Eugene Thacker, In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy.[1]

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Pictures Without People

> I need to watch things die from
> a good safe distance.
> Tool. "Vicarious"

How can one think of complete extinction when the very possibility of it suggests the total negation of all thought? This is the question at the heart of "the dark mysticism of the inhuman," a philosophical approach laid out by Eugene Thacker in his book *In the Dust of this Planet* (2011), the first volume of his *Horror of Philosophy* theoretical trilogy.

The subject is indeed the horror of philosophy, and not the philosophy of horror, as in his discourse on the intersection of horror and philosophy Thacker does not outline a certain discipline meant to formalize the literary and cinematographic genre in question, but instead "probes" the boundaries of philosophical thinking while mapping out the genre field. That said, horror's privileged positioning is determined by the possibility of deploying its manifestations as machines of indirect referencing, which is the only way of "alluding to the uncapturable and the ever-elusory" (Kuznetsov 2018: 159). Interpreted not as a human emotion but as "the enigmatic thought of the unknown," horror allows us to determine the absolute limit of all thought through negation. Thus, horror is nothing other than "a non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically" (Thacker 2011: 9). At first glance, this thesis strongly reminds us of a well-known formula stipulating that "anxiety

[1] This review was inspired by the recent translation of the book into Russian (Thacker 2017).

reveals the nothing" (Heidegger 1993: 101). Stating that "anxiety robs us of speech," Heidegger links this "fundamental mood" to man's being, which is constituted by "the original revelation of the nothing." In Thacker's work, however, "the clear night of the nothing" turns dark. In other words, the American philosopher is not merely exploring the limits of language; his goal is to approach the horizon of thinking itself, thus resolving the philosophical challenge of modern age: "how does one rethink the world as unthinkable? — that is, in the absence of the human-centric point of view, and without an over-reliance on the metaphysics of being?" (Thacker 2011: 48). Tapping into Thacker's experimental manner of expression, we could restate this question in a different way: how does one think about the world from the perspective of "demontology"?[2] An attempt to answer this question brings us back to the problem of extinction, tinted with mysticism and apocalyptic tones, which goes hand in hand with the problem of the witness (Ibid.: 123). According to Thacker, horror is that which can guide us into the world-without-us. The conceptualization of such a world allows for the juxtaposition of philosophy and horror, and it is the relationship between them that the book aims to study.

Without the slightest intention to diminish in any way the originality of the author's theoretical experiment, I wish to highlight the weaker aspects of this dark mysticism, and will try to challenge the extent of its effectiveness in combating the human-centric worldview.

According to Thacker, the dilemma is that we cannot help but think of the world as a human one, by virtue of the fact that it is we human beings that think it. The researcher transplants this problem — which ascends in the very least to Kant's antinomies of pure reason and has by now primarily become associated with attempts to step out of the correlation circle — into the dimension of thinking about planetary catastrophes, pandemics, climate anomalies, etc. Thacker interprets all these somewhat abysmal events of the current epoch as a way for the inhuman world to persistently make its presence felt or, if put metaphorically, to "bite back" (Ibid: 4). Thacker states that the search for an answer to the question of how to conceive a world that mostly "cataclysmically manifests itself in the form of a disaster" boasts a long history in Western culture; this history is constructed on the basis of three basic interpretative approaches: mythological, theological, and existential. The mythological interpretation is inherent to Greek tragedy, which evokes "a world at once familiar

[2] Introduced by Thacker, the concept of "demontology" is meant to describe the non-anthropological philosophical demonology that refuses to separate the personal from the impersonal. In this case, such terms as "man" and "cosmos" are collapsed into paradoxical pairings ("impersonal affects," "cosmic suffering"). The purpose of Thacker's demontology is to undertake the thinking of the nothingness that lies beyond the ontological distinction of being/non-being (Thacker 2011: 46).

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and unfamiliar, a world within our control or a world as a plaything of the gods" (Ibid.: 3). In the Middle Ages, the theological interpretation, bound to the tradition of apocalyptic literature, looks at the world through the lens of Scholastic commentaries on the nature of evil, casting the non-human world within a moral framework. In the wake of industrial capitalism, the development of modern science, and the "death of God," the existential response emerges; it narrows down this philosophical inquiry to the questioning of the role of human individuals. Despite the seeming obsolescence of all these approaches, it would be mistaken to think they are a thing of the past: the mythological interpretation has been recycled by the culture industries; the theological is reflected in various forms of religious fanaticism and political ideology, while the existential "has been re-purposed into self-help and the therapeutics of consumerism" (Ibid.). The major downside of the aforementioned approaches lies in their implication of a markedly human-centric worldview. Moreover, they all lead to negative consequences manifested as climate change and catastrophes, which "the specter of extinction furtively looms over" (Ibid.: 5). Thus, Thacker shows evidence of a virtual apocalypse that becomes a kind of attractor of contemporaneity, fuelled by our inability to think the world as a non-human one.

The Dust of This Planet suggests a way out from the specified dead end of anthropocentrism; for this, the concepts in place need to be revised. Thacker redesigns the Kantian phenomenal/noumenal distinction, presenting it as the "world-for-us," which we claim to be ours, and the "world-in-itself" that surpasses the borders of intelligibility. The two notions are supplemented by the "world-without-us," its function explained in the following way:

> The world-without-us allows us to think the world-in-itself, without getting caught up in a vicious circle of logical paradox. The world-in-itself may co-exist with the world-for-us — indeed the human being is defined by its impressive capacity for not recognizing this distinction. By contrast, the world-without-us cannot co-exist with the human world-for-us; the world-without-us is the subtraction of the human from the world. […] The world-without-us lies somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific. […] This world-without-us continues to persist in the shadows of the world-for-us and the world-in-itself. (Ibid. 6)

The three terms have been assigned conceptual analogues: the world-for-us is the World, the world-in-itself is associated with the Earth, while the world-without-us with the Planet. The latter is an umbrella term for everything that is not accounted for and cannot be predicted, hiding in incongruity and abnormality. "The Planet (the world-without-

us) is, in the words of darkness mysticism, the 'dark intelligible abyss'" (Ibid: 8); we can experience it only through a powerless horror, the "sense — of an unhuman, indifferent, planet" (Ibid.: 150). This philosophical metaphor finds its origin in the idea of *Ungrund*, introduced by Böhme and later developed by Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Georges Bataille's notions of general economy and darkness as an absorption into the outside, Emmanuel Levinas' concept of *il-y-a*, as well as Arthur Schopenhauer's nihil negativum (Ibid: 140, 145–150, 138, 129, 19). Through these quasi-scholastic speculations on demonology, occult philosophy, the horror of theology, and darkness mysticism, Thacker brings us to an idiosyncratic "verdict": "we should delve deeper into this abyss, this nothingness, which may hold within a way out of the dead end of nihilism. […] The only way beyond nihilism is through nihilism" (Ibid.: 157). This "dark" credo may be the only so-termed practical recommendation derived from the concept of "Cosmic Pessimism" — this concept allows for a bringing together of all of the book's different threads:

> There is only the anonymous, impersonal "in itself" of the world, indifferent to us as human beings, despite all we do to change, to shape, to improve and even to save the world. We could be even more specific and refer to this perspective not just as cosmic, but as a form of "Cosmic Pessimism." The view of Cosmic Pessimism is a strange mysticism of the world-without-us, a hermeticism of the abyss, a noumenal occultism. It is the difficult thought of the world as absolutely unhuman. […] Its limit-thought is the idea of absolute nothingness, unconsciously represented in the many popular media images of nuclear war, natural disasters, global pandemics, and the cataclysmic effects of climate change. (Ibid.: 17)

Thus, Cosmic Pessimism is offered to us as a way out from the dead end of the human-centric worldview. However, we should ask ourselves whether this outlook is not a mere manifestation of a negative anthropocentrism? As Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros De Castro point out, speculations on the world without humans eventually turn out to be inseparable from the human point of view. The thing is that such speculations are implicitly based on the idea that a negation of the human is a necessary condition for the world to exist. Thus, disguised as realism, what is offered to us is a curious negative idealism, which is far from free of anthropocentrism. On the contrary, this negative anthropocentrism is perhaps the only really radical form of anthropocentrism itself (Danowski and Castro 2017: 35).

To prove this thesis is tenable, let us appeal to some of the statements within Thacker's philosophical demonology. The researcher characterizes the "demon" as a placeholder for a non-human agency. In other

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words, the demonic is merely a conceptual substitute for the non-human as the limit of all thought. That said, "the demon is inseparable from a process of demonization" (Thacker 2011: 25). However, is the very equation "demonic = non-human" not enshrined in the very same logic of demonization? According to Thacker, "demons swarm about [...] in films" (Ibid.: 22). One of the most vivid examples of demonic cinematography is *Jacob's Ladder* (1990). To my mind, this film presents a good case for elaborating arguments against nihilism, pessimism, and "obsession" with the dark — currently widespread among many theoreticians. The main character in the film is pursued by demons that are completely "*inhuman*." In a key scene, the characters discuss Eckhart's[3] ideas:

> "You ever read Meister Eckhart?"
> "No."
> "How did you get your doctorate without reading Eckhart? [...] Eckhart saw hell, too. You know what he said? He said the only thing that burns in hell is the part of you that won't let go of your life — your memories, your attachments. They burn them all away. But they're not punishing you, he said. They're freeing your soul. [...] So the way he sees it... if you're frightened of dying and you're holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels freeing you from the earth. It's just *a matter of how you look at it,* that's all." (Lyne 1990)

Here, Eckhart's mysticism shows similarity with Deleuze's affirmativism. In his work on Bacon, Deleuze emphasizes the following idea of the artist: if we are invigorated by life, we should equally draw inspiration from its shadow — that is death. This stance is far from pessimistic; it is an example of inclusive disjunction: the pessimism of the intellect + the optimism of the nerves. This peculiar "declaration of faith in life" goes hand in hand with the thesis "the struggle with the shadow is the only real struggle" (Deleuze 2004: 62). In this way, accepting death and forces beyond our control — or, in Thacker's terms, demons — does not mean sliding into nihilism and pessimism. In this sense, death is nothing more than a change of perspective that is, a transition from the molar ontological register to the molecular one: "death is a state of the living that does not cease living; death is... simply life reduced to the level of tiny perceptions" (Deleuze 2015: 79). At the same time, within this approach, nihilism refers to the molar level, where we find human conscience. Therefore, intending to indicate a way out of the anthropocentric maze, nihilism leads us right into its (dark) heart. The thought aspiring to the speculative "truth of extinction" proves to be incapable of explaining — without se-

[3] Whom Thacker mentions among other "dark" mystics (Thacker 2011: 152).

cretly feeding on the anthropocentrism it critiques — what justifies its privileged position over life (Woodward 2015: 30). A "dark metaphysics of negation, nothingness, and the non-human" (Thacker 2011: 20) determines a mode of thinking that can solely be used for "taking pictures without people" (Cronenberg 2014: 5). However, this is not at all tantamount to a leap into the "great outdoors"; it is more likely that the exposure of images will allow for keeping a safe distance. Obsessed with the idea of the dead world, Cosmic Pessimism confines itself within the "magic circle"[4] of representation: contrary to Thacker's opinion (Thacker 2011: 154; Thacker 2015: 4), "immobile sections" of cataclysms derived from popular culture carry out a solely therapeutic function; if everything is already virtually dead, contemplating the meaninglessness of life on the cosmic scale will not encourage any active engagement but instead free the *human* mind of day-to-day worries and calm it down (Woodward 2015: 33). Apart from this, what raises concern is the very transition to the cosmic scale, as the rift between the cosmological and anthropological orders — where the first is privileged — repeats in a peculiar way the modern distinction between Nature and Culture (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017: 35–36). This way, the "way out" from anthropocentrism leads us back in.

Thacker's dark mysticism does not fulfil its promise. Viveiros De Castro shows that anthropocentrism can be far more successfully avoided by ubiquitously spreading perspectives (observers), rather than in attempting to eliminate them from the world. The idea is to opt for personification instead of objectification. The former also implies that the non-human should not be demonized, but rather anthropomorphized. Thus, we can manage to do away with the principle of human exceptionality, for "to say that everything is human is to say that humans are not a special species" (Ibid.: 72). In this way, anthropomorphism appears to be the most effective tool for combating anthropocentrism, and "when everything is human, the human becomes a wholly other thing" (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 63). Whereas for radical nihilists such as Thacker the non-human demonstrate — necessarily — certain Cthulhu-like features, a perspectivist like Viveiros De Castro sees every entity in the "multiverse" as hybrid, at once human-for-itself and non-human-for-an-other. Thus, there is no sense in contemplating being-in-itself, as any being is a being-in-relation, a being-outside-of-itself. In this way, we arrive at a conclusion that is almost completely opposite to where nihilistic thinking would take us:

[4] For Thacker, the magic circle serves as a screen that, on the one hand, allows for the exposure of the non-human, while on the other protects the human from dealing with the exposed (Thacker 2011: 64–65). In this way, the magic circle simulates a non-traumatic encounter with the non-human, which is characteristic not only of horror movies but also of Thacker's conception itself.

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"Exteriority is everywhere. […] The Amerindian philosopher should therefore conclude: 'everything is always already alive'. Which does not prevent (much on the contrary) death from being a fundamental motif and motor of life, human life in particular" (Danowski and Castro 2017: 73). In their careful attention to death, Indians coincide with speculative nihilists; however, unlike nihilists, Indians hardly engage in composing odes to the dark. In his book Thacker mentions Plotinian affirmative mysticism and — quite predictably — separates his "dark" approach from it (Thacker 2011: 153). Interestingly, Viveiros De Castro also appeals to The Enneads, yet he substitutes "the molar and solar neo-Platonic metaphysics of the One for the indigenous metaphysics of stellar and molecular multiplicities" (Viveiros De Castro 2007: 24). Nevertheless, what is important here is not the mere substitution, but its outcome: unlike Thacker's demons, the "xapiripë" spirits studied by the Brazilian anthropologist are on the side of pure light, "light not images" (Ibid.: 25). This formula sounds like a motto against contemporary nihilism. Life is undoubtedly terrifying (Thacker 2011: 99). However, instead of demonizing it, we should accept those elements that we cannot control or grasp intellectually. Only then "the horror of life becomes a very pure and very intense life" (Deleuze 2004: 52) without becoming petrified in the dark iconography of theoretical "cosmicomics."

Translated from the Russian by Maria Afanasyeva

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