

The Sight of a Mangled Corpse

—An Interview with Eugene Thacker

Eugene Thacker is the author of a number of books, including *In The Dust Of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (Zero Books, 2011) and *After Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2010). His most recent is the forthcoming *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, co-authored with Alexander Galloway and McKenzie Wark (University of Chicago Press, 2013). Thacker also writes an online column for *Mute Magazine* called “Occultural Studies,” and he teaches at The New School in New York.

As consummate fans of horror and avid readers of Eugene’s writing, *Scapegoat* asked the author to engage our issue on Excess by responding to a series of questions that address the philosophical lineage of horror and its relation to speculative thought. What follows is an edited version of our correspondence.

Scapegoat Says In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine poses the rhetorical question, “What pleasure can there be in the sight of a mangled corpse, which can only horrify?” As if to take up and pervert this very point, your work as a philosopher, especially in your recent book *In the Dust of This Planet*, takes a certain pleasure in the horror of thought.¹ In fact, the “horror of philosophy”—a phrase Bataille used to characterize the fear felt by specialists when making more abstract claims of thought—is a concept entangled in many of your recent essays. What, in your estimation, is the horror of philosophy in contemporary thought?

Eugene Thacker Well, yes, the phrase “horror of philosophy” is meant to be taken in a couple of ways. Initially, I set out to write a book about the horror genre, and in particular about what H.P. Lovecraft called “supernatural horror.” But very quickly the book became something else. In asking myself why I found the horror genre so interesting I was eventually led to consider philosophical questions, which is a bit odd, since the horror genre has historically been very low-brow and unintellectual. It is only recently that we now see the likes of Lovecraft enshrined in the Penguin Classics or Modern Library editions. The origins of genre horror have always been low, from the sensationalism of the gothic novel to pulp magazines like *Weird Tales* and cult film directors like

Roger Corman, Mario Bava, and Teruo Ishii. But what I find interesting about the horror genre is not any of the elements that make it a genre—the characters, plot, setting, or style, nor the gore, the monsters, or the genre conventions. What I find interesting are the *ideas* embedded in these stories. These are stories that are concept-driven, rather than being driven by character, plot, or genre expectations. Lovecraft is a great example, though he took much of what he learned from the likes of Poe, Machen, Blackwood, and Dunsany. In a Lovecraft story you rarely get fully developed, well-rounded characters; in fact, you rarely give a damn about the characters at all. But at the core of these stories you find a fundamental question about the fabric of reality and the impossibility of ever fully knowing or comprehending it. Supernatural horror moves away from human-centric concerns over psychology, desire, motive, free will, and the like, and towards a view of a world that is either against the human, or in many cases indifferent to the human. So what was a philosophical question then becomes a religious question...

Augustine’s words are especially apt in that he assumes that pleasure cannot be said of something for which we feel horror, dread, or fear. And yet that almost exactly describes what the horror genre is all about—and it extends back to the earlier fascination with gothic novels, graveyard poetry, and the like. Ultimately, for me, it extends back to pre-modernity, to mystical texts that discuss shadows and dark-

ness, to the political theology of demonic possession, to the sanctified grotesque of the suffering body in religion, to “divine darkness;” there is a *religious* intuition here that I have always found fascinating, and it connects modern genre horror with philosophy, and in particular religious and mystical philosophy.

But going back to the “horror of philosophy”—this also means, in a more banal sense, the sort of allergic reaction many of us have to philosophy with a capital P. I include myself in this group. I did not major in philosophy as a student, in part because I was utterly bored with the analytical logic-chopping that seemed to constitute most of the discipline. It is also quite intimidating, what with massive Germanic tomes of systematic theories-of-everything filled to the brim with obscure French jargon, complete with good-old American pragmatic application (usually to politics or ethics). I also never bought the big claims philosophy often made (and makes) to know everything, to figure everything out. There is a bit of the know-it-all in philosophy that I am always skeptical of.

So the phrase reflects the ways in which the horror genre interrogates philosophy, just as much as the way that philosophy comes in to “explain” or help us understand the horror genre. I often teach Noel Carroll’s book *The Philosophy of Horror*, a book I admire very much, and the simple reversal came to me as an apt title for the series.

SS Near the conclusion of “Clouds of Unknowing,” your preface to *In the Dust of This Planet*, you explain how the genre of horror takes aim at some of the central presuppositions of philosophical inquiry, noting that horror “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.’”² How, for you, does this collection of impossible life forms relate to the practice of thinking the world-without-us?

ET Well, the idea was drawn from *After Life*, where I was interested in tracing the

contradictions inherent in the concept of “life” in philosophy and theology. Many of the twists and turns of the concept derive from Aristotle, for whom the issue of “form” was all-important. Form-giving is not only part of the life-principle for Aristotle, but forming and in-forming are also part of life processes, and this led him to his natural philosophy work. But there is also de-forming, and even un-forming as well. In much supernatural horror—particularly in the weird fiction of Lovecraft and his circle—you get “monsters” that are atypical in that they defy not only existing categories of life, but they seem to defy conceptual thought and language, as well. You either have to question the more basic presuppositions (for instance, about the division between the organic and inorganic), or you can just ignore it and invent a new category, a new name. Interestingly, we can still see this today in the sciences, with so-called “extremophiles,” organisms living in conditions in which life was not thought to be possible.

Monsters are, of course, everywhere in the horror genre. But they also have a way of becoming quite tame and domesticated within the confines of the genre through sheer repetition. There was a time when I was interested in the figure of the zombie, but at this point we have all been so inundated with zombies everywhere (a perfect example of allegory) that the *last* thing I want to read about or write about is yet another example of the living dead as metaphor for otherness or the multitude. The same has happened with other monsters, many of which have been repeated so often and with such little imagination that the only avenue left open is snarkiness and satire (e.g. the tiring reiterations of the vampire in pop culture).

What is interesting is that, arguably, this is what happens in the history of the natural sciences surrounding monsters. A monster is never just a monster, never just a physical or biological anomaly. It is always accompanied by an interpretive framework within which the monster is able to be *monstrum*, literally “to show” or “to warn.” Monsters are always a matter of interpretation. They may be taken as manifestations of religious prophecy, or they may be taken as a demonstration

of the unceasing creativity of nature, or they may be taken as curiosities and entertainment (today we should also add the interpretation of monsters as “errors” in biological information). There is one view which argues that monsters are a threat to the status quo; another view could argue that monsters are precisely what hold up the status quo, and the moment the monster appears it is recuperated and designated, given a name—even if that name is “the unnameable.” A great case study is the now-forgotten field of teratology, which was influenced by biological classification and natural history, but attempted a classification system for monsters—those beings that, by definition, could not be classified. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire’s *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l’organisation chez l’homme et les animaux* (ca. 1832–37) is a fascinating exercise in futility.

SS It seems that a common trajectory among the various lines of inquiry that comprise the philosophical tendency known as speculative realism is the movement toward a non-anthropomorphic philosophical perspective. The specificity of this trajectory is, of course, quite various, from object-oriented ontologies, to a new *Naturphilosophie*, to the more radical anti-genre of horror fiction, as in the work of Reza Negarestani. Notwithstanding the innovative philosophical contribution of these other threads of speculative realism, it seems your own work is most closely aligned with the excessive strangeness of Negarestani.³ Was this a motive behind the *Leper Creativity* symposium and publication?⁴ Can you say a little about the “conceptual persona” of Negarestani and his role in the development of the horror of philosophy, and a philosophy of horror?

ET I have always liked Reza’s works and his particular way of doing “theory-fiction.” There is always a tenuous balance in his prose between, on the one hand, being articulate and precise, and, on the other hand, developing a poetics of technical language. This is part of the play of Reza’s prose. Sometimes he is so precise that

the language breaks down and you get lost in it, as if Proust were a systems engineer. At other times he is enamoured of the poetics of technical language—of what most of us call jargon—and it almost becomes an exercise in sculpting nonsense (which is why I think the diagram works well within the context of his writing).

The thing that I don’t understand is the reception of his work. Many readers seem to forget that so-called theory-fiction has always been a part of the philosophically fringe anti-tradition. What is the bulk of Kierkegaard’s works if not theory-fiction, with his fake professors writing treatises that footnote each other? To say nothing of Nietzsche, who has, if nothing else, mapped out the stylistic terrain of theory-fiction, from the aphorism to the fable to the prophecy. And the literary examples are innumerable, not to mention the way that early-twentieth century thinkers like Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski blurred the line between philosophy and literature. I’ve also always admired Pierre Guyotat’s unreadable *en lange* novels. Closer to our time, a whole group of post-structuralist experiments in textuality are important to recognize here, from Derrida’s *Glas* to Irigaray’s *Marine Lover* to Barthes’ experiments in autobiography. And in the 1990s we had the “hyper-stition” of Warwick anti-philosophers like Nick Land (an influence on Reza), the *Virtual Futures* anthology, the *Ctheory* journal, and the hyper-theory of Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (one colleague described Kroker’s writing to me as “Adorno on speed,” but I don’t think it was a compliment). This is all to say that Reza’s *Cyclonopedia* is amazing, but that it also participates in a broader anti-tradition. Actually, I also like Reza’s earlier works, like *GAS* (on the corpse of Deleuze), as well as the various Warwick experiments from the 1990s like the CCRU (Cyber-Culture Research Unit).

I think it is safe to say that “speculative realism” is more an act of branding, or self-promotional historicizing, than anything else. Don’t get me wrong—I do find the “speculative turn” interesting, I love the job Robin MacKay is doing with *Urbanomic* and *Collapse*, and I often find myself returning to books like *Nihil Unbound*. But it has also become so self-absorbed that you feel like the speculative blogosphere

has eclipsed or become equivalent to the activity of “doing philosophy.” Maybe it has. But then again, isn’t that how “The History of Philosophy” is written? People in certain positions simply enact, by divine fiat, a movement, a program, and a pedigree. I find the works associated with Speculative Realism interesting, but I also think it’s important to note that it’s not the only game in town—there is a whole world of philosophy out there beyond the narrow confines of four or five books. We are just beginning to examine the space between analytical and continental philosophy (an unfortunate split largely the result of the academy), and we have yet to seriously explore the question of a comparative philosophy (beyond an Orientalizing relation to Zen or Sufi mysticism).

SS To return to your bestiary of the impossible, I would like to ask about another aspect of the horror of philosophy in relation to speculation and extinction. You take up the scientific concept of extinction, as explicated by Georges Cuvier and the Comte de Buffon, noting that Cuvier’s advocacy for “catastrophism”—“the theory that the Earth is periodically visited by sudden, cataclysmic events that not only radically alter the Earth’s geological composition, but the organisms living on the Earth as well”—leads to a strange problem, namely, how to conceive of extinction.⁵ As you note, Kant’s take on the problem in “The End of All Things” is to insist that any postulation about absolute negation can only be speculative. How would you characterize the “value”—in terms of ethics, philosophy, pleasure, or anything else—of such a speculative enterprise?

ET I am tempted to say that the “value” is absolutely null. Not only because such a thought—the thought of the end of all thought, as it were—entails the foreclosure of any value “for us” as human beings, but also because the very endeavour of such a speculation is, at best, a speculative failure. Kant seems aware of this in his short piece, which has a bit of satire, even sarcasm, about it. Nietzsche takes this one

step further, where he suggests that the thought of the end of all thought is really the pinnacle of humanism, in which even the possibility of human extinction is recuperated by the heroic capacity of human beings to think it, to comprehend it, to understand it, maybe even to accept it. Thus the speculative opportunity of extinction becomes, ironically, a form of therapy. This is what we see happening in culture today, where speculation about extinction is rampant, from pop science books about “the world without us” or science documentaries on “life after people.” Even the discourse around climate change and sustainability plays into this. It’s been interesting to see it shift in subtle ways. At one point not so long ago, the rhetoric was about changing our habits so as to change the planet—little changes resulting in big changes. Now it seems that it’s too late. We’ve pretty much fucked things up, and watched ourselves do it. So the rhetoric has changed from “saving the planet” (a ridiculous and naive proposition—that the planet needs to be saved by us is the height of human presumptuousness), and more towards a new rhetoric of minimizing the negative effects, doing the least amount of damage, living in the “least worst” of all possible worlds. A strange, compromised pessimism. Arguably we’re even moving into a further stage of the discourse, where it’s not just that we’ve destroyed the planet (for ourselves), and not just that we try, in our neo-hippie artisanal ways, to do the least amount of damage, but a real confrontation with the possibility that it just doesn’t matter. This is the question of nihilism, and it’s a question that Nietzsche posed over a century ago. Of course, this isn’t to advocate anything in particular. It’s not to say we should all participate in a mass, collective suicide. It’s not to say we should ignore the science and pretend like nothing has changed. And therein lies the difficulty. There’s nothing to do. And yet we keep on doing stuff, we wake up and go to sleep, we write books and occasionally read them, we talk and sometimes listen, we eat food and shit it out, we make plans and try not to think of the disappointment that might follow—all of it mostly out of habit, perhaps out of conviction or belief, perhaps out of the need to feel

that every little bit we do makes a difference, according to some kind of self-help version of the butterfly effect. The more we know about the planet and its ecology, the more we become aware of exactly how insignificant we are, no matter how many “footprints” we excitedly make upon its shores. This is the “planetary paradox.” The more we learn, the more we learn that it doesn’t matter. What becomes more and more apparent is the *indifference* of the planet to us. This is what is so alarming about our new, chaotic order of extreme weather and natural disasters—the seeming arbitrariness of it all, in spite of our attempts to be prepared, to safeguard our lives, to make meaning out of the persistence of the human. It’s as if we’re living in two parallel worlds, one which is the world “for us,” a human-centric world for human beings, blissfully deaf to the silent cacophony of the non-human world around us, a world “without us.”

SS In your commentary on “The Subharmonic Murmur of Black Tentacular Voids,” you take up Bataille’s estimation, from *The Accursed Share* as well as (somewhat more poetically) from his lesser known essay “The Congested Planet,” that the problem of scarcity is a false problem; or, perhaps more accurately, scarcity is a human problem, and thus indicates the weakness of an anthropocentric conception of the universe.⁶ Does Bataille’s cosmic libidinal materialism suggest, in your view, ways we might begin to think about climatological chaos, or, more recently, the geological reformation of the Anthropocene?

ET The first thing I should say is that the discussion about Bataille is not meant to suggest a solution to a problem as muddy and complex as that of climate change. The question of whether Bataille himself thought so is open to interpretation. His late turn to the questions of ecology and the planet are fascinating to me, in part because they are an extension of his earlier interests in eroticism, mysticism, and corporeality. And Bataille does highlight the problem with anthropocentric thinking, the way we routinely fail to connect

our individual dynamics of hope, fear, desire, and such to larger scale of environmental and planetary, and ultimately cosmic, dynamics of the same order. Bataille’s insight is that this connection to a scaled-up non-human world is not simply a way of making us feel cozy and more friendly with the world “out there”—quite the opposite. It incites in us a kind of fascinated dread, a recognition of the stark differences between our everyday world of “discontinuity” of individuals, mine and thine, and so on, and an anonymous, indifferent world of “continuity” (these are Bataille’s terms). That sense of a fascinated dread Bataille connected to mystical traditions, particularly those that culminate in self-abnegation, and the ambivalent sense of this continuity He sometimes referred to as “divinity.” Now, whether this scaled-up consciousness of the non-human is “helpful” in any way is another question. True, it may help us see things differently, but to me that’s far from being helpful.

SS To come back to your image of the “bestiary of the impossible” once again, I’d like to ask about *The Global Genome*, which remains, to my knowledge, one of the most comprehensive political economic analyses of bioinformatics out there.⁷ While it is clear that there is a political and ethical motivation behind the work, what specifically led you to this research? Since its publication in 2005, have you continued to follow the vicissitudes of the biotech industry and its cataloguing of genetic information? Has the industry developed as you anticipated, or are there areas of unexpected new research? For example, in the innovation by John Gurdon and Shinya Yamanaka to develop re-programmable adult stem-cells (for which they won the 2012 Nobel Prize in medicine), it seems that the potential for bio-informatic industrial applications is mutating; and, it seems that the public, in a broad sense, is quite comfortable with the notion of biological life as a “platform” for a scientific reprogramming.

ET Thank you for saying so. I had a

great conversation with Arthur Kroker once, and he nailed it when he told me that *The Global Genome* was really a book about death, and in particular, the political economy of death. That's spot on, and I very much had Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, as well as Bataille's work, in mind when I was writing it. Both *Biomedica* and *The Global Genome* are the result of my own, perhaps peculiar, science fictional approach to science. I remember feeling that, in some ways, the best science fiction was being done in the sciences, and they were doing it in very material, artifactual ways, by building DNA chips, molecular databases, vat-grown organs, and so on. The very existence of these strange entities seemed to call into question all sorts of conceptual and philosophical dichotomies—the boundary between life and death, the natural and the artificial, the organic and the inorganic, “data” and “flesh.” Of course, it is not only in our era that this has happened. This is arguably the history of the life sciences itself, going back to Aristotle's first attempts to stratify and classify the flora and fauna around him on the island of Lesbos. But in order to undertake this project, it seemed that I needed to do more than simply rely on critical theorists and their general claims about science. It seemed that I needed to actually understand, to the best of my ability, what the sciences were doing, in addition to considering them from the more distanced, critical standpoint of theory, media studies, science studies, and so on. So both of those books contain relatively little “theory” and a lot more close attention was paid to the materiality of the artifacts. The artifacts themselves seemed to defy these conceptual categories, and I wanted to stay true to that. The “theoretical” arguments were actually embedded in the artifacts themselves. That said, the real theoretical experiment in *The Global Genome* was to create some type of hybrid of Foucault and Marx—specifically Foucault's later lectures on biopolitics and Marx's early writings on “species being.” It seemed to me that if there was something unique about the current moment, it was the way in which the technical concept of “information” was mobilized and made flesh, as it were, in a range of scientific

artifacts at once biological and technological. Foucault's genealogy of “population” as a proto-informatic entity was one way into this, as was Marx's insight that the “natural” was natural precisely through its ability to be instrumentalized. While I was, at the time, interested in autonomist thinkers like Lazzarato and Negri, this was not something I found accounted for in their theories of “immaterial labour” and biopolitics. All this is reflected in the book's over-arching structure, based on political economy—production, exchange, consumption; encoding, recoding, decoding.

SS If we were to distinguish the horror of philosophy from the horror of already-existing political economies of bioinformatics, how would you describe the latter? In his project The Center for Postnatural History (CPNH), Rich Pell explains that the scale of genetic manipulation (specifically as it is imposed by humans onto animal species) exponentially exceeds our assumptions, but his work, including the design of the museum portion of the CPNH, is, at least in part, about encouraging a confrontation with this reality. Do you see *The Global Genome* as a project about “making things public,” to borrow from Bruno Latour's lexicon?

ET Well, this goes back to the previous question a bit. The short answer is, no, I haven't really kept up with developments in science and technology since *The Global Genome* and *The Exploit*. And no, I do not really have any illusions about those books being part of some imagined public sphere—which to me really means isolated academic conferences and publication of anthologies that even libraries don't purchase. If people happen upon the books, read them, and find them interesting, then I'm glad to hear it. But I don't feel the need to imagine a non-existent community of readers in civil conversation because of that. I suppose if I were a different kind of writer, I would leverage the work I did in these early books and stay with it. But I'm not. As a writer I tend to work on discrete projects and then move on. There is continuity to be sure, but I'm just not inter-

ested in being that kind of academic that milks one idea for the rest of one's life, and I've realized I'm also not the kind of scholar that does that really deep work on a single, specific topic that writers like me rely on. I think I got a lot of this from my background in philosophy and comparative literature, at a time when I was especially interested in writing that combined experimentation in form with experimentation in content. I was reading Plato and Kant, but also, on my own, Breton and Soupault's *Les Champs magnétiques*, Burroughs and Gysin's *The Third Mind*, Bataille, Blanchot, Cioran, and Lautréamont. And my first publications in college were more in the vein of “experimental fiction” or “theory-fiction,” published in various now-forgotten 'zines—when 'zines were actually in print. To me this notion of experiment applies as much to nonfiction as it does to fiction. One should utilize the form of the expository essay only if it makes sense for the project. So for me, *Biomedica*, *The Global Genome*, and the essays from that period formed part of one project—at one point I was going to call it all “The Question Concerning Biotechnology” and assemble a third volume with that title. There I was doing “close readings” of science artifacts and adopting the science fictional view of science. And then *The Exploit*, the “Networks, Swarms, Multitudes” essays, and some other bits are part of another project (borrowing from Deleuze, I was referring to this project as “The Life of Ensembles”). There the writings are more in a modular form of “nodes” and “edges.” There's another group of writings on biopolitics, the body politic, and zombies, which was a project that never really coalesced into a book. And then the more recent work around *After Life* and the question of the ontology of life, and the *Horror of Philosophy*... Anyways, it goes on. Plenty of ideas, little time to carry them out.

SS In *After Life*, you turn your attention to the history of philosophy, from Aristotle to Kant (and Bataille), in order to investigate the philosophical problem of life as such. You write, “‘Life’ is not only a problem of philosophy, but a problem for philosophy.”⁸ What led to your interest in develop-

ing this historical account? Do you think, from this historical perspective, that we need to reconceive of “life” within the context of contemporary political economic regimes?

ET Well there is a clear through-line from *Biomedica* to *After Life*, and that is the way that life—and more importantly the concept of “life itself”—is variously defined, redefined, and deployed in different ways. But with *After Life*, I wanted to address the question head-on, and for a long time I had been wanting to do a more straight-up philosophy book. Although, I consider each book I have written “philosophy,” even though I'm probably the only one who does. At any rate, one of the interesting problems surrounding “life” is that it is never clear if we are talking about a concept or the thing itself. “Life” has a strange status in philosophy; it is not quite a foundational metaphysical concept, like “substance” or “cause,” but it is also not simply a secondary concept relegated to ethics, political philosophy, or logic. In fact, even in Aristotle there is this slippage. Aristotle feels compelled to use one term when describing animal life, and then another term to describe the life that is common to animals, plants, and human beings. “Life” seems to be one of those concepts that disappears when you look at it directly. What philosophers typically do is simply swap out one concept for another. The question “what is life?” usually supplants some other concept—form, time, spirit—for “life” and thereby just begs the question. The modern variants of pantheism, vitalism, *Lebensphilosophie*, process, becoming, information, and so on, simply repeat this same move. I was also struck by the pervasiveness of the problem in contemporary theory, with all the talk of “bare life,” “precarious life,” “liquid life,” etc. It seemed to be a place-holder for so many things that the term itself was buried beneath them. To me this is precisely the moment one should undertake a serious investigation of a concept, that is, at the moment when it is eclipsed by other concerns, and therefore is taken for granted.

Such a project is ridiculously ambitious, so I had to make a number of decisions to make it workable. I had to stay

within the Western philosophical tradition, although I tried to at least gesture toward the need for a comparative philosophical approach. I also decided to begin with Aristotle rather than, say, Linnaeus, Darwin, or the modern life sciences. This was because I think the problem is identified as a *philosophical* problem by Aristotle, not only in his term *psukhê* (which might be translated as “life-principle”), but in the way he stratifies particular instances of *psukhe*. The way Aristotle frames the problem can still be seen today in discussions of biopolitics, neo-vitalism, and the post-secular turn in philosophy. Aristotle was, of course, central for medieval and early modern thinkers; what they do is extend his categories, blending them with a whole host of influences, from Neo-Platonism to Scholastic theology to Christian mysticism, or life conceived in terms of form, time, and spirit. This passage is necessary because it sets the stage for Kant’s articulation of a contradiction at the core of thinking “life itself,” forever split between a thinking human subject that is “living” and a background continuity of “Life” that is never itself lived. And that was where I was really interested in going, toward the notion that in order to think “life” philosophically one has to also think it through a logic of contradiction. This is, of course, also the terrain of horror authors like Lovecraft...

SS If there is one figure with whom we could associate the most emphatic horror of existence, and one who pushes the hardest against any resolution to the problem of “life,” it might be E.M. Cioran. By way of a conclusion, then, in his magisterial essay, “The Temptation to Exist,” he offers the following lines: “We must learn to think against our doubts and against our certitudes, against our omniscient humors, we must above all, by creating for ourselves *another* death, one that will be incompatible with our carrion carcasses, consent to the undemonstrable, to the idea that something exists.”⁹ Does Cioran’s estimation of “*another* death” suggest, for you, a way of approaching the excess of horror, and life, today?

ET I don’t know. I just don’t think of it in those terms. Certainly reading a philosopher or a book of philosophy can help a person understand something. I don’t deny that at all. But to me the most interesting books are those that are *unhelpful*, if only because they operate in a different register or in a different key. Recently I had the opportunity to write the forewords to the Arcade editions of Cioran’s works, and it gave me the excuse to dive back into his writings, which I have always found fascinating. I don’t think Cioran would put the question in terms of being helpful. Not simply because he is being a misanthrope, or because it is not cool to help. But there is something in Cioran’s work that mitigates against philosophy in the key of philosophy. That is a good definition of “pessimism” to me—the philosophy of the futility of philosophy. Cioran takes up this thread from other thinkers to be sure—Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Lichtenberg, Leopardi, Pascal, the French moralists. His writing itself works against the presuppositions of grand, systematic philosophy, composed as it is of fragments, aphorisms, stray thoughts. It is refreshing to read his work today, especially against the mania for systematicity in philosophy textbooks or the so-called speculative realist treatises. But Cioran’s writing is not without rigour, quite the opposite. There is a subtractive rigour to this kind of pessimism, what Nietzsche called the rigour of the “unfinished thought.” Cioran appeals to the secret voice inside all our heads when we read philosophy, or science, or psychology, or self-help: “Really? You really think we can just figure it all out?” Cioran’s works call the bluff on philosophy, and in particular on philosophy’s three main functions: a therapeutic function (philosophy is there to help us live our lives); a descriptive function (philosophy’s job is to provide an accurate, truthful account of the state of things); and a hermeneutic function (philosophy’s job is to make meaning of it all for us as human beings). I have never believed any of this, and the books of philosophy I like are not because of these reasons. Perhaps, in spite of all the books that have been published, we still lack an unhuman philosophy. Whether we require it is another question.✕

Excess

Endnotes

- 1 Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2011).
- 2 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 3 Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008).
- 4 Ed Keller, Nicola Masciandaro and Eugene Thacker, eds., *Leper Creativity* (Brooklyn: punctum, 2012).
- 5 Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, 9.
- 6 Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, 133–159; see also Eugene Thacker, “Spiritual Meat: Resurrection and Religious Horror in Bataille,” *Collapse VII* (2011).

- 7 Eugene Thacker, *The Global Genome: Biotechnology, Politics, and Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005).
- 8 Eugene Thacker, *After Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), x; also see Eugene Thacker, “After Life: Swarms, Demons and the Antinomies of Immanence,” in *Theory After “Theory,”* eds. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 181–193.
- 9 E.M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1968), 222.



Sam Leach, *The Thinking Object*, 2011, Oil and resin on wood, 35 x 27cm
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf