"Just a Surface": Anamorphic Perspective and Nonhuman Narration in Jeff VanderMeer's *The Strange Bird*[1]

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Abstract This chapter close-reads *The Strange Bird* by Jeff VanderMeer (2017) in light of ongoing discussions in ecocriticism, posthumanism, and narrative theory. I argue that the novella takes the point of view of the nonhuman without rendering the plot genre-formulaic and depoliticised on the one hand, and without succumbing to pure allegory on the other. Based on the assumption that weird narratives demonstrate an affinity for expressing ecological anxieties via nonhuman characters by challenging tensions between hierarchical binaries such as subject and object, self and other, I argue that *The Strange Bird* uses affordances of the weird mode to trouble (under)current notions of subjectivity and agency, specifically by experimenting with nonhuman narration, affect, and a form of narrativised anamorphic projection.

Keywords affect, agency, Anthropocene, ecocriticism, Jeff VanderMeer, monster, narratology, nonhuman, subjectivity, *The Strange Bird,* weird

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Introduction

> She wished only that she might be that remote from the Earth and the humans who lived upon it. To glide above, to go where she wished without fear because she was too high up.

[1] This chapter has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 714166).

> To reduce humans again to the size she preferred: distant ghosts trudging and winking out to reappear again, looped and unimportant. (SB, 21-22)[2]

How does the reader interpret the passage above, which is narrated from the point of view of a nonhuman who explicitly distances herself from humanity? Do we empathise; do we identify? What does such perspective-taking – or perspective-giving – communicate to the reader, and what strategies are needed to engage with this point of view in a responsible, ethical manner? Jeff VanderMeer's 2017 novella *The Strange Bird: A Borne Story* is a 'weird' story about a genetically manipulated bird-squid-human chimera who, as much as she wishes to, cannot escape from the parts of her manufactured for human purpose. In a key passage, the Strange Bird considers her anguished existence as a human construct and her resulting mental and bodily instability, asserting that she is "just a surface" (SB, 90). By this point, however, she has become much more than that to the reader, who has been invited to share the Strange Bird's perspective throughout the story.

According to David Herman, such stories – he calls them "non-or anti-anthropocentric self-narratives" (2018, 50), use the nonhuman perspective as a storytelling strategy by which audiences are subjected to a dramatised "ontological reorientation" (50). When this reorientation is set in a fictional storyworld and narrated by way of focalising through a nonhuman character, argues Herman, the stories "afford solidarity-building projections of other creatures' ways of being-in-the-world – projections that enable a reassessment, in turn, of forms of human being" (194). Herman's proposed *Narratology Beyond the Human* (2018) for the largest part discusses realist or postmodernist narratives rather than non-mimetic or genre fiction such as fantasy and sci-fi. Although this hesitation is understandable given the standardisation of nonhuman presence in supernatural (fantasy) or advanced technological (sci-fi) storyworlds, there are modes and registers associated with fantastic fiction in which nonhuman storytelling does perform the ontological reorientation that Herman describes.

The Strange Bird belongs to 'the weird,' a literary mode that started out as pulp fiction in the early twentieth century (often referred to as 'old weird'), and which has seen a twenty-first-century revival ('new weird'). Typically, the weird addresses themes like fear of the unknown, cosmic insignificance, and loss of self by following cultivated genre conventions; in new weird writing these themes get a more outspoken political edge and are often explicitly geared towards ecological concerns and nonhuman subjectivity (Ulstein 2019). In this chapter I ask whether a weird story such as *The Strange Bird* can take the point of view of the nonhuman without, on the one hand, rendering it genre-formulaic and depoliticised, and without succumbing to pure allegory on the other. My argument, pertaining to the weird specifically, therefore rests at the intersection of narrative theory, posthumanism, and ecocriticism, and is based on the assumption that weird narratives demonstrate an affinity for using nonhuman characters to express ecological anxi-

[2] In all in-text citations hereafter, "SB" refers to *The Strange Bird*.

eties by challenging the tension between hierarchical binaries such as subject and object, self and other. If agency is the ability to affect change upon an external environment – and the degree to which this ability can be expressed – subjectivity is the experience of having a self that exists in and is affected by an external environment. I argue that *The Strange Bird* troubles these notions of subjectivity and agency via sustained anamorphic projection and nonhuman narration in the weird mode.

Anamorphic Anthropo(s)cenes

In weird fiction, nonhuman characters or events are usually beyond comprehension to the extent that they become *anti*-human and monstrous. The anti-humanism of the weird is famously rooted in "fear of the unknown," as stipulated by H. P. Lovecraft (2011a, 1041) and evident in the writings of Lovecraft himself, as well as other early-twentieth-century writers such as Algernon Blackwood, August Derleth, and Arthur Machen. Their typically human characters encounter things that defy all norms; things so excruciatingly other that, by merit of this otherness, they compel the attention of the characters just as they dodge any rational description. As such, VanderMeer's novella enacts an inversion of genre as well as narrative perspective. The traditional weird usually engages with the nonhuman other as a source of irreducible existential dread, and the nonhuman is therefore also *anti*-human by virtue of its otherness. *The Strange Bird* conversely, and quite literally, embodies existential dread as a direct result of human actions, skewing the subject-object relation and frontloading the entanglement, rather than merely the opposition, of human and nonhuman subjectivity.

The nonhuman narration in *The Strange Bird* is arguably caught in what Lars Bernaerts and his cowriters call "a dialectic of empathy and defamiliarization" (2014, 73), which they argue can "generate narrative interest by producing startling insights" (89) – the effect of which, they admit, depends on readers' "predispositions as well as on the specific strategies and meanings brought into play by the text" (89). As we shall see below, this dialectic also informs Herman's ontological reorientation (although Herman disagrees with Bernaerts et al.'s conflation of animal and object nonhuman narrators). But the salient otherness of the Strange Bird *as* a nonhuman focaliser centres on her constant experience of powerlessness and lack of agency in her interaction with humans, whereby the categorical anti-human other of the weird becomes inverted, arguably dramatising Bernaerts et al.'s empathic defamiliarisation to the point of hyperbole. The non-mimetic extremity of the narrative situation in *The Strange Bird*, resisting both weird and narratological coordinates, might therefore be better described as an example of sustained anamorphosis or anamorphic projection.

Anamorphic projection is a technique associated with visual art, in which the perception of an object is distorted unless it is viewed from a particular angle or point of view. Such projection, writes Daniel L. Collins,

> casts the observer in an active role in which the conventional relationship to the object of vision is literally thrown 'off-center.' To observe anamorphic images, one must be an 'eccentric observer,' that is, an observer who is not only a bit 'eccentric' in the usual sense of the term (i. e. strange), but an observer who is willing to sacrifice a centric vantage point for the possibility of catching a glimpse of the uncanny from a position off-axis. (Collins 1992, 73)

In *The Strange Bird* VanderMeer has taken the weird's established aptitude for defamiliarisation to a new extreme, placing the reader in the position of the "eccentric observer" by "bringing that which still remains outside of the field of the gaze into the line of sight and into consciousness" (Colins 1992, 81). *The Strange Bird* adopts a similarly off-axis perspective via nonhuman narration, experimenting with focalisation, affect, and characterisation, and moving the reader's position to the periphery of experientiality: to that of the eccentric observer. In several places the narration explicitly engages the senses, and because of the confined situation in which the Strange Bird finds herself, most of the sensory information is communicated via the human characters that come into contact with the Strange Bird – for instance when she is handled by one of her captors, Charlie X: "[B]y his touch the Strange Bird learned more of her own contours and reach, for there were parts of her that could not feel at all, were rendered numb, and by the distant ghost of Charlie X's hand she began to sense the map of her new body" (SB, 67). Acts of looking, touching, and bodily awareness are rendered through the Strange Bird's perspective. However, as I will discuss in further detail below, her experience as a subject is extremely limited for most of the plot. This means that the reader's perspective is pushed to the periphery both intradiegetically and extradiegetically, and the Strange Bird's reality is often accessed via a projection of the actions of other – human – characters.

Accompanying this eccentric position is the painful awareness that the Strange Bird deeply resents the information she vicariously gleans about herself because (referring to Charlie X's touch above): "What he gave her in awareness he took away a hundred times over in how she had no say in the matter" (SB, 68). By taking on the Strange Bird's perspective, then, the reader is asked to experience the storyworld with double vicariousness: once removed through the nonhuman perspective of the Strange Bird (extradiegetically), and twice removed wherever the Strange Bird's access to that reality is limited (intradiegetically). The story tries to access a point of subjectivity without agency that is outside the vantage point of the human gaze. In scenes like the one referred to above, this (lack of) access is in itself jarring, but the formal engagement with the Strange Bird's anamorphic perspective and narrative voice also directs attention towards a number of ethical questions at the level of content. Writing on similar representations of nonhuman

subjectivity in *The Southern Reach*, Kaisa Kortekallio argues that VanderMeer's readers are positioned as "conduits for nonhuman powers," which invites readers "to amplify their experience of themselves as part of more-than-human assemblages" (2020, 237). The eccentric point of view is, therefore, also interesting for the ongoing discussion of agency and subjectivity in the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene is the proposed name for the current geological age as marked by detrimental human planetary effects.[3] The demand for a sustainable, fathomable representation of the vast scales affecting and entangling human and nonhuman realities in the Anthropocene has shown to be both crucial and exceptionally challenging. We have, in Rosi Braidotti's words, exhausted "a set of familiar formulae, a compilation of motifs and mental habits 'we' had embroidered about the notion of the human as a concept and a repertoire of representations" (Braidotti 2019, 18). In a recent paper, Alexandra Arènes, Bruno Latour, and Jérôme Gaillardet therefore suggest that in order to better situate the human species in the Anthropocene, future schematic representations of the earth surface – or the so-called 'Critical Zone' – should be inverted via anamorphic projection.[4] Arènes et al. argue that depicting the planet's surface as the centre rather than the outer layer of the sphere, grants focus (however technically imprecise) to the part of the earth most crucial to life; or as the authors conclude: "[T]he only territorial attachment that we might be ready, at the time of the Anthropocene, to study and to care for" (2018, 134). Herman's point about how nonhuman narratives can trigger an ontological reorientation in the reader thus maps onto the perspective-flip that haunts the Anthropocene discourse.

The Strange Bird plays out this ontological reorientation, interrogating the structural biases or what Braidotti calls the "familiar formulae" (Braidotti, 2019, 18) of the human gaze. Its protagonist becomes a critical zone of nonhuman attachment, a surface *and* a centre, for the reader to study and care for. Via anamorphic projection, Arenes et al. argue, "we may begin to feel that the skin of the earth has been, so to speak, *reversed like a glove*, and that we are now *inside* a deep set of envelopes instead of *on* the surface of a planet" (2018, 127). Similarly, the Strange Bird is "just a surface" (SB, 90) that has become reversed for the reader and, in dramatising a broader Anthropocene perspective-shift, becomes imbued with more potent, more urgent meaning. VanderMeer's story therefore presents a suitable case study for three intersecting 'turns' in twenty-first-century literary research: the turn towards narrative theory within ecocriticism, the broader nonhuman turn within the humanities, and the turn towards ecocriticism within weird scholarship more specifically.

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[3] In this paper, the Anthropocene should be understood in terms of what Timothy Clark calls a loose "pseudo-geological concept," one used to "mark a threshold in human historical self-understanding" (Clark 2019, 21).

[4] "'[T]he Critical Zone' (CZ) designates the (mostly continental) layers from the top of the canopy to the mother rocks, thus foregrounding the thin, porous and permeable layer where life has modified the cycles of matter by activating or catalyzing physical and chemical reactions" (Arènes, Latour and Gaillardet 2018, 121).

Three Turns

Herman's theory of nonhuman narration is framed by a recent turn towards narrative theory within ecocritical scholarship. According to Erin James and Eric Morel, this turn stands to challenge not just the typical ecocritical focus on content over form, but also

> to sophisticate or outright complicate existing ecocritical arguments that favor genres such as comedy, the nature essay, the pastoral, the georgic, the realist novel, the picaresque, science fiction and posthuman cinema – among others – as ideally suited for raising environmental consciousness. (James and Morel 2018, 358)

This, thus, opens up space for discussions of more liminal genres and modes, such as the short story, horror, or the weird as part of the literary expression of environmental issues and anxieties. Moreover, the growing narratological interest in literary representations of nonhuman realities has in turn given long due attention to "how narratives can challenge readers' conceptions of what it means to be human and how nonhuman characters and actants express their agency" (James and Morel 2018, 262). As Herman writes, a focus on form and narrative structures in nonhuman narratives frontloads "the power of narrative to reframe the cultural models or ontologies that undergird hierarchical understandings of humans' place in the larger biotic communities of which they are members" (2018, 4). Studies of nonhuman narratives – or "non-or anti-anthropocentric self-narratives," as Herman calls them (50) – such as *The Strange Bird* are therefore in a position to question the self-evidence with which readers attribute different levels of agency or passivity to various agents and objects in narratives – and by extension in the real world.

The ecocritical turn towards narrative theory is therefore also informed by the "nonhuman turn," verbalised by Richard Grusin in 2015 to indicate the large number of contemporary humanities scholars calling for a radical shift in how humans conceptualise reality and negotiate their position in the world in relation to nonhuman beings and phenomena (x). In one such effort to "represent theoretically and artistically the profound interconnections between humans and nonhuman factors and agents," Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova's *Posthuman Glossary* stresses the importance of "keeping in mind the structural inequalities that control access to the dominant category of the 'human' to begin with" (2018, 8). Crucially for the discussion of *The Strange Bird,* the entry on "Non-Human Agency" frontloads the issue of this "access" to humanness and agency as one of the tropes ready for evolution, and problematises the role of literary critique in the formation and continuation of the trope:

> [T]he concept of agency within literary critique, and more generally the Humanities, has long been associated with notions of intentionality, rationality and voice; in short, agency

> has traditionally been intricately tied to extremely limited notions of subjectivity and power. (Marchand 2018, 292-293)

The Strange Bird addresses these issues directly, as the novella plays with surface and depth both in narrative content and form to complicate definitions of subjectivity, agency, life, and being. By imagining the nonhuman as a thinking subject in a postapocalyptic setting which clearly targets urgent issues of the Anthropocene, *The Strange Bird* is undeniably a commentary on nonhuman agency in the twenty-first century. But the novella also presents a radical experimentation with genre, which takes us to the third 'turn' that *The Strange Bird* navigates.

As mentioned above, the weird is associated with a branch of horror narratives particularly interested in the cosmic dread experienced when realising the relative insignificance of subjective existence. A classic, and over-appropriated, example of a weird monster is Lovecraft's Cthulhu, the tentacular god slumbering below the surface of the earth (Lovecraft 2011b). Typically, the otherness of Cthulhu and other Lovecraftian creations is such that they cannot be rendered in rational description, mocking human sense of existential superiority and revealing the insignificance of the human individual in relation to the vast scales of deep time and space. Mark Fisher succinctly describes the weird as "a sense of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here" (Fisher 2016, 15). Roger Luckhurst distinguishes the weird from related affective registers like the uncanny and the sublime by how the dread experienced in the weird is irreducible and cannot be returned to the familiar or the repressed; nor does it map neatly onto the "majestic failure of the Kantian sublime" (Lockhurst 2017, 1052).

Given the weird's tradition for engaging with the nonhuman and for contemplating vast scales and cosmic dread, it is perhaps not surprising that Timothy Morton uses the weird to describe ecological thinking: for instance, he has called large-scale issues like global climate change "Cthulhu-like" (Morton 2013, 64). Morton's monstrous simile reflects a broader tendency in contemporary scholarship towards reading the weird ecocritically by both ecocritics and weird scholars. This trend also involves a move away from 'Lovecraftian' as 'Weird' par excellence to frontloading more recent weird writing.[5] Often referred to as the 'new weird', contemporary weird fiction typically centres on the more-than-human world as potentially enlightening and even hopeful rather than (merely) terrifying in its otherness. The weird, as Ann and Jeff VanderMeer describe it in the introduction to *The Weird Compendium*, "strives for a kind of understanding even when something cannot be understood and acknowledges failure as a sign and symbol of our limitations" (VanderMeer and VanderMeer 2011, xvi). Through this humble approach to the monstrous, the weird stands to challenge readers to

[5] See for example Luckhurst's "The Weird: A (Dis)orientation" (2017); Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman's edited volume *Global Weirding* (2016); Julius Greve and Florian Zappe's collection *Spaces and Fictions of the Weird and the Fantastic* (2019).

reposition themselves in relation to multiple forms of nonhuman subjectivities and come to terms with the limitations this repositioning reveals (Ulstein 2019, 139-141).

A particularly interesting feature of the (new) weird in this regard is its experimentation with perspective and its "new sensibility of welcoming the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming" (Noys and Murphy 2016, 125). Since Lovecraft, the weird has evolved to become a hybrid mode that can be traced across established genres such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, and dystopian fiction, but also more marginal subgenres like cyberpunk or detective noir. While Lovecraft's expression of large-scale existential dread took the shape of terrible monsters, new weird writers "are becoming-Other [cf. Deleuze and Guattari] than Lovecraft, by taking on and transforming his tropes, just as he took those topoi from earlier writers and radically refashioned and combined them" (Jarvis 2017, 1135). This new materialist approach to the weird reflects efforts by scholars who are part of the nonhuman turn to, in Latour's words, "distribute agency as far and in as differentiated a way as possible" in order to navigate the, inevitably, cross-species effects of the Anthropocene (Latour 2014, 17). The weird, because of its long tradition of questioning human agency, has a latent potential for representing such differentiated distributions of agency, skewing the perspective and bringing the nonhuman from the periphery and into focus by sustained anamorphic projection.

Scales, Depths, Surfaces

In the past decade or so, the discussion of the dethroned human has almost become a cliché within the humanities. The discussion surrounding the Anthropocene has given rise to what Latour calls a "surprising inversion of background and foreground," where nature becomes the acting subject and humanity the passive object (2014, 14). Timothy Clark, likewise, points out that the destabilisation of the human has brought on cases of "Anthropocene disorder": the affliction caused by the "unresolved and perhaps unresolvable conflicts revealed by thinking the world of the Anthropocene at different scales" (Clark 2015, 154). Questions of subject-object inversions and of large-scale thinking have led to uncertainty and anxiety about the future. Elsewhere, I have argued that these anxieties can be traced in contemporary (weird) narratives as "Anthropocene Monsters": figures conjured to express the monstrous urgency of environmental collapse (Ulstein 2017, 74). The monstrous and the nonhuman are intricately entwined – not synonymous, but rather as related figures used in different ways to destabilise the category of the human. As Nikita Mazurov emphasises in a *Posthuman Glossary* entry entitled "Monster/The Unhuman" (echoing Latour): "the monstrous is a rejection of the stifling non/human binary entrapment" (Mazurov 2018, 262). Heather Swanson and her cowriters argue that monsters are therefore "useful figures with

which to think the Anthropocene, this time of massive human transformations of multispecies life and their uneven effects" (2017, M4). The weird emerges as a narrative mode particularly adept at using the (monstrous) figure of the nonhuman to grapple with Anthropocene anxieties. *The Strange Bird* dramatises this affinity – via anamorphic projection – by inverting not just the subject and object positions of the human and the nonhuman, but also by making the Strange Bird live and narrate the monstrous as a rejection of that binary.

As Collins notes, the anamorphic perspective foregrounds

> a series of oblique nuances, mind-bending vistas and disturbing cuts in the otherwise uniform, homogenous pattern (of behavior) that we carry both as a comfort and as a burden. It is in these 'wrinkles in the field' that an opportunity for giving expression to those things that stand to the side, that have been literally and figuratively marginalized, is found.
>
> (Collins 1992, 81)

The Strange Bird, likewise, in a move very similar to Latour's background-into-foreground inversion, embodies one of those marginalised things discussed by Collins: the novella makes a similar "disturbing cut" in the pattern of, on the one hand, genre norms of the weird, and in anthropocentrism on the other. Set in the same postapocalyptic world as VanderMeer's novel *Borne* (2017) and later *Dead Astronauts* (2019), the story follows the Strange Bird's quest to find a destination programmed into her like a compass. Her goal is to arrive at her destination with some form of genetic code that might save humanity, and in the course of her journey, the reader is invited along to explore agency and subjectivity from the off-axis angle of anamorphic projection. The protagonist goes through a series of imposed metamorphoses until, in the end, she is finally given a choice in whether she wants to fulfil her quest or not. Crucially, she decides *not* to act, because, as she reflects, "It had been a human need, […] and she was, in the end, much diminished for having followed it" (SB, 102). The tension between the Strange Bird's experience and the reader's position as eccentric observer foreshadows the character's ultimate choice to own the full potential of her agency outside of her pre-programmed human framework.

On the surface, *The Strange Bird* is a story about a genetically manipulated creature with enough cognition to reflect lucidly on the purpose of her existence,

but with too little agency to effect changes upon her environment. Going one interpretative 'layer' deeper, it would be equally easy to read the novella as a commentary on animal cruelty or a thought experiment considering nonhuman ethics – especially since the Strange Bird is the only focalised character. But the story resists both superficial, plot-driven readings and straight-forward allegorical analysis; in fact, on occasion it explicitly disparages such interpretations. The Strange Bird is little else, but a handy tool supposed to serve human purposes, at one point literally stretched into a surface to cover another, human, character as a cloak. She is forced into the periphery, an eccentric observer to her own non-life, but this periphery position is also balanced against the reader's access to the Strange Bird's thoughts. Bernaerts et al.'s dialectic of empathy and defamiliarisation therefore plays out its full generative potential in VanderMeer's novella, with a protagonist explicitly objectified at the level of plot, and explicitly subjectified (though still at a remove via the third-person narrator) at the level of narration. Being "just a surface" (SB 90) thus becomes the strength of a story like *The Strange Bird,* by merit of its narrative anamorphosis. Arènes et al. argue that such projection gives a more straightforward, but also richer perspective on the reality of the Anthropocene: "Everything is now visible as if we were looking at the earth simultaneously *sideways, from the bottom* and *from the inside*, a point of view utterly different from the planetary view" (Arènes, Latour and Gaillardet 2018, 124). Likewise, *The Strange Bird* plays with an inverted perspective of narration vis-à-vis characterisation that give the reader multiple 'directions' and depths by which to reevaluate their view of nonhuman experientiality.

In a similar vein as Herman, Bernaerts et al. argue that "stories narrated by non-human animals can destabilise anthropocentric ideologies" because they place nonhuman beings "on a continuum with humans, rather than constructing them as opposites" (2014, 74). *The Strange Bird* addresses this continuum directly at times, such as when the Strange Bird has a dream in which she is human, but "has no sense of her body," and even though she "feels a compulsion to speak," she cannot: "She is still a bird. She is a bird. She is a bird. But she is a human. […]" (SB, 37). The hybrid identity of the Strange Bird thus complicates the idea of subjectivity and invites the reader to entertain the viewpoint of a subject without agency from the unfamiliar position of the eccentric observer, as the Strange Bird fights to regain her agency without falling back on a human purpose. *The Strange Bird* is therefore representative of weird fiction as a marginal, but well-suited literary mode for delving deeper than "just the surface" of nonhuman bodies. The rest of this paper will in further detail explore some of the narrative strategies by which VanderMeer exploits this affinity of the weird for expressing nonhuman realities, demonstrating how techniques of focalisation and characterisation inform ecological themes and motifs.

Affect, Agency, Affirmation

The mere fact that we are dealing with a nonhuman protagonist whose thoughts, feelings and reflections are comparable to that of a human, already makes *The Strange Bird* quite 'weird': upon entering the storyworld, the reader is placed in an impossible position and asked to accept it. Because of the genre conventions of the weird, *The Strange Bird* represents an odd case of suspension of disbelief. The reader must, without irony, succumb to the impossible narrative situation and anamorphic projection, while constantly being reminded of this impossibility. As the story begins, it is easy to go along with the Strange Bird's joy at having escaped captivity – flying for the first time: "[S]he went higher and higher and she did not care who saw or what awaited her in the bliss of free fall and the glide and the limitless expanse. Oh, for if this was life, then she had not yet been alive!" (SB, 4). The free indirect discourse of the last sentence is used in a similar way throughout the novella to increase the emotional familiarity with the Strange Bird. But this empathy is constantly at odds with the strangeness of the story's only focaliser. This exacerbates the defamiliarisation-empathy dialectic discussed by Bernaerts et al. As they write, the stylistic devices used to "call forth empathetic responses almost against the audience's will," sometimes leading to a state of absorption whereby the reader "becomes fully conscious of her own perspective-taking – of her 'becoming-other' through narrative empathy" (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 79). *The Strange Bird* embodies, quite literally at times, this simultaneous resistance and compulsion of "becoming-other."

A few pages after the Strange Bird's joyful flight, she remembers the carnage at the lab that had allowed her to escape, a moment of crisis when the scientists started killing their own lab creations for food:

> The Strange Bird had perched for safety on a hook near the ceiling and watched, knowing she might be next. The badger that stared up, wishing for wings. The goat. The monkey. She stared back at them and did not look away, because to look away was to be a coward and she was not cowardly. Because she must offer them some comfort, no matter how useless. Everything added to her and everything taken away had led to that moment and from her perch she had radiated love for every animal she could not help, with nothing left over for any human being. Not even in the parts of her that were human. (SB, 7)

The human-animal opposition expressed by the Strange Bird in this passage is destabilised by her nonhuman identity, creating a tension in the encounter between the (inevitably) human reader and the ("impossibly") nonhuman focaliser. Marco Caracciolo calls this effect "cognitive strangeness," (2016, 144) and his argument is appropriate for *The Strange Bird* even though Caracciolo works with a different corpus. Because we, as humans, can never truly experience nonhuman consciousness, Caracciolo writes, the animal body in literary narrative,

> can take center stage because it is a material, living reminder of this divide: it can be considered incomprehensible, alien, abject, immoral, thus estranging audiences from the narrator at an epistemic and axiological level. At the same time, foregrounding the animal body and (what we imagine to be) its experiential states is an effective strategy for inviting forms of somatic and emotional empathy for the narrator. (Caracciolo 2016, 144)

The tension Caracciolo describes is doubly reflected in the slaughter scene quoted above, where the reader has little choice but to empathise with the Strange Bird, while most likely simultaneously identifying with the humans who are essentially choosing to kill rather than die of hunger. Andrzej Zaniewski's *Rat* (1993) and Marie Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales* (1996) are compelling examples for Caracciolo's argument about strange narrators in contemporary narratives. But I would argue that VanderMeer's novella is an even more striking display of what Caracciolo describes as important affordances of nonhuman narrators, as they open up "a vast range of liminal experiences and culturally drawn boundaries, interrogating not just animal consciousness or humans' relationship with animals but also broader sociocultural and existential issues" (2016, 145). In *The Strange Bird*, for instance, political issues broached directly or implied by the apocalyptic setting – beyond animal ethics and questions of agency – are environmental destruction, species extinction, ethics of (bio-)technological advances, and what counts as life. Through nonhuman perspective-taking, persuasive stylistic devices, and framed by anamorphic projection at both intra- and extradiegetic levels, *The Strange Bird* reads as an invitation to accept the role of eccentric observer, and to be as brave as the Strange Bird and "not look away" from the array of vital questions the story poses about technology, ecology, and nonhuman agency. However, *The Strange Bird's* affective registers might complicate the reader's willingness to accept this invitation.

In *Affective Ecologies* (2017), Alexa Weik von Mossner explores the ways in which environmental narratives trigger emotional responses in readers and viewers, leaning on empirical studies on empathy and narratives where possible, and pointing out the gaps that still need to be filled by cross-disciplinary approaches to researching affect in environmental narrative. Very much in line with Bernaerts and his cowriters, Weik von Mossner refers to Vittorio Gallese's concept of "embodied simulation," defined as the reader's experience of a protagonist's narrated experience of being in a storyworld environment – "leading to an empathetic affective response" (2017, 26, 48). At the intersection of cognitive psychology, empirical studies and close readings of narratives across genres and media, Weik von Mossner demonstrates the potential of ecologically themed fiction to trigger such empathetic responses in readers. In her chapter on dystopian narratives she makes an important observation about negative affect. She writes that it is risky to only rely on emotions such as fear, sadness, regret, or anger to communicate environ-

mental issues, because "an overload of negative emotions might either lead to debilitating pessimism or to various forms of denial" (163). This claim has interesting implications for *The Strange Bird* and the weird more broadly, as negative affect is central to the mode.

In many dystopian narratives, a layer of irony or satire provides emotional distance that allows the reader to experience the nightmarish societies in a more detached, 'safer' way. The weird, on the other hand, while often set in dystopian or catastrophic storyworlds, provides no such comfort – if anything, as mentioned above, it demands the same kind of immersion as fantasy literature. At times it is difficult to keep reading *The Strange Bird*, but just like the title character keeps gazing at her fellow lab creatures, the reader is indirectly asked to keep reading as the Strange Bird suffers. A powerful example is the scene in which the Strange Bird is captured by a bioengineer who calls herself the Magician, who takes the Strange Bird apart and reshapes her into a biotechnological cloak of "invisibility" (it relies on the Strange Bird's squid camouflage genes). The whole procedure is executed while the Strange Bird is conscious:

> […] the agony as the Magician took her wings from her, broke her spine, removed her bones one by one, but left her alive, writhing and formless on the stone table, still able to see, and thus watching as the Magician casually threw away so many parts that were irreplaceable. As she gasped through a slit of a mouth, her beak removed as well. (SB, 53)

The embodied simulation or 'becoming-other' in this passage has crossed the line of what I, as a reader, am comfortable with imagining. It is possible to argue that there is a strong anti-humanism at work in the story, and that the negative affect as demonstrated in the passage above and at several other points might lead to an overall emotional response of pessimism or denial, as Weik von Mossner suggests. This might also imply that new weird narratives are not necessarily successful in moving beyond the nihilism of the traditional weird.

However, when reading *The Strange Bird*, questions of agency – or in Kortekallio's words, "more-than-human assemblages," (2020, 237) arguably resonate stronger than any latent anti-humanism. VanderMeer's choice of third-person narrator with only one focalizer highlights the core tension in the Strange Bird's scattered identity: She constantly tries to comprehend and distance herself from her humanity, but she is controlled by the compass and quest bio-coded into her and she *cannot* escape it. Reduced to a focalised character at the mercy of the third-person narrator, and a lab-grown construct at the mercy of her human creators, her mind and body are never truly her own, reaching the lowest possible point of passive object as she is draped around the body of the Magician, with nothing but "[…]the sensation of being undone, of being only a skin slid across the skin of the Magician, and that this made her less than animal, less than nothing, a mere surface with no depth […]" (SB, 70).

Because of the narrative situation, the reader has insight into the Strange Bird's struggle to maintain some sense of self and agency: she "saved herself, only by imagining that […] *she* chose to frame the Magician's features and that in any moment she willed, the Strange Bird could […] bring the Magician visible" (SB, 70). The Strange Bird's extremely reduced exterior is here contrasted with a desperate dream of control, reinforced further by anamorphosis: her limited, off-axis access to her storyworld reality might not be enough to render the Magician visible at will, but it underlines her position of eccentric observer, which in turn exposes the reader's shared role as vicarious observer. This exposure is uncomfortable, possibly fueling pessimism or denial, as Weik von Mossner suggests (2017, 163), but I argue that it also incites hope and affirmative action.

For a large part of the plot, the Strange Bird is perceived, used, and comes to see herself as "just a surface," and therefore constrained to a non-life with no real agency. Conversely, the reader has access *beneath* the surface of her stretched-out body, constantly confronted with the depth of the Strange Bird's suffering and her complex ethical reflections. As mentioned above, it would be easy to argue that *The Strange Bird* is a parable for (and plea against) twenty-first century animal abuse via advanced technology – but such a reading would be *too* easy and rather downplay the complexity of the story. Most of VanderMeer's work expresses a strong skepticism towards capitalism and technological advances that violently transgress human-nonhuman boundaries for the sake of human gain, but *The Southern Reach* (2014), *Borne* (2017)*, The Strange Bird* (2018), and *Dead Astronauts* (2019) are all oddly hopeful about the future in the middle of their horror. For posthuman thinkers like Braidotti, the way forward is to address the tensions of agency in the Anthropocene affirmatively, by being politically and culturally inclusive and by "creating heterogenous assemblages," in which nonhuman beings are recognised as always already integral members. The important takeaway from Braidotti's posthuman ecologies is a call to contest the habituation of structural models that overestimate the human; to expose the category 'human' for all its limitations. She urges us to use the human enmeshment in the nonhuman world as a foundation to build a "multiscalar relationality" based on a "transversal range" of posthuman subjectivity, "so that the frame and scope of epistemological and ethical subjectivity is enlarged along the lines of posthumanist and post-anthropocentric relations and the multiple perspectives that inhabit them" (Braidotti 2019, 18; 46). This affirmative outlook on a notion of subjectivity and agency beyond the human is what *The Strange Bird* tries to communicate.

The ending of *The Strange Bird* in particular captures this hopeful feeling. After she has reached her destination, her body is diminished and different, but she celebrates her new-found agency:

> Yet what did it matter? For what are bodies? Where do they end and where do they begin? And why must they be constant? Why must they be strong? So much was leaving her, but […] the Strange Brid sang for joy. She sang for joy. Not because she had not suffered or

> been reduced. But because she was finally free and the world could not be saved, but nor would it be destroyed. (SB, 98)

VanderMeer's novels do not stipulate that the world presented is necessarily worse or better than the real world. Rather, they offer unorthodox, weird spaces for reflecting upon what it means to be human, and what it means to exist as a part of a human species in constant interrelation with a multitude of nonhuman beings – in the Anthropocene moment. As Heather Swanson et al. phrase it: "Somehow, in the midst of ruins, we must maintain enough curiosity to notice the strange and wonderful as well as the terrible and terrifying," which might "help us notice landscapes of entanglement, bodies with other bodies, time with other times" (Swanson et al. 2017, 7). *The Strange Bird* acts out this call for curiosity, for noticing the simultaneously terrible and wonderful truth of the limits and possibilities of human agency as deeply entangled in multitudes of nonhuman agencies.

Conclusion

The Strange Bird politicises nonhuman narration and engages in the eco-political debate by at once evolving weird topoi without abandoning a weird aesthetic, and by a resisting straightforward allegorical reading. The novella explores subjectivity without agency, but simultaneously grants the Strange Bird a *form* of agency through focalisation. As Herman puts it: nonhuman narratives such as *The Strange Bird* address "possibilities for other-than-human selfhood, modes of being-in-the-world that, cutting across species differences, involve being recognised and oriented to as a who and not just a what" (Herman 2018, 86). Arguably, the Strange Bird is never the active participant in her own narrative; she is always the object of experimentation, trapped between multiple intra- and extradiegetic layers of humans who have constructed her. The lab researchers have even inserted parts of themselves into the Strange Bird's genetic code for the hope of human survival; the Magician needs a cloak of invisibility to increase her power.

By being "just a surface" in the storyworld, the Strange Bird embodies and addresses the reader's transportation into her inner life and becomes the narrative equivalent of Arènes et al.'s critical zone through anamorphic projection. The Strange Bird is forced into the eccentric-observer position of her own life – and so is the reader. To the Magician she is malleable, light, and absorbent, the perfect cloak of invisibility, a passive object to be used and discarded when broken. To the reader, who, unlike the Magician, has access to her thoughts and understands her potential for subjective agency, the Strange Bird represents Herman's "other-than-human selfhood," made accessible in narrative as "who's" rather than as "what's" (86). From the off-axis, weird vantage-point of the eccentric observer the reader might glean insights about different modes of being-in-the-world, possibly

triggering Herman's ontological reorientation towards the nonhuman, which seems particularly urgent for the Anthropocene.

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