PESSIMISM, FUTILITY, AND EXTINCTION

An interview with Eugene Thacker

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In this interview with Thomas Dekeyser, Eugene Thacker elaborates on the central themes of his work. Addressing themes including extinction, futility, human universalism, network euphoria, political indecision and scientific nihilism, the interview positions Thacker's work within the contemporary theoretical conjuncture, specifically through its relation to genres of thought his work is often grouped with or cast against: vitalism, speculative realism, and accelerationism. More broadly, however, the interview offers a unique insight into Thacker's approach to the thinking, doing and writing of 'philosophy'.

IN THE PAST TWO DECADES, Eugene Thacker's work has captured the attention and imagination of academic theorists and cultural practitioners around the world. His unique voice is inspired by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Cioran, Kierkegaard, Mainländer, Pascal, Unamuno, Eckhart and others that are, often against their will or post-mortem, classified as belonging to a pessimist 'school of thought'. Through the lure of pessimism, demonology, mysticism and nihilism, his work raises important questions around familiar themes in philosophy and cultural theory – philosophy's own status, the category of the human, biopolitics, network cultures, extinction – but, like many of those thinkers that inspire him, he always does so almost reluctantly, as if overwhelmed by the futility of thought.

His latest book, titled 'Infinite Resignation', delivers short passages, aphorisms and musings, together adding up to a world that is dark and full of suffering, and surprisingly humble and humorous. As he describes in the book, Thacker's pessimist tone emerges in tension with two other genres of pessimism. The first – moral pessimism – is a subjective pessimism: the world is 'made in our own suffocating image, a world-for-us'.[1] It is the pessimism of those who would rather not have been born at all. The second genre – metaphysical pessimism – is an objective pessimism: the world is 'closed off and opaque, objected and projected as a world-in-itself.'[2] It is the pessimism of those who, like Schopenhauer, condemn this world as 'the worst of all possible worlds.' These two forms can be summarised as, respectively, the

1 Thacker, E. (2018) *Infinite Resignation*. London: Repeater Books, p. 19.
2 Ibid.

pessimism of 'the glass is half-empty' and the pessimism that takes 'emptiness as the property of all glass'. But both pessimistic genres are, Thacker notes, compromised philosophically. They fail 'to locate human beings within a larger non-human world,'[3] tethered as they are to the anthropocentric delusion of a 'human' world. Hoping to conjure a pessimism of the world-without-us, he arrives, tentatively, at what he calls a 'cosmic pessimism', even if such a project could, by definition, never add up to a graspable, coherent story, a human story. Instead, cosmic pessimism is a pessimism of impersonal affects, scaling-up, scaling-down, the human point of view, a pessimism succumbing to the indifference of the cosmos.

But Thacker's is a complex intellectual journey, refusing any simple classification or positioning. Before first entering into an explicit engagement with pessimism with the 'Horror of Philosophy series', his earlier books yield distinctive contributions to debates around the notion of 'life' in philosophy, the economics of biotechnologies, control through networks, science-fiction as critical practice, the techno-scientific body, amongst other themes. What is remarkable is how, throughout these works, Thacker already returns, again and again, to the problematic of what he calls an 'unhuman concept of life',[4] a concept that would later underpin 'cosmic pessimism' and its ideas of a 'world-without-us'. These works think, each in their own way, through a way of understanding life that is neither anthropomorphic or anthropocentric, nor misanthropic. It's a conception of life that starts from the unintelligibility inhabiting any

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3 Ibid.
4 Thacker, E. (2010) *After Life*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, p. xv.

ontology of life. For Thacker, life tends to be ontologised by way of something other than life (time, form, spirit). The human impossibility to think life in itself sits uncomfortably with contemporary conceptions of life in phenomenologist, correlationist and vitalist thought.

Hoping to further 'locate' Thacker's genre of pessimism, the interview engages a variety of themes with an eye on better understanding how his work connects to, or might be cast against, contemporary fields of thought. Thacker specifically offers an, at times strident, set of comments on speculative realism, vitalism, and accelerationism.

What is perhaps one of the central virtues of this interview is how it also provides insight into Thacker's approach to the project of philosophy more broadly. Reading through the interview, we witness his approach in action. Thacker steps back from the questions at time, refraining from and revealing the lure of solutionism, totalising stories, passing theoretical fads and all-too-human-centric thought of those he calls 'Panglossian professional thinkers' in this interview. At the edge of contemporary thought, he reminds us, even pessimism becomes a means to an end. By contrast, for Thacker, pessimism is 'the introduction of humility into thought',[5] and with it, the danger of thought slipping into futility.

Thomas Dekeyser: Your work has, for at least a decade, been explicitly concerned with the seeming 'problematic' of pessimism. In your forward to Emil Cioran's 'A short history of decay', you wrote: 'Decay, decline, decadence—these are never popular topics, especially in an era such as ours, equally enamored with the explanatory power of

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5 Thacker, E. (2018) *Infinite Resignation*. London: Repeater Books, p. 26.

science as we are with an almost religious preoccupation with self-help.[6] Perhaps, since then, the philosophical tide has turned. Affirmationism and vitalism are increasingly assaulted from various directions, whilst their conceptual and thematic antitheses (negativity and extinction) are becoming dominant themes in social theory. How are we to understand the emergence of such themes, and more specifically, of 'pessimism', in both terms you ascribe to it, as a metaphysical, even cosmic, proposition, and, simply, as a 'bad attitude'?

Eugene Thacker: I find pessimism, nihilism, skepticism, and the like to be compelling because they seem to have a dubious status in philosophy. They seem like viable, sound philosophical positions (I suppose adding '-ism' to anything makes it a thing), but they always seem to fall short of being philosophical. There is something internal to these ways of thinking that mitigates against the allure of totality, mastery, and structural integrity that still occupies much of philosophy today. A philosopher rarely begins as a pessimist or nihilist; they arrive at it, and often through failure, futility, and a philosophy in ruins. One always admits one is a pessimist; one is always resigned to pessimism. It's a concession. Philosophers have rarely described themselves or their work as pessimistic (this is the case even with Schopenhauer, who only uses the term a handful of times, and never to describe his own work). Pessimism doesn't have the canonical legitimacy of, say, empiricism or materialism or functionalism, nor does it have the cultural and political integrity of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis,

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6 Cioran, E. (2012) *A Short History of Decay*. New York: Arcade Publishing, p. vii.

or what have you. It's generally pathologised in philosophical circles (especially those that are either themselves pathologically professionalised or that deem themselves as some kind of political vanguard through the sheer opacity of their terminology), and pessimism et al. will only be entertained if it leads somewhere else, as a means to an end – pessimism as the latest symptom of disenchantment and estrangement; nihilism as the newest form of a radical politics-beyond-politics; skepticism as the newest avatar of a Bartleby-esque critical praxis, and so on. In fact, if anything, 'pessimism' as a term is used as more of an indictment or a dismissal than as a description of a philosophical position, much less a school of thought (it occurs to me that the idea of a pessimist or nihilist philosophical school is almost worthy of a comedy sketch – the latter would annul itself before it began, while the former wouldn't bother trying in the first place).

That's all fine, but for me that doesn't get at this perpetually dubious status within philosophy. There is, to use Schopenhauer's phrase, an 'inner antagonism' at the core of pessimism that is part of why it's never quite philosophical. This applies as much to the form as to the content of philosophy, and the question of writing practice is as much a part of the issue. Many pessimist books eschew the big, totalising, theory-of-everything tome for the 'short form', the book that is always less-than-a-book: the fragment, the aphorism, the anecdote, the axiom, the parable, the journal, the notebook, the prose poem, and so on. There's a grey zone here that's neither quite philosophy nor quite literature, but that does involve a kind of poetics, a poetics of disintegration. This is why for me the fragmentary prose works of writers as wide-ranging as Dostoevsky, Lichtenberg, Leopardi, Hedayat,

Pessoa, Dazai, Pizarnik, Bernhard, Lispector, Cioran, Pitol, and a host of others all enter into this space of the inner antagonism of thinking. To be sure, none of these authors would ever describe their work as 'pessimist', but to be fair neither would any of the philosophers routinely described as such. I'm interested in accepting the way that so-called pessimist philosophies fail to be philosophical, the philosophical never quite rising above the mundane or the spiteful or the absurd, all those elevated concepts never quite rising above a bad attitude (or worse, a bad joke). I realised the last thing I wanted to do was to write a book about pessimism, especially a scholarly, academic treatise; it seemed absurdly blind to the intertwining of philosophy and poetics that is so integral to the works I was reading. 'Infinite Resignation' was written over a period of about eight years, and it was as much about the negative work of deleting and cutting things down as it was about actual writing. As a book it was attempting to address themes I've long been fascinated by, so the writing itself had to change, which is why it's basically 400 pages of aphorisms and fragments, but assembled or 'composed' (if I may be allowed the music analogy).

As an example, Schopenhauer begins 'The World as Will and Representation' very much in a Kantian vein, with a judicious management of concepts, careful analytical distinctions, and a respectful awareness of the problematic set out by Kant (principally, the impasse between phenomena and noumena). But by the end of the work, the project breaks down and crumbles, the writing disintegrates into shards and fragments, his thinking will suddenly career off into subdued ruminations on suffering, rantish disparagements of human vanity, cryptic quotations from the 'Upanishads' or Calderón,

sublimely innovative insults against Hegel and German Idealism, and a general tone of resignation that ends up questioning the presumptuousness of philosophy itself. All this from a deceptively simple premise: I do not live, I am lived (and lived according to something that can only be described negatively as impersonal, indifferent, and for no reason). I find this totally compelling. And I've always been fascinated by the 'failure' of Schopenhauer's philosophy in particular (it applies as much to his non-career as an author as it does to his strangely uneventful and long life). The case of Schopenhauer is that of a shimmering failure of systematic philosophy, an evocative crumbling of the architectonics of philosophical thinking – a philosophy in ruins, the humility of being human.

TD: This 'tone of resignation' you mention marks your 'Horrors of Philosophy' books and 'Infinite Resignation'. To what extent is this an explicit attempt at complicating, if not entirely departing from, affirmationism as a philosophical project?

ET: In terms of the current trends between affirmationist and negativist thinking, I don't see this as a shift or a turning of the tide; the culture accommodates everything. And for me the motive for writing wasn't because pessimism or nihilism were 'on trend.' In theory circles today affirmationism and vitalisms of all kinds are, as it were, alive and well. Reams of peer-reviewed articles, books, and overly-ambitious dissertations continue to be produced. Nor do I think that affirmationism and vitalism need to be defended or protected from whatever assaults they are supposedly enduring. You're right in that there also seems to be an engagement with negation at different levels in the form of nihilism, pessimism, radical forms of skepticism or cynicism, variants of eliminativist

thinking, 'cold rationalist' appropriations of science, and all the varieties of 'dark'-this and 'dark'-that. One could easily argue that there is something to this 'negative turn' in philosophy, and it wouldn't be hard to point to various philosophical and extra-philosophical factors, from the long legacy of Nietzsche's prognostications of nihilism, to the contemporary stalemate over the anthropocene and the big data, 'program earth' understanding of climate change. Humans have created this insular echo-chamber bubble of social media precisely during the same period in which awareness of climate change has been levelled up into the discursive space of 'when' not 'if,' resulting in a species-wide imposter syndrome. When I made the comment about 'the explanatory power of science' and the 'religious preoccupation with self-help' I was attempting to simply point out the apparent rift between these two views of the world.

There is also the possibility that negation becomes employed or deployed in the service of affirmationism – I think that's basically what's happening in accelerationism's 'I'm so against it that I'm for it' approach, or in afro-pessimism's cryptic musings on blackness, or in gender theory's subterranean evocations of gender abolitionism, and so on. There are some ideas in there that I find compelling, but I find it difficult to tell how much of this is a significant turn in philosophy, and how much of it is simply part of the mostly forgettable, self-important, jargon-riddled trends in cultural theory that seem to have the same accelerated half-life of algorithmic capital itself. When it comes to the passing fads of contemporary theory, I kind of shrug my shoulders at the lot of it.

TD: The principle of sufficient reason, as found in Leibniz and others, is a recurrent theme throughout

your work. You argue that this principle fails to live up to the unthinkability of this world: the indifference of the unhuman. Horror, blasphemy, the figure of the demon, even extinction; each of these are, at different points in your work, activated towards tracing this unthinkability. In doing so, you trace the limits of and explicitly depart from Enlightenment ideals of human reason and scientific knowledge.

Following an alternative conceptual path, for thinkers such as Ray Brassier the Enlightenment project presents us not with the denial of the unthinkable – cosmic indifference – but with its elaboration, what Brassier refers to as science's 'labour of disenchantment'.[7] Whilst arriving at perhaps similar philosophical propositions, what are the diverging impulses underpinning a nihilism-via-science and a nihilism-contra-science?

ET: I don't see these as mutually exclusive approaches, though they may end up in the same place, philosophically speaking. For me the key distinction is between the world in relation to us as human beings, whether it be in terms of the world-for-us or the world-in-itself. There is an anthropocentrism that inhabits both of these views, inclusive of the scientific understanding, simply by virtue of the "world" being articulated as such. A minimum relationality is built into both views, and in that sense I don't know that we've ever really moved beyond the Kantian impasse of phenomena and noumena. When philosophy reaches this kind of limit, it's interesting to me how it often cloaks itself in other garb to continue its work, be it religion, politics, or

7 Brassier, R. (2007) *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 40.

science. The 'horror of philosophy' books attempted to look at that grey area, particularly in terms of mysticism or demonology, which seem to be opposed to each other but which are, from another point of view, means by which the human attempts to confront the unhuman – not through irrationalist or expressionist evocations of pure affect, but through a set of rigorous practices and methods that often reach the point where language, bodies, and thought must necessarily negate themselves.

I understand Ray's project in 'Nihil Unbound' to be about the conjunction of nihilism-via-science and nihilism-contra-science, the point at which they are one in the same. Certainly he's drawing a lot upon work in the philosophy of science and the analytical tradition generally. But I think he's careful to distinguish the scientific description of the world from the possible scientific assessment or evaluation of the world (which may or may not be co-extensive with the scientific description). I doubt that the analytic philosophers Ray discusses would describe themselves as 'nihilists' (at least without a lengthy, judicious, hair-splitting rationalist clarification of what one means by 'nihilist' – by which time the rest of us would have realised how little it matters... ironically). But this is what makes Ray's book interesting, it asks us to adopt a tactical investment in the 'scientific image' of the world in so far as it reveals a world that is indifferent to human morality, desires, interests, instrumentality, etc.

I think there's been too much emphasis on these supposed 'rules' of philosophical thinking, but what's equally surprising to me is how much they are still in play. I've always been baffled by the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). It's always seemed too naive to me. Really?

You really believe that for every existent there's a reason for its existing? Says who? Well, of course, it's the philosopher who says so, and in a way the PSR is accurate because, yes, from within the game of rationalism one can deduce a reason for every existent, as long as one plays the game with the contractual understanding that we forget we made up the rules of the game to begin with. Such is how a ground or foundation is established so that thinking can continue. Such is philosophy, I suppose. I understand that there are nuances in Leibniz, and part of what's important is how the principle is derived from within his metaphysics, and the complex relation between metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Even so, it's really one of the silliest notions to come out of Western philosophy.

But this gets at a larger issue, which has to do with the various philosophical functions that notions like the PSR afford. In a way, the PSR gives philosophical thinking a job description, a task list; it tells philosophy what it is for. I think you can still see this today, but in areas that are uncomfortably adjacent to philosophy. There's the explanatory function of philosophy, where thought's job is to accurately describe things ('ah, I see, so that's how everything works'). Then there's the hermeneutic function of philosophy, where the task is to reveal, elucidate, or create meaning ('a ha, so that's why everything is the way it is'). Finally, there's the therapeutic function of philosophy – to help, to console, to guide, to tell us finally how to live. Today, however, it seems the explanatory function has long ago been claimed by the sciences (be it the arcana of physics or the embarrassingly anthropomorphic mania for everything to do with the brain and cognition). The hermeneutic

function has been overtaken by the harrowing apparatus of Big Pharma, insurance industries, and various therapy modalities – inclusive of the desperate, miasmatic spread of new spiritualisms, Wellness, and yoga selfies. And the therapeutic function has been eclipsed by the constantly mutating self-help industry, which is never so far from 'philosophy' or 'theory' as condescending, bemused academics with guru-complexes would like to think (especially when such academics give their Invited Keynote Lectures, which increasingly resemble sales pitches disguised as TED talks).

TD: I would like to return to the important distinction between three different conceptualisations of the human-world relationship that you just hinted at, and that you explain in detail in 'In the Dust of this Planet' (2011): the 'world-for-us' (world in the shape of the human), the 'world-in-itself' (inaccessible world) and the 'world-without-us' (world as unhuman, as indifferent). Whilst the 'world-without-us' seems to speak to ongoing debates in speculative realism, Deleuze-influenced affect theory, or Simondonian media and technology studies, you suggest taking an alternative route. What is, if any, the insufficiency of those approaches that leads you to explore mysticism, the gothic, dark pantheism and occultism for thinking the world-without-us?

ET: I don't think that any of those approaches are insufficient in themselves, I just wasn't interested in them. True, I'm suspicious of affirmationist thinking in general (and it's quite possible that all thinking is affirmationist thinking...), but for the 'Horror of Philosophy' books it was more about delineating another kind of thinking more adequate to the project, a thinking that takes non-being as its starting point, and that begins from the dubiousness

of both being and becoming. As for the rest, I think it's safe to say that speculative realism has long outlived any potential usefulness it had for contemporary philosophy (a specious claim at best), and what I've read of affect theory (Deleuzian or otherwise) often comes across to me a bit too touchy-feely in its romantic eulogies of being in the flow, and its ponderous evocations of bodies and materialities, as if we're all supposed to beatifically bathe in some kind of creepily-naive '60s acid-burnout love fest also known as "community." I tried reading Simondon, and I believe there is a project there that is interesting, but I stopped because I found it boring to read and a bit tentative conceptually; there's a point for me at which the tedious is simply disguising itself as the technical. But all this is my shortcoming.

If there is something that dictated my turn to 'dark' studies, the occult, the gothic, and so on, it has to do with negation, and the way in which negation is coupled with futility. It's surprising to me, given the long and sorry saga of human suffering and ineptitude, that there aren't more philosophies of futility. Most likely there are, and because they were 'successful' either they no longer exist or no one knows about them. Generally, I'm very suspicious of any project whereby, simply by thinking in some new way or via some overlooked alternative or by learning coding, we can suddenly broach the rift between self and world, or between the world-for-us and the world-in-itself. I've always found that presumption to be incredibly gullible. But it's an a priori of a great deal of cultural theory and philosophy. It borders on self-help: if you change the way you think about the world, the world that you think about will change.

TD: In 'The Exploit', written with Alexander Galloway, you complicate the easy conflation of networks with liberation before going on to the describe the operations of control through decentralisation. The response, for emancipatory politics, in your view, should not be 'to destroy technology in some neo-Luddite delusion but to push technology into a hypertrophic state, further than it is meant to go. [...] We must scale up, not unplug.'[8] This work was published in 2007, before a range of technological advancements and linked operations of control emerged. Do you still hold this accelerationist view on technology, or might we find another source of inspiration in a negative attunement to technology, a 'techno-pessimism' or 'techno-nihilism' inspired by the thought of Cioran, Schopenhauer and others? I have always felt that accelerationism is lacking in its capacity for dealing with the relationship between technology and control (in the Deleuzian sense), unless one is willing to accept, even celebrate, the anti-humanist movement of capitalist technology, as per the right accelerationism of Nick Land. Is the celebration of technological acceleration in your work akin to the promotion of technology's anti-humanist drive, a misanthropic world-against-us?

ET: I don't understand our work in 'The Exploit' to be an accelerationist project. For me networks were another way to think about the limits of the human, or about how the conjunction of 'pattern' and 'purpose' are scaled above and below the scale of the human. My previous writings on networks, swarms, and multitudes are also part of that set of interests. Actually, when I

8 Galloway, A. and Thacker, E. (2007) *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

think about it, everything I've written has really been about one of two things: the unhuman outside the human, and the unhuman within the human. Distinctions of scale, granularity, and perspective may dictate the shape that a particular project takes, but there's always that delimiting gesture. 'The Exploit' in particular allowed us to work against a lot of the network euphoria that was around at the time, both within theory and outside of it (e.g. pop science books on how network science or scale-free networks are the key to understanding the Internet, cities, brains, capitalism, memes, and ultimately everything). It was also an invitation for us to point to a genealogy of network philosophy, while also delving a bit into cybernetics, graph theory, swarm intelligence, and those aspects of complexity science that relate to networks.

TD: Against 'network euphoria', might we find inspiration in something like a techno-pessimism?

ET: I would never promote anything like a 'techno-pessimism' – not in itself and certainly not as some kind of solution to whatever urgent problematic algorithmic capitalism present us with and that needs to be as urgently addressed by Panglossian professional thinkers. I don't know how much acceleration is too much. Whether Nick Land is 'really' right is a meaningless question that glosses over the real issue, which is that our patrimonial conceptual terminology of politics and ethics is woefully antiquated and very far from even coming close to describing the 'current situation.' And I don't see much to celebrate, theoretically or otherwise – even the fact that there's not much to celebrate.

I have never thought of the work I do in terms of 'problematising,' let alone in coming up with some kind

of solution or alternative so as to 'keep the discussion going', so as to, if even in the most micropolitical-intersectional-interventionist sense, 'make a difference.' I've never felt a part of that grotesquely presumptuous 'we' of theory-problematisers. And I don't want to. (I dread that, actually.) I understand this is how much of cultural theory and theory within the academy operates. But it's simply a self-aggrandising, auto-legitimising, and ultimately vapid gesture that only has a modicum of intellectual currency within the microworld that is the academic institution, a microworld that, like so many others, takes the part for the whole. Who knows, maybe this is a new Copernican turn, via the perfect storm of big data, social media, and algorithmic capital: I am the center, and the center is everywhere. Who says that it is we theorisers or intellectuals who have the provenance of both identifying problems and humble-braggingly offering solutions (solutions that are often published in laughably inaccessible online top-tier journals and that require one to first have judiciously studied the entirety of Hegel before proceeding or to at least have read the latest Žižek book with a sort-of-funny joke as the title). And we haven't even broached the topic of the staggering inefficacy of all this navel-gasing theory-mongering, much of which is also just tedious writing, no doubt the result of being so egregiously interpolated by academic standards, aspirational careerism, and a rapacious apparatus of app-driven pedagogy, vocationalising edutainment, and an imbecilic administrative technocracy that frequently passes for higher education. None of this has never been the motive for me writing what I write.

TD: For a small number of theorists, human extinction is a premise we ought to embrace. Cioran

wrote: 'I anticipated witnessing in my lifetime the disappearance of our species. But the gods have been against me.'[9] Similarly, in a different tone, Claire Colebrook has argued that, if extinction teaches us anything, it is that we need to question humanity's 'right to life'.[10] In 'Infinite Resignation', you appear to follow a similar trajectory in writing: 'Let us cast off all forms of racism, sexism, nationalism, and the like in favor of a new kind of discrimination – that of a speciesism. A disgust and revulsion towards the species that has, as a further qualification, the disgust towards ourselves.'[11]

But how might we prevent this 'speciesism' from universalising the human? The kinds of discrimination you mention (racism, sexism, nationalism) are unavoidably tied up in the production of the human species as a category. As various scholars have shown (including Frank Wilderson III, Sylvia Wynter, Jared Sexton), the category of the human is constituted through negating the 'non-human', the 'object' - the slave, the fugitive, the black body. What does speciesism entail if it considers this 'social death' underpinning the socialisation and materialisation of the racialised category of the 'human'?

ET: Questions like the ones posed by Colebrook will increasingly become the questions that will be unavoidable in theory. They are questions of theory that question theory itself. They are also irresolvable questions. At its most compelling, the idea of the extinction of the

9 Cioran, E. (1991) *Anathemas and Admiration*. New York: Arcade Publishing, p. 128.
10 Colebrook, C. (2014) *The Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction*. London: Open University Press, p. 185.
11 Thacker, E. (2018) *Infinite Resignation*. London: Repeater Books, p. 154.

species (as opposed to the death of the individual) forces a kind of humility to thought, and even, in some instances, a confrontation with the futility of thought. Whether this is a counterpoint to the ongoing voraciousness of self-absorbed, 'road-to-hell-paved-with-good-intentions' technicity, is an open question. But, as a colleague once said to me at my first teaching job, 'hope for the best and expect the worst.' At this level of the discussion, I don't have any innovative ideas, new terminologies, or erudite references. Maybe I'm a human abolitionist. Starting with the category of 'human.' The historical record – such as it is – speaks for itself. As does the scientific tally. As does everyday life. The misfortunate experiment calling itself humanity is, at best, a failed experiment. Humanity is – and perhaps has always been – a lost cause. This futility is registered at many levels, from the super-collective to the sub-individual.

For example, I live in a country founded on genocide, slavery, and the routine, violent subjection of women, children, immigrants, and people of color (...and animals, and plant life, and geological life, and the elements...). These stains don't wash out so easily. And now I find myself living in a culture of delusion (or is it me?), where live-streamed POV mass shootings or Facebook suicides are becoming the norm. It's harrowing. Eerie. Uncanny. I can play the intellectual but in truth I don't know what to make of it. No one does, really. The situation is compounded by the sense that we are confused about our confusion, as if the crux of the problem continually recedes into a discursive blind spot. But anyone who states they're a human abolitionist is obviously put in an awkward position. This is why the great misanthropists are always auto-misanthropists.

As to the idea of 'speciesism,' there is no preventing or avoiding the universalising of the human – that's what 'the human' is. It's part of the architecture of human thinking. Universals are moving targets. And they are effective in their apparent absoluteness. The idea that we could ever have a theoretical framework that includes everyone equally is a farce. It's only a very narrow brand of vaguely post-structuralist quasi-Derridian-Deleuzian thinking that has obsessed over difference to the extent that difference itself becomes a universal (with their ponderous quasi-mystical evocations of an Other that can never be relatable). These sorts of things are always being recalibrated, whether someone's talking about the 'anthropological machine' or about the 'cybernetic triangle' of human, animals, and machines. It's a theatre of performative negations. And it operates at several levels.

For instance, when talking about 'the human' we routinely imply the not-human (everything excluded from the category of the human but with which the human can interact like rocks, books, Shoggoths, and cats... well, actually my cat can be pretty non-interactive). But this is only operative because we also talk about the non-human (those entities close to but separate from the human, like animals, robots, puppets or dolls), and the judicious management of the non-human makes possible the more speculative discussions of the posthuman (be it via the do-gooder, all-inclusive, materially-informatic fiat of cultural theory, or via the puerile fantasies of 'uploading' and a Messianic, computational 'singularity'). And then of course there's the pseudo-human (which may apply to humans, insofar as the species is a simulacra or an imposter of itself). The sub-human. The hyper-

human. And so on. As a reply we can opt for hybridity and its variants of cyborg-this-and-that, but this also involves boundary managing, including/excluding, particularising/universalising, and the often virtuous claims for 'contingency,' 'situatedness' and the like belie the almost infinite granularity of warding off the demon of the universal. If you're lucky, it's a zero-sum game.

A short look at the developments in any branch of philosophy or theory… or media studies or gender studies or black studies or queer theory or whatever demonstrates this. Someone says 'it is X.' That works for a while, conference attendees sagely nod, and then someone else asks, 'Yes but what about X(a)? Shouldn't X(a) be considered when thinking about X?' (Note that X(a) is really Y in another, concurrent discussion happening at the conference room next door.) 'Ah yes, good point, so we should really talk about X(a).' And then another person says 'what about X(b)?' And so on, until finally, at the brink of reciting pi, someone asks 'what about the Southeast Asian afro-pessimist gender-queer misanthropocene meme-farm AI epiphyte omni-dimensional obsidian Ooloi Shoggoth barista lyric poets? What about them?' (And for the record a Southeast Asian afro-pessimist gender-queer misanthropocene meme-farm AI epiphyte omni-dimensional obsidian Ooloi Shoggoth barista lyric poet would be amazing, and I would purchase the print version of their chapbook – and they prefer the pronoun 'it.') At what point does intersectionalism become so complex that it exceeds the capacity of theory to theorise it? One would spend all one's time simply enumerating the long list of descriptors (like a mantra) before even getting to the problem. This is the big data problem of cultural studies.

But I often wonder, what current categories will later generations look back on in moral horror and almost laughable incredulity, the same way we might look back at previous forms of discrimination? In our moral righteousness we look back aghast at 'historical' examples of genocide or slavery, and dutifully go about the redemptive business of comprehending it all. But will the routine treatment of animals as either pets or food be regarded this way in the future? Plants? Rocks? What about the flora and fauna of AI and intelligent agents that currently populate the other kind of 'cloud'? What about the elements themselves – air, water, fire, earth – given that the wars we are headed into may very well be elemental wars, and given that we are as much constituted by them as we constitute, control, design, and destroy the elements? Yet we're so far from having moved beyond our haunting taxonomies of discrimination it's very very difficult to see human thinking as not category-bound in some way. In its darkest recesses, cultural theory may be forced to entertain the disturbing notion that, for example, the category of 'race' implies 'racism' – and that it may even produce it. And yet we don't seem willing – or able – to abolish the categories. Maybe we're underestimating the particular form of negation that is misanthropy; maybe we're underestimating the hatred of humanity. In this way human thinking frustratingly binds anthropocentrism, if not anthropomorphism.

TD: The fruitful concept of 'decision' is one you refer to at various places in your work. In your article 'Networks, Swarms, Multitudes', you offer a critical examination of the political concept of multitude, asking 'where heterogeneity, diversity, and difference flourish, how is 'political decision' possible, without resort to

the tradition of the social contract?'[12] Taking up a philosophical iteration of the concept, in 'Notes on the axiomatic of the desert'[13] you follow Laruelle's refusal of 'philosophical decision', that is, philosophy's constitutive drive towards capturing and carving out an object of thought.

How might we conceive of the connection between 'philosophical decision', as Laruelle describes it, and 'political decision'? Does Laruelle's refusal of the 'philosophical decision', and his subsequent turn towards 'non-philosophy', allow us to approach the 'problem of the political decision' differently? Alexander Galloway, in his book 'Laruelle: Against the digital',[14] finds in Laruelle's refusal to 'decide' a political imperative, not dissimilar to Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' as the ultimate refusal. Given that you write 'the pessimist can never be political […], can never live up to the political',[15] is Galloway's an approach you agree with? In other words, can there be an ethics of indecision?

ET: My aim in raising the concept of 'decision' in those essays was to make the traditional concept of decision irrelevant – at least when it comes to comprehending the distributed phenomena of networks, swarms, multitudes. It seemed to me that there was a basic contradiction at play. On the one hand there is the assertion of the 'bottom-up' or 'intentionless' aspect of these forms – local actions, global patterns. On the other hand, the

12 Thacker, E. (2004) Swarms, Networks, Multitudes. *CTheory*, n.p.
13 Thacker, E. (2014) Notes on the axiomatic of the desert. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities,* 19(2): 85-91.
14 Galloway, A. (2014) *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
15 Thacker, E. (2018) *Infinite Resignation*. London: Repeater Books, p. 49.

main motive behind the fascination with these forms is precisely in how they can be rendered instrumental, how they can be designed, how particular global patterns can result from this or that set of local actions to serve particular agendas or interests, and this is as true of engineers routing data packets in information networks for a Telecom conglomerate (built upon the study of insect swarms) as it is of activists wanting to know how to leverage mobile and WiFi or social media to protest against said conglomerate. It challenges basic notions not only of technological instrumentality but of causality and relationality. There's something absurd about this. Perhaps we will witness the accidental or unintentional revolution. Or the sponsored revolution. Arguably, we already have. We are, no doubt, already in this space, a space of functional inversion, in which human beings may simply be another way for some other aspect of existence to perpetuate itself, and for ends that are non-existent or that may remain forever occluded from the blind spot of humanity's increasingly ridiculous and misguided provenance. (I'm reminded of the J.G. Ballard story in which World War 3 does happen, but it goes unnoticed. It's just another show.)

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