



The Weird: Aesthetic Effect and Power

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Abstract

Rod Serling's The Twilight Zone, Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," and The Who's Tommy have all been called weird, but what makes these texts weird? This paper examines weirdness beyond its use as a value judgment or genre category. Similar to Sianne Ngai's Our Aesthetic Categories (2012), which describes cute, zany, and interesting as aesthetic effects, my project also describes the weird as an aesthetic effect. By drawing upon its etymology, my project establishes the weird as a term referencing a power, "an effect that holds an audience enthralled." Occurring either via ruptures of coherency or when distinct boundaries are blurred to create "in-between states," the weird as a critical term has the potential to examine our contemporary preoccupation with destabilization. My paper poses several questions: Can the weird be reclaimed from a subjective judgment to one of critical application? How is context important in determining what is weird and what is not? How does the weird challenge what society considers normal, logical, and stable? By establishing the weird as an analytical term, my project provides a lens through which to examine texts that perplex and discomfort, yet simultaneously enthrall, an audience.

Introduction

The term weird can seemingly describe anything. It could categorize the nonsense title and lyrics of Cream's psychedelic hit, *S.W.L.A.B.R.*, with its title of the invented acronym for "she walked like a bearded rainbow" (Bruce). It could describe Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), from either the half-finished "monstrosity" of Edward or his metallic hands, to Joyce's strange and obsessive fascination with them. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's surrealist experiment *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) could certainly be considered weird in its juxtapositions of a man pulling a piano, ants coming from inside one's palm, and a door opened to reveal a beach. Often, cult classic films, such as Jim Sharman's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), are weird for their mixing of genres or the

participatory elements they have established around them. Unlike various genres or artistic movements with set aesthetic criteria, the concept of weird is far more nebulous. As a description or aesthetic judgment, the weird has the potential to span the fictional goblin-infested land of Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* (1986) come to life, to the comic book/video game/film collage of Edgar Wright's action-comedy film, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (2010). In its contemporary, popular usage, the concept of weird is ultimately subjective and depends wholly upon the viewer's social frame of reference.

Due to the social implications that the term weird carries, categorizing an artistic work as weird is both a value and an aesthetic judgment. In her examination of contemporary aesthetic categories, Sianne Ngai terms these classifications "minor aesthetic judgments" or judgments that do not ascribe a text to a specific period or movement, but rather comment on its qualities and effects (Ngai 53). Ngai examines three aesthetic categories—the cute, the zany, and the interesting—that she argues best discuss the postmodern emphasis on "production, circulation, and consumption" (1). By framing these categories inside the economic concerns of postmodernism, Ngai attempts to shift the discourse from these labels as "subjective, feeling based judgments" to ones with critical applications (38). While Ngai acknowledges that the judgments made regarding her categories are often ones dependent upon "pleasure and value" (44), she proposes that instead of making "taste"-based judgments, one should make analytical ones (49). Similar to the categories that Ngai examines, the weird remains relegated to a mere judgment of taste, even though it has the potential for an analytical, critical application. Rather than serve as simply a term with which one can condemn what is strange and different from his/her social norm, the weird can be placed inside the context of its larger assigned genre, as well as its manifestations across genre where it is concerned largely with unexpected combinations, audience estrangement, and intertextuality.

In its only usage as a critical term, the weird refers to the previously mentioned genre, which has now been further split between the Old Weird and the New Weird. Benjamin Noys, scholar of this particular genre, ascribes the Old Weird to roughly 1850-1940 with the iconic figure of H.P. Lovecraft as the guiding force (Noys 119). Lovecraft, and his tales dealing with the supernatural nonhuman and capitalizing on human fears of the unknown, introduced thematic ideas (such as inherited guilt) that would later become genre conventions. Kate Marshall describes this genre as a combination of the recently popular 19th-century gothic novels and "kitschy pulp horror" found in magazines (Marshall 631). The New Weird is significantly more contemporary according to Noys, and began in the early 2000s and continues to the current day. While the Old Weird was grounded heavily in the gothic and made use of the uncanny effect in the return of the repressed, the New Weird "welcome[s] the alien and monstrous as sites of affirming and becoming" (Noys 119). However, as a genre, the use of the term is fairly limited, especially since what is considered part of the Old or New

Weird has been absorbed by genres such as horror, science fiction, fantasy, and cyberpunk (123).

As both a term and genre, the current nebulous definition and broad and indiscriminate application limit the weird's analytical potential. Rather than serve in itself as a clear-cut category with tropes and conventions, the weird can encompass a variety of genres, although it certainly manifests itself as an effect in some more than others. Though credited as the founder of the Old Weird genre, H.P. Lovecraft was the closest to viewing the weird not as a genre or category, but rather as an effect. Lovecraft describes the weird as contributing to a certain "atmosphere" or aesthetic within already established genres, such as supernatural or speculative fiction (Lovecraft). However, Lovecraft's general use of "atmosphere" to describe his weird fiction also further convolutes its definition and, therefore, its usefulness as an aesthetic term. Due to the borrowing inherent in both the Old and New Weird as genres, the term came to serve as a synonym for the genres of gothic and fantastic and for the effects of eerie and uncanny. Though it may seem unnecessary to definitively separate the weird from its close associations with various genres and effects, the weird suggests more than the baroque and dark landscapes of the gothic can alone, and more than the hesitation between the real and the supernatural that the fantastic produces. Furthermore, though Lovecraft was the closest to establishing weirdness as part of an aesthetic effect rather than a genre itself, to confine the concept of weirdness to simply atmosphere is also too simplistic, for it implies the weird is only a visual aesthetic.

However, when the term weird is used without the context of genre or category, implicit in this usage is a value judgment. By calling a text weird, the speaker makes either a social distinction or a high/low culture art distinction. In the former case, a weird piece may be something associated with geek culture, such as science fiction or fantasy and, therefore, less valued by society, or the weird could imply an association with hipster culture, such as indie music, and, therefore, more valued by a certain portion of society, though less valued by the mainstream. In both cases, the social distinction is clear: weird art is for fringe groups and subcultures. To use the term in this manner places it as part of a dichotomy; what is weird is principally *not normal* and defined only in opposition to mainstream culture, rather than possessing any inherent attributes of its own. In the latter case, a weird piece of text may imply a low culture distinction, such as the literal pulp fiction of the late 19th and early 20th century or the current "pulpy" horror fiction of authors such as Stephen King. This secondary distinction assumes the weird piece has no artistic merit and should not be considered or analyzed with the same distinction as high art. Both of these can be explained partially by reception theory and subjectivity of the perceiver, which suggest on a most basic level that what some people find weird, others may not, simply based upon the reception of a specific work within their subgroup (Fluck 116). However, on a deeper level, this theory suggests that the judgments regarding a text become part of its content for that specific perceiver. For example, when a show such

as HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011- present) that would normally be associated with only a "fantasy geek" subculture gained mainstream popularity and critical acclaim, the judgments associated with its normal subgroup were transferred to its mainstream perception. While the fantasy geek subgroup compared both the novels and series to the rest of the fantasy cannon, noting where Martin departed from convention, the mainstream culture unfamiliar with fantasy convention would not notice a difference between this work and others *without* the judgment of another subgroup. The judgment that this series is unlike other fantasy series in its portrayal of antiheroes and its potential to allow even main characters to die became part of the content of the show. Not only has this perception become a guiding principal for those watching, but it also marks how the mainstream adopted the opinion of a subgroup and, therefore, made it part of the content surrounding the viewing and discussing of the show itself. However, though this may be interesting on a psychological level, in terms of aesthetic judgments, this subjectivity of perception is not consistent and cannot be a quality of whether or not a specific work is weird.

In the following sections, I will examine how within the etymology of the term weird lies the potential to establish the word as a critical term referring to an aesthetic effect. Rather than focus further upon the lay usage of the term or its role as a value judgment, I propose that weirdness should be analyzed primarily as an effect that holds an audience in thrall. This effect occurs either when something out of place intrudes upon the context of a work, or when boundaries between normally definite oppositions are blurred, creating a state of confusion in an audience as well. Through a variety of strategies, such as fringe experience, intrusion, and collage, the weird may manifest in a variety of genres. As an effect, the weird works to challenge an audience's conception of normal, as well as notions of linear and logical thought. If Ngai's examination of cute, zany, and interesting best explain the current obsession with production, my examination of weird can best explain the contemporary preoccupation with destabilization.

Weird Power and Fringe Experience

In my purpose of reclaiming the term "weird" from a value judgment predicated upon individual subjective taste to a critical definition, it is useful to examine the evolution of the term from its roots as a synonym for fate, to its colloquial use as a synonym for odd, to my intended critical use as a verb representative of a certain power. This weird power is a state of enthrallment in which a viewer may want to turn away due to discomfort or unfamiliarity, but cannot due to fascination. The genesis of the word itself demands an attention to states of opposition, such as the real/unreal, supernatural/natural, and familiar/unfamiliar. One of these opposing states from which the weird draws power is the space between the frightening and the enchanting, which is forecasted in Shakespeare's usage of the term to refer to the *werde* sisters in his play *Macbeth*.

The term evolved from its origin as an Anglo-Saxon synonym for fate to an adjective, as shown in the definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary* below:

weird. Forms: *wyrd*, *wird*, *wirde*, *wyrde*, *wyerde*, *wierde*, *werd*, *werde*, *weird*, *ward*.

1. The principle, power, or agency by which events are predetermined; fate, destiny.
2. The Fates, the three goddesses supposed to determine the course of human life.
4.
 - a. A happening, event, or occurrence.
 - b. An omen or token significant of the nature of a future event; a prognostic.
 - c. A prediction of the fate which is to happen to a person; etc.; a prophecy.
 - d. A supernatural or marvelous occurrence.

All of the above definitions refer to weird as a noun: an abstract power, a specific person, a tangible object, or an experience. While weird is no longer a noun in contemporary usage, the association of weird with specific power is relevant when considering how a weird text or object affects an audience. Unlike a realist or baroque aesthetic, the weird does not simply fulfill certain descriptive conventions to be classified as such; rather, the weird must hold a power of uncomfortable enthrallment over an audience. However, the shift from *wyrd* as fate to weird as an adjective occurred, as mentioned before, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

weird. Also: *wyrde*, *werde*, *veird*, *weyard*, *weer'd*, *weerd*. [Originally an attrib. use of prec. in *weird sisters* (see 1 above), the later currency and adjectival use being derived from the occurrence of this in the story of *Macbeth*.

1. Having the power to control the fate or destiny of human beings, etc.; later, claiming the supernatural power of dealing with fate or destiny.
2. Partaking of or suggestive of the supernatural; of a mysterious or unearthly character; unaccountably or uncomfortably strange; uncanny.
3. Of strange or unusual appearance, odd-looking.
4. Out of the ordinary course, strange, unusual; hence odd, fantastic (Freq. in recent use.)

Shakespeare's shift from *wyrd* as a noun to *werde* as an adjective to describe the *werde* sisters is important because it marks a transition in the function of the weird from some sort of tangible object to a word of description. However, more important than the shift in the function of how one uses the word is the associations that Shakespeare makes, suggesting for the first time the connection between the frightening and the fascinating. In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth experiences fear at the thought of learning his fate through the *werde* sisters as well as a fascination

when he tells the “imperfect speakers” to stay and tell him more information (Shakespeare I.iii.70). While Macbeth’s fate troubles him throughout the earlier portions of the play, he eventually becomes obsessed with knowing the future and seeks out the *werde* sisters a second time. In his pursuit of knowledge of his fate, the *werde* sisters do hold Macbeth in a complete enthrallment of both fear and fascination, suggesting that these figures literally hold a weird power.

Though Shakespeare’s association of the weird with the supernatural and as a source of power is not the most common contemporary use of the weird, in his science fiction series *Dune*, Frank Herbert borrows Shakespeare’s definition of weird. In his series, the Bene Gesserit witches possess the power of the weirding way, a prana-bindu combination of both psychological and physical powers. While Shakespeare’s usage of weird shifted the term from noun to adjective, Herbert’s usage shifts the term from adjective to an implicit verb. Implied in Herbert’s usage is action, which manifests perhaps most effectively in their ability to use the Voice to control the actions of others by holding them completely enthralled with the words and desires of the speaker. In addition, like Shakespeare’s usage, Herbert describes a weird power that combines the supernatural and prescience in characters that work to shape the fates of those around them. Therefore, Herbert’s definition also foreshadows what will continue to be unpacked as one of the sources of weird power: the in-between or hybrid state.

Though perhaps less apparent, the fourth definition listed above also relies on a hybrid state to imply weird power, in this case, one that blends the real and the fantastic or supernatural. This definition is drawn from Keats’ “Lamia” (1820) and reflects the most frequent contemporary use of the word, as well as how weird is now principally defined as a term of opposition. According to this definition, for something to be weird, it is *not* usual, but rather *unusual*. However, though not explicitly stated, this definition also affects the notion of weird power as something “out of the ordinary course,” and, therefore, makes use of the space between ordinary and unusual. In fact, most of what could be classified into the genre of the Old Weird would hold power over its audience purely due to this one aspect of weird power. Gothic writers such as Poe create a weird effect in stories such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) by leaving the audience in intentional ambiguity regarding whether Madeline’s resurrected corpse is real, a result of Roderick’s overactive imagination or a projection of his psyche. Madeline’s resurrection, an event I will return to later as an example of the repressed intruding upon the everyday, also demonstrates weird power because Poe locates her in-between the real and the unreal. Though this definition may seem on its surface to be simply a synonym for strange, the implications of the weird move beyond a mere category in which to put unfamiliar objects, as the Poe example demonstrates.

Although weird power is not always associated with the supernatural as these definitions and examples suggest, it certainly invokes elements beyond the natural. For some viewers, the term weird, in popular usage, can be applied to

anything that contains the “otherworldly,” such as ghosts or re-animated corpses. However, the mere presence of such elements in a text is not enough to give it weird power; rather, the unnatural or otherworldly must intrude upon the natural, or the distinction between two opposing sides must be blurred. For example, Jim Henson’s cult film *Labyrinth* (1986) becomes weird when the fictional characters of Sarah’s (Jennifer Connelly) novel intrude upon her reality. On the other hand, Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) is weird because it blurs the boundary between the real and the psychological, leaving the viewer unsure of setting, reality, and how to make sense of the film as a whole. While a realist aesthetic retains a clear boundary between the opposing states of life and death for example, a weird aesthetic, such as that of *Un Chien Andalou*, draws its power from the oppositions, creating another set of oppositions (fascination and fear) within the viewer. The truly weird possess this power, transforming what was previously a passive adjective into an active verb that acts upon an audience. When someone describes a text that “weirded them out,” the informal expression implies that same power to create a deep enthrallment.

Bruce Mangan gives another way to examine a specific in-between area from which the weird draws its power, which he labels fringe consciousness. This normally hidden realm is closely associated with the uncanny for Mangan, for if accessed, it is the site at which the repressed returns (Mangan 197). A fringe experience, then, would be a point of contact with this specific form of consciousness—an experience that “combines familiar with a certain degree of wrongness” (196). An example of a fringe experience that is *not* uncanny, but merely weird is the barbecue scene in Tim Burton’s *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). In this scene, the idea of a neighborhood barbecue is certainly familiar to viewers, many of which likely live in suburban neighborhoods similar to Peg’s (Diane Wiest). However, Edward (Johnny Depp) barbecuing food on his long, metallic “fingers” and Joyce’s (Kathy Baker) sexual fascination with the adolescent are examples of where wrongness intrudes upon a familiar setting, making this scene one that is even weirder than the creation of Edward or the dark, gothic mansion where Peg originally finds him. This area in-between familiarity and the wrong (or unfamiliar) is a site of potential weird power, and a strategy to produce a weird text. However, fringe experiences within a text create locations of weird power, moments that are weird rather than entire texts that possess this power of enthrallment.

To further understand the importance of fringe experience and consciousness in relation to how the public experiences the weird, and how those experiences are different for members of particular subcultures, it necessary to understand the concept of fringe association. While a fringe experience in a text is the previously mentioned contact with another, normally hidden realm, a fringe association is contact with a normally hidden subculture or aesthetic. Any of the *Doctor Who* television series are examples of texts that possess a fringe association. The original television series and its revival series have specific

terminology, such as Daleks, Time Lords, and Tardis, that is unknown to the mainstream culture, making any reference to them “weird.” Therefore, it may seem that an easy way to achieve weird power is to draw from fringe groups and points of contact outside of the mainstream. However, simply being a “non-mainstream” piece is not enough for a text to possess weird power. As I will later explain with Jim Sharman’s *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), once an audience begins to familiarize itself with a weird piece, it becomes more “normal” and the ability to produce sensations of enthrallment wane.

The connection between subculture and fringe association is critical for understanding how Mangan’s fringe *experience* derives its weird power. It is surprisingly useful to turn to psychologist Robert Thornberg’s research into bullying when further explicating this relationship. According to Thornberg, a “weird” child may become a victim of bullying if s/he breaks established social rules or norms (Thornberg 258). Similarly, when a text is associated with a fringe group and mostly unknown to the mainstream, when the mainstream discovers it, it may produce a type of social fringe experience, as a “repressed” subculture returns to the forefront, albeit usually temporarily. While the presence of subculture-representative art makes some viewers so uncomfortable they refuse to partake and actively avoid it (similar to the bully lashing out at the deviant child), the perceived “wrongness” in regard to mainstream culture holds other viewers in thrall as they are both fascinated and discomfited by it.

Jim Sharman’s *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the cult following that it has spawned are particularly useful as examples with which to examine the weird power that derives from both fringe association and fringe experience. Sharman’s film serves as an almost quintessential example of the power of fringe association to contribute to a weird effect because Sharman pulls his key material completely from “fringe” or subculture groups. For example, Sharman and co-screenwriter and original playwright Richard O’Brien took inspiration from popular B-list science fiction movies, horror films, and 1950s rock ‘n’ roll music to develop the concept that would eventually become a midnight movie classic. Though the film clearly parodies science fiction and horror movies, in order to realize the extent of the parody, a viewer would need to be familiar with the original genres and conventions. These two genres are principally fringe genres, with science fiction associated with nerd subculture, and horror associated with cheap, pulp fiction outside the critically acclaimed mainstream. Not only does Sharman’s film draw from fringe genres, one of his main characters also associates with another “fringe” group: transsexuals. Dr. Frank N. Furter (Tim Curry) and his fellow aliens from Transsexual, Transylvania, all dress in flashy costumes, wear heavy makeup and unusual jewelry, which are merely unfamiliar in the case of Riff Raff (Richard O’Brien) and Magenta (Patricia Quinn), and explicitly drag in the case of Frank N. Furter. The presence of so many associations that, at least to varying degrees, are unfamiliar to a typical audience serves to alienate the audience, who flounders for locations of stability and familiarity in the film. While these

subculture associations would be enough to classify the film as strange or unusual, these affiliations alone do not qualify the film as an example of weird power. Rather, the combination of these normally separate elements aid in the creation of audience enthrallment by producing Mangan's phenomenon of fringe *experience*.

The power of this film relies then upon the tension between the familiar elements from science fiction and horror combined with the "wrong" elements of transsexuals and musical numbers. To clarify, the familiar elements are the parodied conventions, such as Charles Gray's narrative role as the criminologist forecasting the horrors to come and Riff Raff's over-dramatic portentous dialogue to Frank N. Furter when he threatens him with an alien weapon. The "wrong" elements, then, are simply those that would not normally belong in the established genre(s). The foregrounding of transsexuality in the aliens as their defining quality is certainly unusual. Traditionally, for example, one would foreground superior technology as a way to differentiate the aliens from the humans; however, foregrounding drag fashion as the main differentiating factor is at least surprising, if not a complete subversion of audience expectations. The musical numbers in the film serve a similar function to transsexuality in their creation of weird power. Similarly to Frank N. Furter's drag fashion, the musical breaks seem out of place in a horror/science fiction film to say the least. More likely, they serve to completely subvert the function of horror/science fiction as a potentially scary or fear-inducing genre. Therefore, it is these juxtapositions of familiar horror/science fiction conventions with the wrongness of transsexuality and musical numbers that produce a fringe experience in the audience.

While Sharman's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* certainly demonstrates other elements and strategies of the weird that will be later explicated, its principal source of weird power is its use of fringe experience to create a deep sense of audience enthrallment. The very nature of a fringe experience lends itself to the creation of enthrallment precisely because at the same time a viewer is fearful or anxious regarding the unfamiliar or wrong, he/she is delighted at the inclusion of these same elements with the familiar. For example, even the opening credits of Sharman's film create a sense of enthrallment. Visually, Patricia Quinn's disembodied lips are at once "wrong" because they are separate from the body, creating slight anxiety, as well as familiar because they perform the normal function of singing. This opening sequence serves both to set the mood for the film, as well as foreshadow the familiar/wrong combinations that the film will continue to use. From the opening sequence on, Sharman's familiar/wrong juxtapositions create a simultaneous anxiety and refusal to look away, a hallmark trait of the enthrallment that is a principal function of the weird.

However, the film and its cult following also serve as an example of how a text can become less weird as it becomes more familiar. The more familiar a text becomes, the lower its degree of "wrongness" for viewers becomes; the newer and more unfamiliar a text, the greater its potential to enthrall an audience. In a midnight showing of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, shadow casts that know

the film well enough to act it out alongside the film perform their versions of the story. In addition, audience members shout callbacks in response to the film's dialogue, some of which are locally-known responses so familiar that they have become part of the film's cultural text. Both the shadow casts and the callbacks add to the ritualization of the film's performance, reducing the weird power of the film especially for that specific subculture. While a reduction in weird power does not necessarily equate with a reduction in enjoyment, the film certainly holds less of a thrall over a seasoned viewer than it does over a first time, "virgin" viewer. While the performance aspects of the film certainly immerse the viewer, they do so via participation and audience engagement, both different attributes than the enthrallment of simultaneous fear and fascination that a weird text can produce.

Sharman's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* demonstrates the importance of recognizing weird power. This film exemplifies how the weird is far more than merely a genre or aesthetic category, but rather serves as an effect that produces a definite, almost transformational, power over an audience. The enthrallment that *Rocky Horror Picture Show* demonstrates is a key quality in recognizing weird texts, and uses strategies such as hybridity, which will be further examined as sources of weird power in the following sections. Perhaps most importantly, the film's cult following helps make an important point regarding weird power: the idea that weird power can diminish, though not completely vanish, if a text becomes familiar enough. This idea forecasts the importance that context plays in regard to whether or not a text can achieve weird power, a topic that the next section shall discuss in greater detail.

Context & Rupture

As I have identified the primary marker of weird power is its ability to produce a sense of deep enthrallment in an audience, I will now examine the first source of this power: the intrusion of the unnatural into the natural. In order to explore what is natural and what is unnatural, an examination of context necessarily arises. This concept is difficult because it ascribes weirdness to a location, rather than to inherent qualities within the text. However, while this concept may seem to add an unnecessary layer of subjectivity to an aesthetic judgment that already seems too indiscriminate, a single example can illustrate how our notion regarding context and the weird can be definitively explained with a closer look at a work's setting. For example, compare the resurrection of Catelyn Stark in George R.R. Martin's *A Storm of Swords* (2000) to the resurrection of Beloved in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel of the same name. While elements of Catelyn's resurrection are certainly supernatural or even *unnatural*, the event does not possess any weird power precisely because of context. The novel is set in a world where magic and sorcery *are* real, and there is no intrusion of the supernatural into the natural because the entire setting possesses supernatural elements. In contrast, Morrison's *Beloved* is set in the mid-1850s in Ohio, a seemingly realistic setting.

When supernatural elements intrude, such as Beloved's revenant haunting the house and her eventual resurrection as a fully-grown woman, the novel achieves weird power due to this intrusion. While Catelyn's resurrection, in the context, is a believable plot point, Beloved's inclusion challenges the logic and order of what an audience considers real.

However, the idea that the weird often relies upon context for its power is one derived from Percy Shelley's use in his poem, "The Revolt of Islam" (1818). In this poem, Shelley's speaker is perceived as foreign and strange, a "fiend from [his] weird cave, who had stolen human form" (Shelley 9.67). In this use, most of the negative perception of the speaker comes from the intrusion of his supernatural and unearthly attributes into an otherwise realist setting. Similar to Shakespeare's use in *Macbeth*, Shelley's use also suggests a type of power that emanates from what the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as "a mysterious or unearthly character" (see definition two in the previous section). However, implicit in the word "unearthly" is a notion of the unnatural, and therefore something or someone that becomes an intrusion into the normal and everyday.

The intrusion of the supernatural or unnatural into the normal is also a key attribute of both the Old and New Weird genres. Kate Marshall characterizes the Old Weird as founded in the supernatural with "twisted mythic underpinnings" (Marshall 631). Marshall's description references not simply a mythic foundation, but one that is "twisted" or changed in surprising and subversive ways. Though not initially apparent, her explanation makes an implicit context argument as well, for merely the presence of the mythic or supernatural is not enough to characterize a piece as weird, as the Catelyn Stark example demonstrated. The piece must also be "twisted" or intentionally subvert and rupture the normal and natural order of a work's context.

Perhaps even more useful than Marshall's description of some of the weird's earliest manifestations in the Old Weird is Todd Spaulding's definition of the New Weird Tale. Spaulding describes a weird tale as one where "the supernatural appears as a rupture of the coherent universe" (Spaulding 79). Though Spaulding intended his definition to be applied solely to the emerging New Weird genre, he in fact addresses one of the key locations of weird power, regardless of genre. In addressing the concept of rupture, Spaulding provides the framework to discuss why context often determines what is weird and what is merely strange or foreign. According to Spaulding, this intrusion of the supernatural—and I would include the unnatural—into a realist setting is violent and unexpected, like a rupture, precisely because it challenges the logic and coherency of real, science-grounded universe. While generally works of fiction attempt to retain elements of believability, a weird text challenges the logic, coherency, and reason that normally create a believable plot line.

Using the unnatural to rupture the logical coherency of a realist setting is the primary strategy used by Rod Serling in his decidedly weird television series, *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964). Though not every episode is an episode of the

weird, the majority include an unnatural twist at the end of the episode, causing a coherency rupture. Episode nine of the first season, “Perchance to Dream,” based on writer Charles Beaumont’s short story of the same name, makes use of this strategy to create the weird’s hallmark sense of enthrallment. In the episode, Edward Hall (Richard Conte) is a man with a severe heart condition and a wildly overactive imagination. Haunted by a series of dreams involving a seductive carnival dancer, Maya (Suzanne Lloyd), Edward begins to fear falling asleep for fear of returning to the dream. He then visits psychiatrist Dr. Rathmann (John Larch) for help, realizes the psychiatrist cannot help him, and leaves. As Edward leaves, he sees Rathmann’s receptionist who looks just like Maya, which causes him to run back into the room and jump out the window. The inclusion of the psychological supernatural comes with the twist ending when Rathmann calls his receptionist and they walk into the room from which Edward jumped. Rathmann tells Maya that Edward walked in the room, lay down, screamed, and promptly died. As evidence, he points to Edward’s body on the table, which reveals Edward never jumped from the window, but died in his sleep. This moment is the twist that produces the intrusion of the unnatural into the natural. This contrast between the reality of an overactive imagination and the irrational fear of dying from a dream collide, rupturing the coherency of the previous narrative (a man whose horrifying dreams drive him to suicide). Therefore, the episode uses the strategy of unnatural rupture to challenge the episode’s believability, creating a sense of enthrallment as the audience’s perception of logic and coherency is interrupted.

However, not all weird texts intrude the unnatural upon the natural. Some weird texts create coherency ruptures by intruding something both real and familiar upon an unnatural context. For example, as I discussed in the previous section, some of the weirdest moments in Tim Burton’s *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) occur when familiar events occur in the odd narrative of the film, such as when the normal neighborhood barbecue ruptures a narrative about the half-finished Edward and his larger questions about humanity and monstrosity. Therefore, ruptures to a text’s logical order do not have to occur in only one manner, but can occur when any element disrupts the coherency of a text. In Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), the return of Madeline Usher from the dead ruptures the text’s coherency by intruding the real and familiar figure of Madeline into a context with which she no longer fits: the world of the living. The return of Madeline, who arguably represents a repressed part of her brother, Roderick Usher, is also an example of the uncanny, an effect which sometimes occurs in tandem with the weird. According to Sigmund Freud, who coined the term, several circumstances can produce an uncanny effect: when inanimate objects become too close to animate ones (Freud 9), the inclusion of doppelgängers (10), the reanimation of corpses (13), and unexplained repetition, such as the same name, trait, or crime repeating throughout generations (10). However, Freud ultimately settles upon a single definition with which to encompass all that creates uncanny effects: a familiar

object that has been repressed and then emerges to the forefront of consciousness (15). This final definition demonstrates how the uncanny effect is also based upon rupture, in this case, the rupture of the familiar emerging in a “wrong” context, a context in which it does not normally belong. While Madeline’s resurrection could arguably fit into any of Freud’s examples of the uncanny listed above, the purpose of the above example is not to demonstrate how her re-emergence is primarily uncanny, but rather how sometimes the uncanny is also weird, as both make use of coherency ruptures.

In “Fall of the House of Usher,” Madeline’s return after Roderick claims he buried her alive is not the only example of the familiar or real creating a rupture that produces unnatural or seemingly unreal effects. After Madeline dies and Roderick buries her, the narrator notes that Roderick’s health declines as though his life is tied to hers, noting that “the pallor of [Roderick’s] countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue—but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out” (Poe 7). In this instance, Madeline’s real death creates a coherency rupture when her literal decay in the grave seems to simultaneously decay her brother in life. Another example of the real creating an unnatural rupture occurs when the narrator reads the “Mad Trist” of Sir Launcelot Canning to Roderick and, as the narrator reads aloud about screams, shrieks, and other noises, these noises appear in their reality. Therefore, Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher” creates its weird power not by inserting the supernatural into a realist setting, but rather by causing the familiar form of Madeline and the real words of the text the narrator reads to rupture the coherency of a narrative that seemed to be about a sick man whose sister recently died. Madeline’s return is certainly the most obvious rupture of the logical order of the text, an event that is both uncanny and weird.

The above examples demonstrated how ruptures in the coherency of the subject matter, or plot and setting context, can create weird power. However, a text can also achieve weird power when the form is stylistically ruptured, and out of place aesthetic elements occur in an unfamiliar or not normal context. In Edgar Wright’s *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (2010), the intrusion of comic book and video game qualities into an action-comedy film disrupt the coherency of the narrative’s style. The film draws deliberate attention to the fact that it is a constructed story by interrupting normal film methods, which often mask cinematographic and editing technique to achieve believability. Instead of attempting to present a cohesive stylistic whole, Wright’s film continually ruptures the medium of film itself, by superimposing comic book-style onomatopoeic letters, such as RING and BRRRR, and using non-diegetic video game sounds in fight scenes. While the film’s content does demonstrate the intrusion of the imaginary (in video games and comic books) onto the real narrative about a boy trying to date a girl, the primary rupture the film uses to achieve weird power is the intrusion of other media onto the medium of film. Even stylistic ruptures, such as those in *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, return to issues of context; in this case, the context and

conventions of a specific form or medium itself.

While the discussion of context may seem, on the surface, to be another subjective attribute of the popular usage of the term “weird,” the notion of context plays an important role in how the weird achieves power. One major source of the weird aesthetic draws its power from the inclusion of out-of-place elements, in regard to content or form, that rupture the coherency of the narrative or style. When the weird draws its power from these intrusions of either the unnatural into the natural or the familiar into the unfamiliar, the power is one principally achieved via the twist and surprise that such a rupture causes. Consequently, these ruptures in the expected order or coherency in a text do create an enthrallment in the audience. Unlike the enthrallment that was one of mainly delight as the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* example demonstrated, this enthrallment is one mainly created by curiosity and surprise. These ruptures to coherency mainly pose a challenge to the audience, retaining their weird power as they disturb the normal expectations and context. Therefore, even the notions of context and rupture in relation to the weird support the idea that the weird principally opposes and actively subverts the normal.

In-Between States: Ambiguity, Hesitation & Tension

While coherency ruptures are one source of weird power, another source of weird power lies in Kate Marshall’s “in-between stages” that deliberately cause confusion in an audience (Marshall 645). As briefly touched upon in the first section, in-between stages are those that foreground duality or allow for two different qualities to exist simultaneously, such as sleepwalking or the reanimation of corpses. Since Marshall’s use of the word “stage” implies a characteristic that is part of a process or a certain type of development, I would suggest that we should recast the discussion of in-between forms as one relating to *states*. The word “state,” on the other hand, implies permanence and a solid boundary that is not easily disrupted. Therefore, when in-between states, such as human/nonhuman or animate/inanimate, are foregrounded, they create tension between two normally opposed forms. While the distinction between stage and state seems small, the importance of considering that the weird draws power from the tension of in-between states is important because it shifts the focus to the blurring of normally definite boundaries. When these boundaries are blurred, challenged, or collapsed, an audience often experiences anxiety or discomfort. Even though these states often interest viewers, contributing to their enthrallment, weird texts that draw their power from ambiguity and tension do so in a way that challenges an audience’s assumptions about categories that are often believed objective and definite.

To better understand how a weird text can simultaneously enthrall and discomfort an audience, it is useful to turn to Roland Barthes distinction of texts or bliss and texts of pleasure. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Barthes contrasts

texts of pleasure—a text that “contents, fills, grants euphoria” and “comes from culture and does not break with it” —with texts of bliss. In the original French, these are texts of *jouissance*, which is translated to bliss in English, but carries the meaning of orgasm in it as well. These texts of bliss are not pleasing in the traditional sense; rather, a text of bliss “imposes a state of loss...discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, [and] brings to a crisis his relation with language” (Barthes 14). Though every text of bliss is certainly not weird, weird texts that discomfort an audience through ambiguity, tension, or hesitation are examples of texts of bliss. Though not directly stated, a text of bliss destabilizes boundaries in the same way weird texts do, as well as draws attention to the contrast between what is like the self (a text of pleasure) and what is unlike or apart from it.

In their chapter on pleasure in texts, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle use Barthes to explain this distinction, and then further clarify the implications of Barthes’ claims. According to Bennett and Royle, texts of bliss “subvert identity itself, creating a subject who is never anything but a living contradiction” or a “split subject who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of its selfhood and its collapse” (Bennett 197). Since these texts destabilize boundaries and inhabit in-between stages, it is logical that the feelings that they produce in an audience would also be dual and conflicting, such as simultaneous enthrallment and discomfort. Therefore, weird texts that are also texts of bliss create a discomfort in the collapse of selfhood and a type of enthrallment in the enjoyment of the state.

Two of the states frequently blurred in order to produce weird power are human and nonhuman. These states could also be more broadly categorized as self and other, and ambiguity between these two destabilizes the boundary between what an audience knows (itself) and what is presumed unknown in the other. This intentional blurring of states creates discomfort in the audience, as the idea of human as a definite state is challenged. In her book, *Human, All Too Human*, Diana Fuss examines how the “fascination with the ‘almost human’” actually “provokes our greatest anxiety” mainly due to the “sameness” of a nonhuman to a biological human. While Fuss’s work is certainly applicable in science fiction where machines and other automatons are present, her claim that these distinctions are often more “social” than “natural” or “biological” allows for an application to any group of individuals that mainstream society has named another (qtd. in Laga 49). While Fuss’s work can be used to question what qualities make one human, her examination of how the nonhuman causes anxiety allows for an application to weird texts as well. Fuss uses both “fascination” and “anxiety” to describe an audience’s reaction to nonhuman characters or elements, which echoes Barthes’ idea of how texts of bliss create both enjoyment and a collapse of selfhood and my idea that weird texts create both enthrallment and discomfort. Therefore, the boundaries between these three concepts intertwine, suggesting that blurring the

boundaries between human and nonhuman is one strategy with which to create the seemingly contrasting effects of the weird.

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) serves as an example of how the ambiguity of almost-human characters can be used to create weird power. Based on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Android's Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), the film follows Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) as he hunts down four replicants (genetically engineered automatons who appear no different than adult humans) who escaped from an off-world colony. One of the most interesting tensions in the film is between Deckard and Rachael (Sean Young), an experimental replicant with implanted memories. Unlike many of the other replicant characters in the film, Rachael does not originally know that she is not human. When Deckard gives Rachael the Voight-Kampff test, which separates humans from replicants, it takes over one hundred questions for him to determine she is replicant not human, whereas the typical replicant is discovered in around thirty. Deckard and Dr. Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel), the replicants' creator, suspect her human traits, such as empathy, compassion, and a sense of ethics, are the result of her implanted memories. While the scene in which Rachael discovers she is a replicant does not create weird power in the audience, it serves as a model for how the rest of the film will create enthrallment and anxiety. For Rachael, the tension between her humanity and the knowledge that she is an automaton is essentially weird, and gives her deep discomfort and curiosity. What makes *Blade Runner* a weird film as a whole is that it uses the ambiguity of which characters are human and which are not to create the same anxiety Rachael experiences in the audience.

However, though there are moments of ambiguity in the film where the audience is unsure of who is human and who is replicant, the greatest ambiguity comes from the film's most enduring question: is Rick Deckard a replicant? In the theatrical release, the possibility is hinted at, but not definitively stated. Deckard never directly says he has passed a Voight-Kampff test, his house is full of photographs, suggesting a preoccupation with a past that may or may not be real, and he performs several seemingly superhuman feats in the film, such as climbing a building with two broken fingers and enduring severe beatings from other replicants. While according to Scott and his director's cut released in 1992, Deckard is definitely a replicant (as a deleted scene confirms), many fans regard the theatrical release to be the "true" version of the film and desire that the answer remain ambiguous. The ambiguity of the theatrical cut certainly addresses the anxiety and enthrallment that a human/nonhuman uncertainty can produce. Fans and viewers are obsessed with the answer to this question and, despite the seemingly definitive answer of the director's cut, continue to watch the film and search for evidence pointing either way.

However, the ambiguity of the theatrical cut foregrounds the self/other tension of the film, encouraging viewers to identify with the "human" lead in Deckard, while supplying some evidence that Deckard is not human at all. Not only could this knowledge lead to a collapse of selfhood in Deckard, as it does

with Rachael, the knowledge challenges the audience's conception of selfhood as well. The anxiety produced while an audience attempts to uncover whether or not Deckard is a replicant blurs what seem to be clear-cut boundaries between human/nonhuman at the beginning of the film. These boundaries, according to the Tyrell Corporation, are so clear-cut a single Voight-Kampff test can separate human and replicant. However, throughout the course of the film, replicants are humanized and Deckard is certainly mechanized (at least due to audience speculation), challenging the concept of definitive boundaries all together. Though *Blade Runner* certainly can be explored only as a science fiction film that comments on human/machine distinctions, the film also uses the ambiguity of almost-human characters to create weird power. The question of Deckard's humanity itself is enough to simultaneously fascinate an audience as they puzzle through the clues, as well as cause severe discomfort, as they realize they may have identified with an automaton over humans in the film. By leaving the audience in a perpetual state of uncertainty regarding which characters are human and which are not, the film produces weird power through this enduring ambiguity. However, the ambiguity that almost humans produce is only one example of a strategy with which to produce weird power.

Another strategy that makes use of in-between states to create weird power is when fantastic elements collapse the boundary between the natural and the supernatural or the real and the unreal. The term "fantastic" usually describes an aesthetic effect, originally coined by Tzvetan Todorov to describe the hesitation that characters or readers face when confronted with questions regarding the nature of their reality. A true fantastic text will leave the audience with uncertainty; any text in which the supernatural/natural or dream/reality binary is explained loses its fantastic effect (Todorov). An example of a fantastic text that uses this hesitation to create weird power is Amparo Dávila's short story, "El Huespéd" ("The Guest," 1959). Narrated by the wife of a distant husband, Dávila's story begins when the husband brings a guest home to stay with them. The narrator describes the guest as sinister with large eyes, giving an overall animalistic or cat-like impression. The narrator continues to describe a night when the cat attacks her children, the eventual efforts of her servant Guadalupe and the narrator herself to board up the house, and the departure or death of the guest. What qualifies this text as an example of the fantastic is that Dávila never reveals whether or not the cat-like guest is real, a product of the narrator's imagination, or a psychological manifestation of her oppressive husband. Therefore, the text draws its weird power from the hesitation between the real and the supernatural appearance and qualities of the guest.

Like texts that remain in deliberate ambiguity or create hesitation as the audience attempts to puzzle through what is real and what is not, weird texts may also achieve power by creating tension between these normally opposing states. While this tension can be created via subject matter as *Blade Runner* does, pitting the human state against the nonhuman state, it can also be created via the

form a text takes. Just as *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* achieves its weird power through stylistic ruptures of coherency, weird texts can take stylistically hybrid or in-between forms in order to achieve weirdness. One of the common forms that is stylistically an in-between state is collage, a method that is often used in visual or written media, but can also be used in film. Collage texts draw attention to opposing states via juxtaposition, often making use of intertextuality. As a result, these pieces are fraught with tension.

The masturbation scene in Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film adaptation of Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) is an example of a weird collage created via editing. This scene begins with Alex putting on a tape of Beethoven's 9th Symphony and then implies Alex's sexual thoughts by showing a snake coiling near a painting of a woman with spread legs. This juxtaposition alone reveals one of the tensions of the scene, and in fact, the film itself: the opposition between high art and low actions. However, the scene continues to show a figure of four dancing Christ figurines, shot from different angles, as blood pours from their wounds. This juxtaposition reveals a secondary tension in the scene: the opposition between the sacred and the profane in the action of masturbation. Finally, the scene concludes with shots of a woman being hanged, a large explosion, and rocks falling onto men below, juxtaposed with blood running from the corner of Alex's delighted mouth. The scene itself is certainly confusing upon a first viewing, and this confusion comes largely from the tension between normally separate states of thought and being.

As with the feeling of simultaneous discomfort and enthrallment created by weird texts with ambiguous subject matter, when the form of a text occupies an in-between state, an audience is similarly placed in a location of both anxiety and fascination. During Alex's voiceover of the scene, he mentions how the moment is one of "bliss," and his use certainly recalls Barthes' definition of bliss in a text. Similar to a text of bliss, Alex's actions during the scene create a moment so enthralling that he experiences a temporary loss or collapse of selfhood. The end of the scene no longer relates images to Alex and his identity, but rather the experience itself, of which Alex is merely one fragmented piece. As the scene is shot from Alex's perspective, revealing what is on his mind, it encourages the audience to identify with Alex. By watching Alex enter a state of bliss, the audience becomes enthralled with him. It is important to note that although this scene implies sexual content, the audience enthrallment is not the result of such subject matter. Rather, the scene produces simultaneous discomfort and enthrallment because the audience is fascinated by the odd juxtapositions at the same time they are made anxious because the images do not seem to belong together. Just as Alex momentarily loses his sense of self in an all-consuming action, the confusing collage form of the scene also distances the audience from itself. The scene itself achieves weird power through the tensions that the collage format highlights, inhabiting the space in between these tensions.

When weird texts dwell in ambiguity, create hesitation, or highlight tensions, they draw power from their ability to inhabit the space in-between normally opposing states. However, while the coherency ruptures discussed in the previous section challenge logical order and believability to achieve weird power, these texts challenge what are normally perceived as defined, rigid boundaries.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, my focus has been on reclaiming the idea of weird from a subjective, value judgment with no critical application, to an analytical term indicative of a specific power and aesthetic effect. While the weird may seem to be simply an effect to create discomfort in an audience, surprise an audience with unexpected intrusions, or hold them captive with strange juxtapositions, the weird also comments upon what society perceives as normal, logical and stable. The weird is also an effect that destabilizes boundaries, form, or perception as a result of its strategies, and its implications are more social than they may seem. Since the weird is an aesthetic effect best defined by what it opposes (the normal, the logical, the familiar), it consequently encourages the perceptive viewers to ponder how their personal contexts are constructed and what contexts society has constructed for them. The “weird” in popular usage has social and hierarchical implications, while the weird as a critical term enables us to analyze these implications in the context of texts themselves and what the texts we can now classify as “weird” reveal about what we call “normal.”

While my project does address some of the broader concerns surrounding the weird as an aesthetic effect, my work is merely an introduction to the question of what makes a piece weird or not. Though I have purposefully studied texts that are well-known to the point of almost being mainstream, more attention should be given to contemporary fringe texts that are often concerned with destabilizing form to achieve weird effect. Modern art, both avant-garde and simply contemporary, as a category may hold pieces that work to create weird power through unusual juxtapositions, intertextuality in regard to medium, and their non-representational nature in general. While this category likely pulls the majority of its weird power from blurring definite states to create ambiguity, I would be interested in investigating examples of avant-garde art where the unfamiliar intrudes upon the familiar, or the unnatural intrudes upon the natural. In addition to making use of these strategies to achieve weird power, modern and avant-garde art both occupy a subculture association due to what many perceive as their inaccessibility, making them an important category to examine in regard to weirdness.

Another large category missing from my brief analysis of the weird is music, which has the potential to be weird both in form and in content. The collage-like nature of contemporary music due to sampling, co-writing, and visual/audio album releases has the potential to achieve weird power through tension within its form. Artists such as Beck Hanson and his sampling-heavy, genre-defying album

Odelay (1997) perhaps deserve attention as sources of weird power, not due to any inclusion of the supernatural, but due to juxtaposition, nonsense lyrics, and the inclusion of non-musical sounds. In addition, some concept albums, such as The Who's *Tommy* (1969), create coherency ruptures as a way to achieve weird power. With its 1975 Ken Russell produced film companion, *Tommy* intrudes the spiritual into the physical, the surreal into the real, and the wrong into the familiar. While I have merely touched upon these two texts as instances of weird power within music, a category I mainly neglected, these two examples demonstrate the need to apply the notion of weirdness to music as well.

Finally, I wish to speculate regarding the future of the weird as an aesthetic effect. As I noted with *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, since the weird relies heavily upon its opposition to the everyday, it does have the potential to be normalized and therefore lose some of its ability to enthrall. While this does not mean that the weird will eventually cease to exist as both an aesthetic and value judgment, it does imply that the notion of weirdness may shift as time passes. Due to the nature of the weird as dependent upon context, it is decidedly difficult for any one text to maintain a permanent weird effect. Within my essay, texts that have retained their weird power, such as Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher," do so mainly with the strategy of coherency ruptures, as these intrusions disrupt the logical order of a text. While a piece such as *Rocky Horror Picture Show* gained some of its weird power through its fringe association, which could be slowly normalized, texts that use coherency ruptures to achieve their weird power are able to sustain over time. It is likely then that texts with the greatest "lasting" weird power will make use of these ruptures, while those that achieve most of their power from fringe association will slowly become normalized and cease to create the same enthrallment they may have in original audiences. Regardless of which texts maintain and which lose their weird power, my essay has provided several definitive qualities of and strategies for creating weird power, allowing for us to analytically treat various texts we as a society may have previously undervalued.

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