

WEIRD SCIENCES AND THE SCIENCES OF THE WEIRD part 1

Nowadays, it has become a familiar refrain to state that we live in a time of the “new normal,” a time marked by the accelerating climate crisis, environmental disasters, and global pandemic. To put it in the vernacular of weird studies, the events we once thought should not exist have crept into our daily lives. The bizarre chain of events we are witnessing is more than ever calling for the studies of the weird.

If the past couple of decades of research in microbiology, animal cognition, climatology, and space science have taught us anything, it is that there is more to the world than what our perceptual apparatus can comprehend. These scientific discoveries have enabled us to both zoom in on the hidden microworlds and to zoom out on the deep geological and cosmic time, revealing the strange dynamics of human-nonhuman interconnectedness that cannot be reduced to our familiar, human-centered categories. Such dramatic perception shifts are an important aspect of the weird.

What is commonly referred to as “weird science” serves as a descriptive term attributed to any scientific inquiry and practice that produces knowledge which can significantly disrupt our sense of reality and of our place within it. Accordingly, the main subject of the weird sciences are any natural phenomena that have the ability to reveal the frameworks within which we used to conceive and imagine the world around us as obsolete. Some of the most obvious examples of disciplines dealing with the strange, anomalous and aberrant are quantum mechanics, microbiology, neurosciences, animal cognition studies, climatology and space science. Aside from designating a specific type of literary genre and aesthetic experience,

“the weird” can be understood more broadly as a mode of thinking and, as such, it opens up possibilities to rethink the present and to come up with new methods of imagining and responding to the present circumstances. The part of the allure of the weird is its ability to transform our way of understanding, interpreting, perceiving and imagining the non-human world. So, what can the existing literature on/of the weird teach us about the current state of affairs?

The proliferation of the weird in mainstream culture, which has become evident in the last few years, has only highlighted the need for addressing these issues. Some popular examples of the weird include television shows such as *Stranger Things* (2016–), which deploys the trope of inverted version of the world, and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018–2020), which deals with the occult and supernatural but heavily relies on the fictional world of H. P. Lovecraft. The most recent example is *Lovecraft Country* (2020–), a TV horror drama series that is highly indebted to Lovecraft’s weird fiction legacy, but gives a critical twist to his racist and xenophobic attitudes. Furthermore, while Jordan Peele’s movies *Get Out!* (2017) and *Us* (2019) deploy the motif of the puppet reminiscent of the characters in the prose of Thomas Ligotti, Robert Egger’s *The Lighthouse* (2019) unfolds a story of madness in isolation by incorporating folk legends and tentacular weird tropes into the narrative. Among these, we have also witnessed literature-to-film adaptations of old and new guises of the weird, as exemplified by Alex Garland’s *Annihilation* (2018) and Richard Stanley’s *Color Out of Space* (2020).

Some of the most exciting contemporary writers of genre fiction are well established in the canon of weird fiction (assuming, of course, that one can speak of such a canon at all): M. John Harrison, N. K. Jemisin, Cixin Liu, China Miéville and Jeff VanderMeer. What brings these diverse authors together is that they all draw on natural sciences—astrophysics, biology, environmental sciences, etc.—more precisely, on various natural phenomena we perceive as weird. This strain is also evident in music, particularly electronic music genres. For instance, the albums *Unflesh* (2014) and *Pastoral* (2018) by the English electronic music producer Gazelle Twin orbit in the spheres of the eerie, occult, and visceral, both in terms of their aesthetics and music style. The weird has even found its way into the gaming culture, which is best exemplified by the action-adventure video game *Control* (2019): set in the haunting scenery of brutalist architecture, *Control* seeks to expose the weird in mundane objects. All of the above examples witness the predominance of this mode in contemporary culture and underline the importance of weird studies.

The contributors to this special issue have attempted to address the notion of weird sciences—the sciences that deal with strange natural phenomena—and the sciences of the weird—theoretical perspectives on the ethics, politics and aesthetics of the weird—through different media (music, literature, film, and new media art practices) and various approaches (science studies,

evolutionary history, cognitive narratology, psychoanalysis, new materialism, cultural studies, etc.). Understood this way, science functions both as a source of inspiration for weird content in cultural production and as a prism for observing that particular type of cultural content. In this vein, the article “Accessing Microbial Lifeworlds: Weird Entanglements and Strange Symbionts” by Aaron Bradshaw zooms into the weirdness of microworlds and reveals strange symbiotic relationships between microbes and humans, drawing both on microbiology and cultural theory. Siobhan Leddy’s practice-led-research article entitled “*cannibals lovers both neither: An Experiment in Mimetic Communication with Tardigrades*” presents an audiovisual installation which explores the possibilities of communication between humans and—one of the most exciting species in the field of weird science at the moment—tardigrades. By approaching this problem through the medium of sound, Leddy’s research illustrates that the weird often lies at the core of bioart practices.

Leanne Rae Darnbrough’s “On the Emphatic Possibilities of a Multi-species Ethnopoetics” presents examples of poetic takes on the nonhuman *Umwelt*, making an important contribution at the crossover of cognitive narratology, animal studies, posthumanism, and multispecies ethnography. By bringing into conversation Julian Huxley’s discussions of evolutionary theory and H. P. Lovecraft’s fiction, Ben Woodard’s “Monkey Panic in the Deep Time Machine” deals with temporal scales that exceed our own: evolutionary, geological and cosmic. This conversation opens up important questions about the imbrication of slavery, eugenics and history of evolutionary thought.

Mashya Boon’s “Chromophilic *Annihilation*: Posthuman Prisms and New Materialist Refractions of Reality” analyses colour as an important, yet often overlooked aspect of Garland’s adaptation of *The Southern Reach Trilogy* by Jeff VanderMeer, through David Batchelor’s concepts of chromophobia and chromophilia. Lisa Garforth and Miranda Iossifidis in the article entitled “Weirding Utopia for the Anthropocene: Hope, Un/Home and the Uncanny in *Annihilation* and *The City We Became*” take a seemingly unexpected direction by analysing weird fiction that deals with the issues of anthropogenic climate change, challenging the existing definitions of the New Weird, and paving the way for weird utopia research. Andrea Jović in “‘This is a happy house’: The Weeknd, the Eerie and the Death Drive” deploys Mark Fisher’s concept of party hauntology and the eerie, along with Slavoj Žižek’s reading of the Freudian death drive, to contemporary trap and R&B music. The central example in this analysis is The Weeknd’s latest album *After Hours* (2020) in which the author detects an inclination towards hedonism and a certain sense of joylessness, as one of the dominant traits of contemporary Western culture. Furthermore, in “‘We are All Human Resources’: The Weird as Neoliberal Critique in Thomas Ligotti’s ‘My Work is Not Yet Done’” Oliver Rendle analyses the problem of the inhumanity of neoliberalism in Ligotti’s corporate horror novella. Christopher Webb’s “A ‘Clock Less Urgent’: Work, Leisure, and Time in J. G. Ballard’s *The*

Drowned World and Vermilion Sands” tackles the issue of weird temporality in Ballard’s early fiction in view of the mid-twentieth century re-examination of the concepts of work and leisure.

These valuable contributions are complemented by the selection of book reviews on weird fiction and horror, media studies, and bioart. Niall Gildea’s review of Sean Moreland’s edited volume *New Directions on Supernatural Horror: The Critical Influence of H. P. Lovecraft* (2018) walks us through a collection of essays on literature, film and contemporary philosophy indebted to Lovecraft’s critical work. Furthermore, Alexander Hay reflects on *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880–1939* (2018), an extensive study of British writers such as Arthur Machen, M. P. Shiel and John Buchan by James Machin, while Vincenzo Maria Di Mino’s presents Lisa Blackman’s compelling exploration of the convergence of data, media and affects, entitled *Haunted Data: Affect, Transmedia, Weird Science* (2019). Finally, Tori Bush introduces us to *Art As We Don’t Know It* (2020), an edited volume that documents artistic projects and assembles a number of research articles dedicated to bioart.

Instead of providing a unique theoretical model for observing the intersections of the weird and science, this volume of *Pulse* aims to illustrate the heterogeneous nature of this area of inquiry through an array of various perspectives. The content of this volume sheds light on the relationship between the scientific and fictional discourse, and thus foregrounds the studies of the weird as an essential framework for thinking about the current conditions we find ourselves in, namely the Anthropocene and the global pandemic. Ultimately, these theoretical perspectives question the familiar models within which we perceive the world and create new paths for responding to these odd conditions and global challenges.

As indicated in the above title, the contributions contained in this volume make up the first part of the two-volume collection on the theme of the weird. We hope that these two volumes will provide a comprehensive guide through the realms of weird sciences and the sciences of the weird.

– Marijeta Bradić
Guest editor