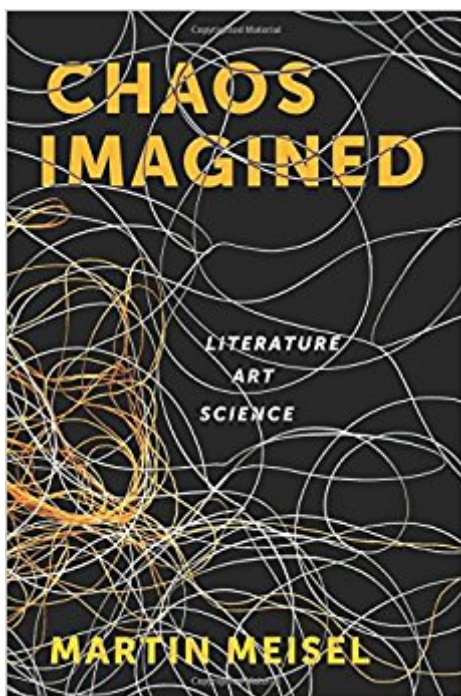


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Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science



Synopsis

The stories we tell in our attempt to make sense of the world—our myths and religion, literature and philosophy, science and art—are the comforting vehicles we use to transmit ideas of order. But beneath the quest for order lies the uneasy dread of fundamental disorder. True chaos is hard to imagine and even harder to represent. In this book, Martin Meisel considers the long effort to conjure, depict, and rationalize extreme disorder, with all the passion, excitement, and compromises the act provokes. Meisel builds a rough history from major social, psychological, and cosmological turning points in the imagining of chaos. He uses examples from literature, philosophy, painting, graphic art, science, linguistics, music, and film, particularly exploring the remarkable shift in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from conceiving of chaos as disruptive to celebrating its liberating and energizing potential. Discussions of Sophocles, Plato, Lucretius, Calderon, Milton, Haydn, Blake, Faraday, Chekhov, Faulkner, Wells, and Beckett, among others, are matched with incisive readings of art by Brueghel, Rubens, Goya, Turner, Dix, Dada, and the futurists. Meisel addresses the revolution in mapping energy and entropy and the manifold effect of thermodynamics. He then uses this chaotic frame to elaborate on purpose, mortality, meaning, and mind.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Meisel has a unique perspective, remarkable command of examples, and astute use of etymologies. His discussions of Sophocles, Calderon, Chekhov, Beckett, and Stoppard are matched

by equally detailed and thoughtful considerations of graphics by Otto Dix, the landscapes of Turner, War and Peace, Zola's Rougon-Macquart series, and Haydn's Creation. (Ross Hamilton, Barnard College) Meisel's magnum opus is a heroic act of defiance against its own subject matter: an enlightening, judicious, cohesive history of three millennia of thought about the terrors and attractions of chaos. The book moves with steady confidence through literature, science, art, and philosophy, illuminating many varieties of darkness and finding convincing and original connections across centuries and continents. With authority and energy, Meisel creates a whole new field of study. (Edward Mendelson, Columbia University) This extraordinary, encyclopedic exploration of how artists, poets, philosophers, and scientists have imagined and represented chaos explores not chaos in the abstract but those crucial transitions to (and from) chaos that are so intricately represented in the most complex artworks. The unpredictable is then made not predictable but endlessly fascinating. Martin Meisel's is a bravura performance, one of those rare critical studies not for one but for all seasons. (Marjorie Perloff, Stanford University) This exhilarating masterpiece can only have emerged from a mind steeped in physics as an undergraduate and theater as a graduate student, followed by the broadest explorations in a lifetime of scholarship. The world may have emerged from the quantum 'chaos' of the Big Bang, but Meisel has ordered everything since beautifully. (David Helfand, author of A Survival Guide to the Misinformation Age) [An] ambitious multidisciplinary work. (Publishers Weekly)

Martin Meisel considers the long effort to conjure, depict, and rationalize extreme disorder, with all the passions, excitements, and compromises the act has provoked. He builds a rough history from major social, psychological, and cosmological turning points in the imagining of chaos, particularly exploring the remarkable shift in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from conceiving of chaos as disruptive to celebrating its liberating and energizing potential.

Really interesting book across a number of disciplines. The breadth and depth of research and his ability to play with it all is impressive. Seldom do I find a book that is awe inspiring and has me chuckling once and while as well. Warning, the book may cause you to buy more books.

Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science by Martin Meisel is a masterful work that serves as both a history (of sorts) of the concept of chaos as well as detailed analyses of various texts to illustrate how perceptions were expressed and eventually changed. This is not a simple read but it is quite accessible to anyone who likely is interested in an interdisciplinary volume about chaos. It is not so

much a difficult read as it is a broad read which invites readers to ponder what they have just read and to possibly (re)read the texts under discussion. This is a wonderful book to work through slowly with a blank journal at hand. The depth and breadth of Meisel's knowledge is impressive, providing excellent explanations of scientific material while also offering superb analyses of literary and philosophical texts. In doing so he manages to avoid excessive jargon (it cannot be completely avoided, some topics simply need their specialized vocabulary) but his explanations excel in the areas that require specialized terminology. Chaos underwent a significant change in how it is perceived in the 18th and 19th centuries, as Meisel illustrates remarkably. It went from disruptive and associated with evil or bad while order was its opposite, perceived as good and desirable. Chaos then became more closely associated with the freedom of potential, in no small part due to understanding that the world is more chaotic than it is ordered. I would hesitate to put this into the pop category of science-themed books that are so useful for the general public, but I do think it would be enjoyable to most who like those works. Because the author ranges over so many areas (literature, science, art, film, etc) there are many opportunities for a reader to find an interesting avenue into the topic, which makes this an ideal volume for those who like to think deeply as well as broadly. Reviewed from a copy made available by the publisher via NetGalley.

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