

In The Dust of This Planet

[*Horror of Philosophy, vol 1*]

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Preface

Clouds of Unknowing

The life of every individual, viewed as a whole and in general, and when only its most significant features are emphasized, is really a tragedy; but gone through in detail it has the character of a comedy.

~ Arthur Schopenhauer

...when you are "nowhere" physically, you are "everywhere" spiritually...Never mind if you cannot fathom this nothing, for I love it surely so much the better.

~ The Cloud of Unknowing

The world is increasingly unthinkable – a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction. In spite of our daily concerns, wants, and desires, it is increasingly difficult to comprehend the world in which we live and of which we are a part. To confront this idea is to confront an absolute limit to our ability to adequately understand the world at all – an idea that has been a central motif of the horror genre for some time.

The aim of this book is to explore the relationship between philosophy and horror, through this motif of the "unthinkable world." More specifically, we will explore the relation between philosophy as it overlaps with a number of adjacent fields (demonology, occultism, and mysticism), and the genre of supernatural horror, as it is manifest in fiction, film, comics, music, and other media. However, this relationship between philosophy and horror should not be taken to mean "the

philosophy of horror," in which horror as a literary or film genre is presented as a rigorous formal system. If anything, it means the reverse, *the horror of philosophy*: the isolation of those moments in which philosophy reveals its own limitations and constraints, moments in which thinking enigmatically confronts the horizon of its own possibility – the thought of the unthinkable that philosophy cannot pronounce but via a non-philosophical language. The genre of supernatural horror is a privileged site in which this paradoxical thought of the unthinkable takes place. What an earlier era would have described through the language of darkness mysticism or negative theology, our contemporary era thinks of in terms of supernatural horror.

In this book, the means by which philosophy and horror are related to each other is the idea of the "world." But the world can mean many things, from a subjective experience of living in the world, to the objective, scientific study of geological conditions. The world is human and non-human, anthropocentric and non-anthropomorphic, sometimes even misanthropic. Arguably, one of the greatest challenges that philosophy faces today lies in comprehending the world in which we live as both a human *and* a non-human world – and of comprehending this politically.

On the one hand, we are increasingly more and more aware of the world in which we live as a non-human world, a world outside, one that is manifest is the effects of global climate change, natural disasters, the energy crisis, and the progressive extinction of species world-wide. On the other hand, all these effects are linked, directly and indirectly, to our living in and living as a part of this non-human world. Hence contradiction is built into this challenge – we cannot help but to think of the world as a human world, by virtue of the fact that it is we human beings that think it.

However, this dilemma is not necessarily new. Philosophy has repeatedly returned to this problem of the non-human

world. While in philosophy circles today it may be called "correlationism," "accelerationism," or "atmospheric politics," for earlier philosophers this same dilemma was expressed in different terminology: the problem of "being-in-the-world," the dichotomy between "active" or "passive" nihilism, or the limits of human thought in the "antinomies of reason."

When the world as such cataclysmically manifests itself in the form of a disaster, how do we interpret or give meaning to the world? There are precedents in Western culture for this kind of thinking. In classical Greece the interpretation is primarily *mythological* – Greek tragedy, for instance, not only deals with the questions of fate and destiny, but in so doing it also evokes a world at once familiar and unfamiliar, a world within our control or a world as a plaything of the gods. By contrast, the response of Medieval and early modern Christianity is primarily *theological* – the long tradition of apocalyptic literature, as well as the Scholastic commentaries on the nature of evil, cast the non-human world within a moral framework of salvation. In modernity, in the intersection of scientific hegemony, industrial capitalism, and what Nietzsche famously prophesied as the death of God, the non-human world gains a different value. In modernity, the response is primarily *existential* – a questioning of the role of human individuals and human groups in light of modern science, high technology, industrial and post-industrial capitalism, and world wars.

The contemporary cynic – which on many days describes myself – might respond that we still live by all of these interpretive frameworks, and that only their outer shell has changed – the mythological has become the stuff of the culture industries, spinning out big-budget, computer-generated films and merchandise; the theological has diffused into political ideology and the fanaticism of religious conflict; and the existential has been re-purposed into self-help and the therapeutics of consumerism. While there may be some truth in this, what is

more important is how all of these interpretive lenses – mythological, theological, existential – have as their most basic presupposition a view of the world as a human-centric world, as a world “for us” as human beings, living in human cultures, governed by human values. While classical Greece does, of course, acknowledge that the world is not totally within human control, it nevertheless tends to personify the non-human world in its pantheon of humanoid creatures and its all-too-human gods, themselves ruled by jealousy, greed, and lust. The same can be said of the Christian framework, which, while also personifying the supernatural (angels and demons; a paternal God by turns loving and abusive), re-casts the order of the world within a moral-economic framework of sin, debt, and redemption in a life after life. And the modern existential framework, with its ethical imperative of choice, freedom, and will, in the face of both scientific and religious determinisms, ultimately constricts the entire world into a solipsistic, angst-ridden vortex of the individual human subject. In short, when the non-human world manifests itself to us in these ambivalent ways, more often than not our response is to recuperate that non-human world into whatever the dominant, human-centric worldview is at the time. After all, being human, how else would we make sense of the world?

However, one of the greatest lessons of the ongoing discussion on global climate change is that these approaches are no longer adequate. We can, instead, offer a new terminology for thinking about this problem of the non-human world. Let us call the world in which we live the *world-for-us*. This is the world that we, as human beings, interpret and give meaning to, the world that we relate to or feel alienated from, the world that we are at once a part of and that is also separate from the human. But this *world-for-us* is not, of course, totally within the ambit of human wants and desires; the world often “bites back,” resists, or ignores our attempts to mold it into the *world-for-us*. Let us call

this the *world-in-itself*. This is the world in some inaccessible, already-given state, which we then turn into the *world-for-us*. The *world-in-itself* is a paradoxical concept; the moment we think it and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the *world-in-itself* and becomes the *world-for-us*. A significant part of this paradoxical *world-in-itself* is grounded by scientific inquiry – both the production of scientific knowledge of the world and the technical means of acting on and intervening in the world.

Even though there is something out there that is not the *world-for-us*, and even though we can name it the *world-in-itself*, this latter constitutes a horizon for thought, always receding just beyond the bounds of intelligibility. Tragically, we are most reminded of the *world-in-itself* when the *world-in-itself* is manifest in the form of natural disasters. The discussions on the long-term impact of climate change also evoke this reminder of the *world-in-itself*, as the specter of extinction furtively looms over such discussions. Using advanced predictive models, we have even imagined what would happen to the world if we as human beings were to become extinct. So, while we can never experience the *world-in-itself*, we seem to be almost fatalistically drawn to it, perhaps as a limit that defines who we are as human beings.

Let us call this spectral and speculative world the *world-without-us*. In a sense, 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. To say that the *world-without-us* is antagonistic to the human is to attempt to put things in human terms, in the terms of the *world-for-us*. To say that the *world-without-us* is neutral with respect to the human, is to attempt to

put things in the terms of the world-in-itself. The world-without-us lies somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific. The world-without-us is as much a cultural concept as it is a scientific one, and, as this book attempts to show, it is in the genres of supernatural horror and science fiction that we most frequently find attempts to think about, and to confront the difficult thought of, the world-without-us.

In a sense, the real challenge today is not finding a new or improved version of the world-for-us, and it is not relentlessly pursuing the phantom objectivity of the world-in-itself. The real challenge lies in confronting this enigmatic concept of the world-without-us, and understanding why this world-without-us continues to persist in the shadows of the world-for-us and the world-in-itself. We can even abbreviate these three concepts further: the world-for-us is simply the *World*, the world-in-itself is simply the *Earth*, and the world-without-us is simply the *Planet*. The terms "world" and "worlding" are frequently used in phenomenology to describe the way in which we as human subjects exist in the world, at the same time as the world is revealed to us. By contrast, we understand the "Earth" as encompassing all the knowledge of the world as an object, via geology, archaeology, paleontology, the life sciences, the atmospheric sciences (meteorology, climatology), and so on.

What then is the "Planet"? The World (the world-for-us) not only implies a human-centric mode of being, but it also points to the fuzzy domain of the not-human, or that which is not for-us. We may understand this in a general sense as that which we cannot control or predict, or we may understand it in more concrete terms as the ozone, carbon footprints, and so on. Thus the World implicitly opens onto the Earth. But even "the Earth" is simply a designation that we've given to something that has revealed itself or made itself available to the gathering of samples, the generating of data, the production of models, and

the disputes over policy. By necessity there are other characteristics that are not accounted for, that are not measured, and that remain hidden and occulted. Anything that reveals itself does not reveal itself in total. This remainder, perhaps, is the "Planet." In a literal sense the Planet moves beyond the subjective World, but it also recedes behind the objective Earth. The Planet is a planet, it is one planet among other planets, moving the scale of things out from the terrestrial into the cosmological framework. Whether the Planet is yet another subjective, idealist construct or whether it can have objectivity and be accounted for as such, is an irresolvable dilemma. What is important in the concept of the Planet is that it remains a negative concept, simply that which remains "after" the human. The Planet can thus be described as impersonal and anonymous.

In the context of philosophy, the central question today is whether thought is always determined within the framework of the human point of view. What other alternatives lay open to us? One approach is to cease searching for some imaginary locus of the non-human "out there" in the world, and to refuse the well-worn dichotomy between self and world, subject and object. This is, of course, much easier said than done. In addition to the interpretive frameworks of the mythological (classical-Greek), the theological (Medieval-Christian), and the existential (modern-European), would it be possible to shift our framework to something we can only call *cosmological*? Could such a cosmological view be understood not simply as the view from interstellar space, but as the view of the world-without-us, the Planetary view?

Scientists estimate that approximate ninety percent of the cells in the human body belong to non-human organisms (bacteria, fungi, and a whole bestiary of other organisms). Why shouldn't this also be the case for human thought as well? In a sense, this book is an exploration of this idea – *that thought is not human*. In a sense, the world-without-us is not to be found in a

"great beyond" that is exterior to the World (the world-for-us) or the Earth (the world-in-itself); rather, it is in the very fissures, lapses, or lacunae in the World and the Earth. The Planet (the world-without-us) is, in the words of darkness mysticism, the "dark intelligible abyss" that is paradoxically manifest as the World and the Earth.

Hence, a central focus of this book is on the problem of thinking this world-without-us; and its argument is that this problem is at once a philosophical, a political, and a cultural problem. Hence the subtitle of the series, of which this book is a part: "horror of philosophy." But here a terminological clarification is in order. The term "horror" does not exclusively mean cultural productions of horror (or "art horror"), be it in fiction, film, comics, or video games. While the horror genre is an important part of culture, and while scholarly studies of the horror genre do help us to understand how a book or film obtains the effects it does, genre horror deserves to be considered as more than the sum of its formal properties. Also, by "horror" I do not mean the human emotion of fear, be it manifest in a fiction film, a news report, or a personal experience. Certainly this type of horror is an important part of the human condition, and it can be leveraged in different ways – ethically, politically, religiously – for the gain of different ends. This also deserves to be studied, especially for the ways in which reality and fiction increasingly overlap in our reality-TV culture. But "horror" in this sense remains strongly inscribed within the scope of human interests and the world-for-us.

Against these two common assumptions, I would propose that horror be understood not as dealing with human fear in a human world (the world-for-us), but that horror be understood as being about the limits of the human as it confronts a world that is not just a World, and not just the Earth, but also a Planet (the world-without-us). This also means that horror is not simply about fear, but instead about the enigmatic thought of the

unknown. As H.P. Lovecraft famously noted, "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is the fear of the unknown." Horror is about the paradoxical thought of the unthinkable. In so far as it deals with this limit of thought, encapsulated in the phrase of the world-without-us, horror is "philosophical." But in so far as it evokes the world-without-us as a limit, it is a "negative philosophy" (akin to negative theology, but in the absence of God).

Briefly, the argument of this book is that "horror" is a *non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically*. Here culture is the terrain on which we find attempts to confront an impersonal and indifferent world-without-us, an irresolvable gulf between the world-for-us and the world-in-itself, with a void called the Planet that is poised between the World and the Earth. It is for this reason that this book treats genre horror as a mode of philosophy (or, perhaps, as "non-philosophy"¹). Certainly a short story about an amorphous, quasi-sentient, mass of crude oil taking over the planet will not contain the type of logical rigor that one finds in the philosophy of Aristotle or Kant. But in a different way, what genre horror does do is it takes aim at the presuppositions of philosophical inquiry – that the world is always the world-for-us – and makes of those blind spots its central concern, expressing them not in abstract concepts but in a whole bestiary of impossible life forms – mists, ooze, blobs, slime, clouds, and muck. Or, as Plato once put it, "hair, mud, and dirt."