



REVIEWS

Review of *Collapse IV: Concept-Horror*

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This multi-genre journal explores the “intimate bond between horror and philosophical thought” and the nether realm that awaits those who pursue the rational beyond its limits. Other volumes of the journal are I: *Numerical Materialism*; II: *Speculative Realism*; III: *Unknown Deleuze*; V: *The Copernican Imperative*; and VI: *Geo/philosophy*. This issue includes essays, poetry, visual art, and photographs, all introduced by Robin Mackay’s “Editorial Introduction” and concluding with “Notes on Contributors and Acknowledgements.”

Collapse IV requires that the reader understand that it is not about horror but, in many ways, *is* horror. At times, it delves into fetishism (especially Keith Telford’s cover art and illustrations throughout) and the underworld, often threatening the reader. Throughout, it engages the threat of the outside and the other to the survival of the self. Further, the issue does not engage literary scholarship. It is not subject to the normal rigors of literary research and, thus, promotes philosophical insights while missing observations from literary sources. Also, for the non-philosopher, it is fogged by its nomenclature, making it difficult for those outside the field.

Kristen Alvanson’s “*Arbor Deformia*,” illustrated with her own black and white photographs of deformities, is a case in point. The images of babies and animals preserved in jars are so stunning that the text almost becomes secondary to their attachment to Ambrose Paré’s sixteenth-century *Des monstres et des prodiges*. Biology and “inter-specific biological forces” yield aberrant relationships among humans, animals, and insects (379). While the photographs are disturbing, the language is difficult for the uninitiated. For example, “‘Taxonomy as monstrous’, [sic] ‘hierarchy as deformity’, [sic] ‘category as schizophrenic order’ and ‘tree as *lusus naturae*’ could stand as partial consequences of Paré’s teratological system” requires considerable intellectual assiduousness (368). Alvanson certainly provides a much different perspective than literary approaches, such as Arthur Clayborough’s *The Grotesque in English Literature*. Continuing this imagery and drawing upon Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Aristotle’s lost fragment “The Corpse Bride,” Reza Negarestani’s “The Corpse Bride: Thinking with *Nigredo*” begins with Mezentius’s punishment of Aeneas’s captive soldiers by binding them face to face with corpses. He explores the difference and similarity between the soul and the body in its historical and philosophical contexts and the “art” of living with the dead. The soul needs the body to invigorate, yet as the body decays, the soul resists putrefaction. Thus, the

soul faces its decaying double, an essential element in both real and fictional horror. Continuing the motif of repugnance, Quentin Meillassoux's "Spectral Dilemma," the third in a trilogy begun in *Collapse II*, engages rationalism and the insistence of divine dilemma. He asserts that mourning is central to maintaining ethics and offers this as a remedy for despair, especially in the face of a "virtual god" who is responsible for suffering and "can only be the object of horror and repugnance rather than veneration" (18).

Somewhat in contrast to these essays on decay, Eugene Thacker's particularly interesting "Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror," unfortunately, begins by intimating that the identification of the soul is Aristotle's (348–322 BCE). In Western European culture, the concept of the soul more rightly belongs to Pythagoras (560–500 BCE) and Orphism; in other cultures, its inception is much earlier (e.g., the Egyptian *ka*). However, from there, he historically traces the anonymous primal ooze, the blob, that nameless something that is neither dead nor alive with allusions to Lovecraft's cosmic otherness and its antipathy to humanity as well as to his bio-horror (e.g., the Shoggoths). This is analogous to Coleridge's "life-in-death" in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the Golem, and Frankenstein's construct, all of which also dispute the duality of life and death with its afterlife, reincarnation, and/or resurrection. Thacker's nine categories are After-Life, Blasphemous Life, Ambient Plague, *Nekros* (with two meanings from the *Odyssey*: corpse and revitalized being), the Spirit of Biology, Univocal Creatures, Pathological Immanence, Life as Non-Being, and Anonymous Horror. Also using the eminent slime or zero, Iain Hamilton Grant is the "foremost exponent of *steampunk materialism*" (21). His "Being and Slime: The Mathematics of Protoplasm in Lorenz Oken's 'Physio-Philosophy,'" with drawings by Todosch, seeks a philosophy of nature. His and Oken's "naturephilosophy" destroys the sanctity and security of the self, inverting the interior and the exterior. Echoing Thacker's dualism, Thomas Ligotti's "Thinking Horror / 'Memento Mori'—Dead Monkeys," illustrated by twelve black and white photographs by Oleg Kulik of monkeys, quickly emphasizes the issue's frequent focus on the void and references Peter Wessel Zapffe's "The Last Messiah." Summoning the spirit of Lovecraft, Thacker links thinking and cognition directly to horror and nihilism and delineates the struggle between "the will to extinction" and the will to survive (15).

There is a core of essays with either a primary or passing emphasis on literature, especially H. P. Lovecraft's. George Sieg's "Infinite Regress into Self-Referential Horror: The Gnosis of the Victim" explores the nature of victims and the attacks upon them by the alien other and the outsider. He postulates that horror is defined more by the victim than by the monster, although I would propose that it is more likely a balance between the two. He traces H. P. Lovecraft's racism through Aryanism (purity) and deeper yet to Zoroas-

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trian monotheism, especially *druj*, a.k.a. “xenophobia turned inward” (7). As mentioned earlier, since this is not literary research, Sieg mentions only S. T. Joshi’s *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* and Michel Houellebecq’s *H. P. Lovecraft: Contre le Monde contre le vie* to support his argument. China Miéville’s “M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire: Weird; Hauntological: Versus and/or or?...” pursues the “high Weird” (105) as it was initiated by Lovecraft and perhaps William Hope Hodgson along with such precursors and followers as Jules Verne, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, Sheridan Le Fanu, and particularly M. R. James. Miéville structures the Weird as the formless “skulltopus,” inspired by Jean Painlevé’s “Le Vampire” (125). Unlike Sieg, Miéville does critically engage the research into the weird, monstrous, and unseen that characterizes horror.

Graham Harman’s “On the Horror of Phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl,” with assorted ink/marker illustrations by Keith Telford entitled “Singular Agitations and a Common Vertigo,” begins by assailing the vapid nature of academic philosophy. In pursuit of weird realism, Harman then interplays Lovecraft’s “horror of phenomenology” (342) with the writings of Heidegger and Kant (where he agrees with Miéville in regards to the necessary element of the unspeakable). For him, as Mackay points out, “the weird and the horrific are always palpable, but their pulpy flesh ultimately always escapes our grasp” (27). Benjamin Noys’s “*Horror Temporis*” focuses on the nihilistic nature of time in Lovecraft and its parasitic nature and indifference to human will and coercion. Lovecraft’s time is the dark abyss reminiscent of the Greek Tartarus and is the realm that is unresponsive to even the concept of law. James Trafford’s “The Shadow of a Puppet Dance: Metzinger, Ligotti and the Illusion of Selfhood” continues the focus on nothingness. It draws upon Thomas Metzinger’s *Being No One: The Self Model Theory of Subjectivity* and suggests that the horrific fiction of Thomas Ligotti (whose self-reflective essay also appears in the issue) is generated by the void. Ligotti’s protagonists illustrate that the self with its generation and self-modeling does not exist. Thus, the cosmos is “nemocentric” (nemo = no one).

So too, the art and the poetry do not yield to assumed aesthetics or to sanctuary. Rafani’s “Czech Forest” cutouts are historically and politically inspired by the Czechs’ expulsion of the Germans at the end of World War II and are marked by the triumphant slogans taken from “Unofficial Decalogue of Czech Soldiers at the Borderland” (e.g., “The German remains our irreconcilable enemy”). Jake and Dinos Chapman’s “I Can See,” pen and ink drawings, is subtitled “A Children’s Coloring Book about Eye Care.” These drawings combine the macabre with the normal, introducing running wounds and insect appendages with normal adolescent and Christian images. Young girls, decoratively posed, dangle their heads in their hands; an attractive

hairdo features an eye in a bleeding mouth; a maimed girl hangs from a cross as two small children point to her; a Ken and Barbie scene puts swastikas on the bikini and an insect head and wings on the boy. Steven Shearer's "Poems XVII" (28 x 35 inches, charcoal on rag paper) covered the entire side of a building for its initial presentation in Berlin (2006). Via the use of profanity with demonic and death-metal music allusions, it chronicles the reduction of faith into a pool of vomit and seeks to capture the essence of nihilism. Michael Houellebecq's "Poems," selected from his *Le Sens du Combat* and *La Poursuite du Bonheur*, focuses on such themes as death, dread, despair, loss, and angst. He exercises these through images of the intersection of life with the cold emptiness of the universe. Banality is only invigorated by intrusions of personal horrors that carry the entire weight of the cosmos. (Houellebecq is also the author of *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*.)

Collapse IV is not for the semantically faint of heart or those who are easily shocked. However, for students of the essential nature of horror, it is rewarding reading, especially in regard to Lovecraft. It offers unusual and enlightening perspectives that normally do not appear in literary scholarship. It's also nice that it's now free and very accessible.

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