

## Editorial Introduction

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Surveying a century in which experience has taught us that man is capable of inventing ever more atrocious forms of violence and horror, is it necessary to remark that much of modern thought offers little to soothe, and much to exacerbate our disquiet? Nietzsche famously observed that the psychic well-being of the human organism is predicated, minimally, upon a drastically partial perspective, and ultimately upon untruth. Human cognitive defaults continue to cry out against the insights which modern physics, cosmology, genetics, neuroscience, psychoanalysis and the rest seem to require us to integrate into our worldview. As for philosophy, it has largely replaced wonder, awe, and the drive to certainty with dread, anxiety and finitude. Moreover, despite the diverse technological wonders they have made possible, the modern sciences offer little existential respite: There is no consolation in the claim that (for instance) I am the contingent product of evolution, or a chance formation of elementary particles, or that my 'self' is

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nothing but the correlate of the activation of neurobiological phase-spaces. Yet mundane thought, whether through obstinacy or inertia, maintains its stubborn course regardless, as if oblivious to their consequences, or at most allowing them to subsist at a safely delimited, solely theoretical level.

What if, prising the more disturbing elements of modern thought loose from their comfortable framing as part of an intellectual canon, we were to become fully attentive to their most harrowing consequences? What if, impatient with a consideration of their claims solely from the point of view of their explanatory power and formal consistency, we yielded to the (perhaps ‘unphilosophical’) temptation to experiment with their potentially corrosive effects upon lived experience? If the overriding affect connected with what we ‘know’ – but still do not really *know* – about the universe and our place in it, would be one of horror, then, inversely, how might the existing literature of horror inform a reading of these tendencies of contemporary thought?

These are some of the questions with which this volume of **COLLAPSE** sets out to grapple, imagining for a moment a philosophy absolved of humanistic responsibilities, devoting itself to the experimental marshalling of all possible resources in the service of a transformation that would no longer be circumscribed within the bounds of the purely theoretical, and thus striking an alliance with those affects which, for the most part elided, nonetheless haunt philosophical thought like its very shadow. A philosophy, then, bound to experiment with the employment of horror, that its insights might begin slowly but effectively to erode anthropic automatism.

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Such experiments are already being undertaken – not for the most part by philosophers, but by those working in literature and the arts who, drawing upon the resources of modern thought, have devised means by which to produce *experiences* of the conceptual upheavals characteristic of the post-Enlightenment age. It is the scenarios of weird and horror fiction, the excessive existential sufferings of literature, the abstract emotional engineering of sound-art and music, and the poetical extrapolations of artists, that are apt to put us in the place of individuals set loose from the protective envelope of consensual reality, forced to integrate directly the lacerating force of thoughts usually blunted (even – or, sad to say, *especially* – in philosophical discourse) by the knowledge that they are, after all, ‘*only* thoughts’. It is through them that we identify ourselves with tormented individuals compelled – even if only momentarily – to *live the problem* of the rational corrosion of our cherished self-image, to viscerally absorb thoughts ‘whose merest mention is paralysing’ (Lovecraft).

In the twentieth century, SF, weird fiction, and horror in particular have furnished a laboratory for shaping narratives pointedly informed by the conceptual paradoxes produced by modern science and philosophy. And increasingly, philosophy itself, and the high arts which so long looked with disdain upon such pulp fictions, are realising with what anticipatory clarity these genres have formulated problematics which are becoming ever more pressing, not only conceptually and aesthetically, but even politically (given what is at stake in our maintenance of a naïve, comfortable self-image even as the most speculative theoretical insights are immediately and ruthlessly operationalised throughout the sociopolitical and commercial spheres, from advertising to healthcare, from warfare to banking).

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Given this discursive intersection between the attempt to rethink reality through contemporary science and philosophy, and the tropes of the horror ‘genre’, then, there is a certain logic in examining together conceptual armature and artistic dramatisation. It was this double-edged approach that we decided to take in the present volume, by bringing together contributions from authors of weird fiction, artists, and philosophers – only to discover ourselves vindicated by the impossibility of determining where the concept ends and the horror begins. The theme thus presented an opportunity to bring more fully to fruition **COLLAPSE**’s vision of an integration of elements originating from very different spheres, mutually catalysing so as to produce a series of conceptual ‘interzones’.

**GEORGE SIEG**’s contribution ably demonstrates how, in examining the nature of horror as an affect, a rich intersection of cognitive, conceptual, existential and political stakes comes into view. Firstly, unlike the essentially animal responses of fear and terror, horror attaches especially to the conceptual abstraction and reflexivity attendant upon self-consciousness – which is as much as to say that *homo philosophicus* is defined by a capacity for feeling horror. As Sieg argues, horror is characterised more through its victims than through its predators, and the victim’s itinerary is always that from innocence to knowledge. Corollary to this is the impossibility of flight to a ‘critical’ position on horror, since it is ‘always already’ (even such hoary philosophical locutions reveal a menacing aspect here ...) the horror of *knowing* horror – whence Sieg’s characterisation of horror as peculiarly ‘gnostic’ (thus introducing a recurrent theme of this volume).

Sieg locates the historical kernel of horror in the endotropic amplification of an anthropological

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commonplace – the Zoroastrian concept of *druj* as xenophobia turned inward. However, in order for horror to flower, he emphasises, another element is necessary – a thoroughgoing materialism, in which the knowledge of non-apparent conceptual distinction – the sensitivity towards hidden otherness – is prevented from diffusing into mysticism: The very birth, one might say, of the distinction between philosophy and religion, is also the birth of horror. It is this compaction, suggests Sieg, which finally blocks all exit from a self-referential universe pregnant with horror and yet (or precisely because it is) entirely rational – a universe in which the innocent victim is defenceless before the monstrous knowledge which invades them.

In his contribution **EUGENE THACKER** details how theology has, nevertheless, maintained a consistent historical relation to horror. His ‘Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror’ examines the extent to which the concept of ‘life’ owes its integrity to an immanent ‘after-life’ which is the proper object of horror. If life is defined by a duplicity – the distinction between the living being and life ‘itself’ – then, according to Thacker’s historical survey of the ‘teratological noosphere’, in the undertow of the questioning of life we always find changing conceptualizations of afterlife, whose horrific avatars are so many embodiments (or disembodiments) of this problematic duplicity. They provide us with a handle on a fundamental question of biopolitics in its varying historical forms: The suppression of the after-life immanent to life, whose horror reveals that which is already there prior to individual lives, the anonymous Levinasian ‘there is’ which, Thacker argues, is ‘a point of attraction for ontology’ – in Thacker’s coinage, a ‘nouminous’ (both noumenal and numinous) life. However as Thacker’s ‘disputations’ deepen, the ‘always-receding horizon’ of the

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concept of life leads him to a more radical consideration of 'life as non-being', or the horror of 'life-without-Being'.

In their 'Czech Forest' cycle, Prague artist collective **RAFANI** take an oblique approach to confronting a horrifying episode in their national history. Although at their birth Rafani announced themselves through overtly political manifestos, by addressing this suppressed event through a reappropriation of folk art, 'Czech Forest' displays a keen ability to navigate the borders of the political, the mythical and the aesthetic. In doing so, it adds a supplement to George Sieg's argument that horror has its roots in xenophobia and the fear of the 'enemy within'.

At the end of the Second World War, Czech inhabitants of the now-liberated Sudetenland turned on neighbouring Germans, whose families in some cases had inhabited the forest region for over a century, and drove them out with vengeful ferocity. The slogans reproduced in Rafani's iconic images (from the 'Unofficial Decalogue of Czech Soldiers in the Borderland', a propaganda handbook published at the time) demonstrate starkly enough how this triumphalist convulsion relayed the horrors suffered under occupation, revisiting them once more upon the innocent. But the 'Czech forest' of the title also conducts a deeper current: the Forest, as fairy-tale locus of darkness, where children get lost, monsters lurk, and, at dusk, branch and leaf become menacingly animate. By subtly adapting the folk-art-inspired woodcuts that often illustrate such tales, Rafani's work connects the transmutation of the rage of the oppressed into xenophobic hatred, with the mythopoetic roots of fear, thus transforming the story from national history into psychogeographical fable of horror: it becomes a reminder of what lurks beneath the comfort of homeliness, and of the horror of the internal other.

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Graham Harman's emblematic invocation of 'the electrons that form the pulpy torso of Great Cthulhu' reminds us that the hard-nosed materialism that is a prerequisite for the emergence of horror finds its equally necessary counterpart in the polysemic qualifier 'pulp'. Historically describing the re-formed, low-grade paper used to manufacture magazines carrying what was, and to some extent still is, considered low-grade and derivative literature, including fantastic fiction and comics, 'pulp' came to apply also to the latter's supposedly 'generic' nature. More than coincidentally, it also sits well with what **CHINA MIÉVILLE** nominates, in his contribution, the 'new (Weird) haptic' – a certain 'palpability' associated with horror and whose avatar, Miéville proposes, is that exemplarily 'formless' creature, the octopus – *le poulpe*. Himself a contemporary giant of weird fiction, and an unashamed champion of pulp, in his essay Miéville clearly demonstrates that an attentive reading of the history of the fantastic underpins his fiction. He undertakes to extract from their various historical combinations and scissions the two currents of the weird and the 'hauntological'. Taking the 'skulltopus' and its 'extreme rarity [...] in culture' as an indicator that the coexistence of the two genres makes them no less inviolably distinct, Miéville argues that, if the rise of the weird belongs to 'crisis-blasted modernity' – the enlightenment become dark – and if in contemporary capitalism we *live* the weird, we are also haunted by ghosts of futures that never happened: the superposed temporalities of the genres expressing the tensions of post-modernity.

Disabusing us of any suspicion that the link between horror and philosophical thought is a purely modern invention, **REZA NEGARESTANI'S** contribution recounts

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how a certain hideously ingenious torture was no sooner historically recorded than its most gruesome details were employed as a conceptual resource for philosophical meditation. Building on a fragment from a lost work by Aristotle, 'The Corpse Bride' launches a necrophilic investigation into the idea of ontology as a system of metaphysical cruelty which reveals vitalism to be a 'farce' played out among the remains of the already-dead.

In imbuing a famous Etruscan torture with universal pertinence, Negarestani's Aristotle becomes a prophet of terror, insistent that any intelligible ontology as such mobilises non-belonging (or nothing) through the agency of a chain of putrefactory ratios or problematic intimacies with the dead. Aristotle assimilates the bond between soul and body with the bond between corpse and living victim, wherein only the differential layer of blackening or *nigredo* can properly be called 'life'. Yet in Negarestani's argument, even this chemistry of horror is only a preface to a deeper bond with the void which Aristotle seeks to dissimulate. The final twist in Negarestani's investigation, in which the glorification of negativity or the subtractive mobilization of non-belonging (Badiou, Zizek, *et al.*) is revealed as an implicit and unconditional affirmation of the radically exterior, adds new and macabre detail to his previous **COLLAPSE** essays on absolute exteriority and 'affordance': survival becomes an art of living with the dead, of maintaining a ratio of intensive decay to extensive putrefaction, of abiding in *nigredo*.

What follows from Negarestani's probing of the problematic conjunction of *nekrous* and *philia*, the dead and the essence of affirmation, reads like a thoroughly perverse twisting of Deleuze's dialectic of problem and solution, and

a retrospective ‘blackening’ of the history of differential calculus he associates with it: for ‘what could be worse for vitalism than at once being animated through a necrophilic alliance, and simultaneously, protected under the aegis of the void’?

The work of **JAKE AND DINOS CHAPMAN** has continually toyed with the cohabitation of horror and laughter, employing the debasement of form and image as a weapon against moral self-certainty. Proof of concept in this respect was achieved in their (2004) ‘improvement’ of Goya’s famous *Disasters of War* through ‘rectifications’ that yanked the atrocity-victims into a cruelly absurd cartoon universe that addressed the viewer far more intensely and disquietingly than the ‘originals’ with their patina of historical didacticism and art-historical legitimation.

In the drawings they contribute to our volume, the Chapman brothers continue a preoccupation with the uncannily vacant images of the children’s colouring book (see e.g. *Gigantic Fun* [2000], *My Giant Colouring Book* [2004]). In *I Can See*, vulgarised Bataillean themes vie with the vacant potency of stereotyped simulacra reproduced for juvenile consumption; the comically brutal irruption into these adumbrated banalities of fragments of body-horror, and an insidious cross-breeding with the Chapmans’ own stock of cartoon atrocities, engenders a menacing air of inanity that resists easy decipherment. The artists’ programmatic impoverishments, testing the limit at which the image will cease to conduct the craving for improvement, might be read in the light of Negarestani’s Aristotelian arithmetic as a willed acceleration of the putrefaction of the form of art, an iterative process of decay which, however, only ever momentarily disturbs the veneration of ‘what remains’.

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The Chapmans' extended practical joke on the art-world continually subverts any anticipation that a work should supply abreactive or cathartic moral reinforcement through didactically-framed images ('eye-care'?). Instead it invites a jarring and problematic convulsion, an irresolvable *horror vacui*.

If Lovecraft's name resounds throughout this volume, making several of his tales 'required reading' for the collected articles, it often does so through the filter of another work. Hardly a work of 'secondary literature' – despite its biographical form, it is more of a passionate affirmation and exacerbation of Lovecraft's great themes – MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ's *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*<sup>1</sup> is one of the few studies to successfully explore the singular qualities of Lovecraft's work. And, as little as it may seem evident at first, reading Houellebecq's own work through his appreciation for Lovecraft reveals a profound influence. Houellebecq's characters too live out the 'unlivable', encountering in heightened form the cosmic horrors which modern society simultaneously unleashes and suppresses; they are individuals who have taken into their very soul the full weight of what we know about our universe and our place within it. Yet unlike Lovecraft's doomed heroes, for the most part Houellebecq's remain trapped within the banal everyday: with no respite even through the negative transcendence of madness, the world becomes a relentless trial, its everyday rituals and objects beacons of desolate horror. Houellebecq's poems – a selection of which we are delighted to include in this volume translated into English for the first time – distil his powerful vision into translucid moments of dread certainty.

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1. Trans. D. Khazeni, San Francisco: Believer Books, 2005.

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The poems record moments when the obtuse momentum of life draws it momentarily into proximity with the indifference of the universe; they offer no affirmation, no redemption, but only an icy clarity, a kind of conciliation with this indifference. The most innocuous spaces of the everyday ('the insides of cupboards') become abysmal revelations, whilst the empty repetitions of life reveal time as an implacable horror of merciless recurrence 'every day, until the end of the world'.

In his reading of the work of Thomas Ligotti – one of the foremost contemporary exponents of weird fiction – in tandem with the neurophilosophy of Thomas Metzinger, **JAMES TRAFFORD** argues that the horrifying travails of Ligotti's protagonists give phenomenological expression to insights anticipating those presented in Metzinger's extraordinary treatise *Being No-One*. The latter includes explicitly as one of its goals the achievement of a theory that can be 'culturally integrated';<sup>2</sup> Trafford's suggestion is that such an integration may imply a passage through horrors similar to those described – and generated – by Ligotti's singularly suffocating tales.

Metzinger's central contention is that the apparent immediacy or transparency of phenomenological appearances owes itself to an instrumental miscognition: transparency is in fact a 'special form of darkness'. Ligotti's fiction, premised upon the catastrophic undoing of this miscognition, this protective opacity, documents the experience of the unravelling of selfhood.

Sieg argues that the monster is a less indispensable element of the horror genre than the victim, and it is the victims in Ligotti's fictions, in their plumbing of the depths

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2. T. Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (London: MIT Press, 2004).

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of a 'spinning abyss' (recalling the 'layers within layers of horrific depravity' revealed to Sieg's gnostics) that Trafford sees as revealing the dark truth of Metzinger's 'nemocentrism'.

In his own contribution, **THOMAS LIGOTTI** demonstrates that not only is self-consciousness a precondition for horror, the two are inextricable. 'Thinking Horror' is thus a pleonasm: the new epoch heralded by the dawn of self-consciousness is characterized by the production of 'horrors [and] flagrantly joyless possibilities' and – swiftly ensuing – the erection of psychic defences against truth, either explicit, socialised, or in the form of commonplace ironies and homely platitudes ('being alive is okay').

If Ligotti's fictions represent so many twisted descents into the void, here it is offered to us neat, in the manner of a classic, if unhinged, essayist, and with a certain humour indissociable from such dismal truths. Eschewing any orientation of his position according to the standard co-ordinates of a philosophical orthodoxy, Ligotti introduces us to the obscure figures who form his secret lineage of pessimism, and invents a pulp philosophy at once bracing for its brutal honesty and perversely enjoyable for its mordant wit.

Whilst much contemporary thought remains doggedly committed to continuing the perennial philosophical battle against mechanism and determinism, focusing increasingly sophisticated conceptual resources on the characterisation of 'singularities' or 'events', Ligotti aligns himself, against 'the crushing majority of philosophers', with a pessimistic creed which, refusing to imprudently postulate such exceptions, instead assigns itself the sole task of outlining the futility of man's lot and the comical details of his desperate attempts

to think without thinking horror. Ligotti rightly locates the interest of this programme less in its conceptual innovation than in its audacious defiance of the snares of rhetoric and the delights of intellectual sophistication. For, rather than reason, is it not these latter passions which govern more ‘sophisticated’ philosophical architectonics, and in doing so obscure the conceptual vistas that might open up to those brave or foolhardy enough to interrogate philosophically the ‘taboo commonplaces’ which they superciliously outlaw?<sup>3</sup> For Ligotti, though, perhaps even such interrogations risk tainting the crystalline clarity of thinkers such as Zapffe and Mainländer, for whom the real question swiftly becomes a practical one – in a reprise of the Gnostic abhorrence of nature and will-to-extinction.

One might of course argue that, even in writing, such thinkers, and Ligotti himself, yield to the tide of life. Even the will to know, to think, and to write, may itself be a sublimated form of the *not knowing* that is crucial to survival. But if thinking and writing can themselves be sources of distraction, a thinking and writing of ‘concept horror’ attempts to force the reader to secrete something of the poison that is buried within them; it is a kind of demonic invocation. No less than his fictions, Ligotti’s straightforward account of our ‘malignant uselessness’ succeeds in so far as its language – like that of Lovecraft’s eldritch incantations – ceases to be representational and begins to summon the very desolate reality it describes, doing away with all cultivated distance and calm objectivity. Ligotti counsels precisely this surreptitious promotion of disillusionment, to be carried out patiently by those in every age to whom it

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3. A rare and fine example of such a dispassionate experiment in nihilism is Ray Brassier’s recently published *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007). (See also ‘The Enigma of Realism’ in *COLLAPSE II*, 15-54.)

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falls to carry on the bad work, hastening the dissolution of the horrors of consciousness and life, and returning us to the void.

Ligotti's text appears in our volume alongside a series of photographs by **OLEG KULIK**, a Russian artist whose work includes photography and photoassemblage but which culminates in his extraordinary live actions.<sup>4</sup> One of the first artists from post-Soviet Russia to have garnered international attention, Kulik's work thematises the porous boundary between animal and human (a tendency which reached its infamous apex in 'Dog House' [1996] when, exhibiting himself as a chained canine, Kulik was arrested for physically harming and mentally traumatising members of the public who flouted the warning to 'beware of the dog'). As well as extending Kulik's researches into what Mila Bredikhina has called 'zoophrenia',<sup>5</sup> Kulik's 'Memento Mori' complexifies the dialectic of life and death, presenting us with images of creatures who are doubly dead – already corpses, their deaths have been preserved through interment in a museum. Of course, we still cannot help reading their visages as anthropomorphic signifiers, now all the more macabre. Evincing all the stuffed-shirt dignity of victorian portraiture, the photographs could also be read as an extended 'family tree' – an ancestral archive we might prefer to keep in the closet. Not only do they act as 'memento mori', reminding us of the horror of personal death; they also remind us, as does Ligotti, of the senseless and indifferent continuum of life of which we are an insignificant part, and of the absurd folly of our enshrining any part of it, stuffed and preserved, for posterity. Perhaps Kulik thus identifies in advance the museums and

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4. See the essential *Oleg Kulik: Art Animal* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2001) for documentation of Kulik's work from 1993-2000.

5. *Ibid.*, *passim*.

commemorative discourses in which his own work is destined to be preserved as cultural mausolea, even as he promotes the simultaneous fascination and horror that the mummified object, in its living death, evokes.

The alternately accusing and mutely questioning faces of the dead monkeys describe a strange twisting associative dance with Ligotti's text, the nuances of dumb bewilderment and silent petition inviting us to identify ourselves simultaneously with Kulik's photographic subjects and the hapless, self-deluding targets of Ligotti's rant. A deeply felt unease, and the troubled laughter that accompanies it, is the inevitable initial response to this marriage of text and image. But ironically, read within the context of Kulik's work, 'Memento Mori' obliquely hints at an egress from Ligotti's dead end. For Kulik's performances seek a zoophrenic overcoming of the limitations of the anthropic through a plunging into the animal. The involvement of 'the point of view of different biological species in aesthetic practice,' the artist proposes, 'will produce a new renaissance'<sup>6</sup> – Since the anthropomorphisation of the animal can only subject it to a further death, we should rather *zoomorphise the human*. This strategy of a 'forward-to-nature'<sup>7</sup> zoofuturism implies that escape from 'the crisis of human schizophrenic culture'<sup>8</sup> might involve intimacy with a horror that walks on four legs – a horror that has left its teeth-marks on witnesses to Kulik's uncompromising and profoundly disturbing animal-becomings.

In this volume we present the final part of a 'trilogy' of essays by **QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX**, which proposes a

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6. *Ibid.*, 1.

7. *Ibid.*, 51.

8. *Ibid.*

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wholly different, rationalist, antidote to despair. In previous contributions, Meillassoux presented his thesis of ‘absolute time’ or ‘the necessity of contingency’, founded upon a re-examination of Hume’s problem.<sup>9</sup> In ‘Spectral Dilemma’, he unveils the ethical consequences of the position, introducing the conception of the ‘virtual god’ that lies at the heart of the philosophical system to which the acclaimed *After Finitude*<sup>10</sup> – although a significant intervention in its own right – is a prolegomena. In his meditation on irremediable bereavement, Meillassoux asks, with regard both to the spectres of those whose loss is personal to us, and to those belonging to the atrocities of the last century and which seemingly cannot be dispelled, how it is possible to escape the shadow of such deaths, thus to hope once more. Meillassoux’s answer to this question will surprise many, but undoubtedly constitutes a consistent development from his central philosophical contentions. Identifying the dilemma presented by the theist and atheist responses to the demands of ‘essential mourning’ – namely, that one must hope something for the dead, but that any *existing* god, having to be held responsible for their sufferings, can only be the object of horror and repugnance rather than veneration – Meillassoux shows that the ‘impossible’ conciliation of the parties must be sought through a thinking of the *divine character of inexistence*, which is further expanded into a very particular modal thesis, revealing the solution to the ‘spectral dilemma’ to be a formal counterpart to the speculative-rational solution of Hume’s problem.

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9. Q. Meillassoux, ‘Potentiality and Virtuality’, *COLLAPSE* Vol. II (2007), 55-82 and R. Brassier ‘The Enigma of Realism’, 207-34, in the same volume; ‘Subtraction and Contraction’, *COLLAPSE* Vol. III (2007), 63-107.

10. Trans. R. Brassier (London/NY: Continuum, 2008).

Meillassoux presents us here with a foretaste of what he will develop of a *divinology*, in rupture with the very couplet a/theism. But if the question for the bereaved is then no longer that of having enough time to mourn, but of *what type* of time, then, glancing forward to **BENJAMIN NOYS**' reading of Lovecraft's conception of time, we might wonder whether the god who is to come, but whose arrival depends upon a lawless 'hyperchaos', is not destined to visit upon its devotees a '*Horror Temporis*' more terrible still than the dilemma from which it frees them. Inspired by Meillassoux's conception of 'absolute time', Noys suggests that, (as Harman argues) the comparison between Lovecraft and Kant does not hold good, at least one affinity between them may yet be attested: in the introduction into weird fiction of the affect corresponding to the 'empty form of time'. Time, released from its anthropocentric cycles, becomes unhinged and threatening in its indifference to humanity; fully purified, as in Meillassoux, of sufficient reason, it implies a 'suspension of natural laws'. Invoking the 'arche-fossil' as emblem of cosmic temporal disquiet, Noys notes that the Meillassouxian universe, freed from the yoke of the Principle of Sufficient Reason by a time whose vicissitudes are not even ameliorated by lawfulness, carries the Lovecraftian implication of a 'material "outside" responding to no law', a truly 'unmasterable' god – it is the universe of *Azathothic materialism*, releasing us 'into the experience of the horror of [...] the seething vortex of time'. And, as we know, those of Lovecraft's protagonists who fall under the eldritch shadow of beings hailing from this 'outside', far from finding their hope replenished, finish traumatised and deranged. Given the trajectory of 'irrealism' which accompanies the discovery of *horror temporis*, Noys concludes fittingly by showing how Peaslee's 'researches', unsatisfactorily abridged

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in the ending of Lovecraft's tale, might be completed from the perspective of a contemporary philosophy of the real which reveals time itself as the 'shadow'.

German artist **TODOSCH**<sup>11</sup> (whose work, like that of Oleg Kulik, has involved an uncanny intimacy with the animal: one of his live actions, connected with the infamous 'Hundetunnel' project in Chicago,<sup>12</sup> involved implanting dog fangs into his mouth for a year) produces work which seems to invite myths and/or rationalisations whilst simultaneously repelling them: How to 'explain' live actions causing great public inconvenience and stress-testing public reaction (various Sisyphean labours including dragging six carriages of scrap through the streets from Berlin to the Hanover Expo); fictional institutions (*Das Falten von Böhmen*, *Conscious Force*) which realise themselves through an exhaustive documentary archive; or the painstaking production of strange objects (cute pokemon-like critters that turn out to have been carved from Carrera marble) like fetishes of a classical alien culture? A part of their disarraying force, and the irresistible desire to quell it with some narrative, results from a forced confrontation with the brute materiality of the heterogeneous matter that surrounds us but whose opacity and intractability are systematically suppressed through commodification and habituation. Refusing to make it serve him, as an artist Todosch repeatedly takes the burden of (physical, informational, cultural) 'stuff' upon himself. The drawings which he contributes to this volume of **COLLAPSE** might be understood both as a depiction and a channeling of this heterogeneous, cloacal, sinewy, abstract matter. The 'stuff' is never quite recognisable, but is recognisably

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11. A.K.A. Thorsten Schlopsnies. See <http://todosch.felix-werner.net/>

12. See 'Thorsten Schlopsnies – Todosch', in *Umelec* 2, 2005, 51-4.

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*impure*, and evidently in the process either of coagulation or of decomposition – a research study from one of Todosch’s fictitious institutions, *The Institute for Recycling Reality*?

Quite apart from the general ineptitude attacked by Graham Harman, there is a particular want of critical finesse in denouncing as ‘continental science fiction’ the work of IAIN HAMILTON GRANT, who his readers will know as the foremost exponent of *steampunk materialism*,<sup>13</sup> but who has latterly become – judging by his more recent works’ protracted descent into what he has described as ‘the nuclear night of the unthinged’<sup>14</sup> – chief scribe of *idealist horror*. In his essay on Lorenz Oken, which accompanies Todosch’s drawings, Grant adds an extraordinary coda to the powerful case put in his recent book<sup>15</sup> for the contemporary importance of a philosophy of nature.

As anticipated in Grant’s earlier account in **COLLAPSE**<sup>16</sup> of the necessarily speculative form of its central problem – that of accounting for its own possibility qua natural production – the chief horror of naturephilosophy is that of an evacuation of the ‘comfort zone of interiority’.<sup>17</sup> If ‘the Idea is exterior to the thinking, the thinking is exterior to the thinker, and the thinker is exterior to the nature that produced it’, then naturephilosophy’s vocation, in the shape of thinking the production of thought, is to turn ‘us’ inside

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13. See, e.g. ‘At the Mountains of Madness: The Demonology of the New Earth and the Politics of Becoming’, in *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. K. A. Pearson (London: Routledge, 1997); and ‘Burning AutoPoiOedipus’, in *Abstract Culture* 2:5 (At [http://www.cru.net/swarm2/2\\_auto.htm](http://www.cru.net/swarm2/2_auto.htm)).

14. ‘The Chemistry of Darkness’, in *PLI: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 9 (2000), 36-52: 36.

15. *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (NY/London: Continuum, 2006).

16. See ‘Speculative Realism’, in **COLLAPSE** III, 307-449.

17. *Ibid.*, 334, 343.

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out, in the process making it impossible ‘for anyone to recognise themselves in the production of their thoughts’.<sup>18</sup> This is accompanied, too, by an unpleasant community with the lower orders, far beyond zoophrenia (and even *within* the individual – in Oken’s theory of recapitulation the body becomes an infolded horror in which the head is a spine, the jaws and teeth deterritorialized limbs and nails ...).

Since a universe where even thought is a natural production, its ‘content’ thus having no necessary purchase on that production, is indeed something ‘very difficult to imagine’,<sup>19</sup> we might say that a successful naturephilosophy would be a kind of forcible manipulation of the imagination; that it must appear in the form of a literally *mind-bending* speculative science/fiction and a brutal dismemberment of the body of representational thinking, relegating the Kantian a priori to a mere natural-historical *prius*, thought being separated from its conditions not by some absolutised transcendental membrane but by an asymmetry in the time of production.<sup>20</sup> Naturephilosophy thus provides the formal schema for precisely that negation of the ‘insularity of transcendental subjectivity’ which (as Trafford argues) is harboured by the neuroscientific viewpoint and which afflicts Ligotti’s tormented protagonists.

If this gives us permission to speak of naturephilosophy as a kind of intellectual self-harm, an auto-horrification, Grant insists that against its ‘better judgement’, contemporary philosophy must indeed inflict this harm upon itself once again. Does post-Kantian philosophy, he asks, bowed by the blows of naturalism, dare escape the ‘trap’ of

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18. *Ibid.*, 343.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 343.

reasserting its ‘comfort zone’ through some neo-Fichtean subordination of the natural conditions of thought (irrecoverably – indeed horrifically – excessive for thought itself) to a pacificatory illusion of self-knowledge, and a resubordination of physics to ethics? In reasserting the need for a (necessarily speculative) account of nature to revoke Kant’s ‘daring act of reason’ which ineluctably peters out into the ‘ethical process’, Grant selects the model in which naturephilosophy’s science-fictional credentials are most ostentatiously paraded – Lorenz Oken’s monstrous (in size as in content) account of the natural generation of the universe.

In pursuing the ultimate ground of nature on the basis that the whole of nature is involved in each part, Oken characterises what Thacker described as the immanent ‘after-life’ of life as a universal Ur-slime [*Urschliem*]. But since each successive sphere of nature constitutes an appearance of ‘something from nothing’, then that ‘nothing’ appears as another element in the naturephilosophical system: Ur-slime and Zero, mucus and matheme, are thus pitted against each other as true genetic elements of nature. Grant’s negotiation of Oken’s twisted dialectic of Zero, the ‘sink’ at the ‘core’ of existence, and Slime as its ‘oozing ground’, ends in the affirmation of an ‘ontological queasiness’ that cannot be ceded to the hygienic instinct. In a conclusion which demonstrates the capacity of naturephilosophy to offer new and profound readings of contemporary philosophical problems – in this case that of Badiou’s mobilisation of a dialectic of ‘animal’ and ‘number’ against Deleuze – Grant argues that the impossibility of abstracting away ‘the shock of the objective world’ means that there can be no ‘slime-free matheme’ unless via a unilateral assertion of

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the impossibility of a philosophy of nature – which would be simply to blanch squeamishly at that twisting, oozing process which *is* thinking (or being thought by) nature.

Using the search-engine as a stratigraphical probe to sample the online collective unconscious, artist **STEVEN SHEARER** assembles vast archives (sometimes partially exhibited as works in their own right) recording otherwise uncelebrated cultural and social formations, including in particular the young fans who draw sustenance from the hyperenergetic musical genre of death metal. The *Poems* series (2001–present) draws upon an extensive archive of death metal band and song names, evidence of the genre's unremitting quest to make the cutting edges of language coincide with the violence of its sonic bombardment. Resynthesising the archive material to create a hysterical cycle of disturbing, fantastical, and absurd narratives and imagery, Shearer's well-honed method of selection yields a striking and consistent objective cross-section of this cultural matter.

Although the relentless, hysterical fervour of the *Poems* is certainly amusing at times, Shearer's work never stoops to ironic condescension. Like the lambent depictions of longhaired fans in his glowering Munch-like paintings, or in portraits which make of the humble biro an old-masterly instrument, the *Poems* are imbued with a sensitivity to a collective existential quandary whose inhabitants seek to anchor themselves to the most extreme point of reference in a world of demonstrable mediocrity. And as Shearer's *Poems* forcibly and prolongedly hold the viewer's gaze captive at the point where language is flattened out into a continuous and impassive appeal to what it can't say, his work rediscovers this extreme point. Beyond the lyrics'

superficial preoccupations with death and violence lie more real and more profound depths of horror, distributed social-existential complexes rather than personal pathologies. Seen in the light of Shearer's other work – for instance, his archive of thousands of *eBay* photographs that unintentionally afford glimpses into metalheads' home lives – the evident absurdity of the *Poems*' unremitting nihilism, the distance between such extremity and 'real life', becomes an index of isolation and of the psychic torment of socialisation, showing how the metalhead's absolute 'no' to life anchors them against their inevitable concession to the tepid homeliness of 'reality'.

In their painstakingly hand-drawn form, the *Poems* have been exhibited both in galleries and in public spaces – Notably, during the 2006 Berlin Biennial, on the flank of an eight-storey building (see p. 322). Thus transformed, they invite a little of the negative sublime unapologetically celebrated by this subculture into the overlit, overfinanced spaces of the contemporary arts whose executives once told Shearer (as documented in *Sorry Steve* [1999]): 'when we talk about celebrating cultural diversity, we don't mean yours'.<sup>21</sup> It is through a sort of sociological alchemy that Shearer distils and recombines – so they can no longer be overlooked – the potent elements of what Lovecraft might have called a *shoggoth*-culture, with all the class associations implied in this (one of Shearer's favourite epithets for his works is 'lumpen'). Shearer's poetic invocations also echo those of Lovecraft, who considered his task to be to excite a physiological response in his readers. Again, like the famously overdone Lovecraftian prose – itself frequently

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21. See the beautiful recently published monograph accompanying Shearer's 2007-8 shows in Birmingham and Toronto: *Steven Shearer* (Birmingham/Toronto: Ikon Gallery/Powerplant, 2007).

## COLLAPSE IV

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verging on the comical or hysterical – the *Poems* obsessively *invoke* or *engender*, rather than merely describing, the objectless cosmic horror that inhabits every thinking being – the non-sense that ungrounds sense – but which some, by force of circumstance, are closer to than others, so that they may even cherish the secret of its constant closeness as a source of psychic sustenance.

‘On the Horror of Phenomenology’ finds **GRAHAM HARMAN** arguing, against a certain normative notion of philosophical ‘maturity’, in favour of the demonstrable and necessary weirdness of philosophy. Turning to Husserl’s phenomenology as a test case, Harman suggests that reading its insistence on the excessiveness of intentional objects against Lovecraft’s descriptive delirium might provide some pointers towards the type of ‘weird realism’ he advocates.

Problematising a Kantian reading of Lovecraft, Harman concurs with Miéville that a hallmark of weird writing is that it takes on the ‘unspeakable’ with an ‘excess of specificity’ in description; adding that, rather than suggesting a noumenal ‘backworld’, this is the excess of a *phenomenal* realm pregnant with the menace of ‘malignant beings’ which are threatening precisely in so far as they stalk the very same web of experience whose threads we too clamber along, attempting to ignore their more ominous vibrations.

Using literature’s manufacture of unassimilable and inexhaustible objects as a model for the production of philosophical concepts, Harman insists that the latter’s excess over any definition makes them, too, excessive phenomena, intentional objects whose properties can never be exhaustively enumerated – precisely the model proposed by Husserl’s sensitive and meticulous phenomenology.

Reading the persistent poring of phenomenological description over its object against Lovecraft's circumlocutory evocations of the unspeakable, Harman discovers – like Negarestani – that 'real objects taunt us with endless withdrawal'. The probing of a disconnection between the 'excessive presence' of intentional objects and the withdrawing correlate that binds their qualities is the motor of both phenomenology and horror – As Miéville argues, the weird and the horrific are always palpable, but their pulpy flesh ultimately always escapes our grasp. What appears at first to be a mere similarity between literary style and philosophical programme reveals, according to Harman, a common strategy for intuiting this faultline in the object, this 'weird tension in [...] phenomena'.

KRISTEN ALVANSON's contribution presents us with a deformation produced in thought in its ongoing struggle to encompass the horror of nature's indifference to its classificatory desires. Her *Arbor Deformia* is a cross-section of a discursive phylum, the product of the baffled internal forces and tendencies of reason.

Images such as those in Alvanson's contribution (not least the fearsome 'spider-goat' [p. 366], whose branch in the *Arbor* surely neighbours that of Miéville's 'skulltopus') have always been the object of simultaneous fascination and repulsion. Her photographs capture unfortunate creatures in already preserved form, as 'doubly-dead' as Kulik's monkeys; all-too familiar, but so repugnant as to oblige us to a discursive dissociation. As she notes, they therefore seem to breed conceptual monstrosities, out-of-control taxonomical systems as deranged as the beings they are designed to corral into rational discourse. The *Arbor Deformia*, integrating the biological and taxonomical levels

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of this twofold teratology, gives an inventive graphical solution to the twisted logics of Paré's sixteenth-century classifications.

It is not only Miéville's essay, whose very title exhibits the combinatorial dis-ease it discusses, that vindicates this thesis according to which, when reason turns its classificatory attentions toward monsters, taxonomy itself tends to become diseased and monstrous; in fact, Alvanson's work seems a fitting coda to the entire volume in its affirmation that one does not bring the concept to bear on horror without horror simultaneously investing the conceptual.

We would like to offer our sincere thanks to all of our contributors for their work and commitment, and for having collaborated so willingly in our experiment in concept-horror. Their enthusiasm and generosity has made possible a volume whose diversity and wealth of conceptual interconnections this brief overview has only been able to hint at. We hope that the work collected here will – in line with our subtitle – provide inspiration both for further philosophical research, and for further development in the shape of literary and artistic creations fit to assemble philosophical ideas into machines for effective deterritorialization, whether it be through the 'experiential gnosis of horror', 'multiple fraud', 'zoophrenia', 'mental experiment', 'neurotechnology', the 'shock of the objective', 'molecular disembowelment', 'necrophilic reason', the 'furtive broadcasting of disillusionment' or even, in the last resort, through 'purely medical means' ... Let the horrors commence.

Robin Mackay,  
Falmouth, April 2008.