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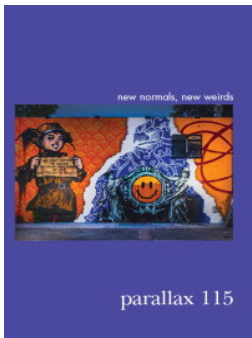
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The Weird Turn: Spillovers of Weird Fiction into Ecology and Economy

Maria Boletsi  and Dimitris Soudias 

Introduction

‘How weird are things going to get?’ ask environmental scholars, who describe the Anthropocene as ‘an epoch of extreme weirding’. ‘This might be the defining question of the twenty-first century’, they suggest.¹ Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, economists echoed this concern by proclaiming that ‘the future will be weirder than we think’.² In this article, we address the widespread sense that the twenty-first century is marked by a growing weirdness, and we argue that the question of the weird warrants sustained academic enquiry – not only as a diagnostic of our present but also as a resource for imagining liveable, desirable futures on Earth. We organise this enquiry around the claim that we are witnessing a *weird turn* across multiple domains.³ As we see it, the weird has spilled over from literature, where it has been associated with a fictional genre, into the arts, the sciences and public culture, as well as into the fields of economy and ecology, which we take as our focus.

In our analysis, the weird turn mobilises practices, aesthetics and representational modes from the genre of weird fiction, and from speculative fiction more broadly, to address contemporary disorientating experiences of intersecting crises that are often framed as a ‘new normal’.⁴ The constant proclamation of ‘new normals’ in recent years, including scholars’ dubbing of climate change and extreme weather events as a ‘new normal’,⁵ testifies to the erosion of the category of the normal today. While the ‘new normal’ trope tries to domesticate and scale down this weirdness, it in fact betrays, so we argue, the waning of the political and cultural authority of the ‘normal’. If the ‘normal’ was ‘one of the most powerful ideological tools of the twentieth century’,⁶ we suggest that the weird may be emerging as a defining concept for the current millennium.

The ‘new normal’ tries to capture an experience of converging crises – the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 migrant reception crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise of the far-right and (neo-)fascist movements, gaping global inequalities, wars and ongoing genocidal violence, as recently exemplified in Palestine and Sudan – which are together crowned by the climate emergency and are compounding to intensify people’s sense that they ‘don’t understand the world any more’.⁷ The perpetuation of these and other intersecting crises yields obsessive attempts by experts and policymakers to analyse, manage and

‘solve’ such extensive and often catastrophic challenges through the language of data, including evidence-based policy, technological fixes and other positivist approaches. Post-truth populists and conspiracy theorists, in turn, promise a return to ‘normality’ through nostalgic restorations of an idealised past that never existed,⁸ or they manufacture a climate of imminent danger, polarisation and xenophobia through dystopian, quasi-apocalyptic scenarios.⁹ As positivist and rationalist approaches cannot fully counter the allure of post-truth and conspiracy cultures,¹⁰ nor help people come to terms with their rapidly transforming realities, we contend that turning to the weird can offer alternative approaches to these challenges.

In the present, *crisis* is less a momentary rupture, turning point or point of decision, as it is by definition and etymologically speaking, than it is a chronic condition that scholars describe as ‘polycrisis’.¹¹ *Polycrisis* signifies not a set of discrete events but their entangled interplay – a ‘*knotted eventedness*’ – in which multiple crises fold into one another and generate harmful effects that are larger than the sum of their parts.¹² This shift from crisis to polycrisis poses a new challenge: how can we inhabit a world whose strangeness is no longer episodic but enduring? Against the backdrop of this shift, the ‘weird turn’ departs from earlier notions of defamiliarisation. Defamiliarisation has historically served as an artistic and social technique for momentarily disrupting habituated or automated modes of perception – as in Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s articulation of *ostranenie* in his 1917 essay ‘Art as Device’, where defamiliarisation is presented as the main function of art.¹³ The weird turn, by contrast, responds to a qualitatively different challenge: rather than momentarily unsettling a normalised order, it seeks to *sustain* the weirdness of a present shaped by polycrisis without allowing it to harden into something which ‘we can get used to’ – into, that is, a ‘new normal’.¹⁴ In doing so, the weird turn cultivates a protracted ‘sense of wrongness’ that may counter the indecision, paralysis or resignation characteristic of and induced by the ‘new normal’, fuelling instead the will to act towards sociopolitical change.¹⁵ At the same time, it foregrounds alternative epistemological and ontological frameworks for living on a damaged planet – approaches that exceed Western rationalism and positivism, and that often draw on knowledge traditions both within and beyond the West, which have been and are still marginalised by the modern/colonial order.

We approach the weird turn as a ‘spillover’ of weird and speculative fiction into domains that appear unrelated at first glance. From literature and the arts to the natural sciences, economics, civil society, policymaking and the media, we observe an unprecedented manifestation of the language, tropes, themes and aesthetics associated with the weird and weird fiction. Our interest is not in whether these spillovers are deliberate or incidental; rather, we are concerned with their political, epistemological and ethical implications.¹⁶ Proposing a weird turn allows us to explore how weird fiction, and indeed fiction at large, has become increasingly important for rethinking the present and for imagining possible futures under conditions of polycrisis. Rather than

rationalising away the weirdness of our present world, we suggest that the weird can be harnessed to envision and enact inclusive, sustainable and emancipatory futures.

Although we highlight the transformative potentiality of the weird turn, we do not treat it (or the concept of the weird) as a priori emancipatory or universally desirable. In addition to its emancipatory potential, we also address the *discontents* of the weird turn, which arise from the concept's nebulousness, its susceptibility to marketisation, its openness to appropriation by antagonistic political forces – including authoritarian and fascist ideologies – and the racist and sexist aspects of early articulations of the weird genre that continue to reverberate in contemporary manifestations.

In light of the above, we begin our analysis of the weird turn by first sketching out the concept of the weird and its historical linkages with fiction. We then examine how uses of the weird have spilled over into adjacent and seemingly distant fields beyond fiction, paying particular attention to its mobilisation in ecology and economy – an emphasis that reflects the importance of these fields for imagining inclusive, sustainable and emancipatory futures. As the current economic system is destroying the foundations of natural life on the planet, exploring uses of the weird in economy and ecology may provide fruitful pathways for envisioning and enacting alternative futures. Drawing on insights from our exploration of weird ecologies and economies, we subsequently conceptualise the weird turn as a set of practices and approaches that respond both to disorientating empirical realities and to the inadequacy of existing concepts that do not fully capture these realities or the many, uneven experiences different people have of them. The weird turn, we argue, articulates political desires and intervenes into the limitations of realist and rationalist attempts to understand the present and to envision desirable futures. Finally, we turn to the weird's discontents, that is, to its ethically controversial and co-optive dimensions, which must be confronted in any critical account of the weird turn today.

Weird Fiction

While the concept of the 'normal' first took shape in scientific arenas in the nineteenth century – particularly in medicine, mathematics and statistics – before it entered popular language,¹⁷ the weird was developed primarily through fiction before entering everyday language in the twentieth century. Even before the weird became associated with a fictional genre in the nineteenth century, its meanings had already been inflected by literature, at least since the 'Weird Sisters' – conveyors of prophecies and fate – in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Fiction is thus central to unpacking the weird's genealogy.

The weird's history, and indeed its etymology, encapsulates various attitudes to the future in (Western) modernity. As a noun, in early modernity *weird*

was a synonym for ‘fate’, ‘destiny’, ‘prophecy’ and ‘prediction’.¹⁸ Enlightenment rationalism and positivist science, valorising ‘reason over superstition’, expelled the weird from modern constructions of reality and marginalised it ‘as odd, strange, fantastic, unaccountable’ – a set of meanings and associations that were later transferred to the genre of weird fiction.¹⁹ As a result, its initial meaning, which was linked to deterministic thinking, ‘flipped entirely’²⁰ as the weird came to denote a ‘turn of events’ and something ‘wayward’ or ‘strange’, thus connoting contingency and disorientation marked by ‘twists’ and ‘loops’.²¹ As an adjective, *weird* came to denote the ‘unearthly, eerie; unaccountably or uncomfortably strange; queer, uncanny’ and ‘out of the ordinary’, especially since its entrance in late eighteenth-century Romantic poetry.²²

In the nineteenth century, the weird became a ‘literary descriptor’ for a hybrid genre of speculative fiction hosted in periodicals and pulp magazines (such as *Weird Tales*),²³ and was marked by an estrangement of ‘our sense of reality’.²⁴ Though often ‘treated as a subliterate phenomenon’, this genre was also entwined with futurism and avant-garde art and literature and functioned as a parallel ‘low-brow’ current of modernism.²⁵ The weird’s popularity as a genre declined after 1940 but picked up again in the twenty-first century owing to the popularity of writers of New Weird fiction, such as Jeff VanderMeer, M. John Harrison and China Miéville, who also contributed to the genre’s theorisation²⁶ and to the canonisation and critical revisiting of ‘Old Weird’ writers like H. P. Lovecraft.²⁷ Particularly since the 2010s, James Machin writes, weird fiction has been ‘making its presence felt across scholarship, publishing, and wider culture to an unprecedented degree’:²⁸ numerous new anthologies and scholarly studies on the genre testify to a ‘return of the Weird from cultural margins’.²⁹ New Weird fiction unsettles humanist assumptions about nature and culture, addressing human/nonhuman entanglements and climate change in new ways,³⁰ and chooses ‘realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping-off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy’.³¹

In her recent study, Kate Marshall argues that themes and figures of the weird are no longer limited to a fictional genre but have entered the mainstream literary establishment and ‘flash up’ in realist narratives, as realist novels become increasingly hybrid by incorporating science fiction, fantasy and weird elements.³² This spillover of the weird into other genres and domains is broadening the concept’s *expansion*. Marshall sees this genre hybridity as a ‘thinking-with genre’, which in the twenty-first century turns into ‘a significant resource’ for ‘novels responding to the material pressures of technology and climate’.³³

Alongside the twenty-first-century surge in mobilisations of the weird, we observe renewed scholarly interest in adjacent concepts such as the *uncanny*,³⁴ the *eerie*,³⁵ the *wild*,³⁶ the *queer* and the *spectral*,³⁷ as well as in neighbouring genres such as fantasy, science fiction and utopia.³⁸ Several studies explore

how these concepts intersect with the weird.³⁹ While we remain attentive to these imbrications and to each concept's distinct functions, we use the weird as an overarching category for the emerging turn we trace. The term's conceptual multiformity – approached variously as genre, aesthetic category, cultural mode,⁴⁰ form,⁴¹ mood, atmosphere, affect,⁴² cognitive frame or even condition and practice ('weirding',⁴³) – gives it an epistemological breadth and malleability that we do not find in adjacent concepts. These qualities make the weird particularly suited for drawing together developments across different cultural, socio-political and theoretical domains.

Our emphasis on the weird is shaped by the specific affordances of weird fiction in comparison with contiguous speculative genres. Whereas fantasy constructs other worlds and science fiction imagines possible futures through more or less coherent scientific or technological extrapolations, the *weird* generates estranging – and often conflicting – versions of lived reality, rejecting 'a stable world that can be understood'.⁴⁴ By meshing realism with speculative fiction, the weird accommodates incongruous scales and perspectives – human and nonhuman alike – evoking what Fisher calls a 'sense of wrongness'.⁴⁵ This enables the weird to register tensions and contradictions in contemporary realities without resolving them. This includes the often ungraspable dimensions of the environmental crisis that preoccupy much of New Weird fiction. To borrow Donna Haraway's formulation, the weird 'stays with the trouble': it engages irreconcilable forces without subsuming them into a single vision, thus spurring critique and cultivating alternative imaginaries of our world.⁴⁶ The weird is marked by what Miéville calls 'genre bleed': a quality that is 'critically valuable' because it 'provoke[s] questioning of the world rather than retreat from it', while it also facilitates the weird's spillover into other genres as well as domains beyond literature.⁴⁷

Spillovers of Weird Fiction

Spillovers of the weird extend far beyond the field of literature. The usage of the word 'weird' has been growing in recent years. The Ngram chart of its usage in English since 1800 (Figure 1) shows a striking acceleration in the twenty-first century, which is much more conspicuous than the rise in frequency of related categories (for example, *eerie* and *uncanny*).

A recent quantitative study of adjectives in the semantic field of strangeness shows that while the use of related terms, such as 'strange', is declining, the term 'weird' 'has expanded dramatically, usurping all other forms' in everyday usage.⁴⁸ Not all vernacular uses of the weird – for instance, as a casual descriptor for something odd – are directly connected to weird fiction or to the developments we identify as part of the 'weird turn'. However, research in discourse analysis and linguistics indicates that shifts in frequency, semantic prosody and distribution of words often track broader ideological and cultural transformations.⁴⁹ The term's expanding circulation in public discourse – including its recent prominence in US political rhetoric – underscores this.

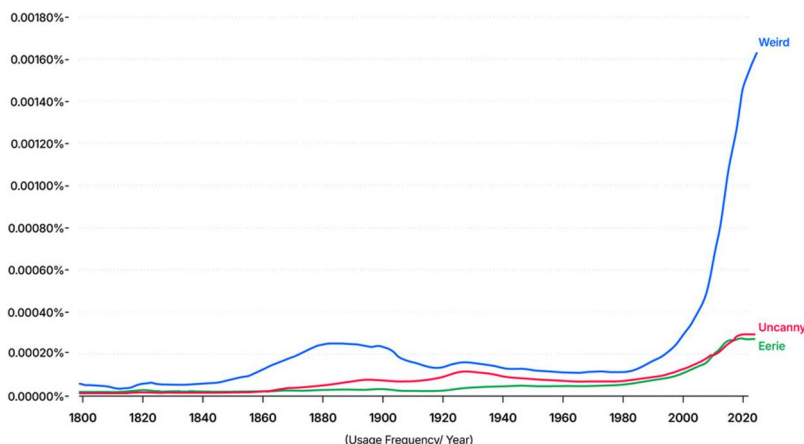


Figure 1. Diachronic use of the term ‘weird’ compared with the terms ‘eerie’ and ‘uncanny’ in English-language books, 1800–2020, showing their relative frequency of occurrence in the Google Books corpus over approximately the last two centuries. Data source: Google Books Ngram dataset. Visualisation by the authors.

In the summer of 2024, *weird* became ‘the word that shook up American politics’ through its central role in the US Democratic presidential campaign against D. J. Trump⁵⁰ – a usage we return to in our subsequent discussion of the weird turn’s ‘discontents’.

We therefore argue that rising vernacular uses of the weird – including those mobilised in politics – need to be explored alongside the renewed prominence of the weird genre and its diffusion across domains. Tagliamonte and Brooke observe that the two major accelerations in the frequency of the weird – in the late nineteenth and late twentieth century – coincide with the emergence of Weird Fiction and its revival by authors of the New Weird respectively. They hypothesise that these upswings reflect the genre’s broader resonance, including its presence in pulp culture.⁵¹ Although there is, to our knowledge, no systematic study of how vernacular uses of the weird relate to the genre’s development, the parallel rise of both supports our claim that weird fiction – particularly through its spillover beyond literature – plays a central role in the contemporary weird turn.

In the past fifteen years, the weird has been claiming a conceptual place in various domains such as ecology, economy and public culture, where it is mobilised to develop epistemological and sociopolitical alternatives to the status quo in the face of the climate emergency and other global challenges and intersecting crises. Weird fiction resonates in many of these mobilisations. Some of the spillovers of weird fiction can be situated in a broader theoretical framework since the turn of the millennium, when theories often affiliated with new materialism, the ontological turn, posthumanism and ecocriticism dethroned the human to foreground the agency of objects, landscapes or nonhuman entities; to reframe established narratives about nature/culture; and to experiment with estranging, nonhuman or transscalar

perspectives.⁵² In philosophy, ‘speculative realism’ or ‘weird realism’ develops anti-humanist alternatives to continental philosophy and phenomenology.⁵³ Graham Harman, in his study *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012), proposed weird realism as a ‘new philosophical mythology’ by teasing out the philosophical concepts underlying Lovecraft’s weird fiction and its monstrous figures.⁵⁴ More and more thinkers propose a meshing of speculative fabulation and science fiction with philosophical thinking as fruitful for novel modes of thinking and imagining the world.⁵⁵

Figures such as monsters, aliens, zombies, mutants, cyborgs, ghosts and spectres have left their literary lodgings to enter scholarship in the humanities and social sciences as conceptual metaphors for theorising alternative approaches to anthropocentric, positivist and rationalist epistemic paradigms. The monsters of weird fiction, for example, become protagonists in the growing field of ‘monster studies’ and inspire new (or until recently marginalised) modes of thinking.⁵⁶ Haraway’s ‘tentacular thinking’ and her notion of the ‘Cthulucene’ for a world of ‘interconnected multispecies being’ are cases in point.⁵⁷ Cultural economy scholars, too, have drawn from zombie or mutant metaphors to highlight the parasitical ways in which neoliberalism encroaches upon competing principles,⁵⁸ and to render meaningful the ‘transmutation, and continual reconstitution of neoliberalism’.⁵⁹

In geography, New Weird fiction and its ‘treatment of difference, dis/orientation and ecological relation’ prompts ‘geographers to foster a speculative ethics suited to a weirding world’.⁶⁰ In sociology, the weird has been used to radically rethink utopianism. If utopias today cannot afford projections of ‘a holistically good society into the future’, a ‘weirded utopianism’ that can ‘generate estrangement and disquiet’, so Lisa Garforth and Miranda Iossifidis argue, ‘can help us understand how our transformed reality might be survivable, and how we can continue to identify and express desires for a better way of living with and in it’.⁶¹ In cultural studies, Mark Fisher famously theorised the *weird* as an affect and (cultural) mode that twists ‘standard perception, cognition and experience’, and traced its workings in literature, film and music.⁶² In film studies, the ‘weird wave’ labels a cinematic movement that emerged amidst the recent Greek financial crisis, using weird cinematic grammars to capture a ‘feeling of unease’ with a crisis-ridden present.⁶³ And as for the natural sciences, according to Marijeta Bradić’s introduction to a special issue on ‘Weird Sciences and the Sciences of the Weird’, ‘weird science’ is now used for ‘scientific inquiry and practice [...] which can significantly disrupt our sense of reality and of our place within it’ and expose ‘the strange dynamics of human-nonhuman interconnectedness that cannot be reduced to our familiar, human-centered categories’.⁶⁴ Examples of ‘weird sciences’ that are able to disrupt ‘frameworks within which we used to conceive and imagine the world’ can be found within the disciplines of ‘quantum mechanics, microbiology, neuro-sciences, animal cognition studies, climatology and space science’, amongst others.⁶⁵

Having briefly outlined a state of the art of the weird in various disciplines, in what follows, we will take a closer look at two intertwined fields, namely, ecology and economy, to scrutinise the uses and workings of the weird in more detail.

Weird Ecologies

The weird's spillover into environmental thinking at large, which has surged in the past decade, testifies to a remarkable intrusion of speculative fiction, artistic and literary modalities, and imaginaries into scholarly and civil society discourses on the climate emergency. As it becomes clearer that the climate crisis is not 'amenable to a single rational solution',⁶⁶ the rhetoric of adaptation and mitigation that typifies the so-called 'crisis realism' of the climate science community, including the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, is losing credence.⁶⁷ Positivist approaches to environmental degradation are grounded in calculating probabilities and favour 'the familiar over the unknown and unexpected' and are therefore unable to account for the unlikely, extreme and unpredictable climatic phenomena that are currently unfolding.⁶⁸ Thus, in the last ten years, the weird has been mobilised in this context to counter the normalising rhetoric of 'crisis realism', which assumes that the climate crisis can be compartmentalised and managed, and to generate alternative ways of narrativising and responding to the environmental emergency.

It is mainly against this backdrop that the previously marginalised genre of weird fiction has been drawing remarkable attention. As Marshall claims, the present moment is one 'in which multiple aesthetic forms and multiple fields and disciplines are trying to imagine a nonhuman perspective' through hybrid encounters that 'involve both technology and the environment, realism and its generic outliers, and science and its sometimes disrupting fictions'.⁶⁹ Literary scholars and novelists thus tap into the genre of the weird and speculative fiction in attempts to incorporate nonhuman scales and eco-critical perspectives into their work. In their special issue on 'Global Weirding' (2016), Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman explore how 'the literary genre of the "New Weird" [...] has taken up situations, speculations, and problems associated with climate change'.⁷⁰ Elsewhere, Henry Ivry proposes 'weird realism' as the literary form best suited for the 'climate crisis novel', which favours new vocabularies of 'cohabitation, immanence, and ecological interdependence' and inspires a mode of 'transscalar', 'atmospheric reading'.⁷¹ Reversely, too, weird fiction is increasingly read through an ecological lens. The volume *Spaces and Fictions of the Weird and Fantastic* (2019), edited by Julius Greve and Florian Zappe, collects recent scholarship that studies the genres of the 'weird' and the 'fantastic' in fiction and film from the nineteenth century to the present day through the lens of environmental humanities; these works are read as 'ecologically [...] informed ways of meaning-making'.⁷² Taking the weird as a diagnostic tool for sociocultural anxieties related to the ecological crisis, the editors plead for an 'ecologically

informed concept of the weird’ as crucial for understanding weird and fantastic literature.⁷³

Beyond literature and literary studies, scholars in the humanities and social sciences at large have adopted the weird or ‘weirding’ in ecocritical, posthumanist, queer, new materialist approaches to ‘disorient normative concepts’ like ‘human’ or ‘nature’.⁷⁴ In ecocritical theory, Timothy Morton was amongst the first to theorise the weird in relation to climate change, proposing it as a ‘twisted, looping form’ that marks ‘[e]cological awareness’, that is, an awareness of the limits of human mastery that acknowledges the ‘finitude and fragility’ of a world joined by modes of interdependence which ‘are always contingent, brittle, and flawed’.⁷⁵ Responding to the need for alternative frameworks in an increasingly ungraspable world, Morton proposes a ‘weird essentialism’ that defies the logical ‘law’ of non-contradiction and offers an alternative to the metaphysics of presence.⁷⁶ In this context, the term ‘global weirding’ has been adopted by scholars in the humanities and social sciences to capture ‘anthropogenically changed worlds and the experience of dwelling within them’.⁷⁷ Global weirding challenges the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of rationalist and quantitative approaches to the climate crisis and prompts us to become ‘accustomed to something strange’ ‘that doesn’t become less strange through acclimation’.⁷⁸

The term ‘global weirding’ is not limited to scholarship but has infiltrated public debates on the climate crisis. Coined by environmentalist Hunter Lovins in 2008 and popularised by *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman in 2010, it was proposed for capturing abnormal changes on a planetary scale as a result of global warming, from extreme weather events, such as catastrophic forest fires in Australia, to the unsettling feeling of an unseasonably warm January day in the northern hemisphere.⁷⁹ As Friedman and others have suggested, ‘global weirding’ does more justice to the catastrophic reality and unpredictable implications of climate change than ‘global warming’; the latter term is too ‘comfortable’ to describe the unexpected changes occurring.⁸⁰ The concept of global weirding has been circulating since 2008 in activist, educational and scholarly discourses, where it seeks to address the environmental crisis in its multiple scales and in its transversality with other declared crises, capitalist extractivism, racism and colonialism.⁸¹ Environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Greenpeace have mobilised it in their platforms, warning, for example, that ‘[c]limate weirding will wreak havoc’.⁸² In education, ‘global weirding’ has titled university courses and seminar series.⁸³ Climate protests have been said to ‘get weird’ too, mobilising fictional figures and weird aesthetics to draw attention to environmental destruction and the insufficient action taken to limit the damage.⁸⁴ A recent example is Ocean Rebellion’s interruption of a meeting of the Marine Environment Protection Committee that was held at the UN International Maritime Organization (IMO) Headquarters on 3 July 2023. The protesters, who were dressed as Poseidon and other dying ‘merpeople’, addressed the

IMO's failure to achieve environmental progress and the absent voice of ocean life at the meeting.⁸⁵

It is noteworthy that the late Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation on the climate crisis from 4 October 2023 also employs a vocabulary akin to the semantic field of weirdness. He refers not only to extreme, unusual, unpredictable developments but also to the 'irreversibility' of the damage and the possibility that 'there is no turning back'.⁸⁶ Leaving behind the vocabulary of mitigation and 'crisis realism' and moving towards the weird, he criticises technocratic approaches and '[t]he mentality of maximum gain at minimal cost, disguised in terms of reasonableness, progress and illusory promises': the semblance of 'reasonableness' in these approaches naturalises destructive practices that ought to be deemed estranging and disturbing. His notable distancing from the anthropocentrism of the Judeo-Christian vision that, in his words, 'defends the unique and central value of the human being' and his shift towards a more entangled understanding of the earth as a 'contact zone' between humans, nature and other beings resonates with weird fiction and posthumanist scholarship.⁸⁷ This global crisis, he contends, calls for a radically different framework: 'Our world has become so multipolar and at the same time so complex that a different framework for effective cooperation is required.'⁸⁸ Although the term 'weird' does not explicitly figure in his text, the vocabulary, vision, tropes and themes evoked in his narrative suggest a spillover of the weird in religious narratives that warrants further scrutiny.

In sum, the weird provides ways to process and address unpredictable implications of environmental change and the (globally uneven) *experience* of living through them. Weirding has gained valence in environmental thinking, because it responds to a central pursuit in current ecocritical theory and literature: the attempt to imagine nonhuman perspectives and 'the-world-without-us' and to debunk human supremacy and mastery over nature.⁸⁹ While this accounts for the weird's uptake by posthumanist theories, it should be noted that the weird does not *necessarily* entail an outright disavowal of humanism as such. Historically, the weird genre has pushed against the limits of 'the anthropocentric discursive framework of humanism', exposing the inadequacy of a 'humanist ethics' when it comes to acknowledging nonhuman others.⁹⁰ Yet, as Kahn Faassen and Pieter Vermeulen argue, the weird genre needs a 'human reference point' for the tension that produces 'the weird effect/affect'.⁹¹ The weird depends on sustaining this tension. Its capacity to accommodate the tension of incommensurable visions could thus also function as an invitation to radically rethink humanism itself, that is, to 'weird' humanism through an engagement with posthumanist frameworks without reconciling the two in a coherent vision.

The weird in this context can thus help recalibrate our frameworks for responding to a rapidly shifting reality of environmental destruction. If Old Weird fiction 'mirrored the fear of modernization and industrialization (and its resultant social and cultural contradictions in Western society)' in the early

twentieth century, New Weird fiction and its spillovers in environmental scholarship and activism confront today's 'creeping awareness of fundamental *ecological* and *geological* crises' in terrifying but also hopeful terms.⁹² As a condition in the Anthropocene, 'weirding' can take catastrophic paths,⁹³ but it can also generate an 'ecological awareness' that may 'twist' despair towards new forms of 'future coexistence' and ecological hope.⁹⁴

Such new forms of coexistence and awareness antagonise the current capitalist economic system, which is predicated on human mastery over nature, perpetual growth and exploitative practices. So, how has the weird infiltrated economic thinking? Do its spillovers in economy manage to point towards alternative, emancipatory economic models?

Weird Economies

Collocations such as 'estranging economics',⁹⁵ 'strange economics',⁹⁶ 'weird economies',⁹⁷ 'economic science fictions'⁹⁸ or 'strange economies'⁹⁹ illustrate how journalists, economists, literary and cultural studies scholars and creative practitioners have mobilised notions of the weird not only to describe current economic realities, which are marked by intersecting crises, but also to envision future ones. As Stephen Shapiro reminds us, such invocations of the weird are not merely rhetorical devices but are symptomatic of moments when hegemonic economic ideas and metaphors falter.¹⁰⁰ Historically, weird fiction has intensified at periods when capitalism's underlying contradictions become partially visible yet remain difficult to articulate through existing concepts and frameworks.

Journalists have used the weird as a news hook to carve out unusual economic relations that shape the global marketplace. For example, the US news channel CNBC runs an entire segment titled 'The Weird Economy' that covers issues such as the paint shortages driven by home DIY projects during Covid-19 lockdowns or the pressures on temperature-sensitive supply chains caused by US consumers' increasing demand for frozen meals.¹⁰¹ Economists have built on the weird to depict an economic reality that defies conventional theoretical assumptions and ordinary expectations. Financial analysts at a US-based bank, for instance, describe the Covid-19 pandemic as 'the economic version of global weirding' in an attempt to render meaningful the uncanny reality of 'all time highs [*sic*] or multi-decade highs' of key indicators in the midst of the global pandemic.¹⁰² Journalist Derek Thompson similarly calls the combination of falling energy prices and increasing inflation as 'the Everything-Is-Weird Economy', capturing the dizzying volatility of economic performance measures.¹⁰³ Greg Walters's 'Couch Report' for VICE adds that in the face of the global supply-chain crisis, 'the American Economy is doing some weird shit right now, but some of what seems scary might actually be kind of awesome'.¹⁰⁴ In such constructions, the weird describes the unsettling atmosphere emanating from unexpectedly pleasant occurrences in otherwise frightening circumstances and vice versa: strong demand across industries during soaring unemployment; or the eerie sight of festive Christmas chocolates in vegetable

aisles to mask empty shelves, as UK supermarkets scramble to maintain the appearance of normality during the lorry driver shortage crisis. In this sense, the weird operates as a diagnostic mode, underscoring a 'sense of wrongness' and the arrival of something unexpected that 'does not belong'.¹⁰⁵

For literary scholars and novelists, the weird offers a way in which to examine economic relations in and through fiction, both as a mode of critique and of imagining alternatives. Whereas the Old Weird often generated unsettling atmospheres through supernatural monsters,¹⁰⁶ the New Weird produces such atmospheres more pointedly through well-described settings, where 'the strangeness of weird worlds' is incorporated in 'the density of detail we associate with our idea of [...] a real world'.¹⁰⁷ The edited volume *Strange Economics* (2018), a collection of stories compiled by an interdisciplinary editorial team including science-fiction writers, economists and social scientists, is a telling example. By posing questions such as, 'What if human potential could be bought and sold? What if souls were a type of currency? Or what is the monetary value of a memory?', the goal of this volume is to unsettle how we understand hegemonic ideas about market freedom and consumer choice today, thereby reimagining questions of fairness and wealth distribution.¹⁰⁸ In this vein, Jo Lindsay Walton's contribution explores the relationship between speculative fiction and the discipline of economics (dubbed as 'Economystics'). As Walton argues, what makes this relationship so fruitful for the imagination of the future is that both economics and speculative fiction construct certain models that shape, rather than merely describe, the world. The goal is to 'cast familiar things in a strange light, so that we properly notice them, as if for the first time'.¹⁰⁹ Building on Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarisation and Darko Suvin's work on cognitive estrangement, Walton shows how making economic ideas 'a bit weird can make them more visible and available to intervention'.¹¹⁰ If orthodox economics is primarily quantitative-mathematical, and speculative fiction primarily qualitative-narrative, we may argue that the practice of 'weirding' economics is about re-embedding or retelling economic models and logics in an estranging narrative, so as to twist them towards more just and sustainable ends.

Heterodox and critical political economists, artists and design practitioners have drawn on speculative, weird, design and science fiction to imagine new economic models. Their analyses often begin by using fictional elements as a method to address practical micro- and macro-economic challenges in experiential ways that depart from mainstream economics. In *Economic Science Fictions* (2018), for instance, editor William Davies examines how utopian and dystopian imagination can be harnessed to revitalise economic thinking and motivate novel approaches to economics beyond the narrow foci of the discipline. Bastien Kerspern's contribution to the volume elaborates on 'economic design fictions', which seek to spark new interactions amongst economists, policymakers, citizens and other relevant stakeholders by building on innovation methodologies such as design thinking and an overall 'problem-finding approach rather than a problem-solving

one'.¹¹¹ The aim is to make the broader implications of macroeconomic shifts tangible and experiential by imagining and creating 'uncanny products and services'.¹¹² Following designer and futurist Anab Jain, these speculative proposals engage the 'strange now' while extrapolating current global trends to reveal 'the sheer breadth, of, often unsettling, future possibilities that lie ahead of us'.¹¹³ Through anecdotal evidence, Kerspern illustrates how the process of 'doing' economic design fiction scenarios can help to articulate 'the economic stakes behind ageing in place with speculations on elderly employment, the impact of the silver economy and the struggles of the healthcare system'.¹¹⁴

The importance of such approaches is further underscored by the turning of policy analysts in the field of public sector innovation and foresight towards 'speculative design', 'experiential futures' and 'design fictions' in order to create solutions to (economic) policy issues.¹¹⁵ Design fiction, for example, fuses 'science fact, design and science fiction [...] that together bend the expectations as to what each does on its own and ties them together into something new'.¹¹⁶ As design fiction scholar Fabien Girardin explains, the aim is to suspend 'disbelief as to what is possible' in order to 'raise awareness that there are weird possibilities and changes going on'.¹¹⁷ In critical design, speculative fiction techniques are used to produce so-called para-functional or post-optimal objects, wherein function and optimisation encourage reflection on how consumer products condition our behaviour.¹¹⁸ By evoking feelings of estrangement in product use, such objects invite critical reflection on the cultural stereotypes and economic structures that drive the development of new technologies.¹¹⁹

While these approaches share a desire to mobilise the weird as an unsettling or defamiliarising force capable of generating more just and sustainable practices and futures, some partly reproduce the very mainstream economic positions they seek to challenge. The design thinking methodology that Kerspern uses for economic design fictions,¹²⁰ for example, has been criticised as a 'bullshit' patented commercial product more than a scientific methodology for inducing social change.¹²¹ If we accept this critique as valid, we can only conclude that mobilising the weird in such a way can end up reinforcing the hegemony of orthodox economics and capitalist ideas about the economy while simultaneously normalising the weird itself – reducing it to a catchphrase or buzzword.

This becomes evident in how orthodox economists have mobilised notions of the weird for diagnostic and prognostic purposes. Mark Sheppard, for example, claims that 'weird metrics' can be 'more flexible instruments' for macroeconomic policymaking and forecasting than their 'traditional counterparts' of large institutions such as the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹²² By *weird metrics*, Sheppard refers to unusual correlations between pop-cultural reference points and economic datasets that are meant to anticipate macroeconomic developments. The so-called Waffle House Index – named after the eponymous restaurant chain – is one such example. The index is meant to anticipate the economic severity of an ongoing environmental disaster. Because

the restaurant is known for its 24-hour, 365-day service, the theory is that when the restaurant is serving a full menu, there is only limited damage to the area. However, when Waffle House is serving a limited menu or operating with limited hours, the index implies low food supplies or the need to rely on generator power, potentially due to a localised disaster.¹²³ By using the opening hours and menu availability of a fast-food chain as indicators for disaster severity, such metrics appear, at first glance, to open up novel economic relationships that challenge the authority of hegemonic institutions while remaining formally scientific. Yet rather than defying the economic status quo, weird metrics ultimately confirm it.

Award-winning economist Paul Krugman's speculative theorems are another case in point. Building on science fiction, Krugman imagines what interstellar trade would look like, by attending to the problem of calculating transit time; in space, travel time appears to be less to an observer on board a spacecraft than to one who remains on Earth.¹²⁴ While both weird metrics and the notion of interstellar trade overlap with or build on both science fiction and weird fiction tropes, the resulting theorems are not attempts to twist or radically re-envision economics. As Krugman himself admits, they are about imagining what it would take for economics to apply to the real world. They are, in his own words, about raising 'the distinct possibility that we may eventually discover or construct a world to which orthodox economic theory applies'.¹²⁵ These efforts therefore create, rather than describe, the very reality they claim to model. They enact an immanent form of critique that corrects and regulates but never fundamentally challenges that which is being measured.¹²⁶ In this sense, weird metrics do more to stabilise econometric forms of reasoning and knowing than to unsettle them through weirding.

Weirding in the field of the economy involves bringing unusual practices and perspectives into economic thinking – practices and viewpoints that do not fit into (the measures of) the economics discipline – not only in order to highlight the strangeness of established theorems, indicators and correlations but also to re-evaluate that which is deemed valuable in our anthropocentric present and to make visible that which cannot be or is not being measured and valued. Taken together, these examples show that while weirding the economy can illuminate the contradictions and unevenness of contemporary capitalism in times of polycrisis, some invocations of the weird also work to normalise the status quo – by re-absorbing crises into familiar frameworks rather than exposing their structural causes.

Conceptualising the Weird Turn

Compared with uses of the weird in economic thought, mobilisations of the weird in environmental thinking – be it in literature, art or civil society – generally show a more systematic engagement with the weird as a concept, cognitive framework, atmosphere, affect and mode of thinking or reading. In

environmental scholarship and activism, the weird has developed into an expansive conceptual vocabulary for confronting ecological crisis and for imagining human and more-than-human entanglements. By contrast, as the previous section has showed, spillovers of the weird in economic thinking are more uneven: they range from journalistic diagnoses of market volatility to speculative-fictional policy experiments and design-oriented interventions. Yet despite this variation, these figurations of the weird also function as heuristics for critically rethinking dominant economic models and for imagining more sustainable and just economic futures. Together the ecological and economic mobilisations of the weird illuminate the emergence of a broader weird turn – one that spans domains yet unfolds with different intensities, conceptual elaborations and political stakes. In this turn, the weird emerges as a descriptor of a sometimes unfathomable present but also as an opportunity to explore how weird fiction, and fiction at large, reconfigures our thinking about the present and the future.

Because turns both describe and produce a reality, we can think of them as a set of ‘material-discursive practices’¹²⁷ that involves ‘the empirical foregrounding and theoretical reinvigoration of a set of concepts’.¹²⁸ As turns require scholars to proclaim and proliferate such reinvigoration, they are also inherently performative. For Monique Allewaert, turns are

a change in direction that might be rendered as a curved line that stops short of a full circling. [...] Figuring the turn as a curved line gives it a geometry, which implies at least an abstract temporality and spatiality but does not anchor the turn in a specific geography. And while it offers the possibility of movement, which implies temporality, it implies no teleology. In short, the metaphor of the turn evokes a partiality that does not promise a trajectory or telos. It is, then, [...] a metaphorical vehicle without a clear metaphorical target, a trope that gains its energy not from its completion, but from veering toward a frame that does not yet exist.¹²⁹

As opposed to other signifiers of spatio-temporal movement and change, such as ‘post’, ‘age of’ or ‘neo’, turn-making is arguably less about sequential or epochal claims and more about enriching and twisting extant lines of inquiry in certain fields by cross-fertilising disciplinary boundaries.¹³⁰

Critics have argued that scholarly turns are the product of a ‘neoliberal apparatus’ that values the kinds of publications that proliferate ‘capitalist techniques of accumulation and growth’.¹³¹ In this reading, turn-making signifies the marketisation of scholarly trends, where the pressures of knowledge production in the neoliberal academy condition the precedence of fashionable and stylish theory buzzwords over intellectual substance.¹³²

Proposing a weird turn, then, requires a reflexive position towards these conflicts and tensions. On the one hand, considering the spike in uses of the word ‘weird’ and the weird’s overall countercultural appeal, proclaiming a weird turn may be complicit in reproducing the neoliberal political economy of proliferating fashionable research agendas that are attractive to funding agencies and policymakers. However, the fact of this appeal, in combination with the weird’s current foregrounding in so many (and unlikely) domains beyond fiction, warrants scholarly attention in order to chart and conceptualise the weird’s mobilisations and their epistemological, affective and political affordances. While proclaiming a weird turn may reproduce certain neoliberal tenets, we claim that the weird is a mode that can effectively transgress this very reproduction. This is because turns are political, in that they organise and direct intellectual work in particular ways rather than merely being a neutral channel of communicating trends.¹³³ How the weird may ‘steer’ this work – marked by the waywardness, disorientation, twisting and boundary-crossing that, as we have shown above, are part of its generic and conceptual make-up – may hold emancipatory potentialities for imagining the present and future *otherwise*.

On this basis, we view the weird turn as a historically situated response – expressed through diverse practices and approaches – to the disorientating empirical landscapes of polycrisis and to the inadequacy of existing conceptual and theoretical tools to fully account for or render those landscapes meaningful. In addressing these landscapes, the weird turn formulates political desires in the space between fact and fiction. Specifically, the weird turn is a politico-epistemological intervention into the limitations of realist and rationalist forms of trying to understand the present and imagine a future – be it positivist epistemology, big data and evidence-based practice, technological fixes or the ‘economic style of reasoning’ of efficient policymaking,¹³⁴ but also the ‘juridico-discursive’ spirit of enlightenment critique.¹³⁵ The weird, therefore, emerges in times of crises, when radical changes in the social world call for alternative means of sense-making. It captures experiences of disorientation, discomfort and defamiliarisation that flow from conflicts between old and emerging realities and worldviews.¹³⁶ As a response to crises, the weird is linked to attempts to cultivate ‘alternative ways of thinking and being’, both ‘wonderful and terrifying’, and to engender new narratives for the present and future.¹³⁷

Importantly, as a generic marker, the weird is not an escape to other worlds or something absurd and non-sensical. Rather, it is ‘a particular iteration of the real’¹³⁸ that ‘places pressure on realism’ without abandoning it.¹³⁹ Put differently, because the weird integrates elements from other genres, including gothic, horror, fantasy, science fiction and realism, it becomes a generic ‘egress’ that opens up ‘contact between incommensurable worlds’ and provokes questioning of singular frameworks of understanding the world.¹⁴⁰

Consequently, the weird turn is not anti-scientific or conspiratorial. Although the weird has historically been a response to new, (previously) unfathomable

accounts of the world produced by science in the nineteenth century (for example, evolutionary theory, thermodynamics and quantum physics), weird fiction was genuinely fascinated by science and the newly estranged versions of reality it made possible while addressing science's limitations and embracing 'the unknown and unexpected'.¹⁴¹ The weird's mode of knotting together worlds, genres or fields – transgressing but not erasing their boundaries – can serve today as a model for transdisciplinary conversations within and beyond academia.

The weird turn therefore signifies the creation of room for constructing a 'weird version of reality' 'within the visible, known, material, physical world'.¹⁴² In that sense, the weird turn seeks to imagine alternative epistemologies and visions *within* the fragile, interconnected world we inhabit. As a mode of envisioning the future, this turn responds to the pressures of environmental destruction and future uncertainty, as well as to the complicity of scientism, rationalism and capitalism with this destruction. It involves modes of *futuring* that have been marginalised or expelled by Western modernity but are becoming increasingly important for formulating alternative future imaginaries. It does so not by disavowing technoscientific advancements but by repurposing and reframing them, for example, within decolonial or Indigenous knowledge systems.¹⁴³ Although historically primarily grounded in Anglo-American genealogies, the weird's antagonistic relation to dominant Western epistemological paradigms makes it conducive to experimentation and to conversations across epistemic traditions that include Indigenous and emancipatory decolonial modes of future-thinking.

At the same time, the very elasticity that enables the weird to twist existing epistemologies and open speculative possibilities also renders it vulnerable to appropriation and reactionary reinterpretation. As we will show in the next section, these risks – central to the weird's contemporary proliferation – are integral to understanding the weird turn's political and ethical stakes.

The Weird Turn and its Discontents

Although we make a case for the weird as putting forward radically alternative modes of future thinking, we do not approach the weird turn as a priori affirmative or emancipatory. As outlined above vis-à-vis the marketist pitfalls of turn-making in the neoliberal university, we acknowledge the limitations of the weird and the challenges of co-optation. One of these challenges stems from controversial aspects in early historical articulations of the weird, particularly the racist and sexist ideas permeating the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft – an emblematic figure of Old Weird fiction. Writers of the New Weird have confronted the problematic aspects of the genre's earlier articulations in Old Weird fiction and have sought to reshape Lovecraft's motifs towards progressive ends, for example, by approaching 'the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming' rather than 'horror'.¹⁴⁴ The New Weird genre thus emerged as an attempt to make the *weird* a part of queer, feminist, anti-

capitalist and anti-racist politics.¹⁴⁵ Aesthetic categories and genres are dynamic constructs that often iterate problematic histories, yet they remain open to affirmative resignifications.¹⁴⁶ Embedding the weird turn in progressive politics – an objective that underlies much of New Weird fiction and scholarship on the weird – involves the difficult but necessary task of critically engaging with Old Weird writers without dismissing the emancipatory aspects of their work.¹⁴⁷

Scrutinising the weird's genealogy, including its problematic chapters, can make us better equipped to identify and counter exclusivist evocations of the weird today. If, for example, New Weird fiction and posthumanist and ecocritical theory have tried to 'reform' problematic aspects of the Old Weird in progressive, inclusive politics, could today's versions of neo- or eco-fascism represent a reactionary spillover of the weird genre that taps into the racist dimensions of the weird's early articulations? As far-right climate denialism has become difficult to uphold today, given the ubiquitous effects of climate change, and is thus losing momentum,¹⁴⁸ eco-fascism and far-right ecologism are experiencing a revival that is influencing environmental debates.¹⁴⁹ Neo-ecofascist groups and platforms thus blend environmental concerns with racist, xenophobic, supremacist, nativist and conspiratorial agendas. The critique of positivism, technology and data-driven empiricism, and the involvement of science fiction, fantasy, archeofuturism, esoterism, mysticism and myth in the narratives of many such groups¹⁵⁰ – such as the white nationalist group Pine Tree Gang or the extreme-right publishing platform Counter-Currents – raise the question of whether and, if so, in what ways their narratives, mythologies and practices have been inflected through the weird genre. While answering this question is beyond the scope of this article, we argue that reactionary spillovers of the weird need to be part of discussions about the weird turn. Tropes, imagery and aesthetics associated with the weird can be co-opted by excessive, dystopian scenarios propagated by conspiracy cultures and post-truth populist rhetoric, which feed on crises and uncertainty. However, proponents of conspiracy theories neither label their narratives as 'weird' nor seek to provoke prolonged estrangement and ambivalence: their aim is usually to normalise their narratives and project them as commonsensical to the public.¹⁵¹

At the same time, what we arguably observe under the current Trump administration in the United States is a more systematic attempt to destabilise shared reality itself. This fosters new conditions for potential reactionary spillovers of the weird: instead of making extreme claims appear commonsensical, Trump's politics erodes the very conditions under which claims can be verified or contested. At the aesthetic level, the proliferation of deep-faked imagery, 'AI slop' and meme-based visual culture within MAGA (Make America Great Again) social media and political communication produces a form of regressive or reactionary weirding. These visual regimes generate atmospheres of distortion and ontological instability that echo some of the unsettling moods associated with weird fiction while stripping away the

genre's critical estrangement. Rather than inviting reflection, they weaponise incoherence, amplifying conspiratorial interpretation and destabilising shared referential worlds. In this way, the weird's affective and atmospheric affordances can be redirected towards reactionary ends, reinforcing disorientation as a tool for ideological steering, thereby instrumentalising and furthering the observation established earlier: people's sense that they 'don't understand the world any more'.¹⁵²

This epistemic disorientation has concrete political-economic effects. By weakening forms of evidence, expertise and reality that ordinarily constrain how politics and policies can be justified, it creates the conditions under which abrupt, self-contradictory or incoherent policies – such as punitive and erratic tariffs, or climate denial alongside climate-emergency militarisation – can be advanced with minimal justification. In this sense, regressive weirding does not merely distort public perception; it helps to underwrite transformations in the political-economic order that would otherwise be difficult to justify. Indeed, as Quinn Slobodian argues, neoliberalism under Trump is not disappearing but mutating – shifting away from the cosmopolitan rationalism often critiqued by weird fiction and towards a volatile mix of nationalist protectionism, nostalgia-driven economic storytelling and techno-accelerationist fantasies.¹⁵³ The Trump administration's economic rhetoric increasingly operates through ontologically unstable narratives, where policy is framed less through empirical realities than through affective spectacle and ambiguous moralistic imaginaries. These developments highlight the weird's ambivalence: the epistemic fractures that can enable alternative imaginaries can also be mobilised to legitimise regressive reconfigurations of the political.

Alongside this involvement of the weird in new forms of disorientation in post-truth politics, the weird as a term is often deployed as a normative category for delegitimising political opponents. Its appeal in mainstream politics reached a peak during the 2024 US presidential campaign, when Governor Tim Walz's description of Donald Trump and D. J. Vance as 'weird' unexpectedly became a catchword that rapidly spread through memes and (social) media, helping propel Walz to the Democratic ticket.¹⁵⁴ Trump and Vance responded by asserting their 'normality' and redirecting the 'weird' label back at the Democrats, resulting in a 'you're weird – no, you're weird' stand-off.¹⁵⁵ At one level, this use of *weird* operates as a norm-enforcing gesture, drawing on the term's pejorative sense as the deviant other of the normal – a rhetorical practice that, as sociologist Jeffrey Nathaniel Parker noted, reinforces in-group/out-group boundaries central to authoritarian politics.¹⁵⁶ Such a deployment not only bears little relation to weird fiction but also runs counter to its history as a genre that, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues, 'introduces cracks into the edifice of the status quo' and amplifies marginalised perspectives.¹⁵⁷

This political episode also reveals something more general about the weird's rhetorical force: its affective and atmospheric qualities make it particularly

amenable to the logics of post-truth politics. The weird's susceptibility to appropriation within post-truth politics can be linked to its genealogy as a genre, albeit tangentially. The weird genre is elusive but is often experienced and intuitively recognised as a mood, atmosphere and affect.¹⁵⁸ In that sense, it lends itself well to post-truth politics, which relies on triggering affects from statements that *feel* true – such as Trump's or Vance's declared weirdness. In this context, calling Trump 'weird' functions as a 'felt truth' – a fuzzy but rhetorically potent accusation that, as commentators observed, is 'specific enough to be damning, but without a clear path to a comeback'.¹⁵⁹ The term's success in the campaign thus mirrored Trump's own fuzzy post-truth rhetoric even as it attempted to weaponise that style against him.

The political instrumentalisation of the weird thus illustrates its rhetorical potency as well as the risks that accompany its elasticity. The weird's conceptual nebulousness also makes it vulnerable to appropriations that tend to exoticise, defang or even depoliticise the phenomena it names. Some scholars have pointed out, for example, the exoticising and neo-orientalist attitudes involved in the use of the label 'weird wave' by international critics for a recent trend in Greek cinema, which thrived during the country's so-called 'crisis decade' (2008–2018).¹⁶⁰ Even the term 'global weirding' is deemed by some to be too 'quirky', 'innocuous' or 'not serious enough' to address the scale of the climate crisis.¹⁶¹

The weird's popularity today as a tag for cultural and artistic practices may at times also signal its co-optation by neoliberal and consumerist rationalities that blunt its emancipatory potential. In other words, when used as a fashionable tag, the weird serves the late capitalist 'economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods' and 'assigns an increasingly structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation'.¹⁶² To borrow Hunter Thompson's words, 'When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.'¹⁶³ When does the term 'weird' become fashionable or a commodity and to what effects, and who can or cannot afford to be 'weird' in the culture, film, music, art or design industry?¹⁶⁴ The weird figures prominently in public culture, from the weird aesthetics of countercultures, street art and recent public protest events to social media, entertainment, advertising and campaigns.¹⁶⁵ Many of its uses in these domains resist corporate culture or mainstream rationalities while also being embedded in (and often co-opted by) the very rationalities, platforms or mainstream cultures they try to twist. In the world of social media, for example, 'weird twitter' denotes a hard-to-define, somewhat surreal and absurdist genre of twitter humour.¹⁶⁶ Introduced a bit more than a decade ago, it quickly evolved into a 'burgeoning comedy subculture', which, according to John Herrman and Katie Notopoulos, constitutes 'one of the biggest influences on comedy today'.¹⁶⁷ Initially conceived as a way 'to subtly mock the site's corporate and mainstream users',¹⁶⁸ this subgenre, marked by linguistic experimentation and incorrect, twisted, improper use of language, style and grammar, has drawn conflicting responses and descriptions, which testify to its ambivalent

relation to the platform from which it emerged: from an ‘idiotic’ style of comedy to twitter’s ‘best, and most powerful, creative engine’ and ‘a meritocratic place where genders, ages, backgrounds, and jobs are either absent or distorted beyond recognition’.¹⁶⁹

Conclusion

In this article, we propose that we are currently witnessing a spillover of weird fiction, and of speculative fiction more generally, beyond the realm of literature, and that this spillover can be broadly subsumed under the rubric ‘weird turn’. The weird turn is not, in our analysis, an escape to a fantasy world but is rather an exploration of alternative ways of understanding and experiencing a disorientating present of polycrisis and of imagining a desirable future in the liminal space between fiction and reality. As a generic ‘egress’ that connects ‘incommensurable worlds’,¹⁷⁰ the weird can function as a conduit for various genres, domains and fields to enter into unlikely alliances and conversations on how fiction, theory, science and civil society may ‘twist together’ to devise new narratives for responding to our present and its challenges.¹⁷¹

If the weird turn is to contribute to what Arjun Appadurai calls a ‘politics of possibility’ – a politics that keeps the future radically open rather than seeking to calculate and determine it through a ‘politics of probability’¹⁷² – we must continue to scrutinise, compare and distinguish pathological or discriminatory mobilisations of the weird from emancipatory ones aimed at inclusivity and social and environmental justice, even if this distinction is not always easy to draw. The weird’s genealogy as both a genre and a vernacular term paradoxically enables sharply contrasting uses. As a genre, it can embrace monsters as affirmative figures in alternative, inclusive modes of thinking and being, yet it also carries echoes of its racist historical articulations. And as a word, it can enable critique or stigmatise deviance; it can accommodate and affirm otherness or exclude others.

Across ecological, economic, political and cultural domains, the weird’s expanding presence thus exposes a broader transformation: that the epistemic, affective and narrative modes through which crises are sensed, interpreted and governed are themselves in flux. As we have shown, weirding can sharpen critique, open speculative space and unsettle narratives – but it can also be weaponised to destabilise shared realities and recast regressive agendas in affectively desirable terms. Despite – or precisely because of – the paradoxes it incorporates, we contend that the weird is well suited to attune us to the contradictions and tensions that mark contemporary realities of polycrisis and to help us navigate these realities without collapsing these tensions in a homogeneous vision. For this reason, it is worth insisting on the weird’s potential as a conceptual tool and lens. As such, the weird can help us pose critical questions about the present, experiment with alternative modes of

relating to the world and to human and nonhuman others, and cultivate practices that foster inclusivity and emancipated futures.

Notes

¹ John A. Sweeney, 'Global Weirding', in *The Postnormal Times Reader*, ed. by Ziauddin Sardar (The Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies, 2017), pp. 203–10 (p. 204). Sweeney's claim is also reflected in the contributions collected in *The Postnormal Times Reader* as well as in several other publications that adopt the term 'global weirding', which we discuss further in this article.

² Tyler Cowen, 'The Future Will Be Weirder than We Think', Bloomberg, 1 August 2021.

³ The term 'weird turn' was first proposed in Maria Boletsi, 'The Politics of Weird Aesthetics: Fictionality in New Forms of Protest', *parallax*, 30.1 (2024), pp. 26–61. The present article draws on and further develops the very concise overview of certain aspects of the weird's conceptual lineage and contemporary circulation given in Boletsi's previous article, which explores the weird aesthetics of contemporary forms of protest.

⁴ Lesley Head, 'Transformative Change Requires Resisting a New Normal', *Nature Climate Change*, 10.3 (2020), pp. 173–74.

⁵ Iman Mallakpour, Mojtaba Sadegh, and Amir AghaKouchak, 'A New Normal for Streamflow in California in a Warming Climate: Wetter Wet Seasons and Drier Dry Seasons', *Journal of Hydrology*, 567 (2018), pp. 203–11; Head, 'Transformative Change'.

⁶ Peter Cryle and Elizabeth Stephens, *Normality: A Critical Genealogy* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 3; Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 169.

⁷ Ulrich Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World: How Climate Change Is Transforming our Concept of the World* (Polity Press, 2016), p. 1.

⁸ Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (Sage, 2015).

⁹ Eric King Watts, '"Zombies Are Real": Fantasies, Conspiracies, and the Post-Truth Wars', *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 51.4 (2018), pp. 441–70.

¹⁰ Maria Boletsi, 'The Revenge of Fiction in New Languages of Protest: Holograms, Post-

Truth, and the Literary Uncanny', *Frame*, 31.2 (2018), pp. 13–34.

¹¹ For crisis as a chronic condition, see Henrik Vigh, 'Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline', *Ethnos*, 73.1 (2008), pp. 5–24; and for the present chronic condition of crisis as polycrisis, see David Henig and Daniel M. Knight, 'Polycrisis: Prompts for an Emerging Worldview', *Anthropology Today*, 39 (2023), pp. 3–6; and Michael Lawrence and others, 'Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement', *Global Sustainability*, 7 (2024), pp. 1–36.

¹² Henig and Knight, 'Polycrisis', p. 4; original emphasis.

¹³ Viktor Shklovsky, *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. by Alexandra Berlina (Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 73–96.

¹⁴ Head, 'Transformative Change'.

¹⁵ The quoted phrase is from Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2016), p. 13.

¹⁶ Not all mobilisations of the weird acknowledge having been inflected by the weird fiction genre, but some discuss this influence at length. An example is Jonathon Turnbull, Ben Platt, and Adam Searle, 'For a New Weird Geography', *Progress in Human Geography*, 46.5 (2022), pp. 1207–31, which discusses the 'conceptual import' of New Weird fiction in 'emerging debates in geography' (p. 1207).

¹⁷ Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*; Cryle and Stephens, *Normality*, p. 3. See also the contribution by Florian Lippert in this special issue: Lippert, 'What Is an Average Citizen? Outlines of a Cultural History', *parallax*, 31.2 (2025), pp. 210–32.

¹⁸ See the entry 'weird, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d. <<https://www.oed.com>> [accessed 11 December 2025].

¹⁹ Emily Alder, *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 19.

²⁰ Alder, *Weird Fiction*, p. 12.

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