, the Vast, the Flesh, the Corruption, the End, the Desolation, the Dark, and the Buried, as well as a fifteenth called the Extinction, that might currently be coming into existence. These entities exist just outside of the world, but their influences are leaking through in the form of manifestations. In order to feed on the fear of humans, an entity can influence the world in a few different ways. They can create monsters or objects that scare people in a way that aligns with the domain of fear that these are a part of. For example, the Flesh⁷ might manifest a giant evil pig to a farmer (ep. 103 "Cruelty Free"). They can also warp existing things, areas, or perceptions of people to engender the right kind of fear. A

⁷ The Flesh is the fear of having your body altered, mutilated, or eaten. It originates from the collective fear that animals generate because of the global meat industry, and when this animalistic fear is filtered through human neuroses, results in a fear of being nothing but meat. Statements of the Flesh often touch on cannibalism, body horror, and dysmorphia. Rising with the industrial revolution, it is thought to be the youngest of the fear entities.

good example of this would be how the Buried⁸ changes the cave around the statement giver of “Lost Johns’ Cave” (ep. 015) to become impossibly claustrophobic. Finally, and most interestingly, here, some people might tie themselves to one of these entities by choice, becoming an avatar for that entity and allowing them to gain aspects and powers of that flavour of fear. People throughout the series have chosen to do this in a myriad of ways, some have erected cults around their patron entities and worship them as gods, while others see their entities as an extension of their own ideologies. Thus, per Cosmic Horror conventions, in *TMA*’s world these fear entities fully envelop the mundane world, and because of this scope, most people in the world are unaware that they are being fed on and influenced by these beings.

1.2 The Horror of Audio

The episode-structure of the show is given form as supernatural statements which are being read out loud to a tape recorder. As a consequence, the amount of information given to the listener is severely limited and fractured. As seen in the previous section, it is not until halfway through the series that an actual explanation is given about the supernatural. This in turn means that the events caught on tape can be quite confusing and without much context for the listener, something the series uses expertly to create a horror atmosphere. The mysterious role of the tape recorders themselves and the way in which they are presented makes the listener complicit in the horror the characters have to live through.

⁸ The Buried is the fear of enclosed spaces, of being pressed in on by earth or water, and of being constricted in body or ability to breathe. It is closely linked to feelings of claustrophobia. It mostly interacts with the ongoing narrative of the series in the form of a chained-up coffin that lures people into the Buried, to be trapped and slowly digested.

TMA is set up as a frame narrative by virtue of the statements that Jon converts to audio which function as short, standalone, horror stories. While these stories are connected to the overarching narrative, at first glance they function as standalone stories. This kind of frame narrative is a form that goes all the way back to Chaucer and Boccaccio, but also has well-established roots within horror and gothic literature (Southward 2). Think for example of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or of Lovecraft's own "The Call of Cthulhu." This genre lends itself particularly well to both a short story format, and to a slowly developing super-narrative. The short format allows for a sudden twist, and a possibly ambiguous ending. In concert with this, returning to a frame grants the story a measure of legitimacy, often by breaking down the established distance between the frame and the story in some way. For example, the childrens' television show *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* (1990-2000) did this by having each child bring an object to the campfire about which they would tell their story. Horror in this format also lends itself well to subversions. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* manages to dislocate this frame format completely, by simply not returning to the frame narrative after the story has ended (Goetz 73). The reader is left with a distinctly adrift feeling as the ghost story abruptly just comes to an end.

TMA does a similar thing, in that it also slowly transforms and deconstructs the frame, and the listener's understanding of it over the course of the full series. Consequently, in *TMA*, the first breakdown of this frame narrative is the attack of Jane Prentiss⁹ at the end of the first season. While both Martin's and Sasha's experiences¹⁰ earlier in the season still

⁹ Jane Prentiss is an avatar of the Corruption. She exists as a living hive for semi-sentient white worms. She is first mentioned in ep. 006, "Squirm". She dies at the end of the first season from CO2 poisoning, by way of the fire prevention system in the archives.

¹⁰ Martin was barricaded in his apartment for two weeks while Jane Prentiss tried to get in. Sasha had various encounters with Michael the Distortion that led to her finding a victim of Jane Prentiss, and to learning that the worms cannot survive CO2 gas.

took place within the framework of a statement (ep. 022 “Colony,” ep. 026 “A Distortion”), Jane’s attack on the archives happens ‘in person’, rather than in a statement about something that has already come to pass. This is the first instance of something like this happening during the frame portion, and thus inside of the archives themselves.

Alex J Newall clarifies the following during a Q&A session: “Everything that you hear is on the actual tape within the world of *The Magnus Archives* except the music” (Newall Q&A1). This rule holds true for the entire series, barring of course the occasional explicitly diegetic music, an example of which would be the calliope’s music. Because both the frame and the statements of *TMA* are made up out of the same cloth - they are diegetically recorded onto the same tape-recorder – they actually take place within one and the same frame (*Audionarratology* 132). This encompassing frame is shaped by the act of listening to the tapes, and exists in two places at once, as objects that make up the archives, but also in the ears of the listener and thus as a part of the real world. Because both the audience and the characters inside of the podcast are listening to the exact same thing, the distance between the two worlds dissolves. As the series progresses, this dissolution becomes more apparent. In season four, Jon says the following: “I don’t record anything anymore, not, not really; I just sort of assume they’ll turn on if it’s important” ([ep. 146 “Threshold”](#)). By then, tape recorders constantly appear out of thin air to the point that Jon treats them as an indicator of plot progression, exactly like the listener who follows the story with the understanding that they will be shown all the important scenes. By the end of the series, the listener has become part of the narrative through the audio, and thus, complicit in its horror.

1.3 The Stranger as a Foil

In order to get a clear and comprehensive picture on the nature of this horror, the following section shall explore a single one of the fear entities, the Stranger,¹¹ and consider its function within the narrative, starting with the pilot episode.

“Anglerfish,” *The Magnus Archives*’ first episode, has a lot it needs to accomplish. It needs to set up the aforementioned conceit of the episode structure where statements in an archive are being converted to audio format. The protagonist, Jonathan Sims, as well as the most important characters around him need to be introduced. Various narrative clues for the next 200 episodes need to be sprinkled in. All of this is on top of the actual first statement, which needs to stand on its own as an interesting horror story to hook the listener in. “Anglerfish” manages this masterfully within the constrictive timespan of less than seventeen minutes. Still, what the episode excels most at is in establishing an atmosphere that sets the tone of the rest of the first season, of the mundane unsettled by something large and unknowable.

In the episode, Jonathan Sims gripes about the state of the archives and his own role as the new head archivist, and chooses a statement to start recording at random, because he had to “begin somewhere” ([ep. 001](#)). In this statement, a student recounts his encounter with something seemingly human that asked him for a cigarette as he was walking home from the bar in Edinburgh, circa 2010. Something about the way the figure was swaying put him in mind of an anglerfish. When the student pulled out his phone, the figure disappeared. After the statement, Jon explains that his team found that there had been a string of disappearances around that same alleyway of Old Fishmongers Close, for a few

¹¹ The Stranger, also known as I Do Not Know You, is the fear of the familiar made wrong or unrecognisable. It engages with the Uncanny Valley, and with a loss of identity. In statements it is often associated with skin.

years. Jon concludes by remarking on the photograph that one of the victims took of the empty alleyway. He notes that when the contrast on a picture is dialled up, a shadow of a hand is revealed, and it seems to be beckoning.

At the end of the pilot, the listener is left with the same questions that, diegetically, the archivist has. The nature of what was in that alley is not revealed in the episode itself, and the following episode, “Do not Open,” is about a completely separate statement, with different people, a different monster, and a very different tone. The listener does not encounter this particular monster again until episode 54.

When considering these entities and the role they play in the world of *TMA*, “Anglerfish” accomplishes something important, which is to let the listener intuit how these kinds of forces function. Namely, that tone and atmosphere are perhaps more important to these monsters than logic and consistency.

This reflects what Lovecraft himself thought about the genre. In his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature” he wrote the following: “Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation” (Lovecraft, I). As such, the prevailing tone in this first episode is that of mystery and the unknown, in the mythos of the series – it falls under the dominion of the Stranger. The statement giver even unwittingly names the monster as such directly:

If I hadn’t been so drunk, maybe I’d have noticed quicker, but even when the stranger asked the question again, “Can I have a cigarette?” utterly without intonation, still I didn’t understand why I was so uneasy. ([ep. 001](#))

Thus, the Stranger is not so much just a manifestation of xenophobia, although that may very well play a part, it is much more so a manifestation of the Uncanny (Punter 129). It is the familiar made wrong. As Lovecraft puts it, in the same essay: “The oldest and strongest

emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (1). This unknown is certainly a recurring theme in much cosmic horror, including Lovecraft’s own writing, since it appeals to a core trait of human curiosity. It is likely because of this that The Stranger is one of the more prevalent antagonists in the narrative of *TMA*. For all of the Stranger’s power to unnerve, it is relatively uncomplicated when compared to the much more nebulous fear of madness and lies that the Spiral¹² presents. The Stranger also provides a clear oppositional force to Jon and the other members of the archival team, who hope to uncover the mystery, and who unwittingly work for a second Entity - the Eye.¹³ As it may be, the fear of being watched and surveilled, of knowledge unchecked, might be Sims’s modern answer to Lovecraft’s assertion. *TMA* posits that it is not the unknown that modern society fears most, rather, people fear where their own curiosity may lead, and that the unknown is just a mirror, a scapegoat for that fear.

Accordingly, the Stranger is the first foil of the Eye. It is the entity at work in the pilot, which also introduces Jon, Head Archivist of the Magnus Archives, and thus The locus of the Eye. The first death of a voiced character was at the hands of a monster of the Stranger. Sasha is murdered and replaced by a monster of the Stranger, despite the fact that the Corruption¹⁴ had been looming in the form of Jane Prentiss for a large part of the season. This links the first true raising of the stakes for the audience directly to this entity. This concludes in the third season, when the looming threat is that the monsters and

¹² The Spiral is the fear of madness and lies, and of not being able to trust your own mind and senses. It often manifests as impossible geometry and confusing architecture.

¹³ The Eye, also known as the Beholding or the Ceaseless Watcher, is the fear of being watched. The fear that someone or something out there is surveying you or looking at you. It is also associated with the obsessive pursuit of knowledge. The Eye is especially powerful in the current day, during this modern surveillance state. The Magnus Institute itself is a bastion of the Eye, and various people have remarked upon an uncomfortable feeling of being watched when they come to visit the institute.

¹⁴ The Corruption, also sometimes known as Filth, is the fear of bodily corruption. It usually manifests as disease, rot, fungus, or insects. Thematically it is often linked to unhealthy relationships, codependency and an erosion of individuality.

avatars of the Stranger are trying to bring about a ritual of “Unknowing” that will bring the entity fully into our world. This is another raising of stakes, and results in the death of Tim Stoker, the second significant character death, as well as Jon’s coma (ep. 120).

The Unknowing also functions as a red herring for the Eye’s own ritual, which Elias¹⁵ is trying to bring about by using Jon, reiterating the Stranger’s function as a counter force to the Eye. This defeat of the unknown is thus symbolic of the Eye’s victory over a lack of knowledge, and it therefore makes sense that this is what facilitates Jon’s transformation into an Avatar. Through these interactions, the Stranger showcases that these fear entities function on both a literal as well as a metaphorical level within the world of the show.

1.4 Manifestations and the Core of a Fear Entity

Meanwhile, continuing the conversation in “Family Business,” Gerard Keay proceeds to give context to these forces and to the way they might overlap or manifest in similar ways:

I always think it helps to imagine them like colours. The edges bleed together, and you can talk about little differences: “oh, that’s indigo, that’s more lilac”, but they’re both purple. I mean, I guess there are technically infinite colours, but you group them together into a few big ones. A lot of it’s kind of arbitrary. I mean, why are navy blue and sky blue both called blue, when pink’s an entirely different colour from red? Y’know? I don’t know, that’s just how it works.

And like colours, some of these powers, they feed into or balance each other. Some really clash, and you just can’t put them together. I mean, you could see them all as

¹⁵ Elias Bouchard is the head of the Magnus Institute. He is a powerful avatar of the Eye who is near omniscient and can see through any image of eyes, real or stylised. Secretly, he is actually the original founder of the institute, Jonah Magnus, who has been taking over new bodies for generations by transplanting his eyes.

just one thing, I guess, but it would be pretty much meaningless, y'know, like... like trying to describe a... shirt by talking about the concept of colour. ([ep. 111](#))

In other words, the distinction between the entities is not a hard boundary, but rather a more fluid transition. The aforementioned *Stranger*, for example, can touch on similar phobias as the *Spiral*, when it leans towards fears of wrongness and the uncanny.

Alternatively, the *Stranger* sometimes trends instead to a fear of the other and there overlaps more with the *Lonely*¹⁶ or even the *Slaughter*.¹⁷

The show makes a distinction between its understanding of the entity and the core fear it embodies, versus the symbolism that the entity might manifest as in order to elicit that flavour of fear. Perhaps the most clear cut example of this would be the *Web*, since it has such a clear delineation between its core and its expression. The *Web* at its heart is the fear of manipulation, of being a puppet in someone or something else's game, and of not being in control of one's own actions. It is thus the metaphorical fear of being a fly that has been caught in the web of a spider. However, its favourite symbolism is this metaphor being made literal through the imagery of spiders and webs. This creates a divide between the almost juvenile and clear-cut fear of spiders, and the more deepened, adult, understanding of that fear for what it truly means to be afraid of a spider while being caught in its web. This means that *TMA* is able to reflect on clichés and tropes in the horror genre, and question what truly makes these things scary. For example, statements featuring the *Web* frequently touch on themes of addiction, as well as familial manipulation and other things that may bind or pull on people, filtered through the lens of this fear of spiders.

¹⁶ The *Lonely* is the fear of loneliness and often manifests as misty, cold, environments and feelings of apathy and memory issues.

¹⁷ The *Slaughter* is the fear of human violence, both individual violence and wars. In the statements, it is often associated with music.

This distinction between the entity and its imagery allows the series a great degree of flexibility with its horrors, since the same symbol might in different contexts play host to multiple different entities. The flexibility of horrific imagery also means that *TMA* is able to let aspects of the different entities interact with each other through similar or conflicting imagery. It lets them develop relationships with the others, developing rivalries and turf-wars but also temporary alliances. As an example of this kind of imagery, let's consider the image of a corpse. Depending on the atmosphere and the interpretation of the statement givers, a corpse has been a symbol of death for the End (ep. 094 "Dead Woman Walking"),¹⁸ it has been made to look uncanny and alive for the Stranger (ep. 118 "The Masquerade"), it might be a symbol of the Slaughter during a statement about the horrors of war (ep. 095 "Absent Without Leave"), or a nexus point of infection and rot for The Corruption (ep. 036 "Taken III"), to name a few. The difference is not so much in the image of a dead body, but again, for lack of a better term, in the 'vibe' of it, as well as in the fear in the statement giver that it ends up creating or reflecting.

1.5 Entities as Metaphors

In his non-fiction work *Danse Macabre*. Stephen King writes the following about the possibilities of horror fiction:

The horror genre has often been able to find national phobic pressure points, and those books and films which have been the most successful almost always seem to play upon and express fears which exist across a wide spectrum of people. Such

¹⁸ The End is the fear of death as well as the unstoppable end of all things. It is also known as Terminus. Statements about the End often show characters trying to stave off their own time of death through various, rather ineffectual, means.

fears, which are often political, economic, and psychological rather than supernatural, give the best work of horror a pleasing allegorical feel. (11)

As seen with the Web and the Stranger, the entities work as recurring metaphors much like the phobic pressure points King describes. One of the more clearly allegorical of the entities would be the Desolation, which is the fear of destruction, pain, and loss, and manifests as a fear of fire and burning. Many of its avatars are connected to systems of capital. Of the members of the Cult of the Lightless Flame,¹⁹ Jude Perry used to be a stockbroker, and Arthur Nolan still acts as a landlord. This is in contrast to Jack Barnabas, who was a young boy working in a cafe when he fell in love with a pretty woman, and was burned for it. Agnes Mantague, the pretty woman, was born into the Cult for the very purpose of creating a messiah for The Desolation. The goodbye kiss she gives him leaves him with severe burn wounds, and puts him in the hospital:

I lost almost everything after that. I never had much to begin with, and after I was let go at the cafe, I couldn't afford to keep my home. They didn't even try to pretend it wasn't because my burned face would scare away customers. I've ended up living with my father again, who has been... understanding about the situation, though even he can't bring himself to meet my eye most days. ([ep. 067 "Burning Desire"](#))

The Desolation burns forests and houses. It traces families over the course of generations, just for the pleasure of causing destruction. The short romance between Jack and Agnes reads very much like a tragic love between someone from the working class and someone from the upper class. This transforms the understanding of the Desolation from a relatively

¹⁹ The Cult of the Lightless Flame is a group of avatars of the Desolation who tried to enact a ritual to bring their entity into the world by creating a vessel for it in the form of Agnes Montague. Their skin is made out of candle wax and they run so hot that they scorch everything around them. By the time the first season begins, Agnes has died and the Cult has largely disbanded.

simple fear of fire and destruction, to a fear of economic devastation that can hit someone who lives from paycheck to paycheck. It is not for nothing that the avatars of this entity are made of wax; they are candles that are literally burning themselves up till there is nothing left.

In a similar vein, the Lonely functions as a lens through which to reframe the British upper class. This is the fear of being alone, unseen, uncherished, and it has a single prominent family of avatars, the Lukas family. The Lukasses are incredibly wealthy, something gleaned from the fact that they live in a manor, and from the fact that they are one of the financial benefactors of the Magnus Institute (ep. 013 “Alone”). The Lonely repeatedly plays with the idea that being physically alone is expensive, and is therefore a privilege of sorts. Peter Lukas owns a boat that he uses to escape responsibility, his familial manor house was able to hire invisible servants and rotating private tutors. This is constantly juxtaposed by the show against the sensation of loneliness while being among crowds of people, which is often connected to a lack of money and the lower-class living conditions that come with this. An example is that Peter’s attempt at a ritual was to create affordable apartments that were purposefully designed to seclude and isolate the inhabitants. Martin himself, and all of his interactions with the Lonely, are another clear example of this. Martin, who has been scraping by with low paying jobs to support his sick mother his entire life, has to choose to isolate himself from the rest of the archival staff in order to gain little bits of knowledge at a time from Peter. He puts his head down and does what needs to be done.

The way these unimaginably powerful entities manifest within the mythos of *TMA* by appealing to mundane worries and fears, is in contrast with what Jonathan Newell describes in his work *A Century of Weird Fiction*, in which he dissects cosmic horror:

As a rule [cosmic horror] is largely unconcerned with the mundane anxieties, hopes or beliefs of ordinary people, with the banalities of everyday life. Though, like all literature, it cannot escape politics or discourse, it is rarely polemical. (201)

This seems to indicate a separateness from the mundane in cosmic horror that is not present in the monsters of *TMA*, which instead seem to be communicating with exactly those sorts of banalities and anxieties. Indeed, the entities feed on, and are likely to have been formed out of, the fears of the inhabitants of *TMA*'s world. As proven earlier, the series is also highly engaged with politically minded critique, while the cosmic horror of Newell's description would perhaps rather shy away from that sort of thing in favour of "the absolute beyond, the bizarre, often horrifying reaches of unplumbed space" (202).

However, not everyone agrees with Newell's assertion that cosmic horror manages to stay mostly apolitical. For example, Heinrich Wilke has the following to say on the subject.

While this world, which passes for normalcy vis-à-vis the supernatural, is unsettled by the intrusion of the otherworldly horror, the very fact that it takes a cosmic entity to call into question the ordinary implies the latter's imperviousness to human action. This construction of normalcy is ideological in that it insinuates that the human world thus depicted is stable (rather than rife with conflict) and deserving of protection (rather than subversion). Cosmic horror frequently suggests that the unacceptable and the outrageous originate somewhere else, not here. Set up as conflicts between this world and something beyond, cosmic horror stories easily affirm the entrenchment of what is. (187)

Consequently, this quiet affirmation of the ordinary that Wilke finds in cosmic horror is the result of the attempt to stay away from anything Newell called polemical. As shown

throughout this chapter, this is not a trait shared by *TMA*. Rather, this series engages purposefully with political and societal “phobic pressure points” (King 11) through its fear entities. In this way, the horror in *TMA* is not an otherworldly and unsettling force attacking the normal, it is moreover a calcified part of that normal world. Accordingly, fighting against these entities that are made and fed by human fears, means fighting against a system from the inside. Because of this, it could be suggested that, while *TMA* certainly has many markers of cosmic horror, it instead uses that imagery to turn inwards rather than outwards. In doing so, it allows the horrific to function as a magnifying glass onto the inner lives of the people living in this world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter explored how, like cosmic horror, *TMA* centres otherworldly beings beyond human comprehension. These others disorient the normal world, and are often invisible to normal people. In *TMA*, these others present as entities created from human fear that influence the normal world in order to feed on fear. Thus, the cosmology of *TMA* revolves around the exploration of fear.

Since *TMA* is set up as a frame narrative, dissemination of information to the listener is fractured. Throughout the series, *TMA* deconstructs this frame. Since the listener and the characters are both listening to the same statements, the distance between the two worlds dissolves. Thus, the listener becomes complicit in the horror of the narrative. The fear of something familiar turned wrong, the Stranger, functions as a foil to the Eye, and a main antagonistic force to the characters for the first three seasons. This allows the Stranger to show that fear entities exist on both a literal and a metaphorical level within the series, which operate on dream-logic and atmosphere.

TMA makes a distinction between the core fear an entity embodies, and the symbolism that it manifests to elicit that kind of fear. This distinction gives the series flexibility with its horrors, since the same symbol might fit multiple different entities. Through this, *TMA* reflects on the horror genre, and questions what truly makes something scary.

The entities function as recurring metaphors for societal phobic pressure points. Thus, it confronts cosmic horror's habit of affirming an assumed normal by engaging with societal critiques through these anxieties. Because the horror in *TMA* is a part of the mundane world, it uses concepts of cosmic horror to look inwards. The horrific becomes a magnifying glass which externalises the morphing anxieties of its characters.

Chapter 2

The Structure of a Horror Tragedy in Five Parts

The Magnus Archives reinforces this externalisation of the inner world of the people in its world on a structural level, by virtue of its dialogue with horror genre conventions, as well as because of its nature as an audio drama. The way that *TMA* is structured, both as a seasonal series, and as an auditory experience, serves to lead the listener on a similar emotional journey as the protagonists themselves are on.

The seasons of *The Magnus Archives* map onto the popular model of the Kübler-Ross five stages of grief. This model was developed by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross to discuss the manner in which people deal with forms of grief. She found five stages in coming to terms with death; denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Mahmood 232). While this theory is widely held as discredited and overly simplistic, the model has been found useful in its application as a lens through which to view pop culture, much in the same way that Freud's ideas about the Ego, Superego and Id are still used. This way of using the grief model as a framework to analyse can definitely be applied to *TMA*, where every season translates directly onto one of the stages in order, reflecting the development that Jon goes through on his journey to become the Archivist. The developing atmosphere allows the auditor to vicariously experience this development along with him. Interestingly, this same structure present in *TMA*, of five separate parts which each serve to lead the protagonists through a developmental character arc, is simultaneously very reminiscent of a five act tragedy play. On multiple occasions, Sims and Newall have referred to *TMA* as a "Cosmic horror tragedy" (S5 Q&A part 2, 09:40-10:00). In light of this referral, this chapter will also

consider the overlap between the grief model and the dramatic acts of a tragedy play as codified by Gustav Freytag (115).

This morphing structural atmosphere along the stages of grief, then, is also supported by the development of audio presence, and soundscapes in the series. There are particular qualities afforded to the story by virtue of its auditory nature. Through this it is able to convey meaning that it otherwise would not be able to do. Crucially, it communicates the slow disintegration of the normal world through the intrusions of the supernatural.

TMA builds a sense of a strongly realised expanded world by starting with short individual intrusions into the strange during the first season, before devolving into the strange more permanently and the connections between all of the statements in later seasons. All of these tools are utilised to translate the inner world of Jon's fear as well as the other characters into the outer world of the series, and through that, allow it to reverberate in the listener.

Accordingly, this chapter will discuss how the five seasons of *TMA*, when viewed through the lens of the Kübler-Ross grief model, unsettle the structure of a tragedy play in order to show the development of the characters as they engage with themes of fear.

2.1 Denial

Over the course of the first season, Jon has to learn to accept that the supernatural is real, and that horror found the statements exist in the same world as him. Accordingly, the first season of *TMA* corresponds to the stage of denial in the Kübler-Ross model. Within Jon's experience, this expresses itself as scepticism.

This first season fills the structural function of the Exposition in a five act play, which is the stage in the play where the hero's fatal flaw is established that will bring about his fate. From this, the question arises what Jonathan Sims's fatal flaw could be. Certainly, Danielle Hancock and Leslie McMurtry have found a common flaw among the protagonists of what they term docu-drama horror podcasts: "As the intrepid journalists travel deeper into the hearts of darkness, their innocence is often revealed to be their untrustworthiness" (Hancock and McMurtry 7). Jon shares this character trait of a curiosity that is driven by "innocence," in this case that innocence is a lack of knowledge. Especially in these early episodes, he allows this curiosity to lead him into dangerous circumstances. He has already allowed it to unknowingly tie him to the Eye through his job at the Magnus Institute. Additionally, his scepticism is a similar driving force for his curiosity and is simultaneously something he uses to deny his own lack of knowledge.

At the end of the season, he lets go of his denial that these statements and he, himself, are both part of the same world. The fact that denial is at least in part the root emotion behind his scepticism is proven in the penultimate episode of the season, when Martin [asks](#) him directly why exactly he holds on to his disbelief so fiercely, Jon replies:

"Because I'm scared, Martin! Because when I record these statements it feels... it feels like I'm being watched. I... I lose myself a bit. And then when I come back, it's like... like if I admit there may be any truth to it, whatever's watching will... know somehow. The scepticism, feigning ignorance. It just felt safer." ([ep. 039](#)

["Infestation"](#))

Jon's explanation links both his scepticism and his denial to an underlying fear against which he tries to fight. This interaction with Martin, however, is the moment that Jon finally lets go of his scepticism. This explanation is him coming to terms with that development inside

himself, which was brought on in the face of the undeniable proof of the supernatural; Jane Prentiss's attack on the archives. Evidently, it is hard to disbelieve a wall of worms that is targeting you specifically. This makes the Corruption, as one of the most tangible Fears, an excellent culmination for this first season. The fear of bugs, rot, and filth, cannot be denied because it will, per definition, corrupt its surroundings. As the final spoken line of the season, Jon, no longer able to feign scepticism, vows to learn what is going on ([ep. 40](#)).²⁰

2.2 Anger

After having done away with his denial, Jon dives head first into feelings of anger and suspicion during the second season of *TMA*. When Martin found Gertrude's body at the end of the last season, Jon decides one of the people in the archives is the most likely culprit, and starts investigating his co-workers. This sense of paranoia that haunts the archives is exacerbated by the lack of Sasha, as well as the unnerving presence of Not-Sasha. This monster is interesting because she does not at all appear as Sasha was, however, she has rewritten the memories of everyone who interacts with her. This manifests in the struggle Jon experiences between being as suspicious of her as he is of everyone, and implicitly trusting her because she seems the most well-adjusted after the events of the season one finale. The lack of Sasha herself, as a component-part of the archives, articulates her thematic similarity to the previous head archivist. It is no surprise to find out that Sasha was the person that Gertrude assumed would be the one to follow in her footsteps. Without her, the archives cannot function as rationally and level-headed as they had under Gertrude. Without her, Jon is left to sink away in his suspicions and fears. Because of that, Jon's

²⁰ The end of the first season sees Martin finding the body of Gertrude Robinson in the tunnels under the archives, and Sasha is taken and replaced by something later described as the Not-Them which is an aspect of the fear entity the Stranger.

distrust of the other members of the archive, and his subsequent stalking, serves to erode the bond between him and Tim.

They now know that the supernatural is real, and furthermore, is more ever-present than they thought. This begs the question of how far the horror stretches. Sims has said the following:

[Mystery and horror] both rely on the unknown so heavily. And so the unknown feeds the horror and entices the mystery. But as it goes on, the mystery needs to be, it needs to get answers, otherwise you feel cheated, whereas the horror needs to stay unknown, because if you get all the answers to what the horror is, it's no longer scary, and if everything stays unknown and horrific, then you don't get any answers to the mystery. ("Q&A 1")

Through the limited scope of the early seasons the series manages to contain the setting to just the archives, and through the small voice-cast the characters in the archives have the distinct feel of being more real, more tangible than anyone within the statements. This reflects how Jon sees these people as more real, as well. However, it also is an effective feature of audio narratives when the audio does cross that threshold from unvoiced statements into voiced. This can be felt on a visceral level for the first time in the atmosphere change in the first season episode of "Lost Johns' Cave," when the auditor hears a short voice recording of the surviving statement giver ([ep. 015](#)).

In the second season this becomes ubiquitous; the world expands, connections between statement givers become apparent, and various characters at the peripherals of statements turn out to be recurring. More characters outside of the archives are voiced, and

so are the monsters, most notably, Not-Sasha and MICHEAL the Distortion.²¹ Meta audio-narration starts happening more regularly in this season - the listener is made aware that the Not-Sasha is different from Sasha James because she is suddenly voiced by Evelyn Hewitt instead of by Lottie Broomhall. However, the characters cannot hear this difference because their memories of Sasha have been overwritten by this new person.²² This leaves the listener, for the first time, with knowledge that the characters do not have access to. That is, until Jon finds and relistens to the tapes with the original Sasha's voice on it and realises what has happened. By doing this, Jon breaks into the meta-textuality of the frame-narratology of the tapes that was mentioned in the previous chapter. It is brought into focus that these tapes are not just a medium to bring the story to the listener, they are diegetic objects, and as such, also play a substantial role in the narrative.

The characters are at this point no longer completely in the dark about the supernatural, but neither do they fully know the scope of it yet. They are frantically grasping for answers. It follows then, that the final episodes of season two feature The Stranger²³ and the Spiral,²⁴ in the shape of Not-Sasha and MICHAEL. Both of these monsters play with, and prey on, false perceptions of reality.

However, the true end of the season culminates in a conversation between Jon and Jurgen Leitner,²⁵ who has been hiding in the tunnels. Jurgen Leitner is responsible for Jon's

²¹ The Distortion is a monster of the Spiral, which manifests as a yellow door leading to an unending series of impossible hallways. The Distortion was originally the centre of the Spiral's ritual, which Gertrude Robinson stopped by binding her assistant, Michael Shelley to it, causing MICHAEL to become the face of the Distortion. During the second season, MICHAEL the Distortion is killed and replaced by HELEN, a former victim of it. See chapter 3 for more information.

²² The exception to this is Melanie King, who somehow remembers the original Sasha, when she returns to the archives to give a second statement.

²³ Fear of the unknown, see p. 16 for full note.

²⁴ Fear of madness, see p. 18 for full note.

²⁵ Jurgen Leitner collected as many supernatural books as he could in his fortified library, with the intent of keeping the general public safe. Since the library was destroyed in 1994, the books have spread again, carrying a stamp which reads "From the Library of Jurgen Leitner". Since the death of Gertrude Robinson, Leitner has been hiding in the tunnel system under the archives.

first brush with a Fear Entity through his books, and thus, shaped him into the archivist he is. Leitner is also, without question, the person Jon harbours the most anger and hate towards. Leitner explains the scope of the entities to Jon, giving him some of the answers he so desperately wants, but is murdered by Elias, while Jon goes for a smoke, before he can tell Jon too much. Fittingly, for a season that corresponds to the stage of anger, this murder might just be the most directly auditorily graphic depiction of violence in the entire series ([ep. 080 "The Librarian"](#)). Jon's conversation with Leitner is what allows Jon to finally let go of that passionate anger, and is therefore a transition for Jon out of this particular stage of grief.

2.3 Bargaining

The next stage that *TMA* journeys through is the stage of bargaining. The third season begins with Jon on the run from the police, who think he was responsible for Leitner's murder. While hiding out he starts to notice that he now craves the statements, much like a substance addiction. He also learns that when he asks a question of someone, they have to answer him. This power was already hinted at a few times during the previous season, however, now Jon is conscious of his ability and starts to actively use his power. He makes the choice to potentially deepen his own bond with the Eye in order to understand what is going on, and after he has been exonerated and reinstated as the head archivist, to try and stop the Stranger.

It transpires that the Stranger is about to conduct a ritual that will allow it to come fully into the mundane world, and in doing so, will make it strange and unknowable. The second half of the season revolves around the protagonists trying to find a way to disrupt this ritual, the aforementioned Unknowing, which they do with the help of a large quantity

of plastic explosives that Gertrude had been stockpiling before her death (ep. 113 “Breathing Room”). The hope is that they will be able to salvage the situation and save the world, now that they mostly understand the layout of the supernatural.

However, in the effort, Daisy is trapped in the Buried,²⁶ and Tim and Jon are both hit by the TNT explosion. The season ends with Tim having died, and Jon in a coma, trapped on the verge of making a choice between dying as a human or living on as an avatar in service of the Eye.

The soundscaping and the setting are both significantly expanded this season. The setting has started to expand drastically, by virtue of Jon being forced out of the archives - the tapes leave the archives to record Georgie’s apartment, and even take trips to the U.S. and China. Alongside this expanded setting, the sound has also started to more clearly reflect the distinction between the normal and the supernatural by switching between mono and stereo²⁷. This has the effect of making the strange sound progressively more real and vibrant than the mundane, the sound scape for which has not changed but does now sound flat by comparison. A quiet question is posed to the listener as well as the characters - who is listening to the tapes - Jon, Elias, the Eye, or something else? Thus, a new and broader frame starts to form, and very occasionally bits of it can be seen.

Throughout this season, Jon encounters statements about people connected to the entities and their road to becoming, and crucially - choosing to become - avatars for their fear entity (ep. 089, ep. 091). Much emphasis is placed on the necessity for choice during this process, so this season foregrounds the dilemma of this choice for Jon. It shows him other people who have made the bargain of power and relative safety in exchange for tying

²⁶ Fear of tight spaces, see p. 13 for full note.

²⁷ An example of mono sound can be found in [this](#) excerpt of ep. 118, and an example of stereo sound can be found [here](#) in the same episode. Headphones are recommended.

themselves to various fear entities. During the Unknowing, Nikola²⁸, wearing Gertrude's skin, taunts Jon with his inadequacies; "You didn't even know what it was. Do you know how many people I killed to keep the world in one piece? The sacrifices I made, and you didn't even know what you were fighting" ([ep. 119 "Stranger and Stranger"](#)).

This makes it clear that his deepest fear is a lack of knowledge, and for that he bargains his humanity away. His fear does not just lie in the fact that he would fail to stop the ritual, his fear instead lies in that he was not even aware of it before it was too late. At this point in his journey, he does not desire more agency, but more knowledge. Of course, this obsession is precisely what drives him further into the domain of the Eye, but that is the transaction he makes by choice. Naturally, however, he is making this choice without all of the knowledge needed to see what that will eventually result in.

2.4 Depression

The fourth season begins with Jon having to reckon with the fallout of the previous season, setting the tone for a season that corresponds to the stage of depression, as characterised by a prolonged period of profound sadness or alternatively a feeling of apathy, as well as to the Falling Action in the tragic structure.

Interestingly, this marks the first season where the first episode is not narrated by Jon himself, because Jon has been in a coma ever since the explosion in "Stranger and Stranger." Instead, Oliver Banks, an avatar of the End,²⁹ tells a still comatose Jon that he has a choice to make between letting go of life completely, or choose to become an avatar for

²⁸ Nikola Orsinov is an aspect of the Stranger. She appears as a store mannequin dressed as a circus ringmaster. She can take on the guise of people by wearing their skin and voice-boxes. To a degree she also seems to wear their personalities and memories when she does this.

²⁹ Fear of death, see p. 21 for full note.

the Eye. Heralded by the sound of static, Jon chooses to live and wakes up, alone, and as a being that now has to feed on the fear of others. From here, he comes back to a very different archive. Tim has died in the explosion, Daisy was trapped inside of the Buried, and Martin has completely isolated himself from the others in the intervening months and is quietly on his way to become an avatar of the Lonely.

With this being the stage of depression, it is also fitting that the entities that are posing the largest threat this season are the Lonely and something new that might be looming on the horizon called the Extinction. Of these, the Lonely is an emotional threat to Jon, promising the loss of Martin in favour of saving the world from this newly developing entity. The Extinction is a much more straightforward threat. It is the fear of “the future without us” (ep 134 “Time of Revelation”), and ties into current fears of climate change and other man made calamities that will spell the end of the human race. As an emergent entity, it is closely linked to a recurring focus of Weird fiction, the Anthropocene. Luckhurst describes this concept as “the largely detrimental effects of human development on Nature and the fate of the planet, now so irreversible and substantial as perhaps to inaugurate a new geological epoch” (27). This lets the Extinction connect back into established anxieties regarding the future, and those pessimistic perspectives that much Cosmic Horror holds (Packer and Stoneman 24).

It follows that the threat of the emergence of such an entity in particular externalises a feeling of hopelessness, a feeling that the characters of *TMA* are similarly also wrapped up in. Even the characters that were most shaped by their anger or aggression in the previous season are supernaturally purged of those hot passions, and are left colder. Melanie has the source of her wrath, a ghost bullet that was lodged inside of her, removed during an impromptu surgery, while Daisy is severed from the Hunt by her period of

captivity inside of the Buried. Logic and reason has been returned to them, and with that, it seems, comes the cold certainty that they are doomed.

This becomes textual when Jon finds out the only way to leave the institute and the Eye is to gauge your eyes out. He immediately asks Martin to leave with him and run away together, and Martin refusing to do so is what marks the true low point of the season's depression (ep. 154). It is thus made explicit that they are not going to get away from the situation, by their own choice. It also marks the point after which the characters stop being caught in their inertia and instead start moving again. In "Panopticon" (ep. 158), Martin reveals that he was never truly planning to join the Lonely, and was only playing along to see what Peter Lukas's aim was. In response, Peter traps him into the realm of the Lonely, where he loses himself in the mist.

After Jon has pulled Martin out of the Lonely, and has destroyed Peter, the two hide in a cottage in Scotland. Thinking themselves safe for a little while, Jon reads what he thinks is one of the statements he has brought for sustenance, only to be trapped into reading Elias's ritual to bring all of the fear entities fully into the world, with the Eye at the top (ep. 160). As the world as we know it ends, Jon ascends into omniscience.

In the end, the Eye ends the world before the Extinction can truly come into its own. However, neither the Extinction nor the Lonely cannot be said to merely have been red herrings and nothing else because they externalise the mental stage of Jon and the other characters and allow them to reflect and develop further through that interaction.

2.5 Acceptance

Finally, the fifth season resonates with the last stage of the grieving process; acceptance. It is therefore fitting that the season begins with an episode that reflects back on everything

that has led to this point, and on the people that were lost (ep. 161 “Dwelling”). This reflection allows Jon and Martin to find sufficient closure to leave the cottage in order to journey through the now hellish and strange world to where the Eye and Elias reside; the Magnus Institute, now the centre of the world. They make the decision to try and stop Elias, and try to turn the world back to normal. Embarking on this quest-like journey allows the two to pursue a goal, and with that, to stay in motion instead of relapsing into the inertia of the previous season. While they are not hopeful, necessarily, they are also no longer directionless even if they are unsure of how much they might be able to do against these fear gods. However, the fact that on a grand scale there might be no true use to their actions does not matter now, because they are making their own meaning among the endless horror.

Since Jon has now reached a state of acceptance, he is no longer ignorant of the scope of the horror like he was in season one and two, but he is no longer in despair like he was in the third and fourth season either. He is now fully aware of the world around him, to the point of omniscience, and he is, while not hopeful, now intent on being an agent of his own fate.

This final season does away completely with the distance between Jon’s personal world and the statements themselves. As he and Martin travel through a string of horrific domains in a manner reminiscent of Dante Allegiri’s *Divine Comedy*, Jon remains compelled to narrate what they find there. Now though, he is no longer separated from it. He is physically standing in these assorted hell spaces and watches it all. This is emphasised by the now fully realised stereo soundscaping that characterises this entire season. Sound is now able to convey story on its own, and even replaces part of the spoken dialogue between

characters.³⁰ Previously, the sound of the supernatural was mostly confined to a sterile sound booth quality that was used for the statements, with exceptions when the supernatural intruded into the world of the characters. Consequently, this strongly increased presence of the soundscape conveys that the supernatural has become the new natural.

In terms of the tragedy structure, this final season takes the place of the denouement. Traditionally, the denouement is the act that brings a new equilibrium to the play by resolving the plot (Freytag 137). Although of course not necessarily resulting in a happy ending, this does return a balance and therefore a sense of closure to the play.

Here, the unsettling element of cosmic horror that was discussed in the previous chapter present is visible again in the unsettled version of the denouement that is portrayed in *TMA*. While season five does present a new normal at the start of the season; a world overtaken by fear entities, it does not see fit to end the tragedy there. Instead the narrative lingers in this state for another full season, looking at itself in detail and forcing the audience to be present alongside it. Richard J. Hand says that horror podcasts have a particular ability to confuse the boundary between the narrative and the listener. He adds:

Podcast drama at its best explores this embodiment and the tensions between object and subject, and is even able to take us inside the head of a protagonist and make us become the subject. This can create a phenomenal interiority, a dynamic that challenges the traditional gaze of spectatorship and makes our experience of a narrative implicit, intimate and even illicit. (198)

³⁰ For a clear example of this, listen to the scene involving a creaky bench in “Epoch”, ep. 175.

That this complicity of the listener is something the series engages with was touched on briefly in the previous chapter as well. Here, near the end of the two hundred episodes long podcast, the boundary between listener and subject finally collapses completely when listener and protagonists find out that the tapes themselves have always been a ritual of the Web. The answer to the question of who has been listening to the tapes is finally answered; it is us, the listeners. The aim of the ritual is to release the entities from their world into countless other hypothetical worlds through the tapes, like our own perhaps, thereby ridding their own world of the entities and turning it back to how it was before the Eye took over. Jon and co. are asked to make the choice between dooming their world forever or potentially dooming others (ep. 197 “Connected”). In this ritual, the act of listening to these episodes is what has opened the door between our worlds for the fears.

We, the listeners, are equally responsible, but still cannot stop listening until we know how it all ends. And then, at the end, the listener is denied this knowledge. Jon tells Martin: “Cut the tether. Send them away. Maybe we both die. Probably. But maybe not. Maybe, maybe everything works out, and we end up somewhere else” ([ep. 200 “Last Words”](#)). Yes, Jon makes his choice and the fears are released into other worlds, and the world is turned back. However, Jon and Martin are gone, and the listener is left unsure of their fate. Have they died? Have they also gone to another world? Or has something else entirely happened to them? The final episode ends without divulging this knowledge. While there is a definite sense of closure in the conclusion to the plot, there is no emotional closure to be found. Jon has escaped his role of a tragic hero because he has both ended tragically and not ended tragically simultaneously. Thus, the series denies the listener not just the knowledge of what happened, but through that, again unsettles the idea of a resolution. Instead, Basira speaks directly into the tape recorder: “If anyone’s listening ...

Goodbye. I'm sorry, and - Good luck. [CLICK]" ([ep. 200](#)) There is no ending, and then it simply ends. The listener is returned to a world that is whole again and, ostensibly, as if it never happened, except that everyone in it remembers the horror they experienced.

The last season, thus, subverts the idea of resolution by withholding this emotional closure after having constructed a kinship between the listener and the characters over the course of the entire series by dissolving the distance between these realms. It does this through its aforementioned transformation of frame narratives and soundscaping, as well as by leading the listener along these five stages, in a simulation of the development of the characters themselves.

Conclusion

As a short review, this chapter considered each of the five seasons of *TMA* as they dovetail with both the Kübler-Ross grief model and the structure of a tragedy play.

The first season processes Jon's denial, which expresses itself as scepticism. By framing it as scepticism, he denies that he fears his lack of knowledge. This denial is a driving force for his curiosity, bringing to mind a tragic hero's fatal flaw. He cannot let go of his denial until a monster from a statement attacks the archives directly.

During the second season, Jon is driven by directionless anger and suspicion, eroding the bond between him and his colleagues. While the group now know the supernatural exists, they do not know the entirety, and are searching for answers as more connections between statement givers become apparent.

Finally, Jon's conversation with Leitner allows him to transition out of the stage of anger.

The third season, the bargaining stage, has Jon choosing to deepen his alignment with the Eye to gain more knowledge. His fear of not knowing has grown into a fear that this

lack might hurt others. This season foregrounds the dilemma of this choice for Jon, and to inform his decision, he is presented with people who also faced this choice.

The fourth season corresponds to depression, centring the emotional fallout of the climax of season three in the characters. This is reflected in the two entities that are foregrounded this season. The Extinction externalises a feeling of existential hopelessness, while the Lonely reflects the lack of solidarity among the characters. These entities allow the characters to reflect and develop further through that interaction.

During the fifth season, Jon has accepted his own fear and his agency within that scope. His growth serves to unsettle the final stage of the tragic structure, the denouement, by refusing to despair and endure the apocalypse as new normal. The end does not divulge the fate of the two central characters, Jon and Martin, thus withholding emotional closure from the listener. Through that, the series unsettles even the final resolution and reframes it as uncertain. The future is not decided yet, fatal flaws are not what decides one's fate, they themselves do.

Thus, this exploration of fate, constricting the tragic hero, could also be seen as an examination of existential ideas. This will be further explored in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

Existential Bad Faith, Humanity, and Choice

The first chapter discussed the ways in which *The Magnus Archives* sets itself apart from other cosmic horror, namely, by envisioning the monstrous as something that ultimately sprouted from human fear. Subsequently, chapter two explored how the podcast used its form and structure to reflect the arc of protagonist Jonathan Sims, through its tragedy-like construction. This showed that, rather than characters in traditional tragedies, the fatal flaw of the people in *TMA* was not anything inherent, but rather came from their fear and their grief. This chapter will develop this idea further by exploring how various characters respond to fear in ways that highlight their agency, or the lack thereof. In the series, these struggles are externalised by way of the particular monsters that the characters find themselves connected to and repeatedly interacting with. Additionally, the other characters serve as a comparison to Jonathan Sims's own struggle with these issues.

In order to frame these analyses, several existentialist concepts have generated worthwhile avenues of questioning and conceptualising the struggles of these characters. More Specifically, these are Sartre's concepts of "authenticity" and "bad faith" (*Being and Nothingness* 47). This chapter will, thus, start by defining these concepts and ideas, after which it will proceed to apply them to the analyses of various characters of *TMA*.

3.1 An Existential Framework

As said above, the critical lens of this chapter consists of several concepts which originate from Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism. Existentialism is a school of thought that sees the

universe as inherently meaningless and chaotic. There is no higher being or imposed moral structure that shapes reality. This means that we must create any meaning in our life ourselves, and that we are free to make our own choices. Jack Reynolds says the following: “It is the realization that nothing external can compel us to be or do anything, and consequently that the failures and successes of our lives depend only on ourselves” (71). Thus, we are more than just “free” to make choices, it is imperative that we do so. Realising and exercising our freedom to act is what enables us to live authentically, according to Sartre. Since this freedom to choose is always present, by denying the very existence of a choice, one is acting in bad faith, causing them to act inauthentically (73). For example, someone might act in bad faith through passive inaction. The example that Sartre gives is of a woman who does not react to the hand laid on her by a flirty man. By not removing the hand, while not reacting favourably either, she is denying the reality and postponing the need for her to react in either way (*Being and Nothingness* 55). Sartre posits that she is making herself into an object by acting inauthentically.

Another way to act in bad faith could be someone who is asked to hurt another person under the threat of being killed, they might very well say that they have no choice but to comply. Sartre would disagree, and would instead posit that there is still a decision being made here. The decision to die, while not a desirable outcome, is still a true choice. By denying the presence of a decision in the moment, the chooser is positioning themselves as a passive object, at the mercy of circumstance, rather than as a sentient actor. In *TMA*, previous Archivist, Gertrude Robinson is in danger of acting in bad faith in this way by putting the pressing need to save the world before any other consideration. She is willing to do anything, sacrifice anyone around her, because she has decided that the greater good takes absolute precedence over all else. After a lifetime of fighting to prevent the rituals at

all cost, she learns that all rituals up to that point were inherently flawed and could never have come to fruition. The question remains if the rituals would have failed without her or if she was the fated spoke in the wheels that the universe pushed in place to topple the rituals. Consequently, in the world of *TMA*, Gertrude's self-deception has externalised her as an object of the universe. Of course, following this realisation, she is murdered by Elias, and thus rendered into a literal object before the first episode even begins (ep. 158, "Panopticon").

Additionally, according to Sartre, a choice can only be made in the present and for the immediate present, since no decision made in the past can retain power over you in later moments. "...the existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and that there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero. What counts is the total commitment, and it is not by a particular case or particular action that you are committed altogether" ("Existentialism is a Humanism" 11). As Reynolds phrases it: "What I currently am is not the foundation of what I will be in the future; the past does not cause me to act in any manner whatsoever, so each moment is perpetually a new one" (71). An example of what this means would be that, if a person makes the decision to stop drinking alcohol, if the next week this person is offered a beer, they now have to make the choice to adhere to their previous decision to not drink. In actuality, nothing is constricting this person's option to disregard their past, and drink the beer. Instead, the person has to choose to not drink, over and over again, every time they are confronted with the choice. In that sense, any past authenticity you might have chosen to embody, does not say anything about your future authenticity. For *TMA* this would mean that, according to Sartre, characters are

continuously shaping themselves anew, sometimes authentically and other times in bad faith, but always as separate identities from their past.

3.2 Jonathan Sims's struggle of guilt

As stated in earlier chapters, the series' protagonist, Jonathan Sims, struggles profusely with exactly these types of questions. Throughout the series he questions his freedom to make his own choices, and in doing so he anguishes over his responsibility within this systemic evil he finds himself trapped within. Put concretely, Jon tries to find answers to the following two questions. Firstly, has he lost his humanity, whatever this might mean to him, and become a monster? Secondly, is he guilty of the bad things he does, or is he being controlled by an outside force?

These questions are inevitably, in part, informed by Jon's own history with the fears. His first experience with anything supernatural is unveiled to the listener in the episode "A Guest for Mr. Spider" (ep. 081). In this, he explains how, as a young child, he encountered a children's book about a spider that tried to lure him into its parlour. By pure coincidence, he was saved by a neighbourhood bully who broke the hold the book had on Jon, but then proceeded to get caught by the spider, instead. This experience seems to have set Jon on the trajectory that led him to become a researcher of the supernatural at the Magnus Institute. Most visibly, it instilled in him an acute phobia of spiders and an obsession with books from the library of Jurgen Leitner. Perhaps less immediately visible but nevertheless clearly present in the following excerpt, is the effect it has had on his sense of self-reliance:

The feeling I have been living with my whole life, that if that poor idiot hadn't gotten involved he would still be alive. A strange conviction that, if I had been able to face

that thing myself, maybe I could have saved him. Stopped it. ([ep. 81, "A Guest from Mr. Spider"](#))

Guilt, then, seems to be a strong component in Jon's esteem of himself, and a concept at the core of the moral system to which he holds himself. This guilt shows in his initial reluctance to involve the people around him in his problems. Later, it shows in his unquestioning willingness to accept hostile or even aggressive behaviour and blame from others as automatically justified and deserved. At the end of the series this sense of guilt culminates in Jon's choice to make himself into a martyr in order to keep the Fears contained. A choice that he reneges on when this choice will mean the death of Martin.³¹ He can sacrifice himself but not the person he loves, because he does not see himself as worth saving. There, Jon seems to have set himself apart from what he considers human, by virtue of making this distinction of being worth saving. In doing so, he himself has at last answered his own question regarding his status as a monster.

But the text of the series itself does not necessarily agree with him on this. As discussed in the previous chapter, the tragic hero is moved by his fatal flaw, something in their personality that means they were always going to make the choices to lead them down the path that led to their tragedy. In 2013, Katy Doughty posted a comic which showed that if Hamlet and Othello switched places, they would solve each other's problems immediately and without much trouble ([Dipthatpen.blog](#)). But instead, Hamlet spends his play hemming and hawing, and Othello acts too rashly where he should have perhaps considered the circumstances.

³¹ By this point, as per the end of the fourth season, Jon and Martin are in a romantic relationship.

However, *TMA*'s tragic heroes are different in that they do not follow this mould. Instead, they are pushed into tragedy by their encounters with horror, not by character flaws. Jon is moved to join the institute by his encounter with the web as a child. Thus, his choice to do so is not internally motivated. Instead, the character trait that can be perceived as his fatal flaw, his curiosity, is created externally by the Web, which is not coincidentally the fear of being manipulated.

This pattern holds for other characters, too. Martin is moved to join the Magnus Institute because of his sick mother, which also led him to drop out of his education. Tim joins because of his brother's death, and Melanie cannot let go of a true encounter with a ghost. Both Basira and Daisy are forced into a section of the police that deals with the supernatural cases after they each have an encounter. All of them are victims, not inherently flawed. Nor do they need to learn from their flaws over the course of the series. Instead, for all of them, their storylines revolve around learning to recognise that they are trapped in a world with monsters, and choosing how to handle that.

According to Sartre; "Man makes himself; he is not found ready-made; he makes himself by the choice of his morality, and he cannot but choose a morality, such is the pressure of circumstances upon him." ("Existentialism is a Humanism" 15). The circumstances that press on these characters could very well be immutable, but instead of preventing them from acting in accordance with their morals, Sartre states that it forces them to do so. How they handle it, per definition, is what gives shape to their morality.

Therefore, rather than weighing Jon's true guilt, it might perhaps be more helpful to ask why his feelings of guilt are foregrounded by the text. What is Jon's guilt achieving for the listener? Certainly, it allows the text to engage with those same questions in a more broad sense. From Jon's agonising about his perceived transformation from human into

monster springs an exploration of the true nature of humanity versus monstrosity.

Similarly, Jon's doubts about the extent of his free will and agency allows for an examination of various points of view on the subject by different characters. Therefore these questions, while stemming from Jon's trauma and subsequent guilt, grant deep insight into all of *TMA*'s characters, be they protagonist or antagonist.

3.3 Martin Blackwood's moments of choosing

Martin K. Blackwood is the closest thing *TMA* has to a second protagonist, and he functions somewhat as a mirror to Jon. Other than Jon, Martin is the only non-antagonistic character that stays present for the entire duration of the series. He is one of the original archival assistants, and because of this he functions as a point of support and commiseration to Jon since he has survived the same horrors together with Jon. However, Martin also acts as a counterbalance to Jon. This is evident in the way their personalities shift in opposition to each other as the series progresses. As discussed in detail in the previous chapter, Jon begins the series as an abrasive, petty, and somewhat suspicious man, and over the course of the seasons he opens up into someone much gentler. At the same time, Martin comes across as insecure, sweet, and a little naive and bumbling in the first season. By the end of *TMA*, he has become much more self-assured and, with that, much snarkier.

Similarly, Martin's conflicts are a departure from Jon's. While both are struggling with feelings of guilt, Martin's is focussed on his perceived inadequacy and not so much on any question about any moral implication regarding his humanity. Martin's fears are of not being enough and of falling short. These fears stem from his mother, whom he has had to take care of from a young age and who has always resented him quietly for that fact (ep. 118 "The Masquerade"). These feelings were exacerbated by having to drop out of high

school, and subsequently having to lie on his CV in order to work jobs he is unqualified for so he could make enough money to provide for his mother (ep. 039 “Infestation”). These experiences have resulted in low self-esteem, loneliness, apathy, and the aforementioned feelings of inadequacy. His first horrific experience, being isolated by Jane Prentiss in his flat without anyone noticing for a period of two weeks (ep. 020 “Colony”), compounded these as the conflicts Martin struggles with for the rest of his arc.

Compared to Jon, then, Martin’s struggle with the question of agency is turned inwards. He thinks that nothing he does could ever matter in any case, especially in the grand scheme of things. Because of this, it matters less to him whether or not he is being controlled or manipulated. To him, manipulation can even be a tool to be used. Often, the way Martin brandishes his own manipulation is in order to make the people around him overlook him, to their own detriment (ep. 118, ep. 158 “Panopticon”). Perhaps because of this need to be overlooked, while simultaneously fearing it, he has attracted the interest of a surprisingly large number of fear entities.

The Corruption, the Web, and the Lonely are all rejected by him because they would not help him further his goals.³² Originally, these goals take the shape of taking care of his mother, and gaining a comfortable measure of financial security and general stability in his life, informing his choice to take a position he is unqualified for because it will have a higher salary. Later in the series, especially after his mother passes away in season four, his singular goal becomes keeping Jon safe, and to a lesser extent, the other assistants as well. Towards the end of the series, his goal expands from just keeping Jon safe, to also taking care of himself. Even if this mostly manifests in a need for revenge on the avatars that have hurt

³² In season 1, 5, and 4, respectively.

him personally. However, the entities that court Martin, can only appeal to his wounds and fears and not to these goals. This allows him, a person who has lived his life embodying the concept of responsibility, to stand firm against them. The Corruption offers a family of sorts, an escape from his loneliness at the cost of his individuality. Something he cannot even contemplate at the time because it would mean abandoning the care for his mother. The Web appeals to his need for control, to the ease he has in appearing as he wants to be perceived by people around him, and he refuses it without a second thought.

The Lonely is the most tempting to Martin since it offers him an escape from the pain of caring for people who do not return those feelings. It does this by letting him sink into apathy and indulge in isolation. This comes to a climax at the end of the fourth season, when he gives Peter Lukas the following explanation on why he will not join the Lonely after all.

“It’s not him! It’s not anybody. It’s just me. Always has been. When I first came to you, I thought I had lost everything. John was dead, my mother was dead, the job I had put everything into trapped me into spreading evil and I- I really didn’t care what happened to me. I told myself I was trying to protect the others, but honestly we didn’t even like each other. Maybe I just thought joining up with you would be a good way to get killed.

And then Jon came back, and suddenly I had a reason I had to keep your attention on me. Make you feel in control so you didn’t take it out on him. And if that meant drifting further away, so what? I’d already grieved for him. And if it meant now saving him, it was worth it.” ([ep. 158, “Panopticon”](#))

He rejects the Lonely because he was only indulging it to save Jon, and it becomes clear that the Lonely will not help with that. The distinction is clear. Getting closer to the Lonely was

done out of self-destruction, out of pain. Breaking that connection was done, not so much out of a fear that he was becoming a monster as Jon might have, nor out of a fear that he was losing agency, but out of a more utilitarian sentiment.

3.4 Helen Richardson and Mike Crew: Monster or Avatar

Around the second and third season of the series, it is starting to become apparent that there are two possible futures available to Jon. He will either become a victim, or a willing avatar of the fear entity he is tied to via his role as the archivist. The series presents a whole array of examples of how both of these outcomes played out for other characters. Of these, Mike Crew and Helen Richardson are perhaps the most illuminating, since they provide close parallels to Jon's situation in two different ways.

Helen first appears in "The New Door" (ep. 047), where she tells Jon about her captivity inside of the Distortion, a manifestation of impossible architecture and hallways which is part of the Spiral, and whose humanoid form at that time is going by the name MICHAEL. At the end of the episode she is recaptured by MICHAEL, leading to her being digested inside of its hallways and killed. In episode 101, "Another Twist" after MICHAEL decides to kill Jon, he is destroyed by the Distortion, who now uses the shape of HELEN. HELEN as the Distortion is adamant that the original Helen has died in the corridors, and that HELEN, both, is Helen, but is not Helen. She is the Distortion in the guise of Helen. Helen died as a victim of the Distortion, and was subsequently made into the Distortion. She is now no longer a person, but a monster. In existential terms, she has lost the ability to give meaning to her life, and to live authentically, since she is now part of a much larger being. As a manifestation of the Spiral, she can only act out of instinct. While she might appear to make decisions, from an existential point of view, none of these can be authentic choices,

because she does not want anything for herself anymore. This is made explicit in the final scene before Jon destroys the Distortion:

HELEN. Fine. So if that's all true... why? Why would I do any of that? What's my actual motive?

ARCHIVIST. I don't think you even have one. It's just what you are. ([ep. 187, "Checking Out"](#))

The distinction is made here between a motive or a state of being, as a reason for actions being taken. This inability to act authentically, then, is what makes her distinct from an avatar. She is not an active agent who has chosen to walk down the path to Becoming, but a victim, taken, and assimilated. She is truly an existential object in this world, exemplified further by the Distortion's appearance as something so passive as architecture, rather than anything alive and active.

Mike Crew exists on the other side of that coin. He did absolutely choose to become an avatar of the Vast³³. On the subject of his leap of faith into the Vast, he says:

"There are echoes of resignation, I think, almost desperation. That *can't* be right, though. What reason would I have had not to jump? Not to become as I am now. Perhaps I just didn't know the true joy of vertigo. It doesn't matter. In the end I threw myself into the arms of that vast emptiness, and I bound my tormentor to the book." ([ep. 091, "The Coming Storm"](#))

A few things become clear from this excerpt. The first is Mike's feeling of disconnect between his past fears and his current feelings about his existence. The second is his reason

³³ The Vast itself is of course a fascinating expression of a nihilist worldview. Simon Fairchild, a prominent avatar of the Vast, is vocal and cheerful about the opinion that humanity is meaningless in the face of the vastness of the universe. He holds, therefore, that while people may freely choose to act in any way, any action a person may take is ultimately just as meaningless as if they had not had the free will to take them.

for doing so being to escape and trap his “tormentor,” a Lichtenberg figure that stalked him since childhood. During his statement he talks about the other entities he searched out and considered as a possible way to save him from the thing chasing him. The question arises, then, if Mike was driven to the Vast by his acute fear, can that be constituted as a true choice? Robert Solomon says the following on the subject:

Bad faith, in its typical and most disturbing form, is pretending that one has no choice. One always has choices. Of course, the choices may well be repellent. The consequences may be ghastly. It may take real courage or firm psychological resolve to be able to do what one comes to see should be done. But what one cannot and should not do is to wave one's hands helplessly and declare, “I have no choice.” Even looking down the barrel of a gun, one has choices. They just turn out to be rather terrifying and quite possibly fatal. (136)

An existentialist would hold that, yes absolutely, that is still a choice. Still, Mike and Helen present two different ways a person can be forced into becoming associated with a fear entity. Mike Crew is forced by his circumstances into believing that he had no choice but to join the Vast. By needing to escape the Lichtenberg figure so badly, he assumes that to escape takes undeniable precedence over any other choice, causing him to act in bad faith. While Helen was made into an object by outside forces, Mike is making himself into one. Within *TMA*, then, to be given over to a fear entity is a relinquishing of agency, and is therefore, in existential terms, to a degree indeed a loss of humanity.

3.5 Annabelle Cane and Melanie King: Debating free will

There is one person in the world of *TMA* who has very well defined thoughts on this matter of free will, and that is Annabelle Cane. Perhaps not surprisingly, given her status as an avatar of the Web, Annabelle seems to have considered the matter deeply, and has come to the conclusion that she feels mostly ambivalent about the idea of freedom of choice as anything. In the statement she leaves for the archivist to find, she speaks about the subject extensively:

In its post-script, Tolstoy muses on the concept of free will, on whether or not *he* really believes in it. He ultimately decides that if all the millions upon millions of factors that weigh upon our choices were fully and completely known, then all could be foreseen and predetermined.

But, he argues, it is quite impossible for the human mind to comprehend even a fraction of these. And in that vast, dark space of ignorance lies: free will.

Isn't that marvelous, Jon? Free will is simply ignorance. It's just the name we give to the fact that no one can ever really see everything that controls them.

Of course, that's not the real crux of the free will question that's bothering you at the moment, is it? I think that one probably comes down to whether or not you're *choosing* to continue reading this statement out loud. ([ep. 147 "Weaver"](#))

In this excerpt, Annabelle takes a deterministic approach to the question of if even free will exists at all. She defers to Tolstoy, and says that free will is effectively the same as ignorance. If someone were aware of all the treads pulling on them, they would know why they could only ever have made the exact choice that they did make. "If you choose to believe in a free will," she says to Jon, "then yes. All you have done has been of your own

free will. They have all been your choices” ([ep. 147](#)). Of course, Annabelle’s patron is the Web, the fear of control and manipulations, so her perception of agency is coloured by this mindset. Still, she considers Jon in charge of his own actions. She makes a distinction between outright manipulation and the simple inevitability of cause and effect that only an omniscient observer would be able to discern and understand. She does not absolve Jon of his actions and choices, but neither does she blame him for them. He was not coerced or manipulated by her, but he was presented with bad choices as well as with new monstrous impulses and urges. For Annabelle, he is both able to make free and authentic choices, while simultaneously constricted and steered by largely unseen influences. To her, the idea of free will itself is thus wholly superfluous. Instead, she regards her own painful history of Becoming with apathy. It does not matter to her whether it was part of a big plan or if it happened by random chance (ep. 69 “Thought for the Day”). It simply happened.

Of course, Annabelle is far from the only one with an opinion about this matter. There are a number of characters who categorically disagree with her disregard of the importance of free will. Perhaps the best example of these is Melanie King,³⁴ a ghost hunter with a YouTube channel who joins the archives around the third season. Her reaction to being confined to a situation that she cannot change would likely garner Sartre’s approval. Upon finding out she is stuck working for an evil entity, Melanie acts in protest. Initially, she repeatedly tries to murder Elias because he is the representative of that evil. After the bullet that was lodged inside her, and that was poisoning her with rage is removed, she lets go of that strategy and instead decides to embark on a prolonged strike.

³⁴ Another good example is found in Daisy Tonner, who fights to repent for her acts after she is rescued from the coffin, as well as Tim Stoker, who chooses to go out in a blaze of glory fighting the entity that took his brother and Sasha, saving the world in the process.

The reasoning she gives for this is as follows: “If I’m just another cog, maybe I can’t leave the machine, but from this moment I’m not turning. I’m jammed” ([ep. 150, “Cul-de-Sac”](#)). She decides that while she cannot quit, she does not have to comply either. Through this, she asserts her authentic will. This decision is presented in the series as a step on her journey of personal growth, and an expression of mental health because it comes on the heels of her decision to start seeing a therapist (ep. 149 “Concrete Jungle”). She is the only character in the entire show to do so. Similarly, when it is revealed that the way to leave the institute and sever your bond with the Eye is by wilfully blinding yourself, she is the only person to choose to do so. “It’s going to be okay. Honestly, I think it is. I can’t be a part of this anymore and if this is the price, then I think I’m okay to pay it” ([ep. 155, “The Cost of Living”](#)). Here, she deliberately frames this as a choice that she is making, rather than something she needs to do or is forced to. Again, making the choice to blind herself in order to escape this prison is framed in the series as the healthy, authentic, choice for her. Because she has chosen to prioritise her bodily autonomy, and has managed to carve that space out for herself, it makes thematic sense that she is one of the very few characters who survives the series to the very end and who lives to see the world restored. She, together with the other two final survivors, Basira and Georgie, are all characterised by their deliberate choice to prioritise their personal safety, physical as well as emotional. This is something neither Jon nor Martin never fully managed to embrace. Annabelle, on the other hand, morphs further with the Web and becomes a spider monster, but after she has played her role in the Web’s ritual, she disappears from the story:

ANNABELLE. I’ve played my part to its completion. You get to decide how I exit the stage.

MARTIN. John?

ARCHIVIST. Go!

ANNABELLE. Very well. We shall not see each other again, Archivist. But I eagerly await your decision. ([ep. 197, "Connected"](#))

After the Web's ritual has succeeded and the Fears have escaped, no indication is given whether or not she has escaped to another world with them, or whether she has been discarded, alive or dead, in the now mundane world. It is clear, then, that according to the text, Melanie, more than Annabelle, showcases one way someone might withstand extreme horrors, and indicates how they might even start to recover from these experiences. Namely, this is by acting authentically, and by being aware of one's ability to choose, rather than Annabelle's submission to becoming an object at the whim of larger things.

Thus, with Melanie as an example, Jon's challenge is to learn to let go of coping mechanisms that have become harmful to him. His journey over the course of the series sees him realise he does not want to push the people around him away. During season five, his acceptance of his own fear allows him to start to let go of his curiosity as a crutch. Still, his guilt is not so easy to shake. Even as Martin slowly starts to unpack his own guilt, Jon holds on to his to the bitter end. Thus, the true tragedy of the Magnus Archives is in his inability to do so. The triumph of it is that he might have eventually, after we all stopped listening in. After all, people change.

Conclusion

To reiterate this chapter, when seen through an existential lens the characters in *TMA* are continuously changed by their encounters with horror as well as through their own actions in response.

Since Sartre's existentialism states the universe is inherently meaningless, one acts authentically by exercising their freedom to act, while denying that freedom results in acting in bad faith.

Jon himself asks two existential questions - is he becoming a monster, and is he responsible for his actions. Guilt is at the core of his moral system, informing many of his actions. Curiosity seems like Jon's fatal flaw. However, it is a coping-mechanism that formed from his experiences with the fears. Thus, he might still change, and is not predetermined to a particular fate. Jon's questions allow the series to explore ideas concerning free will and agency through the metaphor of supernatural entities eating away at one's humanity.

Because Martin counterbalances Jon, as their personalities change they keep contrasting each other. Martin's conflicts differ from Jon's instead revolving around his perceived inadequacy, not on his moral responsibilities. Even so, both characters are struggling with feelings of guilt.

In the mythos of *TMA*, people can become a manifestation or an avatar of an entity. Helen was turned into a manifestation of the Spiral and now exists as an extension of it. While Mike Crew chose to become an avatar, his circumstances made him believe he had no choice. To be given over to a fear entity is a relinquishing of agency, and constitutes a loss of humanity.

Some characters have their own answers to Jon's questions. Annabelle Cane takes a deterministic approach, saying that free will exists in the ignorance of the full circumstances. Melanie King disagrees by asserting her agency purposefully. By presenting her rebellious inaction as a healthy and worthwhile act, *TMA* proposes that acting authentically is imperative in surviving under oppressive circumstances. Reflecting this, Jon's character arc reassesses his harmful coping mechanisms.

Conclusion

This paper set out to demonstrate that *The Magnus Archives* is exceptional in how it transforms the genre of cosmic horror to explore how fears impact character, as well as show how both the monsters and the structure of the series serves to elucidate the underlying theme of agency by reflecting the emotional development of the characters.

The first chapter analysed how *TMA*'s horror, falling within the subgenre of cosmic horror, de-centres the human as a subject in favour of something other. The world and cosmology of *TMA* revolves around fear and the exploration of the nature of fear. A clear distinction between the mundane and the supernatural world is created through the frame narrative in every individual episode. This format limits and fractures the initial information given about the world, which both the characters and the listener experiences. This overlap between listener and character serves to dissolve the distinction between the two, especially as diegetically, the line between the archives and the statements breaks down as the series progresses. By the final episode, the listener has become part of the narrative and has become complicit in its horror by virtue of the act of listening.

Since the fear entities function on an emotional level, instead of on rationale, they manifest based on atmospheres and tones. Through this dream-logic, these entities can function both as literal fears and as symbols for complex anxieties. While manifestations of separate entities might overlap with and blur into each other, the entities themselves are a distinct and defining core fear. This distinction between the entity and its imagery allows the series flexibility with its horrors, since the same symbol might in different contexts speak to a different underlying anxiety. The core fear that a symbol embodies is filtered through the fears elicited in its victim. Therefore, fundamentally, horror in *TMA* can never be objective,

and instead work as thematic symbols. These deeper symbols serve to construct metaphors which touch on societal phobic pressure points. Through them, *TMA* engages with societal anxieties and political critiques. In contrast to Lovecraft's cosmic horror stories, the horror in *TMA* is not an otherworldly force attacking the normal, but part of that normal world. Fighting the horror, then, necessitates interrogating what systems make up this normal.

Consequently, *TMA* uses its fear entities to gaze inwards rather than outwards, externalising the emotional developments of its characters and critiquing the assumed normal through having its entities reflect fears from the mundane into a supernatural realm.

The second chapter considered the overall structure of the audio drama. During each season of *TMA*, the experience of the characters corresponds to a stage of the Kübler-Ross model of grief. For the first season that is the stage of denial, which shows up as scepticism in Jon's character. His scepticism is a driving force for his curiosity and is simultaneously something he uses to deny his own lack of knowledge. Jon himself links both this scepticism and his denial to an underlying fear against which he tries to fight.

During the second season, Jon is driven by feelings of anger and suspicion, consistent with the stage of anger. As the world expands this season and connections between statement givers become apparent, Jon's distrust of the other members of the archive erodes the bond between them.

The third stage is bargaining. Jon makes the choice to deepen his bond with the Eye to understand what is going on, since his deepest fear is still a lack of knowledge. Curiosity is still a driving force to Jon. Throughout this season, Jon encounters statements about people on the road to becoming avatars. Much emphasis is placed on the necessity for choice during this process, so this season foregrounds the dilemma of this choice for Jon. The third season ends with the Climax in which the group saves the world at a great cost.

The fourth season corresponds to the stage of depression, as well as to the Falling Action in the tragic structure, and in it Jon has to process the fallout of the previous season. Two entities are foregrounded as the main threats this season. The Extinction externalises a feeling of hopelessness, while the Lonely reflects the lack of solidarity among the characters. Both entities externalise the mental stage of Jon and the other characters and allow them to reflect and develop further through that interaction.

In the fifth season, Jon has accepted his own situation and fear. He is now fully aware of the world around him, and he is intent on actively choosing his own fate. *TMA* manages to unsettle the denouement by presenting a new normal at the start of the season, but not ending the tragedy here. The final episode unsettles it further by not divulging the fate of the two central characters, Jon and Martin, and thus withholding emotional closure. *TMA* denies the listener the knowledge of what happened, and through that unsettles the resolution and reframes it into an uncertainty. The future is not decided yet, fatal flaws are not what decides one's faith, the person themselves does.

Finally, the third chapter draws on several concepts from Sartre's works on Existentialism, which posit the universe is inherently meaningless and chaotic, and in which someone lives authentically by realising and exercising their freedom to act. Conversely, living inauthentically means denying the existence of a choice and is thus acting in bad faith. Reading *TMA* through this lens shows that characters are continuously choosing to take actions, even if they might not be aware of it.

Jon struggles with two existential questions. Firstly, whether he has lost his humanity and become a monster. Secondly, whether he is guilty of his actions, or if he is being controlled by an outside force. Guilt is central to Jon's moral system, as evident from his decisions throughout the series. While Jon seems to follow the template of a tragic hero,

with his fatal flaw as curiosity, upon further examinations this flaw is not an inherent part of his personality, but is instead something induced in him by his experiences with the fears. He and other characters are not internally predetermined to enact their tragic fate, but are instead externally pushed into this position. Jon's questions are thus a springboard for the series to explore ideas about free will and agency through the metaphor of supernatural forces eating away at one's humanity.

Martin provides a continuous counterbalance to Jon, their personalities shift in opposition to each other as the series progresses. Martin's conflicts depart from Jon's because his struggle with the question of agency is turned inwards. Interestingly, the self-oriented mindset that he holds seems to grant him a certain degree of resistance against the influence of the fears.

The series presents examples of the two futures presented to Jon to either become a victim or an avatar to the Eye. Helen is a victim of the Spiral who has been turned into a monster. After becoming a manifestation of the Spiral, she can only act out of instinct because she is no longer a person, but has become an object. Mike Crew did choose to become an avatar of the Vast, but he was forced by his circumstances into believing that he had no choice but to make himself into an object to a fear entity. Within *TMA*, then, to be given over to a fear entity is a relinquishing of agency, and constitutes a literal loss of humanity.

Other characters have formulated their own thoughts about agency and responsibility. Annabelle Cane, avatar of the Web, takes a deterministic approach to the idea of free will, saying that it comes from ignorance. To her, making free and authentic choices is not mutually exclusive to being steered by unseen influences.

At the other end is Melanie King, who asserts her will deliberately. When she finds out the Institute serves the Eye, and that she cannot resign, she resists by refusing to carry out any labour. By presenting this as a healthy and worthwhile act, *TMA* validates Melanie's stance over that of Annabelle. Melanie's self-aware actions present how someone might withstand extreme horrors, and recover from these experiences by acting authentically, and by being aware of one's ability to choose. This reflects Jon's challenge to let go of coping mechanisms that have become harmful.

In brief, *The Magnus Archives*, while set in a grand and complicated universe, is not preoccupied with the intricacies and hard logic of how its entities function, but instead focuses on the human aspect of its world. It is an innovative tragedy that sees initially simple characters deepen to fully realised, complicated people through their experiences with the horrors of the world, as they slowly realise the assertion of their agency. This series, then, shows a new possible way of telling cosmic horror stories, which, like New Weird authors like China Mieville, is mindful of real-world power structures, but which additionally foregrounds and extensively explores the inner world of characters while grappling with existential angst in a way that resonates strongly with the current zeitgeist. *The Magnus Archives* has done something truly impressive by adapting the cosmic horror tale to a modern audience by transforming it to fit the relatively new and unexplored medium of audio dramas. It has taken this genre about otherworldly horrors and has made it about people.

Of course, this paper was not able to fully dive into how *TMA* developed and maintained a strong connection between the listener and its characters. Nor was it possible to look at the nevertheless fascinating events surrounding the production and airing of the fifth season of the series, which happened during the initial covid-19 global lockdown period

in 2020. Because of the accidental overlap between the apocalypse in the show, and similar connotations with the real world events, a strange dissolution and interconnectivity between the series and its audience took place. Both of these subjects deserve further research, and I sincerely hope that someone will choose to do so in a future article.

Appendix

The Magnus Archives Summary

After the previous head archivist of the Magnus Institute has gone missing, Jonathan Sims is promoted to take over the position. The Institute is an academic institution in London that researches the supernatural, its archives house statements given by the general public about their experiences. The first season follows Jon as he tries to bring order to the chaos left by his predecessor. He has decided to convert all of the statements to audio format in order to overhaul the organising system. Some statements have to be recorded on an old tape-recorder because digital recording somehow does not work for them. To help him with this, he is given three assistants, Sasha James, Tim Stoker, and Martin Blackwood. After Jane Prentiss, a woman filled with worms, forces Martin to barricade himself in his apartment for a period of two weeks, the group realise that there is some truth to the statements. They start finding worms around the institute. When Jon squashes a spider on the wall of his office, he inadvertently crumbles the severely weakened wall, causing an avalanche of worms to come pouring in. Sasha is able to run for help to the head of the institute, Elias Bouchard, while Jon, Martin and Tim escape the worms into the tunnel system that lies beyond the destroyed wall. There, Martin, separated from the others, finds the body of the previous archivist, Gertrude Robinson. Upstairs, Elias and Sasha pull the fire extinction system, causing the worms and Jane to die from CO₂ exposure. To hide from the dying worms, Sasha retreats into the department of Artefact Storage, where she finds a table with a webbed pattern from which something appears that kills and replaces her.

In the second season, the Institute is under investigation for the murder of Gertrude by two police officers, Basira Houssain and Alice (Daisy) Tonner. Simultaneously, Jon is investigating the same on his own. Out of suspicion, he pushes Tim and Martin further away. When Jon realises that the Sasha in the archives is not the real one but a monster that has killed the original Sasha, he decides to destroy the table she came from. Sadly, the table was actually holding the monster captive, and with it destroyed, the Not-Sasha attacks. Jon flees into the tunnels under the Institute, where he finds Jurgen Leitner. Leitner tells him that Gertrude was murdered by Elias, and starts to tell about what the world is truly like. However, while Jon takes a moment to smoke a cigarette and process everything he learned, Elias comes in and kills Leitner with a piece of pipe. Jon comes back to the room to find Leitner's body.

At the start of the third season, Jon has gone on the run because he is the primary suspect of Leitner's murder. He is hiding out at the place of his ex-girlfriend, Georgie Barker. He has started to notice that when he asks someone a question, they are compelled to answer. At the same time, he cannot go long without reading statements anymore without starting to feel faint and tired. He uses this new power to question people who also seem to have strange powers, in order to find out more about the Unknowing, a ritual that Gertrude was trying to prevent before she died. This ritual is performed to bring a metaphysical fear entity called the Stranger into the world. They also find out that the Magnus Institute itself is a bastion of another fear entity, the Eye, which none of them can resign from or leave for longer than a couple of weeks. To stop the Unknowing, the group, now including Basira, Daisy, and Melanie King, go to the Madame Tussauds wax museum in order to blow up the ritual while it is underway and thus vulnerable. During the confrontation, Daisy is trapped in a mysterious coffin, Tim dies, and Jon is left in a strange coma. At the same time, Martin and

Melanie use the ritual as a distraction to find evidence that Elias was behind the murders, and have him arrested.

In the fourth season, Jon wakes up from his coma as an avatar of the Eye. Returning to the institute, he finds that Peter Lukas has taken over as interim head of the institute, and that Martin has become his personal assistant. They are researching the potential emergence of a new fear entity, which Peter says will be catastrophic. After being confronted by his friends, Jon resolves to refrain from feeding on people by making them recite their traumatic experiences with the paranormal. To assuage his guilt, he goes into the coffin and saves Daisy. The group finds out that a person can leave the archives if they blind themselves and Melanie chooses to do so. When Peter tells Martin that he is the one who can save the world, Martin realises that he is part of a bet between Elias and Peter and he refuses to keep cooperating. In response, Peter traps him in the Lonely, prompting Jon to come save him. The two go into hiding at a cabin of Daisy's in Scotland. There, Jon is tricked into reading a ritual to bring all the fear entities fully into the world under the Eye's rule. Elias, who is revealed to be the original founder of the Magnus Institute, Jonah Magnus, has been making sure Jon got marked by every single entity over the course of the series. The ritual succeeds, and the world is transformed into a hellscape.

In the fifth season Jon and Martin decide to journey down to what used to be London to destroy Elias and the Institute, as it has become the centre of the Eye, in hope of restoring the world. They travel through segmented domains trapping people inside their deepest fears. They find Basira who is tracking down a feral and monstrous Daisy, who Basira eventually has to kill. As the Archivist, Jon has become omniscient and powerful enough that he can destroy other avatars, although doing this does not help the victims in those domains. When they get to London, they find Georgie, Melanie, and several escaped

victims living in the tunnels. They learn that one entity, the Web, as the only entity capable of something like thought, has orchestrated everything in order to escape to other alternate universes with the intent of preventing the entities' eventual, and inevitable death. This includes the Eye's ritual, as well as the tapes themselves, which are the vehicle to traverse from their world to the world of the listeners. Releasing the fears by destroying the institute would turn their own world back to normal. They decide to blow up the institute. However, Jon betrays this decision and goes to kill Elias, allowing him to take over as the centre of the Eye, so he can let the world die instead. Martin finds him and tells him that he is too late - the others have already set off the explosions. Knowing Martin will die in the explosion, Jon asks him to kill him so that they might perhaps escape to another world together, even if this will release the fears too. Martin stabs Jon. Afterwards, when the world has returned to normal, Basira, Georgie and Melanie search the rubble but all they find is one last tape-recorder.

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