

head in the cloud
of unknowing

a deliriant noir manifesto



head in the

cloud

of

unknowing

noir manifesto

a deliriant

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SMM

DELIRIUM

[də'liəriəm]

NOUN

A DISTURBED STATE OF MIND OR CONSCIOUSNESS, ESPECIALLY AN ACUTE, TRANSIENT CONDITION ASSOCIATED WITH FEVER, INTOXICATION, AND CERTAIN OTHER PHYSICAL DISORDERS, CHARACTERIZED BY SYMPTOMS SUCH AS CONFUSION, DISORIENTATION, AGITATION, AND HALLUCINATIONS.

NOIR

[nwɑːr]

NOUN

A GENRE OF CRIME FILM OR FICTION CHARACTERIZED BY CYNICISM, FATALISM, AND MORAL AMBIGUITY.

an introduction, or the history of a failed review...

In 2020, I was crushed by B.R. Yeager's novel, *Negative Space*. I couldn't stop thinking about its strange blend of horror, occult, and weird sensibilities. It's a coming-of-age novel set in an (eerily familiar) youth; it's a novel warped by substances; it's an irreverent but sincere meditation on depression and suicide; it's a novel that eschews easy answers in favor of realism while the reality it depicts is distorted, hallucinatory, and horrific; it is, above all, brilliantly difficult to categorize (and therefore difficult to write about). It's the inspiration of my current work, which may or may not ever see release.

Negative Space was published by Apocalypse Party. When you go to their "About" page (apocalypse-party.com), you'll discover that they are a small press from Philadelphia. They describe the work they publish as follows:

I've **bolded** the qualities that interest me in *Negative Space*, *Terminal Park* by Gary J. Shipley, and everything I'm currently reading from AP that appears relevant to deliriant noir. This "manifesto" is a way of writing about my own current work, about *Negative Space*

[finally...I didn't feel equipped to review this book during the year of its release, since I then lacked parameters in which to discuss it.]

and about other books that could be considered within this genre



[some suggestions
from others
have been
certain works by
Mark Samuels,
Tom Piccirilli's
A Choir of Ill Children,
and Paul Curran's *Left Hand*]

It's a way for me to write about these things without actually writing about them.

Is Apocalypse Party a deliriant noir press? The question is irrelevant, but the books they published have certainly inspired this current

delirium is a state of confusion and fear characterized by hallucinations. Deliriant is a class of drugs that cause delirium. Unlike LSD and THC, a deliriant trip is divorced from the emphasis on pleasurable and/or "transcendent" experiences. The visuals of a deliriant trip are dark and frightening—the walls crawl with spiders, static fills the mirror, and figures speak to you in unintelligible languages from the shadows.

Deliriant: the liminal space between horror and reality

While plants of the genera *Datura* and *Brugmansia* are deliriant, they are most commonly procured for the purposes of abuse as OTC (over the counter) medications and consumed in the form of higher than recommended doses of diphenhydramine, or "DPH" (Benadryl). DPH abuse is characterized by highly realistic and convincing hallucinations that are difficult to distinguish from reality. These hallucinations are horrifying and frequently accompanied by states of intense discomfort, suggesting a correlation between DPH abuse and self-harming behavior. Often, long term users of DPH describe nightmares, cognitive deterioration, and difficulty forgetting images and events they've witnessed while tripping.

The abuse of deliriant is also represented by a rich "underground" online culture. Images and videos purporting to capture the experience of deliriant trips populate platforms like Reddit and YouTube. The aesthetic parallel between these "simulations" and horror fiction is unmistakable. The online deliriant culture, in fact, represents a fertile nexus linking the worlds of fiction and reality—occurrences at home in horror fiction are here experienced and reported as fact. In a sense, deliriant let the monster emerge from the static of the screen. A cursory search of the "trip journals" on <https://www.reddit.com/r/DPH> will demonstrate this.

Here is an account taken nearly at random from the subreddit above. This description is typical of descriptions of deliriant abuse:

"1:30: I am standing up then I close my eyes and suddenly I'm in a carpark , I look around confused and see that all the cars upside down and then I think to myself " I never had dph trip where cars look upside down .." then I suddenly snap out of it and wake up and realize I was standing at my front door and completely forgot why I was standing there. I look across the street at a small branch then out of nowhere a huge ass winged looking spider is sitting on it like it's a bird then it starts flying at me in high speed so I move and run back and clumsily fall over and realize there was nothing there at all."¹

[Note: I do not include deliriant dosing information here because deliriant abuse is potentially harmful and fatal. In this sense, deliriant noir is oriented towards death—it is an

approaching of death,

enactment of death,

dream of death (see the musical genre "death dream"),

death wish,

death meditation (see Rudolf Eb.er),

depiction of death,

death ritual (see Georges Bataille),

love of death (Lustmord).



Deliriant noir is a method
of approaching death via fiction.]

¹ "Trip journal" quotes in this font are taken verbatim from:
https://www.reddit.com/r/DPH/comments/pdk09q/660_mg_trip_report_after_2_years/
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Noir: the dark mystery

Noir, while historically associated with crime fiction, is taken here to be "characterized by cynicism, fatalism, and moral ambiguity." Deliriant noir is related to the shifting hallucinogenic worlds of William S. Burroughs, the strange heavy darkness of Cornell Woolrich, the drug-addled insanity of Will Christopher Baer. Deliriant noir, however, is not necessarily crime fiction in a traditional sense. While it involves attempts to "solve" a "mystery," its characters need not inhabit the roles of law enforcement.

The "mystery" at the heart of deliriant noir is not a judiciary one. It involves the darkness at the limits of human perception, the blank mirror of outer limits that shimmers with the mercurial light of unknowable stirrings beyond.

This mystery is the mystery of the wholly Other, a darkness that the perceptive faculties must bend to begin to comprehend. In this sense, deliriant noir, while decidedly not weird fiction, is related to the worlds of H.P. Lovecraft, Thomas Ligotti, and Ramsey Campbell.

Deliriant noir, in short, resides within the unsettled, liminal space between weird fiction and noir.

The deliriant noir protagonist

Deliriant noir protagonists aren't cops or private detectives any more than they are professors of literature, journalists, or other representatives of the "educated" class. Deliriant are OTC drugs, comfortable on the shelf next to triple C's, cans of air duster, and bottles of gas station wine, all probably stolen. This isn't to say that the protagonist is unintelligent or morally corrupt. Such distinctions are profoundly unimportant in the deliriant noir universe. But the problems at the heart of deliriant noir

problems like what lies beyond the knowable? where have they gone? why did they commit suicide? why does their face keep appearing to me in the depths of darkness? why do I hear their voice in the static, glimpse their sad sunken eyes in the black of the mirror?

are not academic; they are not abstract. These are problems that every contemporary human faces. One can drown these questions in the unending stream of placid consumerism or sink into them by way of a deliriant trip, meet them on their own ground in the liminal darkness dripping with the muttering glossolalia of shadows. Deliriant noir opts for the latter method.

[note: This intense investigation of darkness, just like the abuse of deliriant and its connection to self-harming behavior suggests, connects deliriant noir to a kind of masochism of the soul, a self-flagellation at the altar of abject unknowability that brings to mind the work of Georges Bataille and other negative mystics.]

Further notes on the deliriant noir protagonist

B.R. Yeager on the influence of PKD:

I first encountered PKD in high school and read much of his work through my early 20s, and like everyone with that experience I'm sure it had a very formative impact. But I haven't read him in a very long time. That said, I'm positive that the central premise of *Negative Space* (drugs that impact objective reality) was inspired by (stolen from) *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*. It's a concept that has stuck with me ever since reading it, and feels perpetually relevant in that it poses so many questions about perspective, reality, our individual roles in the creation of reality, etc.²

I'm also really fond of *A Scanner Darkly*⁽²⁾³—it feels like his most successful attempt at writing about people rather than concepts, and if I remember correctly he pulled it off rather well. El-P was recently on a podcast talking about how most of PKD's characters are just regular jerk-offs, rather than these brilliant engineers or courageous war heroes, and that separated him from a lot of speculative authors of the time. I think that's easy to take for granted these days, where every sci-fi protagonist or superhero is being pitched as a relatable everyman, often in a way that feels pandering. But with PKD you get the impression that the reason his characters were like that was because he couldn't help but write from the perspective of just an average guy caught up in insane circumstances, because that's what he believed himself to be!⁽³⁾⁴

² Recall the above suggestion that deliriant abuse represents the nexus between reality and horror fiction. Deliriant noir is a genre of ambiguities and liminal spaces. The liminal space between perception and reality, and all the weirdness this nexus implies (the occult, mysticism, death) is the central concern/mystery of deliriant noir.

³ The opening lines of *A Scanner Darkly* perfectly inhabit the world of deliriant noir: "Once a guy stood all day shaking bugs from his hair. The doctor told him there were no bugs in his hair. [etc.]"

⁴ This describes all deliriant noir protagonists. In another strange crossover between fiction and reality, we can say that PKD himself is the archetypal deliriant noir protagonist.

Deliriant noir is fiction that is:

- Dark (noir) in that it addresses an "increasingly bleak world" where people feel (1) compelled to engage in self-harming behavior, and where they (2) vanish inexplicably without a trace (death). In connection to this second quality, the 2001 Japanese techno-horror film *Kairo* is a brilliant example of deliriant noir.
- Not horror, weird fiction, transgressive fiction, noir, suspense, Giallo, gothic, body horror, or psychological horror. It is a generous mix of all these things, or, more appropriately, a liminal darkness between them.
- Restlessly shifting and confused, like someone scratching the bites of bugs that aren't there (see 2006's *Bug*, with Ashley Judd).
- Hallucinogenic: characters change and dissolve, sometimes into other things entirely.
- Full of substances used deliberately to commune in some way with the darkness of unknowing. This aspect makes deliriant noir related to negative mysticism. A deliriant noir author would do well to mix their reading of contemporary weird fiction with Pseudo-Dionysius and Saint John of the Cross. Above all, Eugene Thacker's *Horror of Philosophy* trilogy should be required reading [not really. Notions of "required reading" have no place here. Take all such suggestions in this manifesto as purely personal reflections on my part. This is a self-published .pdf, not a college course].
- Soaked in static, that liminal space of non-information that becomes communicative with deliriant abuse.
- A fiction of labyrinths, being the ultimate architectural expression of delirium (in this way, delirium noir can be connected, at least in theory, to writers like Ernesto Sabato, particularly his "Essay on the Blind" in *On Heroes and Tombs*, Roberto Bolaño, and Borges)
- A melding of online culture and "IRL," or a fiction that does not distinguish any more sharply between these two realms than it does any other diametric opposition: distinctions between "I" and "thou" are blurred, as are "male" and "female." **Deliriant noir always favors a nonbinary space**, possibly because its base tenant is the permeability of the boundaries between knowing and unknowing, fact and fiction, hallucination and reality. **As such, deliriant noir is a kind of weird realism, a closer reflection of conditions as they actually exist than any system that reinforces the sharp distinctions between things established by the abstract concepts inherent in language. Which is why deliriant noir is a form of visual glossolalia, or tongue speak, the language of the divine (nothingness), whispers in the static.**

["1 pm: I got into my room where it's dark (I have blackout curtains) and sit down on the edge of my bed staring at my lamp ... All of the sudden the fucking lamp becomes my friend and I'm sitting there like" hey when did you get here dude ?" I think I said that , but I actually said gibberish. But my " friend " understood and said " I'm doing fine , do you want to go for a ride to taco bell." My" friend" said as I nod and turn to get up to head to the door, I look back and my friend is gone and realize it was just my lamp . [sic]"

Soaked in static, that liminal space of non-information that becomes communicative with deliriant abuse

Static is the noise produced in a radio receiver by atmospheric disturbances. It is a product of the man-made world and associated with its malfunction, a breakdown in communications systems, a form of electrical glossolalia that resides at the event horizon of understanding. These disturbances occur in the liminal space between signals, a signifier whose signified is there but invisible, submerged in relation to the signals it distorts in a place inaccessible and uninterpretable by the signal itself. In this sense, static is the language of ghosts, textures brought into existence by something outside of the system of language it impacts. It is this language—the unintentional language caused by interference of occult movements occurring outside the realm of knowability—that deliriant noir seeks (impossibly, there is never hope of success) to interpret. Is deliriant noir simply cosmic horror, then? No. There are no breaches into unknown dimensions, no unnamable monsters welling from a universe of Lovecraftian ruin, no portals generated by soundwaves or other methods lifted from science fiction. There's only the unending sadness of *this* world—a world of message boards and alleyways and train stations and filthy bedrooms littered with vape cartridges and condoms and the bright lights smeared by dirty car windows that reveal liminal glimpses of long-lost faces with hollowed out features.

Deliriant noir straddles the known and unknown. Its narratives are labyrinthine and submerged in static. It eschews linearity. It is always *here* and *there* at once, never "approaching" a momentous translation into the beyond, but dissolving into it until all that's left is a vaguely humanoid silhouette of ash in the shadows of an empty apartment.

