

# The Thing

## A Phenomenology of Horror



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It must not be supposed that atoms of every sort can be linked in every variety of combination. If that were so, you would see monsters coming into being everywhere. Hybrid growths of man and beast would arise. Lofty branches would spread here and there from a living body. Limbs of land-beast and sea-beast would often be conjoined. Chimeras breathing flame from hideous jaws would be reared by nature throughout the all-generating earth.

Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*.





## Preface

# Before Life

A vast, sepulchral universe of unbroken midnight gloom and perpetual arctic fridity, through which will roll dark, cold suns with their hordes of dead, frozen planets, on which will lie the dust of those unhappy mortals who will have perished as their dominant stars faded from their skies. Such is the depressing picture of a future too remote for calculation.

H. P. Lovecraft, *Clusters and Nebulae*.

A planet in the solar system. Dwarfed by darkness, the planet emits a distress signal in the form of an evolutionary accident termed "life." On this green and blue orb, a slow terraformation of the alien landscape will begin. Deep ravines cut into the surface of the planet, a boundless ocean now separated by continents, on which cities and forests intertwine. Beings will colonise the minuscule unit of space in the cosmos, transforming the planet into a habitable world. From nowhere, further generations of living animals will come into existence. There, they will establish a base on the interstellar ark; both cultivating the land and fortifying themselves with built structures they will term "homes." Here, they will dwell with the assurance that the planet they have found themselves on is both their origin and their future.

An event will occur in the future that will bring about the planet's slow extinction. Ten thousand years will pass, and a new ice age will begin. In the arid deserts of the planet, glaciers will begin their slow, creeping advance. In time, the oceans will themselves become frozen landscapes, linking hitherto isolated countries. Cities that once housed millions of people will become deserted, and the lights that illuminated the planet will flicker

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erratically in the darkness of night, before slowly but irretrievably being consigned to total blackness. Of the few who refuse to depart from the planet, they will remain as scavengers of a lost world. With the seasons colonized by the unrelenting cold, farming and all other modes of sustenance vanish. There, the fragments of a population that remain will establish a new territory in the ancient forests that have become their new homes.

Time will proceed, and the ice will withdraw. In its place, the planet's sun will undergo its own entropic decline, annihilating whatever animal life remains on the surface of the planet and forcing any residual life to seek exile in the depths of the oceans. As for the rest of the planet, much of it will be covered by dunes, interspersed with dried rocks and endless horizons of empty sand. Up above, the blue sky that shrouded the planet in times long gone will be filled with unrelenting thunderstorms and hailstorms. Over a longer expanse of time, the oceans that remain will evaporate, leaving immense basins of dried salt where the swelling of blue water once existed. The place from which life slowly emerged onto the surface of the planet will cease to be, finally dissolving the bonds between life and non-life, and thereby reducing all matter to an undulating terrain, in which everything and nothing exists. Everything that exists, has existed, and will exist no longer bears any trace of its presence.

\* \* \*

For too long philosophy has laboured under the assumption that post-humanism, in all its variations, offers us the only escape route from a legacy of anthropomorphism. Part of this thinking is legitimate. In the vision of an uninhabitable world, overrun with ruins and feral vegetation, an entire landscape opens, full of the possibilities of another philosophy. After humanity, so the thought proceeds, the world will go on without us, thus reinforcing the fundamental contingency of our existence as a

particular species of life.

This tragic realization becomes the site of a new philosophy. Whereas the old philosophy found it impossible to envision the world in a non-sensuous and non-subjective way, indeed going so far as to align this non-subjective world with naïve realism, the new philosophy openly asserts the validity of realism and equally contests any form of antirealism.

Opposed to the post-Kantian tradition (and for that matter any philosophy that would emphasize the irreducible centrality of the subject), the new philosophy takes as its point of departure the world outside of the subject. Into the wilderness of thought, objects that hitherto seemed to constitute an innocuous background to our lives becomes enchanted with a weird aura. Indeed, the very term “weird” becomes the site of a critical reevaluation of existing norms, in which the gaze of human subjectivity loses its privileged place.

Against this horizon of speculation, the phenomenological tradition, once a beacon of integrity, has become emblematic of a failure in thought to think outside of the subject. Instead, the method purportedly reduces the world of things to an anthropomorphised world, enclosed at all times with an unbreakable alliance between subject and world, best exemplified in the Heideggerian phrase, *being-in-the-world*.

In the shadow, not only of phenomenology, but also linguistic idealism and post-structuralism, a call has been made to a post-human ontology, which delivers us from this obsolete legacy of thinking the world in terms of how it can be accessed for us, and us alone. Into this vision, the promise of a philosophy that replaces subjects with objects finds its inspiration in the image of a world without us. Aesthetically, the vision merely reinforces what the new philosophy knew all along: that human beings are not and never were at the centre of things. To be sure, humanity persists through this thinking, but only now is rendered ontologically equal to any other object, be it a carved table or the red rain

in Kerala. Thus, if humans and the world still exist in a relation with one another, then the relation is no more special than that between a forest and the night.

Today, this promise of a philosophy that replaces subjects with objects has long since folded back upon itself, becoming a distinctly human—alas, all too human—vision fixed at all times on the perennial question: *How will the Earth remember us?* A strange impasse intervenes. Despite its attempt to transcend a philosophy that binds the subject with the world, the new philosophy remains linked to a glorification of the world that persists long after humans have left the scene, both conceptually and empirically. What emerges is a philosophy at the end of the world, in which thinking gains its power by cultivating the ruins that outlive this end before then employing those ruins as ambassadors for a lost humanity.

Yet something else remains in this end. Beyond the ruins of a lost world, there is a persistence of matter that renders the philosophical apocalypse possible in the first place. If we were to invoke the Cartesian method of doubt to arrive at a foundational ground to account for this matter, then we might reformulate the cogito less in terms of an *I think* and more in terms of an *It lives*. What survives the end is a thing that should not be, an anonymous mass of materiality, the origins of which remain obscure. The thing is no less than the *body*.

\* \* \*

This book sets out to do two things. One, to redefine phenomenology as a philosophical method of inquiry. Two, to demonstrate phenomenology's value by conducting an investigation into the horror of the body. The need to reinstate phenomenology's validity is twofold: On the one hand, the renewal is set against the backdrop of phenomenology itself, as it would traditionally be conceived and practised by its exponents through the

twentieth century, and even beyond. In this context, phenomenology marks a mode of inquiry concerned with a particular type of human experience, characterised by a sense of unity and coherence. From this perspective, phenomenology is specifically human, not only in its epistemological limitations, but also in its ethical tendencies.

On the other hand, the need to redefine phenomenology takes as its point of departure recent developments in continental philosophy, not least the challenges put forward by Quentin Meillassoux. In this reading of phenomenology, the method is reduced to a concern with access to the phenomenal realm, in which human subjectivity is placed at the centre, and where a thinking outside of the subject is inconceivable. While this book engages with the ideas of Meillassoux, the model of phenomenology presented does not seek to define itself in opposition to this background. At stake is not the question of becoming complicit with Meillassoux, but of recognising the value of entering into a dialogue with certain strands of his thinking.

In contrast to this background, the phenomenology outlined in this book is attuned to both human and nonhuman entities. In this work, human experience is a necessary point of departure for philosophical inquiry. But it is only that—a departure. Beyond humanity, another phenomenology persists. Far from being the vehicle of a solely human voice, we will show that phenomenology can attend to a realm outside of humanity. Indeed, in this book we seek to defend a model of phenomenology that is not only capable of speaking on behalf of nonhuman realms, but is especially suited to this study of foreign entities. We will term phenomenology's specific mode of accounting for the nonhuman realm, the *unhuman*. Why this terminology? The reasons are twofold.

First, the inclusion of the “un” in unhuman aligns the concept with the notion of the uncanny. Our account of the unhuman accents the gesture of repression that is synonymous with the

uncanny, especially in its Freudian guise. With the unhuman, something comes back to haunt the human without it being fully integrated into humanity. In this respect, the unhuman is closely tied up with notions of alienation, anonymity, and the unconscious (and to this extent, is also registered by the equivalent but more cumbersome term, *xenophenomenology*).

Second, the distinction of the unhuman is that it does not negate humanity, even though in experiential terms it may be felt as a force of opposition. As we will see, it is precisely through the inclusion of the human that the nonhuman element becomes visible. This does not mean falling back into anthropomorphism. Rather, it means letting the unhumanity of the human speak for itself.

If phenomenology finds itself in an apparent impasse, then it is precisely because its rebirth is not only needed but also especially timely. In what follows, the plan is to reinforce the vitality and dynamism of the method, with a reach that extends beyond the human body and crawls into another body altogether. The task, such as it presents itself, is to excavate aspects of phenomenology that can help us chart the emergence of a future phenomenology from within the history of the tradition.

An unhuman phenomenology, then, is a phenomenology that runs against the notion that description is a guarantor of truth, and thus strikes a discord with traditional phenomenology. In this way, unhuman phenomenology is a genuine alien phenomenology in that it is concerned with the limits of alterity rather than simply replacing subjects with objects. The germs of this redefined phenomenology are already evident in the lesser known works of Husserl, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty, all of whom are central and recurring figures in this work. Many of their ideas concerning anonymity, archaeology, and alterity are instrumental in guiding an unhuman phenomenology to the shores.

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To situate these ideas in context will require that we turn to the affective experience of phenomenology becoming its other. To this end, our phenomenology focuses on the materiality of the body before treating that materiality within the framework of horror. What is the body? On the one hand, it is the site of all that is irreducibly human—the bearer of value and ethics, and the means by which our being-in-the-world is possible. More than a homogenous mass that enables us to get from one point in the world to another geometrically, it is through the body that the world gains meaning. On the other hand, the body is a work of physiology that can be examined in objective terms. Inside the body, a set of organs can be found, without which our existence as subjects would be threatened.

In terms of our idea of what it is to be a self, it is only comparatively recently that the body has assumed importance. Indeed, historically, our conception of what it is to be human has tended to focus on the singularity of the mind. Thus, in the manner of British empiricism and Cartesian rationalism, the body becomes contingent while the mind retains its sovereignty. For John Locke, this contingency extends to the parts of the body themselves:

Cut off a hand, and thereby separate it from that consciousness he had of its heat, cold, and other affections, and it is then no longer a part of that which is himself, any more than the remotest part of matter (Locke 1993, 182).

*Pace* Locke, for the most part our attachment to the body tends to be more than a mere formality. Theoretically, this attachment has been legitimised through phenomenology and more recently cognitive science, both of which posit the primacy of the body. The present work is complicit with the view that body is primary

in the constitution of self. But in distinction to the classical phenomenological view that would characterise the body as the site of unity and coherence here, the body is anterior to personal history, and at all times in a divisive relation to the subject.

Part of the problem inherent in traditional phenomenology is that it has become too comfortable with the idea that the bodily subject under investigation is a distinctly human body. The human body, as it figures in phenomenology, tends to be characterised by a sense of ownership and self-identity. It is a body that carries with it a rich multiplicity of moods, each of which anchors us to the world. While there is no doubt that such a body exists—it is reasonable to assume each of us has a relation to one—this body is not exhaustive, nor does it account for the material conditions under which life emerges. A bodily subject (in phenomenological terms) is not necessarily a *human* subject. Another body needs to be accounted for in phenomenology. A creature that invades and encroaches upon the humanity of this thing we term “the body,” while at the same time retaining the centrality of the human body as its native host.

By contrast, we would like to propose an unethical body, anterior to personal identity and prior to cultural assimilation. And it is important to note that how a living body finds itself attached to a life is wholly contingent. The particular configuration of the human body is not an end point in history, but part of a mutating process, which may or may not transform into another shape. The body to be posited in this book is not only anterior to humanity but in some sense opposed to human existence, at least insofar as it destabilises the experience of being a subject by establishing an unassimilated depth within the heart of familiar existence.

It is for this reason that the horror of which the title of this book speaks is fundamentally a *body horror*. The affective response of horror—far from an aestheticising of alien existence—is the necessary symptom of experiencing oneself as



other. The point being that the involvement of horror in this phenomenology is not for the sake merely of countering a tendency in phenomenology to exhibit the human within the scope of light and unity. Rather, horror concerns as much the structure of the human becoming unhuman as it does the thematic experience of this transformation. Indeed, without horror, the framework of an unhuman phenomenology would resist conceptualization altogether.

This horror takes its cues from both a conceptual horror—a horror inherent in the deformation of phenomenology itself—as well in the cinematic and literary articulations of such ideas. In the films of John Carpenter and David Cronenberg, and in the writings of H. P. Lovecraft, we gain a sense of the body as the site of another life. If it is a life that manifests in the contours of the human body, this does not mean that such a life is reducible to humanity. Rather, the horror of the body marks both the betrayal of an anthropocentric phenomenology, and (for precisely this reason) its renewal. In this way, it is only because we begin with the centrality of the body as a pre-given theme that its eventual figuration as uncanny, other, and resistant to integration becomes possible.

\* \* \*

In what follows, we will explore a phenomenology of body horror in four ways, marked by each chapter. Each chapter forms a whole, which loosely plots the origins of the body. Accordingly, in the first chapter, the relation between the Earth and the body forms the main concern. The chapter takes as its point of departure recent findings in astrobiology concerning ancient Martian meteorites discovered in the Antarctic. These discoveries are situated in the context of a late fragment from Husserl known as “The Earth Does Not Move,” concerning the Earth as understood phenomenologically. For Husserl, the Earth is not

just an empirical object in space but, more primordially, a foundation upon which the possibility of bodily subjectivity is dependent. In order to address the limits of such a phenomenology, we will consider some recent findings in astrobiology, which are suggestive of the possibility that life on Earth may have had its origins elsewhere in the solar system. Even at a hypothetical level, what these findings suggest is that our understanding of the human-Earth relation needs to accommodate the notion that the origin of life is not grounded in a transcendental structure, as Husserl has it, but instead involves the notion of life as, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, a “metamorphosis” rather than “beginning from zero” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 268). To flesh this claim out, reference is made to *Quatermass and the Pit* directed by Roy Ward Baker (1967). This film is exemplary in articulating the anterior origins of the human body at both a conceptual and imaginary level.

In the second chapter, the theme of the alien Earth is interwoven with the origin of the body itself. To chart the emergence of the body, we turn to Levinas. Emmanuel Levinas is often thought of as a philosopher of ethics, above all else. Indeed, his notions of the face, the Other, and alterity have all earned him a distinguished place in the history of phenomenology as a fundamental thinker of ethics as a first philosophy. But what has been overlooked in this attention on ethics is the early work of Levinas, which reveals him less as a philosopher of the Other and more as a philosopher of elemental and anonymous being. Two claims are made: First, Levinas’s idea of the “*il y a*” (the *there is*) offers us a way of rethinking the relation between the body and the world. This idea can be approached by phrasing Levinas as a materialist. Second, the experience of horror, on which Levinas will place great emphasis, provides us with a phenomenology at the threshold of experience. As we will see, it is precisely through what Levinas terms “the horror of the night,” that phenomenology begins to exceed its methodological constraints in accounting for a plane of

elemental existence beyond experience. Through this, a phenomenological realism can be developed, with the materiality of the body, above all, coming to surface as an existence that both enables and exceeds subjectivity. These ontological notions are played out in the work of Andrei Tarkovsky, especially his early film, *Solaris* (1972). It is in this film that we can witness the Levinasian account of the body as constitutive of subjectivity but at the same time a betrayer of subjectivity.

If the first part of the book focuses on the emergence of life on Earth, then the second part focuses on the specific life that inheres in the human body. Thus, the aim of the third chapter is to give an account of the prehistory specific to the human body. This is achieved by pairing Merleau-Ponty and Lovecraft in dialogue with one another, specifically Lovecraft's seminal story, *The Shadow Out of Time*. With recourse to Merleau-Ponty, we will see that Lovecraft's story shows us two things about alien subjectivity: First, constitutionally, the human subject can be seen as "sharing" its bodily experience with a prehistoric subject. In Lovecraft's tale, the horror central to the narrative centres on the struggle between the body as possessor of the subject and the body as possessed by the subject. Second, temporally, this prehistoric constitution sets in place a body out of joint. This focus on the temporality of the alien subject throws into doubt traditional notions of personal identity as relying on the continuity of personal memory and instead raises the spectre of phylogenetic memory. Such themes are then analysed in their cinematic appearance in the works of David Cronenberg and John Carpenter.

The final chapter confronts a series of critiques posited in contemporary continental philosophy concerning whether phenomenology can account for non-human things. In particular, this issue is taken up through introducing Meillassoux's notions of "arche fossils" and "ancestrality" into the discussion. Meillassoux's ideas are important because they

problematize access to things “anterior even to the emergence of life.” In his view, correlationism is only able to derive knowledge of the past from the standpoint of the present, thus rendering the phenomenologist (by implication) the guarantor of knowledge “for us.” By engaging with Meillassoux’s critique of phenomenology, a counter-argument is formulated based on Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology of the flesh. What Merleau-Ponty shows us is that our value-laden narcissistic reflection on our place in the universe is offset by the collapse of conceptual thought. Through this collapse, the elemental foundation of what he terms “the flesh” is proven to be ontologically prior to correlationism in the first instance. In turn, we will employ Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh to stage a debate with Meillassoux’s idea of “*arche fossils*.”

If these concepts are resistant to experience, then they can nevertheless be approached through an indirect route; namely, that of the cinematic image. Accordingly, in the conclusion of this book, we turn to John Carpenter’s seminal film, *The Thing* (1982). Carpenter’s film—and his vision more broadly—is essential in allowing us to formulate the central thesis of the book, namely: *the horror of the cosmos is essentially the horror of the body*. Our point of departure for examining Carpenter’s film is that the abject creature in the film is an expression of the origin of life itself. This is evident in that the body can be seen as being constituted not only in structural terms by an alien subjectivity, but in thematic terms by an anonymous teleology, the implication being that the origin of the universe is both constitutive of humanity and also *against humanity*.