

SEAN SEEGER¹

Julius Greve and
Florian Zappe, eds.

THE AMERICAN
WEIRD: CONCEPT
AND MEDIUM

London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

The American Weird is an innovative and varied anthology of scholarly work on the topic of the weird in contemporary American culture. As the editors explain in their introduction, the principle aim of the collection is to expand our critical vocabulary by re-evaluating the concept of the weird and granting it a new prominence in our approaches to American culture.² The book consists of seventeen essays divided into two sections. “Part One: Concept” is concerned with theorising the weird as an aesthetic concept, while “Part Two: Medium” focuses on “medial manifestations of the weird in word, image, and sound,”³ encompassing literature, cinema, visual art, and popular music.

The weird, the editors claim, has remained “a haunting presence in American

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² Julius Greve and Florian Zappe, “Introduction: Conceptualizations, Mediations, and Remediations of the American Weird,” in *The American Weird: Concept and Medium*, ed. Julius Greve and Florian Zappe (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 2.

³ Greve and Zappe, 6.

literature and culture.”⁴ Importantly, they see the weird as simultaneously a genre, an aesthetic category, and a mode of experience, and celebrate the fact that it therefore crosses conventional boundaries and breaks with critical decorum.⁵ The weird, they note, is both a colloquial term and a theoretical designation, both a part of our common speech and an aesthetic category.⁶ Despite its intrinsic interest, however, the weird “remains a comparatively understudied phenomenon” and is “surprisingly undertheorized so far.”⁷

One point of departure for the collection is provided by the work of the literary scholar Roger Luckhurst, who also contributes an afterword to the collection that draws attention to its resonances with recent political developments both within and beyond the U.S. The editors also acknowledge the importance of the work of H. P. Lovecraft, both for his fiction and for his extended 1927 essay, “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” in which he influentially claimed that “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”⁸ The editors single out two key texts which inform their view of Lovecraft and their understanding of the weird more generally: Graham Harman’s *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* and Mark Fisher’s *The Weird and the Eerie*, each of which is cited by at least half of the volume’s contributors.⁹ In the former case, Harman reads Lovecraft from a speculative realist perspective as a “tacit philosopher” who is “perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them.”¹⁰ Fisher supplies the idea that the weird is an experience as well as a genre by defining it as “that which does not belong”, and holding that it pertains to the presence of the inappropriate or out of place.¹¹ Although Harman’s interest in the ontological gap between thing and thought is clearly of relevance for scholars of the weird, the editors find more resources for their own project in Fisher’s work due to its emphasis on specific cultural forms.¹² As they put it, they wish to consider the weird “*qua* medium” within an American context.¹³

Part One of the book begins with Dan O’Hara’s suggestive exploration of the origins and development of the word “weird” itself, “A Doxa of the American Weird.” O’Hara notes that Shakespeare appears to have imported the word into English from Scots for *Macbeth* in the early seventeenth century.¹⁴ Two other meanings of the term—weird in the sense of strangeness and weird in the sense of “funny”—were later, possibly nineteenth-century British inventions. This means that the word inherited

⁴ Greve and Zappe, 3.
⁵ Greve and Zappe, 3.
⁶ Greve and Zappe, 3.
⁷ Greve and Zappe, 4.
⁸ Greve and Zappe, 3.
⁹ Greve and Zappe, 4.
¹⁰ Greve and Zappe, 4.
¹¹ Greve and Zappe, 4.
¹² Greve and Zappe, 5.
¹³ Greve and Zappe, 5.
¹⁴ Greve and Zappe, 15.

by the seventeenth-century Americans-to-be would have retained the associations of the word as found in a writer like Shakespeare.¹⁵ During the reign of James I, the weird had been associated with witchcraft, prophesying, and fate.¹⁶ In America, O'Hara argues, this morphed into a related "apocalyptic sense of predestination and imminent revelation," which represented a repudiation of the perceived "European godlessness" on the part of the Puritan colonists.¹⁷ O'Hara's fascinating claim is that utopia and dystopia in America are therefore refractions of the weird in its early modern sense of fate or destiny.¹⁸ In suggesting that the weird lies at the root of the American attempt to secularise millenarian Christian thought, O'Hara makes a vital contribution to answering the editors' question of how to understand the weird in its American guise.¹⁹

The following piece by Johnny Murray, "The Oozy Set: Toward a Weird(ed) Taxonomy," contends that the weird is a hybrid of gothic, science fiction, fantasy, and horror, while being irreducible to any one of these.²⁰ In a precise and illuminating manner, Murray maps the connections between the weird and these four genres, explaining in each case how it overlaps with the weird and how it differs from it. To take just one example, whereas the gothic is said to be concerned with the return of something already known, as in the case of a haunting, the effect of the weird is said to issue from an encounter with something "completely unprecedented" in the midst of the familiar.²¹ Summing up, Murray concludes that the weird works by "estranging the very estrangements" of the genres on which it draws,²² going beyond the estrangement of science fiction, for instance, by embodying a kind of meta-estrangement which "paradoxically short-circuits cognition."²³ For this reader, Murray's essay is one of the standout pieces of the collection and one that more than fulfils its author's aim of "augmenting the viability of the weird as a critical concept."²⁴

Stephen Shapiro's contribution, "Woke Weird and the Cultural Politics of Camp Transformation," situates the weird in relation to contemporary culture and politics, and considers to what extent a "woke weird" serving to contest dominant conceptions of masculinity and related values might contribute to a counter-hegemonic project. Shapiro's exploration of the socio-economic dynamics, whereby differential and uneven subjection to capital can take on gothic or weird cultural forms, proves highly thought provoking.²⁵

Among the remaining essays, highlights include discussions of Jeff

¹⁵ Greve and Zappe, 15.

¹⁶ Greve and Zappe, 16.

¹⁷ Greve and Zappe, 16.

¹⁸ Greve and Zappe, 18-20.

¹⁹ Greve and Zappe, 25.

²⁰ Greve and Zappe, 29.

²¹ Greve and Zappe, 31.

²² Greve and Zappe, 37.

²³ Greve and Zappe, 32.

²⁴ Greve and Zappe, 37.

²⁵ Greve and Zappe, 63.

VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*, which is read as a commentary on the increasing difficulty of imagining an outside to capital in a world where even Cthulhu can be rationalised away and integrated into the system;²⁶ Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, which addresses the "common weirdness" of normalised racist state violence;²⁷ and Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, which is seen to articulate a "postcolonial weird" that contributes to decolonising US pop culture.²⁸

While acknowledging that, as Luckhurst contends, it is "hard to define a national tradition in relation to the weird," the editors of the book nevertheless wish to pose the question "what is specifically 'American' about this aesthetic mode."²⁹ Rather than providing a singular answer to this question, *The American Weird* offers seventeen quite different perspectives on it, leaving the reader with a much more comprehensive sense of the territory being mapped than any one point of view could afford by itself. Overall, the collection advances the scholarly conversation about the weird in two main ways. Firstly, it explores the extent to which the weird has followed a unique trajectory in an American context, and, secondly, it considers weird culture from across a wide range of media in a genuinely interdisciplinary manner. □

²⁶ Greve and Zappe, 86.

²⁷ Greve and Zappe, 127.

²⁸ Greve and Zappe, 140.

²⁹ Greve and Zappe, 5.