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Lisa Blackman
HAUNTED DATA.
AFFECT, TRANSMEDIA,
WEIRD SCIENCE

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The irruption of the ‘Big Data’ has, from every point of view, revolutionized the coordinates by which reality is usually observed, as relations between subjects, and as a system of values and beliefs with which to interpret them. Following Bernard Stiegler, the externalization and sedimentation of memory on external devices constitutes the phenomenon that the French philosopher called “tertiary retention,” a process of machinic “grammatization” of desire, which manifests a profound ambivalence.² That is, the hybridization between bodies and artificial intelligence stimulates the creation of new forms of materialistic epistemology situated between affects and cognition, in the interzone between the human and the non-human.

Blackman’s volume questions, in the wake of such ambivalence, the relationship between the data production circuit and scientific discourses. The author bases her argumentation on three analytical trajectories, capable of grasping the complex interactions between space and atomic declination of time, effectively shifting the perceptual horizons of classically founded subjectivity: affect, transmediality, and ‘the weird’ as applied to science. First, she redefines the materiality of bodies within the global networks of digital capitalism, highlighting how data is fully intersected by the affectivity of subjects that produce them, and how this same affectivity is fundamental to the systemic valorisation of networks. Secondly, the concept of transmediality links

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2 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1. The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998.)

the co-presence of technical devices and different times within scientific discourses, as both retroactive and future-oriented movement of scientific results and their diffusion.³ Thirdly, the concept of the weird, linked to terms such as estrangement and obscurity, far from reducing scientific discourse to content exclusive to specialists, instead emphasises the internal inconsistencies, possible connections that exceed it, glitches and spectral oddities that live ‘laterally’ to it.

The first thematic axis of the book focuses on the spectral dimension of scientific discourse, assuming ‘data’ as the subject to observe the effects of the analysed phenomena. The ‘data’, as an explicit mediation between observer and object, loses its neutrality to become a meta-temporal archive in which the ‘linear’ timeline is in fact deconstructed. The mutation of time influences both the object and subject of research, producing a new alienating mediation in which the past and possible futures reverberate in the present without interruption. The author makes a clear reference to Derrida’s work, with the concepts of ‘trace,’ as an irrepresentable residue of otherness, and ‘hauntology,’ a cross-over between ontology and haunting, especially Mark Fisher’s take on it as a temporal disjunction between the present and the virtual effects of possible futures that could be generated from it.⁴ This temporal gap, precisely because it is located within the life of scientific processes, can lead to what the author calls “embodied empathy,” an experience of material and psychic reciprocity that fuels a new ecology of sense production.⁵

This conceptual toolbox paves the way for the second part of the book, which deals with the study of ‘weird science’—the series of scientific phenomena that present conceptual problems which are difficult to explain by ‘normal’ epistemological means. The weird is in this sense similar to Freudian uncanny, as something removed and alien that returns as an irreducible trace to rationality or an anticipation of the future. Such futuristic experience needs tools and devices suitable for “feeling the future,”⁶ to perceive the impact of psycho-temporal virtualities on the present, which can be provided by speculative psychology as an analysis of intra-psychic connections and affective fragments. The author underlines the need for a theoretical approach that holds together the psychic life of subjects and the material life of data within specific historical contexts, without excluding the possible impact of other elements and temporalities. She explores the example of “Buzz on Bem,” a 2010 performance by D. Ben, which attempted to statistically demonstrate how the future can retroactively reshape the past, unhinging the unidirectional interpretation of time in relation to the cognitive processes of extrasensory perception. According to Blackman, such futurological approach to social phenomena allows for multiple links between

3 Lisa Blackman, *Haunted Data. Affect, Transmediality, Weird Science*, (London, Bloomsbury, 2019), 21–24

4 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2014.)

5 Blackman, 73–76.

6 Blackman, 84.

the different elements that define the thing to be analysed. More precisely, this configures a materialist epistemology that concatenates the different fragments and exposes them to a dynamic irruption of time, looking back retroactively from the future or pushing forward the ghosts of the past. Another example is that of “pornception,” an experiment which showed that the subject was able to anticipate an erotic image before it was projected. In this case the imagination is immediately able to stimulate physiological reactions, connecting matter, cognition and memory. According to the author, such transmedial objects are the product of mediation between different forms of emotional contagion that concern both the work (material and immaterial) behind it, and the future anticipation of subjective choices.⁷

This volume shows how analysis of data, and more generally of algorithms, must incorporate the material nature of production that concerns subjectivity and its desires, as well as the spectral fog that envelops it. In Barad’s wake, scientific objects are analysed as singular quantum entanglement, endowed with their own space-time coordinates, constantly exposed to the input of data-ghost carriers of further data fragmentation and affects. A new materialism, able to interact with the spectral inside the algorithms, could be based on what the author calls “alien phenomenologies,” which dislocate the human-centric cosmologies, opening them to the intra-actions of other experiences, human or non-human, in a continuous interdisciplinary engagement with different historical strata of matter. A science of hauntologies, opening the analysis of the present to different temporal variations, can contribute to an ecology of media and technology that deconstructs the enclosures of digital capitalism and is attuned to those elements that can initially escape reason. Blackman describes open science as a field of phenomena in which the temporal, psychological and material dimensions escape their disciplinary characterizations and bind together in new forms. This new scientific experimentalism connects the forms of life and different incorporeal experiences, which are not limited to the materiality of the analysed processes but go beyond them. This methodology is thus characterised by human indeterminacy and the dispersal of agency throughout the entire social fabric. Phenomena such as clairvoyance, speculative psychology or strange causalities indicate the possibilities of new emotional links between subjects and automatic machines, among the contradictions of the eco-technical environment. The aim of these practices is to democratize the field of scientific production, strengthening its relations with the humanities and life sciences, in an attempt to transform analytical experimentalism into political radicalism. The imaginary of weird science, in this sense, more than invoking the paranormal or transcendence, can metaphorically indicate the virtual and the immaterial as a trace of material and creative connections still unexpressed: the haunted life of data is both the human-machine connection that produces them, and the dreams of the future that they can implement. □

7 Blackman, 120.

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