



Weird Fiction

A Genre Study

Michael Cisco

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Genre and Judgement

In “The Law of Genre,” Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell define genre as an exclusive category; that is, genre is defined by the fact that it must shut something out. The chapter opens with this observation: “As soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded ... a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: ‘Do,’ ‘Do not’ says ‘genre’”¹ and closes, predictably, with this: “it would be folly to draw any sort of general conclusion here.”² My folly ensues below.

The first thing to note here, before going further, is that when Derrida and Ronell speak of genre, they are following Genette and speaking of the differences between novels and short stories, plays and poems. Weird fiction is not a genre the way a novel is a genre, since we will include in the genre of weird fiction examples drawn from short stories and novels, poetry, plays, and screenplays; so there is already a bit of a mismatch between these two uses of the term genre. While Derrida and Ronell invert the more familiar, inclusive idea of genre, they don’t innovate in genre studies so much as they send us down a cul-de-sac, by defining genre negatively. The resulting definition is likely to be only whatever remains after performing all the genre’s exclusions, which was, perhaps, the point, since a definition also excludes possibilities. What is excluded from this definition of genre is an accounting for that exclusionary activity itself, which would necessarily address the appeal of a genre. Our definition of genre here is liable to do the same if we’re not careful to draw a

general inclusion, such that the idea of genre remains open and dynamic, operating productively in terms of a selection. What is genre, positively speaking? What is it that selects which differences matter?

Deleuze and Guattari, among other post-structuralist thinkers, complicate any territorial concept of definition.³ The difficulty is not that there is a territory established, since this is impossible to avoid: territories maintain themselves through our various logics and grammars. The difficulty is that art is constantly deterritorializing; in other words, it isn't the same thing over and over, even if the each work of art is consistent with other works of art. Art persists through time as art by repeating, but not by repeating the same particular works of art. Instead, art exists in a condition of constant reinvention, albeit with ongoing relationships to established art, and so genre definitions are always more or less behind the times. Definitions are hard to make because they want to be able to predict the future, or even to judge the present, but so often they are basically only descriptions of what has usually been done up to now. Genre in fiction may posit a sort of model story, a transcendent one that we never actually read, but which seems to stand behind any given example. However, it is better to say that the model story is an aggregate of existing stories, coming about after the fact, rather than the cause of these actual stories. A weird tale may be written in keeping with such an aggregate model, but it is important to understand that this model is not fixed or determinative; in fact, the genre waits for stories that are very different. The genre then is not a transcendent identity, but a virtuality that is concretely immanent to weird fiction, which is an elaborate way of saying that the genre is in all the stories written to date; it is the selection that gathers certain stories into certain canons for certain readers and writers. We may come up with a checklist of common tropes in weird fiction; this is not a waste of time, but it is not the whole story, either, since such a list isn't going to help us to understand the selections that produced it. So, this study will address the concept that guides the selection of what we call weird fiction.

The end result still involves collecting various stories and grouping them as weird fiction. The difference, however, is that these stories are selected because they are germ cultures, which generate more stories. In this way, the productive aspect of weird fiction as a genre can be studied and we can understand that the genre exclusion process is part of larger productive process.

Instead of thinking of a canon in terms of provisionally fixed genre boundaries, this approach will think of canonizations; whenever a certain

culture of weird fiction develops, it organizes its own canon, and as new kinds of weird fiction are created, new canons arise and old ones adjust. Coming up with a concept of weirdness will not only make an understanding of the genre easier, it will also mean we can establish connections with works not considered weird fiction without being compelled to claim them for the genre, to the exclusion of other genres.

The point of all this is to see if we can “have done with judgement,” in keeping with the recommendations of Deleuze and Guattari. That is to say, we are throwing away the cookie cutters of genre analysis. What would a genre study that has done with judgement look like? And would it make any difference? Would it entail a judgement banishing “general conclusions”?

Having done with judgement means taking up the question of genre without treating it as a preconceived idea, but rather in a more investigative way. This monograph aspires to be that kind of criticism. As this work on the genre of weird fiction develops, it will also develop its own genre of criticism; this which may turn out to be nothing more than the author’s folly, but it will be a useful one even if it is only an example of how not to proceed.

* * *

An immanent genre is one whose resemblances are reciprocal. They are understood less in terms of a fixed content or form, and more as repetitions with a shared orientation—that is, the desire or affect. Within genres, stories produce other stories without acting as transcendental models. Where stories are copies of other stories, or to the extent they are copies, they treat some prior story as at least locally transcendent, but where there is original work, there is a more rhizomatic branching-off. This study posits genre as an orientation, which is to say it selects and ranks certain affects, but those affects need not be considered transcendent, and, in fact, there is something about the repetition of the same that destroys affects. The repetition of the affect depends on a certain amount of difference.

Criticism, as Derrida points out, insofar as it approaches genre as a logical problem, rests on a contradiction involving boundaries: is a boundary inside what it bounds, or outside? In defining what it must exclude, the boundary ends up including those exclusions. However, this is not really a difficulty for anyone trying to understand genre practically. Genre does seem to have a transcendent aspect, as it seems to sit above the fiction it categorizes, apparently defining it, judging what is in and what is out, but

without our ever encountering the genre per se, only its examples. This is where judgement comes in. But this only means that a genre is an encounter with an example, a sort of logical distribution. We can parse the world in all manner of logical schemes, but the ones that are useful are the ones we keep. Merely being logical is not enough, nor does this logic produce new art. Weird fiction has its pillars, the uncontestedly canonical works like *Dracula* and *The Turn of the Screw*, but it's also obvious that weird fiction is not constant through time, but changeable and adaptable. The genre and its canonical works support, reread, and rewrite each other. Derivative stories merely copy models; more original stories will extend the orientation of the genre further or develop a new way to travel in that direction, often from a starting point in other fictions, which then become canonical for that new story. The canon is a genealogical mesh, varying from one work to another, and exclusions and inclusions are carried out experimentally in order to find a way to travel. Travelling in a direction has no necessary connection to any idea, adequate or otherwise, of a destination, and often one travels only to see what there is to see in that direction.

* * *

The genre of weird fiction is a means of production. With it, a writer produces stories which, as commodities, have a dual orientation, both use and exchange values. While, in this monograph, the orientation towards a use value will be more important—and rightly so, since it is the use value that involves something immanent to the work of art—the use value of a weird tale can't simply be divorced from its exchange value without a word or two about it. Here use needs to be understood as the realization of desire, rather than the narrower realization of practical utility. Perhaps this means, depending on the story, only that the writer was prompted to write the story for pay.⁴ We should say, though, that the art-commodity produces forms, as models to be strictly copied. This is one locality where the boundaries between genres are actually policed as a kind of property right, although even here the policing may be restricted to a single venue. Sometimes a single venue's rejection is enough.

The genre of weird fiction is full of redundancy. Select any conventional theme, and there will be dozens if not hundreds of interchangeable stories on that theme, along with the noteworthy ones. What else can account for this, if not what we would have to describe as the promotion of exchange value and the demotion of use value. To produce redundant fictions in

order to sell them to a market defined by that redundant model is to write copies of models, so that the market in weird fiction will set up a series of locally transcendent “popular” models. Innovative stories don’t simplistically oppose these transcendent models—they connect the stories to immanent forces that the mere copies ignore. They de-transcendentalize the stories. These innovative stories may or may not start off a new round of robotic copying, but they always arise in the midst of writing, not outside or at the beginning, nor do they necessarily involve some logical scheme of categorization.

* * *

So, to return to the idea of a canon: if we designate a canon, or a period, for weird fiction, we find ourselves outside of it, trying to impose logical limitations on the genre externally. Then we have to somehow account for this position; we have to be able to say why we are in a position to do this, and do it in a binding way. However, in modern critical parlance, this idea of weird fiction and these works have arisen for reasons that must be at least partially immanent, and rather than try to come up with an external definition, it seems better to say that weird fiction is a way of writing fiction that arises out of the internal self-difference of religious, moralizing, and/or a certain strain of philosophizing fiction writing, when producing the bizarre becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end (that end usually being greater piety, more obedience, etc.). There are many examples of weird tales, such as “A Christmas Carol,” which contain sermons without being sermons. The story, in such cases, does more than illustrate a moral point, but has attractions of its own. While “A Christmas Carol” does function primarily as a kind of sermon, *Dracula* is not *primarily* a vindication of the cross.

If structure simply means having some kind of organization, then genre is structure, but calling a genre a structure according to this definition is tantamount to identifying genre with structure and with organization, then calling it a day. This definition won’t help to explain why a given structure is different from another. So a genre is not just a plan, it’s an assemblage, collecting works and critical perspectives and connecting them together. The assemblage of weird fiction dynamically continues to produce a weird line, and to extend that weird line across breaks in genre conventions to reach new connections, which amount to deterritorializing weird fiction as a genre. The conventions have to be included in the

scheme of the genre, but they do more than sit there; they are more than ad hoc content. Genre conventions can only repeat by differing from their past uses. This can mean making superficial alterations or it can mean making a more sophisticated use of conventions. The ghost in “Grayling; or ‘Murder Will Out,’” by William Gilmore Simms, is a spectre of guilt in a conventional narrative of supernatural justice that has little to surprise us and assures us that the cosmos is itself fundamentally just along Christian lines. The spectre of a murdered man identifies his killer and makes possible his capture and punishment. In *Aura*, Carlos Fuentes hits on the use of a ghostly presence as a way to capture nostalgia; something he is able to do because the ghost and nostalgia are both conjured by a particular desire. A solitary woman lives in a house haunted by the spectre of her younger self. *Aura* understands reality in the relativistic way that is, by now, rather old hat; a way that allows contradictions, such that the positing of a ghost is not controversial. Involving a ghost requires no justification, because the modern audience is expected to take for granted an idea of reality that does not exclude contradictory, localized differences. The ghost in Simms’ story seems, on the contrary, to insist on an absolute union between morality and reality. Neither story is unique in the use they are making of ghosts; their differences are typical of a development of the genre, although it’s possible to say that Fuentes has only retrieved the idea of the ghost from weird fiction and employed it in a “psychologically realistic” fiction. His realism is only augmented by the fact that he represents the psychological belief in ghosts. We could look at *Aura* that way, but is our reasoning prompted by the novella’s immanent characteristics, or by something else, like snobbery?

The more important question is this: how do we account for the way the genre of weird fiction receives both “Grayling” and *Aura* equally well?

* * *

Returning to “The Law of Genre” for a moment—Derrida and Ronell approach genre from a logical point of view, that is, they understand genre categorically and transcendently.

Derrida’s theory of genre is based upon the idea that within every categorization there is the implication of its Other, where genre is the normativity that (attempts) to keep contamination out or at bay. However, in attempting to police these boundaries, that Other is contained and produced by/within that [category].⁵

They are right to say that there is no mixing of genres, but only provided we look at genre from a transcendent position; genres, however, develop immanently, not transcendently, and exclusion fills a strictly secondary role in this process. It is involved only insofar as making a given connection precludes making some other connection. Certain things are excluded only insofar as certain things are selected, and the selection process excludes by affirming what is included.

Weird fiction has a tendency to make genre itself behave bizarrely. If we try to categorize weird fiction by making the inclusion of what is usually referred to as the supernatural determinative, then we run into difficulties insofar as it is impossible to establish the terms of that inclusion in any categorical way. Instead, we might try to understand the genre in terms of the territory it selects for deterritorialization, which in this case would be reality. Weird fiction is weird because it gives us reality itself as a territory that can be deterritorialized, where it is taken for granted that this is not possible.

What is weird about weird fiction? It is supernatural fiction, but it is not Fantasy (capitalized to distinguish the genre from fantasy as a daydream or desire). It is horror fiction, but it does not depend on real-life horrors, such as murder or torture. The horror of weird fiction is derived from the implications of a deterritorialization of ordinary experience, insofar as the ordinary is fetishized as “reality.” Ordinary experience can be deterritorialized by nonsupernatural experiences, so the supernatural aspect is not necessary to produce the deterritorialization. What makes the supernatural aspect necessary for weird fiction is the way that it allows fiction to deterritorialize in an ontological or epistemological direction, and so address reality more broadly, or more basically. Stories of crime horrify us with the prospect of what human beings are capable of, while stories of supernatural events threaten readers with the prospect of what experience itself is capable of, that is, our capacity to affect and to be affected does seem to extend well beyond the reach of our current understanding and may be impossible to understand sufficiently. The supernatural of weird fiction is not a clearly articulated causal system, acting as an alternative to, or as an esoteric expansion of, known causality; that, I would call Fantasy. Even where we encounter something like this idea, in fiction belonging to the “psychic detective” subgenre, for example, the system is never actually articulated by the author, but only intimated. To the extent that there is a system, the story inclines more towards Fantasy.

The supernatural of weird fiction, unlike the supernaturalism of theology, cannot properly be a category; where it is a category, the story is

Fantasy. Where the supernatural is not a category, but an opening out towards infinity in experience, then the story is weird.

A weird tale is not weird because it describes events that may or may not fit into some category of the supernatural; they are events that weirdly fail to belong to any category. This is all the more alarming since there is, basically, only supposed to be one category available to stories set more or less in the here-and-now: the category of reality, or “realism,” or “naturalism.” All events occurring in an ordinary setting, the here-and-now of some historic epoch, “should” be real; the apparent supernatural event that is debunked turns out to be either a type of real event we call a hoax or a non-event like a hallucination or a mistake of the kind that the narrator makes in Poe’s “The Sphynx.” If the supernatural were a category of event, then its reality would be of the same kind as any other reality, whether that be ordinary reality or crisis reality, and this is how the supernatural functions in Fantasy. However, where the supernatural is weird, it is neither a real category nor a category of the unreal. The supernatural in weird fiction is a simulacrum of reality, insofar as reality is itself considered a category. This doesn’t mean it’s an illusion, because it can affect us, can act on its own. Plato must banish the simulacrum because it makes the real and the false too hard to tell apart; but this is exactly why weird fiction is fascinated with the simulacrum. It depends on this difficulty in distinguishing real and unreal for its characteristic effect, insofar as this difficulty is experienced and opens experience to broader possibilities, rather than insofar as the difficulty is merely a logical conundrum, as Todorov would have it. The target is always the stability of that real category, not the establishment of an alternative. The supernatural in weird fiction is a deterritorialization of category, with the intention of creating an open set where reality would seem to tend to close itself off. Weirdness is what we call the self-difference of the normal, opening out into the strange from the normal, rather than jumping from a normal track to a separate fantastic track. If weirdness is the contrast that makes the normal appear, it doesn’t do this from an external position or a negative position; weirdness is self-difference of the normal, not the lack of the normal.

* * *

A genre is produced by literary works and contributes to the production of literary works. It is organized according to a logic of interests that keeps changing. Deterritorializations will reterritorialize right away, become

memory-images, and repeat as new models. There is no concern for purity in the production or reproduction of a genre; that only arises in the logical definition of genre, which is a cite of contention for control of the reproduction of the genre. I'm not interested in developing and imposing a fixed canon of weird fiction, but understanding where weird fiction takes us, since it is the orientation of weird fiction that differentiates it from other genres. This is an immanent understanding, which is to say it sees weird fiction as arising from an internal self-difference in literature. For Derrida and Ronell, the genre boundary is basically neither inner nor outer, but a fold; here we will think of it as something related to the fold, as a reterritorialization; it isn't a fixed place or thing, but an event that repeats.

Naturally a writer picks their sources, their own canon, and, given that genre is a logical contradiction, this choice cannot be wrong or right when evaluated from the point of view of some overall logical definition of genre. Therefore we can dispense with the evaluation of this logical contradiction and survey empirically the use of the concept or conceit of genre. I repeat that Derrida and Ronell are right; genre is a matter of preventing mixing when we observe it from above and in pause. Their account of genre is another form of weird fiction.

Things look different when the perspective is shifted to the level of production over time. If sense is a product, then the slipperiness of sense is the productive versatility of sense. The product keeps on producing, instead of remaining static; that is, a work of art will continue to develop meanings, but this isn't a mistake, a failure to remain still, but a sign of life. Horace Walpole, inventing the Gothic in *The Castle of Otranto*, steers literature around back through the middle ages, going in reverse, bearing modern aesthetic values with him into the past, and revaluing and reinventing the medieval in an act of deliberate anachronism. That is, he produces "the medieval" as a rather haphazard contraction based on his personal tastes and uses this as his ground or setting. This orientation is sustained as a memory-image in future Gothic fiction, that is, it repeats, but with important differences—greater attention paid to naturalistic character psychology, supernatural manifestations toned down, inner life Romantically connected to landscape and weather. The contraction is repeated in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and in *The Monk*, with some elements retained from Walpole, others added, yet others subtracted or altered.

Claire Colebrook writes that a concept is an extreme, not an average.⁶ If we try to approach weird fiction as the averaging together of various literary works belonging to some canon, we fail to explain the formation of the canon or the selection of those terms we average. It is the concept of weird fiction that attracts readers and drives writers, and this concept must be an extreme. If we think of genre in terms of borders, then the borders of a genre understood as an average would be defined automatically by clichés, which are stupidities. A genre understood as a direction of travel would necessarily border on a conceptual horizon that is continually driven forward. No one ever reaches the horizon, but movement in the direction of the horizon continually discovers new things.

Critics like Fredric Jameson identify ideology as the more or less inescapable foundation of all values, and Tzvetan Todorov writes that ideology shapes genres.⁷ If we take this to mean that, no matter what, we never leave the territory defined by ideology, then there is no accounting for the changes that do occur. If, on the other hand, we make ideology dynamic, how then can it remain prior or determinative? Deleuze and Guattari are sceptical about ideology insofar as it is transcendent; their idea of ideology is dynamic, without being inconsistent, because it is an immanent ideology. The immanent version of ideology is their “major” literature, described in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Major literature is the mode of expression proper to ruling elites, those who own the means of literary production (including platforms); it’s “major” because the elites, while a headcount minority themselves, are dominant in the majority of power relations. Minor literature, on the other hand, isn’t unimportant, an opposite, or a rival to major literature; it’s inside major literature.

The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.⁸

Deleuze and Guattari associate genre with major literature where minor is regarded as being *sui generis*, but isn’t there a major and minor to genre, that is, major genre is transcendent where minor genre is immanent?

Major literature is always in the service of a status quo, so it can’t say anything new. In minor literature we *see* something disappear the way

Cezanne's paintings disappear, but that is not simply the absence of an appearance, an exclusion. What disappears is the familiar, the known, but the familiar, which is major, must appear and then disappear, like the vicar in M.R. James' story "A Tale of a Disappearance and an Appearance." The local attributes of major literature remain present in the story, but their "major" character is made to vanish. Blanchot writes, for example, that the writer, understood as creator of minor literature, is dead, disappeared, writing about the disappearance of things, that literature is intimately connected with death. The creative author ceases to exist insofar as any reified idea of an author is concerned. The author must die as a stereotype pouring out clichés in order to disappear into something else not yet known, hence, alive. The creative author reinvents authorship. What the creative writer makes disappear is all that stupid trash, the truly dead world we find ourselves in all too often, all too damned often. This is why minor literature is so important: only through the minor does literature live and participate in the problem of living to its fullest extent. Innovation in major literature is more like marketing.

The idea of major and minor can be applied to weird fiction in two ways. First, with respect to the genre's standing as a whole relative to "legitimate" literature, and second, with respect to what is major and minor within the genre. There's already been plenty of work done to establish the legitimacy of weird fiction in relation to other genres and to affirm its artistic value; this study takes that validity for granted and focuses more on the second question: what is major and minor within the genre? As "genre" fiction, what is there to weird fiction apart from recycling a handful of clichés?

Major literature deals in clichés, but what matters more is the power to demand adherence to clichéd formulas and contents and to banish, bury, or co-opt work that re-animates these clichés, making them de-clichéd. This is the broader political question, which goes beyond even the implicit political content of particular stories to the actual politics of publications, critical acceptance, and so on. This is why minor literature develops; it doesn't compete with major literature, it adopts its clichés in order to use them against themselves. As a genre, weird fiction will not be all major or minor, but will move in ways that have major and minor currents pulling it this way and that. Weird fiction frequently upholds pretty conservative, majoritarian positions. "A Christmas Carol," for example, perpetuates the archetypal bourgeois fallacy that all social problems stem from the averaged consequences of individual moral choices, rather than from an

economic and class system that is inherently exploitative and indifferent to individual choices. On the other hand, weird fiction often meets the three criteria for minor literature listed above; that is, weird fiction has its own weird ways of meeting these criteria. The deterritorialization of language occurs when the weird tale takes us towards the sublime, the indescribable, the ineffable, towards mad ravings, imaginary and transcendent languages. The individual is connected to the political in weird tales primarily through the recognition that, one way or another, there is a problem with reality, one that calls to us, either to escape reality and its attendant problems or to protect reality from these problems; in other words, while one might be tempted to dismiss weird fiction as apolitical escapism, this begs the question: what is it that the reader wants to escape, if not a situation that does have definite political dimensions and causes? The collective arrangement of utterance in weird fiction is the way in which this loss of reality takes place, a way that involves the reader, linking characters and readers, but also linking readers with other readers.

Does the story disturb the delusional or hallucinating insane ones, even the daydreaming or fanciful—and therefore socially unproductive—ones, the drug-addled ones, the possessed ones, the emotionally oversensitive or overwrought ones, the mystics and other religious nonconformists? Or does it disturb the people who define themselves as the contraries of these things, as their mere negation in fact, even though they have difficulty identifying anything positive in this contrary position? If the normal is only the absence of the abnormal, *then it is the abnormal that is real*.

To simplify this, we may come up with a basic spectrum for weird fiction:

The major strain in weird fiction says: defend the normal.

The minor strain says: beware the normal.

* * *

Weird fiction involves the supernatural. This can then seem to be determinative for the genre, such that every story is understood in terms of a logical duel between the supernatural and whatever is considered to stand in opposition to the supernatural—generally, science or materialism. Weird fiction isn't anti-science, may indeed be very much pro-science, but characteristically objects to imposition and dogmatism, to the arbitrary limits

that our ideas of the world, humanity, and ourselves impose on imagination and desire. The major mode identifies two opposing poles, generally in order to identify the pretender and elect the real thing. Minor literature doesn't do this—instead, it occupies the major work and makes use of it for its own ends. A story that frankly affirms the supernatural over materialism or science, or vice-versa, may be weird, but it is not minor. The minor form takes existing clichés, scientific or supernatural, and makes new use of them. Weird fiction isn't an anti-capitalist genre, either, but it does often register an objection to the way capitalism not only forecloses choices but misrepresents the loss of possibilities as a kind of liberation. In its particular interest in destiny, weird fiction also addresses the way that capitalism divorces people from any grounding, by staging a kind of revenge of the ground. Weird fiction is not feminist or anti-racist and is often filled with prejudice, but it does also at times undermine the confining categories of sexism and bigotry.

This study is not trying to compose two canons of weird fiction, one major and the other minor, although it will label the stories it studies major or minor. However, it is taken for granted here that a given story will have both major and minor tendencies, and that primary designation involves seeing which side of the balance tips further. A writer like Lovecraft will have more major stories and more minor stories, and, in those major stories, there will be minor moments; vice-versa for those minor stories.

Lovecraft, as one of the principal theorists of weird fiction, can be used as an example here. His work is majoritarian in its racism and sexism, but minoritarian in its scepticism about progress, its more socialistic tendencies, its cosmicism, and its treatment of identity. The racism of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" is oddly conflicted, given that the inhuman fish people have all the things Lovecraft valued most in his conservative conception of society: a highly sophisticated aesthetic sensibility and level of artistic expression, the continuity of generations over time, and an iron-clad identity so solid that no amount of racial admixture with humans will prevent them from retaining their innate racial characteristics. It seems pretty clear that giving all the things he valued most to monsters rather than humans was part of the horror for Lovecraft, but that horror is inextricably bound to the horror of racist persecution. There are moments, both here and in *At the Mountains of Madness*, when Lovecraft seems to waver in identification between wholesome humans and monsters; identity is precarious and must be defended (major) but part of what we are defending it against is our own impulse to reject our identity, which is

more minor. In *The Lurking Fear*, the narrator speaks of a desire to abandon himself to the nightmare, to become part of it, which is the fate of the narrator in “The Outsider.” This probably arises in the main from a desire to escape vulnerability by siding with the threat, becoming part of it, choosing a less vulnerable identity than that of an ordinary person. However, the ordinary identity is normally presented as natural, inevitable, healthy, and correct; it’s one thing to say that identity must face its contrary, the loss of identity, but if that contrary is not purely negative, not the absence of identity, but the presence of a different identity, then the necessity, the salubriousness, the superiority of the normal identity is no longer self-evident and automatic. The very defence of the normal makes us aware that it isn’t the only way. For all that the story has strong racist elements; “The Call of Cthulhu” is a call that anyone of sufficient sensitivity can hear. It can sound in anyone’s dreams, not just the dreams of the “lesser” humanity.

The common thread in the minor mode is a desire for escape in an undefined direction, and generally what is to be escaped is identity. Kant’s noumena—God, the world, and the soul—are, for him, the indemonstrable limits of experience which act to ground all identity, understood here in the broad sense of a persistent self-sameness. These ideas percolate into English Romantic literature, mainly through Coleridge, and into weird fiction mainly from Coleridge through Poe. Weird fiction is minor insofar as it thematizes and confronts these limits, and challenges identity in that broad sense, in God, in the world, and in soul or ego. For major weird fiction, this is an attack on identity which must be resisted. For minor weird fiction, this a form of liberation, however frightening, from these limits, which appeals to readers who desire to be free of them. Weird fiction is distinguished from Fantasy in that the Fantasy world appears to provide the reader with an alternative identity, while weird fiction moves in an undefined, or less defined, direction.⁹

* * *

For Deleuze and Guattari, ideas produce differences creatively, while representations are those things which are merely indifferent rearrangements of the same old thing. Any genre will make use of both. Once weird fiction becomes a commodity, it must be produced in bulk, to reach a large market and to help drive the per-story cost down, but it must also innovate, in order to retain its audience or attract new readers. This pressure builds

deterritorialization into the production process in the same way that other forms of capitalist production require technical innovation. Deterritorialization produces ideas, while representations constitute the territory.

So, for example, the vampire is a representation. It first appears in folktales, which are not commodities. Bram Stoker deterritorialized the vampire when he transposed it from the medieval past to the modern day. Since every deterritorialization is immediately followed by a reterritorialization, *Dracula* the innovation becomes *Dracula* the cliché, a new representation. After Stoker, vampires are either Draculas or counter-Draculas. The 1979 film adaptation of *Dracula*, starring Frank Langella, deterritorializes Dracula by making him an anti-hero. The plot of the film is itself *Dracula* deterritorialized and infiltrated by Joanna Russ' 1962 short story, "My Dear Emily" (see below) that does not involve Dracula the character at all. This deterritorialization is innovation, but it will nevertheless involve repetition, not only of the text that it takes as its original, but of other related or unrelated elements. Lord Byron was the model for Polidori's vampire, Lord Ruthven, generally regarded as a forerunner of Dracula, but he does not seem much in evidence in the 1931 adaptation of *Dracula*, in which the vampire is presented as a kind of Continental seducer. Lord Byron clearly returns, however, in Langella's realization of the character, a mordant and acerbic puncturer of sexual hypocrisy, redeployed to expose secular puritanism as a blind for a patriarchalist anxiety about controlling women's sexuality. Where Stoker's *Dracula* would seem to be in line with the conservative values of major literature, the 1979 adaptation makes him plainly minor, because in that version he comes to represent for Mina a kind of desperate escape from the living death of a conventional bourgeois existence. She is the only character in the film who meaningfully doubts his absolute villainy, and she is not saved in the end, when Dracula himself dies in what looks a little bit like a lynching. This version of *Dracula* would then be more on the minor side; "good" wins, but it doesn't come out looking "good."

There are less heady examples. Given enough sequels, most franchise killers like Jason Voorhees or Freddy Krueger become protagonists after a while. Mikhail Bakhtin described the carnivalesque as a literary moment in which the tension between high and low ranks becomes volatile and unfixed. It's a kind of domesticated revolt of the low against the high, and there's something of this in rooting for the monster. There's a rejection of the canonical values which cast the monster as a strictly evil thing. The

living dead are monsters, but, casually shooting Ben at the end of *Night of the Living Dead*, the sheriff and his posse seem no less mindless and monstrous. “Minor literature” and “Carnavalesque” are not equivalent terms, but they do interilluminate each other. We might note what appears to be a major/minor split in this passage from *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*:

It could be said ... that a person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, *two lives*: one that was the *official* life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence and piety; the other was the *life of the carnival square*, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything.¹⁰

This is not unlike descriptions of witches’ sabbath, that early strain of horror fiction that all too often had real and lethal consequences. Bakhtin’s carnival is, however, still a festival permitted and organized by the powers that be in order to further reinforce that first life. Deleuze and Guattari don’t see the minor as a rival power or counterforce to the major, but rather as a way of redirecting the major force back onto itself. Nevertheless, there is a kind of major/minor aspect to the carnivalesque. In a theatre or with a group of friends in the safety of a living room, watching a horror film will often be an experience like Bakhtin’s carnival square, looking onto that official life from the outside. The outsider is a horror to the insider, but then who is really inside, anyway? Perhaps this helps us to understand why weird fiction and horror films present us with images of that official, normal life. The struggle or experiment is to see if we can think the minor, the escape, without turning it into a representation. Is this the Latin Quarter of New Orleans, or is it Disneyland?

* * *

Another difference between major and minor writing: major literature judges, minor literature warns. In weird fiction, and in Todorov’s false “choice” between the supernatural and the nonsupernatural, we have, on the one hand, a variant Platonism in which there is only one reality, for which the elimination of the other possibility is essential because it is false, and then, on the other hand, we also have a sort of latter-day Aristotelian variant, which can admit anything so long as it can find a stable category

for it. Both of these variants involve making judgements based on preconceived ideas of what the overall condition *should* be, which is to say that this a matter of moral judgement, in addition to ontological or epistemological conceptualization. The idea that the cosmos must and can only be one is used to justify moral and Statist impositions of order, rather than as a motive to further observation and experiment in an open-ended scientific investigation.

But a story of judgement is also a warning: the minor warns us about judgement. The ambivalent weird story does warn us away from judging whether or not the events are definitely supernatural, and to the extent that it questions the application of judgement to reality, it is minor. Major literature gives orders and renders verdicts. The minor warns us to avoid judgement as a negative understanding of difference. If we argue for the literary merit of weird fiction, there is a danger of forgetting that the negative difference dividing literature from writing that is not-literature is an illusion which reaffirms the idea of major literature. The key is to argue for the importance of the minor without making it major. Minor literature operates like a simulacrum of major literature, which means it does not put itself forward as an alternative candidate for literary status, but changes the way the elections are conducted and sabotages the existing parties.

In Deleuze's critique of Plato, the simulacrum takes on maximum importance, because it shows that the conditions for Platonic judgement are impossible. For Plato, reality is something that is determined by a judgement between rival claimants, one of whom is true, the other false. The simulacrum is something that is real and false at the same time, an impossibility in Plato's system. It is real, because it is effective, actual, makes a difference, but not real in that it is not in keeping with a transcendent scheme of reality. This is why art troubles Plato; he needs it to be subordinate to the real. Art therefore cannot be both false and real according to him; it can only be a reality of an inferior degree. According to Deleuze, a copy of the real thing can't be real if it makes no difference. If art is just a copy of reality, if genre is only a matter of copying a model story, then genre really would only be an averaging after the fact and unable to account for the genesis of the stories that belong to it. The stories wouldn't make a difference, so they wouldn't be real. This account wouldn't be able to explain why everybody would copy a particular model story, instead of any other; it couldn't say anything about the origin of the genre itself.

This question is double for weird fiction, since genre in general and the genre of weird fiction specifically both tend to be defined negatively, in terms of judgement. Is literature just phoney life? Idealized life? If literature can have life, then what do we make of literary chimaeras, like vampires and ghosts? This point is not out of bounds for a genre study of weird fiction, because the question of the existence of the supernatural extends beyond the story. Just as a love story presents a specimen of a kind of interpersonal experience, so a supernatural story presents a specimen of a certain kind of bizarre experience. Weird fiction dwells exactly on this spot where judgement cannot stick, which is why it's a waste of time to think of weird fiction in terms of a choice the reader is supposed to make about the existence of the supernatural—a choice which, empirical familiarity tells us, readers never bother to make. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson identifies the distinction between materialism and idealism as a matter of judgement and goes beyond this distinction with his idea of the image.¹¹ All things are images, a blend of subjective inner phenomena and objective outer phenomena, both. The Bergsonian image seems to be his version of a Spinozan idea; that the appearances of a thing in experience and in thought are two modes of existence of one thing.

Using Bergson's concept of the image as a springboard: "fantasy forges fictive causal chains, illegitimate rules, simulacra of belief, either by conflating the accidental and the essential or by using the properties of language to substitute" either for "the repetition of similar cases actually observed" or "a simple verbal repetition that only simulates its effect." What's more, "education, superstition, eloquence, and poetry also work in this way."¹² With this in mind, we find weird fiction at the intersection of Fantasy art, literature as what might be meant by poetry and eloquence, and superstition. Education may be included too, if we recall the idea that minor literature warns us, often about the limitations of what we learn in conventional, major curricula.

Horror fiction says yes to whatever we say no to. Even if we feel Stevenson's "leap of welcome,"¹³ an inclination to share in the horror, we enjoy our own outraged rejection of our own sanctioned impulses, and this is usually a reactionary aspect of the genre. It helps reenlist readers in the Victorian task of reproducing the self as something repressed. But to see it in these terms, while still involving ourselves with judgement, at least means beginning with an affirmation before moving to a negation, instead of the other way around. Weird fiction upholds the anti-difference bias, presenting difference as monstrous, but it also cannot do this without

having to approach difference. The danger here is that this difference will turn out to be appealingly seductive, more attractive than repulsive, that it will have simulacrum-power, something positive about it. From the beginning of the Gothic tale, crime and outlaws, “knights and robbers,” have been every bit as important as ghosts in horror fiction, and there is an outlaw residue to weird fiction as well. Drawing near to the lawbreaker or rebel, whose archetype in this literature is Milton’s Satan, we are in danger. The danger is not so much that we will side with Satan, but that, in acknowledging that Satan even has a “side” at all, we will fracture an ideology which seeks to maintain a monopoly on our perspective, our selves, and our world. In other words, if we say that evil is more than the absence of good, but something of its own, then we have already been contaminated by the simulacrum. Evil can only be an inferior copy of the good, officially. If it is something on its own, then there is some other idea of the good. God is the source of all existing things. If evil is something on its own, then God created evil, which is impermissible for a perfectly good God. This religious reasoning outlives religious controversy and survives in homologies with science; that is, if the supernatural is irrational, then to assert its existence is to say that not all existence is rational, which requires us to affirm that science cannot ever explain all existence. If that’s the case—given that only reason can define the extent of existence susceptible to scientific understanding, and given that this assertion of the existence of the irrational as something of its own (and not just as the absence of reason) entails the limitation of reason—how is the sure extent of reason to be determined at all?

* * *

Is genre structure? Necessarily? Couldn’t it be a machine, a vehicle, at least some of the time, and hence more dynamically continuing to produce a weird line, extend a weird line across breaks, or maybe via breaks, in genre conventions?

The structuralist approach to weird fiction we find in Todorov identifies the unresolvedly ambiguous supernatural story as the true form, with two subsets which arise when a verdict is called for.¹⁴ That is to say, the structuralist study of the genre depends entirely on judgement, and where that judgement is impossible, it is all the more important, because the effect of the story depends on a presumed need for a judgement that we cannot make. This model originates in the negative. It begins with the

supernatural understood as what is excluded from the category of the demonstrable, and then makes the typical genre story depend on what judgement, if any, is made about this indemonstrable event. If there is no call for a judgement, there is no tension, no effect, according to this model. Todorov's scheme is dialectic in that it privileges the ambiguous story as a gateway to psychological fiction (and this is supposed to represent progress I suppose) which in turn makes the fantastic obsolete.

Todorov bases his definition on the supernatural, then turns aside the question of the supernatural by changing the subject to psychology. For no reason this psychological reading is treated as if it ruled out an epistemological reading, even though weird fiction's particular domain of affect is epistemological; in fact, weird fiction's whole reason for being seems to be the creation of epistemological affects. Todorov can't really account for the weirdness of weird fiction, except to say that it's a primitive, pre-Freudian way of trying to think about psychology. So if Todorov is right and at least Victorian weird fiction is typified by an either/or—madness or supernatural—we see no such distinction in *Macbeth*, or in any of the other source material for Victorian weird fiction. How can there be shadings of reality, or even of reason? Aren't these either/or? How can there be “and”? Reason and unreason at once, real and unreal at once? Weird fiction tries to give us precisely this. Not one or the other, as Todorov would have it, but both and neither.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche wrote that tragedy is the fact that anything can be affirmed, even two contradictory things at once.¹⁵ Not one or the other, but both, because life is bigger than just one or just the other. If we follow the ambiguous definition of the fantastic as Todorov has it, then we cannot account for *The Haunting of Hill House*, by Shirley Jackson; the novel can be classified easily enough as marvellous, since the reality of the haunting is bluntly asserted from the beginning, but there is consequently nothing whatever at stake in the judgement respecting the reality of the supernatural. That stake is simply dispensed with by Jackson, making the judgement of supernatural activity entirely beside the point. Nor is the supernatural aspect of the story merely an adjunct to a more important psychological portrait of Eleanor Vance. Hill House is a character, a kind of demon psychoanalyst, who manipulates Eleanor using her own neuroses. The aim in weird fiction must be this broader view, which makes life something primal, the ground from which structures are drawn, and not a structure itself.

This goes further than presenting everything we are supposed to reject, only in order that we may reaffirm ourselves by repeating the gesture of rejecting it again. If that were all weird fiction did, then it would still be under the sway of what it was not. Todorov would be right; there would be no weird fiction, only bad psychological fiction. However, weird fiction does more than this; it begins with an affirmation of the greater scope of experience and then moves to a negation of limitations to experience, in order to affirm a boundless horizon.

* * *

Major literatures compete with each other to the extent that they are major. Minor literature originates within its major regime, but escapes it. In weird fiction, we could say that the minor story is the weird tale of radical epistemological doubt, the kind that undermines any sense of solid reality, but then there is actually nothing to prevent the reactionary majoritarian forces in society from making use of the same kind of doubt. The doubt is not what makes the story minor. Very often, the epistemologically sceptical weird tale walks back its challenges by receding into a validation of bland conventionality, almost always with the same fucking quote from *Hamlet*, you know the one, about there being more things. This maintains an appearance of sceptical uncertainty, but it amounts to saying that we might as well rely on the usual verities, rather than go off on wild goose chases looking for new ones that will be no more reliable. Klossowski will call this “easy-going agnosticism”¹⁶ and there’s nothing radical or interesting about it. The story of posthumous justice, for its part, is no more necessarily major than the sceptical story is necessarily minor. Labelling of stories like “Grayling; or Murder Will Out” as conservative means flirting with a problem. The idea of a moral universe may be integral to a certain status quo, but it also makes that status quo vulnerable to moral critique. The shear between theory and practice in the application of the idea is a virtual transformation point. Kafka wrote stories of minority justice, set within the virtual transformation point, all the time, that justice being a justice that generates verdicts which are in turn only new beginnings. The destruction of Dracula is a major judgement in the novel, but a minor judgement, which is to say a kind of tragedy, in the Frank Langella film.

The basis for the opposition lies in the idea that the major story recruits the ghost to act as a mere cypher for the self-serving “justice” of human

ruling classes, but justice is too important an idea to cede entirely to the major. Is the epistemological story also a story of justice? Insofar as the epistemological story, by insisting on an open conception of experience, cautions us when it comes to judgement? Do we abandon judgement, or only bad judgements? Is abandoning judgement itself a judgement? Just because the weird doesn't depend on the making of a judgement, that doesn't mean that judgement isn't involved at all (Wilde says that morality is involved in art, but only insofar as art shows us people thinking about morality, the art itself being neither moral nor immoral).¹⁷ And, if a more nuanced idea of judgement is better, isn't it better because it is more just? The properly mourned dead are truly dead, because they more or less disappear from our experience in life; we may gaze on their likenesses, but these images are really no different from the noble abstractions of a hall of allegorical busts representing Statist ideological values like industry or sobriety. Seen from this perspective, official mourning is a second death for the dead, the death of our living image of someone, replacing complex living changeable beings with idealized mannikins; it's a kind of ritual execution, which might call for a kind of justice that explodes in the haunting. Then the scandal of the haunting as such emerges, where the scandal is the rejection of the idealized image by the dead themselves, and not the crimes of which they were the victims in life. The restless dead are looking more like rebels who refuse to be silenced by banishment or to be co-opted by praise (see, e.g., "We Are the Dead," by Henry Kuttner). The peaceful dead look a bit complacent and sad next to these vigorous protester-ghosts!

Weird fiction walks a line with a conservative idea of a transcendent moral order as an important instrument for maintaining a political status quo on one side, and, on the other side, a radical idea of a cosmos that is inherently inimical to any status quo. It would be stupid, though, to miss the utility of the chaotic cosmos for a conservative status quo, or of the idea of a transcendent moral order for the radical side. Radicals call on eternal verities all the time, as Dr. King did, and conservatives have pointed to cosmic chaos to validate the importance of invented stability, as Lovecraft did. So the line weird fiction walks divides two tendencies in thought, but each tendency is itself able to go in two directions.

With Nietzsche, Deleuze says judgement is priestly psychology, in that it demands total revelation of the complete story.¹⁸ This means, the totalization of a story and the closing of all its boundaries. But Deleuze also says, this time apropos of Kant's third critique, that judgement can also

emerge as a masterstroke of reason in a form of free play that does not seem to me to be able to coexist with the transcendence of total revelation. Priestly judgement is levelling all to one identity; an identity that is created by exhaustion, but this masterstroke judgement doesn't seem to work like that. It's more like the establishment of an excellent connection between things, rather than the isolation and categorization of a thing. In Nietzsche, the creator of laws is substituted as the more life-affirming alternative to the judge; which is to say that there is still a figure there with power, but that power is creative. It doesn't consist in reducing new events to types of past precedents and so on, but continually reinvents the law, much as we see in Kafka. So what might be emerging here is an idea of the judge as one who reduces everything to a static arrangement on the one hand, and the creator who participates in the transformations of events. Law in this case becomes a negotiation, a contract, or bargain—a kind of minor law. The weird tale asks us to recognize these contracts for what they are, by speculating about the consequences of a discovery that nullifies those contracts.

* * *

In a filmed interview, John Brunner defined genre as the repetition of an audience: “if one looks back at the historical record it makes far better sense to try and trace a continuity of an audience of this kind than it does to try and trace some kind of literary genealogy in which a writer of one generation specializing in or dabbling in marvel tales influenced directly a writer of the following generation.”¹⁹ While readers don't write contracts for writers, they do decide which works within the marketing category of a given genre belong to their own personal canons, and thus influence sales and so on. This means that accounting for the production of a genre has to include the audience; the audience makes the genre.

Genre is a contraction. For Bergson, the past is a contraction entailing all those things we find already around us, so the past is what we experience as it is understood. The present, for Bergson, is the arrival of difference in contact with the past, and concentrated in the present are all the mobile forces of change.²⁰ The future is an expansion of possibilities brought into being by the transformations of the present moment. If we think of the time of literature, then genre would be something like a memory-image in which the contraction consists of a given canon of texts. However, since there is no actual image in this case, and the term “image”

in the phrase “memory-image” is concretely associated by Bergson with images on a movie screen, a different term is called for here: “memory-reading,” where reading is a noun understood to mean a constellation of specific literary elements. Taking the typical definition of weird fiction, for example, the memory-reading would constellate together ghosts, psychic detectives, derelict mansions, and so on, but the memory-reading wouldn’t be confined to lists of familiar tropes—the content of the reading wouldn’t be determined by the type of content but by the distinguishing affects of the genre.

The critic’s task can be a matter of justifying a given memory-reading before a critical tribunal, but this begs the question of how the memory-reading is compiled. Even where there is a preconceived idea of the content or the origin of a genre, the preconception remains to be accounted for. This study will examine how the genre’s memory-reading combines the supernatural, a concept of the bizarre, and a concept of destiny. Genre, from this point of view, will function as a principle of individuation as Gilbert Simondon described it:

that which the individuation makes appear is not only the individual, but also the pair individual-environment. The individual is thus relative in two senses, both because it is not all of the being, and because it is the result of a state of the being in which it existed neither as individual, nor as principle of individuation.²¹

When writers, readers, and critics bring together the elements of the supernatural, the bizarre, and destiny, they produce weird fiction together by means of the genre. The genre produces individual stories as well as their “environment,” which is not only their audience or “theatre” but also the creative climate that perpetuates the genre. As it stands in any given moment, the genre does not cover all weird fiction, but only weird fiction as it is being produced, and as it relates selectively to past weird fiction. There is more in existence, namely the potentials for new weird tales. These potentials come into being with and in both stories and audiences. Stories introduce ideas and techniques which will be extended, challenged, supplanted, in new stories. Audiences become ready for new materials in time and make the repetition of the genre happen.

NOTES

1. Derrida, Jacques, and Ronell, Avital. "The Law of Genre." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (Autumn, 1980), pp. 55–81; page 56.
2. *Ibid.*, page 80.
3. Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987; page 81.
4. "Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*, was an unproductive worker. On the other hand, a writer who turns out work for his publisher in factory style is a productive worker. Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as a silkworm produces silk, as the activity of his own nature. He later sold his product for £5 and thus became a merchant. But the literary proletariat of Leipzig who produces books, such as compendia on political economy, at the behest of his publisher is pretty nearly a productive worker since his production is taken over by capital and only occurs in order to increase it. A singer who sings like a bird is an unproductive worker. If she sells her song for money, she is to that extent a wage laborer or merchant. But if the same singer is engaged by an entrepreneur who makes her sing to make money, then she becomes a productive worker, since she produces capital directly"—Marx, Karl. *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. London: New Left Review, 1976; page 1044.
5. Frey, Renea. "The Law of Genre." *Devil or the Dictionary: Genre Theory Adventures*. Posted 2/16/12. URL: genretheoryannotations.wordpress.com.
6. Colebrook, Claire. *Gilles Deleuze*. London: Routledge Press, 2002; pages 15–16.
7. See Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Origin of Genres." *Modern Genre Theory*. Ed. David Duff. NY: Longman, 2000.
8. Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Origin of Genres." *Modern Genre Theory*. Ed. David Duff. NY: Longman, 2000; page 18.
9. "the personal self requires God and the world in general. But when substantives and adjectives begin to dissolve, when the names ... are carried away by the verbs of pure becoming and slide into the language of events, all identity disappears from the self, the world, and God. ... For personal uncertainty is not a doubt foreign to what is happening, but rather an objective structure of the event itself"—Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990; page 3.
10. Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; pages 129–130.
11. Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. Digireads, 2010; page 22.