Weirding the Outside: *The OA and the New Weird*

*The OA* is a show about a young woman known as OA, or Prairie as her foster parents call her, who comes back to her town having been gone for more than seven years. There are two main storylines, one set after OA returns and one told as a narrated flashback by OA to a group of friends. In the present storyline, OA’s foster parents, the police, and the community have no idea what she went through. OA refuses to say where she has been but miraculously she can now see. OA finds a group of five friends whom she tells her story to.

This begins the narrated flashback sequences which dominate most of show’s middle episodes. She was held captive by a doctor, Hap, who investigates near death experiences. The doctor believes that he can find the truth to the afterlife. He does so by constantly killing and bringing back OA and the four other people. Indeed, OA and the others go to some unknown dimension, bringing back knowledge of healing and interdimensional travel. Having brought back enough knowledge, OA is left on the side of the road to make her own way home. Having told the story to her friends the show ends dramatically with a school shooting. The friends use the inter-dimensional traveling dance to distract the shooter for long enough that the cook can overpower him. OA is shot by accident and is driven away in an ambulance as strange sounds are heard, possibly from the rings of Saturn.

The show is obsessed with portals, gaps, and holes. We constantly see shots of locks closing, odd point of view shots from no discernible character position, discussions of the insides of people, and near death experiences. People come back from death, bringing back memories from another dimension. Near death experiences suggest not only an afterlife but also celestial travel. The show is enthralled by the outside, the desire for what is on the other side of life, while keeping the characters literally trapped inside small glass cages.
Swallowing is a peculiar motif across several different scenes and episodes. OA’s parents removes her door after too many incidents of odd behavior, nor will they let her access the wifi in the house. Everything in the show revolves around confinement versus escape, outside versus inside, and similar imagery. This vacillation produces a mood that is best encapsulated by the term “weird.”

Weird fiction, as Mark Fisher notes, is obsessed with the in-between and in classic weird fiction that obsession manifests in a proliferation of portals, doors, and thresholds. In doing so, weird fiction denaturalizes worlds by exposing their openness to the outside.¹ As we can see The OA is equally obsessed with the outside portals and thresholds. The question becomes, how does the show produce its weird mood? How does the outside, the beyond, participate in the mood of the show?

Weird Mood

In an article on the transcendent in cinema, Vivian Sobchack develops a notion of ecstasy.² For Sobchack, ecstasy relates to ex-stasis, a tension between movement and standing still. But for The OA ecstasy also suggests displacement and standing outside.³ For Sobchack, the issue is the various ways in which cinema evokes transcendence in the viewer, since transcendence is usually understood as something non-corporeal, immaterial, beyond

¹ Fisher, the Weird and the Eerie, loc 304
³ OED: From Old French estaise (“ecstasy, rapture”), from Latin ecstasis, from Ancient Greek ἔκστασις (ékstasis), from ἐξίστημι (existēmi, “I displace”), from ἐκ (ek, “out”) and ἱστημι (histēmi, “I stand”).
the body. In other words, how does cinema make us feel something beyond our own bodies?

I am interested in how Sobchack parses ecstasy and ex-stasis because that helps us think about the relationship between inside and outside, the predominance of portals, holes, gaps, and other dimensions in The OA. Sobchack terms the viewer the “cinesthetic subject” to emphasize the sensual relation between viewer and screen. The cinematic experience is felt with our entire bodies, not just observed through our eyes and ears. Because of this embodied relation with the screen, an audiovisual experience may reconfigure our sense-making—which for Sobchack signifies both meaning and sensation.

For the production of a weird mood, we may keep this notion that an audiovisual experience is paradoxical relation that both intensifies and diffuses our experience at the same time. The atmosphere of the weird generates an ex-static bodily enhancement that produces a porous experience beyond here-there, inside-outside dichotomies. Feeling is loosened from an exact location and produced in the in-between of the cinesthetic subject.

For Sobchack, this in-betweenness of feeling, which is also congruent with Alfred Whitehead’s understanding of feeling as non-sensuous perception, is what produces the cinesthetic subject and it is also the paradoxical movement between intensification and diffusion of feeling, a movement that is always resolved for Sobchack—either our experience is intensified or it is diffused. But what about experience that does neither, but remains in the liminal spacetime of non-sensuous feeling? A feeling that we cannot name,

---

4 Sobchack, “Embodying Transcendence” 198.

5 Whitehead, Process and Reality.
cannot capture, cannot identity without it slipping through our fingers and becoming something else? This is the weirding of weird fiction; a liminal experience that remains in the background as mood.

How then are moments of ecstasy and ex-stasis employed in weird fictions such as *The OA*? Sobchack distinguishes between two modes: cinema either mobilizes or figures our embodied relation to the moving images. Action movies and other body genre type movies such as horror mobilize our bodies corporeally in moments of intense experience. There is a degree of bodily movement, an innervation, in these movies. Spiritual and religious movies, on the other hand, that are the main focus of Sobchack’s article, figures our embodiment literally, and so diffuse feeling into concrete static imagery.

Weird fiction stands at an intersection – not exactly horror, nor exactly spiritual. Coupled with the notion of the weird as not exactly a distinct feeling but more a background atmosphere, I suggest that we use “creeping” to describe the embodied relation to weird cinema. Creeping suggests slowness of movement often unnoticeable, but it also suggests something unsettling even if we cannot tell why or how. Creeping stands halfway between the innervated mobilization of body genres and the static, symbolic imagery of spiritual movies. Movement, but unnoticeable movement.

**Creeping Narrative**

Openness is pat of *The OA*’s plot, its slowness of narration suggests a degree of creepiness because events unfold much too slowly to produce full-on tension. Instead, there are constant expansions, preambles, and other forms of narrative stretching that suggest a sense of creeping time. The group in the present timeline is kept in the dark by the OA’s constant digressions and postponement of events. As viewers we are kept in the dark by the
narrative duration of the show — the way the show stretches plot time. The first episodes are more than an hour long but as the season progresses the episodes get shorter, rushing, condensing, contracting towards some unclear endpoint. The show ends with no resolution only a distinct openness towards the future, the next season.

The impatient viewer might feel like they are watching a Derridaen argument unfold cinematically. If only OA would actually get to the point of what she experienced, maybe we could actually understand it. But such an argument would of course be missing the point entirely. The show is fascinating because of its slow, meandering unfolding. The gradual unravelling of a core mystery that we never learn what is suggests a degree of openness that is on the hand part of the serial turn in contemporary storytelling but also part of *The OA’s* more general fascination with openness.

But there is a far more subtle aspect of the show’s narration, which is that of narrative agency and point of view. The past timeline of OA and the others trapped by Hap is clearly framed as told by OA from her point of view. Yet as the episodes progress, we get scenes from Hap’s perspective, Homer’s perspective, as well as what appears to be possibly non-human perspectives. A creeping doubt sets in, raising the issue of OA’s reliability. This reliability is pushed to the foreground at the end of the season, when French (Alfonso) finds several books on OA’s room that suggest she made everything up: *The Iliad*, books on near-death experiences, and so on.

The narrative perspective is complicated in this instance, since it seems to be a moment of *peripeteia*, of a revelation that we have been lied to. Yet as the season ends, one of OA’s dreams come true: the school shooting proleptically shown in episode seven, which suggests that OA is telling the truth. Indeed, the five movements that the OA has taught the
group in the present timeline is part of what enables them to stop the school shooter. And as OA is hit by random shots from the shooter and driven away in an ambulance, we hear strange sounds coming from nowhere that still sound strikingly similar to the sound we heard in one of OA’s near-death experiences. The same sounds that Hap discovered to be similar to the sounds of Saturn’s rings.

What we find, then, is a creep between narrative perspectives, a form of in-between narration that both belongs to and does not belong to OA. Again, as Fisher insists, it is “the irruption into this world of something from outside which is the marker of the weird.” OA stands as that irruption, she brings something back from the outside, a view from elsewhere. The OA thus instantiates a new kind of narrative mode, what we might call weird narration, a narration that does not respect conventional boundaries or perspectives. But perhaps The OA does not invent this weird narration but simply push it to one of its limits. We know that the writers Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij had trouble writing the script and instead developed it aurally and even pitched the show by acting out the story, rather than handing in a conventional treatment.

Creeping Points of View

Steven Shaviro showed a few years ago at this very conference how important narration is for weird fiction. Similarly, Kate Marshall has shown how intimately weird

---


fiction and paradoxes of perspectives are wound. We can synthesize Fisher’s notion of the weird as the irruption of an outside, Shaviro’s interest in affective narration, and Marshall’s insistence that narration can come from something other than a person into an argument for weird narration as that which produces a creeping point of view.

I mean creeping here in two senses of the word. The first pertains to the slowness of movement that weird’s in-betweenness produces. The perspectival shifts are so slow and so subtle, that it is unlikely that we notice them the first time we watch the show. The revelation that OA may have been lying is bound to shock us, yet at the same time it should not come as a surprise. She is constantly referred to as unreliable by doctors and even her foster parents. Furthermore, many of the things she tells us are fantastical and surely produce at least some moments of Todorovian hesitation.

The second is the adjectival form of creeping: creepy and creepiness, which is that of an undefined feeling. *The OA* is not a horror story, there are no truly horrific moments or scenes in it, but the show’s deeply strange narration is creepy in the sense of something unnameable, something that cannot be placed. We find such creepiness in the strange points of view that are slowly introduced throughout the show. Odd, non-human points of view are subtly announced with the use of shots of locks shown from inside the mechanism. Unusual, but conventional enough that they do not disturb conventional points of view.

However, slowly these creepy points of view begin to proliferate, such as when Homer goes to Cuba with Hap to bring back Renata, another NDE. At first, conventional shot-reverse shot continuity establishes Homer’s reaction to her sublime playing but at the

---

end a new point of view is introduced, with a gauzy filter, lens flare, and an ominous sound creeping into the soundtrack, blocking out the guitar sound.

Even more creepy are the transitions from Hap’s controlled NDE experiments. When Scott dies, there is a cut to a black background with an odd yellow lighting pattern that morphs and grows. This might be a subjective point of view shot from Scott’s perspective that signals what death is like for him, yet this is an odd representation of death and the afterlife. No less weird are Homer and OA’s transition shots. Homer’s NDE is a blurry, vague almost fog-like shot, while OA’s is the starry blackness that we have seen her visit before.

Where are these places, who sees them, and where do they fit in in terms of narration? These questions are certainly never answered but these shots are creepy and unsettling; they cannot be placed on a straightforward diegetic level, nor can they be ascribed to a clear narrating instance. They appear to be beyond space and time, to some extent. I consider them similar to the non-anthropocentric narrative perspectives that Marshall has identified in her article on the weird. Attempts at giving narrative agency to something non-human, an opening to something more that is usually foreclosed by the anthropocentric.

This is where the definition of creepy takes on extra significance, because creepiness is associated with “some thing” across one’s body. These point of view shots, then, are creepy because they are “some thing,” that cannot be named, cannot be rationalized, but still connect with our cinesthetic experience. Suddenly, rather than the transcendent experience Sobchack discusses, we have a different experience, better named as creepy and weird. As
Mark Fisher argues in his book on the weird, “the weird is a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete”.\textsuperscript{9} 

What *The OA* attempts to do, through its slow unfolding, its refusal to explain, its constant obfuscation, and its incessant deferral of meaning is to produce “a new sensibility of welcoming the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming” that Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy identify as a main preoccupation of weird fiction.\textsuperscript{10} *The OA* relishes in the production of a strange, haunting atmosphere that desires an outside of the human lifeworld, something that is inevitably beyond us. Fisher’s argument is a variation of China Miéville’s argument that the weird “impregnates the present with a bleak, unthinkable novum.”\textsuperscript{11} This is the bleak, unthinkable novum of *The OA* — humanity is not at the center of the world, there is an outside that is stronger. Yet the show’s force comes from the embrace of this outside the human, the desire and fascination with moments of non-anthropocentrism. Maybe the show even goes some ways towards making us feel what it would be like to be other than human.

---

\textsuperscript{9} Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, loc 95
