**Review of Lisa Blackman, *Haunted Data: Affect, Transmedia and Weird Science* (Bloomsbury, 2019), 224 pages, £21.99**

**Reviewed by Carolyn Pedwell**

**Abstract**

Re-animating salient controversies from ‘weird science’ and ‘alien phenomenology’, Blackman explores how networked and computational media are changing the evolution of science and interrogating established ‘truths’ concerning embodied communication and less-than-conscious cognition. Bringing together media studies, critical psychology, feminist science studies, queer theory, cultural studies and affect theory, the book develops a manifesto for how we might engage critically and imaginatively with digital communication to develop a Future Psychology and a genuinely Open Science.

https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/haunted-data-9781350047044/

**Keywords**

Affect; anomalous psychology; computational media; data; speculative theory; weird science

As a first year undergraduate taking Psychology 101, I distinctly remember learning about the strange case of Clever Hans, the amazing horse who could count. While Hans’s ability to answer mathematical problems by tapping his hoof the correct number of times initially astounded the public and scientific community alike, it was ultimately concluded that he was responding to unconscious cues from his German owner, Mr. von Osten, who was entirely unaware he was providing them. To introductory psychology students, the story was presented as a cautionary tale concerning the risk of observer-expectancy effects in experimental design.

But was this subtle process of communication between horse and human not impressive in and of itself? Although Hans could not count he demonstrated a powerful capacity to ‘read bodies’ and ‘make bodies be moved and affected’ without their knowledge (Despret, 2004: 113 cited in Blackman, 2019: 70). Indeed, as Lisa Blackman suggests in this fascinating book, perhaps Clever Hans was trying to tell us something different all along, if only we had been willing and able listen. While Hans’s story has been reduced to a simple lesson on experimental bias, it may have much more to teach us about the nature of embodied sensitivities, relational connection and less-than-conscious cognition.

This is just one of the episodes of ‘weird science’ re-animated in *Haunted Data* – a process that Blackman suggests has become easier, and potentially more generative, with the advent of digital media platforms that enable new opportunities for post-publication peer review (PPPR). At a time when many critical scholars have highlighted significant anxieties and dangers associated with emergent digital technologies, Blackman offers an account of how networked media are changing the nature of scientific innovation, consensus and debate that is at once critical and affirmative. The book’s central claim is that imaginative software-driven interactions have the potential to support a genuinely Open Science, while transforming dominant accounts of both embodied consciousness and digital communication.

As *Haunted Data* explores, the ghost of Clever Hans was most recently resurrected via a scientific controversy that erupted online when the Yale cognitive psychologist John Bargh responded angrily on his blog, *The Natural Unconscious*, to an experiment that failed to replicate the findings of his famous 1996 study claiming that subjects walked slower after being asked to read words pertaining to the experience of being elderly. While Bargh’s experiment had long been upheld as evidence of the powerful role of priming – or unconscious suggestion – in influencing human behavior, various online engagements in the aftermath of the non-replication study began to question its veracity, paying particular attention to the role of researcher expectation in shaping results. It is in this context that some commentators linked Bargh to the ill-fated legacy of Mr. von Osten and his horse.

For Blackman, however, while priming is ultimately ‘a limited concept due to the assumptions surrounding mind, cognition, will and affect, which have shaped modern psychology’ (2019: 8-9), what is most interesting about the controversy is how its digital re-mediation enabled the resurfacing of possibilities for understanding subliminal thought and non-conscious communication that had previously been disavowed. In this vein, *Haunted Data* argues that what networked media have made possible in relation to such landmark psychological experiments are forms of ‘transmedial story telling’ that grapple with the after-lives of scientific data to mine the potentialities of that which has been deemed impossible or improbable by ‘straight science’. Through re-moving scientific controversies widely understood to be settled or resolved, such engagements with ‘haunted data’ pose important questions concerning the past, present and future of psychology – including what truths about the nature of subjectivity might have emerged if modern psychology had taken a more ecological turn.

As Blackman has explored in her previous writing - most notably in *Mass Hysteria* (with Valerie Walkerdine) (2001) and *Immaterial Bodies* (2012) - earlier sociologists, philosophers and social psychologists such as Gabriel Tarde, William James, Henri Bergson and William McDougal paid careful attention to ‘threshold phenomena’, such as voice hearing, suggestion, hypnosis and telepathy, in order to illuminate ‘questions about body-world-consciousness relations’ (2019: 15). When psychology consolidated as a discipline at the turn of the nineteenth century, however, it developed a much more bounded and individualist model of ‘the mind’ that excised these earlier speculative and relational accounts of more-than-human subjectivity.

In the midst of growing interest in speculative inquiry across a range of critical theories, Blackman develops a rich and evocative approach premised not (or not only) on ‘creative misreadings of science or speculative *what if* scenarios’, but rather (or also), on engaging with ‘what is excluded from legitimate science’ (2019: 179). The result is a compelling exploration of ‘psychological processes as fundamentally entangled, indeterminate, processual phenomena’ (xx) – an approach relevant not only to the ‘Future Psychology’ Blackman envisions, but also to changing accounts of ‘the human’ within post-humanism, new materialism and affect theory. While critical theories associated with these ‘turns’ have developed generative understandings of ontology and materiality, Blackman argues that what remains under-explored are ‘mind-matter relations’ and ‘the incorporeal’, which engagement with the haunted histories of psychology as it ‘intersects with weird science’ could help remedy (178).

A second key controversy addressed in *Haunted Data* centers on the Cornell scientist Daryl Bem’s 2010 experiments on pre-mediation, and particularly his claim that it is possible ‘to anticipate and shape the future, or even for the future to shape the past’ (2019: 83). Similar to the John Bargh priming controversy, Bem’s studies, which involved psychology undergraduates predicting which curtain an erotic image would appear behind, elicited an array of responses across various media platforms – many of which derided the scientific rigor and value of the research. Yet, from Blackman’s perspective, although Bem may not have proven precisely what he claimed, the wider possibilities concerning the links among ‘anticipation, pre-emption, subliminal and non-conscious registers of experience’ (89) that his experiments re-opened are ones that should be taken seriously.

Indeed, what both controversies indicate, Blackman suggests, is how little we actually know about the dynamics of unconscious suggestion and, particularly in the case of Bem’s research, the relationship between psychic processes and non-linear temporalities. As such, we still urgently require ‘accounts of the psychic and the psychological (or mind-matter relations more broadly) that are attentive to the historicity of matter and the materiality of history’ (163). Furthermore, the two controversies similarly illustrate how vigilantly the psychological sciences are policed, so as to resist ‘strange’ or unexplainable occurrences that might undo long-held assumptions concerning the workings of the mind.

Significantly, while Bem’s interest in the capacity to ‘feel the future’ was largely dismissed by mainstream science, it resonates powerfully with practices presently being enacted via computational media and quantum methodologies. As Blackman notes, ‘the concepts of time-travel, precognition, or even quantum recausation are weird or strange propositions’, yet they have nonetheless ‘formed the basis for regimes of speculative forecast and anticipation that are part of the defining logic of computational cultures as they operate within a capitalist mode’ (160-1). Although designed by humans, it is claimed that these automated technologies ‘can “see” patterns that exceed human perception and consciousness, and prime and shape potential futures through practices and processes of quantum aggregation’ (150).

For some leading scholars of affect and digital media, the growing ubiquity of such algorithmic processes indicate the need for a more decisive move away from ‘the human’ within critical theory. As Patricia Clough et al note, for instance, with algorithms coming to play a bigger role in the parsing of big data, new technologies are ‘no longer slowed by the process of translating back to human consciousness’ (2015: 148). Relatedly, Luciana Parisi contends in *Contagious Architectures* that the new modes of thought and decision-making that adaptive algorithmic architectures enable do not, by definition, ‘exist in direct relation to human thinking’ (2013: xviii). Rather, they entail the automatic processing of ‘infinite volumes of data … which refuse to be fully comprehended, compressed, or sensed by totalities’ such as the ‘mind, the machine, or the body’ (ix-x).

Drawing on these frameworks, Blackman argues convincingly, however, that addressing the logics of computational media in and through the haunted archives of cognitive science and anomalistic psychology might offer a more robust and ecologically-attuned account of more-than-human entanglements. As she puts it, ‘we should not banish the human from discussions of the digital subject or consciousness, but we do need radically revised notions of body-world-consciousness relations and theories of the human compatible with twenty-first-century media’ (2019: 178) – an assessment which resonates with Mark Hansen’s reading of digital technologies via the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead in *Feed-Forward* (2015).

In other words, for Blackman, there is no going forward without simultaneously going back: science and computational culture alike are haunted by ‘the histories and excesses of their own storytelling’ and ‘these excesses surface in “queer aggregations” … to be mined, poached and put to work in newly emergent contexts and settings’ (2019: xiii). From this perspective, the imperative is not to dispense with accounts of ‘the subject’, but rather to continue developing theories of more-than-human subjectivity that extend well beyond the bounded organism and hew the ‘strange’ genealogies of anomalous science for clues regarding the collaborative dynamics of unconscious cognition.

My only critique of the book is that there were times when I would have liked more detailed discussion of the critical implications of the two key case studies. There is a lot of thoughtful and informative setting up of the various fields, concepts and questions invoked by the two main scientific controversies discussed, but perhaps not quite enough explication of where each case gets us and what exactly it tells us about the nature of collaborative embodiment and less-than-conscious communication. Nonetheless, this is more than made up for by Blackman’s highly novel and generative approach and by the impressive range of insights the book offers to readers positioned across numerous interdisciplinary fields.

Indeed, in addition to its analysis of the status of the human in the wake of the ‘non-human turn’, *Haunted Data* also makes a vital contribution to growing interdisciplinary research on ‘the datalogical turn’ (Clough et al, 2015), ‘the data revolution’ (Kitchin, 2014) and ‘the data gaze’ (Beer, 2019). Focusing on what more quantitative and instrumental approaches to big and small data leave out, Blackman develops an ‘affective approach to data’ attuned to the ways in which data ‘never speak for themselves’, but rather must be interpreted (xiii, 56). Drawing on the media scholar Matt Fuller’s concept of data ‘after-lives’, she examines how scientific ‘data can be extracted, mapped, aggregated, condensed, measured and translated, acquiring autonomies and agencies that extend and travel beyond the original event or transaction’ (xxiii). In this way, *Haunted Data* generatively expands the very meaning of ‘data’, offering a framework in which human and non-human, psychic and technical, affective and algorithmic are immanently intertwined and data inevitably ‘bear the traces of human, material, technical, symbolic and imaginary histories’ (xiii).

What is also particularly useful about the data that comprises Blackman’s own archive and the materials of PPPR more generally – including ‘science writing appearing in blogs, tweets, comments posted on websites, in comments offered by open-access journals linked to journal articles, in Google+ communities, Reddit bulletin boards, emails and responses to science journalists’ (xxiii) – is that it offers humanities scholars a way into debates and practices within the psychological and biological sciences. That is, these online traces and transactions provide an entry point to - a*nd thus the ability to critically reassess and intervene in* - ‘some of the controversies, submerged narratives, displaced actors and disqualifications that are often covered over, edited out, discarded or exist as minor agencies within legitimate science’ (xxv). *Haunted Data* acknowledges, however, that PPPR ‘has the tendency to be straightened out’ and replaced with more ‘positivist science writing’ (xxv).

In order for this not to be an inevitability, Blackman argues that interdisciplinary conversations are vital: ‘the shaping and emergence of more speculative psychologies and philosophies within science will only come through collaboration with scientists, artists and humanities scholars who can “think together” as part of a collective enterprise’ (164-5). This is perhaps *Haunted Data’s* most important contribution: It develops an innovative manifesto and methodology for the kind of cross-fertilization among the humanities, social sciences and life sciences that many scholars have called for as a means to better address some of the key (im)material, technological and ecological phenomena animating and transforming our social world.

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**Further Reading**

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**Bio**

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