



**Birds, Bears, and Writing Humanimal Futures:  
An Interview with Jeff VanderMeer at the 75<sup>th</sup> Science  
Fiction WorldCon, Helsinki, August 2017**

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The following interview questions were inspired by the 75<sup>th</sup> Science Fiction WorldCon's Academic Track, entitled "100 Years of Estrangement", and my own PhD research. The conference, as the title itself suggests, was meant not only to revisit but also to revise Schlovsky's "ostranenie" with respect to its use in the field of fantastic literatures before and after Darko Suvin's coinage of "cognitive estrangement", differentiating between science fiction and fantasy. Consequently, a great portion of the academic discussion revolved around the question of genre; this is relevant to the position of New Weird within fantastic literatures and the interpretation of Jeff VanderMeer's fiction, whose work has been closely related to New Weird, and, most recently, critical posthumanism.

The lack of completely satisfying definitions and the intention to define science fiction alongside speculative fiction, fantasy, horror, gothic, Weird and New Weird, magical realism, and other related genres have been the focal point of ongoing debate. While these "narrative grammars" (Clute 19) overlap in their engagement with defamiliarisation as a means of encountering or capturing the fantastic, there seems to be a commercial need for the maintenance of boundaries, even though it appears to be increasingly challenging to do so. The debate is not only concerned with the placement of boundaries between genres, especially between science fiction and fantasy, but also the very necessity of such classification. There are strong arguments for both keeping and discarding genre, and the conference itself allowed a platform for both considerations. For one, the already existing corpus of fantastic literatures is so overwhelmingly large that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to work with it without an artificial generic breakdown. On the other hand, these boundaries can lead to the loss of nuances of the subtle intertextual engagement. In addition, genre itself seems to marginalise "genre literature", preventing it from becoming more present in the mainstream, with the exception of a few authors (one such is Jeff VanderMeer, one of the major authors of New Weird).

Before discussing New Weird, it is necessary to elaborate on Suvin's take on estrangement, its closeness to the uncanny, and John Clute's "fantastika". Suvin, in his

1979 book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, attempted to distinguish science fiction from other forms of fantastic literature based on its *modus operandi*: what he termed the process of cognitive estrangement. He defined this as the plausible spatio-temporal distancing of the historic context of the author (and, by extension, the reader). Although in this case defamiliarisation (or a certain aspect of it) has been set as the basis for separating genres, it can also be instrumental in the unification of them. In Suvin's terminology, estrangement seems to work as a meta-framework for genre: these forms of literature show a great sense of self-awareness regarding their own aesthetics, "jargon", and audience, which means that they actively exercise defamiliarisation to create a distance from other literary traditions, forming their own. (Web) The difference in the poetics of the several strands of fantastic literatures emphasises the similar effect of the encounter with the fantastic: "the suspension of disbelief", estrangement from reality.

John Clute's promotion of the term "fantastika", originating from Slavonic literatures, provides an approach focusing more on the similarities between the three major strands of fantastika: science fiction, fantasy, and horror (which he prefers to call terror). In his 2007 keynote lecture at the *Cultural Landscapes/Fiction Without Borders* conference, entitled "Fantastika in the World Storm", he proposes to "describe fantastika as the necessary form of planetary fiction since 1750" (19). He argues that the absolute overtaking of Enlightenment in Western civilisation resulted in repressing the human mind and culture's natural inclination toward the irrational, which was deemed as inappropriate and abnormal by the ruling normative rationalism. Relying on ancient Greek tales and Freudian psychoanalysis, he suggests that "what is repressed will come back" (21), and explains that from 1750 onwards stories begin to "consciously subvert the ordered world above" (21, original emphasis). One of his examples is Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which he and others consider the debut of gothic in literature, "the contemplation of the new discovered category of the Ruin, and the sense of the quite extraordinary *precariousness* of the civilized world" (22, original emphasis). In this sense fantastika appears as a counter narrative, criticising Enlightenment, and in a broader sense, humanist ideology, also marking "the point when Western Civilisation begins to understand that we do not inhabit a world but a planet" (23). In my understanding, the difficulty of locating the individual narratives of fantastic literatures (science fiction, fantasy, horror) is their simultaneous timelessness – in the sense that engaging with sublime imagination, which seems to be a primordial trait of human sentience – and locality in both time and space. Clute's timeline of fantastika, which begins in the mid-18th century, reflects on the technological advances of the First Industrial Revolution, which were beyond most people's cognitive reach and catalysed immanently threatening processes to the environment and the understanding of the category of life. These profound changes resulted in literary expressions of anxiety, predominantly linked to monstrosity and the supernatural, both glorifying and diminishing human life.

Similarly, there has been a heated debate over the beginning of the Anthropocene (a term resurfacing in 2016), which has also been linked to the First Industrial Revolution – a suggested historical turning point in the relation of human activity and the environment. The Anthropocene has become a major theme in posthumanist discourse, especially its most recent narrative development, turning to animal and climate studies: critical posthumanism. Critical posthumanism seems to originate from both modernism's destabilising the ego through psychoanalysis and Marxism (Badmington 4–5), and the following sceptic, anti-humanist approach of postmodernism. In Rosi Braidotti's words (critical) posthumanism seeks to deconstruct the normative model of the human represented by the Vitruvian-man (13). Consequently, "narratives of otherness" (such as feminist criticism, postcolonialism, and animal studies) are instrumental in forming critical posthumanism. One of the most important areas of academic discussion within the field is the problem of subjectivity. Critical posthumanism seeks to offer an ontological framework with fewer ontological constraints (Roden), imagining a certain "porous

subjectivity” that discards the previous models of hybridity and symbiosis and focuses on constant exchange, metamorphosis, and contamination (Nayar).

Clute, arguing for the inherent conceptual unity of fantastic literatures, establishes 12 terms – four categories describing the features of science fiction, fantasy, and horror narratives – which being juxtaposed demonstrates the “permutations of one Ur Story, like three snakes mutually entwined, each snake undergoing the same morphological transformations” (28). The speakers on the genre panel at the “100 Years of Estrangement” conference suggested that the category of estrangement could be used as a unificatory force rather than a source of boundaries. In the Q&A section, New Weird, a relative new-comer as a “rogue” genre, was offered as a model for the unification of genres, or more precisely, redrawing the boundaries between them. Both estrangement and the New Weird are relevant for discussions revolving around genre and the unruly categories of Western civilisation, culminating in the understanding of human and non-human. Estrangement seems to offer an epistemological framework in which previous binary categories can be rejected. Defamiliarisation, as many of the conference’s papers pointed out, is related to the Freudian “unheimlich”. The uncanny is, of course, a complex cognitive and emotional response to the familiar, which, for some reason, can no longer be understood within the framework of the ordinary. Freud’s example is the corpse, once human but at that particular material state lacking “humanness”. Posthumanism, and the often monstrous posthuman, reflects on the problematic nature and maintenance of categorisation.

New Weird seems to be situated somewhat outside of fantastika, or more precisely between the “narrative grammars” of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. The creation of New Weird can be linked to authors primarily associated with one (or more) of the main strands of fantastic literatures, and their attempt to come to terms with their own work. The spark of discussion has been ignited by the publication of novels like China Mieville’s *Perdido Street Station* or Jeff VanderMeer’s *City of Saints and Madmen*, presenting a problem of rendering these works into any of the primarily established narratives of fantastika. VanderMeer has been active in this discussion not only as an author but also as an editor, working with Ann VanderMeer, carefully archiving and curating the weird tradition – associated with, for example, H.P. Lovecraft, Lord Dunsany, and William Howard Hodgson – providing a platform for authors, previously categorised in one of the strands of fantastika, to publish their works and have a more stable access to the mainstream. In the 2008 anthology *The New Weird*, VanderMeer gives a thorough explanation of the foundation of New Weird, and a detailed definition of the genre, linking it to various literary traditions:

New Weird is a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy. New Weird has a visceral, in-the-moment quality that often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style and effects – in combination with the stimulus of influence from New Wave writers or their proxies (including also such forbearers as Mervyn Peake and the French/English Decadents). New Weird fictions are acutely aware of the modern world, even if disguise, but not always overtly political. As part of this awareness of the modern world, New Weird relies for its visionary power on a “surrender to the weird” that isn’t, for example, hermetically sealed in a haunted house or the moors or in a cave in Antarctica. The “surrender” (or “belief”) of the writer can take many forms, some of them even involving the use of postmodern techniques that do not undermine the surface reality of the text. (xvi)

The introduction of New Weird draws attention to the creation of genres and the artificiality of the process, and hence the impossibility of maintaining clean boundaries. New Weird incorporates the previously described ontology of porousness and contamination both on conceptual and aesthetic levels: New Weird defines itself as a chimera, showing self-awareness of its genealogy and closeness to gothic alongside the later influences of science fiction and fantasy. The closeness of critical posthumanism is apparent in the emergence and increasing popularity of the term “global weirding”.

“Global weirding”, coined by Hunter Lovins, co-founder of the Rocky Mountain Institute, and popularised by Thomas L. Friedman, columnist at *The New York Times*, is a suggested substitute for “global warming” and “climate change”. This addition to the climate discourse was necessary, as “global warming” (a) has been abused by politics and energy politics and (b) it is not descriptive enough of the complex processes of climate change. As Friedman emphasises it in his article “Global Weirding is Here”:

Avoid the term “global warming.” I prefer the term “global weirding,” because that is what actually happens as global temperatures rise and the climate changes. The weather gets weird. The hots are expected to get hotter, the wets wetter, the dries drier and the most violent storms more numerous. (Friedman 2010)

In 2016, *Paradoxa*, devoted a special issue to global weirding, which I find significant, as it not only signals that the term has been accepted by the climate discourse of humanities (or rather, posthumanities), but also that it is associated and juxtaposed with the literary tradition of the New/Weird, suggested by the contribution of both Jeff VanderMeer and China Mieville, two major authors of the genre.

I interviewed Jeff VanderMeer at the World Science Fiction Convention in Helsinki in 2017.

### **Beata Gubacsi**

The academic track, “100 Years of Estrangement” is focusing on the various use of defamiliarization, especially in relation to the history of science fiction. One of the papers pointed out that both science fiction and fantasy are defined by estrangement, so there's no point in separating them. What do you think of that?

### **Jeff VanderMeer**

Something instinctually makes me not think of science fiction in terms of estrangement, but maybe it's my own personal definition of science fiction. I'd define science fiction as something I don't do and instead usually writing something that's in a weird fiction tradition, or an uncanny tradition that happens to include elements of science fiction. Or with *Borne*, there's definitely less of an issue of estrangement but it's more based on anime and manga, combined with the weird impulse.

### **BG**

Do you see your “weird impulse” as part of the weird tradition and fantastic literature?

### **JV**

I think only in modern times is fantasy more thought of as something lighter or not containing some kind of darkness to it, right? So I definitely see it in that way. I just think that there's maybe a tactile element and that's where things like contamination and estrangement come from, but you don't find that in its raw form in science fiction, if that makes any sense, except maybe very weird space opera. You can find some of the same elements of the new weird in Alastair Reynolds's strangest space opera, but I'm mostly

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interested in contamination and the idea of contamination in fiction, which sometimes takes the form of estrangement.

I do have to say that I try in my readings of philosophy and academic papers to read outside of genre criticism because I feel it can get a little bit too tied up into particular, very narrow windows debating stuff, like whether some other science-fiction academic is correct, when there's kind of a wider world out there, especially when it comes to environmental stuff. Like the stuff Timothy Morton is doing about dark ecology.

**BG**

Your works seem to be interpreted in terms of posthumanism. Do you read academic pieces analysing your work? Does it affect the way you write or do you distance yourself from it?

**JV**

This may seem irrelevant, but it is relevant. My dad's an entomologist and research chemist, studying invasive species, and my early knowledge of the academic world was through scientific papers and things of that nature, which I always found fascinating. And I think that's carried through to the fact that I'm fascinated in academic responses to my work in part because I both synthesise what I learn from that and sometimes apply it consciously.

There was one paper on Area X that about contamination and the porousness of skin, basically, in the modern era with regard to contaminants and I thought that was really fascinating. It was talking about all these times in the *Southern Reach* trilogy where the porousness of barriers is mentioned and in both bad and good ways and about the body and it made me more aware of something that I didn't actually consciously think about when I was writing those books, but will come out consciously later. Sometimes, I have to be honest, I also send up academic papers in my fiction because I'm very interested in using non-fiction forms in a fictional sense.

I'm also resistant to Marxist interpretations of my work, the main reason being that as much as I think capitalism is responsible for our problems, I think there is something irrational in the human psyche that comes out in bad ways regardless of the ideology that we're using. I see Marxism useful in response to capitalism, but I don't see it as the unalloyed solution for political systems, for example. So sometimes I see people mapping *The Southern Reach* to that, and the whole idea behind the book was to try to reject any kind of entrenched ideology and push to something new even if it failed.

But even when I'm using something in a negative context, if I spend that much time researching it, using it, that doesn't actually mean that I hate it or have a fear of it. Quite the opposite, no matter how it's deployed, like fungi.

**BG**

You mentioned that you do a lot of research for your writing. This puts you in a really interesting position where you're a reader, a researcher, and a writer. It's a fascinating, complex, and somewhat disjointed mindset. How do you cope?

**JV**

I basically log myself off. When I'm working on a novel, I'm not on the internet, I'm not doing research. I'm simply living in the world of the novel. One reason I think I'm able to create, at the very least (whether people like the novels or not), an immersive experience is because I'm immersed in it. I tend to write the kind of novels where everything in my environment can somehow have an influence on it.

And then there's what I think of as mathematical equations to solve, which are editing anthologies. That's more of a mathematical equation, whereas writing a novel is kind of like being immersed in a dream, being immersed in a relationship or something.

It's very visceral and lives in the body, so to speak. I feel it – like when I was writing *Authority*, I felt that and I actually became more paranoid.

The point is [that] compartmentalisation is very important. It's very important for a long-term career too, because a way you get burned out is when you start trying to mix writing and social media, mix writing and promotion – and then also the line between what's creative and what's promotional gets blurred. I actually welcome doing the research, because that also is a way of getting away from the fiction, seeing it with fresh eyes. But I always do the research several years ahead of time, so it kind of organically comes out.

I even see *The Weird* [an anthology of weird stories from Borges to Neil Gaiman, edited by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, published in 2011] as being a kind of research for the *Southern Reach*, in that it was kind of a crash course. Even though I knew weird fiction, I had to read six million words, or at least skim some of that. Obviously, you can skip a story and know it's not for you, but we did look at over six million words to get to our word count of 750,000. When you do that, it creates sedimentary layers in your head that you don't even realise are there, and so that's how I do the research for the novels now. If I do all that philosophical research a couple years before I actually write anything, I don't refer to my notes later. It's just whatever comes out from that.

### **BG**

We've been discussing the academic attention on your works and the New/Weird in general. Do you think it has changed the genre in the past decade or two decades?

### **JV**

I think that it created a pathway or a corridor for some of us towards something that...and you can say some of Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* is political, even in *In The Hills*, *The Cities* is political...but I think it created a corridor towards the weird taking on more present-day concerns in an organic way. I think also that the weird is ideally positioned to deal with things like climate change, which are part of the physical laws of the universe but manifest in uncanny ways.

Even a non-fiction text like *Imperial* by William Vollmann, to me, is an uncanny text because there are all these repetitions and weirdnesses in it that are more or less because he's grappling with this place being haunted by climate change, and he can't quite deal with it on a conscious level. He has to engage in a repetition to kind of protect himself from ecological devastation. In general, I just feel like it's also a way for the weird to become more progressive because obviously there's still an old guard out there that is using the weird in the regressive, and sometimes very conservative way even in the stories where the weird element encountered is something beautiful and not something that's horrifying. Even when there's no return to status quo, there's still a conservative element to it.

So when you add something like the environmental issues or you add something political in the social-justice sphere, you can integrate it in such a way that you still get that frisson of being somewhere unexpected and somewhere strange, like you do from the best classic stories, but create something new. I think there's a real value there. It puts people in a psychological space where maybe they can better see the reality that they're living through. I'm really energised by that idea, and I'm still working in that space for that reason. But ecological concerns are pretty much in all my fiction.... It astonishes me when people act like climate change awareness is a new thing, because I remember being aware of it in the late 1980s, early 1990s, and almost all of my major fiction deals with it. It just deals with it in a more weird way now, in a less science-fictional way.

The other thing I was going to say is that the weird creates the necessary distance to be able to write about the present, which is important because it's almost like when as a writer you try to assimilate an autobiographical element and then manifest it in your

fiction, but you have to wait because it's too personal or raw. Well, the current situation is too personal or raw to sometimes show directly, and the weird is a filter that gives the necessary distance for perspective and context, to say something useful in a narratological way.

That said, the next novel I'm working on, *Hummingbird Salamander*, has elements of the weird but no uncanny or speculative element. It's like a very slight one, and it's set about 10 seconds in to the future, because I feel like the future, and that uncanniness of the future, is bleeding into the present more and more.

In a weird way, it's almost like history is coming towards us faster and faster. I know that sounds very strange. But the point is I don't really feel like I need distance anymore because the present is itself very strange.

**BG**

Do you see yourself becoming a political writer?

**JV**

I feel like I've always been political; it's just that people haven't recognised it because they haven't seen certain topics as being political. It's only recently that we've seen climate change as being a huge political issue, which is so stupid but it's true. People haven't seen the plight of animals as being a political issue, but yet it's so tied to climate change. It's so tied to all these other issues.

It's also about underused opportunities in narrative because so many writers use animals in an unthinking way in their stories, but what they're really doing is depriving themselves of additional interesting choices. It's kind of terrifying because I feel like I'm becoming more political the more urgent the situation becomes, by default, without changing anything about how I write, and that's a bad feeling. But there's also the idea that it's not the books themselves but the fact that I get to talk about ecological issues because of them that can make an impact on behaviour.

**BG**

I find this “underused” narrative opportunity fascinating. From a writer's point of view, how do you approach the non-human?

**JV**

Certain kinds of animal life are still kind of regarded as alien on this planet, but that doesn't stop speculative-fiction writers from writing about aliens or writing about any number of scenarios that, to my mind, you can apply the same question to, if you wanted to.

Nature photographers deal with this issue all the time when they want to try to remove the human gaze from the composition. And one of the answers is that you can never actually do it, but that by trying to do it you get closer, and in your failure you do something more interesting than if you didn't try.

Now, the other answer is that, for example, “The Strange Bird”, which is from the point of view of a piece of biotech that's in *Borne*.... The way I hedged my bet was that you find out that the strange bird also has some human DNA, and so that is the way in which I kind of compromise to the point where you can believe that you're actually reading the story from a bird's point of view. That kind of gets you halfway there.

But you can definitely extrapolate. A bird lives in a vertical and not a horizontal world, for example. I know we're not supposed to anthropomorphise, but to be absolutely honest, the propaganda about animals every day is an anthropomorphising act. We have memes about wise owls; owls are actually the stupidest of the birds. It's not even accurate. We also have all kinds of things that are actually acts of violence against animals that are taken as being cute in internet memes.

And if you really think about it, it's just objectively distasteful not to consider the ethical and moral obligation we have toward animals. And so we have all kinds of issues that go well beyond a failed experiment in anthropomorphising an animal. You also have animal-behaviour scientists beginning to second-guess their attempt to not anthropomorphise animals because they've interpreted data as very different from humans as a result, so they've over corrected, in a sense. You begin to see in animal-behaviour science too this recognition that sometimes we're trying to push a similarity away because we've been taught all our lives that they're not like us, and it's actually skewing research, so this is a very complicated question.

If there is one thing beyond social-justice issues that people 100 years are going to come back and say "They were barbarians", it's going to be treatment of animals. Also, an inability to work within our environment instead of pushing against our environment using the soft-tech that's all around us in nature, rather than constructing hard-tech that destroys the world, and animals are part of there.

Not to go on too long, but there's also this thing where with gene splicing, what's happening is that the distinction between animal as object to be used as art, science...if you can create a creature, and you may create it as an art form, and you can also manipulate genes to the point where you can create a hybrid creature, there are all kinds of ethical and moral questions that we haven't engaged with.

One thing that the laboratory fiction can do is get ahead of that, and it can show how capitalism is creating a situation where we don't even think about those questions anymore. We just think about animals as objects, even as we're reaching this pressure point where changing our foundational values is important to our own survival.

**BG**

Did you have this in mind when you were writing *Borne*?

**JV**

Yes, in fact, I was trying.... I wasn't entirely successful, but there is a little mini-narrative involving the foxes. If you read the scenes just for what the foxes are doing, they're doing their own thing. They have their own story. That's another way you can get across an animal perspective, and I'm going to continue to experiment with those kinds of ideas, even if I know that I'm doomed to failure, because I think it's very important.

**BG**

Earlier, you mentioned that you are happy that we have an academic track at the [Helsinki] WorldCon. How do you see the critique/fan divide? Do you think it's important to do academic research in fantastic literatures?

**JV**

Yeah, I think it's very important. It's actually more important than with literary mainstream because even today, even though pop culture has given genre fiction a great "in" to the mainstream in a way... if you look at a typical review of a contemporary novel set in a contemporary place without a speculative element, even in *The New York Times*, there's a fair amount of literary analysis going on, whereas in the same venues, if it is a book with a fantastical element, the fantastical element will absorb the attention to the point of there not actually being much analysis of what is going on with the subtext. It's almost like there's a bright and shiny object that distracts. And also just simply in terms of respectability and what students get taught in classes and what they see as valuable in fiction.

I love all kinds of literary mainstream material, and half of my influences are from that realm. But I am glad to see that there's more and more serious discussion of genre fiction. I think it is very important, and, as with most things, you just have to ignore the



naysayers and recognise [that] the genre is still very tribal. There's always going to be people who disagree with what your particular role in all of this is.

**BG**

Is there anything that nobody has ever asked you, and you really want to be asked and you really want to answer that question?

**JV**

I don't know that there's a specific question. I do know that there's a kind of weirdness where if you write something that isn't mainstream realism people seem to think it's not autobiographical. The whole *Southern Reach* trilogy, for example, every detail of setting, everything that the characters encounter that isn't uncanny, is something that I know first-hand with all five senses, so to speak. Even in the *Ambergris* books, where there's a more hidden autobiography, there are a lot of autobiographical elements. What I don't see is people asking questions about that or realising that most of all of these books are based on some kind of personal experience.

But I've been really lucky. Ever since I've switched to a mainstream literary publisher in the US, the whole conversation about my books has changed. Ever since *Annihilation*. And to be honest, I don't know that the academic reaction in the US would have been the same otherwise.

**BG**

How do you see the authorial position in changing media?

**JV**

I'm very playful on social media, and I think that helps. I'm also very welcoming and nurturing to fan art, fan fiction, things like that. Luckily, the *Southern Reach* books created this space for reader imagination through their ambiguity that was very useful in generating creativity. So, I haven't experienced it yet in the negative so much. Things like that I just kind of ignore. There was a point at which authors were getting more upset about it, and then they got used to it, this idea that readers were more prevalent. I just inoculate myself. People say, "Don't read your Goodreads reviews or your Amazon reviews." But I actually do. I actually read them and I kind of inoculate myself against worrying about that by reading them.

**BG**

How much do negative reviews affect you, however scarce they might be?

**JV**

First of all, *Annihilation* and *Southern Reach* and *Borne* have gotten incredible reviews all over the place that have helped, so when you go to read the reader reviews and there are some that are negative, it doesn't really sting. But I would also say if I was a new writer starting out, I don't know how it would affect me. I've been in the business for 30-plus years, I've been in almost every kind of situation publishing-wise, so after a while you have so much scar tissue that it doesn't really register that way.

If I feel like I'm emotionally vulnerable, I won't read that stuff. But I've never been blocked by reading that. Part of that, to be absolutely honest, is that earlier in my career, there were a lot of genre gatekeepers that didn't like my work, and so the only way that I could sustain my career was by ignoring a lot of advice about what to do. I have to be careful about that now because my instant reaction sometimes is to reject certain kinds of advice, and I have to ask myself, "Is that a knee-jerk reaction because of where you came from or is it legitimate?"

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The long answer is that it doesn't affect me as much, but I don't know.... I have seen beginning writers who have been destroyed by it because they just internalise it to the point that it affects their ideas.... So I do recommend that you try to keep a certain distance and know the things that can get into your head and avoid them.

**BG**

Speaking of beginner writers, do you think fan fiction can be a good first step for new writers?

**JV**

I do, and we do this Shared Worlds SF/F teen writing workshop, 60 students every year, and the first week they build their own world in groups of 10 and then they write it in the second, yeah, which allows them a way to have something personal that's not too personal so they don't get frozen. But a lot of them come in absolutely beating themselves up because they're writing only fan fiction.

If a 13- or 14-year-old is only writing fan fiction, there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. It's all practice writing. Chances are, you're not going to get published anyway until you're in your 20s. And so we often have writers come in who also write fan fiction in addition. There are bestselling *New York Times* writers who also write a lot of fan fiction still, so we have someone like that come in and stop them from beating themselves up over this and then provide them with strategies so that they finish more of their own original work, but also recognise that they can do both things. It's all practice. It all teaches you something.

My only rule is that if I'm still working in a universe, I absolutely do not want to see the fan fiction until I'm finished working in that universe, just because I don't want it influencing me. I don't want somehow to inadvertently to copy it, but I also just don't want it in my head. That's why I didn't want to see the movie [*Annihilation*] for the longest time because I'm still writing *Southern Reach* fiction.

The interview draws attention to the recent changes in understanding genres and the position of the author. New Weird seems to have a unique awareness of otherness – not only the political scene but also the academic. While estrangement has been predominantly associated with science fiction, New Weird seems to be related to the uncanny, which opposes the suggestions that fantastic literatures can be unified under the aegis of estrangement only. As suggested in the interview, New Weird as a genre is linked to the uncanny, rather than to estrangement, which makes it relevant to the current discussions of the category of life, human and non-human, manifesting in the different strands of posthumanism, especially critical posthumanism. Nayar defines critical posthumanism:

Critical posthumanism is not a simple binary of the human/anti-humanist positions outlined above but a whole new conceptualisation of the human as a more inclusive, non-unitary entity whose boundaries which the world, with other life forms and species, are porous. Critical posthumanism is thus a *discourse* of life itself in which interconnections, messy histories, blurred origins, borrowings and adaptations, cross-overs, impurities, dependency and mutuality across species are emphasized over boundedness, self-containment, distinctiveness and agency. 'Life' in posthumanist discourse is discussed as a process of becoming through new connections and merges between species, bodies, functions and technologies. (30)

The timeline of New Weird is synchronic with the emergence of the founding texts of posthumanism. It has to be noted that the ties between posthumanism and fantastic

literatures have been longstanding: posthumanist philosophy tends to either merely illustrate or explicitly draw its arguments from iconic works of fantastic literatures, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, or, more recently, VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy. Both posthumanism and fantastika rely on estrangement and uncanniness as they revolve around the nature of cognition, sentience, and subjectivity, experimenting with thoughts of internalising the other and self-othering. In Jeff VanderMeer's work the uncanny appears in his depictions of the juxtaposition of human and non-human experiences. Cary Wolfe in *What is Posthumanism?* proposes that "we must take yet another step, another post-, and realise that the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist" (xvi). New Weird has already been working on developing a poetic toolkit for channelling expressions of "ultimate otherness", sublimating the deeper contents of the collective unconscious and animal past. Humanism has relied heavily on language, authorship and authority (all tying into the idea of human exceptionalism) in building up its epistemology. Thus further research would be required within posthumanism, which until now has been concentrating on primarily ontological problems whilst the creation of a convincing epistemological framework is still in the making.

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