High Weirdness, by Erik Davis

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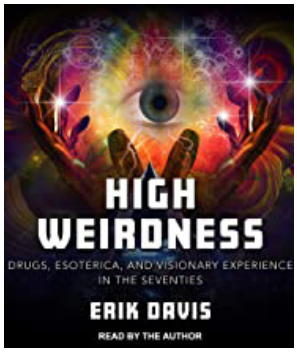
Erik Davis. *High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies*. The MIT Press, 2019. Hardback. 550 pg. $34.95. ISBN 9781907222764.



Erik Davis's most recent foray into the weird currents of the post-war counterculture complements his previous examination of similar territory. Where *TechGnosis* (1998) unfurled the occult foundations of our modern information technologies and *Nomad Codes* (2010) offered a glossary of key ideas in contemporary occulture, *High Weirdness* is a collection of three case studies of key "counter cultural seekers" that places them firmly within the context of California in the early to mid 1970s (31). Taking a critical approach described as incomplete constructivism, Davis strives to map the dynamic forces that structured the first half of the 1970s and had such a profound effect on his three seekers: Robert Anton Wilson, Terence McKenna, and Philip K. Dick. His case studies for each of these authors focus, in turn, on extraordinary experiences that they each reported, and the various methods they each deployed to help them find meaning in those experiences. This is an intimidating book for many reasons, not least of all the 550-page doorstop physicality of the current hard-back edition, so Davis's arguments and approach will prove challenging to many humanities scholars, especially those wedded to prevailing discourses within literary studies.

When approaching the epiphanic experiences of his three psychonauts (a term he uses throughout to collectively describe his three subjects), Davis takes "the risky move of trying to take them seriously without taking them literally" (6). Religious experience is not examined here at arm's length or with any attempt to explain away the experiences, for example, as delusion, as hallucination, etc. Instead, it is taken for granted that in each case something was experienced, and there is no handwringing on Davis' part about how to either taxonomize these experiences or provide ontological justifications for them. Instead, the focus is on producing maps of "influences, resonances and structural dynamics" that reveal the interrelated and looping lines of force that shape, and are in turn shaped by, these religious experiences (7). It is this post-critical approach that may prove incompatible with traditions of Enlightened materialism that have been so central to the discipline of science fiction studies.

This, more religious than literary studies, approach is influenced by William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). James's text exemplifies the technique of incomplete constructivism by only partially committing itself to the tenets of social constructivism, hence

its incompleteness. For James, and in turn Davis, strict adherence to social constructivism is too reductive, reducing all experience to the social forces that shape them while leaving no space for encounters from within or without; from within the biological bodies we inhabit or from a without that is situated outside of or beyond the frame of structured reality. Davis argues that these two spheres, the body and the cosmic, are not blank slates, with the consequence that although encounters will be structured–"organized and exploited" (23)–by social forces, they cannot always be reduced to them.

Davis's transgressive engagement with the prevailing norms of humanities scholarship is furthered by his sympathy for the ideas of polarizing public intellectual Bruno Latour. Latour's storied career has seen his arguments gain both vociferous attack and celebrated acceptance across the disparate schools that make up the broader humanities. For Davis, Latour is useful twice over. First, Latour's mapping of the discourses of power that structure knowledge production and legitimization emboldens Davis in his position-taking as a primarily religious studies scholar, a sub-discipline that has (until recently) been in the proverbial doghouse. Second, Latour's problematizing of cause and effects arguments through his concept of networks and forces of interrelation is a key tool that Davis deploys in order to unlock the interrelationships that produce, and are produced by, the various encounters explored as part of *High Weirdness*.

Though I have described Davis's tome as intimidating, this can be somewhat pushed against. Though a dense text, filled with challenging ideas, the structure is designed to be modular, which is often aimed for in longform academic writing but rarely achieves this degree of success. Chapters are separated into sub-sections, and then into further entries that average out at about 4-5 pages each. Davis invites readers to jump about and read the entries that appeal to them, in the order they choose. Each entry is both discrete from its neighbors while also being one part of a larger jigsaw. This allows flexibility for the reader, who may be pursuing a specific narrow interest, may want to pore over the same entry repeatedly or may want to read the book cover to cover. There are three comparisons that I think are apt here when considering this modular reading as an actualization of potential: first is *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) by JG Ballard; second are the exegetical writings of Philip K. Dick, which are synchronistically covered as part of *High Weirdness*' case study on Dick; third the Bible, and other religious books that invite one to move between procedural and selective reading.

The success of this modularity makes Davis's work far more accessible than might be suspected. One does not need a strong foundation in occult literature or religious studies before tackling this text, nor is it necessary to be a keen reader of any of the three writers focused on: Wilson, McKenna and Dick. However, those already conversant in the existing scholarship are afforded the opportunity to see a leading scholar of religious studies act as part of the vanguard of an increasingly self-confident sub-discipline no longer satisfied with existing on the periphery of the broad humanities.

For science fiction scholars, critical frameworks being developed as part of the respective studies of the weird, the occult, and New Religious Movements can prove challenging to those wedded to secular Marxism and ideology critique (which both make up part of the foundational DNA of SF studies). For scholars who welcome this challenge, the post-critical approach used by Davis could open new approaches to SF texts as well as productively problematizing the boundaries of genre and of form that characterize speculative expression. In this respect, *High Weirdness* puts its money where its mouth is by including Philip K. Dick as its third, and most extensive, case study. Dick, who proved so important to the legitimatization of the nascent discipline of Science Fiction studies, may also prove, via the work of scholars like Davis, to be a key gatekeeper that moves SF studies into the weirder territory that lies *beyond*.

Terence Sawyers is a film and media scholar who insists he is not a SF scholar; despite this the vast majority of his research continues to overlap with SF scholarship, go figure. His primary research area is the adaptation of SF writer Philip K. Dick into film and television. He also side-lines as a conspiracy theory theorist and is a dabbler in the history of occultism. When not sifting through layers of simulated hyperreality he can be found hosting About Film (aboutfilmedinburgh.wordpress.com), a regular public engagement event held in the meat-space that is Edinburgh, Scotland.