

BOOK REVIEWS

PARASCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS: THE SCIENCE AND CULTURE OF THE PARANORMAL

*By Derek Lee. University of Minnesota Press. 2025. 304 pp. Hardback,
paperback, and ebook*

This book presents a series of interesting case studies in which marginal concepts or theories developed in psychical research slip out of scientific orthodoxy but start to thrive in popular culture. Derek Lee (a literature professor) calls this process ‘parascientification’. The cases absorb the attention, despite the rather tortured academic prose throughout. I was less convinced by the conceptual framework Lee proposes for his term ‘parascience’, however.

The first chapter focuses on the mid-1960s work of Adrian Dobbs, who borrowed from the phase of extraordinary science (to use Thomas Kuhn’s term) in the detection of subatomic particles in physics to propose the existence of the ‘psitron’ or ‘thought particle’, which might form the physical underpinning for telepathy. He also thought the speculative existence of tachyons (particles that might travel faster than light) could explain precognition and other time slips. Lee admits that Dobbs’s work was marginal, even to psychical research, but suggests that tachyons have had a significant afterlife.

The term was picked up in the writings of science fiction writer Philip K. Dick and in the comics of Alan Moore. Dick had what he felt was a profound religious experience in the early 1970s, in which he believed he had been bombarded by a beam of tachyon particles bearing information from a remote divine source: he wrote three million words of his ‘exegesis’ trying to explain this experience. Moore, the cult comics writer steeped in alternative histories and heterodox and occult knowledges, also used the tachyon at the core of his influential *Watchmen* series. These instances illustrate Lee’s central proposition that “literature can serve as the primary medium for the evolution and dissemination of anomalous science” (p. 51). This is a valuable exploration of the place of the cultural persistence of ideas originating in psychical research (the classic instance being ‘telepathy’). It’s a little like Christopher Partridge’s term ‘occulture’ for the mix of esoteric and magical discourse with wider cultural expression. Lee’s larger claim, however, that ‘parascientification’ in turn destabilizes the orthodoxies of narrow institutional science, is more problematic, I think.

The second chapter explores the ‘Gaia hypothesis’, first proposed by James Lovelock (and later supported by biologist Lynn Margulis). The proposal that Earth is a complex living entity is now well known—still controversial among evolutionary biologists but widely adopted by some ecologists and again in the wider culture. It seems slightly odd to think of the Gaia hypothesis as a ‘paranormal’ theory, but Lee approaches it initially through a mediumistic channelling of its ‘voice’ in Pepper Lewis’s *Gaia Speaks*, which feels like a mild sleight of hand to allow this framing. It does lead to some valuable tracking of Gaia through diverse locations: philosophy, systems theory, biology, critical theory (Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers), and the kind of Californian New Ageism that comes out of stoner theoretical physics at Berkeley—as in the once fashionable best-sellers by Fritjof Capra. Lee then follows this into science fiction, particularly the work of Greg Bear (another Californian). Bear was a ‘hard SF’ writer, interested in extrapolation from known science, but his work is full of speculative psychical realms. (This chapter is an instance of what Bruno Latour would call ‘actor-network theory’—that is, follow a term wherever it goes without imposing any artificial disciplinary distinctions, to see where and how it travels.)

In chapter three, Lee tracks the work of Ingo Swann, who came, so he claimed, from a family gifted with psychic powers, and who ended up centrally involved in the 1970s and 1980s with the Stanford Research Institute’s pursuit of psychical research in the service of the Cold War. This story is of course well known now; Swann’s role perhaps less so. Swann was a key participant in the development of ‘remote viewing’ as a technique of spying surveillance. When the intensity of Cold War paranoia fell away, so did institutional scientific support for this kind of research. Lee then follows Swann into the writing of novels, and his later popular psychical research manuals and memoir. Again, there is some overstatement about the place of this kind of literature (broadly conceived) in destabilizing the authority of orthodox science. However, it is certainly worth tracking this kind of popular literature, which often sells very well, and Lee is right that manuals and self-help books framed in New Age or psychical paradigms have been largely ignored by critics.

In the last two chapters, Lee moves to a different terrain, exploring in detail how fiction that uses ‘paranormal’ tropes by Asian-American writers further undoes scientific orthodoxies. ‘Science’ is now exposed as what we might call ‘instrumental rationality’: narrow, Westernized, positivistic, institutional knowledge systems that since the 17th century have brooked no alternative to their materialist explanation of the world. Lee brings to bear feminist, post-colonial, and decolonial critiques of modernity to resituate paranormal tropes in fiction as devices to outflank the dead hand of scientific orthodoxy.

In chapter four, Lee focuses on the figure of the medium in Amy Tan’s Chinese-American *The Hundred Secret Senses*, and the Korean shaman in Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*. Lee also explores Chinese conceptions of

qi, the vital energy or life-force that underpins everything in the universe and largely ignores binaries of material versus spiritual or life versus death. An openness to Chinese conceptions or Korean religious frameworks resituates cultural representations of ghosts away from (materialist) readings of them as metaphors for the traumatic past and literalizes the hauntings that pervade these novels in a way that suggests their paranormality subverts Western norms, Lee argues.

The last chapter does the same again, this time using Sesshu Foster's *Atomik Aztex* and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, two novels that employ non-Western conceptions of time and temporality, again resituating some of the central claims of psychical research against the narrow norms of Western science.

There is a wealth of material covered in this book. Unfortunately, it is presented in the densely jargonized prose still favoured by academic cultural studies. The book inadvertently reveals its own narrow disciplinary location in this regard, rather against the grain of its own interdisciplinary ambitions. I come from the same territory, so I am used to this style. Even so, I found some of the fuzziness and slippage in conceptual language throughout frustrating. Ultimately, this slippage seemed to be revealing of weaknesses in the core proposal for Lee's term 'parascience'.

In the introduction, Lee proposes parascience as "the epistemic realm on the borders of establishment science where heterodox concepts can hybridize with other areas like literature, myth, philosophy, theology, non-Western thought, and novel research programs to produce new knowledge forms that persist across modern science and culture" (p. 19). This is valuable: it rightly moves the judgements inherent in terms like 'pseudoscience' or 'parapsychology' out of the way, as well as considering the limits of more recent terms like 'marginal science' (associated with Seymour Mauskopf) or 'almost science' (Massimo Pigliucci) or Christopher Partridge's 'occulture'. It is odd, then, that Lee continuously and almost compulsively switches between 'parascience' and 'pseudoscience' throughout the book, as if they were synonyms. On the same page, he can suggest that the term 'pseudoscience' blocks "any attempt at reasonable debate", but then almost immediately says that the academy has acted as if "pseudoscience does not exist" (p. 214)—he means, I think, parascience in this second quote. I found this kind of conceptual slippage everywhere. For instance, Lee will follow the critique of Western modernity as making other cultural belief systems exotic or primitive, but then immediately argues that "speculative ethnic fiction" harks back "to premodern, theological and non-Western systems of thought" that will "transcend the scientific limitations imposed by the West" (p. 179). Is 'premodern' a negative colonial epithet, then, or a positive escape from coloniality? It seems to be both, switching almost sentence by sentence. His use of a term like 'multiculturalism' is similarly vague—the valence of that term shifts according to political location and context (perhaps especially so in

the UK context, where it is now often used pejoratively), but here it floats free of its place in the culture war as if it can signal diversity only positively.

I'm not sure this is just carelessness in language so much as revealing of an unhelpful cultural relativism at the core of Lee's project. Towards the end, Lee insists that his challenge to scientific authority does not end up in a world where conspiracy theories, alternative facts, or anti-vax claims cannot be challenged. He insists that parascience (or what he also problematically calls pseudoscience at this dangerous juncture) is of a different order of belief than this. But it is hard to stop the slippage into cultural relativism and post-truth with the loose framework Lee formulates for the reader. I found the exploration in this book of the cultural circulation of ideas from psychical research into the wider culture really valuable. I still, however, would prefer to have scientific protocols in place to contest dangerous pseudoscientific ideas. Lee's model does not, in the end, help that distinction: it seems happy to erase these borders. My main worry, as I read it, was that it would persuade very few natural or social scientists who might come across it that this kind of cultural studies isn't just a fast route to relativist positions. Contextual framing can provide subtlety and nuance to the history of science: I don't think Lee quite succeeds in developing a model for this here.

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