Weird Ghosts of the Anthropocene: The Spectral Encounter in New Weird Fiction as a Conceptual Metaphor for Ecocritical Theory

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Abstract

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh links the reluctance of contemporary fiction to tackle the environmental crisis to the inadequacy of realism, with which Western "high" literature has been associated since the rise of the modern novel, to describe the "hyperobject" quality (Clark 140) of the Anthropocene. This paper argues that the genre labeled as New Weird, which strives to portray the *Unheimlich*, the eerie, or precisely the weird in our familiar reality, offers an answer to this aesthetic challenge, having found an especially powerful literary device in spectral encounters. In the works of many New Weird authors, environmental concerns are often embodied by the encounter of human protagonists with the ghostly apparitions of non-human entities. A close reading of three stories from China Miéville's collection *Three Moments of an Explosion*, "Polynia," "Covehithe" and "Estate," will serve as a detailed example of how the portrayal of people's behavior in encountering 'weird' spectral presences bears a specific ecological significance. This significance reverberates in the use of spectrality as a conceptual metaphor in contemporary ecocritical theory, thus corroborating the claim of this genre as the most productive for our historical times.

Keywords: New Weird, spectrality, non-human, ecology, uncanny.

Resumen

En *El gran desvarío*, Amitav Ghosh vincula la reticencia de la ficción contemporánea a abordar la crisis medioambiental con la inadecuación del realismo, con el que se ha asociado la "alta" literatura occidental desde el surgimiento de la novela moderna, para describir la cualidad de "hiperobjeto" (Clark 140) del Antropoceno. En este artículo se argumenta que el género denominado *New Weird*, que se esfuerza por retratar lo *Unheimlich*, lo perturbador, o precisamente lo extraño en nuestra realidad familiar, ofrece una respuesta a este desafío estético, habiendo encontrado un dispositivo literario especialmente poderoso en los encuentros espectrales. En las obras de muchos autores de la ficción *New Weird*, la preocupación por el medio ambiente se plasma a menudo en el encuentro de protagonistas humanos con apariciones fantasmales de entidades no humanas. Una lectura atenta de tres relatos de la colección de China Miéville *Three Moments of an Explosion*, "Polynia," "Covehithe" y "Estate," mostrará cómo el retrato del comportamiento de las personas al encontrarse con presencias espectrales "extrañas" tiene un significado ecológico específico. Este significado reverbera en el uso de la espectralidad como metáfora conceptual en la teoría ecocrítica contemporánea, corroborando así la reivindicación de este género como el más productivo para nuestros tiempos históricos.

Palabras clave: *New Weird*, espectralidad, no-humano, ecología, *uncanny*.

Introduction

Specters and ghosts have haunted human cultures since very ancient times. From Plinio the Young's mentioning of strange apparitions and haunted houses (see Cigliana), to Shakespeare's ghosts in *Hamlet* or *Macbeth,* to Stanley Kubrick's *Shining*, they have played a major role at least, though certainly not only, in the Western collective imagination. As supernatural entities, spiritual returnings or psychological projections, specters have populated a much larger body of legends and folktales than any written tradition can record. Yet what is clear, even just from the examples of which literary texts are scattered, as the editors of *The Spectralities Reader* state, is that "their representational and socio-cultural functions, meanings, and effects have been at least as manifold as their shapes—or non-shapes" (1).

In this essay, I argue that the "representational and socio-cultural functions, meanings and effects" of spectrality have assumed renewed significance, in the 21st century, within the context of ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies. This significance reflects itself in (and might be, in its turn, fuelled by) the presence of a particular kind of spectrality used in the literary genre known as New Weird. Based on the example of three short stories by New Weird author China Miéville, I will demonstrate that the ecological implications of spectral presences and their encounter with human protagonists, as they appear in New Weird texts, make this genre and aesthetics the most productive for our historical times.

In *The Great Derangement,* Amitav Ghosh argues that most contemporary "high" literature is still reluctant to portray that which should be our biggest concern as humans in the 21st century: the environmental crisis. Ghosh traces this reluctance back to the rise of the modern novel, when high literature started to be associated with realism. Conventional literary realism is rather unfit to describe climate change, whose slowly increasing effects are difficult to grasp and make visible within the telling of a human protagonist's life. So are environmental catastrophes, since they are not usually perceived as plausible occurrences, thus as "realistic." They are rather portrayed, especially by politics and the media, as incredible, extraordinary events. Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for instance, reportedly commented on the floods which ravaged Western Europe in 2021 as being "surreal" and "ghostly" (see Moulson). As a consequence, most literary texts which have ventured to tackle the crisis belong to those genres typically banned from what Ghosh calls "serious fiction:" horror, fantasy and science fiction. In fact, only in the realm of non-realist literature are stories allowed to be based on *highly improbable* events. However, portraying ecological disasters as science-fictional, magic, or surreal "would be to rob them of precisely the quality that makes them so urgently compelling—which is that they are actually happening on this earth, at this time" (Ghosh 27). This is why, I argue, the New Weird constitutes exactly the kind of literary aesthetic which is needed in this historical moment.

The label "weird" is generally used to define either the works of H.P. Lovecraft, who stands as the almost exclusive representative of the so-called "Old Weird" (the

founding phase of the genre at the beginning of the 20th century), or the fiction of contemporary authors such as China Miéville, Jeff Vandermeer, N.K. Jemisin, Caitlin Kiernan, Stephen Graham Jones, among many others, as writers of the "New Weird." New Weird literature is neither simply science-fiction nor horror; although it can borrow features from fantasy or magical realism, it exceeds the limits of any of these categories. What New Weird texts strive to portray is the uncanny, the eerie, or precisely the *weird* in our familiar reality. By embodying environmental concerns as the uncanniness which results from inexplicable events immersed in an everyday context, they lead us to realize how our world—the real, present world, not a futuristic or magical one—is itself "weird". One of the most powerful rhetorical devices through which they achieve this effect is, precisely, the spectral, and especially the portrayal of human reactions to the encounter with it.

Specters are by definition liminal beings (Blanco and Peeren 2). As literary figures, they usually perform a bridge-function, connecting different, supposedly even opposite dimensions. They connect life and death—from Patroclus and Anchises returning from Hades to communicate with the living, to the unrestful souls who haunt Scrooge in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. As a consequence, they also connect past and present, disrupting our illusion of a clear division among temporal dimensions. This is the case even when, as happens more and more often throughout the Gothic and Modernism, it is unclear whether they should be interpreted as supernatural beings or projections of the livings' psyche. This happens, for instance, in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, a novel built upon a structural ambiguity so refined that it is impossible to state with certainty whether it is the story of a haunted house or of a mentally unstable governess, projecting all the repressed impulses of her unconscious mind onto the figure of a ghost only she can see.

A ghost which is imaginary, yet actually is seen by those who want (or need) to see it, is a bridge between rationality and imagination or madness, a logical incongruity which makes us doubt our very ability to understand the world around us. This is where spectrality meets the New Weird: the feeling aroused by a *weird* entity, to use Mark Fisher's most accredited words, is one of "wrongness," meaning such entity "makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here" (Fisher 15). Hence, the *weird* entity itself can be said to possess a spectral quality. It does not need to be a ghost in the traditional sense—be it a spirit, a supernatural being or a projection of the mind. Yet, just like a ghost, the weird is that which "literally exists but nonetheless resists linguistic description or cognitive explanation, the thing that dismantles the very tools of signification and representation that fiction depends on" (Wilk).

In the following sections, I will first show how New Weird literature employs spectrality in an innovative way, especially to represent issues related to the Anthropocene and to human-environment relationships. To this end, I will give examples taken from the selected works of Jeff Vandermeer, Stephen Graham Jones and Margaret Atwood. Secondly, the analysis of three short stories by one of the most acclaimed New Weird authors, China Miéville, will allow a closer look into weird

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spectrality and its ecological value. Finally, I will argue for the theoretical potential of weird spectrality. I will show how its most typical aspect, the feeling of uncanniness, wrongness and logical impossibility, also characterises the "ghosts of the Anthropocene" (see Tsing et al.) as a metaphor for ecocritical theory.

The Ecological Significance of Spectrality in New Weird fiction

The kind of aesthetics to which "weird" spectrality comes closest to is probably magical realism. Some of the most prominent authors of this genre, indeed, including Borges and Murakami, have been linked to the Weird not least for the peculiarity of ghostly apparitions in their works (both authors appear in the Vandermeers' compendium *The Weird*). Especially clear is also the resonance with the works of Franz Kafka, who is in fact considered by some as a precursor of magical realism (Rajabi et al. 3). Kafka's prose, whose translation into English in the 1940s has exercised a great influence on Weird literature (see Sperling), is populated by extremely "weird" entities. They can be animals, objects, or just undefined living beings with logically impossible features, such as the famous undefinable creature Odradek in "Die Sorge des Hausvaters". Through this particular type of spectrality, especially when applied to environmental issues, New Weird literature obtains an effect on readers which can again be explained by Fisher's enlightening words: "If the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate" (15).

This way the genre has, I argue, achieved what for Ghosh is literature's greatest challenge in our historical times: representing climate change by necessarily departing from conventional realism, but without presenting it as science-fictional or surreal, in order to push the reader toward the alarming awareness of its urgently real and present status. This level of representation is most successfully achieved by Chine Miéville, whose works are considered among the milestones of the genre, in the three stories which will be closely analysed in the next section. The same, however, can be said of many other New Weird authors.

Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*, one of the most acclaimed recent pieces of New Weird fiction, is admittedly concerned with environmental issues (see Hageman et al.). The novel, set on a US coast in a very near future, is centered on the idea of *Area X,* an expanding zone of natural "wilderness" where inexplicable natural phenomena have been occurring for thirty years, leaving authorities and scientists clueless. Many of these phenomena have more or less explicit spectral qualities: in the first novel, *Annihilation,* the protagonist (nicknamed "Ghost Bird") encounters a series of impossible creatures, from animal hybrids and human-shaped plants to actual zombies.

Stephen Graham Jones, another much appreciated writer of weird fiction, has centered his short story "Little Lambs" on a doubly spectral figure. The narrator is one of four scientists assigned to a peculiar and dangerous mission: monitoring a

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building which has suddenly appeared, one night, among the snowy lands of Wyoming. The building has been recognised as a former prison, which had collapsed in West Virginia more than eight years before, killing all of its prisoners and guards. As the narrator soon finds out, the structure is haunted by the ghost of a prisoner. But the real *weird* specter in the story is the prison itself, the returning of a no-longer-existing building, which even moves by its own will a few centimeters a day. If the spectral nature of these events is clear, their link to ecological concerns might be less evident: once again, it lies in humans' encounter with them. The way the scientists become absorbed in the frozen landscape of this incessant winter, learning to distinguish every shade of light and uncanny sound, clearly resonates with questions of human-environment relationship, as does the unstoppable, exhaustingly slow and apparently aimless progression of the spectral structure. The latter, moreover, shows a *weird* connection to both nature and technology: as the narrator reports, "if you bolt a lightning rod to it [...] when the lightning finally comes, months later, it'll strike our antenna instead" (1102).

One more short story which is not traditionally classified as weird or climate fiction but has been read as such by feminist author and journalist Elvia Wilk, is Margaret Atwood's "Death by Landscape." It is the story of a schoolgirl who gets lost in the woods during a summer camp in Canada. Her best friend, walking beside her, loses sight of her for a few minutes and never sees her again. Not even the body of the disappeared girl ever gets found. Although there might be a rational explanation, the protagonist seems convinced that her friend, wishing to escape from a life she felt too constraining, has arbitrarily decided to vanish. She has merged with the landscape, dissolved in it, maybe—as Wilk suggests—turned into one of the trees of that wood, her ghost becoming the symbol of a new, more intimate and entangled relationship of humans with nature and the landscape.

In conclusion, what makes this genre really stand out is that the "weird" spectral, rather than being embodied by a single human-like entity, is always transferred to narrative elements which can hardly be described as "ghosts" in the traditional sense. Consequently, the story's frame does not shift to a magical or supernatural one. The encounters with this kind of spectrality are "weird" precisely because they occur in such a realistic and consequently relatable context that the reader is forced to acknowledge their reality, despite their logical impossibility. In the following section, I will exemplify this statement in further detail through the analysis of spectral encounters and their ecological significance in three short stories from China Miéville's collection *Three Moments of an Explosion*: "Polynia," "Covehithe," and "Estate."

A Close Reading of New Weird Spectrality in Three Stories by China Miéville

The three stories will be examined together, first with a focus on the spectral quality of their weird apparitions, then for their ecological significance, and finally for

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how the latter is intensified by the description of people's reaction at the encounter with the weird specters.

In "Polynia," whose title is "a variant spelling of the Russian word polynya, meaning 'an area of open water in the middle of an expanse of sea ice' (OED)" (Carrol 83), an unnamed first-person narrator tells a story he has experienced as an eleven-year old child. He recalls the first time giant masses of ice appear in the sky above London, to be soon identified as icebergs. Some people start speculating about a relation with another inexplicable apparition, years prior to the event: the sudden growth of coral on the facades of buildings in Brussels. Later in the story, the narrator seems to suggest a link with one more recent weird event: the invasion of forest undergrowth in some factories in Japan. The story focuses on the description of the icebergs and people's reaction to them. While adult society tries to first analyze and explain, then destroy, and eventually just accept the presence of icebergs, children–like the protagonist and his friends–are excited by these surreal beings and by the whole "exploration" narrative constructed around them, as by a game.

In "Covehithe," the protagonist is a British veteran named Dughan, whose story is narrate by a third-person narrator, if unmistakably from his perspective. One night, Dughan brings his daughter to the cliffs in the actually existing village of Covehithe near Norwich. His goal is to witness the reemergence from the sea of the P36, an oil rig of the Petrobras company, which sank in the sea near Roncador, Brasil, in 2001. It soon becomes clear that this is not the first time a sunken oil platform has 'come alive' and emerged from the sea. The first one was the *Rowan Gorilla I*, which sank in the North Sea in 1988 and came back in Halifax, Canada, in the early 2000s, and it has already been followed by many others. Dughan learned when and where the P36 is going to emerge from former colleagues, since he was himself involved in a "mission" to explore the first ghost-rig, the *Gorilla I*. At the end of the story, Dughan and his daughter run away from the cliffs just one second before the oil rig has come so close to them as to almost touch the girl.

In "Estate," another unnamed protagonist (and this time, again, first-person narrator) wakes up two nights running to a burst of mysterious noise. This turns out to be caused by the loud barking of a group of foxes, accompanied by a mix of inexplicable smells and lights, as of something burning, though no fire is visible. On the morning of the third day, among a gathering of worried neighbours, the narrator meets Dan, an old acquaintance. He was banned from the estate with his family as a child–for reasons which remain untold–and is now back as a garbage collector. Yet that night he takes the role of a sort of ranger when, in the dark, the protagonist and some other curious people witness the appearance of a stag whose antlers are on fire, but who does not move or do anything to try and save itself. Dan starts running behind the stag and tries to shoot it but fails. After causing a lot of fear and a few accidents, the stag gets thrown off a bridge by the impact with a car and dies in the river. Again, the narrator learns of similar apparitions of spectral alive-dying animals being witnessed around the world, from Birmingham and Glasgow to Montreal, Paris, and New York.

The recurrent motif of weird apparitions with a symbolic capacity to problematize the relationship between humans and nature allows a common interpretation of the three stories within an ecocritical framework which, I suggest, gains remarkable strength from this innovative use of spectrality. What makes the icebergs in "Polynia" ghostly is, firstly and maybe ironically, their being white, ungraspable entities, which float "seemingly randomly, according to their own currents" (Miéville 3). They can even suddenly start to roll toward each other, as if moved by a will of their own, accelerating to the point of collision. They are explicitly referred to in spectral terms when, after their appearance in London, time starts to be counted in "days post-manifestation" (6). The psychological and meteorological atmosphere that the bergs create is "profoundly unsettling" (8), as is the look in the eyes of the first explorer who dies on a scientific mission to analyze them, in the last picture taken before her death. What is clear is that they are returnings from the past, impossible apparitions of once and elsewhere existing natural entities. Although they might not be *living* beings, their disappearance from the world, caused by human activities, equals a metaphorical *death* or extinction. However, an iceberg is no traditional ghost, neither a spirit nor a delusive projection of the mind: it is "exactly what it looks like: an iceberg. No more, no less" (7).

The same holds true for the explicitly named "revenant rigs" in "Covehithe" (Miéville 344). There is no doubt regarding their nature: they are oil drilling platforms, once sunken but now resurfacing from the sea, as if—again—moved by a will of their own. Once more, the specters are related to the water. These, however, are no natural entities which used to "live" at sea and are now displaced in an impossible elsewhere. They are human-made artifacts, which have been swallowed by the sea but eventually manage to come back toward the land. This may suggest either a specific will to haunt the humans who once built and abandoned them, or the sea itself spitting them out in an act of revenge, as will be later argued in discussing their ecological value. Just like the icebergs, then, the rigs are uncanny returnings from the past, here appearing in a typical ghost-story setting: a dark night, only illuminated by the moon. However, unlike the icebergs, they are described almost as monsters or animal-like beings. These huge creatures, with legs each as wide as a smokestack, come toward the cliffs with "clumsy steps" (341), moving "like a quadruped skiing" (342). At the end of the story we learn that they are somehow even reproducing, as so-called "baby rigs" (349) are witnessed emerging from waters around the world.

If the specters in "Covehithe" are animal-like but human-made artifacts, the spectral figures in "Estate" are instead real animals, but have been abused and thus modified by humans, which is what has turned them into specters. The antlers of the stag, in fact, are "saturated with something bituminous, long- and slow-burning" (291), a burning which the animal does not seem to perceive, because—as is later explained—it has been fed some ketamine derivative in order to numb its fighting instinct. Moreover, the second type of spectral animals, some alive-dying rabbits witnessed in New York, are also undeniably the result of a human—or at any rate

intentional—action. These rabbits have "something glinting and wrong in their ears" (292), which turns out to be knives, with signs still visible of how they have been sutured to their skin. The "dying things" (293), however, are for a while still quite alive, enough to jump around and cut the hands of those who try to catch them. The spectrality of these extremely weird apparitions lies, I suggest, in the fact that ghosts are by definition in a suspended state between life and death. They are once-alive creatures returned from the realm of the dead, no longer living, but not properly dead either. The animals in "Estate" are trapped in the same in-between state: they are dying, but keep being alive for an unnatural length of time and, long after they logically should have been dead, somehow they still are not. Moreover, the stag only dies when thrown off a bridge into the water. Since someone asks Dan: "Did it work?", and given the narrator's witnessing of strange lights and smells as of burning on the previous night, the reader is led to think that it was not the first burning stag witnessed. This might also mean that the fire, which seemed to be killing it, was not actually killing it—if it ever even was "alive."

What links the three types of specters is their being non-human creatures, in the case of the "Polynia" not even organic and in that of "Covehithe" also artificially made, which however show a capacity to act beyond what they are supposed to be capable of according to logic. Icebergs, coral and forest undergrowth—all natural elements which are disappearing from the planet due to human-caused climate change—(re)appear in the most unlikely places, and they grow back despite any effort to destroy them. Sunken oil rigs—who have been left to drown in the sea, causing pollution and death in its environment—emerge from the water and find their way back to where they came from, bringing destruction and death to human cities. Stags and rabbits—according to a common idealization of "nature," two of the most innocent and harmless creatures on earth—start spreading panic and destruction with fire and blades inexplicably bound to their bodies. And, once more, it is humans themselves who have caused it. These are all forms of that agency of the non-human world which Amitav Ghosh refers to as one of the aspects of life in the Anthropocene struggling to find place in realist literature. At the very beginning of *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh recalls experiences of harmless looking objects turning to harmful living beings, such as vines revealing themselves as snakes, as examples of the uncanny. He starts by asking the poignant question: "Who can forget those moments when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive?" (3). The uncanny way in which these seemingly inanimate or naturally harmless non-human specters come (back) to haunt humans bears a clear ecological significance which will be discussed in the next section.

The Ecological Significance of Weird Spectrality in the Three Stories

Some of these stories might be considered more "overtly environmental" (Carrol 83) than others: the first two have already been read as such. "The ecological uncanny of Miéville's tale", as Carrol writes with respect to "Polynia," "manifests itself

in the form of the ghostly revenants of vanished Nature, which have reappeared to haunt global metropolises" (83). The story seems to be set in a not-too-distant future, if a sentence like "It had been a while since London had had a proper cold, even in December and January" (Miéville 13) might well apply to our present too—not coincidentally, and all the more uncannily so. The apparitions can be easily interpreted as nature's revenge against human civilization: when "the city met their cold" (5), the icebergs start to melt and break down into pieces. However, just as the coral growing on Brussels' facades which authorities have pointlessly tried to eradicate, they grow back. The so-called London Masses are thus changing the city's weather: "from every one of the masses sank microclimates" (4) which make people shiver when passing under them. They even create a new trend for so-called "berg-coats" among Londoners, who had not been able to wear this piece of fashion for a while. Year after year, the cold released from the bergs slowly becomes so intense that the whole city's climate gets affected: "It might be warm summer, but you'll open the curtains onto iced windows" (23). This may be read as a singularly specular revenge against the way in which human activities, especially the ones concentrated in metropolises like London, have affected the earth's climate for centuries. Nonetheless, the only character in the story who seems to acknowledge this, or at least to have a sort of intuition, is a newsagent. He is the one to finally put into words what for the reader has long been clear, showing people in his shop images of the London Masses compared with those of Antarctica icebergs: "'Look, they melt!' he said. 'First they melt and now look they come back'" (13).

The ecocritical value of the "petrospectral presences" (Miéville 345) haunting the second story is even more self-evident. The atmosphere is much darker than in "Polynia." The specter is a sunken oil rig, coming "back" to life all twisted and on fire, as a "suddenly rising intricate blockness, black, angled and extrusioned" (341). Its iron, in a powerful image of ecological uncanny, is covered in barnacles from long laying on the seabed. This kind of specter, as its appearance suggests, seems more immediately dangerous and vindictive than the floating icebergs. The *Rowan Gorilla I* had even reached the city and "walked through buildings," dripping "seawater, chemicals of industrial ruins and long-hoarded oil" (343). As the narrator acknowledges, they "might come, drill, go back to the water, even come up again, anywhere" (344): it is clear, though not fully comprehended, that the world is experiencing a "hydrocarbon Ragnarok" (344), whose link with questions of environmental destruction could not be more explicit.

A similar link is certainly less explicit, but not therefore less effective, in "Estate." The spectral beings are not dead or extinct animals returning in a ghostly shape but, at least apparently, quite real and somehow still living. However, there are several clues to allow an interpretation of these as spectral figures within an ecological framework. One of the strongest images in the story is the contrast between the real animals and the "friendly plastic animals" which populate a playground near the narrator's house. He is first reminded of then at the sight of the foxes, on the first night. This contrast contributes to creating a quite sinister

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atmosphere since the very beginning of the story, enhanced by the feeling of something being "wrong" in the weather on the second night: "It was much colder than it should have been, like winter;" "There was no rain but the air felt wet" (285). Moreover, the figure of the plastic animals returns at the end of the story: after the accident of the burning stag, they are removed from the playground, and the narrator pictures them in his mind as they get buried under the earth, in a landfill. Despite not being directly related to the events involving the stag, the image clearly problematizes the relationship between humans and nature. Both the eerie appearance of the plastic objects themselves, inevitably destined to a landfill, and the blending of the distinction between "natural" creatures and human artifacts, suggested by their contrast with the "natural" but human-modified spectral animals, contribute to this effect. Another powerful moment, with a clear ecological resonance, is the first image of the stag's antlers being on fire "like the branches of a great tree" (288). On the one hand, it is possible to interpret this as a reference to forest fires, one of the most drastic consequences of climate change. On the other hand, what seems even more suggestive is the very idea of this animal, with its head literally on fire, being unable to move or react in any way, because it is so numbed that it is unaware of being slowly dying. It might be venturous, but seems congruent with the ecological framework I have been arguing for so far, to read this image as a metaphor of humanity itselfm acting unaware, because numbed by its own poisoning ideologies, of the fact that—as it has been effectively stated, if some years after the publication of this story—"our house is on fire" (Thunberg).

Rather than in a specific allegorical meaning, however, the clue to the ecological significance of these figures could lie in the effect produced by their "weirdness," rational impossibility and uncanny ungraspability. Precisely this effect is what urges readers to that critical response which Miéville, who considers his fiction as political as his Marxist non-fiction (see Gordon), wants to provoke us to. The specific feature of Miéville's writing which so powerfully creates this effect is precisely what classifies his fiction as weird:

> The settings of his texts often feel extremely close to our shared reality, yet there are always odd beings and objects and systems that distinguish Miéville's worlds as weird. Between the elements of his fiction that are familiar and those that are strange, the reader's mind toggles uncertainly. This experience attunes us to the notion that diverse worlds can coexist while also going unnoticed by each other. (Hageman 3)

The effect of proximity between our reality and the one depicted in the story is significantly enhanced first of all by the factual references to cities, governments and institutions of the real—that is, non-fictional—world. Secondly, and most impressively, by the description of people's very relatable reactions to the impossible events happening in that uncannily relatable world. In "Estate," at the encounter with the spectral entities people mainly express fear through shouting, attempts at running away from the animals or killing them (Dan, for instance, tries to shoot the stag with a rifle).

In "Covehithe," while Dughan's attitude at the apparition of the P36 is ambiguous ("his excitement was not wholly enthusiasm," 340), the approach adopted

by authorities to handle the situation is quite univocal: they want to stop the revenant rigs at any cost. Investigations begin immediately, and the UN even engages a "Platform Event Repulsion Unit" of "scientists, engineers, theologians and exorcists, soldiers, veterans like Dughan" (344). The best strategy they can come up with, however, like Dan in "Estate", is to attack the specters with weapons. This reaction probably ironizes on the inconclusiveness of politics, offering military responses to limit the consequences of events whose causes are deeply rooted in society. That which the revenant rigs embody, indeed, and is hopelessly being fought with bullets is not just a physical object, but the repressed conscience of humanity's guilt in the environmental crisis. If the threatening consequences of these events are clear, the possible causes remain indeed obscure: "They tried to figure out what economies of sacrifice were being invoked, for what this was punishment. Ruined, lost, burnt, scuttled rigs were healing on the ocean floor and coming back" (344). The hint to a dynamics of sacrifice and punishment, and to the rigs as something hurt which need "healing," might suggest a vague—if unconscious—intuition of the spectral presences being linked to a human responsibility. Nonetheless, their deepest meaning does not get acknowledged by any characters in the story. What is more, the specters are soon normalized by society: in a children club, mentioned at the end of the story, games and activities with a clear didactic intent are being organized to learn the history of the revenant oil rigs and the mechanisms of their reproduction.

People's unawareness, the authorities' helplessness and the market's readiness to transform everything into a chance for profit is even more blatant in "Polynia," arguably the most uncanny of the three stories in this respect. The way Londoners react to the spectral encounters is described by the narrator in the very first line: "When cold masses started to congeal above London, they did not show up on radar. By the time they started to, perhaps two hours later, hundreds of thousands of people were already out in the streets and gaping skywards" (3). The public immediately start discussing the incredible event on social media, and every possible theory on the icebergs' nature (denounced as hoax, angels, aliens, or a terrible conspiracy) is assessed. The government's reaction, on the other hand, is limited to sending "army and specialist police unit" (3) to monitor the masses and various crews of scientists to study them. It might be interesting to note that here, unlike in "Covehithe", there is no desperate involvement of theologians and exorcists, probably because the threat seems less imminent and generally less dangerous. An aspect which again ironizes, if in a different respect, on the way politics and societies more generally tend to deal with the environmental crisis. This appears in fact to be the focus of such a detailed account of people's attitude toward that which, to the reader, looks like a clear wake-up call to environmental awareness. Portraying the way a far too relatable society does (not) react to this call, by turning the icebergs into TV series or commodities and building a narrative of "urban exploration" around them which fuels the children's innocent enthusiasm and excitement, might be the key used to build the growing feeling of uncanniness and precisely of *weirdness* which pervades the story.

In the following and final section, I will explain how specters have come to be used not only as literary figures, but also as conceptual metaphors in a range of disciplines, from Derrida's *hauntology* to ecocriticism. Finally, by suggesting a link between the type of spectrality employed by New Weird fiction and by ecocritical theory, I argue that precisely the weird quality of this kind of spectrality makes it an especially effective tool to represent and discuss the climate crisis.

Spectrality as a Framework for Ecocritical Theory

As has been discussed in the first section of this article, ghosts have always been present in Western literatures and cultures. However, some historical periods have been more prone to receiving them than others, one of them notably being the late nineteenth century (Blanco and Pereen 2). The increasing number of spirits and specters in Romantic, Gothic and fantastic literature, the dominating literary trends of the time, sparked a growing interest in the idea of spectrality even outside the realm of fiction, as a means to explore and communicate with dimensions different from everyday, material reality. Thus, spectrality came to be used as a metaphor in various fields, from popular science and technology (such as the telegraph, photography, the cinema) to spiritualism. Nonetheless, the figurative use of the ghost "remained grounded, to an extent, in the ghost's possible reality as an empirically verifiable supernatural phenomenon, making it less a tool for obtaining insight into something else than itself an object of knowledge and scientific experimentation" (3). This led to a mistrust of the use of spectrality by scholars as "not serious," being mainly associated with literal spiritistic beliefs.

It is only in the second half of the twentieth century that spectrality turns into a highly productive metaphor for the questioning of all philosophical constructs and ideologies. Already in 1949, Gilbert Ryle's classic of twentieth-century philosophy *The Concept of Mind* employs the famous expression "the ghost in the machine" to criticize the binary division between the human body and mind as opposite poles within the same category. Yet it is ultimately the deconstructionist movement and especially its founder Jacques Derrida to fully rehabilitate spectrality as a scholarly notion. In his renowned work *Spectres de Marx,* Derrida coins the term *hauntology,* as an alternative ontology which "draws attention to the ephemeral nature of the present and offers the specter as neither being or non-being, alive or dead—the ultimate conceptual, and cultural, paradox" (Shaw 2). From his deconstructionist perspective, in fact, spectrality is a concept which "operates in the between-spaces that separate recognized boundaries", thus highlighting "the limitations of such ontological categories and the limits of standard perceptions" (Shaw 6). Derrida's hauntology soon becomes so popular that the year of the publication of *Spectres de Marx,* 1993, is known as the "spectral turn" of contemporary cultural theory (Blanco and Peeren). Since then, the use of ghosts not as "possible actual entities" but as a proper "conceptual metaphor," standing not just for a single idea but for a whole discourse, has been spreading across a variety of critical fields (Blanco and Peeren 1).

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One of the fields in which it has been especially fruitful is ecocritical and Anthropocene theory, where spectrality is used to discuss issues linked to the environmental crisis and its consequences: the sudden and catastrophic events as well as the less extreme but inexorably, if slowly, paradigm-changing ones. That such events can be best understood through a spectral framework has been effectively argued for by Laura A. White's in her book *Ecospectrality.* White claims that specters are a powerful response to the question of scale in the representation of the climate crisis, i.e. the problem of condensing the macroscopic as well as the microscopic aspects of the crisis and its causes into a scale which is understandable from a human perspective. Since specters are "a force that operates between the visible and the invisible, the corporeal and the incorporeal" (White 2), they are able to cross the boundaries of temporal as well as spacial scales. They can "resurface across centuries and continents, not only putting vast scales into intimate contact, but also making minute scales perceptible, for instance manifesting traces of toxins that would evade visual detection" (White 2). This scale paradox makes the Anthropocene the era of what Timothy Morton has called "hyperobjects", described by Jeff VanderMeer as:

> Something viscous (they stick – to your mind, to the environment) and nonlocal (local versions are manifestations from afar). Their unique temporality renders them invisible to human beings for stretches of time and they exhibit effects in the interrelationship of objects [. …] a hyperobject is everywhere and nowhere, cannot really be held in one place by the human brain, reaction to it by the human world is often irrational or inefficient or wrong. If global warming in the Anthropocene can be identified in general as a hyperobject, there is perhaps further value in describing it specifically as a kind of haunting.

In his article, VanderMeer proposes a "spectral" reading of climate change as a complex web of processes and phenomena, which we are not fully able to understand, and whose reverberations on everyday life are uncanny, because inexplicable and unexpected. This feeling of the uncanny, of something being wrong or logically impossible, is precisely what comes with the experience of the weird. This is why the ghosts of the Anthropocene, in one of the most important recent collections of ecocritical theory, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* by Tsing, Swanson, Gan and Bubandt, are characterized by a "strangeness" (8) which profoundly resonates with the spectral figures of New Weird fiction. As the editors explain in the introduction, the (in)visible ghosts in our landscapes are traces of "past ways of life" (3), no-longer-present creatures or whole entanglements of natural phenomena, which the new geological forces of the Anthropocene—human activities—have brought to extinction. This type of ghosts, as they explain quoting Hélène Cixous, "are uncanny because they disturb the proper separation between life and death; they mark a "between that is tainted with strangeness. Such strangeness, the uncanny nature of nature, abounds in the Anthropocene, where life persists in the shadow of mass death" (Tsing et al. 8).

For anthropologist and forester Andrew S. Mathews, for instance, it is in the landscape of forests that we can most clearly recognize "ghostly forms" as traces of past relationships between "people, trees, and other non-humans," which have been

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coexisting in forests for a very long time. "Although these forests are often empty of people, they are empty in a particular way; evidence of former human use is omnipresent" (Mathews 145). Even living beings, like animals, can be ghosts of the Anthropocene. In a recent article, social and cultural geographer Aurora Fredricksen narrates the return of wild flamingos in Florida as an uncanny apparition, the coming-back-to-life of animals which had been considered extinct from the region for years. The renewed presence of the long-absent forces on us the remembrance of the past ruination which has led to that and to many other disappearances, which will however not all come back to life. In defining this remembrance, Fredricksen employs an explicitly weird and eerie framework: "there is an uncanniness—an unsettled feeling of strangeness within the familiar—that resounds in the absences this return makes visible" (532).

To describe the experience of events related to the environmental crisis as ghostly, weird and uncanny, is a powerful way to make sense not merely of climate change itself, but most importantly of our attitude towards the encounter with it. The New Weird uses spectrality to make readers aware that what in a novel might seem too surreal to be true cannot be dismissed as "fiction:" the eerie feeling it provokes is the same type of reaction we have when confronted with issues of climate change in the "real" world. Ecocritical theory, on a different level, employs spectrality as a conceptual metaphor for these issues, explaining how actually weird our "real" world already is, because it departs from a concept of realism which in the Anthropocene has become obsolete. What this framework highlights, then, is the urgent need for an epistemological shift to follow this "spectral" shift in literature and cultural theory, in order to find new strategies and categories to deal with the climate crisis.

Conclusion

Jeff VanderMeer has described himself as "someone who wants to find new ways of telling stories that better fit the extremes of our era" ("Hauntings In The Anthropocene"). Demonstrating that establishing and especially reaching such an objective is a prerogative of New Weird fiction, or at least a challenge for which this genre seems to be most successful, was the aim of this paper. By presenting some examples of New Weird texts in which ghosts and specters serve a narrative function, I have argued for this particular kind of spectrality as the most productive framework to represent "the extremes of our era." Additionally, the analysis of three short stories by one of the most praised contemporary authors of New Weird fiction, China Miéville, has served as a concrete example of this genre's innovative use of spectrality. This, as I have shown, is mainly achieved by transferring the features of the traditional ghosts onto weird entities, whose more or less literal meaning can be reconducted to issues of the climate crisis. Finally, following a short summary of the process by which specters have turned from supernatural presences to conceptual metaphors of a new (hau)ontology, I have demonstrated the potential of weird spectrality as a theoretical framework for ecocriticism.

From multiple points of view, ghosts are in fact the perfect symbol to represent the weirdness of a crisis which is as ungraspable as it is present and real. Ghosts are not magical creatures or aliens from a different universe; they are traces of the past—our past—in the present, and the ghosts of the Anthropocene are the result of our own actions, the tangible absence of that which we have destroyed. Ghosts can also be projections of the subconscious mind. As such, they are a weighty metaphor of the repressed awareness of, on the one hand, our individual and collective responsibility towards climate change and, on the other hand, of the urgency and inexorability of its catastrophic consequences. Ghosts are, in brief, the exact embodiment of the paradox intrinsic to the weird event: rationally, we know it should not be real, but instead it is, and somehow we have to find a way to deal with its reality.

Dealing with the reality of the climate crisis requires new ways to speak of that which we cannot even think of, new categories to represent that which we can barely conceive of. We need a framework to embrace the ambiguity and accept the ungraspability, without denying the tangibility and urgency of the countless signals which nature is giving us that climate change is a one-way path, and we might be already past the point of no-return. The reason we need to search for these new ways in literature as well as in theory, to say it with the words of VanderMeer, is that "supposedly we already know these things, but sometimes fiction can make us feel them in our bones" (ibd). Ecocritical theory can explain the spectral nature of the Anthropocene, describe the uncanniness of finding ghostly traces of past ways of life in a forest, or of witnessing the returning of supposedly extinct animals. But the impossible spectral encounters in Miéville's otherwise fully realistic fictional worlds have the power to make us ask ourselves the question: what if such seemingly impossible things were real? Since the 'real' world is actually full of unexpected and inexplicable events, what if it is us, who are no longer able to make sense of our own world? To tell what is possible from what is impossible, what is real from what is not? Perhaps, as Elvia Wilk has written, only "by learning to read weird fictions on a literal level it may be possible to see how weird (the fiction of) reality already is."

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