



***A Century of Weird Fiction, 1832-1937: Disgust, Metaphysics and the Aesthetics of Cosmic Horror,***  
By Jonathan Newell.

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Horror studies is a rising area of scholarship and Jonathan Newell's first book, *A Century of Weird Fiction, 1832-1937*, is set to enrich the field. It is the latest in the University of Wales Press's series on the subject which aims to expand the field of study in innovative and student-friendly ways.

Weird fiction is a branch of horror that seeks to induce a sense of fear in the reader, not of physical danger but of cosmic dissolution. Newell looks at five key weird writers from across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – Edgar Allen Poe, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson and Howard Phillip Lovecraft – in light of how they used the aesthetics of disgust to question metaphysical assumptions.

Newell's central argument is that disgust pushes the reader into an area beyond thought where some concepts are more easily expressed. In particular, that the division between the thinking human subject and the objective "world-as-it-is" Immanuel Kant proposed is not as solid as we would like to believe.

Starting with Poe, the forefather of the genre, Newell contends that weird fiction moved away from the Gothic school by using disgust to shift the emphasis from inner psychological terror, to visceral, cosmic horror. To do so Newell relates Poe's fiction to the philosophy of Friedrich Schelling. As he admits, he is not the first to do so, but he is the first to see how Poe used disgust to open up Schelling's ideas.

Schelling, and other German Idealists, sought to challenge Kant's division of phenomena and noumena by showing that the human subject was also part of the objective world and could not therefore observe it from a purely outside perspective. Schelling presented the idea of the Absolute, where all distinctions become meaningless and a primal unity is revealed. The best way to express this, he went on, was through Art. According to Newell, Poe's cosmic horror stories are that perfect artistic expression, and he makes a compelling case, particularly around "The Fall of the House of Usher", with its palpable link between the physical house and its inhabitants which then both succumb to dissolution.

Importantly, Newell does not say that Poe argued Schelling's philosophy through rational plots or any other intellectual approach, but through affect. It is here that the core of Newell's thesis lies, and he succeeds in demonstrating that it is the best approach to the genre. That Poe and other weird writers said as much, certainly helps in that regard. It is not for readers to think "that's terrifying", it is for them to feel physically disturbed.

It is precisely because horror relies on emotional effects that scholarship has largely disregarded it in light of modernism's intellectual bias. As Newell shows, some scholars have

analysed a handful of weird works, but have always done so with an intellectual approach. This has missed the point and belittled the very tropes that make the genre what it is. Newell rectifies that by forcefully presenting the affective nature of weird fiction and tying it to metaphysical and philosophical concepts.

After discussing Poe as the forefather of the genre, Newell moves on to three critically undervalued writers who helped shape weird fiction in its infancy. Machen was at his writing prime in the 1890s, which was also when he was an avid practicing occultist. Machen openly opposed scientific rationalism and Newell shows how he expressed this in his fiction, primarily through the aesthetics of disgust.

With Blackwood, Newell moves us into the Edwardian period and presents the only optimistic weird writer. Blackwood's reverence of Nature led him to write fiction of the human self returning to its place within the cosmic unity. It produced horror, but not to the supposed victims of the dissolution. Mysophobic Hodgson, a neglected figure Newell seeks to give due credit to, had no such optimistic outlook. His fiction is among the most overtly disgusting discussed in the book and sees an ultimate disintegration of all life into a formless chaos.

Newell's final writer, Lovecraft, has become synonymous with the genre. He is also infamously racist, and Newell does not shy away from this. He rightly denounces it but does not try to disconnect it from the fiction, insisting that Lovecraft's bigoted hatred drove much of the fear that went into his work. However, once that is admitted, it is possible to see how the fiction is bigger than an allegory for hate as it produces a greater fear of contamination from sources beyond our reality leading to the eventual destruction of all existence. Perhaps Lovecraft's hatred stopped him from seeing the life-affirming view Blackwood pronounced.

There is some repetition in the book as Newell demonstrates the way each writer used the same aesthetic to achieve a slight variation on the same metaphysical theme. However, the writers each had their own flavour of disgusting aesthetics and Newell uses their different approaches to introduce the reader to a variety of fascinating concepts like Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality and Michael Marder's "vegetal soul".

If anything is missing in the book it is an engagement with some similar theoretical models. Newell does put forward reasons for treating disgust as distinct from the sublime by arguing the sublime reifies Kant's division of phenomena and noumena. The case is well made but does not address the radical sublime as discussed by Jack Voller and others. Nor does Newell explain how the aesthetics of disgust differ from Kristeva's model of abjection, besides statements of not taking a psychoanalytical approach.

The array of ideas explored, the colourful writers being discussed, and the comprehensive and convincing arguments Newell puts forward, all make *A Century of Weird Fiction, 1832-1937*, compelling and entertaining reading. Hopefully, it also takes us one step closer to accepting the scholarly importance of not only weird fiction, but popular fiction as a whole.

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