# ATMOSPHERE
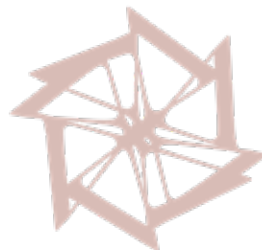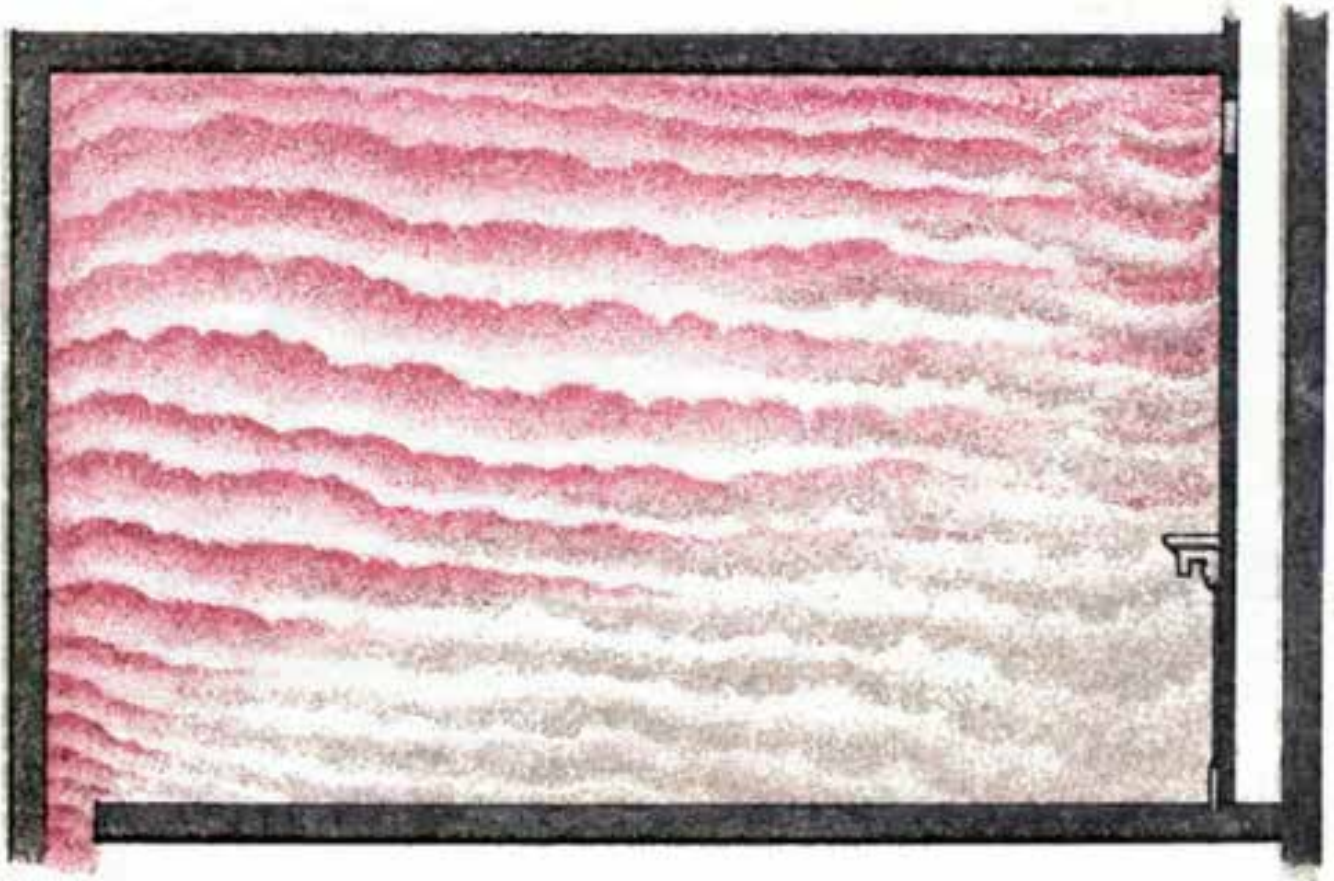
Strange Times and Weird Atmosphers

Marco Caracciolo | essay | 132

Lewis W. Leeds, from *Lectures on Ventilation*, 1869, Lithograph.

Taken from Lewis W. Leeds's *Lectures on Ventilation* (1869), this image is part of a series used to illustrate the movement of air through various rooms. In this figure, brown-gray, cold air has come inside via a fireplace and combined, though not fully, with the room's red, hot air. While other images in the series seem more active (like one of hot air flowing through a flue), this looks like something closer to an ominous room filled with gradient clouds. The air does not seem to flow, and what results gives the image a sense of eerie stillness. Perhaps that is what contributes to a feeling of atmosphere; however changing the air in a room is or isn't, it is our perception that most informs what we experience. In his article, Marco Caracciolo explores how our sense of the world has changed with the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of weird fiction. By comparing works whose characters connect with their weird atmospheres in opposing ways, Caracciolo pushes us to understand how we navigate our own weird atmospheres and that the key to a more stable atmosphere just might lie in our ability to embrace the weirdness.

<div align="right">- The Editors</div>

# Strange Times and Weird Atmospheres

## Marco Caracciolo

"I hope this message finds you well in these strange times." At the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, my inbox was filling up with messages that used variations on that line to signal the tumultuous weirdness of the early stages of the pandemic. The stay-at-home orders, the shuttered stores and restaurants, the inevitable awkwardness of video calls — all conspired to create an atmosphere of striking strangeness. If the virus was not in the air physically, it was in the air emotionally, tangible through unusually tense faces and restrained silence. To most of us living sheltered lives, such atmospheres are (or were, until the outbreak) the stuff of fiction. Yet it gradually became clear that what we were experiencing wasn't the average post-apocalyptic film, with its spectacular action and plot-driven trajectory. This was a slow-moving, baggy drama in which the villainous "monster," the virus, had to be accepted rather than defeated — at least for the time being. The "new normal" that governments keep bandying about is, in fact, a state of uneasy and precarious coexistence with the possibility of new waves in the outbreak.

One literary strand that trades in such strangeness is a genre known as weird fiction. In H. P. Lovecraft's influential definition, weird writing evokes a "certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces."[1] The weird, as Mark McGurl has suggested, is a surprisingly apt literary mode to capture the slow temporality of geological history.[2] One may add that it is also particularly well suited to channel a crisis whose source remains invisible and elusive, such as the coronavirus outbreak or the complex transformations in the Earth system that we discuss under the label *climate change*. Lovecraft's legacy, with its anti-humanist and racist tendencies, is deeply problematic, so much so that many contemporary "New Weird" writers have felt the need to distance themselves from it.[3] Authors such as China Miéville and Jeff VanderMeer — to name two writers typically associated with the New Weird — evoke unspeakable threats reminiscent of Lovecraft's fiction while steering clear of his disturbing politics. Indeed, their New Weird works display a marked interest in linking the genre's signature existential dread to real-world political and social issues — for instance, state surveillance in Miéville and environmental devastation in VanderMeer.[4]

Yet, New Weird writers do take on board Lovecraft's intuition that the weird is, fundamentally, a matter of "breathless and unexplainable" atmosphere. It is this atmospheric dimension of the weird that is the focus of this article, particularly for its power to speak to the destabilization of human societies' relations with the nonhuman environment in times of climate change. The atmosphere of the COVID-19 pandemic can thus be seen as a prefiguration of a more radical, and weirder, disruption to come.

In *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* (2012), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht offers an insightful discussion of the literary significance of atmosphere.[5] Gumbrecht remarks on the unique etymology of the German word *Stimmung*, which points to the sensory domain of sound and not to inner feelings (as in mood) or to an external, objective reality (the Earth's climate). In this sense, *Stimmung* suggests an atmosphere that works in a nonbinary way, blurring the boundary between the inner and the outer, the psychological and the material.[6] Thus, Gumbrecht proposes, "'reading for Stimmung' always means paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality — something that can catalyze inner feelings without matters of representation necessarily being involved."[7] Although weird fiction is not

part of Gumbrecht's archive, it resonates strongly with his embodied account of atmosphere. Similarly relevant is Derek McCormack's approach to atmosphere as a mode of envelopment that "[modifies] and [mediates] the exposure of bodies to an outside."[8] As a literary mode, the weird builds on an atmospheric disruption of distinctions, entrenched in Western culture, between human agents and a passive and inert nonhuman world. The weirdness lies precisely in this atmospheric envelopment within a reality that defies assumptions of human mastery — an envelopment that is both unsettling and grounded in bodily experience. Read in this light, weird fiction echoes the uncertainties of the present moment, with its perceived loss of human control, and provides perhaps a means of negotiating its most debilitating anxieties.

Two examples of the contemporary weird will guide this discussion. The first is a novel by Jeff VanderMeer, *Authority* (2014), the second volume of the acclaimed *Southern Reach* trilogy. The other example is a video game developed by Remedy Entertainment, *Control* (2019), which also inscribes itself in the weird tradition (not least through several allusions to VanderMeer's works). In both narratives, the protagonists are recently appointed directors of federal agencies tasked with managing inexplicable events that challenge consensus reality. VanderMeer names his agency the Southern Reach: its mission is to investigate a coastal region known as Area X, where the ecosystem has been upended by a contagion that may or may not come from outer space. In *Control*, the New York City headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Control has been taken over by a malign presence known as "the Hiss." Both works take place in an extremely mundane setting: Each has its own version of a maze-like government building with largely monotonous offices and corridors. But as the directors — a character nicknamed Control, in VanderMeer's novel, and Jesse Faden in *Control* — familiarize themselves with these spaces, they discover unsettling realities beneath the façade of paperwork and administrative procedures. While Gumbrecht's account of atmosphere as *Stimmung* foregrounds sound, both my case studies use touch to break down dualistic barriers between (human) subjectivity and (nonhuman) materiality. Hearing is a distal sense: the distance between the perceiving subject and a sound source can easily slide into a subject-object binary, a sense of separateness from the non-human world out there. By contrast, as a quintessentially proximal sensory modality, touch eliminates any perceptual distance. The weird atmospheres of *Authority* and *Control* envelop the experiencing character and put them in contact — physically — with disturbing nonhuman realities. Touch thus becomes a means of thinking about the materiality of atmosphere and its disorienting effects on the perceiving subject, who is suddenly made aware of the non-human world's ability to affect us.

This key scene from *Authority*, for example, depicts the dull corridors of the Southern Reach morphing into a far more ominous spatiality: "[Control] turned the corner into the corridor leading to the science division, kept walking under the fluorescent lights. ... Control reached out for the large double doors. Reached for the handle, missed it, tried again. But there were no doors where there had always been doors before. Only wall. And the wall was soft and breathing under the touch of his hand. He was screaming, he thought, but from somewhere deep beneath the sea."[9] Touch is central to Control's experience of unstable spatiality. The mainly visual (and thus distal) language of the first sentence — the "fluorescent lights" — gives way to the organic image of the "soft and breathing" wall, which is apprehended by way of touch. The affective and the material fuse in an atmosphere that is tangible in the etymological sense of "capable of being touched." The effect is unsettling because of how it challenges expectations of spatial stability — e.g., an upright, solid wall — as well as distinctions between life and nonlife (a "breathing" wall). Through such cues, which recur throughout VanderMeer's novel, the protagonist (and, vicariously, the novel's readers) are enveloped by a uniquely weird atmosphere.

Remedy's video game, *Control*, evokes a similar affect, marrying the mundane to the supernatural. The player advances the plot in a relatively linear fashion by defeating enemies and solving puzzles in an attempt to counter the Hiss. While the basic gameplay formula is no different from many other action games, *Control* stands out because of its uniquely atmospheric game world. In part, the game's atmosphere emerges from the consistent chromatic palette, which is rich in shades of gray and burgundy. But there is more to the game's atmosphere than this visual backdrop: nearly everything

in the office environment can be manipulated and weaponized (Figure 1). The player-controlled character, Jesse, is able to grab desks, chairs, and photocopiers through telekinesis and hurl them at hordes of oncoming enemies. The spatial construction of the Federal Bureau of Control shifts constantly as the player reclaims it from the Hiss. Just as in *Authority*, dream sequences surface periodically, transporting the protagonist to the mysterious "Oceanview Motel," which would not feel out of place in a David Lynch film. Again, the emphasis is on touch: players feel their way through *Control* by learning to manipulate the game world to their strategic advantage. A number of everyday objects — a fridge, a rubber duck, a projector — tear through the boring fabric of office life by taking on autonomous agency. Jesse's narrative arc involves asserting dominance over these "objects of power" — mostly through physical contact. In both *Authority* and *Control*, the weirdness is a source of spatial destabilization that envelops the audience by troubling basic ontological binaries of Western thought, particularly life vs. nonlife and human agency (or subjectivity) vs. nonhuman, inanimate matter.

Yet, despite their uniquely weird atmosphere and the obvious similarities in their narrative set-up, *Authority* and *Control* move in profoundly different directions as they imagine ways of relating to an ominous nonhuman. While the "authority" of VanderMeer's title is largely ironic, *Control* takes its title seriously. VanderMeer's protagonist is unable to live up to his role as the director of the Southern Reach. Ultimately, the plot impels Control toward an acknowledgment of powerlessness that is also, on a larger scale, a relinquishment of human agency. In the novel's final scene, Control confronts a character named Ghost Bird. Despite looking like the biologist of the trilogy's first instalment, *Annihilation*, Ghost Bird is actually an emanation of Area X — a human-nonhuman hybrid who enters the stage of the novel and steers it away from anthropocentric assumptions. Together, Control and Ghost Bird head into Area X: "He took one last look back at the world he knew. He took one huge gulp of it, every bit of it he could see, every bit of it he could remember. 'Jump,' said a voice in his head. Control jumped."[10] This leap into the unknown forges an uneasy alliance between a flawed human character and the nonhuman-infused Ghost Bird. The pretense that Area X can be "managed" by a human institution, the Southern Reach, is abandoned once and for all. Instead, Control braces himself as he leaves "the world he knew" behind. This opening onto an uncertain future intimates that the fate of human societies is deeply entangled with nonhuman realities that we cannot — and should not — fully *control*.

It is not a coincidence that the final volume of the trilogy is titled *Acceptance*: as Pieter Vermeulen puts it, "the final instalment... conveys a sense that altering the terms on which human and nonhuman lives coexist is something to welcome rather than resist."[11] The weird, in VanderMeer's storyworld, poses a profound challenge to human mastery over the nonhuman. The weird atmosphere decenters anthropocentric thinking and displaces the human subject, just as it renders Control's nickname entirely ironic. Importantly, the dynamic of the novel's plot prompts an embrace of such weirdness; it conveys a sense that the strangeness of human-nonhuman relations ought to be respected rather than explained away. Not so in *Control*. Despite the game's deep fascination with nonhuman agency, Remedy Entertainment's video game ends with Jesse regaining control over the "Oldest House" (the Bureau's building). An anthropocentric order is reasserted: the objects of power are mastered, the Hiss subdued. "The lockdown [of the Oldest House] can't be lifted until any trace of it [i.e. the Hiss] remains," remarks Jesse, in a statement that rings eerily prescient in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. Jesse's view is that the weirdness has to be contained and suppressed, rather than embraced as a fundamental dimension of humanity's entanglement with nonhuman realities.

In this way, *Authority* and *Control* demonstrate two profoundly different ways of relating to the nonhuman, even as they tap into the same weird atmosphere, with its destabilization of concepts such as human agency vs. nonhuman matter and life vs. nonlife. The affective dynamic generated by the plot spins the atmosphere in opposite directions — toward epistemological modesty and acceptance of human limitation in the face of nonhuman realities, in VanderMeer's novel, and toward a reaffirmation of human mastery, in Remedy Entertainment's video game.[12] This difference does not make the game less enjoyable from a gameplay perspective, or less aesthetically and narratively refined. However, the trajectory of *Control's*

Figure 1. Director Jesse Faden hurling desks in *Control.*

plot does limit the capacity of its weird atmosphere to address the anxieties of the present moment, including those bound up with the coronavirus pandemic and (somewhat farther down the line) the climate crisis.

These crises of the present call for a profound rethinking of our stance vis-à-vis the unknown, the unpredictable, and the uncontrollable, rather than the knee-jerk imposition of human domination. We must learn to welcome the openness of our shared future and use it to refashion society along more ecologically and ethically responsible lines. Such openness can be profoundly unsettling, of course. Weird fiction like VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy teaches us to negotiate the uncertainties of the contemporary and turn our anxieties into a more balanced acceptance of unstable futurity. The atmosphere of weird fiction can inflect and steer our experience of the present, affording, paradoxically, both insight into and imaginative distance from the unease we feel as our lives are upended by the outbreak. Weird writing can perhaps serve as "formative fiction," in Joshua Landy's terminology, that equips readers with affective and conceptual tools to imagine themselves in a world reshaped by nonhuman forces — like the coronavirus, but even more fundamentally the climate transformations unleashed by global capitalism.[13] Not all weird fiction is equally formative, equally conducive to acceptance of nonhuman agency, as my discussion has shown. Nor should we think that fiction can, by itself, do the trick: without thoughtful commentary and collective debate of the kind practiced by teachers and students of literature at all levels, even the most radically weird narratives lose grip on reality. Paradoxically, then, the interpretation and critical discussion of fictional worlds in prose and other media become uniquely capable of bringing readers back in touch with our weird times.

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## Notes

1. H. P. Lovecraft, "Introduction to Supernatural Horror in Literature," in *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Sandner (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 105. For more on the definition of weird fiction, an inherently elusive and hybrid genre, see Roger Luckhurst, "The Weird: A Dis/Orientation," *Textual Practice* 31, no. 6 (2017): 1041–61.

2. Mark McGurl, "The Posthuman Comedy," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 542–47.

3. Jeff and Ann VanderMeer's editorial work played an important role in establishing this "New Weird" label. See Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer, eds., *The New Weird* (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2007).

4. VanderMeer's engagement with the ecological crisis in detail. See Gry Ulstein, "Brave New Weird: Anthropocene Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer's 'The Southern Reach,'" *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 43, no. 1 (March 2017): 71–96; Benjamin J. Robertson, *None of This Is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

5. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

6. I discuss mood and embodiment in a more narratological vein in "Perspectives on Narrative and Mood," in *How to Do Things with Narrative: Cognitive and Diachronic Perspectives*, ed. Jan Alber and Greta Olson (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 15–28.

7. Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere*, 5.

8. Derek P. McCormack, *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 6.

9. Jeff VanderMeer, *Authority* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 290.

10. Ibid., 339.

11. Pieter Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 2.

12. On how specific rhetorical devices can steer atmosphere towards a critique of human exceptionalism, see also Heather Kerr's discussion of personification in "Museal Moods and the Santos Museum of Economic Botany (Adelaide Botanical Garden)," *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no. 12 (2016): 143–52.

13. Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Marco Caracciolo is Associate Professor of English and Literary Theory at Ghent University in Belgium, where he leads the ERC Starting Grant project "Narrating the Mesh." Marco's work explores the phenomenology of narrative, or the structure of the experiences afforded by literary fiction and other narrative media. He is the author of four books, including most recently *Embodiment and the Cosmic Perspective in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Routledge, 2020). His new book, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (University of Virginia Press), is forthcoming in 2021.