



A friendly book about trouble

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BOOK REVIEWS

STRANGE AGENCY AND THAT WHICH DOES NOT BELONG: ON THE EERIE AND THE WEIRD

Mark Fisher: The Weird and the Eerie.
Repeater, London, 2016, 134 pages.
Price: £4.68

Mark Fisher's book on the modes of the weird and the eerie is a short and sharp exploration into a beyond. This is a "beyond the Unheimlich" (8), as the introduction promises, since Fisher aims to discuss the weird and the eerie outside the traditional framework of the unfamiliar within the familiar (the uncanny) as well the affects of terror and horror. It is also an exploration into a more speculative 'beyond' in the sense of that which operates on a scale too vast to be graspable by human imagination. This is an outside that can never be travelled, only experienced as it slips between the cracks and fissures of the known, hinting at experiences beyond human perceptions of space, time and agency. As such, the book investigates what the weird and the eerie have in common, which is "a preoccupation with the strange" (8) rather than with the terrifying, horrific or uncanny, but also how they address different aspects of the strange. Through an analysis and investigation of selected works of fiction, films and music, the book therefore delves into two main sections: one on the weird and one on the eerie.

TWO KINDS OF STRANGE

The weird, Fisher explains, "is that *which does not belong*" (10, emphasis in original). This non-belonging is different from the experience of the uncanny/*unheimlich*, since the non-belonging of the weird lies beyond the homely/familiar and often takes the form of a strange montage in the sense of a collision of a 'realistic' world with an 'unworld'. Fisher exemplifies this montage of worlds through readings of the works of H.P. Lovecraft, H.G. Wells, Tim Powers, Philip K. Dick and David Lynch.

Moving on to the section on the eerie, Fisher explains that the importance of the eerie lies in it being “a particular kind of aesthetic experience” (61), which may be triggered by certain cultural forms, such as literature and films, but does not originate in them. The eerie, he argues, can be understood as a strange, non-human agency that addresses questions concerning a failing absence or a failing presence that may perhaps best be summarized as a ‘nothing where there should be something, and a something where there should be nothing’. To exemplify the eerie, Fisher engages with the works of Daphne du Maurier, Christopher Priest, M.R. James, Nigel Kneale, Margaret Atwood, and Joan Lindsay, among others.

THE EERIE CORSET

What struck this reader about the works that Fisher engages with in his theorizing of the weird and the eerie, is how the section on the weird features no work by female artists, whereas the section on the eerie delves into the works of Margaret Atwood, Daphne du Maurier and Joan Lindsay. I missed some commentary from the author on why no female artists feature in the section of the weird – for they exist, e.g. Caitlín R. Kiernan, Kathe Koja, Joyce Carol Oates and Margaret St. Clair, to name a few – whereas the eerie seemingly opens up to not just female authors, but also to discussions about embodiment, sexuality and misogyny as Fisher delves into Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* and the film *Under the Skin*, which features Scarlet Johansson as an alien. The book even ends on the note of the characters of Lindsay’s novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* from 1967 throwing their corsets into the open air. This is the scene that concludes *The Weird and the Eerie*, and which Fisher refers to as a first step into the unknown for the characters. Yet, the gendered aspects of the corset and this first step into the unknown remain strangely untouched.

BEYOND THE BOOK

Despite my slight reservations about the lacking gender commentary, Fisher’s readings of the selected novels, films and music are engaging, and his suggested definitions of the weird and the eerie are convincing. These are also timely and important issues given the sociopolitical context of the book. As Fisher points out, “the eerie turns crucially on the problem of agency, it is about the forces that govern our lives and the world,” and these forces – whether the unconscious, the spectral structures of capital or tele-technology – are often “not fully available to our sensory apprehension” (64). This is, however, one of the few times Fisher attempts to answer the questions: ‘why the weird and the eerie? And why now?’

In the sociopolitical context of global warming, a supposed ‘refugee crisis’ and growing right wing populism, questions of who and what ‘belongs’ as well as encounters between ‘worlds’ are constantly evoked, and it seems to this reader that the current rekindled interest in ‘weird’ fiction may well be in dialogue with this sociopolitical context. Fisher does not engage directly with these questions, but he also does not set out to do so. In this sense, the missing sociopolitical context of the weird and the eerie is not a broken promise (as much as I would have loved for him to discuss this context), and Fisher’s in-depth readings do offer themselves as creative tools for those who wish to pick them up and make use of them in discussions concerning the weird and eerie times we live in. As such, Fisher’s book is a short, sweet and rich invitation to a beyond; not least a beyond the book itself.

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MONSTROUS GUIDES AND GUILTY PLEASURES

Adam Golub and Heather Richardson Hayton (eds.): Monsters in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching What Scares Us. McFarland: Jefferson, NC, 2017, 264 pages. Foreword by W. Scott Poole, afterword by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. Price: £17.65

Monsters and pedagogy have a lot in common: in the popular perception, neither of them are the kind of thing academics should be spending much time on. Asa Mittman (who also contributes to this volume) writes in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* about being told, early on in his career, to “drop all this monster stuff and start doing *real* scholarship” (2) – not too dissimilarly from how academics seeking advancement are encouraged to concentrate on “real” scholarship, research, not teaching. Adam Golub and Heather Richardson Hayton’s essay collection on teaching with and through monsters, then, comes out of the margins in at least two ways. Its constant theme is that things that are traditionally marginal and undervalued in higher education – low-brow pop-culture syllabuses, apparently unscholarly approaches, even emotion itself – can prove to be valuable and transformative in the classroom. At their best, these essays demonstrate that, just as research practices can inform and inspire teaching, classroom practices can be a rich source for scholarship and thought.”

EFFECTIVE VEHICLES OR DISRUPTIVE FORCES?

“The monster in the classroom” is an ambivalent phrase: it could suggest the monster as the object of study, the monster as a way of learning or a pedagogical tool, or even the monster as a more disruptive force – in the words of “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”, a “harbinger of category crisis” (Cohen 6), something that makes us wholly rethink how

we teach and learn. Golub and Hayton’s introduction, though, sticks mostly to the first and sometimes the second of these possibilities: for them, these essays make monsters “a highly effective vehicle for teaching cultural analysis, fostering a critical imagination, making interdisciplinary connections, and encouraging students to ‘build new mental models of reality’” (11). I found myself missing a sense (present, for instance, in John Edgar Browning’s “Towards a Monster Pedagogy”) that monsters and the monstrous might be potentially difficult, excessive or unpredictable presences in a classroom. This is very much a collection in the spirit of Jeffrey J. Cohen, who also contributes an interesting afterword, but it’s hard to imagine a Cohenian monster as simply a “highly effective vehicle” for anything.

POPULAR AND PEDAGOGICAL MONSTERS

Fortunately, the essays themselves are often interested in and attuned to this quality of monster teaching. Through twelve essays exploring a variety of pedagogical approaches and disciplines – philosophy, literature, art, history, and Japanese second-language learning, to name just a few – certain key notes are sounded. There’s the monstrous syllabus as a “popular” guilty pleasure: in several of the accounts students sign up for courses involving monsters hoping to get to just watch horror films for class credit, and W. Scott Poole’s foreword describes a colleague saying disdainfully of his own monster course, “I hear that’s a popular class” (1).

But the students generally find that the study of monsters takes them further and in different directions than expected. In Bernice M. Murphy’s essay, a single monster, the Wendigo, becomes an unlikely guide to North American history for her Irish students. And Asa Mittman describes the rapid evolution of a set of collaborative notes on a whiteboard in his medieval monster class: “At first, we thought we were mapping the key terms for one essay. Then, we decided we

were mapping the key terms for our course. In the end, it was clear that we'd charted our civilization" (26).

Moreover, many of these essays echo how the study of the monstrous leads both students and teachers to encounters with their own subjectivity and vulnerability. Nancy Hightower's essay on teaching visual rhetoric through monsters movingly describes her students' self-revelatory monster art and reproduces their reflections on it; here, the monster tears at the most basic classroom dichotomy, as the teacher learns from and is surprised by her students. In Heather Richardson Hayton's "The Monster Waiting Within", an experiential course featuring zombie roleplay goes wildly off the rails. Not only is it a good story, it is also – considering how accounts of classroom practice tend to airbrush out rough patches – a striking depiction of pedagogical risk-taking that actually ends in (partial) failure.

DESIGNED FOR THE CLASSROOM

The volume feels pleasingly eclectic rather than strictly centrally planned, and if there is one downside to this, it's that the essays have relatively little geographical and cultural variety. Monsters are embedded in and reflect specific cultural worlds, and since the collection doesn't explicitly aim to be US-centric, it would have been interesting to see monsters from more non-American and non-Anglophone perspectives. An exception is Charlotte Eubanks's essay on using horror fiction in Japanese language acquisition, which beautifully explores the uncanny potential not only of making one's way into a new language, but of language itself. A different kind of variety, but a welcome one, comes in Brian Sweeney's essay, the only one to deal with secondary education. While the monstrous here is more subject matter than method, the essay is a rigorous exploration of the assumptions underpinning a particular didactic field – in this case, high school English – and how they can be unpicked.

Monsters in the Classroom is designed for practical use as well as for reflection: most essays end with a course plan, syllabus, and assignments for the relevant class. This is an excellent resource for other teachers of the monstrous, but also gives an enjoyably immediate insight into other people's classrooms. We disseminate our research, but too often, we keep our teaching private from everyone but our students. This collection becomes, then, not just a set of academic reflections but also a collegial sharing of experiences and stories. The essays' prose styles, though obviously varied, also bear this out: without losing scholarly rigour, they tend towards the conversational, the specific and anecdotal, even, in places, the personal and emotional – the subtitle of the collection, after all, is "Essays on teaching what scares us". These pedagogical campfire tales come highly recommended.

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A FRIENDLY BOOK ABOUT TROUBLE

Donna J. Haraway: Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016, 296 pages. Price: \$26.95

In this well-written book, Haraway leads you on a friendly tour through much of the recent feminist posthumanist, science studies and materialist literature, including her own. She provides important insights into current and historical political, scientific, and artistic entanglements in relation to which this literature can be put to important ethical work. This is much appreciated, and she is a good guide, although sometimes she demands a certain level of pre-knowledge about the literature and issues she is dealing with. However, while reading the book, I was somewhat in doubt about who the intended reader of the book is, and the promise of the title – *Staying with the trouble* – was, at least for me, left somewhat unfulfilled. In relation to trouble, I think the book is far too friendly.

As always in her work, Haraway is well-read, curious, creative, politically engaged and – as a kind of hallmark for the kind of feminist scholarship of which she has been in the forefront for many years – she takes up topics and examples that would go unnoticed, un-combined or un-thought-of by more conventional scholarship. So many animals, concepts, case examples, feminist works, and ethical entanglements are mentioned in the book that only a few examples can be provided in this book review. The multitude of interesting topics and issues, however, also means that as a reader I felt that Haraway skips across each of the cases a bit too fast: out of the book's 296 pages, only 168 pages are made up of the book chapters while the rest are notes, references, and index. Overall, the book feels like an extensive summary of all the things Haraway has worked on and thought about, read and researched, throughout her career.

In the first chapter, for example, we encounter string-figures and pigeons as companion species: well-known topics for Haraway fans, but to the reader already in the know, this chapter seems strangely superficial. The string figure metaphor functions as a sketchy reminder of her classical article from 1994, in which it is powerfully and adeptly employed and related to both science studies, feminist theory, and cultural studies. However, I doubt that most new readers will be able to follow Haraway's point in presenting the figure here. And although human-pigeon entanglements are curious and interesting, compared to in her older work the chapter only provides a sketch of the notion of companion species (see e.g. Haraway 2007).

String figures and companion species are not secluded to the first chapter but are metaphors and themes that recur throughout the book, together with word plays, and entangled concepts and abbreviations. This performs a transdisciplinary world-building that can't help but facilitate contemplation. Across the chapters, Haraway lets you think about co-creation/sympoiesis ("collectively producing systems", chapter 3), becoming-with (chapter 6), entanglements (chapter 4), and ethics/response-ability (chapter 5). According to Haraway, this is "tentacular thinking" (chapter 2); a thinking that brings us away from 'the Anthropocene' – a notion of human-influenced geological time related to current environmental concerns – and towards 'the Chthulucene': a posthuman way of thinking about current times and the tentacular entanglements of, well, everything. This notion does not stem from the figure of Cthulhu – a tentacled mythical god from H.P. Lovecraft's horror fiction – but is inspired by the 'Pimoa cthulhu' spider-species and by Greek myths: "The unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash from the Anthropocene, (...) and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures" (57).

Rich metaphors like these abound in the

book. “It matters which thoughts think thoughts”, Haraway repeats in variations (57, 101, 118, and more); it matters what we think about, and how we do it, what concepts we use. In conclusion, to stay with the trouble means to keep trying to think things differently and create new (string/tentacled) figures out of the complex elements of this world. This might then change how we approach the world, how we build worlds, and create new kinds of kin as well as more sustainable ways of living.

To emphasise this point, the last chapter of the book introduces what I can best describe as an outline of a science fiction novel. This is an original move of Haraway, trying to show where the way of thinking she suggests might lead us: to imagining a future where things are different, where entanglements and response-ability are made part of both social and material structures. At the same time, I can’t help but think that this is also an experiment made from a privileged position. *The Camille stories*, as the chapter is called, is not something anyone could get published by itself as science fiction since it is a mere outline of a story, not a piece of literature. Anyone else attempting to publish this would likely have been turned down.

Still, the ethical project of being attentive to what concepts, systems, stories, etc., we use to think and do things with, is to me probably the most important part of *Staying with the trouble*. As Haraway shows, the importance of decentering the human and critiquing ideas about human exceptionalism, independence from and control over the world, is clear when faced with the consequences these ideas and stories have for human, animal, worldly others. In contrast, stories about being entangled lead us to the key ethical concept of ‘response-ability’ (see earlier works, e.g. Haraway 2007): engaging with the world around you in ways that allow the other to respond. This is a way to navigate in the world that is less anthropocentric, less concerned about control, and more open towards the world. Drawing on Hannah

Arendt’s thinking, Haraway teaches us to ‘go visiting’, to be both curious and polite, to go “a bit too far off the path” (127), and there to find stories that encourage and facilitate such response-ability.

In *Staying with the trouble*, however, the risks never really move beyond the conceptual and, perhaps, methodological. To ‘go visiting’ is risky, it seems, to “an approach that assumes that beings have pre-established natures and abilities” (127). But since most readers of this book have presumably discarded such an approach long ago, where is the risk Haraway takes in making this claim? Similarly, even stories about the symbiotic survival of trees and ants (chapter 6) emphasize how the world is shaped through symbiosis and sympoiesis, rather than how tree-ant survival entail the dead/broken bodies of other plants/animals. There is trouble right there, but we move on.

To conclude, this is a book which will probably bring many readers acquainted with Haraway’s work and the work she draws on pleasurable reminders. But it has few new insights, and too little of staying with the serious troubles which she touches on. For new readers, I would rather recommend engaging with key texts of Haraway’s previous work in order to explore the depth and nuances which this book lacks.

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