

Affect After the End of the World:  
Uncanny Disorientation, Nihilism in Bad Faith, and the Crisis of Modernity

by

David Miller

B.A., Mount Royal University, 2012

M.A., Theory & Criticism, University of Western Ontario, 2014

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Department of Political Science

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University of Victoria

We acknowledge and respect the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and X̱wsep̓səm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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## Abstract

The central claim of this dissertation is that for modern subjects the *world has already ended*, insofar as the modern world upon which their subjective orientation had been based has been rendered inoperative. Several questions then follow from this claim: How does it *feel*, affectively, to live on after the end of the world? And what kinds of activity—social, political, aesthetic, etc.—follow from these affective experiences? It is my contention that the basic affective structure of contemporary reality, after the end of the world, is one of *uncanny disorientation*: an unsettling feeling of creeping strangeness that leaves the modern subject unable to orient themselves in relation to once familiar things. This affective sense of uncanny disorientation then produces a mode of subjectivity that I have termed *nihilism in bad faith*, or a form of passive nihilism in which the subject acknowledges their own nihilistic tendencies only in order to flee from them through a reinvestment in the very modes of life that produced their nihilism in the first place. This theoretical framework of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith will then be applied to three case studies—the aesthetic turn toward nostalgia; the current resurgence in overt white supremacist movements; and contemporary plans for Mars colonization—to demonstrate how these seemingly disparate forms of activity can be understood as reactions to feelings of uncanny disorientation and examples of nihilism in bad faith.

## Acknowledgements

I acknowledge with gratitude the financial support I have received from the Government of Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in the form of a Doctoral Fellowship, as well as the University of Victoria's Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) in the form of a Graduate Fellowship, in service of completing this dissertation.

Sections of this dissertation have been presented in an earlier form at several departmental talks, workshops, and conferences.

An early version of the chapter on "Nihilism...In...Space!" was presented as part of the Cultural, Social, and Political Thought Program's Colloquium Series at the University of Victoria in 2017.

A general outline of this project was presented at the Cultural, Social, and Political Thought Program's Graduate Student Conference at the University of Victoria in 2019.

A paper on "Nihilism in Bad Faith" that would become the basis for Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation was first presented at the Graduate Students of Political Science Colloquium at the University of Victoria in February of 2021 and was presented in a revised form at the Carleton Political Science Graduate Student's Association Conference: Continuity or Rupture—Politics in the 2020s in April of 2021.

A version of the chapter on "White Supremacy, Anti-Black Racism, and Nihilism" was also presented as part of the Department of Political Science's Works-in-Progress Series at the University of Victoria in November of 2025.

## Dedication

There are many people without whose help and encouragement this dissertation would not have been possible.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Simon Glezos, for his unerring support and assistance in the writing of this dissertation. His feedback, encouragement, and patience have been invaluable throughout this entire process. I truly could not have asked for a better supervisor.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Arthur Kroker and Dr. Peyman Vahabzadeh, for agreeing to read my work and act as members of my supervisory committee. Additional thanks to Dr. Nicole Shukin for reading some early drafts of this project.

Thank you also to the many peers and colleagues who I have discussed this project with over the years and whose feedback has helped to shape the final form of this dissertation. Thanks in particular to Regan Burles and Didier Zúñiga, whose feedback helped provide direction and insight during the early stages of writing; Michael Zeigler, whose friendship and conversations over coffee were an invaluable source of inspiration throughout the process; and Gizem Sozen, who has been a supportive friend from the beginning of this project.

Much love and many thanks are also owed to my friends and family, who have always shown a keen interest in my work and provided much needed encouragement and support.

Thank you to my family—Randal Miller, Brenda Simpson, and Anne Miller—for supporting me throughout my Doctorate and taking a genuine interest in what I am reading, writing, teaching, and thinking about.

Thank you also to Morgan Daye for always being a source of strength, comfort, love, and friendship, and for keeping me (relatively) sane during my time in graduate school. Your continued support means the world to me.

I would also like to thank Alexandra Shewan, Eric Smith, and Anne McGladdery-Majumdar for being wonderfully supportive friends, genuinely listening when I talk about esoteric philosophical concepts, and providing much-needed laughter and frivolity in my life. I cannot express how invaluable the time we spend together is.

My deepest love and thanks to Wayne Stewart, whose support for my career as a secret romance novelist has helped turn my home into a lush and beautiful garden, and to Samuel Salvati, whose boundless affection and faith in my capacities has helped me believe that I could finish this dissertation.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this dissertation in part to my non-human companions, Atlas the cat and Benjamin the dog, whose love and companionship helped me through many of the hardest parts of this process.

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## Introduction

In recent years, I have found myself having the same conversation over and over again. Talking with friends, with colleagues, with family, the conversation naturally drifts to current events: the election (and re-election) of Donald Trump; skyrocketing rates of fentanyl overdose and death in Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto; widespread forest fires devastating the interior of British Columbia, Alberta, Oregon, and California; housing crises in the city where I live and the cities where I have lived; rising instances of racial, misogynistic, homophobic, and anti-trans violence; the list goes on. But after relaying to each other in distressed tones the most recent catastrophe, these discussions invariably end in the exact same way: with the conclusion that somehow, these days, the world feels *radically unpredictable*. Over and over, again and again, I hear from the people in my life that, given some recent event in the world, it feels as if *anything could happen*, as if the very texture of reality were marked by uncertainty, and that these feelings of living in an uncertain and unpredictable world produce a general inability to respond. There seems to be no way to act in relation to contemporary reality, no way to really understand what is happening, to know what will happen next, or to formulate an adequate response (whether political, ethical, aesthetic, or existential) to the most pressing problems with which we are faced.<sup>1</sup>

Such feelings are, of course, neither new nor unique to our current situation. In fact, one might argue that they could only seem so to individuals who have had the privilege of, at one

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<sup>1</sup> This, of course, seems to be an exaggerated response; my friends and colleagues continue to act, to organize politically, to educate themselves and others about the world, and (to some extent) understand the problems they face. And I continue to be consistently amazed and humbled by these efforts. But the point remains: there seems to be an undercurrent of feeling to these activities—feelings of uncertainty, unpredictability, and disorientation that emerge, time and again, in our conversations, when we try to give some account of what is happening or what we are working against or toward.

time or another, actually experiencing the world as coherent, predictable, or stable because it has been structured to their benefit. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to take such claims to feelings of uncertainty seriously and to try to understand what it is about living in this particular moment that prompts these expressions of uncertainty and impotence. What is the structure of feeling underlying these current expressions of precariousness and unpredictability? Why does our contemporary moment seem marked by feelings of *uncanny strangeness* and *disorientation*? And what kinds of political, social, ethical, and aesthetic responses do these experiences provoke? Can an understanding of the affective *feel* of contemporary reality shed light on particular activities that function as responses to experiences of uncertainty? Are these responses adequate? And if we understand the structure of feeling underlying our expressions of uncertainty, will it be possible to formulate a more adequate or appropriate response to such feelings?

These are the initial questions that have motivated this dissertation project, and I find that they are tied to multiple currents of contemporary critical theory and political philosophy. I hear echoes of these concerns with uncertainty, unpredictability, and disorientation in the work of the “speculative realists” (as represented by theorists such as Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, and Quentin Meillassoux), theorists of complexity, networks, and hybridity (like Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Alexis Shotwell, William Connolly, and Jasbir Puar), affect theorists and contemporary phenomenologists (like Sara Ahmed, Brian Massumi, Lauren Berlant, and Dylan Trigg), theorists of postmodern aesthetics (like Frederick Jameson, Mark Fisher, and Simon Reynolds), and the contemporary return to philosophies of nihilism (as represented by philosophers like Ray Brassier, Calvin Warren, and Eugene Thacker). While these academic fields and particular theorists represent a wide array of interests, concerns, projects, and

philosophical traditions, they also seem to resonate with one another in their mutual concern for the weird uncertainty, complexity, and contingency of contemporary reality. I, in turn, share these concerns, especially as they regard the affective *feel* of contemporary life, and the impact that these feelings may have on political, ethical, and aesthetic works. More specifically, I am concerned that the predominant affective structure of contemporary life increasingly leads to a form of passive nihilism that expresses itself through escapist fantasies and a reorientation toward ethical values and forms-of-life that have proven themselves to be disastrous and genocidal.

My intention for this dissertation project is thus to outline what I will theorize to be the predominant affective complex of our current moment—an affect I will term *uncanny disorientation*—and to examine how a particular set of political, aesthetic, and ethical phenomena follow as responses to this affective complex. Following Sara Ahmed’s conception of normative disorientation, Dylan Trigg’s phenomenology of the uncanny, and Timothy Morton’s claim that “hyperobjects” (actually-existing systems that display characteristics of “very large finitude” and hybridity) provoke a feeling of uncanniness, I intend to argue that contemporary reality is marked by forms of complexity and hybridity that lend the world a sense of indeterminacy: a sense that things in the world are simultaneously familiar and radically unfamiliar at once. This indeterminacy, in turn, is experienced affectively as a feeling of *uncanniness* and phenomenological *disorientation* that prompts a sense of ontological terror (or a confrontation with the fact that *being* rests upon *nothing*) in those who experience it, leading to the formation of a mode of subjectivity that I will call *nihilism in bad faith*. But while one could pinpoint a variety of material and social sources of uncanny disorientation, this dissertation will focus on one particular source that seems especially pressing in our present moment: namely, *the*

*breakdown of modernity as a result of the increased proliferation of hybrid systems and objects.*

More specifically, I will argue that the problem of uncanny disorientation is not simply *caused* by the mere existence of hybrid systems but rather arises from the conflict between the increasingly undeniable presence of hybrid objects and our ongoing investment in the dreams and values of modernity—particularly, the modern insistence on *purity* and *purification*.

Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour, I will contend that the predominant value and activity of the ideological-historical period of modernity has been an attempt at *purification*: the purification of concepts, categories, and subjects through the creation of binary divisions between ostensibly incommensurate categories (i.e., nature/culture, human/animal, self/other, white/black, West/East, orient/occident, life/non-life, etc.). In modernity, this activity of purification has taken place to the exclusion and suppression of what Latour calls *translation*, or the creation of hybrid systems and entities that transgress the ontological boundaries established through purification, which I will claim constitutes the modern *world*—a world which has now been rendered inoperative through the emergence of undeniable hybridity. And it this undeniable hybridity after the dissolution of the modern world that has prompted our experience of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I will therefore outline a conception of what it means to *have a world*, arguing that the modern constitution of purification-without-translation (as defined by Latour) constitutes a world that is ultimately self-undermining. As theorists from disciplines as varied as deconstruction, systems theory, post-structuralism, post-modern aesthetic theory, post-colonial theory, queer theory, and feminist philosophy have demonstrated repeatedly, the binary divisions created through purification reside at the heart of modern thought and

subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> The production of these binaries is an attempt to establish *control*: the purification of categories, of objects, and bodies, lends the world a semblance of sense and meaning by positioning some subjects as masters of the earth while relegating others to the position of passive material to be used, controlled, and manipulated. In turn, the network of meaning established through the creation of these purified categories comes to constitute a world *for us*, in which human being is positioned as both central to existence and ontologically opposed to the non-human, inhuman, natural, or other. However, as Latour further explains, the very same purification activity that seeks to produce the stability and control of ontologically separate categories also produces, just below the level of general perception and thought, hybrid objects and systems that muddle and resist these attempts at purification—objects that are both/and, neither/nor, that demonstrate qualities belonging to two or more (ostensibly) incommensurable categories in binary opposition. Over the course of the historical period of modernity, such hybrid objects have proliferated to the point of being *undeniably present*, impinging on every aspect of life, thereby undermining the attempts at purification so central to the modern project. This proliferation of hybrid objects constitutes the crisis of modernity, marked by the term post-modernity, which we remain immersed in today.

Moreover, following Timothy Morton's claim that this crisis constitutes the "end of the world" for modern subjects, I will further argue that the self-undermining activity of the modern

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Gloria Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands/La Frontera* on borderland subjectivity, Adrienne Rich's essay "Split at the Root", Donna Haraway's *Cyborg and Companion Species Manifestos*, Jane Bennett's work on *Vibrant Matter* and materialisms that go beyond the subject/object binary, Jacques Derrida's methodology of deconstruction, Luce Irigaray's conception of phallogocentrism from *The Sex Which is Not One*, Helene Cixous' work on sexual difference(s) and animality, Deleuze and Guattari's work on the polyvocality of desire, and the way in which this work is taken up by queer theorists like Guy Hocquenghem and the queer nihilist group *Baeden*, Jasbir Puar's work on assemblages and homonationalism, Susan Stryker and Rebecca Jane Morgan's respective work on trans subjectivity, or Frederic Jameson's work on postmodernism and late capitalism. While these thinkers and texts vary considerably in their approaches, concerns, and conclusions, they each share a critique of the binary purifications at the heart of modernism and work to undo these binaries in multiple ways.

constitution has led to a situation in which the modern world has *ended*, even as we continue to live on as modern subjects.<sup>3</sup> However, this raises the question: *What is it like to live after the “end of the world”?* What is the *feeling*, the general affective *structure*, of subjects who are modern yet no longer can be? And what does this feeling or affective structure prompt such subjects to *do*? What activities—political, ethical, aesthetic—do we pursue in the charnel ground left after the end of the world?<sup>4</sup>

Further following Morton’s reiterative description of hyperobjects as *uncanny*, in conjunction with phenomenological descriptions of “worldlessness” as *disorienting*, I will begin my examination of the affective structure of life after the end of the world by proposing that the predominant feeling of our time (at least for those subjects who can still properly be called modern) is a creeping, disturbing sense of *the uncanny* that arises from an experience of generalized *disorientation*. In Chapters 2 and 3, I will first examine accounts of bodily and normative disorientation (as put forward by Immanuel Kant, Sara Ahmed, Ami Harbin, and

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<sup>3</sup> We might think here of the genre of “post-apocalyptic” narratives that have proliferated since the invention of the atom bomb: in a sense, our existence at “the end of the world” is akin to Charlton Heston’s character in the film *The Omega Man*, or Will Smith’s reprisal of the role in *I Am Legend*, or Charlize Theron’s character Furiosa from *Mad Max: Fury Road*, or, really, any character from the myriad of post-apocalyptic narratives that have circulated through our culture since at least the end of the second World War. Just because our world has ended does not mean that we have stopped living in it. But what can it mean to live after the end of the world? What is that experience like, and how do we orient ourselves in relation to it? Such questions will act as the background against which the rest of this dissertation will unfold.

<sup>4</sup> The description of existence after the “end of the world” as a charnel ground is Morton’s. I invoke it here because I find it to be a particularly evocative image. Drawing on Tibetan Buddhism, Morton explains the charnel ground as: “a place of life and death, of death-in-life and life-in-death, an undead place of zombies, viroids, junk DNA, ghosts, silicates, cyanide, radiation, demonic forces, and pollution... Since there are no charnel grounds to speak of in the West, the best analogy, used by some Tibetan Buddhists (from whom the image derives), is the emergency room of a busy hospital. People are dying everywhere. There is blood and noise, equipment rushing around, screams. When the charm of *world* is dispelled, we find ourselves in the emergency room of ecological coexistence. In the charnel ground, worlds can never take root. Charnel grounds are too vivid for that. Any soft focusing begins to look like violence. Haunting a charnel ground is a much better analogy for ecological coexistence than inhabiting a world. [Yet] there is something immensely soothing about charnel grounds” (126). The charnel ground is what is left when the “world” enabled by the modern constitution is dispelled, and all of the entities that we have neatly purified get churned up into a tangle of networks and hybridity. Such is the non-world which modern subjects find themselves immersed in today.

others) to argue that the experience of contemporary life after the “end of the world” is both spatially and cognitively *disorienting*. I will then turn to works on the uncanny (including the classic texts of Ernst Jentsch and Sigmund Freud, in conjunction with Dylan Trigg’s recent phenomenological examination of uncanny experiences in post-modern landscapes) to argue that the affective content of this generalized disorientation is *uncanniness*, or a haunting sense of indeterminacy and ontological terror at the simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity of the world. This combination of uncanniness and disorientation then forms the affective structure that I will call *uncanny disorientation*, and which I will argue to be the predominant affective experience for modern subjects in the time of the modern world’s dissolution.

Increasingly, as the modern world passes away, we are exposed to the reality that the purified categories through which we think, which our very subjectivity is founded upon, are not (and never have been) tenable. Yet, even today, many of us remain invested in modern dreams of purification. It is precisely because of our investment in this modern project of purification that the increasingly undeniable presence of hybrid systems and objects feels disturbing and unsettling, shaking the very foundations of our predominant mode of thought and subjectivity. And as the presence of such hybrid systems in our daily lives increases, so too the experience of uncanny disorientation. In the initial chapters of this dissertation, I will thus theorize the affective complex of uncanny disorientation as the product of a tension at the heart of a particular mode of subjectivity: the fact that we are still modern, yet we no longer can be modern, and what’s more, we may never have been so in the first place. Living this tension, I will argue, is experienced by the still-modern subject as a feeling of uncanny unreality and disturbing disorientation—a feeling which, further, structures a certain form of nihilistic subjectivity that I will call *nihilism in bad faith*.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I will thus examine how the affective structure of uncanny disorientation produces the subjectivity of modern individuals, arguing that the subjectivity of those who are still invested in the modern constitution and who have been stricken with an experience of uncanny disorientation in response to the dissolution of modernity have become *nihilistic* in their relation to contemporary existence. On my account, this combination of elements—*uncanny disorientation* and *nihilism* in response to undeniable hybridity—constitutes a new form of subjectivity, which I will call *nihilism in bad faith*. Following the distinction between “active” and “passive” forms of nihilism outlined by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Will to Power* and further elaborated by Gilles Deleuze in his book dedicated to Nietzsche’s philosophy, I will contend that the affective complex of uncanny disorientation, prompted by the tension of continuing to subscribe to the values of modernity at a time when those values have been rendered inoperative, produces a particular form of passive nihilism that is lived by the still-modern subject as a form of *bad faith*. Such “passive” nihilism can be defined as a mode of subjectivity marked by reactivity and *ressentiment*, “characterized by negation, reactionary forces and a will to nothingness” (Lucrezia 8). Not passive in the common sense of lacking activity or displaying a tendency toward quietude, the subject of “passive” nihilism may, in fact, be frantically engaged in a plethora of activities. But these activities are, at most, *re-activities*: reactions to negative stimuli and affects received from the world that do not display a tendency towards creativity but rather remain trapped at the level of brute negation and the re-confirmation (in inverted form) of that which has been negated.

Like passive nihilism more generally, the particular form of nihilism that I will call *nihilism in bad faith* is marked by reactivity and a tendency to ultimately reaffirm current values (if only in an inverted form). But, more specifically, subjects affected by nihilism in bad faith

also display a tendency toward *escapism*: a desire to *escape* rather than *negate* the conditions that have provoked their nihilism (and, thus, the condition of nihilism itself) while simultaneously acknowledging and remaining attached to those very same conditions. The subject of nihilism in bad faith thus acknowledges the forces in the world that have produced their uncanny disorientation (sometimes going so far as to acknowledge the experience of uncanny disorientation and nihilism itself) while simultaneously attempting to leave those conditions behind through projects of *reorientation* that aim to regain a sense of normative orientation through a reinvestment in the comfort and safety of modern values. These projects of reorientation, however, ultimately fail to oppose the conditions that have provoked the subject's experience of uncanny disorientation, functioning instead to reaffirm the same ethico-political values that created those conditions in the first place—namely, the modern constitution and its activity of purification without translation. This form of nihilism is therefore in “bad faith” insofar as it involves a confrontation with the fact of nihilism, and an attempt to move into an “active” or completed form of nihilistic subjectivity, yet *still refuses to position itself against the conditions that have produced its pessimistic will-to-nothingness*.

Drawing on more recent work on the philosophy of nihilism, I will therefore claim that nihilism in bad faith (as a form of passive nihilism) is the result of a failure to think and live nihilism through to its ultimate conclusions. Nihilism in bad faith constitutes a form of incomplete nihilism, but one that is distinctively characterized by an open confrontation with the problem of the insignificance of human life to the universe. Yet the nihilist in bad faith also refuses to deny their nihilistic condition or the experience of uncanny disorientation that has prompted it. Rather, they continue to wallow in the contradictory tension of a direct confrontation with the experience of nihilism while simultaneously trying to escape that nihilistic

experience through various projects that reorient them back toward the values of modernity, refusing the possibility of either a completed (active) nihilism *or* the utopic return to a pre-nihilistic experience of the world (even while actively pursuing it). The nihilist in bad faith is therefore in “bad faith” insofar as they take on the subjective experience of nihilism *without following it through to completion*.

In my view, this form of nihilism can be linked to both the prevalent feelings of uncertainty, unpredictability, and uncanny disorientation outlined earlier, as well as a set of political, ethical, and aesthetic projects that have emerged over the course of the last decade. Faced with an uncannily strange and seemingly indifferent world and subsequently thrown into a condition of disorientation, the still-modern subject becomes pessimistic about the forces that have produced them and sinks into a condition of nihilism: a generalized despair at the seeming pointlessness of norms and values that once provided a sense of meaning and normative orientation. But unlike the “active” nihilist, who is able to transmute their pessimism into a project of opposition against oppressive values followed by the joyful creation and proliferation of difference, the passive nihilist remains mired in the negative forces that have provoked their pessimism, merely reacting to the vicissitudes of the world with feelings of *ressentiment* and a desire for negation, channeling their will-to-nothingness into reactive projects that will ultimately do nothing but reaffirm the values and structures that produced them. Such reactive projects may take a variety of forms that cannot be predicted in advance, but it is possible to find examples of the nihilist in bad faith’s (re)activity in certain contemporary phenomena that resist interpretation within conventional aesthetic, ethical, or ideological frameworks. In particular, it is my contention that nihilism in bad faith can be observed in contemporary projects and movements that display a tendency toward what Naomi Klein has recently dubbed *diagnolism*, or the

unlikely alliance between traditionally “left” and “right” wing values and activities that animates our current moment. Additionally, the projects of nihilism in bad faith are marked by a form of *escapism* that aims to reorient the subject back toward the basic values and activities of modernity while simultaneously acknowledging the defunct nature of those same values.

This dissertation project will therefore be constituted by two interrelated aspects: first, a thorough theoretical exploration of the underlying affective structure of contemporary experiences of nihilism in bad faith and the current conditions that provoke it; and second, an examination of some of the varied forms of political, ethical, and aesthetic activity that have recently emerged as effects of this affective structure. Through these two interrelated investigations, I will argue that nihilism in bad faith and its subsequent activities represent inadequate responses to the contemporary conditions that produce uncanny disorientation, as the projects of nihilism in bad faith function to simply reproduce the conditions that provoked experiences uncanny disorientation and nihilism in the first place by attempting to regain a lost sense of control and orientation.

In Chapters 6-8 of this dissertation, I will thus apply the theoretical framework of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith to a set of three case studies that are representative of the reorientation projects just discussed:

- 1) the proliferation of a particularly nihilistic strain of nostalgia aesthetics, as represented by the recent genre of vaporwave music;
- 2) the global rise of overt, organized white supremacist movements; and
- 3) the recent push toward space colonization by organizations like *SpaceX* and *Mars One*.

While these three cultural phenomena are disparate in their means and ends, I believe that each one constitutes a project of reorientation, an attempt to negate the experience of uncanny disorientation and the conditions that have produced it by re-investing in values and systems of modernity that are imagined to have previously provided orientation and stability. It is my contention that each of these projects is motivated by an experience of uncanny disorientation, and all three can be read as instances of nihilism in bad faith. Each one functions as an attempt to reorient disoriented subjects along a normative line that is perceived to be lacking from post-modern existence; yet, what marks the contemporary version of each of these phenomena is their bold-faced nihilistic pessimism towards the world, and, subsequently, a lack of faith in their own capacity for reorientation. I will argue that, while each of these projects takes a nihilistic position of pessimism towards the world as it is, each also flounders in a form of passive nihilism rather than moving to a form of completed nihilism, ultimately reconfirming the socio-political conditions of the world as it is instead of attempting to negate those conditions or create possibilities for the multiplication of different modes of being. In the end, each of these projects attempts to regain some sense of orientation by reinvesting in the dreams and values of modernity, *even as they pessimistically deny the tenability of modern values*. It will be my task in the chapters examining these phenomena (Chapters 6-8) to demonstrate that they are each motivated by uncanny disorientation, are all examples of nihilism in bad faith, and all fail to go beyond current value structures or produce modes of being adequate to the multiple crises we face in contemporary reality.

Methodologically, I intend to approach each of the three chapters dealing with contemporary reorientation projects as case studies of the effects of uncanny disorientation. While these examinations will be largely theoretical in nature, primarily drawing on the

philosophical framework established in the first section of the dissertation as a lens for understanding the phenomena examined, my methodological approach will also involve performing discourse analysis and aesthetic criticism, analyzing statements and artistic works made by individuals engaged in each of the case study projects. In this way, I hope to address the *particularity* of each of the cases while also drawing out the resonances and connections between them. What can a close reading of statements (press releases, aesthetic works, social media comments, etc.) made by people engaged in these reorientation projects tell us about the nature of the projects themselves? What are their reasons (political, ethical, aesthetic) for engaging in these projects? And what do these reasons, coupled with the projects themselves, tell us about our contemporary situation? My position is that an in-depth examination of these statements and the activities they represent will reveal a tendency to interpret contemporary existence in nihilistic terms, yet an incapacity to imagine a world that is significantly different in structure or value from what currently exists. This is important, given that it indicates a widespread tendency towards nihilism in bad faith, and, subsequently, an inability to respond to the contemporary crises we face (global warming and environmental catastrophe, economic crashes and systemic exploitation, etc.) except through a reinvestment in the values and systems that produced these catastrophes in the first place. Moreover, if these reorientation projects represent popular responses to the proliferation of hybridity and the breakdown of modern values of purification, understanding their appeal and underlying logics may garner significant insight into contemporary social and political life.

The first section of the following dissertation (Chapters 1-5) will therefore be devoted to an in-depth theorization of nihilism in bad faith and the affective complex of uncanny disorientation that underpins it. Following the basic structure already outlined in this

introduction, I intend to further elaborate the theorization of each of the elements in this triad (uncanniness—disorientation—nihilism in bad faith) and to develop the links between these elements and the proliferation of hybrid objects in present reality. This will constitute the theoretical framework that will then be applied to three sets of contemporary phenomena, each of which will be examined in its own chapter (Chapters 6-8), to illustrate the social, cultural, and political impacts of the crisis of modernity, nihilism in bad faith, and uncanny disorientation.

“Our age gives the impression of an intermediate condition; the old ways of regarding the world, the old cultures still partially exist, the new are not yet sure and customary and hence are without decision and consistency. It appears as if everything would become chaotic, as if the old were being lost, the new worthless and ever becoming weaker”

(Friedrich Nietzsche *Human, All Too Human* 146)

“I never could find the correct word for the time I’d been given, I used ‘modernity’ usually, not in relation to modern art, or anything within the scholarly vein of ‘modernism,’ modernity was its own beast, and others close to my temperament seemed to understand what I meant. There was nothing left for us here, everyone I knew felt reluctantly guilty for feeling lost, as if being lost was hesitantly, but most definitively, part of who they were” (James Ellis 11)

“Bloom bears the end of the world within himself, but does not declare its abolition; he just empties it of meaning and reduces it to the state of a left-over husk awaiting demolition. In this sense one might affirm that the metaphysical upheaval that Bloom is a synonym for is already behind us, but that the bulk of its consequences is yet to come” (Tiqqun *Bloom Theory* 29)

“You say the ocean’s rising like I give a shit / You say the whole world’s ending, honey, it already did” (Bo Burnham “All Eyes on Me”)

“we have at last reached the Future, and...the truly horrible truth of the End of the World is that it doesn’t end” (Peter Lamborn Wilson 22)

## Chapter 1: Worldlessness

We are still modern. We can no longer be modern. We have never been modern.<sup>5</sup>

It seems apparent that *modernism*, as an ideological project and a form of subjectivity, still constitutes the basic foundations of Western thought and culture today. The dual dreams which have formed the core of modernity through all its iterations—the dream of the total emancipation of humanity from contingency and the related fantasy of humanity’s total domination of the natural (non-human) world—are still very much alive and thriving. And the forms-of-life that these dreams produce, like an effect that acts as its own cause, still flourish and proliferate. Despite its numerous obituaries in the pages of continental philosophy and contemporary theory, *the modern constitution still lives*.

Yet, it is equally apparent that the modern project, with its attendant dreams and subjectivity, has *broken down*, has *been* breaking down for as long as it has existed, has been in a constant state of crisis for at least the past half-century. Whether this crisis takes the form of post-modern critique, anti-modern conservatism, or speculative realist attempts to push modernism into becoming its own opposite, one can no longer avoid the sentiment that the

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<sup>5</sup> The “we” in these sentences and the sentences that follow is (obviously) contested. I decline to speak of “moderns” (the subjects of modernity, subjects who have been shaped and subjectified by modern norms, values, ethos, ideology) as an abstract, third-person entity—as if I did not fall within this category myself. I am not writing about abstract, third-person entities. I am writing about people, affects, ideas, feelings, subjectivities that have existed and continue to exist in the here and now. The problem is that “we” often (always?) produces an enclosure: it delimits an “us” and a “them,” making sure that “they” are not “us,” and that the two never meet, touch, or overlap. It is a word that implies that “we” are not also “them” and “they” are not also “us.” It is not my intention to create these kinds of firm divisions, and I use the word “we” precisely because I do not wish to delimit and foreclose who is, was, or could become “modern” or “not modern” in advance. For the purposes of this dissertation “we” are simply people who have been affected by, and who have taken on, the projects and dreams of modernity as part of their own understanding and mode of being-in-the-world. I cannot say who this is in advance (though, I include myself in this category through the word “we”) but rather hope that through an explication of some of the particular projects, dreams, and ideas that constitute “modernism,” readers will be able to identify for themselves to what extent they fall within this modern “we”.

modern project is no longer *tenable*. For whatever reason, we cannot believe in the dreams of modernity any longer.

But was the modern project ever tenable? Have we ever really believed in the modern fantasy of freedom from contingency through the domination of the non-human? That these goals and methods were achievable? That is to say: has anyone ever really *been modern*? Living through the apparent dissolution of modernism's viability, we are now faced with this shattering thought: *perhaps we have never been modern*.

This is the horizon within which modernity must be thought today. *Are we modern? Can we still be modern? Have we ever really been modern?* Through the twists and turns of twentieth century philosophy and contemporary theory, we have arrived at a point at which it is possible to say sincerely, in the same breath: "We are still modern. We can no longer be modern. We have never been modern." But what does it mean that we are able to think this seeming tangle of contradictions? What does it mean to live this knot as our horizon of possibility? How does that experience *feel*, and what does it lead us to *do*?

The purpose of this chapter will be to partially map this ideological matrix of modernity and to identify it as the basic condition in which we currently exist, from within which contemporary forms of subjectivity are produced. It is my contention that the tension inherent in this condition (living through the simultaneous reality of being modern, of no longer being capable of being modern, and of never having been modern) produces the affective condition that I will call *uncanny disorientation*, and its attendant form-of-life, *nihilism in bad faith*. As such, it will be important to understand what the modern constitution consists of and how it has begun to break down, in order to better understand the basic underlying causes of the uncanniness, disorientation, and nihilism that haunt contemporary reality.

But to begin, it will first be helpful to clarify how the term *modernity* will be deployed and defined within this dissertation. In a general sense, modernity can be understood as both a *historical* and an *ideological* period, or as a specific timeframe and a particular set of ideas, attitudes, or orientations for understanding the world. However, these two dimensions—the historical and the ideological—are not separate aspects of modernity. Rather, they are complexly interrelated. As a term denoting a historical period, *modernity* delimits the time in which modern ideas, attitudes, and activities have proliferated; as an ideological framework, modernism refers to the set of ideas and attitudes which distinguish modernity from other historical timeframes, constituting it as its own period. Yet the particular features which define these aspects of modernity are also widely contested: When did the historical period of modernity begin, and when (if ever) did it end? Did we begin to be modern in the fourteenth century, with the start of the Italian Renaissance and the turn towards humanist thought? In the sixteenth century, at the “discovery” of the Americas and the transition to capitalism? Or perhaps in the seventeenth century, with the Enlightenment and the emergence of a natural science of empirical investigation as the predominant means for accessing truth? And which of these features (humanism, capitalism, natural science and enlightenment) can we use to define modernity as an ideological framework?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Moreover, we might ask: has modernity or modernism been distributed evenly across the globe? Or has it been taken up unevenly across time, cultures, geographical regions, etc.? Is globalism itself perhaps a feature of modernity, such that the particularities of modernism as an ideological project have been obscured through a claim to universality? And if so, does this problematize the “we” in the initial statements with which I have started this chapter, and which I claim to be the background tension that produces a certain contemporary condition—we are still modern, we can no longer be modern, we have never been modern? Unfortunately, the limitations of this

While there are a multitude of approaches we could use to answer these questions, for the purposes of this dissertation project I will be focusing on two particular ideological features that are central to the project of modernity (or what Bruno Latour has called the “modern constitution”), namely, *the interrelated desire for both the total emancipation of human beings from their basic condition of contingency and the total domination of nature* (defined as the entirety of non-human existence) *by human life*.<sup>7</sup> These two interrelated desires constitute what I have called the *dual dreams of modernity*, insofar as they mobilize the modern imagination and constitute the ultimate goal of the modern project. They are interrelated insofar as the achievement of one necessitates the achievement of the other: because human life is rendered contingent by virtue of its existence in, and dependence upon, a world not of its own making (the natural, non-human world), human beings must gain control over that which renders them dependent and vulnerable (i.e., nature) in order to emancipate themselves from contingency. Moreover, these dual dreams are central to the project of modernity insofar as modernism itself is nothing more than the pursuit of these dreams through a particular form of activity—what, in

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dissertation project do not allow me to explore these questions in any depth. Suffice it to say that I am aware of these issues and am interested in pursuing these questions in future projects in order to examine how they might affect the claims I am making here.

<sup>7</sup> As examples of how these dual dreams have animated the modern project in a variety of ways over a long historical period, we can think of Machiavelli’s concern with mastering the contingency and unpredictability of *fortuna* through a practice of political *virtù*; Hobbes’ similar concern with mastering the violent contingency of human life in an anarchic “state of nature” through the construction of a unified political body; Kant’s attempt to overcome the contingency of human life wrought by war and conflict between political bodies and peoples through the vision of a cosmopolitan federation of states, categorical moral duties, and an anthropological mapping of human existence; the biopolitical project (as discussed by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, the Collège de France lectures on *Abnormality, The Birth of Biopolitics, and Security, Territory, Population*, and in a variety of other texts) taken up by Physiocrats in the eighteenth century, psychologists, anthropologists, and public health authorities in the nineteenth century, and revived by neoliberals in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whereby concern over the contingency of human life becomes a project of public health, racial purity, and reproductive futurism managed through the production and policing of norms and normative behaviours; or the general project of modern empirical natural science (as inaugurated by Copernicus, Newton, Hobbes, and Boyle, among others) to reduce the contingency of human life through a thoroughly “objective” understanding of the “natural” world via a methodology of impartial observation and experimentation.

the following section of this chapter, I will define (following the work of Latour) as “purification without translation.”

As we will see, these dual dreams may be (and have been) pursued through a variety of different means, but I will contend that the two primary projects of modernity have been: the construction of an “artificial” human world through the creation of a stable network of meaning that constitutes a world *for us* and a “will to truth” that attempts to achieve mastery over nature through the development of the technical capacities of human beings. In a broader sense, each of these projects represents an attempt to achieve the hypothetical vantage point described by the ancient Greek mathematician Archimedes, whereby one could gain leverage over the entire world (and each individual thing in it) by projecting oneself completely *outside* of the world. Such a vantage point would allow an observer to objectively perceive their subject of inquiry in totality, with the aim of gaining a full and total knowledge of its existence and workings. This, in turn, would allow for a total mastery over the thing observed by removing oneself from the contingency produced by a more symmetrical relation between observer and observed, subject and object. The construction of an “artificial” human world or community is an attempt to gain this vantage point by separating the human from the natural, the artificial human environment from the rest of the world, so as to gain a point from which to exercise mastery over that world by creating a binary division between “culture” and “nature.” The “will to truth” as pursued through modern natural science and philosophical Enlightenment also attempts to achieve this Archimedean point via the separation of subject and object, through the empirical methodology of science, the impartial observation of entities, and the logical deduction of *a priori* axioms. Such methods are used to ostensibly gain an “objective” and impartial viewpoint on things in the world by subtracting the observing subject from involvement in the world of things which they

observe. Discoveries and knowledge gained through this methodology are then used to create new technologies that extend the technical capacities of human beings, allowing us greater control and leverage over our environment and the objects and entities that reside therein.

For the purposes of this dissertation project, this matrix of general features—the dual dreams of human emancipation from contingency and control over the non-human world and the pursuit of an Archimedean point from which to gain this control via the creation of an artificial human world of politics and the “will to truth” of natural science and technical advancement—will be taken as the core aspects of the ideological project of modernity, with the recognition that these features have manifested in a variety of ways and through a plethora of projects throughout the modern historical period, in a diversity of places and cultures that have considered themselves to be modern.<sup>8</sup> However, while these features provide the general goals and background of the ideological project of modernity, it will also be important to outline how these features are pursued in practice, and how they contribute to the formation of a modern subjectivity, a modern mode of being in the world. To explain how modernity is practiced and forms a particularly modern form of subjectivity, I will be following the work of Bruno Latour and his description of the “modern constitution.”

Any discussion of the modern constitution must be prefaced, however, with an acknowledgement of the historical context of modernity’s origins. In particular, we must remember that modernity, as both an historical period and a particular orientation, has its roots in the so-called “discovery” of the Americas by European explorers in the fifteenth century and the

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<sup>8</sup> Other general features of the modern ideological project that will be assumed, but not directly discussed, are: a general belief and faith in historical and cultural progress, the progressive secularization of society, the creation (and subsequent collapse) of strict divisions between public and private life, the “massification” of society, the bureaucratization of political and social life and labour, the creation of capitalist markets and the subsequent globalization of capitalism as a system of production and distribution of goods. Many other features could be mentioned but would draw focus away from the central themes of this dissertation.

subsequent colonization and genocide of the indigenous peoples of these lands. Similarly, it is imperative to recognize that the modern world discussed in this dissertation was built upon the basis of slave labour, the transatlantic slave trade, and the displacement of indigenous peoples across the globe. And while I do not wish to foreclose in advance who may or may not have internalized or been shaped by the modern constitution, I also do not wish to present modernism as a kind of universal culture or mode of subjectivity, divorced from the specificity of history. At the same time, given its roots in colonialism, imperialism, and the displacement, genocide, and enslavement of indigenous peoples, we can say that modernity is *global*, even if it is not *universal*. Colonization and imperialism have been powerful forces in the globalization of modernity, and this should be kept in mind as we explore how the modern constitution has been instilled in those of us who are considered (or consider ourselves) to be modern.

In the discussion that follows, I will primarily be examining modernity and modernism as a particular form of activity and mode of subjectivity. This will require a certain focus that may draw attention away from the historical, material origins of the modern constitution, but this historical context will form the background of our discussion. In the following section of this chapter, I will turn to a discussion of Latour's pivotal work on modernism, *We Have Never Been Modern*, in order to set the stage for the examination of uncanny disorientation I wish to pursue in later chapters. In my estimation, Latour's text provides the best framework for thinking through the matrix of modernity as it is lived today, as his analysis provides a means for thinking through and linking together certain trends in contemporary political theory and philosophy, such as the turn towards speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and new materialist critiques of purity. As such, Latour's theory provides a useful heuristic for thinking through the competing (and seemingly contradictory) aspects of modernity as an ideological project: the fact that we

simultaneously *are* modern, *can no longer be* modern, and *have never been* modern, and that these positions exist together, all at once, as part of the same ideological matrix that forms the horizon against which we exist and stake out our positions—a horizon I will later call the *modern world*.

### *The Latourian Conception of Modernity*

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour outlines what he conceives to be the basic governing principles, ideas, and practices of the ideological-historical period of modernity, which he terms “the modern constitution” (13). Central to this modern constitution are two activities, which Latour calls “purification” and “translation:” the separation and purification of existing entities into ontologically separate categories (for example, “nature/culture,” “life/non-life,” “human/non-human,” etc.) and the subsequent recombination of these categories into hybrid entities<sup>9</sup> that cannot be contained within any single category because they demonstrate qualities from two or more categories that are supposed to be ontologically distinct (10-12).<sup>10</sup> The first half of this equation—the definition, cataloguing, and separation of entities into distinct

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<sup>9</sup> Following the insights of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism (particularly the work of Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, Quentin Meillassoux, and Katherine Behar) and certain tendencies in theories of new materialism (represented by thinkers like Jane Bennett and Elizabeth Povinelli), I will generally be using the words “entity,” “object,” and “thing” interchangeably, to try to avoid the ontological closure of the subject/object binary, which positions subjects as active, living, human entities and objects as passive, inert, non-human things. Because my discussion will largely focus on hybridity, hybrid objects, and the transgression of such ontological purity, I think it is important to avoid reproducing this subject/object binary in my language. Rather, I will take seriously the claim of these theorists that the boundaries between objects/subjects are more complex, shifting, and porous than is generally acknowledged in modern Western thought and language—that “objects” and “subjects” share ontological features, that “subjects” display features of objectivity and “objects” are more active and agentic than the subject/object, life/non-life binaries can account for, and that human beings are not the privileged entity of existence.

<sup>10</sup> Latour calls these hybrid entities “quasi-objects.” Throughout this dissertation, I will maintain the language of “hybrid entities” and “hybrid objects” rather than “quasi-objects,” as it is precisely the *hybridity* of these entities—their embodiment of two or more ontologically distinct categories—that I find to be most relevant to my project.

categories for the purpose of maintaining their ontological purity—is what Latour calls “purification,” and what he considers to be the dominant activity of modernity. The term “translation” subsequently refers to the second half of the modern constitution: the recombination of objects, entities, or qualities that had previously been separated into purified categories through the activity of purification, and the ensuing creation of hybrid objects that straddle the ontological divide between two or more categories. Taken together, these two activities—purification and translation—form the basis of the modern constitution and make up the major activity engaged in by modern subjects. According to Latour, to be modern is to engage in the activity of purifying entities while simultaneously providing the conditions of possibility for the production of hybrids (12).

Moreover, on Latour’s account, these activities of purification and translation are *inextricably linked*, as it is the insistence on ontological purity and the attempt to create and enforce the complete separation of purified entities that is the condition which allows for the possibility of translation and the proliferation of hybrid objects. What marks modernity as *modern*, however, is specifically the *separation* of the activities of purification and translation in the modern constitution and imaginary. To be modern is to engage in both of these activities simultaneously, while vociferously denying that there is any connection between purification and translation.<sup>11</sup> The modern constitution prioritizes purification and denies both the activity of translation and the very existence of hybrid objects. As soon as we begin to direct our attention to

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<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari make a similar claim in their work *Anti-Oedipus*, where they write that “Civilized modern societies are defined by processes of decoding and deterritorialization. *But what they deterritorialize with one hand, they reterritorialize with the other*” (257). Like the process of purification without translation, modern capitalist societies claim to engage in *deterritorialization without reterritorialization*—but this is simply a ruse to cover over the fact that capital depends on the strict territorial borders and disciplinary apparatuses of the State to facilitate its supposedly globalized, deterritorialized flows. In this way, capitalism acts as modernity’s dark, uncanny double: arising alongside (and arguably as part of) the modern world to hybridize that which the modern constitution purifies, all while relying upon that purification for its own activity of deterritorialization and translation.

*both* of these activities at once, *we cease to be modern* (Latour 46-49). On this account, to be modern is nothing more than to engage in purification and translation while simultaneously denying that translation is taking place. When the modern constitution dominates and comes to govern our thought and actions, the activity of translation and the production of hybrid objects is driven underground and becomes unconscious and unregulated.

Again, according to Latour's account of modernity, to be modern is to be committed to the project of creating ontologically distinct zones wherein entities from the world can be contained and categorized while simultaneously denying that this project leads to the creation of hybrid objects through translation. But it is precisely this denial of hybridity that allows hybrid objects to proliferate: whereas people who are not committed to the modern constitution (e.g., "ancients," "non-moderns," etc.) are *distinctly aware* of hybridity and are concerned with the production of hybrid objects through the activity of translation, modern subjects deny even the existence of hybridity, thereby allowing it to flourish just below the surface of modern society's "official" or "conscious" activity of purification (Latour 10-15). This is not to say that only the modern constitution engages in the dual activities of purification and translation, or that hybrid objects are only produced by the subjects of modernity. According to Latour, *all* peoples (perhaps all *things* or *entities*, even) engage in these activities (47-48). But it is the total denial of translation and hybridity that defines modernity and makes modern subjects incapable of regulating the production of hybrid objects. On Latour's model, the difference between "modernity" and its others is thus not a difference of essence, or level of sophistication, or of linear developmental stages, but is simply a difference in *scale*. Moderns and non-moderns both engage in the same activities (purification and translation) but because moderns deny part of what they are doing they allow the process of translation and the production of hybrid objects to

proliferate endlessly, whereas “non-moderns” are more consciously concerned with the process of translation and typically attempt to regulate the production of hybrid objects (49-59).

It should be stated outright that this is not a moral evaluation or description. We could perhaps evaluate the modern constitution ethically, based on the effects it produces, but it would be a mistake to think of hybrid objects and their proliferation as simply “good” or “bad.” One of the strengths of Latour’s analysis is the recognition that *hybrid entities have always existed and will always exist*, and that their existence is not a sign of modern decadence or moral laxity.<sup>12</sup> Rather, on this model, *all* objects are in some sense hybrid before being separated into purified ontological zones, and it is the activity of purification itself that creates the boundaries that hybrids seem to cross. It is because modern subjects pursue the activity of purification single-mindedly and on a massive scale that hybrid objects seem to proliferate in the historical period of modernity, under the modern constitution. By creating ever more ontological divisions, we also create ever more opportunities for objects to exist in the interstices between and within those categories (Latour 12). Purification thus helps hybrids to proliferate simply because it creates ontological boundaries to be crossed. By separating objects with the intention of keeping them pure, it puts those same objects into *contact* in new and unforeseen ways, providing more possibilities for (re)combination and hybridization. Moreover, the modern constitution allows for

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<sup>12</sup> One of the great shortcomings of many critiques and interpretations of modernity (particularly conservative ones) is the description of modernity in terms of *decadence* and *decay*. Such language has been used by a number of theorists, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s invectives against “culture” and dreams of returning to a more “natural” state of humanity, to Nietzsche’s descriptions of European nihilism and fetishization of the pre-Socratics, to Leo Strauss and George Grant’s critique’s of modern Western philosophy and longing for a return to Ancient Greek political formations, to the contemporary eco-primitivism of figures like Derrick Jensen and Lierre Keith who diagnose transgender subjectivity and embodiment as symptoms of the decadence of a modern medical science that they claim subverts the natural order of things. Such descriptions slide easily into racist, sexist, misogynist, and transmisogynist beliefs and actions, rooted as they are in particularly weak biological metaphors—metaphors that are, ironically, invested in particularly modern notions of biological purity and purification. It is one of the strengths of Latour’s analysis that it does not slide into this language of decadence or easily lend itself to such an interpretation, and I would like the same to be true of my own work in this dissertation.

the production of chains of interconnection and interrelation between ontologically distinct objects, producing “networks” that mobilize a vast array of entities as part of their functioning. These networks, in turn, are *also objects themselves*—hybrid objects of massive scale that contain, as part of themselves, multiple entities that the modern activity of purification has positioned as ontologically separate and incommensurable—and, precisely because of the functioning of the modern constitution, these networks are proliferating (Latour 46-49).<sup>13</sup> But again, Latour claims that such networks have always existed. The modern constitution simply allows for their production on a much larger scale, allowing for the chains of interconnection and interrelation between ostensibly disparate elements to multiply and lengthen while denying that these interconnections exist, or that they fall outside of their purified categories. For Latour, the modern constitution thus provides the conditions of possibility for creating hybrid objects on an unprecedented and unforeseen scale.

Following Latour, we can therefore define the ideological project of modernity as an attempt at purification (the creation of ontologically distinct zones for the categorization of

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<sup>13</sup> Latour demonstrates the existence and proliferation of such networks in a succinct and poetic fashion in the opening pages of *We Have Never Been Modern*, where he recounts the experience of reading the daily paper: an article on the ecological and political implications of holes in the ozone layer “mixes together chemical reactions and political reactions. A single thread links the most esoteric sciences and the most sordid politics, the most distant sky and some factory in the Lyon suburbs, dangers on a global scale and the impending local elections or the next board meeting. The horizons, the stakes, the time frames, the actors—none of these is commensurable, yet there they are, caught up in the same story” (1) and such stories multiply and proliferate over time. In the same paper, Latour reads an article on AIDS research that mobilizes “heads of state, chemists, biologists, desperate patients and industrialists [who] find themselves caught up in a single uncertain story mixing biology and society” (1-2), as well as stories about computer manufacturing, frozen embryos, burning forests, endangered species, labour disputes, etc., all of which involve seemingly incommensurable actors and elements. Moreover, Latour claims that such stories “are multiplying, those hybrid articles that sketch out imbroglios of science, politics, economy, law, religion, technology, fiction. If reading the daily paper is modern man’s form of prayer, then it is a very strange man indeed who is doing the praying today while reading about these mixed up affairs. All of culture and all of nature get churned up again every day. Yet no one seems to find this troubling” (2). Additionally, the supposed experts on these topics which keep getting mashed together continually insist that we address them using the same purified categories as before—that we pretend that the hybrid complexity of these networks does not exist, and that they are simply objects to be addressed by one of the purified categories of knowledge that the modern constitution has created to categorize and make sense of the world (i.e., politics, economics, natural science, etc.).

entities in the world) to the exclusion of hybridity and translation (the existence and production of entities that transgress purified categories), with the unintended effect of multiplying and proliferating hybrid objects and networks. This project may be pursued in different ways, using a variety of means, at various registers across the historical period of modernity, and may be taken up by different peoples at different points in time, but it is the general constitution that one must subscribe to in order to *be modern*. To be a modern subject is thus to take on, to be informed or interpellated by, the project of *purification without translation* as one's mode of being in the world.

### *The Crisis of Modernity*

But why is such a project necessary? What are the goals of modernity, and how does the modern constitution help facilitate the achievement of those goals?

As discussed previously, the ultimate ends of modernity are represented by its dual dreams of the total emancipation of humanity from chance and contingency and the total mastery of humanity over the non-human, “natural” world. On my estimation, these dreams fundamentally represent a desire for *control*—a desire which takes the modern constitution as its means of achievement. The single-minded pursuit of purification is, at base, an attempt to reach that mythical vantage point dreamed of by Archimedes, from which one could gain leverage over all things by virtue of being outside the world. And it is driven by that “will to truth” that so concerned Nietzsche as the ultimate source of “European nihilism.” Through the creation of purified ontological zones within which all things can be categorized, the modern subject attempts to move beyond or outside the world of things, to a position from which a total knowledge could be gained of any particular object. The modern subject, in turn, believes that

this total knowledge of the “truth” of things will allow them to act unconditionally on the world from which they have separated themselves, controlling and manipulating objects to their own ends, without being affected by those objects in return. Conceptualizing themselves as radically *other* than the things they attempt to know, manipulate, and control (because they exist at an Archimedean point beyond the world), modern subjects effect an ontological separation of the human from the non-human, the cultural from the natural, the living from the non-living, and consistently position themselves as “active” subjects in relation to “passive” objects.<sup>14</sup> The purification of objects and bodies into discrete and separable ontological zones thus lends the world a semblance of meaning and stability by positioning some entities (humans, modern subjects, etc.) as masters of the earth while relegating others to the position of passive material to be used, controlled, and manipulated. Purification is thereby the means by which an emancipation from chance and contingency through the domination and control of the non-human can be achieved for modern subjects. It is to be pursued relentlessly by modern subjects as a means of achieving the dual dreams of modernity to an ever-greater degree, expanding the circle of purified and known entities ever wider until a totalized form of control can be achieved.

If we thus define the ultimate goal of modernity (as expressed through its dual dreams) as *control*, it becomes clear why it is necessary for modern subjects to deny the possibility of hybridity. As an entity which escapes the sanitized quarantine of purified ontological categories by transgressing the borders of the purified zones, the hybrid object escapes control and becomes unthinkable within the terms of modern thought. The modern constitution must ignore and deny the activity of translation happening just below its surface in order to maintain the possibility of

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<sup>14</sup> Latour also notes that part of the strength and power of the modern constitution is that it allows for the reversibility of the purified categories it creates. In the same breath, the modern subject can speak of nature as non-human, transcendent to human knowledge and control, yet also completely knowable and manipulatable by human science and culture.

total control. As such, the problem created by the modern constitution is not simply that it facilitates the production of hybrid objects. Again, hybridity is neither “good” nor “bad” and the production of hybrid objects cannot, in itself, be said to be a problem. Rather, the central problem of modernity (which is, I will contend, the problem that we are living through today) is that the modern constitution provides *no way to approach or acknowledge the hybrid objects it allows to proliferate*. It produces hybridity at ever greater scales but must continue to deny that hybrid entities exist in order to maintain its fantasy of total control through purification.

What makes this a problem is that we have reached a point at which *it is no longer possible to deny the existence of hybrids*, because the modern constitution has allowed hybridity to proliferate to such a degree that *everything* is part of, or is touched by, some hybrid object.<sup>15</sup> This undeniability of hybridity constitutes the *crisis of modernity*, marked by the term “post-modern,” and is the general horizon within which we must live and think today.<sup>16</sup> The modern constitution has collapsed under its own weight. Its single-minded efforts at purification have proliferated hybrid entities to such a degree that they can no longer be denied or ignored, and we are forced, at last, to acknowledge both sides of the purification-translation equation. We live in the time of hybrid objects, where every aspect of life is once again touched by hybridity. And because of this condition, *we can no longer be modern*.

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<sup>15</sup> In a sense this represents modernity’s self-dissolution and potential self-overcoming, as predicted and described by Nietzsche: the modern’s “will to truth” is pursued through the activity of purification (particularly, through modern natural science), but the truth that this will discovers, again and again, is that there is no purity, that all things are hybrid, that the “pure” categories upon which modern truths are based cannot be maintained.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted here that Latour is generally hostile to the term “postmodern” and the forms of thought that gather themselves under this label. On Latour’s account, postmodern thought presents itself as the solution to modernity’s self-dissolution—a mode of thinking that sets itself apart from the decline of the modern constitution by critiquing its foundations. However, for Latour, postmodern thought is, in reality, simply a symptom of the dissolution of modernity. Postmodernists still live under the modern constitution and are guided by its principles, even as they reject the tenability of its bases. As such, postmodernism participates in the prolongation of the modern project of purification and (denied) translation, but without any belief that this project can achieve its goals.

But beyond arguing that the modern constitution is no longer feasible—that we were once modern but no longer can be because of the proliferation of hybrid entities—Latour claims that, in fact, *we have never actually been modern*. This is not to say that the modern constitution has not been operative, or that groups of people have never subscribed to it, consciously or unconsciously. Latour attempts to define the contours of the modern constitution precisely because he believes that it has been the predominant mode of approaching the world for a significant portion of human history, and that we (mostly, but not exclusively, Western peoples and cultures) have been invested in it as a regulative ideal. His point is rather that, even as we have pursued the goals and activities of the modern constitution, we have never really been doing what we thought we were doing. We have never been modern because we have never been engaged in purification to the exclusion of translation. Rather, we have always been involved in both purification *and* translation, even as we denied the existence of half of this equation.

For Latour, “modernity” as a category is thus, in a way, *nostalgic*.<sup>17</sup> It is an anachronistic view of our own history from a point at which the modern constitution has become impossible to believe in any longer (Block 53). On this model, modernity is a category we impose backwards in an attempt to define what we have been and what we have been doing. It is an oversimplification of the past that allows us to get a handle on the present, by understanding it in contradistinction to a way of being that exists only in the past. On this schema, the “crisis of modernity” that we live through today involves the projection backwards of a definite, crystalized “modern period,” and the simultaneous realization that *we have never been modern*.

But against a reductive reading of Latour, I think it would be a mistake to think that no one has ever really subscribed to the modern constitution, or that modernism and its activities are

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<sup>17</sup> This will be significant for Chapter 6, which deals with the contemporary aesthetics of nostalgia.

just a neat fiction that we have constructed to define ourselves. If we define “moderns” simply as people who have subscribed to the modern constitution, whose actions have been guided by this constitution, and who maintain a belief in the existence of purified categories despite being surrounded by ever more extensive and unruly hybrid objects, then it seems evident that at least some of us have, in fact, been modern. Moreover, it is my contention that many of us continue to be modern. And it is precisely this reality—that we *have been* and *continue to be* modern—that makes the crisis of modernity *feel* like a crisis.<sup>18</sup> If we truly had never been modern, the dissolution of the modern constitution through the increasingly undeniable presence of hybrid objects would pass unfelt and unremarked. But it is precisely my task in this dissertation project to describe, diagnose, and examine how this dissolution is *felt, noticed, and experienced* by those subjects who have subscribed to the modern constitution, and who suddenly find that it no longer provides a tenable means for approaching or understanding the world. I will thus argue that we have in fact simultaneously *been* and *continue to be* modern, even as we no longer *can be* modern. Which again brings us back to the statement with which I began this chapter: We are still modern. We can no longer be modern. We have never been modern. I maintain that the tension produced by this tangle of (seemingly) contradictory statements is the quagmire within which we live today, precisely because we remain invested in the modern constitution even as it is dissolved by the undeniable presence of hybrid objects.

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<sup>18</sup> Timothy Morton has argued something similar: contrary to Latour, Morton maintains that we *have been* modern, and that we are just now learning how not to be. For Morton, the techniques of modernity—namely, the experimentation and investigation of modern natural science—are what lead us to recognize the existence of hybrid hyperobjects, but these techniques cannot properly conceptualize hybrids or resolve the problems they pose, because they are based in a denial of hybridity. The discovery of hyperobjects (which will be defined and examined in the next section of this chapter) by modern techniques thus leads to the dissolution of the feasibility of the modern constitution, putting modernity and its subjects into crisis. And this crisis is precisely the struggle of modern subjects to learn how not to be modern. But this presupposes that we have been modern.

But how has this undeniability of hybrid objects come about, and what, specifically, are its consequences for us erstwhile modern subjects? To think through this condition of undeniable hybridity which has rendered the basic constitution of modernity untenable, it will be useful to turn to another body of theory that deals more explicitly with the affective and phenomenological experience of hybrid objects—namely, the theoretical field of *object oriented ontology* (or OOO for short). The next section of this chapter will thus be dedicated to an examination of one particular strain of OOO—Timothy Morton’s work on the concept of “hyperobjects”—in order to elaborate on how the undeniability of hybrid objects has come about, and what it means for us today.

### *The Time of Hyperobjects and the End of the World*

Many of Morton’s claims in his pivotal work of object oriented ontology, *Hyperobjects*, echo Latour’s concerns in *We Have Never Been Modern*: we are living through the dissolution of the modern constitution (a condition Morton calls “the end of the world”) and this dissolution is a direct result of the way that certain objects (which very much resemble Latour’s “quasi-objects”) have come to impinge upon our existence by occupying an ever greater portion of our conscious life. These objects are what Morton calls *hyperobjects*, which he defines as actually-existing entities that touch and impinge upon our lives in a tangible way, but which exist in a “high dimensional phase space” (1), outstripping the human in scales of size and temporality to such a large degree that they cannot be perceived *directly* by human sense or reason and can only be modeled *statistically* using specialized equipment. Such objects can be perceived *indirectly* through their “local manifestation[s]” (Morton 47)—moments at which part of the object intervenes in the normal functioning of daily life—but these local manifestations are *never the*

*hyperobject itself*. Rather, the hyperobject remains withdrawn from us, looming just beyond perceptibility and knowability, while still remaining intimately close, transecting and involving us as part of itself.<sup>19</sup>

Morton's initial examples of hyperobjects include: "a black hole...the Lago Agrio oil field in Ecuador, or the Florida Everglades...the biosphere, or the Solar System...the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium...[or] the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism" (1). Each of these things can be said to be an actually-existing object, yet they each embody features that make them hard to conceptualize or classify as "objects" in the pure sense of non-human, non-living, passive receptacles of human action and meaning. They can be delimited and differentiated from other entities, their dimensions can be mapped and defined, yet they escape capture within the purified categories of modernity. Often, as in the case of "the biosphere" or "the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism," they involve a vast multiplicity of elements that cannot all be gathered within the same purified

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<sup>19</sup> Morton's book (and, I would claim, much of object oriented ontology) is devoted to explaining how and why hyperobjects are disturbing to our contemporary sensibilities and consciousness. Drawing on Morton's work (as well as the theories of Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux), I would argue that part of what is so disturbing about hyperobjects for subjects still invested in purification without translation, and why they are so fatal to the modern constitution, is that hyperobjects actually model our experience of *all* objects—they expose something about the ontology and constitution of objects and entities themselves. According to Morton (along with Harman and Meillassoux) all objects *exist*, in a real and tangible sense, but they are also in some sense *withdrawn* from direct experience. We thus can never have a full knowledge or total account of *anything* because there are always aspects and qualities of any given object that escape perception. This applies just as much to one entity's experience of another (e.g., my experience of a rock, the rock's experience of me, etc.) as it does to any entity's experience of itself (e.g., my experience of myself, the rock's experience of itself, etc.). *Nothing* can achieve an Archimedean point from which to gain total leverage over another thing or itself. OOO theorists posit that this aspect of objects—their withdrawal from direct experience—is a reality that we have largely been able to ignore until recently, and Morton argues that it is precisely the appearance of hyperobjects (which model this withdrawal at a much larger scale) that has forced us to confront this aspect of objects. I would argue, further, that the forced confrontation with this reality is also fatal to the modern constitution and our ability to be modern. By modeling and exposing this withdrawn aspect of all things, hyperobjects put the lie to the dual dreams of the modern constitution: we will never gain a total knowledge or mastery over the non-human world, and thus we will never gain a total emancipation from contingency.

ontological zone.<sup>20</sup> For example, “the biosphere” as an object includes both “natural” elements (trees, rocks, ozone, rain, etc.) and “artificial” elements (carbon dioxide and hydrofluorocarbons resulting from industrial production), both “living” things (animals, plants, microbes, etc.) and “non-living” things (mountains, rivers, atmosphere), both “passive” material (atoms of plutonium, vegetal matter, etc.) and “active” beings that change their environment (human beings, bees, squirrels, etc.). And yet hyperobjects like the biosphere go beyond any of the entities that compose them to achieve an existence of their own, producing their own effects.<sup>21</sup> Hyperobjects are thus hybrid in that they are composed of elements and entities from an array of different ontological categories, embodying features from these different categories, while also transgressing the neat distinctions between these categories created through the activity of purification.

But hyperobjects are also an important *kind* of hybrid entity insofar as they display particular features that set them apart from other hybrid objects—features which function to disturb the modern constitution, exposing its limits by forcing us to reckon with the reality of translation and hybridity.

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<sup>20</sup> Again, this is not simply true of hyperobjects but of all things. We might think here of Jane Bennett’s book on *Vibrant Matter*. In this book, Bennett argues for a materialist philosophy that would break down the binaries of organic/inorganic, living/inert matter, and recognize the resonances and imbrications of these categories in all material things. Moreover, in the chapter on “Edible Matter” she explores how supposedly “passive” or “inert” matter can become an “actant” (an entity that displays agentic capacity, that acts and produces effects, without necessarily displaying the “will” or “intention” that is attributed to human action) that acts on, and as part of, a human body by being eaten. When eaten, edible matter acts on the body and is what allows the body to act. It is both part of *and* separate from the body. Human bodies and the matter that they eat (along with many other things) thus form an assemblage or network that acts together. The human body is not an independent, self-contained entity, but itself a network that must include other “passive,” “non-living,” “non-human” elements (like food, gut microbes, etc.) within itself for its continued existence as a living human body. Again, this is similar to the hyperobject: it is an entity in its own right but is also composed of multiple other entities with agentic capacities, and thus forms an assemblage of actants that is, itself, an actant. Where hyperobjects differ (and why they are important for this dissertation) is in their size or scale. As Morton claims, the massive scale of hyperobjects forces us to reckon with the way in which all objects display similar features (i.e., that *all objects* are composed of a multitude of elements that are not necessarily of the same ontological category).

<sup>21</sup> In this way, hyperobjects are much like the networks discussed by Latour.

The first of such attributes is what Morton terms “non-locality” (24). Functionally, this means that the hyperobject does not fully exist at any of the points at which it is perceived by individuals, precisely because they exist at such largely distributed scales of time and space that they occupy a “high dimensional phase space” (Morton 1), outside of the normal range of perception for human beings. What this means in practice is that the hyperobject itself is *never perceived directly*—rather, it can only be plotted statistically (as when we aggregate data about climatic conditions and atmospheric carbon to produce an “image” of global warming) or accessed in part through one of its “local manifestations,” which are part of the hyperobject but never the object *itself* (Morton 49). Global warming is Morton’s favored example in this regard: “global warming,” as an object, *exists*—it is a thing that has effects in the world, that can be mapped and modeled, the proportions of which can be plotted statistically, but which exists at higher dimensions of space and time than can be perceived directly by humans. One cannot see or touch “global warming” as an object, cannot point to it, even as it exists intimately with us, intervening in our lives. Rather, one can only ever point to part of the hyperobject, one of its “local manifestations:” a higher frequency of high-impact hurricanes, an especially harsh blizzard, an unusually large forest fire, or even simply “the back of my neck [itching] with yesterdays sunburn” (72). It is really there, its qualities can be statistically enumerated and modeled, but the *object itself* is inaccessibly withdrawn from perception.

This is, in part, because, as a hyperobject, global warming massively outstrips the human in scales of time and space. As mentioned previously, hyperobjects are hybrid insofar as they encompass entities and objects from a variety of categories and display qualities from different ontological zones. This hybridity is, in part, a result of the hyperobject’s vast scale. As Morton explains, hyperobjects display what he calls “very large finitude” (60). They are not *infinite* in

scales of time and space—they do not go on forever, their dimensions can be delimited and mapped through methods like statistical analysis—but their temporality and spatiality also vastly outstrip human existence, and are thus difficult to quantify or conceptualize.<sup>22</sup> For example:

75 percent of global warming effects will persist until five hundred years from now...Thirty thousand years from now, ocean currents will have absorbed more of the carbon compounds, but 25 percent will still hang around in the atmosphere. The half-life of plutonium-239 is 24,100 years. These periods are as long as all of visible human history thus far. The paintings in the Chauvet Cave in France date back thirty thousand years...But 7 percent of global warming effects will still be occurring one hundred thousand years from now as igneous rocks slowly absorb the last of the greenhouse gases (Morton 58-59).

These timescales are massive in comparison to human existence (whether we are thinking in terms of a single human life or the entirety of visible human history), yet they are not infinite—they are finite, but very large. Yet this is precisely why hyperobjects are hard to conceptualize and potentially disturbing to modern consciousness: unlike the soothing reassurance of infinity (which suggests an eternal repose, a never-ending history, or an unchanging great beyond), the “very large finitude” embodied by hyperobjects exposes human life and existence to be *finite, contingent, and temporary*. Humans have not always existed, nor

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<sup>22</sup> Ironically, it would be easier to conceptualize hyperobjects if they were infinite. As Morton notes: “Infinity is far easier to cope with. Infinity brings to mind our cognitive powers, which is why for Kant the mathematical sublime is the realization that infinity is an uncountably vast magnitude beyond magnitude...I can think infinity. But I can’t count up to one hundred thousand. I have written one hundred thousand words, in fits and starts. But one hundred thousand years? It’s unimaginably vast” (60). Rather than the “mathematical sublime” of infinity, hybrid hyperobjects are more likely to provoke a disorienting sense of the uncanny, which Harold Bloom has called “the negative sublime” (Masschelein 132). This will also be relevant in Chapter 2, when we discuss Kant’s conception of (dis)orientation and the need for a conception of “the unlimited” to orient us in thought.

will they necessarily exist forever.<sup>23</sup> It is very possible that some hyperobjects (like global warming, or the radiation half-life from nuclear materials) will outlive the entirety of humanity, and such a thought is potentially *terrifying* to still-modern subjects, as it puts into question the viability of one of modernity's dual dreams: the hope of emancipating humanity from contingency.

Moreover, hyperobjects also seem to undermine the possibility of human beings gaining control over the non-human world (the second of the dual dreams of modernity) by blurring the distinction between "nature" and "culture," the "natural" and the "artificial." By virtue of their vast scale and non-locality, hyperobjects can encompass a plethora of elements within their constitution and may be both human-produced and self-sustaining, independent of human intervention (Morton 1-5, 60-61). Hybrid hyperobjects like global warming or a globalized neoliberal "free market" increasingly penetrate into our everyday lives, popping up frequently and unpredictably, having significant effects on our state of being, yet seeming to *act* of their own accord.<sup>24</sup> More and more we hear stories about local manifestations of global warming (massive forest fires in the interior of British Columbia, the rapid collapse of the Antarctic ice

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<sup>23</sup> Quentin Meillassoux also takes this discovery as the starting point of his critique of modernity (in the form of "correlationism") in *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. According to Meillassoux, modern thought and philosophy (informed by Kant and his conception of the *noumenal* and the *phenomenal*) has been put into crisis by the existence of fossils and carbon dating, which challenge us to think a time before the advent of human existence (i.e., to think human existence as contingent). For Meillassoux, the "correlationist" mode of thinking promoted by the modern Enlightenment cannot account for things that do not permit of human perception—only things that can/could be perceived (specifically by humans) can be said to exist. On this model, the world is thus *dependent* on human perception for its existence (and vice versa). Correlationism cannot conceptualize a world prior to human existence. On this model, such a world should not exist. The discovery of pre-human fossils and their carbon dating thus entirely undermines the modern correlationist mode of thought. Yet Meillassoux claims that correlationism remains dominant in contemporary philosophy, as we have yet to conceptualize a mode of thought that could account for the problem that fossils pose. Speculative Realism and Object Oriented Ontology can both be seen as attempts to formulate such modes of thought.

<sup>24</sup> This happens in both spectacular and banal ways. The hyperobject *global warming's* impingement on my life might come in the form of a forest fire that destroys my home, or it might simply mean, as Morton writes, that global warming "reaches into 'my world' and forces me to use LEDs instead of bulbs with filaments" (124).

shelf, increasingly fierce and destructive hurricanes, etc.) that have an immediately disastrous impact on individuals and communities. We are aware—sometimes vaguely, sometimes acutely—that these are manifestations of the monolithic hyperobject “global warming,” and that global warming is a human-produced phenomenon. Yet no direct line of causality or intentionality can be drawn between the individual actions of human beings and the local manifestations that can have such direct impact on our lives (Morton 47-48). The hyperobject “global warming” seems to act and produce effects without the cognitive intention or intervention of any individual or group, and thus it gains a life beyond us.<sup>25</sup> But this “life” does not conform to the definitions or models of life (as distinguished from “non-life”) so central to modern Western thinking and subjectivity (Povinelli 12-50). Rather, it represents the life of the “non-living” system: a form of life that, within the binary Western model of life/non-life, is both *alive* and *not alive* at one and the same time.

The hybrid hyperobjects that increasingly touch upon the most banal and intimate aspects of our lives thus retain their familiar status as non-living (and therefore non-acting) objects to be controlled by human intervention, and yet *continue to act without us*, producing effects that are more and more undeniable. Things that once appeared to be within our control suddenly reveal themselves to be not only uncontrollable but capable of acting upon us in unpredictable ways. They appear as “strange strangers...whose strangeness is forever strange” yet “not so unfamiliar... [because] uncanny *familiarity* is one of the strange stranger’s traits” (Morton 124),

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<sup>25</sup> Iris Marion-Young, in her work *Responsibility for Justice*, outlines how similar claims can be made about global neoliberal capitalism, which, as a systemic structure consisting of nothing but human actions and interventions, is constantly having effects on individual and collective life without these effects being directly caused or intended by any individual or group actor. Similarly, in *The Fragility of Things*, William Connolly examines the idea that neoliberal markets are self-organizing systems (i.e., organizing and causing effects without intentional human direction), while also maintaining that they are only one among an increasing number of such systems that act and have effects in our everyday lives.

leaving us with the impression that they have come from nowhere, thereby undermining the strict divisions produced through modern purification. And as these hybrid objects—these strange strangers—increasingly transgress the familiar, purified divisions erected by modernity, our modern world seems to become more and more *uncanny*.<sup>26</sup>

But the uncanny strangeness of the hyperobject is not only a product of its hybridity or non-locality; it is also a product of the fact that the hyperobject always seems to *incorporate us as part of itself*. Rather than simply affecting us from without, as if there were a strict separation between entities, or as if the hyperobject existed at that mythical Archimedean point from which it could gain a total externality from the human (or the human from the hyperobject), we are instead always-already *within* the hyperobject as one element of its constitutive makeup.<sup>27</sup> We thus always perceive the hyperobject *from the inside*, undermining the purified subject/object distinction constructed by the modern constitution. Again, this is a product of the hyperobject's very large finitude, and it is another aspect that reveals the hybridity of hyperobjects. Simply by virtue of their size, we are always encompassed by at least one or more hyperobjects, forming a part of their constitutive makeup.

But why is this important? Why are these aspects of the hyperobject (hybridity, non-locality, very large finitude, uncanniness) significant? And how do they relate to the contemporary problem—the crisis of modernity—that I am trying to outline in this chapter?

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<sup>26</sup> The uncanniness of hybrid hyperobjects will be a central theme of this dissertation and will be explored in much greater depth in Chapter 3. At this point, it is enough to note that hyperobjects seem uncanny to modern subjects who are accustomed to approaching entities in the world through purified categories. We may also note that Morton himself claims that “hyperobjects are necessarily uncanny” (55), and that “uncanny” seems to be his favored adjective for describing the experience of being confronted with a hyperobject.

<sup>27</sup> Again, we can think of global warming as an example: we are always-already inside global warming as a hyperobject both in the sense that it is “global,” and thus encompasses the environment in which we exist, but also in the sense that we are *part* of global warming, insofar as our actions have helped to contribute to its formation as an entity.

It is my contention that these aspects of hyperobjects are significant firstly for the ways in which they challenge and undermine the tenability of the modern constitution, and secondly, because the presence of hybrid hyperobjects has become *increasingly undeniable* as various hyperobjects (such as global warming or a global capitalist market) have begun to intervene in daily life to an ever greater degree. This is Morton's claim also, though he is less explicit regarding the hyperobject's role in the dissolution of the modern constitution. According to Morton, we are living in "the time of the hyperobject"—a time in which the discovery of hyperobjects makes the existence of hybridity undeniable, which also represents the "end of the world" (2-3). This is because, for Morton, "the end of the world" is constituted primarily by the end of our ability to construct metanarratives that place human beings or their world at the center of existence, as masters over all of non-human "nature."<sup>28</sup> It is a time in which "the concept *world* is no longer operational" (6) because, in light of the discovery of hyperobjects, human beings have been exposed to be "hypocritical," "weak," and "lame" (2). The ideas that modern subjects have constructed through the activity of purification—that there is a clear difference between the human and the non-human, the human world of culture and the non-human world of nature, between living and non-living things, and that these separations give us some mastery and control over our existence—have become untenable, as human existence is exposed to be contingent, fragile, and potentially finite in the wake of hybrid hyperobjects that force us to think *the possibility of a "world" without us*. The "end of the world" is thus the end of the possibility of conceptualizing a human world that is totally, ontologically separable from the natural world,

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<sup>28</sup> This idea of the "end of metanarratives" is obviously related to theories of post-modernism, as put forward by thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard, Frederic Jameson, and Jean Baudrillard. To my mind, Morton's "end of the world" is essentially synonymous with the advent of post-modernism, and both constitute a description of the crisis of modernity that I am trying to explore here. I am focusing on Morton and Latour's explanation of this phenomenon because I believe that the concepts of hybridity and undeniability present in both their works add an important dimension to the discussion.

and the recognition that *neither the human nor the natural exist as ontologically pure categories*. Rather, these categories are always interdependent, interpenetrating, and hybrid entities.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, Morton positions the “end of the world” as a definite and specific historical event. In fact, it occurs as a double event, first in “April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, an act that commenced the depositing of carbon in Earth’s crust—namely, the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale,” and again “in 1945, in Trinity, New Mexico, where the Manhattan Project tested the Gadget, the first of the atom bombs, and later that year when two nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (7). For Morton, these events constitute the advent of the end of the world because

[they] mark the logarithmic increase in the actions of humans as a geophysical force.

They are of ‘world-historical’ importance for humans—and indeed for any lifeform within range of the fallout—demarcating a geological period, the largest-scale terrestrial era. I put ‘world-historical’ in quotation marks because it is indeed the fate of the concept *world* that is at issue. For what comes into view for humans at this moment is precisely the end of the world, brought about by the encroachment of hyperobjects, one of which is assuredly Earth itself, and its geological cycles demand a *geophilosophy* that doesn’t think simply in terms of human events and human significance (7).

The “encroachment of hyperobjects,” their increasingly undeniable presence and influence on the most banal aspects of everyday life, makes it impossible to conceptualize a world in which “human events and human significance” are central to existence. And this, I argue, marks the death of the modern constitution: the pursuit of the dual dreams of modernity

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<sup>29</sup> Latour makes a similar point through his insistence on the term “nature-culture,” which highlights how these concepts and the objects they apply to cannot be as easily disentangled as the ontologically purified categories of modernity would have us believe.

through the single-minded activity of purification (which, in turn, is achieved through the “will to truth” of the modern natural and social sciences) ironically leads to both the production and proliferation of hybrid hyperobjects (like global warming, capitalist markets, etc.) *and* their discovery (via the technologies and theories enabled by the natural and social sciences), which in turn renders the modern constitution untenable, as it both undermines the dual dreams of modernity (by exposing human existence to be unavoidably contingent and non-human nature to be both hybrid and uncontrollable) and puts the lie to the idea that purification can be pursued without translation.

The modern constitution has become impossible to subscribe to. We can no longer engage in purification while denying translation because we are always-already caught up, undeniably, within the hybrid hyperobject itself.<sup>30</sup> As discussed in the previous section on Latour, the modern constitution collapses under its own weight, leaving us exposed and disoriented at the end of the world. Because of the undeniable presence of hybrid hyperobjects, we can *no longer be modern*, and perhaps we *never were* (since the discovery of hybrid hyperobjects also projects backwards in time, showing that hybridity and translation have always been present).

However, I am concerned that both Morton and Latour (along with many of their fellow travellers in the fields of object oriented ontology, network theory, new materialism, and

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<sup>30</sup> The late Jean Baudrillard provides an excellent summation of this self-dissolution of the modern world in one of his last published works, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* He writes: “If we look closely, we see that the real world begins, in the modern age, with the decision to transform the world, and to do so by means of science, analytical knowledge and the implementation of technology—that is to say that it begins, in Hannah Arendt's words, with the invention of an Archimedean point outside the world (on the basis of the invention of the telescope by Galileo and the discovery of modern mathematical calculation) by which the natural world is definitively alienated. This is the moment when human beings, while setting about analysing and transforming the world, take their leave of it, while at the same time lending it force of reality. We may say, then, that the real world begins, paradoxically, to disappear at the very same time as it begins to exist. By their exceptional faculty for knowledge, human beings, while giving meaning, value and reality to the world, at the same time begin a process of dissolution (‘to analyse’ means literally ‘to dissolve’)” (10-11). We will examine further what this self-dissolution of the modern world means for us today in the next chapter, where I will outline a theory of how it *feels* to live on after the “end of the world”.

speculative realism) have been too hasty in their conclusions about the dissolution of the modern constitution and their declarations of “the end of the world.” Has it really become untenable to subscribe to the modern constitution? Have we really lived through “the end of the world”—the end of our ability to believe in a pure coherent notion of “world”? While I largely agree with these theorists’ assessment that the modern constitution has been put into crisis by the increasingly undeniable presence of hybrid objects, it would be naïve to think that we have broken free of the modern constitution, that our subjectivity has ceased to be modern, that we ourselves can no longer be modern, even as the world is revealed in all its impurity and hybridity.<sup>31</sup> Rather, it is my contention that the socio-political problem that we must work through today is precisely the tension created by the fact that the dissolution of the feasibility of the modern constitution has not made us non-modern in our subjectivity. We have not necessarily moved beyond the modern constitution, even as it has been put into crisis. Somehow, *we are still modern*, insofar as we continue to subscribe to a belief in the modern constitution as an achievable project. Despite modernity’s increasing unfeasibility, many of us are still invested in the modern constitution and the attendant dreams of control that accompany this constitution.

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<sup>31</sup> To be accurate, it should be noted that neither of these theorists has argued that the crisis of modernity or “end of the world” has meant the end of modern subjects or subjectivity. At best, their texts seem *aspirational* in this regard: the crisis of modernity allows for the possibility of overcoming modern subjectivity, and (in the case of Morton) perhaps *subjectivity itself* (insofar as hyperobjects expose human beings to be simply one object among others). But as Katherine Behar has noted more generally about object-oriented ontology, this aspirational longing to shed subjecthood is likely to *remain* aspirational, because “for those not already accustomed to it, human objecthood...rarely will prove liberating” (10). Given the experience of those who have already long been relegated to the realm of objecthood (women, people of colour, colonial subjects, etc.), we can say that “examples of objectification’s benefiting the objectified are few and far between” (10), and that it is unlikely that those who have experienced the privilege of subjecthood will give it up easily. In all likelihood, many people will remain invested in modern subjectivity, in spite of the modern constitution’s dissolution, either out of habit or in an attempt to retain their position as privileged subjects. And so, what about those of us who have remained modern? Those of us living today through the dissolution of the modern constitution, but who are still modern in *our* constitution, our subjectivity, our orientation towards the world? Latour and Morton (along with much of object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, and post-modern theory) tend to treat such subjects as past, or nearly past. This dissertation will try to think through the contemporary condition of such subjects, specifically.

Which is to say, despite the impossibility of being modern any longer, *many of us are still modern.*<sup>32</sup>

*The Modern World, Worldlessness, and Living on After the End*

We are thus returned back to where we started this chapter: We are still modern. We can no longer be modern. We have never been modern. Following Latour and Morton's combined conceptions of the dissolution of the modern constitution and the "end of the world," it is my contention that this triad of statements (still modern—no longer modern—never modern) represents the basic condition that we are living through today (a condition I have called "the crisis of modernity") and that this condition constitutes a *problem*.

The problem, as I see it, is this: *the tenability of the modern constitution has expired before modern subjectivity has gone extinct*. Modern subjects still exist. We are still modern. We still engage in the activities of modernity and subscribe to the tenets of modernism as an ideological project. Yet the conditions that allow for this mode of subjectivity to exist (the modern constitution) have collapsed under the weight of hybrid hyperobjects produced through the activities of modern subjects. We can no longer be modern, and perhaps never really were to begin with. This creates a paradoxical tension that permeates contemporary life and reality for those whose subjectivity is still informed by the modern constitution—a tension that I believe

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<sup>32</sup> Again, to reiterate a previous point, this is precisely why postmodernity is experienced as a crisis: if we were not modern, if we never had been modern, the dissolution of modernity would pass unnoticed—and yet there are whole bodies of contemporary theory and philosophy dedicated to mapping its collapse.

can be productively understood as a form of *worldlessness*, in the sense evoked by Morton's conception of the "end of the world."

However, to better understand what Morton means by the "end of the world" and what it means to experience a condition of worldlessness, we must first ask: in what sense the world has actually ended? And what can this tell us about what it means to have a world to begin with? For to properly understand the connections between the crisis of modernity and the "end of the world" it is first necessary to understand what it means to *have* a world and for such a world to have *ended*. As such, in what sense can we say that we, today, are living through (or living *after*) the "end of the world"? And what is the impact of this ending, this state of *worldlessness*? What does it entail, and what effects does it produce?

To begin answering these questions we may note the immediately apparent reality that, even if conventional usage of the word "world" suggests a reference to the Earth or to the totality of phenomenal reality, to speak of "the end of the world" does not necessarily imply the destruction of the globe or a total annihilation of material existence. Rather, to speak of "the end of the world" typically denotes the dissolution of a particular *mode* of organizing reality, whether that be a particular conception of human civilization, a set of institutions and practices that sustain a specific form of life, or a certain arrangement and distribution of material processes. Indeed, we can see this conception of "the end of the world" commonly in operation in aesthetic works gathered under the generic category of "post-apocalyptic" narratives, which attempt to represent *what the end of the world would be like*—or, more specifically, what the end of the world would be like *for us*, for *humans*. Rarely, if ever, do such representations deal directly with the "end of the world" as a total collapse of material reality, as the complete extinction of life, or

the inevitable breakdown of an entropic universe.<sup>33</sup> Rather, in such narratives, the “end of the world” seems to invariably entail the end of a *particular way of life* in the wake of a catastrophic failure in material, environmental, or social conditions, which is lived through, survived, and witnessed by at least some sentient actors. This suggests that “the world” is, in actuality, a primarily *human* phenomenon, a product of human activity that is somehow separate from the brute facticity of material or phenomenal reality.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, for Morton, “the end of the world” does not entail the total destruction of material reality. Rather, it represents the end of our ability to construct metanarratives that place human beings or our world at the center of existence. As will be recalled from our previous discussion of hybrid hyperobjects, the “end of the world,” in Morton’s sense, constitutes a time in which “the concept *world* is no longer operational” because certain forces within contemporary reality (for example, global warming, the possibility of nuclear annihilation, etc.) have exposed human beings to be “hypocritical,” “weak,” “lame,” and, ultimately, *temporary* (Morton 2-6). It is thus the end of a particular *kind* of world: an anthropocentric world, such as

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<sup>33</sup> The only immediate counter-example that comes to mind is Lars Von Trier’s 2011 film *Melancholia*, in which a wayward, roaming planet crashes into the earth, thereby destroying all possibility of life on the planet.

<sup>34</sup> While this common conception of what it means to have a world may seem to suggest that “world” is an *inherently* anthropocentric concept, or that all worlds are by definition *human* worlds, it is possible to extend the idea of what it is to have a world to include the possibility of *non-human worlds*. Much contemporary theory is interested in questioning common anthropocentric conceptualizations of “world” by positing the existence of non-human worlds and exploring the potential for humans to think or access the worlds of non-human entities. Some examples of this strain of theory include: Giorgio Agamben’s exploration of the overlap between human and non-human worlds and forms-of-life in *The Open: Man and Animal* (particularly, his reading of Baron Jakob von Uexküll’s supposition of “an infinite variety of perceptual worlds” for each form-of-life [39-40]), Jane Bennet’s conception of political ecologies, non-human forms of organization, and hope for limited forms of anthropomorphization that can help humans understand non-human worlds, or the various works of contemporary phenomenology and object-oriented ontology that posit the existence of as many worlds as there are objects in the universe, while also trying to conceptualize how human beings can know or access non-human worlds (for example, Ian Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology, or What it is Like to Be a Thing*, Graham Harman’s *Towards Speculative Realism*, or Dylan Trigg’s *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror*). Similarly, my exploration of Morton’s conception of “the end of the world” will aim to question the idea of “world” as an anthropocentric category, arguing that specifically *anthropocentric* conceptions of the world have been rendered inoperable in the crisis of modernity, thus leading to a sense that there no longer exists a world *for us*, or a properly *human* world.

the world of *modernity*, which has attempted to organize reality through the stark separation of human and non-human into ontologically distinct categories, placing the human in a position of dominion and control over the non-human. The modern world—a world based on the modern constitution’s focus on purified ontological categories to the exclusion of hybridity and hybrid entities—can no longer sustain itself in a time when hybridity impinges, undeniably, on every aspect of life, at every level of existence, troubling the distinctions between human and non-human and challenging our capacity to gain mastery over a non-human “nature.” This undeniability of hybridity thus constitutes the *end* of the world of modernity, insofar as it makes the basic constitution of that world impossible to maintain.

But what does this dissolution of the modern world tell us about what it means to *have* a world in the first place? What can it tell us about what a world *is*, and what could it mean for such a world to *end*? To begin answering these questions, it is necessary to have some conception of the process of world formation, or of what it means to have a world, how a world comes to be, and subsequently, how it is possible for a world to cease or end. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will attempt to outline a theory of world formation through an examination of the philosophy of Hannah Arendt—a political theorist who, throughout her body of work, provides a detailed and robust account not only of what a world *is*, but also of the political, ethical, and existential importance of having a world. I have chosen to draw on Arendt’s work for my conception of what it means to have a world not only because she offers a richly robust account of world formation, but because her theory also represents a powerful and clear formulation of the kind of thinking that Morton finds to be no longer viable today, in the crisis of modernity or at the end of the world: an anthropocentric vision of “world” based upon an ontological distinction between the categories of human and non-human.

For Arendt, the basic existential condition of humanity—the condition that is universally experienced by an otherwise pluralistic human species—is to be thrown, by virtue of our birth, into a phenomenal world of appearances that is constantly subject to *change*. This is the material, “sensate,” or “natural” world, in which all things are in a constant state of flux, caught in some state between coming into existence, appearing, passing away, or changing into something else. In this world of appearance, nothing can or will remain the same in perpetuity—everything changes, and is changing constantly, including “the unstable and mortal creature which is man [*sic*]” (Arendt *The Human Condition* 136-137). This poses a particular problem for the human being, who, in being born, is thrown into this whirling world of perpetual change and motion: namely, the problem of *orientation*, of how to locate and orient oneself in the world of appearances, relative to other phenomenal entities, when everything by which one might orient themselves is constantly subject to change. For to live, and act, and enact life projects necessitates being able to reliably understand where and what one *is*, relative to the material world that sustains one’s life (Biser 522).

According to Arendt, gaining such a sense of orientation requires the construction of a properly *human* world, a world that can act as a *home* for human beings by providing a certain level of stability and familiarity relative to the perpetual change of the phenomenal world. This properly human world is not completely separate from, or transcendent to, the material or phenomenal world, but rather functions as a *stabilization* of part of that world, such that it becomes conducive to the maintenance of human life and the kinds of activity that are proper to human beings (Arendt *The Human Condition* 136-174). For Arendt, this stabilization of the ever-changing world of phenomena begins from the basic fact of *plurality* amongst human beings, which she sees as the very ontological condition of humanity—the fact that “men, not Man, live

on the earth and inhabit the world” (Arendt *The Human Condition* 7). Plurality is a necessary condition for the production of a world, as the world is first and foremost constituted by the space *between* individual human beings, which is generated “wherever human beings come together” and which “simultaneously gathers them...and separates them from one another” (Arendt *The Promise of Politics* 106). As such, Arendt believes that “wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between space that all human affairs are conducted. The space between men, which is the world, cannot, [therefore], exist without them, and a world without human beings, as over against a universe without human beings or nature without human beings, would be a contradiction in terms” (Arendt *The Promise of Politics* 106).

Unlike non-human animals and other entities—which Arendt believes are “worldless” (Arendt *The Promise of Politics* 107)—human beings are able to produce a world in the space that appears between them when they gather together in their plurality, precisely because their *plurality* (as individual, unique beings rather than “a simple multiplication of a single species” [Arendt *The Promise of Politics* 176]) allows them to have multiple perspectives or viewpoints on the same phenomenal reality. In sharing our distinct viewpoints with each other through discussion and debate, we create a broader and more nuanced view of reality than is available to any single human being, who, in their singularity, can only perceive a small portion of reality from the limits of their own particular position (Arendt *The Promise of Politics* 41-42, 175-76). By gathering together and sharing our perspectives on phenomenal reality through dialogue, debate, action, and judgement, human beings begin to make sense of, and thereby stabilize and concretize, the phenomenal world into which we have been thrown by virtue of our birth. As these various perspectives on the fleeting, ever-changing phenomena of reality come together to

form a unique perspective or worldview (which Arendt conceptualizes in terms of “tradition” and “common sense” [*The Promise of Politics* 30, 41-42]), this unique perspective comes to constitute a *world* for the human beings who produced it—a “truly human world,” conducive to human life and action, which can outlast the life of any single human being and endure through the ever-changing flux of phenomena by being passed down through generations (Arendt *The Promise of Politics* 161-162, *The Human Condition* 54-55).<sup>35</sup>

Stabilization of the ever-changing phenomenal world into a properly *human* world thus takes place when human beings gather together and orient themselves toward that space which arises *between* them, which simultaneously connects and separates them. This space is composed of a variety of phenomena—including “natural” or non-human entities, the enduring products of human labour (which Arendt calls “the human artifice” [*The Human Condition* 167-74]), and certain forms of memorable or enduring human action—that can become the subject of discussion and judgement for the plurality of human beings who gather together, each of whom perceives the phenomena from their own unique standpoint. These phenomena, in turn, act as the material support for a network of meanings, judgements, and ideas that human beings develop

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<sup>35</sup> As such, Arendt believes that there are as many worlds as there are peoples, nations, or simply unique human groups which can offer “a unique view of the world arising from its particular position in the world—a position that, however it came about, cannot readily be duplicated” (*The Promise of Politics* 175). Therefore, “the more peoples there are in the world who stand in some particular relationship with one another, the more world there is to form between them, and the larger that world will be. The more standpoints there are within any given nation from which to view the same world that shelters and presents itself equally to all, the more significant and open to the world that nation will be. If, on the other hand, there were to be some cataclysm that left the earth with only one nation, and matters in that nation were to come to a point where everyone saw and understood everything from the same perspective, living in total unanimity with one another, the world would have come to an end in a historical-political sense...In other words, human beings in the truest sense of the term can exist only where there is a world, and there can be a world in the true sense of the term only where the plurality of the human race is more than a simple multiplication of a single species” (*The Promise of Politics* 176). However, we should also note that Arendt consistently limits the possibility of having a world to *human beings* (thereby proposing an anthropocentric vision of what a world *is*), while simultaneously claiming that non-European indigenous peoples are “worldless” (thereby implying that indigenous people are, in fact, *not human beings*) (*The Promise of Politics* 107 and 176).

over time and in conversation with one another, as a way to make sense of our existence and situate it within a wider context. And it is *this* network of meaning that constitutes, for Arendt, a properly human world—a world that can act as a familiar home for human beings and provide us with a sense of orientation that allows us to know what to do and where to go, relative to other things (Biser 523).

By constructing a shared network of meaning through an exchange of judgements and ideas with others about the phenomenal entities that occupy the space between us (which we each perceive from our own particular standpoint) we come to produce a common *world* that can endure the ever-changing flux of phenomenal reality and provide a space conducive to human existence. On this schema, a “world” is therefore simply a set of relatively durable shared meanings that can be used to approach, explain, and understand the various entities that compose phenomenal reality, including the speech, action, and objects produced by other human beings, each of which constitutes a part of the “human artifice.”<sup>36</sup> By organizing the various entities that compose phenomenal reality into relatively unchanging relationships of meaning, human beings

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<sup>36</sup>A similar conception of a “world” is present in the work of Arendt’s friend and mentor Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger (as for Arendt), “The world is a public network of meaningful relationships, in terms of which entities are intelligible as the entities that they are” (Withy 55)—that is, in their *ontological* (as opposed to their *ontic* or merely phenomenal) dimensions. According to Heidegger, it is precisely the existence of such a network of meanings (i.e., a world) that allows things to appear as what they truly (ontologically) *are*, insofar as that network of meaning provides human beings (as *Dasein*) a path (or orientation) by which to approach, access, and make sense of any given thing (thereby allowing things to unconceal themselves and appear as what they are). The “world,” in this sense, is thus not simply the Earth, or the totality of existing entities, but is rather constituted by the context of meaningful relationships (between things, between people, between self/not-self) in terms of which entities emerge to consciousness and exist *for us* (i.e., for *Dasein*, the being who makes sense of Being). It is the background against which entities exist and appear to one another, and which allows human beings (as instances of *Dasein*) to make sense of any given thing (Withy 82-83). Yet, according to Heidegger, this world is not simply *there*, as a medium in which things passively exist. Rather, it is reflexively produced and shaped by human activity—specifically, by our *sense-making* activity, our capacity to *make sense* of things, which Heidegger believes to be a unique and defining quality of human beings (the quality that marks them out as *Dasein*). By engaging in the act of making sense, human beings thus produce, sustain, and change the network of meanings that constitute their world. For both Heidegger and Arendt, “the world” is therefore always a *human* world, because humans (as the only entities that possess the capacity to *make sense* of things) are the only beings capable of organizing phenomenal reality into relationships of meaning.

are able to *make sense* of those entities, become *familiar* with them, and begin to feel at *home* in a world that has been rendered stable and predictable (Arendt *Men in Dark Times* 10-11).

For Arendt, having such a familiar and stable home is a necessity for the human being, as it is only by being situated within a properly human world that human beings are able to truly obtain some degree of *freedom*: both freedom *from* the necessity and contingency of material existence as well as the freedom *to* engage in political life, which expresses the human capacity to *begin something new* (Arendt *The Promise of Politics* 144-146). Moreover, occupying a truly human world provides us with a sense of *orientation*—the capacity to know where to go and what to do relative to the ever-changing world of phenomenal reality—which helps to direct human activity in its freedom by providing goals and standards toward which it can strive (Arendt *The Promise of Politics* 193-196). To be oriented, in Arendt’s sense, is to know *what to do*, to know how to act toward other entities in the phenomenal world, to be able to distinguish right from wrong, and to be able to prevent oneself (or others) from doing wrong. Such a sense of orientation is necessary for human beings because it allows us to direct our actions and activity (which are always an expression of freedom, and therefore in some sense *unpredictable*) toward worthwhile, meaningful projects, while also preventing us from becoming involved (actively or complicitly) in activities that may lead to disastrous outcomes.

However, in Arendt’s estimation, this sense of orientation is largely dependent upon our being situated within a properly *human* world of meaning, as it is the meaningful relationships that we have established between things in the phenomenal world that allow us to *make sense* of those things, and, ultimately, to understand how to comport ourselves in relation to them. This web of familiar meanings and relationships is experienced in everyday life as a “tradition” or a “common sense” understanding of things (“common” because it is shared by all within a

community or world) which can act as a set of “guideposts” by which we can find our way in the ever-shifting world of phenomena (Arendt *Between Past and Future* 17-40). Without the network of familiar meanings that constitute a properly human world, we are thrown back upon the chaotic, ever-changing world of phenomena, with no “guideposts” or predetermined standards of meaning to direct our actions or make sense of the phenomenal entities that we encounter therein.<sup>37</sup> In such instances, we become *worldless* and *disoriented*—a condition that Arendt finds to be particularly dangerous, insofar as it leaves us with no pre-established standards by which to judge or make sense of things, thereby leaving us unsure of how to properly comport ourselves (ethically, morally, politically) in relation to the various entities that we encounter in the phenomenal world of appearances (including ourselves and other human beings) (Biser 532).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> For Arendt, this state of *worldlessness* represents a very real and very dangerous possibility which can be brought about in a variety of ways, including the total extermination of a people, the complete elimination of the public political realm in which ideas and judgements can be exchanged freely, or the totalitarian reduction of human plurality down to a singular viewpoint. But perhaps the most pressing (and certainly, for this dissertation, the most relevant) source of worldlessness identified by Arendt is the worldlessness brought about by *modernity* as a socio-political project. In the conclusion to a lecture course titled “The History of Political Theory” (later reprinted as the Epilogue to *The Promise of Politics*) Arendt strikingly metaphorizes this modern worldlessness in terms of a *desert* spreading to consume the various “oases” constituted by the human world. She writes: “The modern growth of worldlessness, the withering away of everything *between* us, can also be described as the spread of a desert...Modern psychology is desert psychology: when we lose the faculty to judge...we begin to think that there is something wrong with us if we cannot live under the conditions of desert life. Insofar as psychology tries to ‘help’ us, it helps us ‘adjust’ to those conditions, taking away our only hope, namely that we, who are not of the desert though we live in it, are able to transform it into a human world” (201). The truly horrifying aspect of modern worldlessness, for Arendt, is thus not only that it destroys the properly human world (turning it into a desert) but that it simultaneously renders us incapable of transforming the desert *back* into a human world by acclimatizing us to the worldless “conditions of desert life.”

<sup>38</sup> This was one of Arendt’s major concerns about Adolf Eichmann—the Nazi official who helped to facilitate and manage the mass deportation of Jews to death camps during the Holocaust, and whose trial Arendt reported on for *The New Yorker* magazine. For Arendt, who was trying to understand how relatively banal or “normal” Germans like Eichmann could have become (actively or passively) complicit in the Holocaust, Eichmann’s participation in the Nazi party (and, subsequently, in the organization of the death camps) could not be explained through reference to evil intentions or a malevolent will on his part. Rather, Arendt believed that Eichmann’s participation in the atrocities of the Holocaust was a result of his lack of *thought* and *judgement*—an inability to judge right from wrong, or to prevent himself from engaging in wrong by thinking through and judging the consequences of his actions—which led him to simply go along with whatever laws, rules, or moral standards were imposed upon him by his society, and to displace his own culpability and responsibility onto the Nazi bureaucracy of which he had become a part. This lack of thought and judgement (which Arendt did not believe was unique to Eichmann, but had rather become widespread and normalized in the twentieth century) in turn could be explained as a product of the *disorientation* wrought by the rapid dynamism and perpetual motion of *modernity* (Biser 521), which had done

Writing during the mid-twentieth century, Arendt was concerned that certain aspects of modernity as a socio-political project were diminishing our capacity to produce a properly human world—that the world (as a familiar home conducive to human life and action) was coming to an end, and with it, our capacity to reliably orient ourselves in relation to the social and material forces that affect our lives (Arendt *Men in Dark Times* 10-11, *The Promise of Politics* 200-204, and *Between Past and Future* 128-140). Writing today, in the early twenty-first century, Morton claims that this end *has already taken place*: that we, today, are already living *after the end of the world*, and that this ending is far more catastrophic and total than Arendt could have predicted. For Morton claims not only that modernity has *diminished* our capacity to produce a properly human world but that *the very idea of a world proper to human life has become untenable*, as the networks of meaning that modern subjects have constructed to gain mastery over their environment—based in the belief in an ontological difference between the human and the non-human, the human world of culture and a non-human nature, or between living and non-living things—have become unsustainable. As human existence has been revealed to be contingent, fragile, and potentially finite in the wake of realities like global warming, we have been forced to think the possibility of a *world without us*—which, for the modern subject, is *no world at all*. The “end of the world” is thus the end of the possibility of conceptualizing a specifically *human* world that is totally, ontologically separable from the natural or phenomenal

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away with the relatively stable networks of meaning established in the pre-modern world, leaving the subjects of modernity *lost*, without familiar meanings or standards by which to judge their own or others’ actions. This left subjects like Eichmann, who had not developed the capacity *to think or to judge for themselves*, susceptible to totalitarian regimes and authoritarian leaders, who could impose, wholesale, an entirely new network of meanings, laws, and moral standards (i.e., a new *world*) upon a given community or population, with the expectation that the members of that community—in their disorientation—would passively accept the new world that had been imposed upon them as natural, right, or just. The danger of disorientation for Arendt is thus that, in divorcing us from the familiar meanings, standards, or judgements established by a properly human world, it leaves us with *no* standards by which to judge, making us susceptible to the imposition of *any* new standards, no matter how violent, destructive, or evil.

world, and the recognition that *neither the human nor the natural exist as ontologically pure categories*; rather, they are always interdependent, interpenetrating, hybrid entities.

On this interreading of Arendt and Morton, it becomes clear that modernity—in the Latourian sense of a constitution and set of activities that seeks to arrange entities into a particular set of relationships of meaning (i.e., a network of ontologically purified categories)—*constitutes its own world*, the modern world. Moreover, it is apparent that both Arendt and Morton are concerned (in their own way) with the “crisis of modernity,” which I have described previously as the self-undermining of the modern constitution (and thus the modern *world*) through the proliferation of hybrid objects, the undeniability of which has caused the network of meanings that constitute the modern world to collapse. Where Arendt and Morton diverge is in their interpretation of the causes of this crisis, as well as its ultimate consequences. For while Arendt maintains a belief in the possibility (and necessity) of a properly *human* world and interprets the self-undermining of modernity as simply the loss of one *particular* world, Morton and Latour question the continued viability of “world” as an anthropocentric category *all together*, given the collapse of pure ontological divisions between the human and the non-human under the weight of undeniable hybridity.

### *Conclusions*

Yet Morton and Latour’s claims do not completely diminish the importance or veracity of Arendt’s insights regarding the connection between orientation and the existence of a human world. Rather, if we continue to read Morton in conjunction with Arendt, it becomes apparent that inheritors of the modern tradition have been oriented not so much by the *reality* of a properly human world as by a *belief in the possibility of a world proper to humanity*—by an

anthropocentric vision of what it means to *have a world*. The network of meaningful relationships established by the modern constitution has functioned to orient the subjects of modernity by acting as a set of guideposts by which they can determine their place in existence, relative to other entities: an orientation based upon a set of purified ontological distinctions that position the human as completely and purely separate from the non-human. Within the modern network of meaning, human beings are thus conceptualized as occupying their own *world* (the world of culture, as separable from nature) on the basis of the belief that human beings are the only entities truly capable of *having* a world, thereby making them ontologically distinct from all other non-human entities.<sup>39</sup> This belief in the existence of a properly human world—a world *for* humans—thus acts as an orientation device for modern subjects, guiding their comportment toward all those non-human entities which fall outside the boundaries of the human world. But as this orientation device is demolished by the forced recognition that the world is not, and never has been, *for* humans, those subjects who have been oriented by this belief are thrown into a state of *disorientation*, a terrifying inability to find their way or enact meaningful life projects relative to the network of meaning that once constituted their world.

The question then becomes: What are the consequences of such a lack of orientation, when a familiar world is no longer available to orient our actions? What does it mean to be disoriented, and how might it affect what we do, ethically and politically?

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<sup>39</sup> Arendt falls into this anthropocentric trap not simply by claiming that there is such a thing as a world (i.e., a network of meaningful relationships and understandings) proper to humanity—a claim which, on its own, could be interpreted in a way that might cut against anthropocentrism by positioning the human world as one world amongst many (including the worlds constituted by non-human entities) that cannot be organized hierarchically—but rather by claiming that non-human entities (and even some groups of human beings) are *incapable of having or constituting a world*. This aspect of her thinking becomes most clearly evident when she writes: “We can conceive of a catastrophe so monstrous, so world-destroying, that it would...affect man’s ability to produce his world and its things, and *leave him as worldless as any animal*. We can even conceive that such catastrophes have occurred in the prehistoric past, and that certain so-called primitive peoples are their residue, their worldless vestiges” (*The Promise of Politics* 107, emphasis added).

For Arendt, the answer to such questions was clear: the disorientation produced by modernity's self-undermining dissolution of the stable network of meanings and values that constitute a properly human world leaves us without *any* meaning or values by which to orient our activity, opening up the potential for anything to happen. This, for Arendt, was a dangerous possibility, as it could easily allow us to become active or complicit in the enactment of ethical and political atrocities by rendering us susceptible to totalitarian and authoritarian modes of political organization which attempt to impose *an entirely new network of meanings* (i.e., a new *world*) upon an already alienated and disoriented population (Biser 530).<sup>40</sup> Her solution to this problem of disorientation was to encourage a *reorientation* toward relatively stable entities in the phenomenal world of appearances through a reclamation of our faculty of *judgement*—our capacity to judge things for ourselves, without predetermined categories of meaning—and a return to the basic political activity of producing a properly human world.

However, Arendt's account of the danger of disorientation is limited insofar as it assumes the possibility (and necessity) of an anthropocentric world of meaning, a world *for us*. As Latour, Morton, and many other contemporary theorists have argued, this assumption of a "world for us" is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain after the crisis of modernity and "the end of the world." Moreover, Arendt's thinking about the disorientation of living without a world lacks any account of the *affective* dimensions of disorientation—how it *feels* to be disoriented, when the familiar

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<sup>40</sup> Though, Arendt also acknowledges that this state of disorientation could act as a potentially productive chance "to think without the guidance of any authority whatsoever" and to "look upon the past with eyes undistracted by any tradition, with a directness which has disappeared from Occidental reading and hearing," thereby offering the opportunity to create new traditions, new conceptual frameworks of meaning and understanding, that might be more adequate to contemporary reality than the exhausted traditions of Western thought that terminate in modernity (*Between Past and Future* 28). In this way, we who live in the aftermath of the modern world's dissolution, though we have been cast into a state of disorientation, are "[i]n some respects...better off" than thinkers like Kierkegaard, Marx, or Nietzsche—those high-water marks of modern thought—because "they were still held by the categorical framework of the great tradition," while we are not (Arendt *Between Past and Future* 28).

network of meaning that has constituted our world is no longer available to provide orientation, and how such feelings of disorientation affect what we can *do*. This, to me, seems like a grave oversight, for disorientation is obviously an embodied experience. To be oriented (or not) first and foremost implies a certain spatial relation, a relationship between bodies in space, and the ability to find one's way relative to other entities in the phenomenal world. As such, in order to understand the disorientation of today—the disorientation that comes at the end of the modern world, which simultaneously constitutes the end of the operativity of “world” as an anthropocentric concept—I believe that we should engage in an examination of “disorientation” as a phenomenological experience and affective feeling.

In the following chapter, I will offer an explanatory overview of disorientation as an embodied phenomenon, drawing on past and present accounts of orientation in order to construct a descriptive, affective account of its absence. I will then link this descriptive account of the affective feeling of disorientation to the present experience of “the end of the world” as a function of the crisis of modernity through an examination of the related affective phenomenon of *uncanniness*. To conclude, I will also contend that the affective complex created by the conjunction of these two affective states—disorientation and uncanniness—constitutes the predominant feeling of contemporary life after “the end of the world.” In short, to live on as a predominantly modern subject after the end of the (modern) world is to live in a state of uncanny disorientation, unable to reliably orient oneself in relation to once-familiar things, as the familiar entities that once constituted a homely world *for us* have been rendered unhomely, unfamiliar, and uncannily disturbing in the shadows cast by the undeniably hybrid entities that pervade contemporary existence.

“Our passion for categorization, life neatly fit into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions” (James Baldwin 19)

“Yesterday...I lost my human set up for hours and hours. If I have the courage, I'll let myself stay lost. But I'm afraid of newness and I'm afraid of living whatever I don't understand—I always want to be sure to at least think I understand, I don't know how to give myself over to disorientation. How could I explain that my greatest fear is precisely of: being?”  
(Clarice Lispector 4-5)

## Chapter 2: Disorientation

The orientation of existence today can be characterized as a general sense of *disorientation*—an inability to find one’s way, to find one’s place, or to orient oneself in relation to once familiar things.<sup>41</sup> As discussed at the end of the previous chapter, this generalized disorientation can be interpreted as a result of the dissolution of the modern world that has taken place as an effect of the crisis of modernity, in which the strict ontological divisions that have formed the bases of the modern world have become impossible to sustain in relation to

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<sup>41</sup>This is the claim of Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback and Tora Lane in the introduction to their invaluable edited collection *Dis-Orientations: Philosophy, Literature, and the Lost Grounds of Modernity*, which helped to confirm much of my thinking with regards to the connection between the socio-political project of *modernity* and experiences of *disorientation*. However, where Shuback and Lane’s introduction (along with most of the other essays in the collection) interprets this contemporary generalization of disorientation simply as a continuation of the disorientation wrought by modernity, I will interpret it as a result of the disjunction between a still-modern form of subjectivity and the dissolution of the modern world that informed, sustained, and oriented that form of subjectivity.

undeniable forms of hybridity. But what *is* this disorientation? What does it *feel* like? And what constitutes its predominant features, such that we can claim it as a generalized experience of contemporary existence? That is to say: *how are we to understand the affective dimensions of disorientation and its relation to the “end of the world” of modernity?*

In the following sections of this chapter, I will attempt to address these questions by outlining the basic phenomenological and affective features of both *orientation* and its *absence*—that is, *disorientation*—describing the phenomenological and affective experience of disorientation, its sources in the dissolution of the modern world, and its effect on the political, social, and ethical existence of the (once/still) modern subject.

But to begin to understand *disorientation* and the significant role it plays in contemporary existence, we must first establish a framework for understanding *orientation*: what it is, how it is phenomenologically or affectively experienced, and how it relates to the concept of having a world, as established in the previous chapter. In order to do so, I will first turn to an early essay that explicitly attempts to understand orientation and its relation to modernity: namely, Immanuel Kant’s 1786 essay “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” This essay has had a profound impact upon the subsequent theorization of orientation (and, by extension, disorientation) as both a theoretical concept and an embodied experience, and as such, it represents a natural starting point for our discussion of the phenomenological experience of (dis)orientation.

### *What is (Dis)Orientation?—The Kantian Approach*

In the essay, Kant sets himself the task of defining what it means to possess an orientation in thought, or to be oriented in one’s thinking. The question of the essay—“what does it mean to

orient oneself in thinking?”—arose from the “so-called pan-theism controversy” between F.H. Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn over the supposed Spinozism of the philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, which called into question the basic principles of Enlightenment rationalism by implying that those principles could, ultimately, be self-undermining, leading to a kind of religious enthusiasm or mysticism (Wood 3).<sup>42</sup> Kant’s intervention in the debate was meant to defend Enlightenment rationalism, arguing for a limited use of reason bound to certain rules or laws that could provide thinking with a particular orientation, as a means of avoiding the extravagant flights of fancy that lead to religiously enthusiastic and mystical thinking. His contention was that: just as we require a bodily orientation in *space* to know where we are and where to go, we also require an orientation in *thought* to limit our use of reason and to know how or what to think. In presenting his argument, Kant also outlines a robust conception of both bodily and conceptual orientation, the connections between these two forms, as well as the potential dangers of disorientation that arise from the socio-political project of modernity.

The essay begins with a definition of orientation as the ability “to use a given direction (when we divide the horizon into four of them) in order to find the others,” and, subsequently, to determine where we are and which way we are going (Kant 8). Orientation is thus the subject’s capacity to situate themselves bodily in space relative to the cardinal directions. According to Kant, however, this capacity to orient ourselves in space cannot be dependent upon our sense perception of phenomenal things in the world (such as the position of the sun or stars in the sky) because objects in the phenomenal world are constantly subject to change and thus cannot be relied upon to provide stable or consistent grounds for orientation. Similarly, Kant believes that

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<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Jacobi is best known for coining and popularizing the term *nihilism* as a philosophical concept, claiming that Enlightenment rationality necessarily ended in a condition of nihilistic atheism. This will be relevant to our discussion of *uncanny disorientation* and its connection to *nihilism in bad faith* later on.

concepts produced or discovered through the exercise of reason (whether this be a speculative exercise in thinking about things we have never directly perceived, or a practical use of reason to think about the objects of sensual perception) also cannot offer grounds for an orientation in space (Kasprzak 23). Rather, orientation is always a purely *subjective* phenomenon, derived from a subjective *feeling* within oneself—the pre-cognitive feeling of difference between the left and right sides of one’s body (Kant 8-9). For Kant, this capacity to differentiate bodily right from left, independent of any cognitive or sensual relation to external objects, constitutes the basic grounds for orientation. It is the “faculty of making distinctions...implanted by nature but made habitual through frequent practice” (Kant 9), and from this capacity, we are able to orient ourselves in space (i.e., relative to the cardinal directions, or objects of perception) even when situated within a world of unfamiliar or ever-changing objects.<sup>43</sup> Orientation is therefore a function of a bodily, subjective *feeling* of differentiation, rather than being dependent upon rational cognition.

Over time, as we grow accustomed to making distinctions between things in the world (the left and right sides of our body being simply the most fundamental of these orienting distinctions) the *feeling* of orientation, gained through a capacity to differentiate between things, becomes habitual: we navigate the world easily on the basis of a feeling, without having to

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<sup>43</sup> Kant uses an evocative imagined example to make this point. He writes: “I orient myself geographically only through a subjective ground of differentiation; and if all the constellations, though keeping the same shape and position relative to one another, were one day by miracle to be reversed in their direction, so that what was east now became west, no human eye would notice the slightest alteration on the next bright starlit night, and even the astronomer—if he pays attention only to what he sees and not at the same time to what he feels—would inevitably become *disoriented*. But in fact the faculty of making distinctions through the feeling of right and left comes naturally to his aid...If only he fixes his eye on the Pole Star, he will be able not only to notice the alteration which has taken place, but in spite of it he will be able to *orient* himself” (Kant 9). Orientation thus comes through *feeling* rather than through our sense perception of phenomenal objects, or our ratiocination about the world. And if Kant’s example of the miraculous reversal of the stars strikes us as fanciful or improbable, we might think of Quentin Meillasoux’s compelling argument in his recent work, *After Finitude*, that the only thing we can know with any certainty is that anything and everything could change completely at any given moment.

constantly or cognitively seek out directions. Orientation is thus rarely experienced as such. It is only through experiences of *disorientation* that the feeling of orientation appears to consciousness (Kasprzak 23). In such moments when we lack orientation—when the habitual feeling of orientation is lost or absent—we are forced to actively try to find our way, to re-orient ourselves through reference to the fundamental differentiation between the left and right sides of our body. Kant famously describes this experience of disorientation through the example of a darkened room:

In the dark I orient myself in a room that is familiar to me if I can take hold of even one single object whose position I remember. But it is plain that nothing helps me here except the faculty for determining position according to a *subjective* ground of differentiation: for...if someone as a joke had moved all the objects around so that what was previously on the right was now on the left, I would be quite unable to find anything...But I can soon orient myself through the mere feeling of difference between my two sides, right and left (9).

In this example, it is the lack of *familiarity* that seems to provoke disorientation. In a darkened room with which I am familiar, I do not lose my sense of orientation, as I can navigate the room by remembering roughly what objects are present and where they are positioned relative to one another or my body. In such an instance, I orient myself in the room out of habit and familiarity. I only lose my sense of orientation when the room becomes *unfamiliar*, when it is organized in an unfamiliar way. When the room is rendered unfamiliar, I become *disoriented* and am exposed to my own need for orientation. I am unable to find my way in the room and must purposefully (i.e., consciously, non-habitually) re-orient myself through reference to the feeling of difference between the right and left sides of my body. This connection between

*orientation* and *familiarity* (and thus *disorientation* and *unfamiliarity*) is repeated by Kant in his second, briefer example of finding one's way down a series of streets that are "otherwise familiar" but on which one "cannot right now distinguish any of the houses" (9).<sup>44</sup> In this example it is again clear that orientation is normally linked to familiarity, and that disorientation arises when that familiarity is in some way disrupted; the point being that orientation becomes a *habitual feeling* only once the world has become familiar, and returns to consciousness only in experiences of disorientation, when the world has been rendered unfamiliar.

For Kant, then, orientation is first and foremost a *corporeal* phenomenon that describes the subject's capacity to find their way in physical space, relative to objects in the phenomenal world. It is an aspect of *embodiment*, established through an initial *feeling* of differentiation between the right and left sides of one's own body, which is then extended to the differentiation between one's body and other objects in the world. As these differentiations become familiar, orientation becomes a habitual (and thus largely unnoticed) feeling and practice. It is only in instances when things in the world are rendered unfamiliar (for example, in a darkened room in which the furniture is rearranged, or a once-familiar street on which the houses can no longer be distinguished) that orientation is lost and we become *disoriented*.

However, according to Kant, this bodily form of orientation also has an analog in *thinking*, in the realm of pure conceptual objects. Just as we must orient ourselves bodily in space in order to find our way in relation to physical objects and phenomena, Kant argues that we also feel a pressing need to orient ourselves in thinking, through the use of reason and judgement, in

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<sup>44</sup>The odd construction of this hypothetical situation in which one "cannot right now distinguish any of the houses" on an "otherwise familiar" street is striking, and reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's recounting of his own experience of strolling "through the empty and...unfamiliar streets of a small Italian town" that continuously (to his dismay) returned him to that town's red-light district (Freud 170). But Freud describes his experience of disorientation on "unfamiliar streets" as *uncanny*, rather than disorienting—a point I will return to in the next chapter.

relation to conceptual objects (Kant 9-10). Such orientation is necessary for thinking because it provides a certain unity of experience to our thoughts or ideas, allowing them to be more than simply passing flights of imaginative fancy. Without being oriented, thinking becomes directionless, without unity, and fails to adequately make sense of the things that it tries to think about (Kasprzak 24-26). More specifically, this need for orientation in thinking occurs when we are engaged in *speculative* thought, when our use of pure reason “wants to leave familiar objects (of experience) behind, extending itself beyond all bounds of experience” (Kant 9). In such instances, when we attempt to engage with conceptual objects of which we have no previous experience, our understanding of those objects cannot be based on “objective grounds of cognition” (i.e., sensual or rational experience) but, rather, must rely on pure reason “to bring its judgements under a determinate maxim according to a subjective ground of differentiation in the determination of its own faculty of judgement” (Kant 9-10). This is to say that, analogous to bodily orientation, we cannot orient ourselves in thought or in relation to cognitive objects on the basis of any *objective* experience, but solely on the basis of a “subjective ground of differentiation”—a *feeling*, which Kant calls “reason’s feeling of its own need,” and which acts as “a subjective ground for presupposing and assuming something which reason may not presume to know through objective grounds; and consequently, for orienting oneself in thinking...in that immeasurable space of the supersensible, which for us is filled with dark night” (10).

According to Kant, then, thinking is always-already grounded upon, and oriented by, certain ideas that cannot be proven or disproven on the basis of objective experience. Our reason guides itself, determining what and how to think, on the basis of “some projective ideas, more or less clear, of the whole...a conceptual image of the whole” of existence that has not been found

or accepted on the basis of objective reasoning, but as a subjective *belief* that is experienced as a felt *need* (Kasprzak 24-25). Kant calls these foundational subjective beliefs a form of “pure *rational faith*” which “can never be transformed into knowledge by any natural data of reason and experience, because here the ground of holding true is merely subjective, namely a necessary need of reason” (Kant 14). Such beliefs are *beliefs* (i.e., a form of faith) insofar as they cannot be proven or demonstrated to be true through reason or direct experience, but they are also *rational* insofar as they are necessary (as the grounds upon which thought is oriented) for rational thought to take place (Kant 13-14).<sup>45</sup> For Kant, rational faith is thus *necessary* because the ability to orient ourselves in thinking on the basis of objects of pure rational faith is what allows human beings to understand (or to come to understand) unfamiliar concepts or objects, and thus to *make sense* of things in the first place.

But, as mentioned previously, this ability to orient ourselves in thinking operates in an analogous way to our capacity for bodily orientation, by marking out *differentiations* between things (Kant 9-10). In the same way that our bodily orientation is dependent upon an initial differentiation between the left and right sides of our body, Kant finds that our ability to orient ourselves in thinking (and thus our capacity to think rationally at all) is also dependent upon an initial and foundational differentiation. For Kant, this initial differentiation that orients thought is a differentiation between the concept of “the unlimited” (i.e., God, whose existence cannot be demonstrated but must be taken as an article of rational faith) and “limited beings” (i.e., all other things). In this differentiation, “the unlimited” acts as “the ground of the concept of all limited

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<sup>45</sup> Kant thus contrasts *rational faith* with *opinion*, which has the possibility of becoming knowledge through the accumulation of experience or the exercise of reason, as well as with other forms of belief (such as “historical belief”) which can also become knowledge through the accumulation of objective data (such that we can say that we *know* Rome exists, even if we have never been there, on the basis of the weight of testimony from others who *have* been there to see it for themselves). Rational faith, by contrast, can *never* become knowledge because it is a belief based entirely upon subjective grounds (i.e., a feeling of need).

beings—hence of all other things,” and it is this fundamental differentiation between “the unlimited” and limited beings that, for Kant, constitutes a necessary object of rational faith—a rational faith that can ground and orient all subsequent thought, and which allows us to understand and make sense of things through the exercise of our capacity for reason (Kant 9-10). As such, a “rational faith” in the unlimited can act as “the signpost or compass by means of which the speculative thinker orients himself in his rational excursions into the field of supersensible objects...and it is this rational faith that must be taken as the ground of every other faith, and even of every revelation” (Kant 14).<sup>46</sup>

For Kant, in order to think clearly, or to make sense of the things we encounter in the world around us, we must first *orient* our thinking through this initial division between the unlimited and the limited. The risk inherent in attempting to think *without* the orientation provided by this initial distinction is *disorientation*, a disorientation of thought, because thinking always takes place “in that immeasurable space of the supersensible, which for us is filled with dark night” (10). Analogous once again to the physical or embodied phenomenon of (dis)orientation in space, thinking that takes place without orientation is akin to navigating a darkened room in which the objects (in this case, concepts, ideas, or other conceptual objects) have been moved about so that they no longer bear their familiar relations to one another. Kant calls this disorientation in thought a “lawlessness in thinking” that initially experiences itself as *freedom*—the freeing of thought from the familiar, established limits of reason in order to pursue new speculative ideas and relationships between concepts—but which ends with “the freedom to think...ultimately [being] forfeited...and *trifled away*” as “freedom in thinking finally destroys

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<sup>46</sup> In this way, as Nick Land explains, “Kant initiated the modern tradition of insidious theism by shielding God from theoretical investigation, whilst maintaining the moral necessity of his existence. God was exiled into a space of pure practical reason, simultaneously protected against intellectual transgression and underwriting moral law” and rational thought (*The Thirst for Annihilation* 60).

itself [as] it tries to proceed in independence of the laws of reason” (16-18). Disorientation in thought is therefore dangerous, insofar as it leads to a situation in which *anything* can be thought and taken as true (independent of the “laws of reason”), ultimately leading to the destruction of rational thought all together.<sup>47</sup>

But Kant’s concern regarding the disorientation of thought did not simply emerge from the abstract exercise of defining orientation. Rather, as Schuback and Lane argue in their introduction to the edited collection *Dis-Orientations: Philosophy, Literature and the Lost Grounds of Modernity*, Kant’s attempt to establish rational grounds for the orientation of thought arose out of a particular concern with *modernism* and the ways in which modernity had undermined the traditional foundations for such an orientation. Whereas, prior to the rise of modernity, certain traditions and beliefs (or “some projective ideas, more or less clear, of the whole...a conceptual image of the whole” of existence [Kasprzak 24-25]) could be assumed and maintained as grounds for orienting thought, Kant found that these orienting grounds were being undermined by developments linked to modernity and its world (Schuback and Lane ix).<sup>48</sup> More specifically, Kant was concerned that certain forms of speculative rationalism that had developed as part of modernity would lead to a rejection of the traditional foundations for an orientation in thought, which were not (and could not be) established or defended upon rational grounds. Kant felt that such forms of rationalism would lead to “enthusiasm” and the “lawless use of reason,” which would produce a general disorientation of thought (Kant 16-17). His solution, as presented

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<sup>47</sup> Note the similarity here between Kant’s concern that a certain form of rationality characteristic of modernity could lead to a situation in which it becomes possible to *think and believe anything*, and Arendt’s concern that modernity has undermined our capacity to judge, leaving us without standards by which to comport ourselves in relation to the various entities that we encounter in the phenomenal world of appearances (including other human beings), thereby producing a situation in which we can *justify and do anything*, where *anything and everything is permitted*.

<sup>48</sup> Once again, note the similarity between Kant and Arendt here in their concern for modernity’s tendency to destroy *tradition* or traditional modes of thought.

in the essay on orientation, was to propose a *rational* faith in the unlimited as a new basis for reorienting thought. This solution would constitute neither a retreat from rational thought nor an acceptance of the extreme form of speculative rationalism represented by the “lawless use of reason,” but would rather set a *limit* on rationality by contending that rational thought must ground itself on a set of foundational assumptions that cannot be proven through the use of reason but must rather be accepted on the basis of faith or belief.

From Kant’s essay on orientation, we thus learn that orientation is the capacity to *find one’s way* (in the physical world or in thinking) relative to other things (phenomenal objects or conceptual objects of thought) on the basis of a *feeling* (for the difference between the left and right sides of one’s body, or a feeling of need for a rational faith in the unlimited). From this fundamental feeling for the difference between left and right (in the case of physical orientation), or between the limited and unlimited (in the case of an orientation in thought), we are then able to distinguish and differentiate between other things (for example, between self/other, subject/object, etc.) and become oriented in relation to them. But as this feeling for the differentiation between things (as well as the differentiations themselves) comes to seem *familiar*, orientation becomes *habitual* and taken for granted. It is only in moments of *disorientation*, when our sense of orientation is lost and we can no longer orient ourselves in relation to familiar things, that orientation becomes visible or cognizant to consciousness as something *necessary* for existence.

Subsequently, on Kant’s conceptualization, disorientation is both the lack of a feeling of orientation and the feeling of orientation’s lack. It manifests as an experience of being lost, unable to orient ourselves in relation to once familiar things, and occurs when the differentiations we have made between things break down or are rendered inoperative. This is a dangerous

possibility (especially with regards to thinking) as a sense of orientation is *necessary* for both our existence in space and our capacity to think. Unfortunately, in Kant's estimation, such a breakdown in the grounds of orientation has been made possible by modernism and its "lawless use of reason," which has swept away the familiar distinctions that traditionally oriented thought prior to modernity. But Kant also believed that overcoming this modern disorientation was possible through a *reorientation* on the basis of a rational faith in the unlimited, in distinction from all limited beings. Kant thus advocated for a form of limited rationality based upon a rational faith in the foundational distinction between the limited and unlimited, which is beyond the capacity of reason to know or prove, but which must be accepted on the basis of faith for reason to function at all.

With this theoretical framework in mind, some connections between Kant's conception of (dis)orientation and our previous conceptualization of the (end of the) modern world become apparent. First, we may note that Kant emphasizes the connection between *orientation* and *differentiation* or distinction—particularly, an ontological distinction between the unlimited (or God) and all other (limited) things, which he believed could act as the grounds for an orientation in thought *against* the disorienting tendencies of modernity. On the Latourian conception of modernity, however, we can see that Kant's (re)orientation of thought on the basis of a firm ontological distinction between two categories (the limited and the unlimited) is, in fact, *consistent with the modern project* insofar as it shores up the modern world by contributing to its network of purified ontological categories.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, as Shuback and Lane argue, such

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<sup>49</sup> We may also note that Kant's driving concern in the essay on orientation—the reason why he needed to establish this ontological distinction between an unlimited God and all limited beings—was to combat the perceived danger of Jacobi's (and possibly Lessing's) interest in the work of Baruch Spinoza, who famously posited a monist conception of God, in which God (or the unlimited) is not separable from the totality of limited entities (each of which is simply a "mode" or "modification" of the singular substance which is God). In other words, Kant attempted to create a *purified ontological division* between God and all other beings in order to *exclude* the

reorientations constitute the *hallmark of modernity*, which they conceptualize as a process of “self-affirmation through negation” or a perpetual project of re-establishing the foundations of orientation that the modern constitution *itself* negates (ix-x). On their conception, the driving task of modernity is to build a world that does not need to be grounded in a naturally given (or traditional) network of meaning to provide orientation, but rather can provide orientation through the substitution of supposedly *natural* grounds (i.e., pre-modern or non-modern systems of meaning that attempt to integrate hybridity into the world by giving it a proper place) with *artificial* grounds (i.e., rationally determined, ontologically pure categories without hybridity). Over time, the subjects of modernity become habituated to these artificial grounds, such that the purified categories of modernity come to feel *familiar* and natural, like a *home* proper to humanity. But the more obsessed the subjects of modernity become with the search for rational (purified) grounds of orientation, the more they become exposed to the ultimate *groundlessness* of the world that they have created (Schuback and Lane x-xi). New purified ontological categories are subsequently produced in order to bolster the networks of meaning that constitute the modern world, creating unexpected opportunities for translation between these categories to occur, thereby further proliferating the network of hybrid entities that cannot be incorporated within the modern world, until the presence of such hybrid entities becomes *undeniable* to the point that the modern world collapses, leaving the subjects of modernity *worldless* and *disoriented*.<sup>50</sup> On this reading, Kant’s attempt to establish a foundational ground for a

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possibility of a hybrid conception of God (in which God and other beings cannot be separated) so as to ground a particular orientation in thinking—a distinctly *modern* project, on the Latourian conception of modernity as *purification without translation (or hybridity)*.

<sup>50</sup> Schuback and Lane define the end of this process as *postmodernity* (or postmodernism) but argue that it represents nothing more than the intensification or acceleration of modernity—a kind of hypermodernism, in which the problem is no longer how to find or establish new grounds for *orientation*, but of how to think in and through *disorientation* (xi). I am inclined to agree, but have chosen to call this contemporary situation *the crisis of modernity* rather than *postmodernity* in order to avoid the inherent confusion created by the prefix *post* (as if postmodernity were *after* modernity, or represented something entirely separate and different from the modern

(re)orientation in thinking through the purified differentiation between the limited and unlimited simply represents one moment in the larger project of modernity, which attempts to construct a world on the basis of purification without translation but ends in a state of worldlessness brought about by the crisis of modernity, which is, in turn, experienced by the subjects of modernity as a feeling of *disorientation*.<sup>51</sup>

Secondarily, we may note that Kant's theory of (dis)orientation conceptualizes orientation (in both its spatial and rational forms) as being based upon an affective *feeling*: the feeling of difference between the left and right sides of one's body in the case of spatial orientation, and the feeling of reason's need for an analogous differentiation in the case of conceptual orientation in the realm of speculative thought. Similarly, both Kant and Arendt draw a connection between orientation and a feeling of homely familiarity, arguing that orientations come to seem habitual or natural on the basis of our familiarity with the entities we encounter (whether in the phenomenal world of appearances or the conceptual realm of pure reason) which then (for Arendt, at least) become part of our *world* (i.e., our shared network of meaning) on the basis of this familiarity. Following Kant, then, we can argue that orientation always involves a certain *affective* dimension: that orientation is itself a *feeling*, a feeling of *knowing what and where we are relative to other things*, related to (and dependent upon) a feeling of *familiarity* with the various entities that constitute our world as a world *for us*. Conversely, we can think of *disorientation* as resulting from the *lack* of a feeling of orientation, which is experienced as a

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constitution) and to reinforce the continuity between the historical processes that have led to "the end of the world" and our current situation, in which many people still subscribe to the modern *constitution*, even as the modern *world* and its purified categories have become inoperative.

<sup>51</sup> Arendt's attempt to affect a reorientation on the basis of *judgement* through her idiosyncratic reading of Kant's Third Critique constitutes another such moment in the larger project of modernity.

kind of *unfamiliarity* with the things that we encounter, and subsequently, as a kind of *worldlessness*, or a sense that this is not a homely world *for us*.<sup>52</sup>

Unfortunately, this affective dimension of (dis)orientation remains undertheorized and unexamined within Kant's thought. As such, Kant's conception of orientation is ultimately limited in its explanatory usefulness for the project being undertaken in this dissertation, for two main reasons: first, because he does not provide a robust account of the affective feeling of disorientation and instead simply presents it as an *absence* of the feeling of orientation; and second, because Kant remains committed to a firm distinction between *thinking* and embodied *feeling*, even as he presents orientation in space and orientation in thought as having an analogous structure. Kant's essay therefore does not provide a thorough account of the phenomenological or affective experience of disorientation; it cannot tell us how it *feels* to be disoriented, and, subsequently, what kinds of embodied action and thought such feelings of disorientation make possible. Given that it is the purpose of this dissertation to examine the affective dimensions of a particular form of contemporary disorientation—or what it *feels* like to live on after the “end of the world”—and the nihilistic modes of subjectivity that such feelings produce, it will therefore be necessary to outline a more robust conception of the affective experience of disorientation.

### *Phenomenology and Normative Disorientation*

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<sup>52</sup> This sense that the world is not a home *for us* will be discussed further in the section of this dissertation dedicated to exploring the phenomenon of uncanniness, specifically in relation to Dylan Trigg's phenomenology of the uncanny.

To begin constructing such an account, we must first turn away from the Kantian conception of orientation just outlined, toward a theory that deals more directly with orientation as a phenomenological and affective experience, to better understand how disorientation is *lived* and *felt* at the level of the body.

One such theory is put forward by the contemporary phenomenologist and affect theorist Sara Ahmed in her work on *Queer Phenomenology*, in which the phenomena of bodily orientation/disorientation constitutes a central point of analysis. More specifically, in this text, Ahmed undertakes an investigation into the phenomenological experience of orientation and disorientation as a means of critiquing (while also attempting to salvage) the philosophical project of phenomenology more broadly—particularly, the phenomenological tradition that derives from the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. By connecting phenomenological accounts of bodily (dis)orientation to normative projects of sexual orientation, Ahmed explores the phenomenon of orientation in its many varied dimensions, linking together a robust account of the experience of being a body orientated in space with an investigation into what it means to live a particular sexual orientation in order to then produce a theory of *normative* orientation, or what it means to be oriented ethically and politically in the world. The result is an extraordinarily thorough and theoretically nuanced account of the affective feeling of both orientation and disorientation which has come to serve as a touchstone for thinking through the normative, ethical, and political implications of orientation as a concept that cannot be divorced from either its embodied practice or normative impact.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Ahmed’s conception

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<sup>53</sup> For notable examples of some of the varied ways in which Ahmed’s work on (dis)orientation has been used as a framework for exploring social, ethical, and political issues, see Cara Daggett’s “Drone Disorientations: How ‘Unmanned’ Drones Queer the Experience of Killing in War,” Ami Harbin’s “Bodily Disorientations and Moral Change” and “The Disorientations of Acting Against Injustice,” and “Fuck Feelings: On Numbness, Withdrawal, and Disorientation” from Hil Malatino’s *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*.

of orientation will be directly relevant to our discussion of *what it means to have a world* (as outlined previously), as her work also offers an account of the relationship between bodily orientation and the production of a human world.

Drawing on both Kant's essay on orientation and the later phenomenological work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed finds orientation to be a primarily *bodily* phenomenon: a concept which refers to the ways in which bodies exist in (and navigate through) space via relations of "towardness" and "awayness" relative to other objects (*Queer Phenomenology* 1-2). Taking the body as the zero point of orientation—"the point from which the world unfolds and which makes what is 'there' over 'there'" such that one's body is experienced as "here" (*Queer Phenomenology* 8)—to be "oriented" or to possess an "orientation" implies that one *faces* a certain direction, *toward* some things and *away* from other things, which, by virtue of the body's orientation, are placed *away* (or "over there"), into the background. To be oriented is *to know where we are and which way we are going*, insofar as our body is "here" relative to what is "over there." It requires that we be turned *toward* certain objects that help us find our way, objects that we recognize as *familiar*, such that to face them is to know which way we are facing. Ahmed calls such familiar objects "orientation devices": objects that act as guideposts to let us know which way we are facing, which direction we are oriented toward (*Queer Phenomenology* 3, 29). In facing toward such familiar objects, we are able to find our way, gaining an orientation in space as the objects we take as orientation devices form a ground from which we can determine where we are and where we might go.

For Ahmed as for Kant, then, orientation is gained and sustained through *familiarity* with the things we encounter. Orientation, in this sense, is not simply a function of our body's inhabitation of (or existence in) space, but rather the *way* in which our bodies inhabit space, such

that we become familiar with the things we encounter therein. In fact, our body's orientation is in some sense *dependent* on this familiarity, insofar as we must be familiar with the contours of the spaces in which we exist in order to orient ourselves and find our way within them (*Queer Phenomenology* 7). However, Ahmed's interpretation of the source of this familiarity—of *how* bodies become familiar or habituated to the spaces in which they exist—differs significantly from Kant's and marks an important departure from the conceptualization of orientation undertaken thus far. This is because Ahmed interprets the familiarity that grounds orientation through the lens of contemporary theories of *affect*, which attempt to dismantle the conceptual divisions between body and mind, feeling and thinking, self and other, which Kant remained firmly invested in.<sup>54</sup>

For Ahmed, as opposed to Kant, the familiarity necessary for orientation is a function of the affective *feel* of space, which is itself a product of the way in which spaces *impress* upon bodies (and bodies upon spaces), and the subsequent feeling that is affectively communicated between bodies and spaces. Rejecting the conventional conceptualization of space as an empty container occupied by material or phenomenal monads, Ahmed instead offers a conception of materiality in which bodies and objects cannot be fully differentiated from one another, or from the spaces in which they exist. Rather, Ahmed contends that bodies and the spaces that they inhabit *impinge* upon one another, physically and affectively, in a way that reciprocally shapes both bodies and spaces (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 1-4). As such, neither bodies nor

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<sup>54</sup> Specifically, Ahmed conceptualizes bodies, space, and the affects that circulate between and through bodies/spaces in relation to a notion of impression (i.e., the ways in which things *impress* upon and shape each other) that she developed in her earlier work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, which was in turn informed by theories of affect developed by thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, Lauren Berlant, Rosi Braidotti, Antonio Damasio, Elizabeth Grosz, and Ruth Leys.

spaces exist simply in and of themselves. Rather, both take shape through the impressions left as they press upon one another. Or, as Ahmed explains:

space is not a container for the body; it does not contain the body as if the body were ‘in it.’ Rather bodies are submerged, such that they *become the space they inhabit*; in taking up space, bodies move through space and are affected by the ‘where’ of that movement. It is through this movement that the surface of spaces as well as bodies takes shape (*Queer Phenomenology* 53, emphasis added).

For Ahmed, then, what a body *is*—its shape and dimensions—as well as what a body *can do* are largely (but not wholly) dependent upon the impressions that it receives from other objects, other bodies, and its environment, which have shaped it in certain ways. Reciprocally, spaces take on shape and dimension through the impressions that have been left by bodies, in the contact that takes place in the process of inhabitation (*Queer Phenomenology* 52-54). As bodies inhabit space, they impress upon the spaces they inhabit, constructing and shaping those spaces in particular ways. Orientation, in turn, is one element in this process of reciprocal shaping through impression. *How* our bodies are oriented in space (i.e., *toward* some things and *away* from other things) affects both the comportment of our bodies and the shape of the spaces they occupy by affecting relations of *proximity* and *distance* between our bodies and other things. Tending toward some objects and away from others places the objects that we are oriented toward within reach or contact, while relegating other objects into the background, out of reach or contact. Over time, as these relations of proximity and distance are repeated and become habitual through inhabitation, they come to form the contours of space such that particular spaces can be delineated from others on the basis of the distribution of bodies and objects that form them. Lines and boundaries between things are then created to produce spaces that we can

imagine ourselves to be *in*, making certain things available within a given delineated space, while placing others outside of the space, out of reach and view (*Queer Phenomenology* 2-14). Spaces are thus formed and shaped through the repeated inhabitation of bodies that affect relations of “towardness” and “awayness” relative to one another.

At the same time, the particular ways in which space has been shaped through repeated inhabitation reciprocally affects the actions that the bodies which inhabit particular spaces are able to enact, including the orientations that they are able to take on. What we do, how we act, and how we orient ourselves in space are thus partially determined by the particular ways in which the spaces we inhabit have been shaped by past and current actions and orientations. Moreover, Ahmed argues that the repetition of particular relations of “towardness” and “awayness” affect not only how we *occupy* the spaces we inhabit (by making some actions and orientations more available for contact than others) but also how we *apprehend* the world of our shared inhabitation, by conditioning who and what we might come into contact with or orient ourselves toward (*Queer Phenomenology* 3). Our embodied relations of “towardness” and “awayness” thus take on a certain *normative* dimension, as the things that we orient ourselves “toward” become available as potential life projects, while the things that are put “away” into the background become invisible or unavailable (*Queer Phenomenology* 28-29). For example, to orient oneself in alignment with a particular political project or movement will put one into bodily contact and proximity with certain people, practices, ideas, and objects that our actions are oriented toward, while simultaneously placing other people, practices, or ideas on the periphery, out of range of contact or proximity.<sup>55</sup> To be in alignment with the political project of

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<sup>55</sup> Ahmed claims that sexual orientation operates in much the same way: to be sexually orientated is to be oriented in a way that makes some desires, some bodies, some people available for desire and contact, while placing others out of reach.

decolonization may involve being oriented toward, and thus coming into contact with, indigenous peoples and allies in one's community, while turning away from more conservative, colonial forms of politics. Similarly, aligning oneself with the project of white supremacy may involve orienting oneself toward the protection and preservation of "whiteness" while turning one's back on non-white neighbours and communities.<sup>56</sup> But the particular political projects that are available for us to orient toward (that are within reach, or within our bodily horizon) will largely be dependent upon past orientations: who and what we have been oriented towards in the past, and who and what has been available for us to orient towards, which is in turn dependent upon the particular way in which the spaces we occupy have been shaped by the orientation of *others* in the process of our shared inhabitation (*Queer Phenomenology* 15-19).

For Ahmed, the distinction between bodily orientation and normative or conceptual orientation is therefore more porous than it was for Kant, as Ahmed contends that our bodily orientations affect what it is possible for us to think and to do, while what we think and do reciprocally affects our bodily comportment in the world. For, as she explains, when we orient ourselves in space "we are also orientating ourselves toward some objects more than others, including not only physical objects...but also objects of thought, feeling, and judgment, as well as objects in the sense of aims, aspirations, and objectives" (*Queer Phenomenology* 56). On this conception, spatial orientation is never simply a value-neutral practice, as our embodied and affective practices contain certain normative, ethical, and political dimensions as well. As we orient ourselves in space, toward or away from certain physical objects, we simultaneously orient ourselves toward or away from particular objects of thought which take the form of "judgments...aims, aspirations, and objectives" (*Queer Phenomenology* 56). Conversely, as we

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<sup>56</sup> This possibility will be examined in more depth in Chapter 7 on the connections between uncanny disorientation, nihilism in bad faith, and white supremacy.

align ourselves with certain modes of thought, our judgements, aims, aspirations, and objectives will also orient us toward particular objects, people, and actions in physical space. These reciprocal forms of orientation in space and thought then come to shape the spaces we occupy and our bodily comportment in those spaces, as our repeated orientations and actions position some objects, some people, and some modes of thought as available or within reach, while other objects and modes of thought are positioned as unavailable or out of reach. As these orientations are repeated over time, they work to gather, arrange, and distribute objects (both material and conceptual) into spaces of inhabitation, thereby shaping not only the physical space in which we live, but also the normative comportments, relationships, and projects that we perceive as being viable or available within that space.<sup>57</sup> Orientation thus simultaneously affects *how* our bodies occupy space as well as *what* we are able to think and do, and the particular normative life projects that are available to be pursued within the spaces that have been shaped through our repeated inhabitation.<sup>58</sup> In short, the reciprocal action of spatial and normative orientation functions to produce the *world* that we inhabit (*Queer Phenomenology* 16-20).

As we move through this shared world of inhabitation, we become oriented into relations of “towardness” and “awayness” largely on the basis of affective *feel*: we take on orientations because they feel right, because we feel attracted or attached to the objects that we orient ourselves towards, or because a particular orientation facilitates the kinds of life projects we want to take on (*Queer Phenomenology* 15-19). As an affective process through which we quite

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<sup>57</sup> Ahmed discusses the various political and ethical implications of this in both *Queer Phenomenology* and *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Similarly, the philosopher Ami Harbin has discussed the political dimensions of orientation/disorientation in the articles “Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change” and “The Disorientations of Acting Against Injustice,” while the author and academic Ian Williams has recently discussed the connections between orientation, racialization, and the systemic dominance of whiteness in his recent work *Disorientation: Being Black in the World*.

<sup>58</sup> For example, we might consider the legacy of segregation, white flight, and “redlining” in cities across North America, and the way these practices have worked to distribute both bodies and normative life chances unevenly across space.

literally “feel our way,” becoming oriented is therefore primarily an *unconscious* process, although it can also involve some level of conscious decision making between conflicting affective forces (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 12).<sup>59</sup> We may not know *why* we are oriented in a particular way, or even *that we are* oriented at all, because we have been directed to take on an orientation by affective forces which precede any conscious process of judgement or decision making. Moreover, the orientations that we take on may simply be a product of the ways in which the spaces we occupy, or the larger world that we inhabit, have been shaped by other bodies that have repeatedly inhabited those spaces in a particular way before our arrival—a process that Ahmed conceptualizes in terms of “lines” or “paths” (*Queer Phenomenology* 16-20, 89-92). On this schema, as bodily and conceptual orientations are repeated over time they create physical paths and normative lines that we are then encouraged to follow in response to various affective social pressures, or simply as a result of the availability of the line as a pre-formed

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<sup>59</sup> Brian Massumi’s concept of “proprioception” as “a sixth sense directly attuned to the movement of the body” is particularly helpful for understanding this unconscious, affective dimension of orientation (Massumi 179). For Massumi, proprioception constitutes a “self-referential sense” that helps us to navigate the world on the basis of “intuition” or affective feel, rather than by “registering distances from the eye” through sight, or by creating cognitive spatial maps on the basis of our sense perceptions (Massumi 179-83). Arguing that, for the most part, we live our everyday lives “on habitual autopilot,” Massumi relates a series of examples to illustrate the ways in which we often find our way from one place to the next without the use of cognitive thought, mental maps, or visual cues. For example, he writes (in an anecdote strikingly similar to Kant’s example of the darkened room with rearranged furniture): “Close your eyes and try to make your way to the fridge. Your visual memory of the rooms and the configurations of the furniture will start to fade within seconds. But chances are you will ‘intuitively’ find your way to the food with relatively little difficulty. Especially if you’re beginning to get hungry. If you think about it, we all go about most of our everyday lives on habitual autopilot, driven by half-conscious tendencies gnawing at us gently like mild urban hungers. Orienting is more like intuitively homing in on the food with your eyes closed than it is like reading a map” (179). Similarly, we might think of instances in which we have found our way somewhere by following a familiar, habitual path, only to realize later that we have no actual memory of how we arrived in the place that we are—that we can’t visually map the path or the actions that we took on our way here. (This happens to me often when I leave the house, walk to work, and try to remember later if I locked my front door: I find that I am unable to remember or visualize anything that happened between my preparing to leave the house and my arrival at work. Yet, somehow, I always do arrive. And when I get home, the door is always locked). For Massumi, such examples suggest that orientation and spatial navigation rarely happen on the basis of visual reference or cognitive mapping, but rather on the basis of proprioception, which orients us by affective *feel*, following the “half-conscious tendencies gnawing at us gently like mild urban hungers” (Massumi 179-184).

orientation device.<sup>60</sup> By occupying space in a way that follows these normative lines and physical paths, we come to align ourselves with the normative compartments, relationships, and projects that have been made available to us by the way that objects have been gathered, arranged, and distributed through the repeated inhabitation of others who have carved out the lines and paths in advance of our arrival. These paths and lines thus act as orientation devices, such that to follow the lines that have been carved out for us is to become *oriented* into relations of “towardness” and “awayness” that let us know *what we are* and *where we are going* relative to other things (*Queer Phenomenology* 16-19).

Thrown into a world that has largely been shaped and arranged before our arrival, we primarily gain a sense of orientation by following the lines and paths that have already been created for us through the repetition of norms and compartments of inhabitation. Yet, simultaneously, in following these lines and paths we also help to create, reproduce, and bolster the very lines that we have used to orient ourselves in the world. Or, as Ahmed writes:

A paradox of the footprint emerges. Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition. To say that lines are performative is to say that we find our way and we know which direction we face only as an effect of work, which is often hidden from view... We then come to ‘have a line,’ which might mean a specific ‘take’ on the world, a set of views and viewing points, as well as a route through the contours of the world, which gives our world its own contours. So we follow the lines, and in following them we

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<sup>60</sup> As Ahmed writes: “when we see the line of the path before us, we tend to walk upon it, as a path ‘clears’ the way” (*Queer Phenomenology* 16).

become committed to ‘what’ they lead us to as well as ‘where’ they take us (*Queer Phenomenology* 16-17).

In becoming oriented by following a line and taking it on as our own orientation, we thus come to occupy a meaningful world of normative, conceptual, and spatial relationships which have been established before our arrival, while simultaneously helping to create and reproduce that world by becoming committed to the normative projects (i.e., the “what” and “where”) that our orientations direct us toward. In turn, as we repeatedly orient ourselves in a particular direction (*toward* certain objects or normative projects and *away* from others) and as this orientation becomes habitual over time, a certain *feeling* becomes attached to the very experience of being oriented itself—a feeling of *familiarity* and *comfort* that comes to seem “natural” or right, and which Ahmed describes as a sense of “being at home in the world...so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins” (*Queer Phenomenology* 134).

At this point, we may think back to Kant’s conception of orientation and the connection he draws between *orientation* and *familiarity*: to be oriented, and for that experience of orientation to become habitual such that it no longer requires a conscious effort on our part, we must become *familiar* with the physical and conceptual objects that we are orienting ourselves in relation to by creating firm distinctions between them. As these distinctions are repeated and become habitual to our modes of thought and movement the world in which we move is rendered familiar, such that we can easily orient ourselves in relation to it without conscious thought or effort. Similarly, Ahmed argues that by establishing particular relations of “towardness” and “awayness” relative to other objects and repeating these relations over time, we gain a particular orientation on the world which makes that world *feel* familiar, comfortable, and comforting

(*Queer Phenomenology* 134-135). She describes this feeling of comfort and familiarity as a kind of “sinking feeling,” as though one were “sinking into a comfortable chair” that, through repeated contact, has come to take the shape of one’s body (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 148). *Comfort* is thus an affective experience that is “about the fit between body and object,” such that by “fitting” into a space or world that has been shaped to accommodate our bodily compartments through repeated inhabitation, we “sink” into the world in a way that makes it difficult to “distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins” (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 148). In such instances of comfort, the world becomes so familiar that it ceases to appear to us *as a world*—as a *particular* arrangement of physical, conceptual, and normative objects that have required the work and effort of repeated inhabitation to be shaped and arranged as such—but is rather experienced simply as a “natural” or given extension of our bodies, such that we feel “at home” (*Queer Phenomenology* 134-136).

### *Disorientation and Worldlessness*

For Ahmed, being *oriented* in a manner that aligns us with the particular ways in which our world has been shaped and arranged through repeated inhabitation is the primary means by which we achieve this sense of comfort and familiarity, since it is through our normative and bodily orientations that we come to *fit* within a world that has largely been shaped before our arrival.<sup>61</sup> To be *oriented* is to thus to fit comfortably within a familiar world in which we feel at

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<sup>61</sup> Ahmed is also clear that there are limits to how well our bodies can “fit” within spaces and worlds that have been shaped before our arrival. Some spaces have been shaped on the basis of the exclusion, suppression, or elimination of certain kinds of bodies. For example, normative lines of white supremacy have shaped space in such a way as to comfortably “fit” white bodies, so that their inhabitation of such spaces feels “natural” or easy, but this comfortable inhabitation is often predicated on the exclusion and elimination of people of colour who do not “fit in.” Similarly, heteronormative lines have shaped space in such a way as to comfortably accommodate

home, knowing where and what we are, relative to the phenomenal, conceptual, and normative objects that have been rendered familiar by our habitual inhabitation. Reciprocally, the set of objects that have been rendered familiar through our repeated and habitual orientations come to constitute our particular world—a world *for us*—which further functions as a set of orientation devices or guideposts by which we can orient our lives, thereby shoring up and reinforcing our already-established feeling of being comfortably oriented within a familiar world. To *be oriented* is therefore to *have a world*, while *having a world* is what allows us to *feel oriented*, comfortable, familiar, secure in our sense of place and direction. By *feeling* oriented we come to *have a world*, and by having a world we are able to retain our feeling of orientation.

In the case of the modern world, this mutual process of orientation and world formation takes place on the basis of the modern constitution, which acts as a kind of orientation device for the subjects of modernity to follow. By directing us *toward* the ontologically purified objects created through purification and *away* from the hybrid objects produced through translation, the modern constitution orients us into relations of “towardness” and “awayness” that condition the kinds of objects and projects (physical, conceptual, or normative) which we perceive as available, possible, or within reach. This orientation toward purified objects and away from hybridity then affects how we inhabit the world, shaping the contours of both our world and our bodies such that the modern world and we as modern subjects are co-produced in the same gesture. As these particular relations of “towardness” and “awayness” are repeated over time, the

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heterosexual bodily comportments while excluding queer modes of being, such that it is difficult for queer bodies to “fit in” many places. To try to “fit” into spaces that have not been shaped to accommodate one’s bodily comportments or being (which is often a necessity for survival) can be both an uncomfortable and violent experience. Ahmed likens the attempt to follow the line of compulsory heterosexuality as a form of “repetitive strain injury”—the repeated attempt to contort one’s body to “fit” a space that doesn’t accommodate one’s mode of being results in pain, exhaustion, injury (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 145). We can also think of what often happens to bodies that seem out of place or that fail to “fit in.” Such bodies often become the target of forms of violence which attempt to put them “back in their place,” or to eliminate them altogether. I will discuss this further in Chapter 7 in relation to anti-black racism and white supremacy.

objects that we are oriented toward and away from become arranged into networks of relationships that take on meaning and allow us to *make sense* of the world and our place within it, thereby providing the *feeling* of being oriented, comfortably at home in a familiar world. And this comfortable feeling of being oriented within a familiar and homely world, in turn, provides the modern subject with a certain sense of *power*, of mastery and control over a world of purified objects that *make sense*, that can be *made sense of*, and that subsequently become available as objects that one can “do things ‘with’,” which “allows [one] to do this or that” (*Queer Phenomenology* 115).<sup>62</sup> More specifically, a sense of power and mastery results from being oriented on the basis of a specifically *anthropocentric* arrangement of objects, which orients and arranges objects through purified divisions that place the human in a hierarchical position over the non-human—a feeling of control and mastery which becomes attached to the experience of being oriented as a human subject under the modern constitution. And as these feelings of homely comfort, familiarity, and mastery are reinforced by the orientation provided under the modern constitution, that orientation is repeated by modern subjects to the point of becoming habitual, thereby shoring up both the particular arrangement of objects and networks of meaning

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<sup>62</sup> Ahmed conceptualizes this in terms of “extension.” Being oriented, which involves “fitting” within a world such that it becomes difficult to distinguish “where one’s body ends and the world begins,” also involves a form of extension that allows one to “extend the reach of their body” and acquire “new capacities and directions” (*Queer Phenomenology* 115). Becoming comfortably oriented within a particular world entails an increase in one’s capacities and power, what one is able to *do*. For Ahmed, this results from the extension of the body’s reach, such that it can incorporate what it is oriented toward into itself in order to broaden its capacities. She writes: “It is the fact that what I am orientated toward is ‘not me’ that allows me to do this or to do that. The otherness of things is what allows me to do things ‘with’ them. What is other than me is also what allows me to extend the reach of my body. Rather than othering being simply a form of negation, it can also be described *as a form of extension*. The body extends its reach by taking in that which is ‘not’ it, where the ‘not’ involves the acquisition of new capacities and directions—a becoming, in other words, ‘not’ simply what I am ‘not’ but what I can ‘have’ and ‘do.’ The ‘not me’ is incorporated into the body, extending its reach” (*Queer Phenomenology* 115). On my reading, this extension involves *making sense* of the things that we do things “with.” For modern subjects, this making sense involves situating objects within purified ontological categories that make them available *for us*, for use by *humans*. This, in turn, facilitates a feeling of mastery and control, whereby the human is positioned as capable of control and mastery over the non-human, which has been positioned as available for use, for the extension of human capacities and actions.

that constitute the modern world, as well as the feelings of comfort, familiar homeliness, and control that have become attached to the sensation of being oriented.

But what happens when the familiar objects and orientations that have constituted our world are *no longer available as familiar or tenable*, as Morton claims to be the case for the subjects of modernity today? In such instances we are thrown into a state of *disorientation*—an inability to know what or where we are relative to the once-familiar things around us, such that we are no longer able to orient ourselves in relation to them. In a sense, this is the disorientation of wandering objects, akin to Kant’s example of a darkened room in which the furniture has been rearranged. For, as Ahmed argues, “orientation is achieved...[when] things are kept in their place, which might be near me, but it is a nearness that does not threaten to get inside of me, or spill what is inside out” (*Queer Phenomenology* 165). When things can no longer be “kept in their place,” when they begin to wander from their familiar positions and categories, when they begin to “spill” from one category to another such that they appear “inside out,” troubling the very notion of “inside” and “outside” as they rearrange into unfamiliar networks of meaning and relation, a *loss of orientation* is experienced which can be located neither “inside” the subject nor “outside,” in the things that have slipped away (*Queer Phenomenology* 162-63). In the case of the crisis of modernity, such a loss of orientation is provoked precisely by the breakdown of purified categories and objects in response to the undeniability of hybridity. As more and more hybrid objects and greater and greater networks of hybridity emerge into undeniability, making it impossible to orient oneself “away” from hybridity and “toward” familiar purified objects, the purified categories of modernity *themselves* begin to break down, troubling the “inside” and “outside” of those categories as the objects that have been arranged within them begin to wander

into hybrid networks of relational meaning.<sup>63</sup> This dissolution of the modern arrangement of objects into purified categories which we orient *toward* and hybrid entities which we relegate *away* into the background represents a breakdown of *the modern world itself*, insofar as this particular arrangement of objects and the relations of meaning between them are what constitute the modern world in the first place. Moreover, this breakdown in the modern world and its particular arrangement of objects also brings into question the mastery and control of the human over and above the non-human, as the hierarchically arranged categories of “human” and “non-human” are troubled by the undeniable presence of hybrid hyperobjects that cross the purified boundaries between human/non-human.<sup>64</sup>

As the modern world and its purified categories break down, the particular *orientations* that it made possible begin to break down as well, throwing those subjects who have been oriented on the basis of the modern constitution into a generalized state of *disorientation*. For, as Ahmed notes: “If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then *disorientation* occurs when that extension fails,” when we fail to make

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<sup>63</sup> It is interesting to note here that in his work on *Hyperobjects*, Morton also claims that at “the end of the world” (specifically in light of the undeniability of global warming as a hybrid hyperobject) it has become impossible to maintain the illusion of “away”—the idea that unwanted objects can be disposed of simply by putting them away, out of sight, into the background (109-132). What the undeniable reality of global warming exposes is that there is *no “away”* into which we can relegate our unwanted objects. As a complex system of mutually imbricated hybrid entities and networks, of which we are as much a part as anything and everything else, the hyperobject that is our environment contains no space that is truly “away.” Thus, anything that we try to hide “away” will not simply *disappear* but will rather *remain* as a part of our world. The modern world, constructed through an orientation that attempts to deny the existence of hybrid entities and networks by putting them “away,” into the background, where they need not be acknowledged or encountered, only ever defers an encounter with the hybrid, which *remains* as an unacknowledged part of its world. But once hybridity emerges into undeniability and the fantasy of “away” is exposed to be an impossibility, the modern world dissolves into ruins.

<sup>64</sup> Global warming is again a prime example here: as a hybrid object that is simultaneously “natural” and “artificial,” which encompasses a plethora of human, human produced, and non-human entities within its own constitution, and which seems to display certain agentic capacities that have historically been attributed solely to living beings, global warming cannot be adequately categorized within the purified categories of modernity (i.e., human/non-human, natural/artificial, life/non-life), thus throwing those categories into question and reducing their availability as orientation devices. Additionally, the sheer *scale* of global warming as a hybrid hyperobject makes it an important example, given that its global impact and long temporal duration make it a largely *undeniable* form of hybridity that cannot be relegated “away,” into the unthought, unacknowledged background.

the *strange* into the *familiar* (*Queer Phenomenology*, emphasis added 11). As the modern world and its purified categories break down in response to undeniable hybridity, and those purified categories can no longer be relied upon to make things feel familiar, such moments of failure accumulate, making it increasingly difficult to orient oneself in relation to once familiar objects—objects which now, at the “end of the world,” reappear as *strangely unfamiliar*, or resistant to familiarization. Adrift in a wordless world, surrounded by unfamiliar objects and strangely inoperative categories, the modern subject comes to feel that there is nothing to guide their way, no guideposts by which to orient their actions or inhabitations, no comfortable home into which they can fit. And this *feeling* of worldlessness, of living on after the “end of the world,” in a time when the familiar things that once constituted a modern world *for us* are no longer available as familiar (or as *for us*), is one of *disorientation*: “the disorientation of encountering the world differently” (in this case, as *absent* or *unfamiliar*), which is also “a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are” (*Queer Phenomenology* 20).

In such moments of disorientation, when it becomes difficult to render or recognize things in the world as familiar to us, we may come to feel that we are out of place, not at home, lost in space (Harbin “Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change” 262). Affectively, Ahmed argues that this disorientation registers at the level of the body as a feeling of *giddy nausea*, *discomfort*, and *unsettling unfamiliarity*, a certain sense of horror that follows from “the awareness of our contingency,” but which is simultaneously marked by an experience of joy and excitement over the possibilities that become available when one is no longer tethered to once familiar projects, commitments, or other orientation devices (*Queer Phenomenology* 4, 11, 20, 111, 157-58, 162-65). Disorientation may be a “vital” experience when it is “converted into the

joy of a future that has been opened up,” but it may also be felt as “a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered” which “diminishes capacities for action” (*Queer Phenomenology* 20, 111, 157). One may feel “angry from being dislodged from the world” which has been “inhabited as a contourless world,” a comfortable and homely place. As one’s involvement in this comfortably familiar world is put into crisis, one’s body may “collapse...[becoming] an object alongside other objects,” and in such instances, when “disorientation involves becoming an object,” one may experience disorientation as a violent feeling, or as itself a form of violence (*Queer Phenomenology* 158-160).<sup>65</sup>

Ahmed’s contention is that moments of disorientation can involve any-and-all of these various different affective experiences, including joy, giddiness, nausea, discomfort, anger, and violent pain. Disorientation can *simultaneously* be experienced as a form of giddy excitement and potentiality, while also being an intensely discomfoting, unsettling, and terrifying feeling of

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<sup>65</sup> This interpretation of disorientation as becoming “an object alongside other objects” (drawn by Ahmed from the works of Merleau-Ponty and Franz Fanon) has an interesting resonance today, when object-oriented ontology (a strain of philosophy which posits the human as just another object alongside other objects) has become an increasingly productive point of departure for many contemporary theorists. For the most part, theorists of OOO tend to interpret the prospect of being an object alongside other objects in terms of the possibilities and potentialities opened up by a flat (i.e., non-anthropocentric) ontology; however, some theorists have begun to interrogate the potential violences inherent in an ontology that positions human beings as objects. For example, Katherine Behar’s introduction to the edited collection *Object-Oriented Feminism* questions OOO’s rosy outlook toward a flat ontology that would position human beings as simply objects alongside other objects by pointing to the long history of feminist critique examining the violence enacted against women when they are positioned as mere objects for use and consumption by men. Similarly, Ahmed’s reading of Fanon focuses on the capacity of colonial violence to collapse the bodies of colonized subjects into “an object alongside other objects,” linking this collapse with an experience of disorientation. Frank B. Wilderson III extends this argument further in his essay “The Black Liberation Army and The Paradox of Political Engagement,” wherein he claims that “non-Black people fashion self-hood...by way of a comparative calculus which reveals to them that they are safe on the shore of contingent violence rather than adrift in a sea of gratuitous violence” to which Black bodies have been (and continue to be) subjected (25). Non-Black subjects thus achieve a certain “comfort” by positioning Black bodies as objects, open to “gratuitous violence” without end or justification or meaning, knowing that, as non-Black subjects, they will never be subjected to such gratuitous forms of violence themselves. Conversely, Wilderson argues that the “terror” which the prospect of Black paramilitary violence strikes into the heart non-Black civil society reveals what “the phrase ‘fear of a Black Planet’ really means: the fear of no planet at all, the fear of living one’s life like a Black” (25). Non-Black subjectivity is thus a form of *comfort* derived from having a “planet” (i.e., a *world*), but is dependent on positioning Black bodies as objects “adrift in a sea of gratuitous violence,” with “no planet at all” (i.e., no *world*).

loss.<sup>66</sup> The basic experience of disorientation may be the loss of a comfortable familiarity that has become attached to the feeling of being oriented, but *how* this loss will be affectively felt at the level of the body depends on which of the affective dimensions of disorientation are present or emphasized. What is important to note here is how Ahmed's conception of disorientation differs from the Kantian model posited earlier (as well as from much of the phenomenological theory that she draws on in her conceptualization of orientation/disorientation); for, unlike Kant, Ahmed does not posit disorientation as simply the *lack* or *absence* of orientation, which can always be quickly overcome by a process of reorientation aimed at regaining the phenomenological experience of being oriented. Rather, Ahmed conceptualizes disorientation as *itself* a particular state of being, with its own phenomenological properties and affective dimensions. On Ahmed's model, then, disorientation is not simply (or not only) an interstitial state of orientation's *absence* suspended between two more fundamental states of being oriented, but is instead an affective state that can *persist* as an enduring feeling that shapes our experience of existence and our mode of living in the world (or lack thereof).

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<sup>66</sup> Ahmed's primary example for illustrating these varying aspects of disorientation is the experience of *queerness*. To take on a queer form of sexual orientation or gender expression which fails to fit within a world shaped by "straight," heterosexual, or cisgender lines of normative orientation is to become *disoriented* in relation to those normative (and thus familiar) lines. This experience of disorientation may be experienced as a painful, terrifying, or discomfiting loss, as one is forced to navigate a world that has not been shaped to facilitate or accommodate one's mode of being, and is often forced to give up on objects, projects, or aims that had previously oriented one's life. But it may also be experienced as a form of giddy excitement and potentiality, as the queer body, in its disorientation, is opened up to new possibilities for connection, new aims or goals, new projects, and new modes of living that do not rely on familiar normative orientation devices to provide direction (*Queer Phenomenology* 65-108, 157-180). Living and performing queerness can thus be an experience of disorientation in its varied affective dimensions: simultaneously giddy, exciting, terrifying, uncomfortable, and unsettling. Conversely, we might think of Jasbir Puar's conception of "homonormativity" and "homonationalism"—that is, modes of performing queerness that align themselves with (and are accommodated by) the already-existing socio-political formations of the state or nation, such that the performance of queerness serves to bolster and reproduce those formations—as an attempt to *overcome* the disorientation of queerness, either through the reorientation of queer bodies on the basis of already-existing normative lines, or of the carving out of new normative lines through the repetition of a particular performance of being queer. To perform queerness in a "homonormative" or "homonationalist" mode can be a way to recapture the "public comfort" and familiarity that is lost in the disorientation of queerness.

Hence my claim at the beginning of this chapter that the orientation of existence today is, in actuality, a generalized experience of *disorientation*: an inability to find one's way, to find one's place, or to orient oneself in relation to once familiar things. It is my contention that we, today, living on after the "end of the world" and through the crisis of modernity, exist in such a state of disorientation. This generalized disorientation is experienced primarily as a loss of the affective feeling of comfort, familiarity, certainty, and mastery that accompanied the orientation provided by the modern world and its constitution.<sup>67</sup> But this loss of comfort and familiarity is not simply the *absence* of an affective state of orientation; rather, it is experienced as the *presence* of an affective state of *disorientation*. As just outlined, this affective state of disorientation may be perceived as an embodied feeling of terrifying, unsettling, and uncomfortable unfamiliarity—a sense of loss and of being lost, unable to locate oneself in relation to once familiar things—even as it contains dimensions of giddy excitement at the prospect of being lost, of being able to carve out one's own path or follow one's own line. For to

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<sup>67</sup> The author Ian Williams has recently made a similar claim in his 2021 work *Disorientation: Being Black in the World*. Linking experiences of disorientation specifically to processes of racialization, he writes: "Our present moment—of pandemic, of racial justice protests—is a collective disorientation that challenges our prior assumptions about normalcy, safety, and the status quo. White people are finally disoriented by the ubiquity of evidence and cases of violence against Black people. These cases proliferate. But white people are also disoriented by how rapidly things seem to be changing. A white person had a job, said something racist, and *poof*, the job was gone. That kind of disorientation is the crumbling of dominance, a kind of earthquake that leads to vertigo and collapse" (37). Again, the predominant orientation of the present is, in fact, an experience of disorientation caused by a "crumbling of dominance" and lack of mastery over the world. But while Williams interprets this experience of disorientation primarily in relation to experiences of racialization, I would argue that the proliferation of these contemporary experiences of disorientation are more broadly a result of the dissolution of the modern world and its constitution, part of the foundation of which has been an ontological distinction between invented racial categories (e.g., white/black, white/non-white, white/other, un-raced/racialized) that have become destabilized.

be *lost*, without a sense of bearings or direction, is often a disempowering experience. In being disoriented, in the absence of any discernable means of orienting ourselves, we are forced to acknowledge our own lack of mastery over a situation or space. Or, as Ahmed writes:

Disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one's place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body. Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach. At this moment of failure, such objects 'point' somewhere else or they make what is 'here' become strange (*Queer Phenomenology* 160).

This is a disorientation in how objects are gathered and arranged to create a world as the ground from which we can move "toward" some aims or goals and "away" from others. When the familiar objects that have been gathered and arranged to create a "here" (such that their being "here," available and within reach, renders them into a familiar and comforting world *for us*) become *strange* and unfamiliar, we lose our place in relation to them—a loss that is experienced as a "violent feeling" and a feeling of violence, a "failed orientation" that no longer provides comfort or stability as the projects, aims, and modes of life facilitated by that orientation become unavailable as viable options. In such instances, disorientation is affectively experienced as a discomfiting and violent feeling of strangeness and loss, displacement and impotence.

Our response to this uncomfortable feeling of impotence and lack of mastery may take different forms, however. In the absence of the familiarity of a world that makes sense in a way we are accustomed to, we may cast about in search of something—*anything*—that can be used as an orientation device, to get back on track to a place that is more comfortable and familiar. Or we might submit ourselves to the mastery of someone (or some thing) that we believe can lead us,

give us a path to follow, and orient our actions. Or we may strike out in a new direction, without a clear sense of where we are going, in the hopes that this new path may eventually become familiar and that we may create a new orientation for ourselves. Or we may simply revel in the giddy, nauseous pleasure of remaining disoriented. As such, feelings of disorientation can act as the impetus or foundation for a variety of radically different political projects and social formations. For Ahmed, this variability of response to feelings of disorientation constitutes both the productive political potential of such feelings, as well as the danger inherent in promoting disorientation as the ground from which a politics might be developed. While being interested in the potential for radically new, genuinely different, non-normative forms of political action that can follow from the giddy and exciting feelings of disorientation, Ahmed is also quick to acknowledge the possibility that disorientation—as an uncomfortable, unsettling, and terrifying experience—can also produce radically conservative forms of politics that attempt to recapture a lost sense of comfort and familiarity by reorienting subjects back toward bygone, traditional modes of life. For example, in thinking through the possibility of a politics based in the disorientation attached to *queerness*, she writes:

I want us to think about how queer politics might *involve* disorientation, without legislating disorientation as a politics. It is not that disorientation is always radical. Bodies that experience disorientation can be defensive, as they reach out for support or as they search for a place to reground and reorientate their relation to the world. So, too, the forms of politics that proceed from disorientation can be conservative, depending on the ‘aims’ of their gestures, depending on how they seek to (re)ground themselves (*Queer Phenomenology* 158).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Conversely, we might say that queer disorientation is *always already* political, as in the case of trans subjects who experience disorientation as a negative effect (and affect) of living in a world in which their mode of being has

Similarly, the contemporary political and moral philosopher Ami Harbin, drawing on Ahmed's conceptualization of bodily and normative orientation, has argued that embodied feelings of disorientation can simultaneously be the result of attempts to act against social and political injustice while also being a powerful impetus for individual and collective moral change ("Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change" 261, "The Disorientations of Acting Against Injustice" 165-171). According to Harbin, feelings of disorientation can help to strengthen our ethical commitments to others when those feelings force us to recognize our contingent, relational, and interdependent situation as moral agents in the world. In such instances we can develop a heightened sense for the vulnerability of ourselves and others, prompting us to do more to act ethically in order to reduce the level of contingency that we are all exposed to ("Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change" 271-273). Conversely, attempting to act against social, political, or ethical injustices in the world can itself have a disorienting effect, as the normative political landscapes in which we try to address injustice are usually complicated, messy, and contingent. Often, the complex histories of injustice that have formed our world make it difficult to know how best to act against ongoing forms of injustice, how to situate ourselves in relation to socio-political structures of oppression, or what political goals we should orient ourselves toward. And in certain situations, acting against injustice may mean abandoning an identity or orientation that has previously been a source of comfort, familiarity, and stability in our life.<sup>69</sup> In attempting to act against injustice, we may become lost and disoriented within a

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consistently been placed under attack by governmental policy and legislation. For a further discussion of this reality, see: Hil Malatino's *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*.

<sup>69</sup> As an example of how acting against injustice may mean abandoning an identity or orientation and casting oneself into disorientation, Harbin references the sense of disorientation that can accompany attempts to act against structures of settler colonialism as a subject who has historically benefited from colonial structures of power. As a settler attempting to work in conjunction with Indigenous peoples and nations to combat ongoing forms of colonial oppression, decolonization can involve, in part, unlearning colonial ideas and ways of knowing, as well as challenging and dismantling forms of identity and subjectivity that have historically provided settlers with a sense of comforting familiarity. At base, engaging in decolonization work as a settler involves recognizing and

political and moral landscape that is unfamiliar to us, as the once familiar objects, projects, identities, and normative lines by which we have historically oriented ourselves are rendered strange, unsettling, or even threatening in light of their function within a world shaped by relations of oppression and domination. In such instances, our political projects may not be *impelled* by the affective feelings attached to disorientation, so much as they are themselves the *source* of those feelings.

The point here is that how we react to the experience of disorientation can depend on any number of factors, and cannot be fully predetermined in advance. For as Ahmed claims:

The point is not whether we experience disorientation (for we will, and we do), but how such experiences can impact on the orientation of bodies and spaces, which is after all about how things are ‘directed’ and how they are shaped by the lines they follow. *The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation*, as well as what such moments can do—whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope (*Queer Phenomenology* 158, emphasis added).

Claiming that feelings of disorientation *always* produce conservative reactions aimed at recapturing a lost sense of orientation would therefore be disingenuous, as such a claim ignores the radically productive potential to create new modes of organizing and being in the world that is opened up by the experience of being disoriented. But claiming that the experience of

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acknowledging that one is not (and has never been) simply the citizen of a particular nation-state, but also a settler involved in an ongoing project of colonization—a recognition that often changes one’s relation to their own identity and subjectivity, as that identity can no longer be relied upon to provide feelings of comfort. Engaging in decolonization work can also involve a reorientation in the way that settlers approach and relate to the world that they occupy and the land upon which they live, the people with whom they can work, and the political aims that they wish to pursue. On Harbin’s reading, these various aspects of decolonization work can be quite *unsettling* (both figuratively and literally) for settler subjects who have been oriented by colonial structures and institutions, as decolonization involves *disorienting* oneself from the comforting familiarity of those colonial orientations (“The Disorientations of Acting Against Injustice” 162-177).

disorientation always produces vital feelings of giddy nausea that necessarily lead to ethical and political change is similarly disingenuous, insofar as it ignores the reactive conservative tendencies that can follow from feeling lost, unsettled, uncomfortable, and contingent when one falls into a state of disorientation.

Yet, keeping these variable reactions to the feeling of disorientation in mind, I would also like to argue that the particular *kind* of disorientation that one feels, and the particular *source* of that disorientation, can affect the normative and political projects that follow from the experience of being disoriented. While the reactions that follow from disorientation can never be fully determined in advance, it also matters a great deal *how* one is disoriented, as well as the particular affective dimensions that are highlighted in one's experience of disorientation. Some forms of disorientation are more likely to highlight the giddy excitement of striking out on a new unformed path, while others are more likely to highlight the discomfort, unsettling unfamiliarity, and impotent contingency of being lost in a strange place. It is my contention that the particular form of disorientation which modern subjects experience in the wake of living on after the "end of the world" tends to highlight these latter affective dimensions.

### *Conclusions*

As we have seen, the generalized sense of disorientation which attends the crisis of modernity follows from a dissolution of the modern world (i.e., the particular arrangement of material, conceptual, and normative objects into ontologically purified categories through repeated orientation and inhabitation on the basis of the modern constitution) in light of undeniable forms of hybridity. As hybrid objects and networks emerge undeniably into a modern world that has been shaped on the basis of their exclusion, they render inoperative the particular

orientations that have produced and sustained (and been produced and sustained by) that world by calling into question the feasibility of purification without translation and, subsequently, the possibility of purity altogether. Objects that once appeared as *familiar* (insofar as they adhered to their purified ontological categories and could be arranged into a homely and comfortable world *for us*) reappear as *strangely unfamiliar*, caught up within networks of hybridity that reveal dimensions of the object which were previously concealed or ignored. The purified ontological categories that could once be relied upon to provide a sense of orientation, comforting familiarity, and mastery are no longer available as signposts to guide one's way through the world. And the world of modernity *itself*, which once appeared to be a comfortable home *for us*, is dissolved into an uncanny, unhomely, unfamiliar network of hybridity over which human beings possess little-to-no mastery. Subsequently, subjects who have been oriented on the basis of the modern constitution—who have been comforted by the sense of familiarity and mastery that they feel in relation to the modern world—become *lost* in relation to objects and entities that no longer seem familiar, and which can no longer be relied upon to provide a sense of orientation.<sup>70</sup> In short, the subjects of modernity are *disoriented* by the loss of the modern world, but disoriented in a way that highlights the *strange, unfamiliar, unsettling, and disempowering* aspects of disorientation.

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<sup>70</sup> We might think back here to Kant's seemingly strange example of becoming disoriented while walking down a familiar street upon which one cannot currently distinguish any of the houses. We can imagine in this example a person walking down a street they have walked many times before, following a habitual orientation in relation to familiar turns, familiar houses, familiar trees and street signs, when suddenly, for whatever reason, all the familiar objects which constitute the street by which this person orients and guides their way start to loom strangely, in a way that seems unfamiliar. The street remains the same yet no longer feels like the same place. The person becomes disoriented, unsure of where to go, how far to walk, which turn to take, etc. They become lost on a street that seemingly has not changed, yet which no longer provides a sense of direction or orientation. In the crisis of modernity, the modern world becomes a series of streets that seemingly remain the same yet are populated by objects which no longer appear familiar and which can no longer be relied upon to guide one's way or orient one's actions.

The generalized disorientation which follows from the crisis of modernity and the “end of the world” is thus of a particular *kind*: a type of disorientation that is experienced affectively, at the level of the body, as a sense of creeping strangeness, of being lost in an unfamiliar place that no longer appears *familiar* and no longer feels like a comfortable *home*, even as it retains many of the features that once provided a sense of comfort and homeliness. Given these particular affective features, I believe that the specific kind of disorientation that follows from the crisis of modernity can be productively conceptualized as *uncanny*. In the next chapter I will thus outline an *affective* conception of uncanniness that highlights the strong (yet relatively undertheorized) links between uncanniness and disorientation. Following Ernst Jentsch and Sigmund Freud’s classic investigations into the psychology of the uncanny as a feeling of *strange unhomeliness and indeterminacy* which breaks down distinctions between the familiar and unfamiliar, alongside Dylan Trigg’s more contemporary phenomenological account of the uncanniness that arises from our encounters with *nothingness*, I will argue that the particular form of disorientation which follows after the “end of the world” is a kind of *uncanny disorientation*, an experience of disorientation that both follows from, and is productive of, a creeping sensation of *uncanniness*. From this conception of uncanny disorientation, we will then be in a position to examine the nihilistic forms of subjectivity that follow from the crisis of modernity, as well as the types of ethical, aesthetic, and political action that this nihilism leads to.

“Everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original—things are doubled by their own scenario. But this doubling does not signify, as it did traditionally, the imminence of their death—they are already purged of their death, and better than when they were alive; more cheerful, more authentic, in the light of their model, like the faces in funeral homes”

(Jean Baudrillard *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* 8)

“Yes, the whole world is haunted!—Only *is* haunted?—No, it itself haunts, it is eerie [*unheimlich*] through and through, it is the changing apparent-body of a spirit; it is a phantasm.

What else is a ghost but an apparent body, but an actual spirit? Now the world is ‘vain;’ is ‘empty;’ is only dazzling ‘appearance;’ its truth is solely the spirit; it is the apparent-body of a spirit...Aren't we all ghosts, eerie [*unheimlich*] essences, who await ‘deliverance’—that is to say, ‘spirits?’” (Max Stirner 54)

### Chapter 3: Uncanniness

Thus far, I have argued that contemporary existence is marked by the self-dissolution of the modern world which has taken place as a result of the emergence into undeniability of those hybrid objects that the modern constitution has sought to disavow through the creation of purified ontological categories. I have then gone on to argue that the particular phenomenological experience of living on through this end to the modern world has been one of generalized *disorientation*: a loss of the affective sense of homely familiarity, comfort, and mastery that once accompanied the orientation provided by the modern world and its purified categories. Following the work of Sara Ahmed and Ami Harbin, I then attempted to highlight the

ambiguous affective nature of the phenomenological experience of disorientation, which can be variably experienced as a feeling of giddy excitement and freedom over the potential to strike out on a new path, or as a sense of unsettling unfamiliarity, loss, and disempowering contingency in relation to a world (or the lack thereof) which no longer provides the comfort of a familiar orientation. Moreover, I have argued that the particular forms of social, ethical, and political action which follow from the phenomenological experience of disorientation are similarly ambiguous, as disorientation is able to provoke both conservative reactions that attempt to regain a lost sense of orientation by reinforcing those normative or political structures which once provided a sense of guidance, as well as more creative or productive reactions that attempt to construct new modes of being out of the radical potentiality opened by disorientation.

The purpose of this dissertation, however, is to pinpoint the *particular* affective dimensions of the crisis of modernity in order to better understand the types of political, ethical, and aesthetic responses it evokes. The radical ambiguity of possible affective and political responses to disorientation therefore raises a set of questions which must be addressed before we can proceed. For example: how is the particular form of disorientation which pervades our contemporary situation experienced, affectively? How does it *feel*, specifically, to be disoriented by the loss of a world? And what kinds of political, ethical, and aesthetic reactions follow from this particular feeling? At the end of the previous chapter, I put forward the contention that the generalized disorientation which marks contemporary life after the end of the modern world can be productively conceptualized as *uncanny*, and that the predominant affective dimension of this normative disorientation is thus one of *uncanniness*. In the chapter that follows, I will attempt to justify this claim; first, by outlining the particular affective qualities of uncanniness in a way that highlights their connection to the phenomenological experience of disorientation; then by

examining the genealogical history of the uncanny as a theoretical concept in order to call attention to its contemporary significance; and finally, by drawing out the connections between the phenomenological experience of disorientation, the affective feeling of uncanniness, and our current situation in the wake of modernity's dissolution. It will be my contention in this chapter that, while the general phenomenological experience for modern subjects at the end of the world is one of disorientation, the specific *affective* content of this disorientation—how it *feels*, how it registers at the level of the body to be disoriented in this way—is an intense feeling of *uncanniness*, defined as a creeping sense of horror and anxiety stemming from the strangeness of a world that is somehow *not quite right*, as the comforting familiarity of one's orientation suddenly becomes eerily strange and discomfortingly unfamiliar. I will then argue that the particular structure of feeling that marks our contemporary situation is one of *uncanny disorientation*: a phenomenological experience of normative disorientation which is felt affectively, at the level of the body, as a sense of uncanniness.

This chapter will thus serve to outline the affective qualities of the uncanny, and to demonstrate why the particular affective experience of disorientation provoked by the end of the world can be productively conceptualized in terms of uncanniness. An elucidation of the affective content of contemporary disorientation will then provide a basis from which we can examine the types of political, ethical, and aesthetic reactions engendered by the crisis of modernity—reactions which, in the next chapter, I will define as a form of *nihilism* following on from the uncanniness and disorientation experienced at the end of the world.

*The Uncanny Feel of Contemporary Life*

To begin our investigation into the uncanny dimensions of contemporary disorientation, however, it will first be necessary to justify my claim that *uncanniness* constitutes the specific affective content of normative disorientation today. This claim will act as the point of departure and guiding principle for the investigation that follows, and as such, it will be prudent to first explain why I have chosen to focus on the *uncanny* specifically, before outlining the particular affective dimensions of uncanniness and its relation to our contemporary situation at the end of the modern world.

To begin, we can first note the curious tendency for descriptions of disorientation to arise in relation to theorizations of the uncanny. While disorientation constitutes a complex phenomenological experience, encompassing a range of seemingly contradictory affective feelings (e.g., giddiness, nausea, disempowerment, freedom, etc.) which may prompt a wide variety of normative responses, it is also an experience that is described, with remarkable frequency, as a particular feature of *the uncanny*, or as somehow related to the affective feeling of *uncanniness*. For example, a recent collection of essays examining the uncanny as a feature of modernity and modern literature begins its investigation with the striking claim that: “The uncanny *is* an experience of disorientation, where the world in which we live suddenly seems strange, alienating or threatening” (Collins and Jervis, emphasis added 1). And indeed, this description of the uncanny as “an experience of disorientation” seems apt, given the similarity in language used to define both the affective feeling of uncanniness and the phenomenological experience of disorientation, the image of our familiar world suddenly becoming “strange, alienating or threatening” aligning well with the descriptions of disorientation highlighted in the previous chapter.

Yet this claim that the uncanny simply *is* an experience of disorientation would seem to imply that the features of uncanniness and disorientation perfectly overlap, thereby negating any need to discuss uncanniness or to examine the relation between disorientation and the uncanny. If the uncanny simply *is* disorientation, then any attempt to define uncanny disorientation as a particular affective complex will simply end in a recursive, tautological definition of disorientation. The fact remains, however, that even as many theorists tend to highlight the connections and structural similarities between uncanniness and disorientation, they just as often emphasize a strong distinction between these two phenomena, describing one as a by-product or effect of the other. For example, in his work on sexual disorientation, the queer theorist Michael Moon describes such instances of disorientation specifically in terms of “uncanny effects,” claiming that the circulation of “[powerful] images of ostensibly perverse desires and fantasies” may bring home the “shapes of desires and fantasies that we ordinarily disavow as our own,” thereby “forcing us to recognize at least liminally our own familiarity or ‘at-homeness’ with these desires” (16). This “at-homeness” with desires and fantasies that we would normally disavow as foreign is interpreted by Moon in terms of *uncanniness*, as an uncanny effect of the more general experience of sexual disorientation. As such, even while he highlights certain aspects of uncanniness that seem to overlap with the descriptions of (dis)orientation outlined in the previous sections (i.e., a sense of homeliness and familiarity that is somehow disturbed or disrupted by a particular experience of the world), Moon also clearly delineates between the more general phenomenological experience of sexual disorientation and the affective sense of uncanniness it produces, positioning the uncanny as an *effect* of disorientation, rather than as an alternate term for the same experience.

This linking together of the affective feeling of *uncanniness* with the phenomenological experience of *disorientation* in such a way that each remains distinct from the other, even as they overlap or follow on from one another, seems to be a hallmark of attempts to theorize the uncanny—attempts which, as the literary theorist Anneleen Masschelein indicates, have only become more prevalent in recent years (4-14). From Ernst Jenstch’s early claim that “a *lack of orientation* is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident” (2), to Sigmund Freud’s description of the sense of uncanniness that can arise from being lost in a quasi-familiar place (170-171), to Dylan Trigg’s contemporary phenomenological description of the uncanny disorientation of returning to a once-familiar place (*The Memory of a Place* 207-216, 271-276), theoretical accounts of the uncanny seem to inevitably involve some description of the connection between affective feelings of uncanniness and the embodied experience of being disoriented. Yet, even as these various accounts acknowledge a connection between the uncanny and disorientation, they just as frequently elide any sustained discussion of the disorienting aspects of uncanniness or the uncanny dimensions of disorientation, choosing instead to focus on the interplay between *homely familiarity* and *unhomely strangeness* which, in the wake of Jenstch and Freud’s early investigations, has almost universally been considered central to the uncanny experience. The result has been a relative under-theorization of the connections between disorientation and uncanniness, despite the frequency with which such connections have been noted, as well as the prominence of both the uncanny and disorientation as concepts within the circuits of contemporary theory.

This under-theorization can, in part, be attributed to a lack of attentiveness to the uncanny’s *affective* dimensions in particular, as conceptualizations of the uncanny (both past and current) have tended to treat these aspects of uncanniness as secondary to its use as an aesthetic,

psychological, ontological, or existential concept. Following Freud's influential psychoanalytic examination of the uncanny in relation to the stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann, most subsequent theorization of the uncanny has treated uncanniness as simply the by-product of a more fundamental aesthetic, psychological, or existential experience, thereby largely ignoring its particular affective features in favour of speculation into its aesthetic causes or underlying psychological pathology. By eliding these affective dimensions, past examinations of the uncanny have largely failed to account for the strong connection between uncanniness and disorientation as embodied phenomena, the particular forms of activity that follow from feelings of uncanniness and disorientation, or the link between uncanny feelings and the breakdown of modernity, even as theorization of the uncanny has proliferated in the era of modernity's dissolution (Masschelein 4-14).<sup>71</sup>

As such, given the frequent connections drawn between experiences of disorientation and uncanniness, the relative lack of attention paid to this connection, and the strong links that can be drawn between the uncanny and the dissolution of modernity, it seems prudent to examine the nature of the relation between these three terms: *uncanniness*, *disorientation*, and *modernity*. In this chapter, I will aim to correct the relative undertheorization of uncanniness as a *feeling* by focusing my attention on the *affective* dimensions of the uncanny as an embodied experience intimately related to the more general phenomenological and normative experiences of

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<sup>71</sup> Anneleen Masschelein explains this sudden interest in uncanniness as a product of the rapid social changes which have taken place in the wake of the great upheavals of the late-1960s and early-1970s—upheavals which produced “a deep-rooted sense of estrangement, unrest and (paranoid) anxiety...an acute awareness of the challenges posed by a rapidly evolving, globalized, increasingly virtual late-capitalist society: the nuclear threat and the Cold War, terrorism, nationalism, immigration and xenophobia, individualism, and the omnipresence of image and simulacra, etc. The concept of the uncanny at the same time addresses abstract theoretical concerns, the postromantic and neo-Gothic aesthetics, and the sociopolitical climate of the mediatized postindustrial Western society” (Masschelein 5). I will offer an alternative (though related) explanation here: we have, in recent decades, become interested in the uncanny precisely because *the modern world has ended* and the *feeling* of living on after the end of the world is one of *uncanniness*.

disorientation, as outlined in the previous chapter. More specifically, I will argue that *uncanniness* constitutes the predominant affective aspect of the disorientation produced by what I have called the “crisis of modernity” and the subsequent end of the modern world. By outlining an affective conception of uncanniness as a feeling of *horror* provoked by the indeterminacy of once-familiar objects, and inter-reading this conception of uncanniness with the previously established account of disorientation as a loss of the orientation, comfort, and control provided by a familiar world, I believe that the contemporary relevance of the connection between uncanniness and disorientation will become apparent.<sup>72</sup> For the general sense of disorientation which marks the dissolution of the modern world is, in fact, an *uncanny* form of disorientation: a form of disorientation which is experienced affectively as an overwhelming feeling of *uncanniness*.

*What is the Uncanny?: The Uncanny as Affect*

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<sup>72</sup> As a prime example of the connections to be made between unhomeliness, uncanniness, disorientation, and the dissolution of the modern world in the face of undeniable hybridity, we can turn to Homi K. Bhabha’s seminal work on *The Location of Culture*. Discussing the ways in which modernity both obsessively creates cultural, social, and political boundaries while also producing a consistent hybridization of culture that crosses the very boundaries it erects, Bhabha writes: “The negating activity is, indeed, the intervention of the ‘beyond’ that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where ‘presencing’ begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James’s Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of ‘incredulous terror’. And it is at this point that the world first shrinks for Isabel and then expands enormously. As she struggles to survive the fathomless waters, the rushing torrents, James introduces us to the ‘unhomeliness’ inherent in that rite of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation. The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (13). The remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to elaborating further upon this connection between the affective experience of uncanniness, disorientation, and the proliferation of hybridity which initiates the crisis of modernity.

To explain and justify this claim that the predominant affective state provoked by the dissolution of the modern world is one of uncanniness, it will first be necessary to examine what the uncanny *is*, as well as the important position it occupies within the field of contemporary theory. What is “the uncanny”? What specific features denote affective experiences of uncanniness? How has the uncanny previously been theorized, and what is the particular relation between uncanniness, disorientation, and the dissolution of the modern world?

To begin, we may note that the uncanny represents a predominantly *modern* experience. As Anneleen Masschelein has demonstrated through her extensive genealogical investigation into the concept, “the uncanny” constitutes a distinctly modern idea, emerging as a site of theoretical investigation near the turn of the twentieth century through the psychological works of Ernst Jentsch and Sigmund Freud, while only truly gaining traction as a theoretical concept in the mid-1970s (Masschelein 1-16, 125-154). Yet, since that time, the uncanny has quickly become one of the central concepts of (post)modern aesthetic and literary theory, spawning numerous works on the uncanny quality of modern and postmodern art, literature, film, and architecture.<sup>73</sup> In more recent years, it has also been adopted as a central site of theorization within much work on object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, and phenomenology.<sup>74</sup> However, this prodigious and wide-ranging conceptualization of the uncanny within the circuits of twentieth and twenty-first century theory has largely foregone any substantial engagement

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<sup>73</sup> For notable examples, see: Anthony Vidler’s *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Mike Kelly’s “Playing With Dead Things: On the Uncanny,” Helene Cixous’ essay “Fiction and its Phantoms,” Barbara Creed’s *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny*, Gregorio Kohon’s *Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience: Psychoanalysis and The Uncanny*, and *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties* edited by Jo Collins and John Jervis.

<sup>74</sup> See, for example: Dylan Trigg’s *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* and *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror*, Graham Harman’s *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects*, as well as several essays in Katherine Behar’s edited collection *Object Oriented Feminism*, including “Allure and Abjection: The Possible Potential of Severed Qualities” by Frenchy Lunning, “OOPS: Object-Oriented Psychopathia Sexualis” by Adam Zaretsky, and “A Feminist Object” by Irina Aristarkhova.

with the *affective* qualities of the uncanny and has almost universally treated feelings of uncanniness as a secondary effect of more fundamental psychological, aesthetic, or existential experiences.

In part, this has been due to the slipperiness of the uncanny as a concept. Many writers have commented on the impossibility of fully defining the uncanny, which seems to deflect any attempt at rational explanation or logical coherence. Akin to contemporary conceptions of *queerness* within the circuits of queer theory, the uncanny is often presented as precisely that which resists definition and decidability, remaining consistently at the periphery of thought and perception (Masschelein 6-7; Trigg, *The Memory of a Place*, 27-28). Yet, in examining various conceptualizations of the uncanny from across a range of disciplines, it becomes readily apparent that there is, in fact, some consensus as to the affective qualities of uncanniness. Conventionally, in these attempts at conceptualization, “uncanniness” is understood to be a particular affective quality that pervades certain types of objects, while “the uncanny” designates those objects that possess the affective quality of uncanniness (Withy 1-2). However, this distinction seems to posit “uncanniness” as a kind of essence residing within certain objects or entities—that some things just *are*, in their essential being, uncanny.<sup>75</sup> As such, past conceptualizations of the uncanny, while noting the affective dimensions of uncanniness, have tended to elide any sustained discussion of these affective dimensions by positioning them as a kind of epiphenomenon of a more essential quality of certain objects or entities. But given the relative consistency with which the affective qualities of uncanniness have been described across various conceptualizations of

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<sup>75</sup> According to Katherine Withy’s interpretation, this is also Heidegger’s argument about human beings: that the essence of the human condition is to be uncanny; that feelings of uncanniness reveal that we are, essentially, uncanny in our very being (Withy 3-6). I would also contend that much recent work in object-oriented ontology extends this argument (intentionally or unintentionally) to all things. For the object-oriented ontologist, all things are objects, all objects have the same ontological structure, and this structure is *uncanny*. I will expand on this idea in the section on Dylan Trigg’s contemporary phenomenological interpretation of uncanniness.

the uncanny, it would seem that the *feeling* of uncanniness is, in fact, central to what the uncanny *is*. Rather than positing particular *things* as essentially uncanny, then, this dissertation will instead focus on the *affective* dimensions of the uncanny and posit uncanniness as an *affect* which circulates between things, pervading them as an experience or feeling that isn't essentially possessed by a particular subject or object, but instead arises out of certain conditions and interactions *between* things.<sup>76</sup>

Following past conceptualizations of the uncanny, we can briefly define uncanniness as a particular feeling, related in kind to the frightening, eerie, or horrifying, that possesses a quality similar to that of *déjà vu*: a kind of *strange familiarity*, the familiar becoming unfamiliar while remaining what it is in its familiarity. More specifically, we can say that uncanniness is primarily experienced as a sense of creeping weirdness that arises in certain instances of uncertainty or undecidability, in the oscillation between familiarity and unfamiliarity, when things seem simultaneously familiar and strange, foreign yet intimately one's own. A significant aspect of the uncanny is its relation to ambiguity—an ambiguity which, importantly, *cannot be resolved*. This is not merely a temporary uncertainty about how to categorize something in the world in relation

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<sup>76</sup> We may note here that affect *itself* has an air of the uncanny, even as uncanniness constitutes a particular affective state. Affect, as it has been theorized by thinkers falling within the bounds of “new materialism” as a broad school of thought, is a notoriously slippery concept that resists neat categorization within the purified ontological zones of modernity, and which, in descriptions by thinkers like Brian Massumi and Sara Ahmed, seems to maintain a certain life of its own, outside of any will or intention, haunting subjectivity and possessing bodies through its ephemeral (yet tangible, material) presence. By breaking down the mind/body dualism inherited from Cartesian metaphysics and positing a materialist vision of the body that questions the individual integrity of bodies and subjects, theories of affect and new materialism present a challenge to many of the purified ontological categories of the modern constitution, and align with theories of network, assemblage, *agencement*, and non-human (or non-sentient) actants that can appear, to the modern subject, as haunting, uncanny forces. Additionally, we might note some of the ways in which understanding affect often entails focusing on experiences that seem to fall within the domain of the uncanny: for example, Baruch Spinoza's concern with sleepwalkers, Massumi's description of the role of *proprioception* in bodily orientations, or Ahmed's concern with experiences of bodily and normative disorientation. In such instances, bodies seem to possess a life or mind of their own, living and acting independent of cognition, thereby challenging distinctions between mind/body, thought/matter, thinking/acting, life/non-life, etc. This aspect of uncanniness will be examined further in this chapter through Dylan Trigg's phenomenological work on the uncanny.

to purified categories of meaning, but rather an irresolvable uncertainty about the applicability of the categories we use to make sense of the world at all (Withy 16-18). In this way, uncanniness is also closely related to existential experiences of anxiety, dread, and nausea, particularly insofar as these feelings are provoked by the indeterminacy of the human essence, perceived as an *aporia* at the heart of being itself, which has been posited by some thinkers (most notably, Martin Heidegger) as constituting an *ontological* condition, a kind of homelessness of the human being in relation to the world. Most important for the purposes of this dissertation, however, are the connections that have been drawn between uncanniness, disorientation, and the sense of meaninglessness provoked by the horror of strange familiarity.

In a recent investigation into the nature of the uncanny, Katherine Withy describes uncanniness as a moment

when we are struck by a feeling of strangeness, as if there is something wrong with being human. Perhaps we sense the inadequacy of human knowledge in the face of the brute *thatness* of the natural world; perhaps we feel an emptiness in the routines of daily social life; perhaps the familiarity drains away from ordinary objects, leaving only mute intruders. At such moments, it seems that we can never make our lives and our world fully familiar, fully meaningful. Any meaningfulness we win is haunted by meaninglessness. We feel that there is a dimension of human existence out of step with itself—unstable, out of joint, *unheimlich* (Withy 1).

As a general feeling of strangeness, the uncanny constitutes a moment of defamiliarization, turning once-familiar objects into “mute intruders” which suggest that things may not be as familiar as they seem, that the networks of meaningful relationships which have constituted a familiar world *for us* may, in fact, be meaningless, and that the world may not

actually be *for us* at all. Rendering the world a strange and unfamiliar place, uncanny feelings call into question our capacity to make sense of things, to produce or inhabit a familiar world of meaning in which human existence makes sense. We become “haunted by meaninglessness,” a meaninglessness which ultimately extends to *ourselves*, and to the totality of our world. Meanwhile, this meaninglessness is, in turn, experienced *as a haunting*, a sense of horror and dread creeping in at the periphery and popping up where it is least expected, in what is normally most familiar and intimate.<sup>77</sup>

As Dylan Trigg further explains, in an encounter with the uncanny, [things] that are assumed present are now witnessed as absent, things hitherto thought to be homely emerge as unhomely, and entities we once thought dead materialize as being quite undead. In this way, the uncanny is a ‘species of the frightening’ that lurks within the kernel of our epistemic desires, dismantling the very foundations of ‘truth’ and leaving us with a porous divide between the real and the unreal (*The Memory of a Place* 28).

Hence the general concern with the uncanny as an *aesthetic* category, featuring prominently in modern Gothic literature as the figure of the double, the doppelgänger,<sup>78</sup> the ghost who haunts the familial home, the haunted doll, the wax figure, the automaton, and, more recently, the zombie or the android, all of which hauntingly embody the “porous divide between

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<sup>77</sup> In this way, the rapid proliferation of the uncanny’s theorization over the past half century is also related to contemporary concerns with haunting, and what Jacques Derrida has dubbed *hauntology*. See: Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>78</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the uncanny phenomenon of the doppelgänger and its connection to contemporary social and political life, see: Naomi Klein, *Doppelgänger: A Trip into the Mirror World*, Penguin Random House, 2023.

the real and the unreal,” the living and the dead, the animate and inanimate, in a way which calls into question our “epistemic desires” for truth or meaning.

But beyond these aspects of horror, strangeness, defamiliarization, strange familiarity, and meaninglessness, the uncanny has also consistently been theorized as having something to do with *disorientation*. This connection is perhaps unsurprising given the similarities in descriptions of the affective aspects of disorientation and uncanniness, as the defamiliarization of the world which takes place in experiences of uncanniness seems to closely mirror the loss of comfort, familiarity, and homeliness that constitute the more negative or disturbing affective dimensions of disorientation. In experiences of uncanniness, as in disorientation, the familiarity of the world is thrown into question as distinctions between the familiar/unfamiliar are dissolved and exposed to their underlying meaninglessness. This produces a general sense of disempowerment and loss, of being lost in relation to once-familiar, now strangely unfamiliar things. However, while descriptions of disorientation tend to highlight the affective ambivalence of these experiences of defamiliarization, unfamiliarity, and loss, pointing to a potential for such experiences to be converted into an empowering sense of giddy potentiality, theories of the uncanny make clear that these disorienting experiences also tend to involve strong affective feelings of uncanniness, horror, fright, eerie creepiness, unsettling strangeness, and haunting familiarity in an oscillation between homely comfort and unhomely weirdness. Additionally, descriptions of uncanniness tend to highlight the irresolvable undecidability lurking within the epistemic desire for truth or meaning, the suppression of which drives the modern activity of ontological purification which provides modern subjects with a sense of normative orientation. Theoretical literature on the uncanny tends to link this fundamental undecidability with the affective feeling of uncanniness by arguing that the uncanny represents a dimension of

strangeness and unfamiliarity that haunts even those things with which we are most comfortably familiar, acting as the impetus for an ongoing anxiety over the viability of those basic categories of meaning that constitute a world *for us*. On this reading, uncanniness constitutes a kind of *fear over the dissolution of meaning*, an affective feeling of horror at the meaninglessness which lies just below the surface of familiar concepts and figures, haunting our every attempt to discover or construct a truth. This uncanny horror is similar in kind to the sense of loss and discomfort which attends the experience of normative disorientation produced by the dissolution of those networks of meaning which constitute a world *for us*, but with a more definitive emphasis on the affective dimensions of fear, horror, creepiness, and anxiety.

Given these resonances between the typical descriptions of uncanniness and disorientation, then, it is perhaps of little wonder that these two experiences tend to be associated with one another in their respective theoretical literature. But some questions still remain as to the underlying relationship between the two: Why are experiences of disorientation and uncanniness so intimately linked? Does one follow from the other, and do they always arise together out of the same circumstances? Or is uncanniness only associated with a particular *kind* of disorientation, a specific type of disorienting experience? Based on the comparisons drawn between uncanniness and disorientation thus far, I believe that we are in a position to begin answering these questions.

First, in alignment with Michael Moon's descriptions of normative disorientation in terms of "uncanny effects," as well as the greater emphasis placed on the *affective* dimensions of uncanniness in theoretical literature on the uncanny, it seems reasonable to posit that uncanny feelings often follow as an *effect* of the more general bodily experience of disorientation, and thus that *uncanniness constitutes the affective content of a certain kind of disorienting*

*experience*. Second, given that uncanniness entails a sense of defamiliarization and loss of meaning that is similar in kind to the experience of worldlessness, we can also connect these feelings of uncanniness to the forms of normative disorientation outlined previously: specifically, the disorientation that follows the dissolution of those networks of meaning that constitute a world *for us*. If disorientation can produce “uncanny effects,” and uncanniness involves the kinds of defamiliarization associated with the loss of a world, then it follows that the particular experience of disorientation which marks the crisis of modernity is, specifically, an *uncanny* form of disorientation, a disorientation felt affectively as a sense of uncanniness. On this reading, the relationship between disorientation and uncanniness becomes one of imbrication or co-constitution: both are a result of the same event and part of the same experience, arising together as a complex bodily response to the dissolution of modernity and its world, with uncanniness representing the particular *affective content* of a more general phenomenological experience of disorientation, how it *feels* to be disoriented in this particular way. Uncanniness would thus constitute a kind of anxiety and horror at the disorientation which results from the collapse of a world, without any of disorientation’s potential giddiness or freedom, but with an added sense of the meaninglessness which subtends any attempt to construct a world or to orient ourselves within it.

This conception of the relationship between uncanniness and disorientation also helps to explain the rapid proliferation of theories of the uncanny over the past half century. If the disorientation which pervades the crisis of modernity today produces “uncanny effects” (or uncanny *affects*, as the case may be), then contemporary concern over the uncanny as an aesthetic, psychoanalytic, and phenomenological category can be read as a theoretical response to the uncanniness of living on after the end of the world. Specifically, it is my contention that

this sudden interest in conceptualizing the uncanny represents an attempt to articulate the affective experience that marks the crisis of modernity for those subjects who have been shaped by the modern constitution. For the subject who has internalized the modern constitution and its purified ontological distinctions, the disorientation resulting from the crisis of modernity is felt, at the level of the body, as *uncanny*—a kind of horror and anxiety that arises in response to the lack of orientation which follows from the dissolution of the modern world. This widespread feeling of uncanny disorientation, in turn, has prompted a general interest in the uncanny as a theoretical description of how it feels to be alive today.

But what can the various theoretical investigations which inform contemporary concern over the uncanny tell us about our present reality? What, specifically, constitutes an affective feeling of uncanniness, and what kinds of responses (ethical, aesthetic, political) does uncanniness provoke? Why does it matter if the disorientation of the modern crisis is felt affectively as a sense of uncanniness, or if the dominant affective complex for modern subjects today is one of uncanny disorientation? In short, why should we conceptualize contemporary disorientation in terms of uncanniness?

In the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt to answer these questions, first by examining the uncanny as a feeling, using past conceptualizations of the uncanny to outline its predominant affective features and sources, before then drawing out the connections between feelings of uncanniness, disorientation, and the crisis of modernity. I will then use this investigation into the uncanny to explain why the predominant affective complex of today is, precisely, one of *uncanny disorientation*: a form of disorientation which highlights the uncanniness of existence, prompting a confrontation with the meaninglessness subtending the purified ontological distinctions that have constituted a world *for us*. From this explanation of the

affective sources and features of uncanny disorientation, I will then speculate as to its *effects*, arguing that feelings of uncanny disorientation produce a turn toward certain forms of nihilistic subjectivity and practice which constitute the predominant ethical, political, and aesthetic response to contemporary experiences of worldlessness. However, to understand contemporary responses to the disorientation of living on after the end of the world, we must first attend to the affective dimensions of uncanniness, and its relation to nihilistic modes of subjectivity.

To do so, it will first be necessary to return to some early conceptualizations of the uncanny, drawing on their theoretical analysis to better understand the *sources* and *effects* of uncanny feelings, the particular features of uncanniness as an embodied feeling, and how the affective dimensions of uncanniness overlap with our previous discussion of disorientation, the crisis of modernity, and the end of the world. While the uncanny is in some sense resistant to definitive interpretation, and theorists have varied widely in their conceptualization of its essential features, certain patterns emerge from an examination of key moments in the uncanny's history of theorization which will aid in constructing an account of contemporary experiences of uncanny disorientation. As such, I will begin my investigation into uncanniness by providing a brief overview of the most significant moments in the history of the uncanny as an object of theoretical inquiry and conceptualization, highlighting those elements which help to elucidate how it *feels* to live on through the crisis of modernity, at the end of the world.

To this end, we must first return to two early attempts to define the dimensions of uncanniness as a primarily psychological phenomenon: namely, Ernst Jentsch's seminal essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" and Sigmund Freud's later contribution, titled simply "The Uncanny." While Freud's influential essay has, since its initial publication, come to be considered the definitive frame through which to view uncanniness in its varied psychological,

aesthetic, and affective dimensions, it is actually Jenstch's essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," originally published in 1906, which constitutes the first major theoretical examination of the uncanny. Largely overlooked in favour of Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation, Jenstch's essay represents an important touchstone in the history of theorizing the uncanny, not only providing the basis upon which Freud would later develop his interpretation, but itself also presenting a strong psychological explanation for the causes of uncanny feelings. Moreover, in this initial theoretical investigation of the uncanny, Jenstch draws a strong connection between the affective experience of *uncanniness* and *disorientation*—a connection which will largely be lost in the emphasis placed on Freud's essay as the definitive interpretation of uncanny feelings. For, whereas Freud's later essay only touches upon the connection between uncanniness and disorientation obliquely, Jenstch positions disorientation as central to the uncanny experience. As such, I have chosen to begin my investigation into the affective dimensions of uncanniness from a reconsideration of Jenstch's essay, focusing on his conception of uncanniness as a product of "intellectual uncertainty" and the strong connection he draws between uncanniness and disorientation. In doing so, I hope to establish a solid foundation for my interpretation of the crisis of modernity and contemporary worldlessness as a source of uncanny disorientation.

#### *Early Conceptualization of the Uncanny—Ernst Jenstch and the Psychological Explanation*

As the title of his essay suggests, in "Psychology of the Uncanny," Jenstch attempts to construct a psychological explanation for the feeling of uncanniness, "to investigate how the affective excitement of the uncanny arises in psychological terms, how the psychical conditions must be constituted so that the 'uncanny' sensation emerges" (Jenstch 3). To address this question of "how the affective excitement of the uncanny arises," Jenstch outlines a particular

model of psychological development that emphasizes the importance of what he terms “intellectual mastery:” the capacity to conceptualize and understand various phenomena, integrating them into a broader idea of the world, thereby gaining psychological “mastery” over both phenomena and world by producing a framework of understanding that is adequate to reality. In a sense, this model of psychological development mirrors Latour’s conception of purification, as discussed previously: for Jenstch, individuals and cultures attempt to gain control over their environment through the construction of an ideational schema of the world that allows them to subsume the particular entities or objects that they encounter in their environment to familiar, pre-formed intellectual categories, akin to the strictly separated ontological categories produced through purification.<sup>79</sup> As an individual develops from childhood to adulthood (or from what Jenstch calls the “primitive” to the “civilized”) they learn to subsume ever greater portions of reality to the familiar categories of their ideational schema. This creates a psychological sense of mastery, familiarity, certainty, and comfort that becomes habitual as things in the world become self-evidently *known* within their assigned categories.

Contrastingly, feelings of uncanniness arise when this sense of intellectual mastery and certainty is disrupted by an object that resists neat categorization within the pre-formed categories of an ideational schema. This resistance to categorization may result from misrecognition of an object, ignorance of how to properly categorize an object in the world, or tension between the perceptual experience of a phenomenon and its physical reality. However, no matter the reason for it, the inability to easily categorize an object or phenomenon within one’s ideational schema creates a sense of “intellectual uncertainty” that is experienced, affectively, as

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<sup>79</sup> This connection between Jenstch’s conception of uncanniness and Latour’s conception of purification also bears a striking similarity to David Livingstone Smith’s reading of Jentsch in relation to Mary Douglas’ classic work on *Purity and Danger*. See: Livingstone Smith, David. “Paradoxes of Dehumanization.” *Social Theory and Practice*, 42.2, (2016): 476-433.

a feeling of creeping horror, strangeness, and disorientation, which Jenstch attributes to the uncanny. For Jenstch, then, uncanniness is the feeling that arises from an interplay between states of *intellectual mastery* and *intellectual uncertainty*, with the uncanny existing precisely in the oscillation between these two states.

But why define this oscillation between mastery and uncertainty as *uncanny*, specifically? Highlighting the literal meaning of the German word for the uncanny—*unheimlich*, which more literally translates to *unhomely*—Jenstch emphasizes that the uncanny results from a disruption of familiarity, certainty, and comfort. Following this literal reading of *unheimlich* as *unhomely*, he then argues that unhomeliness represents an adequate lexical descriptor for the affective feeling of uncanniness (as a disturbing sense of creeping horror) insofar as it implies that a person who experiences something uncanny is *not at home* in the situation, not at ease or comfortable in their world (Jenstch 2). For Jentsch, the homely is associated with that which is traditional, habitual, usual, and most importantly, *familiar* to a given person, based on their past experiences and overall psychological schema for understanding the world. The unhomely (*unheimlich*), on the other hand, is associated with that which is unusual, foreign, and *unfamiliar*, that which does not easily or comfortably fit within the psychological schema that a person or culture has developed for making sense of things. At its most basic, the uncanny is thus a feeling of unease and discomfort prompted by those entities or experiences which resist being incorporated into one's ideational schema, insofar as they fall outside our sense of the normal, habitual, or familiar (Jenstch 2-3). The uncanny is precisely that which is un-homely, lacking the comfort and familiarity of home, and is a product of the defamiliarization of that which is familiar: the familiar suddenly becoming unfamiliar, the homely suddenly becoming unhomely.

From this reading of *unheimlich* as *unhomely*, Jenstch then attempts to justify his explanation of uncanny feelings through a psychological model that emphasizes the need for intellectual mastery over one's environment, arguing that uncanniness represents the felt experience of an "intellectual uncertainty" that occurs when the usual or familiar is defamiliarized. This defamiliarization can take place in a variety of different situations, as a kind of uncertainty or ambivalence regarding how to categorize an entity within one's already-developed ideational schema for understanding the world, or in instances when an entity or phenomenon that has been rendered familiar through habituation (and thus has come to seem "self-evident") is suddenly viewed in a new way, such that it becomes unfamiliar according to one's habitual mode of understanding the world (Jenstch 3-4). Jenstch's primary example of such an experience is the sudden remembrance "that the rising of the sun does not depend on the sun at all but rather on the movement of the earth, and that, for the inhabitants of the earth, absolute movement in space is much more inconsequential than that at the centre of the earth, and so forth" (Jenstch 4).<sup>80</sup> For the person who has, since childhood, become habitually accustomed to the daily "rising" of the sun, such that it has become "self-evident," this sudden realization that the sun does not actually "rise"—that it is not the sun which circles the earth, but the earth which rotates on its own axis around the sun—provokes a sense of uncertainty which defamiliarizes the world as it is normally lived, provoking a sense of *uncanniness* in the sudden shift between the

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<sup>80</sup> This example could also potentially be read in terms of *disorientation*: the sudden realization that the seemingly solid, stationary earth beneath our feet is, in reality, spinning on its axis as it plunges through the directionless void of space may destabilize our sense of direction or our location at the centre of things, calling into question the reliability of our habitual sense of orientation. Moreover, it evokes the cry of that infamous madman from Nietzsche's *Gay Science* who, in announcing the death of God, anticipates the advent of modern European nihilism: "What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun? Wither is it moving now? Wither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we plunging continuously? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?" (181). This will become pertinent when we discuss the concept of *nihilism in bad faith*.

world in its familiarity (the sun still appears to “rise”) and its unfamiliarity (it is the earth which spins around the sun). But this is only one example of the oscillation between intellectual mastery and intellectual uncertainty that Jenstch attributes to the uncanny. A stronger (and more conventional) source of uncanny feelings is attributed to the psychic uncertainty resulting from doubt as to whether an apparently living being is actually alive, or if a lifeless object may in fact be animate (Jenstch 8). In the realm of aesthetics, such feelings often arise when a figure or character is presented in such a way as to raise doubts as to whether or not they are actually an automaton (Jenstch 11).<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Jenstch claims that uncanny feelings are often provoked by anatomically detailed wax figures of human beings, which are difficult to distinguish from animated, living creatures (Jenstch 10). In other instances, feelings of uncanniness may arise as a result of a mistaken interpretation or intellectual mis-categorization of an entity in the world; Jenstch’s examples here are of a hiker in the forest who sits on what they believe to be a tree trunk but which reveals itself to be a giant snake, or of a person who has no knowledge of locomotives suddenly encountering a steam train from far off and mistaking it for a giant animal (Jenstch 8).

We may note that in each of these examples, it seems to be the *hybridity* of the object—its transgression of boundaries between life and death, animacy and inanimateness, animal and

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<sup>81</sup> Freud will later focus on automata as a source of uncanny feelings in his reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story *The Sandman*. A more contemporary example of this phenomenon is present in Ridley Scott’s cult classic film *Blade Runner*. As many fans of the film have noted, much of the movie’s alluring eeriness is produced by an uncertainty as to whether the story’s anti-hero protagonist, Deckard (played by Harrison Ford), whose main task in the science fictional universe of the film is to hunt and destroy rogue androids, is (or is not) himself an android. Importantly, this doubt as to Deckard’s status as an automaton or a human is not the explicit focus of the film, but is only hinted at obliquely—which, as Jenstch claims more generally about this type of narrative, does not give the audience “the occasion to investigate and clarify the matter straight away; for the particular emotional effect...would hereby be quickly dissipated” (Jenstch 11)—and is ancillary to the film’s interrogation into what it means to be human by questioning the feasibility of the human/non-human (android) distinction. We might also note that this kind of anxious doubt as to the status of people and things as automata is central to Rene Descartes’ project for creating an impeccable foundation for knowledge in his *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*—a text which is often taken to be the foundation of modern thought and subjectivity.

object—that prompts feelings of uncanny horror. More importantly for Jenstch, however, is what underlies each of these particular examples, which he defines as a general experience of “intellectual uncertainty” occurring in the interplay and vacillation between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar, what is known becoming unknown. In such instances, rather than appearing familiar or “homely,” something in the world (or even the world itself) returns as somehow simultaneously the same (nothing has really changed, after all) yet strangely unfamiliar, insofar as it no longer conforms to the ideational schema that one has developed to make sense of it. Without losing its familiar aspect, the world reappears as a strange and unfamiliar place which rejects habitual understandings, undermining intellectual mastery with uncertainty as to how to properly make sense of things. And it is this strange unfamiliarity that Jenstch defines as *uncanny*: the sudden loss of familiarity with that which had previously seemed “homely.” On this model, an affective feeling of uncanniness is the result of a kind of *defamiliarization*: entities and phenomena that have been rendered familiar or self-evident through “intellectual mastery” suddenly becoming unfamiliar, as they resist their normal categorization within a person’s ideational schema of the world.

It should also be noted that, for Jenstch, these experiences are in some sense dependent on a desire and drive for “intellectual mastery.” This concept of “intellectual mastery” runs throughout the entirety of his essay and is of central importance to his conceptualization of the uncanny. According to Jenstch, “intellectual mastery” of things in the world—achieving a total and accurate understanding of the entities in one’s environment—is the ultimate goal towards which both individual psychological development and collective cultural progress strive. For example, in the conclusion of his investigation, he writes:

The human desire for the intellectual mastery of one's environment is a strong one.

Intellectual certainty provides psychological shelter in the struggle for existence. However it came to be, it signifies a defensive position against the assault of hostile forces, and the lack of such certainty is equivalent to lack of cover in the episodes of that never-ending war of the human and organic world for the sake of which the strongest and most impregnable bastions of science were erected (Jenstch 15).

On Jenstch's reading, then, uncanny experiences mark an episode of defeat in this "never-ending war" waged between human beings and their environment in the "struggle for existence," for which "intellectual mastery" is the human being's only real weapon.<sup>82</sup> But it is also precisely the desire to gain mastery over one's environment through the subsumption of entities and phenomena to familiar, habitual, and comfortably intelligible conceptual categories which creates the conditions of possibility for intellectual uncertainty (and thus, uncanniness) to occur, when things in the world (inevitably) fail to adhere to their assigned categories. It is the investment in this desire for intellectual mastery that makes such slippages in certainty and mastery feel disturbing and uncanny, and it is precisely those subjects who are most invested in this ideal who are most likely to experience feelings of uncanniness. For, according to Jenstch's psychological model of explanation, the uncanny is experienced most often and most intensely by those individuals who are "intellectually discriminating [in their perception of] daily phenomena"—that is, those who strive for intellectual mastery by making firm distinctions between categories (Jenstch 3-4). By creating a greater number of firm conceptual distinctions between entities in the world, and subsequently becoming invested in the purity and reality of

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<sup>82</sup> We might note here the way in which Jenstch's theory of psychological development resembles the modern social contract theories of thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (simply displacing onto individual psychological development and "intellectual mastery" the role played by the social contract and sovereignty in protecting individuals from a violent "state of nature").

these distinctions, the “intellectually discriminating” individual also increases the likelihood that they will encounter phenomena that undermine the familiarity and feasibility of established conceptual distinctions by falling outside their scope, occupying more than one discrete category, or resisting incorporation into one’s overall ideational schema. And according to Jenstch, it is in such moments of “intellectual uncertainty” that feelings of uncanniness arise.

At this point, we may once again note that this description of the subject and source of uncanny experience precisely mirrors our earlier examination of hybrid objects, the modern constitution, and the crisis of modernity. Like Jenstch’s “intellectually discriminating” individual, the modern subject is invested in a project of creating distinct zones of ontological purity for the categorization and mastery of entities in the world, to the exclusion of translation and hybridity. However, this project of purification to the exclusion of translation ironically creates ever-greater opportunities for the production of hybrid objects and networks—entities that occupy more than one ontologically distinct category, resisting subsumption to the zones of purity created by modernity. The modern subject, as an “intellectually discriminating” individual, is thus seemingly primed to experience feelings of uncanniness, assuming Jenstch’s model of intellectual mastery and uncertainty. As hybrid entities proliferate to the point of undeniability, so too the potential for modern subjects to experience moments of intellectual uncertainty and, subsequently, uncanny feelings.

Drawing on the conceptions of *purification*, *disorientation*, and *world* defined in previous chapters, we might say that Jenstch’s vision of “intellectual mastery” represents a situation in which individuals or groups orient themselves on the basis of a network of purified ontological categories that have come to constitute their world. As will be recalled, to be *oriented* is to fit comfortably within a world that feels home-like as a result of the ways in which that world has

been shaped through repeated relations of towardness and awayness. The modern constitution, with its project of purification without translation, represents one such set of relations. Repeating and reinforcing these relations over time, such that they eventually become habitual, functions to render the world a familiar and comfortable place *for us*. Conversely, on Jenstch's model, feelings of uncanniness arise precisely when the sense of intellectual mastery, comfort, and homeliness that follow from being oriented on the basis of purified ontological categories is challenged by an encounter with an entity that resists categorization, and thus does not seem to "fit" neatly within the world as it has been shaped by the modern constitution. In such instances, the world, which previously provided a sense of comfort, familiarity, and homeliness suddenly reappears as a disturbing, unfamiliar, and *unhomely* place that, in its strangeness, no longer provides the sense of orientation it once did.

On this reading of Jenstch's essay, we are thus returned to our earlier conception of the relation between uncanniness and disorientation: feelings of uncanniness follow on as an *effect* of disorientation, particularly the disorientation experienced by the "intellectually discriminating" modern subject when faced with proliferating hybridity and the dissolution of the modern world. In fact, Jenstch himself is quick to make this connection between uncanniness and disorientation. Beginning with his evaluation of the word *unheimlich*, Jenstch notes that "the word suggests that a *lack of orientation* is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident" (Jenstch 2), that the uncanny is in some sense *disorienting*, and feelings of uncanniness often follow from experiences of disorientation. Later in the essay, he clarifies that this lack of orientation is an expression of the psychological uncertainty that results from encountering the limits of what is known, familiar, and habitual (Jenstch 5). He writes that it is "bright children [who] are in fact generally quite the most fearful, since they are clearer about the

boundaries of their own orientational abilities” (Jenstch 5)—that is, they are more aware of how to orient themselves in relation to what is known/familiar and what is unknown/unfamiliar since they are clearer about the limits of their own ideational schema of the world, and what it is (or is not) capable of explaining. This also seems to align with Jenstch’s earlier claim that the uncanny is primarily experienced by “intellectually discriminating” individuals who make firm conceptual distinctions between entities and phenomena in an attempt to gain “intellectual mastery” over their world. The “intellectually discriminating” individual achieves this sense of mastery when they are able to orient themselves in relation to a world that has been rendered familiar and homely. Disorientation, as an experience of uncertainty and unfamiliarity with one’s environment, challenges this sense of mastery by exposing the world as *unhomely*, as not a familiar home *for us*. Such instances of disorientation are, in turn, experienced by the “intellectually discriminating” individual as *frightening moments of uncanny strangeness*, a feeling of creeping anxiety and fear of a world that suddenly reappears as unhomely and threatening. For subjects who are invested in a project of gaining intellectual mastery over their world (such as modern subjects), these moments of disorientation and uncanniness are extremely disruptive. Those who are “clearer about the boundaries of their own orientational abilities” will tend to be “quite the most fearful,” insofar as their orientation (and thus their sense of “intellectual mastery”) is constantly threatened by the possibility of disruption, disorientation, and feelings of uncanniness.

Jenstch’s psychological investigation into the uncanny thus seems to provide a strong basis for understanding the affective dimensions of uncanniness, as well as its connection to the disorientation which follows the dissolution of the modern world: uncanniness is an unpleasant, frightening feeling of unhomely strangeness which arises from the disorientation of “intellectual

uncertainty” regarding how to properly categorize an entity or phenomenon in the world, and such sensations are most likely to afflict subjects who (like the subject of modernity) are invested in a project of “intellectual mastery” based on a system of categorical distinctions between phenomena, making the dissolution of the modern world a prime source of uncanny disorientation. However, while I have purposefully focused on those aspects of Jenstch’s theory that can be used to support my interpretation of uncanniness, disorientation, and modernity thus far, it is also important to note some of the major limitations of his psychological model of the uncanny. Particularly, it must be observed that Jenstch’s chauvinistic faith in a linear vision of both psychological and civilizational progress toward “intellectual mastery” over one’s environment—a faith which leads him to draw parallels between a conception of intellectual development from childhood to adulthood and a progressive model of cultural development from “primitive” to “civilized,” thereby perpetuating the stereotype of the “primitive” (i.e., non-European) as infantile—produces contradictions in his account of uncanniness and his argument as to the sources of uncanny feelings.

Such contradictions are evident in Jenstch’s discussion of the connection between ignorance and the uncanny, wherein he claims that it is the *ignorance* of the child or the “primitive” (i.e., their lack of clearly defined, purified categories by which to gain “intellectual mastery” over things in the world) that is likely to produce an intellectual disorientation that manifests as a feeling of uncanniness, before quickly moving on to claim that it is actually the “bright child” (who has a greater sense of the boundaries of their ideational schema) who is most likely to be fearful of the unknown (Jenstch 5). Jenstch thus claims that *both* “ignorance” and greater “intellectual mastery” make one susceptible to experiences of disorientation and uncanny feelings—a paradox which remains unexamined and unresolved in his essay.

Similarly, Katherine Withy notes the incoherence and lack of rigour apparent in the examples listed by Jenstch as instances of uncanny experience. For Withy, most of the examples of uncanniness that Jenstch cites (including the hiker who mistakes a large snake for a tree trunk, or the experience of realizing that the sun does not really rise or set, but rather that the earth is in a perpetual rotation around the sun) are not *actually* instances of the uncanny. Such experiences may be surprising or frightening, but they do not possess the eerie, creeping, anxious quality that delineates uncanniness as a particular kind of horror. Moreover, Withy claims that Jenstch's analysis cannot adequately explain *how* or *why* these experiences provoke feelings of uncanniness, as his psychological model of "intellectual mastery" provides no opportunity for individuals to perceive the uncanny object *as* uncanny in the first place. If "intellectual mastery" is achieved through the construction of a totalizing ideational schema within which any given entity can be categorized for the purpose of providing an orientation, and uncanny objects provoke "intellectual uncertainty" by falling *outside* the networks of meaning through which we categorize phenomena and orient ourselves, then a question arises as to how one is able to perceive hybrid/uncanny objects at all, without immediately assimilating them to a familiar conceptual schema of the world by relegating the uncanny entity to one or another established conceptual category (Withy 24-25). On the Jenstchian model, there seems to be no way to actually encounter hybrid objects, or to have an uncanny experience on the basis of such an encounter, since Jenstch provides no explanation for how or why such objects would be experienced as uncanny instead of being subsumed within the subject's ideational schema of the world.

Withy interprets this lack of explanation as a damning critique of Jenstch's essay. However, as was mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter, the uncanny is

notoriously difficult to adequately define, given the tendency of uncanny objects to resist categorization and transgress conceptual distinctions (Masschelein 2). It is my contention that the core of contemporary uncanniness lies precisely within the paradoxical tension that Jenstch identifies: hybrid objects provoke feelings of uncanniness for the modern subject because they are at once *undeniably real* yet *intractably resistant* to subsumption within the purified ontological categories of modernity.<sup>83</sup> To subjects who have oriented themselves on the basis of the modern constitution, such objects appear unaccountably strange, disorienting, and destructive to the modern world, since they can neither be denied nor acknowledged, neither escaped nor assimilated within a system of meaning based upon purification without translation.

I have chosen to base my interpretation of uncanniness on a reading of Jenstch's essay (in spite of its obvious and well-documented limitations) precisely because his work highlights the indeterminable tension residing at the heart of uncanniness, even as his essay fails to explain the underlying causes or effects of this tension in sufficient detail. Moreover, even though Jenstch's underdeveloped and sometimes contradictory psychological model has historically been elided in favour of the psychoanalytic interpretation put forward by Freud, something of his insight into the oscillation and undecidability between the *familiar* and the *unfamiliar*, *intellectual mastery* and *intellectual uncertainty*, and the relation between *uncanniness* and *disorientation* persists throughout the twists and turns of the uncanny's subsequent theorization, suggesting perhaps that the paradoxical tensions and contradictions which plague Jenstch's essay in fact belong to the structure of the uncanny itself. As such, I believe that we can accept Jenstch's conception of

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<sup>83</sup> This idea—that objects are undeniably real, independent of cognition, and non-reducible to human concepts or consciousness—also aligns with the basic insights of the contemporary philosophical movements of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism. See, in particular: Graham Harman's *Towards Speculative Realism* and *Object Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology*, Katherine Behar's edited collection, *Object-Oriented Feminism*, and Peter Gratton's overview of speculative realism/object-oriented ontology in *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects*.

uncanniness as an affective sensation of creeping fear and anxiety which arises as an effect of disorientation and the loss of “intellectual mastery” as a solid basis for understanding the affective dimensions of uncanniness in its relation to disorientation, even while acknowledging its limitations.

For a more detailed explanation of the sources and effects of uncanniness, however, it will be necessary to examine the ways in which these predominant features of the uncanny, as established through our reading of Jenstch’s essay, have been theorized and explained in subsequent attempts at conceptualization. The most obvious point of departure for this investigation is Sigmund Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny”—by far the most well-known and referenced work on the nature of uncanniness.

*Freud and the Return of the Repressed—The Psychoanalytic Interpretation*

Since its initial publication in 1919, Freud’s essay on the psychological source of uncanny feelings (titled simply “The Uncanny”) has gained the status of a foundational text in the ongoing theorization of uncanniness as a concept. In fact, as Masschelein notes, it is from this essay onward that the process of conceptualizing the uncanny begins in earnest: while previous thinkers had engaged with the uncanny in various ways, it is only following the publication of Freud’s essay that uncanniness becomes seen as a significant site of inquiry, deserving of systematic examination (Masschelein 1-7). As such, most subsequent theorization of the uncanny has been informed to some degree by this text, and any contemporary investigation into uncanniness must grapple with the legacy of Freud’s interpretation.

It is important to note, however, that Freud’s essay hardly constitutes a thorough or systematic treatment of the uncanny. Rather, as H el ene Cixous has argued, the text’s primary

function is to develop certain concepts which distinguish psychoanalysis as a unique field of inquiry, independent of previous models of human psychology (Cixous 525-529). Instead of conceptualizing the uncanny in its particularity, then, Freud interprets feelings of uncanniness as symptomatic of a more fundamental psychological experience—the “return of the repressed”—to which he believes any-and-all possible experiences of the uncanny can be subsumed. As such, his essay does not constitute an investigation into the uncanny *itself*, but rather presents a psychoanalytic explanation of various phenomena that are often experienced as uncanny, with the express purpose of developing psychoanalysis as a coherent and universal system of explanation.

Yet, in his attempt to explain the experience of uncanny feelings through the use of psychoanalytic concepts, Freud also highlights certain aspects of the uncanny that were not adequately explored in Jenstch’s earlier interpretation. It will therefore be pertinent to examine “The Uncanny” in some depth in order to further develop our understanding of uncanniness as an affective state and its relation to the normative disorientation produced by the crisis of modernity. In the following section of this chapter, I will present Freud’s theory not as a comprehensive or definitive account of uncanniness but as a further explication of insights which we have already outlined through our reading of Jenstch’s essay. I will also seek to explain Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of the uncanny, reading it against Jenstch’s earlier conceptualization in order to highlight the particular contributions that Freud makes to our understanding of uncanniness as an affective experience. In particular, I will argue that Freud’s greater concern for the underlying causes and effects of uncanny feelings can help to explain *how* and *why* certain types of phenomena (i.e., hybrid objects) are experienced as uncanny, while also providing insight into the *affective* nature of uncanniness as a particular feeling which circulates in the

relation between subjects and their world, rather than an inherent property residing within uncanny objects themselves.

To begin, we may note that Freud, like Jenstch, explicitly positions his essay as an investigation into the nature of uncanny *feelings*, claiming “that there exists a specific affective nucleus, which justifies the use of [the uncanny as] a special conceptual term. One would like to know the nature of this common nucleus, which allows us to distinguish the ‘uncanny’ within the field of the frightening” (Freud 152). From the outset, then, Freud wishes to define the affective dimensions of uncanniness by distinguishing the uncanny from other kinds of frightening things (or from “the frightening” in general), as he believes the uncanny to be a particular *type* of frightening experience and uncanniness to be a particular “species” of fright. He thus sets out to determine the specific psychological causes and affective features of uncanny feelings by following Jenstch’s etymological examination of the word *unheimlich* in its common German usage, subsequently relating this etymological investigation to case studies of individuals who have been affected by feelings of uncanniness. This avenue of inquiry ultimately leads Freud to conclude “that the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar,” but which has somehow become strangely unfamiliar and unhomely (Freud 153). With this definition of the uncanny established, his guiding question then becomes: “under what conditions the familiar can become uncanny and frightening,” as opposed to habitual and comforting (Freud 153).

This question arises, in part, through Freud’s particular reading of the word *unheimlich*. Determined to define the specific affective valence of uncanniness, he begins his investigation by following Jenstch’s literal reading of the word, which combines the negating or inverting prefix “un” to the complex word *heimlich* which, through a literal reading, means “homely,” but in

conventional German usage also denotes that which is *secret*, *hidden*, or *clandestine* (Freud 153-161). Breaking with Jenstch, however, Freud focuses his analysis on this dual meaning of the root word *heimlich* as something that is simultaneously *homely* (familiar, comfortable, home-like) yet *secretive* (hidden, clandestine, nefarious). From this double meaning, Freud posits that the word *unheimlich*, in fact, only makes explicit the ambivalence of meaning which exists within the structure of the *heimlich* itself: that there is always something *unheimlich* lurking within the *heimlich*, that the homely somehow becomes its own other, the familiar being always-already in some sense *uncanny* (Freud 161-162). The *unheimlich*, then, rather than being the opposite or negation of the *heimlich*, is posited by Freud as *itself a species of the heimlich*, pertaining to “what was once well known and had been familiar” but which has become hidden, secret, and unfamiliar through a process of repression into the unconscious (Freud 153, 159-60). The *unheimlich*, as that which is experienced as *uncanny*, represents anything which combines the comfortable familiarity of the homely with the creeping unfamiliarity of the secret and hidden, and affective feelings of *uncanniness*, as a kind of creeping anxiety and horror which “belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread,” are precisely what mark this ambivalence of the homely, the way in which the comfortably familiar risks becoming strange and unfamiliar, the *heimlich* sliding into the *unheimlich* (Freud 152). Feelings of uncanniness are thus the affective by-product of a certain ambivalence between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the comfortably homey and the clandestinely secret.

In this regard, Freud’s definition of the uncanny largely aligns with Jenstch’s earlier explanation of uncanny feelings in terms of an oscillation between “intellectual mastery” and “intellectual uncertainty,” insofar as both thinkers conceptualize uncanniness as an ambivalent experience which combines a sense of comfortable familiarity (homeliness) with discomfiting

unfamiliarity (unhomeliness). Yet Freud also explicitly breaks with Jenstch's interpretation of the uncanny by reconceptualizing the *source* and *cause* of uncanny feelings in terms of previously repressed childhood beliefs returning to conscious perception, rather than an oscillation between states of intellectual certainty and uncertainty (Freud 173-174).<sup>84</sup> This reconceptualization begins when Freud draws a connection between affective experiences of uncanniness and the childhood compulsion toward repetition, associating this compulsion with the adult neurotic's tendency to repetitively perform certain actions as a means of warding off ill health, as well as their superstitious concern with coincidental repetitions (for example, the tendency to interpret a repeated encounter with a particular number as an ill omen, rather than as simply a coincidence). Noting that it is the neurotic patient who is most likely to experience feelings of uncanniness, Freud claims that uncanny feelings are usually linked to certain compulsions and beliefs developed in childhood which, in the normal process of psychological development, are repressed into the unconscious mind as the child grows into adulthood (Freud 176). Most notably, these repressed childhood beliefs include: animism (a belief that inanimate objects are actually alive), the compulsion to repeat (the tendency of children to compulsively repeat certain games, words, or actions), and the "omnipotence of thoughts" (the belief that thoughts can have a direct influence over reality). From this perceived connection between neuroticism, uncanniness, and repressed childhood beliefs, Freud then posits that feelings of uncanniness, rather than being a product of the oscillation between intellectual mastery and uncertainty as Jenstch had

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<sup>84</sup> Though, as both Anneleen Masschelein and Hélène Cixous note in their respective readings of Freud's essay, Freud himself seems uncertain or ambivalent in his rejection of Jenstch's model for interpreting the uncanny, and at times appears to agree that uncanniness results from a kind of "intellectual uncertainty" (Masschelein 24-25). Moreover, Cixous claims that Freud's apparent need to distinguish his interpretation of the uncanny in contradistinction to Jenstch actually indicates a paranoid desire for intellectual mastery over the concept, rather than a genuine disagreement with Jenstch (Cixous 525-539).

previously claimed, are, in reality, a result of something being *repeated* or *returned* to (Freud 173-174).<sup>85</sup>

Focusing specifically on the connection between the uncanny and the compulsion to repeat, Freud develops his theory of the uncanny as an instance of the *return of the repressed*: the sudden return to consciousness of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that have been psychologically repressed into one's unconscious mind.<sup>86</sup> On this model, it is that which has previously been repressed but subsequently returns to consciousness that is experienced as uncanny, rather than the inability to categorize a given entity within one's intellectual schema of the world. The uncanny entity is thus "actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed" (Freud 173). Hence the ambivalent double meaning of *heimlich* as both homely (something long familiar) and secretive (estranged through repression): the *unheimlich*, as an experience of the return of the repressed, simply reveals the ambivalence which lurks within the *heimlich* itself, the homely and familiar threatening to become unfamiliar and hidden through repression and return.

It is this interpretation of the underlying cause of uncanny feelings as a re-emergence to consciousness of repressed childhood beliefs which largely distinguishes Freud's psychoanalytic theory of uncanniness from Jenstch's more conventional psychological model. Yet, even as Freud rejects Jenstch's explanation of uncanniness in terms of "intellectual uncertainty," he also presents the return of the repressed in terms of a developmental model of psychology that closely

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<sup>85</sup> This link between the uncanny and repetition/return also links feelings of uncanniness with experiences of *déjà vu*—the feeling that one has been somewhere or experienced something once before, which shares with uncanniness a sense of strange familiarity with what is unfamiliar (or, in the case of uncanniness, an unfamiliarity with what was once familiar).

<sup>86</sup> It should be noted here that Freud does not specifically use the phrase "return of the repressed" in "The Uncanny," but that this essay constitutes an important moment in his theorization of this concept and presents one of the strongest articulations of the theory that has come to be expressed by this term.

mirrors Jenstch's conception of a progressive "intellectual mastery" over the world through the process of civilizational progress or individual psychological maturation. On the Freudian model, individuals develop in childhood a "primitive" set of beliefs that are used to make sense of entities and events encountered in the world. As the child grows into adulthood, they become increasingly subject to the "reality principle" (i.e., the ability to adequately assess the reality of the external world and conform one's behaviour accordingly), while their "primitive" childhood beliefs are repressed into the unconscious to be replaced by beliefs that can reconcile the subject to reality. However, the repressed content (the childhood belief in animism and "omnipotence of thoughts") is never fully eliminated from the mind. Instead, it lives on in the unconscious, forgotten but not erased, because repression is never a fully effective psychological mechanism (Masschelein 29-52). Repressed childhood beliefs may therefore *return* from the unconscious to consciousness in certain moments, particularly when an entity or event encountered in the world resists explanation within the adult schema of understanding based on the reality principle. In such instances, a previously repressed belief in animism or the omnipotence of thoughts may return to fill in the gaps of what the reality principle is capable of explaining. But since such beliefs have long been "forgotten" through their repression into the unconscious portion of the mind, their return to consciousness is experienced as *uncanny*: at once homely and familiar, intimately one's own yet somehow strange, foreign, and unhomely. These feelings of uncanniness are then attributed by the mind to whatever object, entity, or experience first prompted the return of repressed beliefs, thereby giving the impression that it is the thing *itself* which is uncanny, rather than the sudden re-emergence of long forgotten beliefs (Withy 23-28).

For Freud, uncanniness is thus a product of the undecidable tension between two modes of making sense of the world (i.e., "primitive" childhood beliefs in animism or the "omnipotence

of thoughts” and more mature adult beliefs based on the reality principle) which occurs when systems of meaning that have been repressed into the individual’s unconscious mind return to consciousness in moments of uncertainty. In such moments, the uncanny entity appears as both familiar (in terms of the repressed childhood belief system) and unfamiliar (in terms of the adult ideational schema based on the reality principle) *at the same time*. But it is really the repressed content’s return to consciousness that is *itself* experienced as uncanny, insofar as these repressed beliefs represent a means of making sense of the world that was once familiar but now return as radically unfamiliar. According to Freud, it is this re-emergence to consciousness of repressed modes of understanding which lies below the surface of experiences of uncanniness, constituting the true nature of uncanny feelings (Freud 170-174). The uncanny object is perceived as simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar (strangely familiar, unfamiliarly strange) because it is being viewed through the lens of a psychological schema that was once habitual but has subsequently been repressed, forgotten, and brought back to consciousness.

This helps to explain why feelings of uncanniness tend to be attached to certain types of objects and narratives, such as dolls, automata, ghosts, stories of possession, or the undead. The adult schema of understanding based upon the reality principle has a difficult time adequately conceptualizing these phenomenon, thereby prompting the return of a belief in animism (e.g., the doll seems lifelike because it *is* alive) or the “omnipotence of thoughts” (e.g., this strange encounter was not coincidental but rather caused by a passing thought) in order to fill the gap in understanding. Such entities are thus frightening, not because they evoke fear for one’s safety or physical well-being, but because they are *disturbing*: they disturb one’s established schema for understanding the world by dredging up and super-imposing past ideas, beliefs, and feelings that have been repressed and rendered unconscious, giving things in the world an uncanny

appearance of simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity (Withy 26). This uncanny disturbance is, in turn, felt at the level of the body as a pervasive sense of anxiety and weirdness, rather than outright fear or terror.

For Freud, uncanniness thus constitutes its own distinct feeling, related in kind, but ultimately separable from, other types of frightening experience on the basis of its disturbing, strange, and anxious quality. However, the particular phenomenal qualities of the entities and experiences perceived as uncanny seem largely irrelevant. Rather, what is felt as uncanny is the *event* of repressed beliefs returning to consciousness. If certain kinds of things (i.e., hybrid entities like automata, ghosts, the living dead, or experiences of disorientation) seem to have a greater capacity to produce uncanny feelings, this is simply a by-product of the single trajectory of psychological development along which all individuals and civilizations supposedly progress, from “primitive” compulsions and beliefs to the “civilized” reality principle (Masschelein 28-39). There is nothing *essentially* uncanny about such objects, they simply recall childhood beliefs that we all share and have all repressed.

Similarly, Freud denies that there is anything inherently uncanny about experiences of disorientation, stating that “[for Jenstch] the essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny is intellectual uncertainty. One would suppose, then, that the uncanny would always be an area in which a person was unsure of his way around: the better oriented he was in the world around him, the less likely he would be to find the objects and occurrences in it uncanny,” but that “[this] definition is clearly not exhaustive” (Freud 153-154). While noting the apparent connection between feelings of uncanniness and experiences of disorientation, Freud tends to dismiss the importance of this connection by positioning uncanniness as conceptually and affectively distinct from disorientation (Freud 153-154). By explaining uncanny experiences as a

product of the return of repressed feelings or beliefs, the connection between *uncanniness* and *disorientation* becomes nothing more than a misinterpretation of the *true* cause of uncanny feelings: the return of a repressed compulsion toward repetition and superstition. For example, Freud writes that becoming lost or disoriented

undoubtedly evokes such a feeling [of uncanniness] under particular conditions, and in combination with particular circumstances—a feeling, moreover, that recalls the helplessness we experience in certain dream-states. Strolling one hot summer afternoon through the empty and to me unfamiliar streets of a small Italian town, I found myself in a district about whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Only heavily made-up women were to be seen at the windows of the little houses, and I hastily left the narrow street at the next turning. However, after wandering about for some time without asking the way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence began to attract attention. Once more I hurried away, only to return there again by a different route. I was now seized by a feeling that I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad to find my way back to the piazza that I had recently left and refrain from any further voyages of discovery (Freud 170).<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Cixous makes much of Freud's reticence to relay the facts of this encounter, choosing to describe the red-light district of Venice and the sex workers who reside therein through the evasive language of "heavily made-up women" and "a district about whose character I could not long remain in doubt." On Cixous' critical reading, this reticence represents an unacknowledged *repression* on Freud's part: a refusal to acknowledge the reality of the situation, interpreting it instead through his own Victorian attitudes toward sexuality (Cixous 540). These omissions of the facts of the story are, in turn, interpreted by Cixous in terms of a pathological need for control. Freud, exercising the control, omnipotence, and privilege of a narrator relating a fictive story, represses certain aspects of the uncanny situation in order to maintain his authoritative position over the concept (Cixous 531-32). For Cixous, this also explains Freud's insistence on distinguishing his psychoanalytical interpretation from certain aspects of Jenstch's previous "layman" reading of the uncanny—most notably, the idea of "intellectual uncertainty" and the connection between disorientation and uncanniness—despite the obvious similarities between his and Jenstch's theory (Cixous 529, 535).

Obviously, this anecdote relates an instance of disorientation: lost in an unfamiliar city, Freud finds himself walking in circles, unable to orient himself in relation to the unfamiliar street that seems to keep bringing him back precisely where he does not wish to be. We may even note the similarity of this story to Kant's classic example of disorientation: suddenly finding oneself lost on a street that should be familiar (Kant 9). Yet, on Freud's reading, the uncanniness of the situation is in no way connected to the experience of disorientation; rather, it is an effect of the *repetition* of returning, over and over, against one's best intentions, to an unfamiliar and disturbing place. It is this aspect of *return*, related to the repressed childhood compulsion to repeat, which Freud claims to be the underlying cause of the situation's uncanniness, rather than disorientation (Freud 171). He goes on, stating that:

Other situations that share this feature of the unintentional return with the one I have just described, but differ from it in other respects, may nevertheless produce the same feeling of helplessness, the same sense of the uncanny. One may, for instance, have lost one's way in the woods, perhaps after being overtaken by fog, and, despite all one's efforts to find a marked or familiar path, one comes back again and again to the same spot, which one recognizes by a particular physical feature. Or one may be groping around in the dark in an unfamiliar room, searching for the door or the light-switch and repeatedly colliding with the same piece of furniture...we have no difficulty in recognizing that it is only the factor of unintended repetition that transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable, when we should normally speak of 'chance' (Freud 170-171).

Again, these particular examples would seem to indicate a strong connection between the uncanny and disorientation, given their similarity to certain descriptions of disorientation

discussed previously. Specifically, Freud's description of "groping around in the dark in an unfamiliar room" appears to be a precise recreation of Kant's hypothetical darkened room with the furniture rearranged (Kant 9), while his description of wandering lost in a foggy wood is strongly reminiscent of Jenstch's imagined hiker who misrecognizes certain shapes in the woods, imagining them to be a tree branch when they are really a snake (Jenstch 8). But, again, Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of these examples leads him to deny the connection between disorientation and uncanniness, instead focusing on the phenomenon of repetition and the repressed compulsion to repeat as the true source of uncanny feelings.

Given this strong disavowal of the connection between disorientation and uncanniness, coupled with the immense influence that Freud's essay has had on subsequent theorization in this field, it is perhaps of little wonder that the relationship of uncanny feelings to experiences of disorientation has remained largely unexplored in literature on the uncanny, even as it is frequently noted in passing. But to what extent is Freud's disavowal of disorientation as the source of uncanny feelings justified? Hélène Cixous, in her critical reading of "The Uncanny," famously critiques Freud's selective interpretation of the Jenstchian theory of uncanniness by claiming that his "elaboration begins, in reality, from a conclusion which returns the analysis to the still intraanalytical circle" such that the "expulsion of 'intellectual uncertainty' allows the prescription of an analytical interpretation" (535). According to Cixous, this summary dismissal of Jenstch's conception of "intellectual uncertainty" in favour of a psychoanalytic interpretation of uncanniness that returns us time and again to the "intraanalytical circle"—a closed theoretical system that permits no alternative interpretation, no uncertainty or ambivalence as to the source of uncanny feelings—ultimately reveals more about Freud's desire to exert control over the uncanny as a concept than it does about the nature of uncanniness itself (525-535). In order to

impose a strictly psychoanalytic interpretation onto the uncanny, to make it fit within the closed system of the “intraanalytical circle” such that uncanny feelings can be fully and exclusively explained in relation to psychoanalytic concepts (i.e., the return of the repressed), the fuzzy ambivalence and paradoxical tension of the uncanny must be excluded and repressed: hence Freud’s general hostility toward Jenstch’s reading of uncanniness, which retains much of the uncanny’s indeterminacy in its contradictory structure, even as his essay draws heavily from (and often aligns with) certain elements of Jenstch’s interpretation.

We might similarly question Freud’s dismissal of the relationship between uncanniness and disorientation. Why does Freud reject the possibility that experiences of disorientation have something to do with the production of uncanny feelings, despite the numerous examples of disorientation that appear throughout his own interpretation of the concept? Why focus on the aspect of “return” in these various examples, rather than the more immediately apparent element of disorientation? Could it be that disorientation, like “intellectual uncertainty,” must be suppressed within Freud’s analysis in order to make the uncanny fit a pre-formed conclusion that “returns the analysis to the still intraanalytic circle”—namely, that feelings of uncanniness are a product of the return of repressed compulsions and beliefs, rather than intellectual uncertainty and disorientation? Following Cixous’ reading of “The Uncanny” in terms of an evident desire for mastery over the uncanny as a concept, it is my contention that Freud’s general disavowal of the connection between uncanniness and disorientation represents an attempt to suppress the uncertainty and paradoxical tension which forms the heart of uncanny feelings, as highlighted by Jenstch’s earlier investigation (Cixous 525-526). In order to render the experience of uncanniness neatly legible within the closed system of psychoanalysis, it becomes necessary to exclude, ignore, or repress those aspects of the uncanny which fail to conform neatly to psychoanalytic

interpretation. As such, Freud rejects the possibility of both intellectual uncertainty and disorientation on the basis of their *ambivalence* and *indeterminacy*, excluding these aspects of the uncanny (which open the possibility for alternate interpretations) from the “intraanalytic circle” by reinterpreting them in terms of a single psychoanalytic concept: the return of the repressed.

We may therefore critique Freud’s rejection of intellectual uncertainty as a source of uncanny feelings, as well as his denial of the connection between experiences of uncanniness and disorientation, even as his theory seems to provide a more robust account of the particular affective dimensions of the uncanny than Jentch’s earlier investigation. Indeed, it is unclear if Freud’s theory of the return of the repressed differs significantly from Jentch’s conception of intellectual uncertainty, as both seem to turn on the ambivalence created by the tension between two ideational schemas, emphasizing the uncertainty and undecideability of such experiences. Freud simply adds that this intellectual uncertainty is not (only or singularly) a product of the tension between the material reality of particular entities and our conceptual understanding of them, but rather between *two competing modes of understanding and explaining the world*, one of which has been repressed and reappears as strangely familiar/unfamiliar. As such, both thinkers emphasize that uncanny feelings are not the product of a particular content or quality possessed by the entity experienced as uncanny but rather result from the sense that the uncanny object is both familiar and unfamiliar at once.

Similarly, both thinkers argue that the experience of something as simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar (which is felt as the affective state of *uncanniness*) results from the tension or oscillation between two ways of understanding the uncanny object, such that the object comes to occupy a position of uncertainty and undecideability regarding its proper categorization. For

Jenstch, this is simply a matter of tension between two or more conceptual categories within the same ideational schema and the oscillation between “intellectual mastery” and “intellectual uncertainty” that results from this tension, while for Freud, it is a tension between two conflicting systems of meaning or interpretation which results from the movement of repressed content from the unconscious to the conscious mind. The difference between Freud and Jenstch’s accounts of the uncanny is therefore the particular *level* at which they locate the uncertainty which produces feelings of uncanniness: at the level of concepts within a single ideational schema in the case of Jenstch, or at the level of two conflicting systems of meaning in the case of Freud (Withy 24). At base, both thinkers are in agreement that feelings of uncanniness result from an uncertainty, ambivalence, and tension regarding how to properly categorize a given entity in the world. By focusing on the more thematic aspects of Freud and Jenstch’s respective conceptions of the uncanny, we can thus conclude that Freud’s theorization of the uncanny does not necessarily break with Jenstch’s earlier conception of uncanniness as a product of “intellectual uncertainty,” but instead, further develops themes and insights already present in Jenstch’s account.

Moreover, we may note that Jenstch and Freud’s overlapping concern with uncanniness as a product of the tension between familiarity/unfamiliarity and the inability to reliably categorize a given entity within one’s habitual schema of understanding seems to align with our previous discussion of hybridity, the crisis of modernity, and the disorientation that follows the dissolution of the modern world. As with Jenstch’s description of the interplay between intellectual mastery and intellectual uncertainty, Freud’s conception of the uncanny easily maps onto Latour’s conception of hybrid objects, which straddle the lines between purified ontological categories of understanding, thereby resisting our habitual schema of categorization and

orientation. On this reading of the Freudian model, the so-called “reality principle” (that is, the set of beliefs and understandings which reconcile the individual to the reality of their world) does not so much represent a transhistorical state towards which all people universally progress, but rather the individual’s subscription to *one particular framework for making sense of things*—namely, the modern constitution. As this framework for making sense of things is internalized, replacing all other possible systems of sense-making (including systems that allow for a belief in animism, the omnipotence of thought, hybridity, etc.) to the point of becoming reflexive and habitual, it comes to constitute its own *world*, the world of modernity. Becoming reconciled to the reality of the modern world then requires that one internalize the tenets of the modern constitution, explaining any-and-all phenomena through its purified ontological categories. This assimilation to the modern world and its system of explanation and orientation, in turn, functions to repress those objects or entities which cannot be made sense of within its framework of understanding, as well as any system of belief or understanding that is not based upon the drive to purification without translation. Translation and its production of hybrid entities subsequently comes to represent the “secret,” hidden activity of modernity, which is “repressed” and forgotten, pushed away into the background in favour of an orientation toward only those objects or entities which can be properly purified and integrated within the system of meaning that constitutes the modern world. But as uninhibited translation continues to take place in the background, just below the surface of the homey and familiar modern world, it begins to produce ever greater networks of hybridity, eventually causing the secret or hidden aspects of modernity (i.e., its hybrid objects) to “return” to the surface, provoking not only an experience of disorientation (as examined in the previous chapter), but also a profound sense of *uncanniness*, insofar as the

uncanny represents “everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open” (Freud 160).

In this way, Freud’s conceptualization of the uncanny seems to mirror my reading of Latour and Morton’s account of modernity, hybridity, and the end of the world, providing insight into how the crisis of modernity and the attendant dissolution of the modern world *feels* for those subjects trapped within it. On this reading, the undeniability of hybridity which prompts the crisis of modernity represents a kind of social return of the repressed capable of provoking not only a profound sense of normative disorientation but intense feelings of *uncanniness* as well. As the modern world ends, and the orientations based upon its system of meaning are challenged by the undeniable presence of previously repressed hybrid objects, a frightening sense of uncanny *disturbance* and *anxiety* arises for the subject of modernity, as their homely and familiar world is suddenly revealed to be strange, unhomely, and unfamiliar, even while retaining an aura of its prior familiarity. For, as Freud’s essay makes clear, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and unhomely, the *heimlich* and *unheimlich* are not necessarily opposed or contradictory categories, but rather exist in an ambivalent tension which constantly threatens to emerge in moments of uncertainty and disorientation. Uncanniness, in its particularity, is precisely this ambivalence between the familiar and unfamiliar: objects appearing intimately familiar and radically strange at the same time.

#### *Contemporary Interest in the Uncanny—The Phenomenological Interpretation*

Yet, as mentioned previously, conceptualization and theoretical interest in the uncanny has only proliferated in the wake of Freud’s seminal investigation, with much of this theorization taking place within the past few decades (Masschelein 3-4). During this recent period of

conceptualization, interest in the uncanny has been focused primarily on its *aesthetic* dimensions, positioning uncanniness as a generic effect produced by certain kinds of artistic works or narrative figures. However, more recent theoretical trends concerned with ontology and phenomenology have taken up the uncanny as a central concept in ways that resonate with the psychological, affective, and ontological aspects of uncanniness examined in the previous sections on Jenstch and Freud. In particular, the developing philosophical schools of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism, along with a renewed contemporary interest in phenomenology and philosophies of nihilism, have focused on uncanniness as both an *ontological* state of being and an *affective* experience of creeping horror, positioning the uncanny as central to questioning modern categories of meaning and sense-making. But while the uncanny and uncanniness appear as important aspects in much work on object-oriented ontology and speculative realism,<sup>88</sup> it is in the renewed attention given to *phenomenology* that uncanniness is thought through most explicitly. In particular, the contemporary phenomenologist Dylan Trigg deals specifically with the uncanny in his attempt to construct a form of phenomenology that is capable of escaping the anthropocentric and correlationist traps identified by the major thinkers of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism, positing uncanniness and horror as central concepts for contemporary philosophy.

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<sup>88</sup>This is perhaps unsurprising, particularly if we consider that much object-oriented ontology follows the work of Graham Harman in extending Heidegger's insights on ontology (as gleaned from his analysis of tools, readiness-to-hand, and presence-at-hand) to *all things*. By positing that everything shares the same ontological structure (i.e., that every *thing* is an *object*, including Dasein), and that this ontological structure is the withdrawn, groundless, inaccessible Being that Heidegger defines as uncanny, Harman suggests that *all* Being (and not just human Being, as for Heidegger) is *fundamentally uncanny*. On Harman's reading, any given thing (including Dasein) is estranged from its own essence, which is entirely withdrawn and inaccessible to it (and to all other entities), looming at the centre of existence as a *strange stranger*—that which is most intimate yet also completely alien, strangely familiar and unsettlingly unfamiliar at once. See: Harman's *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* and Katherine Withy's *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*.

Beginning from Levinas' insistence that there exists an "anonymous state of being"—a form of existence that is pre-subjective and not dependent on the correlation of human subjectivity or consciousness to world—and Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body as anonymous and pre-personal, Trigg argues that the basic structure of being human is itself *uncanny*, because something inhuman and pre-personal always inhabits and grounds human subjectivity (Trigg *The Memory of a Place* 163-169).<sup>89</sup> Following Merleau-Ponty, Trigg then conceptualizes the body as a point of convergence in time and space that is lived phenomenologically by the finite subject. The body acts as an anchor for the subject cast adrift in the flux of time and space, securing the subject in the present by tying together its past, present, and future, thereby orienting it, both spatially and temporally.

Like Sara Ahmed, Trigg then interprets this orientating and anchoring function of the body as a product of its *affective* capacities, claiming that bodies primarily orient themselves in space and time on the basis of affective *feel*, absorbing the contours of a place or time through bodily processes that largely take place below the level of conscious perception.<sup>90</sup> It is only subsequent to this initial affective experience of place that a number of binary distinctions (e.g., left/right, toward/away, self/not-self, etc.) are established as orientation devices, covering over the initial bodily absorption of space which takes place independent of any cognitive mapping of

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<sup>89</sup> In this way, Trigg (like Ahmed) seems to be drawing on (or at least mirroring) the insights of much contemporary theory that falls under the label "new materialism." We might think, specifically, of Elizabeth Grosz' re-reading of Darwin and evolutionary theory in relation to theories of becoming and difference to demonstrate that the *inhuman* is the "uncontainable condition of the human, the origin of and trajectory immanent within the human" (*Becoming Undone* 11); or Jane Bennet's examination of the way that non-human elements form part of the human body and function as actants in assemblages with humans (and the consequences therein for anthropocentric accounts of the world) in her book *Vibrant Matter*; or Donna Haraway's account of co-evolution and the possibility of conceptualizing the human in an extensive way that includes non-human elements and challenges images of a self-contained human subjectivity or body, as presented in her *Companion Species Manifesto* and *When Species Meet*.

<sup>90</sup> We might think again here of Brian Massumi's conception of proprioception—the idea that bodies largely navigate space unconsciously, on the basis of an affective feeling that does not rely on cognitive maps or conventional sense perception.

the environment. Over time, as the dimensions of a particular place are affectively absorbed by the body to the point of becoming habitual, they come to form a constitutive part of one's embodied subjectivity, residing *within* the body as a kind of proprioceptive memory, even as the place itself continues to exist independently, *without* us. For Trigg, this disjunction between our affective memory and cognitive perception of a place, its existence as both part of and independent of us, then opens up the possibility for a clash between our affective and subjective experiences of the world, the personal and prepersonal dimensions of our existence—a clash which is experienced as both profoundly *disorienting* and disturbingly *uncanny* (Trigg *The Memory of a Place* xv-xxv, 6-13, 106-112).

Such a clash is possible because both the body and the world it occupies, aside from being simply a spatio-temporal anchor or the zero-point of orientation for a transcendental subjectivity, also exist as an anonymous, prepersonal materiality with *its own reality and experience*. Normally, this reality is covered over and hidden by subjective or “personal” experience, but it sometimes materializes to the subject as a kind of “impersonal experience,” both “self” (i.e., one's own body) and “not self” (i.e., impersonal material) at the same time, exposing how the impersonal, brute facticity of the prepersonal body is *always there*, accompanying the subject at all times as an intimate part of itself (Trigg *The Thing* 66-67). In such moments of “impersonal experience,” when the body or the world asserts itself as independent of subjectivity, bringing attention to its pre-personal existence, the subject is made aware that they have never had (and never will have) an absolute possessive mastery of self or world, and that the self is never simply an aggregate of ideas, memories, perceptions, thoughts, or psychological states, but is rather dependent on a pre-personal, pre-cognitive, anonymous

body to which the personal self has an ambiguous relationship, as this anonymous body constitutes a “not self” that *grounds* the self (Trigg *The Thing* 77).

On this conception, the material body anchors and orients the subject’s phenomenal experience in space and time while simultaneously containing, in its material facticity and affective capacities, pre-personal tendencies that cannot be accessed by the subject. The body is thus constitutive of subjectivity while remaining inaccessible to the subject. It exists before the subject arrives on the scene, as a system of anonymous functions (e.g., digestion and metabolism, blood circulation, the firing of neurons in the brain, etc.), and constitutes a self that *is* the subject while simultaneously being radically *anterior* to subjectivity (Trigg, *The Thing* 71-72). Yet there is also no duality between the pre-personal and the personal: they are intimately intertwined and dependent, just as the pre-personal body is continuous with the place and time in which it anchors subjectivity. There is no self without the pre-personal body and there is no pre-personal body without the world of which it is a part. The self is dependent on the not-self at its heart.<sup>91</sup>

Normally, the “personal body” (i.e., the self as a subject) represses or covers over the impersonal body, such that we are only consciously aware of ourselves as a subjectivity, not as a

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<sup>91</sup> While Trigg does not explicitly draw on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre to make this claim, instead opting to follow the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and existentialism of Emmanuel Levinas, this vision of the personal/pre-personal body is evocative of Sartre’s existential ontology, as in the following passage from *Being and Nothingness*: “Concretely, each *for-itself* is a lack of a certain coincidence with itself. This means that it is haunted by the presence of that with which it should coincide in order to be *itself*. But as this coincidence in Self is always coincidence with Self, the being which the For-itself lacks, the being which would make the For-itself a Self by assimilation with it—this being is still the For-itself. We have seen that the For-itself is a ‘presence to itself’; what this presence-to-itself lacks can fail to appear to it only as presence-to-itself. The determining relation of the for-itself to its possibility is a nihilating relaxation of the bond of presence-to-itself; this relaxation extends to transcendence since the presence-to-itself which the For-itself lacks is a presence-to-itself which *is not*. Thus the For-itself in so far as it is not *itself* is a presence-to-itself which lacks a certain presence-to-itself, and it is as a lack of this presence that it is presence-to-itself. Every consciousness lacks *something for something*. But it must be understood that the lack does not come to it from without...The lack of the for-itself is a lack which it *is*” (153).

body in the world. It is only in moments of *disturbance* that one may catch oblique glances of the anonymous, impersonal body that anchors and subtends this subjectivity (Trigg *The Thing* 50-55, 78, 101-107). Such moments of disturbance might take the form of the pre-personal body asserting its affective life and memory in ways that are contrary to subjective experience, when our body *remembers* what it has experienced, where it has been and what it has done, or acts without input from our conscious subjective self. For example, the way in which our bodies seem capable of orienting themselves and navigating through space, despite our inability to create adequate cognitive maps of even those places with which we are most familiar (Massumi 179-183). Trigg provocatively describes such instances in terms of an “alien flesh...characterized by the experience of ‘one’s own body’ being subject to another subjectivity,” a subjectivity that “is in some sense *not my own*” (*The Memory of a Place* 163).

Conversely, such instances of disturbance might also be provoked by an experience of *disorientation* when the affective memory of the pre-personal body fails to align with one’s subjective experience. For example, returning to a place that was once intimately familiar, but has since become strangely unfamiliar through the passage of time and the continuous impersonal processes that constantly take place without us (e.g., age, rot, growth, disintegration, etc.), such that our affective memories come into conflict with material reality. In such moments, Trigg argues, we are faced with the realization that the world has *a life of its own*, a history which is profoundly *indifferent* to us, going on without our input even as we live through and within it. This is an encounter with the anonymous materiality of the world which grounds and orients our subjective experience of self—an encounter which is profoundly disorienting, insofar as it displaces the self through a revelation that the world in its brute materiality is not *for us*, that it continues to live on *without us*, and is thus resistant to our attempts at orientation and sense-

making in relation to it (Trigg *The Memory of a Place* xv-xvi 1-2, 70-75). In turn, this disorientation is experienced as a feeling of extreme disturbance, as it calls into question the self-mastery or sovereignty of the subject, which depends upon some sense of bodily ownership and orientation to maintain its integrity as a singular entity (Trigg *The Thing* 74-83).

In either case, these moments of disturbance and disorientation register affectively at the level of the body precisely because *all* experience is embodied, including our encounters with the brute material facticity that subtends any subjective experience (Trigg *The Memory of a Place* xv). More specifically, Trigg claims that these encounters with the anonymous, prepersonal not-self that grounds the self (whether in the form of the prepersonal body or the brute materiality of an indifferent world) constitute a kind of *uncanniness*, a feeling of *horror at being alive*, or an eerie, creeping anxiety over the alien existence which pre-exists yet constitutes the self, such that the self is always being/becoming other (Trigg *The Thing* 9, 74, *The Memory of a Place* 7, 163-169). For Trigg, then:

the uncanny is to be understood fundamentally as an effect, a felt experience that disturbs the body, resulting in a departure from the everyday. Yet no less a displacement from the everyday, the uncanny simultaneously places us in the midst of the familiar. Here a disturbance occurs: the uncanny refuses to concede to stillness, and instead presents us with something genuinely novel: *an augmented familiarity*, thus (un)familiar to the core (*unheimlich*). Close enough to be recognized as broadly familiar, the world of the uncanny nevertheless subtly manipulates that familiar screen, thus engineering a shiver down the spine of anyone caught in its rays. At the heart of this shiver is the sense that what has so far been thought of as inconspicuous in its being is, in fact, charged with a creeping strangeness...The uncanny is strange rather than shocking, weird rather than

annihilating...A feeling of disempowerment occurs. The unity of self-identity becomes vulnerable. No longer do we feel at ease within ourselves. The uncanny leaves us in a state of disquiet, unnerved precisely because we lack the conceptual scheme to put the uncanny in its rightful 'place' (Trigg *The Memory of a Place* 27-28).

Encountering the “augmented familiarity” of the prepersonal ground of subjectivity—the anonymous materiality that simultaneously constitutes the self yet also lives independently of the subject—one is thrown into an affective state of *uncanniness*, experienced as a sense of “creeping strangeness” and “disempowerment” as the “unity of self-identity becomes vulnerable.” This is a sense of uncanniness that exposes *the uncanniness that we are*, arising as it does from an undecidable conflict between the need for a comforting sense of bodily ownership predicated on a set of boundaries between self/not-self, and the reality that this sense of bodily mastery is always-already *betrayed* by the reality of embodiment, by the very fact of existence itself. The conflict is undecidable because one’s bodily schema does not begin or end with the personal subject but is rather constituted by a pre-personal body that inhabits subjectivity like an alien presence (Trigg *The Thing* 77-76). One cannot escape this presence because it is *oneself*, even as it is radically anterior to selfhood. As such, it appears intimately familiar and infinitely strange *at the same time*, troubling the boundaries between self/not-self, human/other, living/non-living that the subject relies on for a sense of mastery, control, and orientation within the world of things (Trigg *The Thing* 78-80). In such moments of uncanniness, we “no longer...feel at ease within ourselves,” precisely because our “self” (i.e., the personal body, our subjectivity) has been displaced from its position of mastery and unity within the world. We are “disempowered,” left in a “state of disquiet,” unable to place ourselves in relation to the world, as things no longer seem to adhere to their familiar categories of meaning (Trigg *The Memory of*

*a Place* 27-28). Lost in our own uncanniness, the uncanniness of existence itself, we find ourselves disoriented within a meaningless, indifferent world.

At this point, some obvious connections can be made between Trigg's phenomenological description of uncanniness and our previous discussion of the crisis of modernity and its attendant production of disorientation. For the affective dimensions of uncanniness that Trigg describes—a loss of mastery, familiarity, and comfort stemming from an encounter with the undecidable hybridity of existence—seem to mirror precisely those negative aspects of normative disorientation outlined by Ahmed, which I have argued to be the primary affective experience of modern subjects within the crisis of modernity. Indeed, Trigg himself (like many theorists of the uncanny before him) often highlights the specifically *disorienting* aspects of uncanniness, describing uncanniness in terms of a disruption or disturbance of orientation in relation to both *place* and to our own sense of *being* (*The Memory of a Place* 58-59, 107, 116, 146-48, 196, *The Thing* 74-78, 80-83). As such, Trigg's phenomenological account of uncanniness would seem to indicate that certain forms of disorientation (specifically, the disorientation that arises from the dissolution of ontological boundaries between self/not-self, etc.) are affectively felt as a disturbing sense of uncanniness.

Moreover, this connection between uncanniness and disorientation is also reinforced through Trigg's description of the uncanny in terms of living through the dissolution of a *world*. Following the work of Emmanuel Levinas specifically, Trigg argues that it is precisely at the *end* of a world that we gain a palpable sense of the pre-personal, anonymous materiality of the body, since it is through the dissolution of the world as a network of meaningful relationships between things that we are exposed to the reality that *existence exists before the birth of the world*, or that things exist outside of their inscription within a world *for us*. As such, existence precedes, will

outlast, and is in some way resistant to our attempts to make sense of it, to convert it to a world proper to humanity. The “end of the world,” in this sense, is simply the realization that *there is*: that things exist beyond any world produced through their division into ontologically purified categories, or that existence *exists* in-and-of-itself, beyond or outside of human sense-making (Trigg *The Thing* 48-57).<sup>92</sup> Yet it is also this brute facticity of existence which grounds all of our attempts at making sense of things, and thus our construction of a world of human meaning. The seemingly straightforward realization that *there is* therefore entails profound consequences for the human being, revealing our utter contingency, while also exposing the uncanniness at the heart of existence: that the familiar meaning we ascribe to the existent is grounded upon a prior impersonal existence which is entirely indifferent to the meaning we invest it with.

The *there is* thus both *constitutes* and is *revealed by* the end of the world, when the familiar network of meaning that is a world *for us* begins to break down. Affectively, Trigg argues that this “end of the world” is felt as a kind of horror at the possibility of a *world without beings*, or a *world without us* (Trigg *The Thing* 48-51). It is a feeling of horror that is experienced as *uncanniness*, insofar as the impersonal existence of the *there is* appears simultaneously *familiar* (as always-already present in the very structure of existence) yet radically *unfamiliar* (because resistant to any attempt at being made sense of) at the same time. Moreover, it is a sense of uncanniness that mirrors the phenomenological experience of conflict between the personal body of subjectivity and the pre-personal material body which acts as the groundless ground of subjective experience. As Trigg describes:

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<sup>92</sup> This is also the basic assertion of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism’s critique of *correlationism*—the anthropocentric assumption that things only really exist when they are perceived (or are capable of being perceived) by human beings. For a strong articulation of this position, see Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*.

More than an invasion of anonymity, the *there is* marks a ‘menace of pure and simple presence,’ in which the finite being is divested of its singularity and subsumed by a ‘swarming of points,’ each of which constitutes an eventual ‘*horror of darkness*’... This horror marks a threshold, a zone of difference, through which the disordering of light and darkness converge. Light recedes from the world, and a shadowline is created. In that shadowline, the play of light and dark confuses boundaries, masking the everyday world...The vision is uncanny...we catch sight of formless shapes, unbound from their categorisation into ‘things’...the subject [is] ‘depersonalized’ and ‘stifled’ by its confrontation with this pre-human reality...At the same [time] as it is stripped of its subjectivity, the subject remains present, occupying an event horizon where the materiality of the physical body outlasts the dissolution of the personal subject (*The Thing* 50-52).

The uncanniness of the *there is* which confronts us at the end of the world is an uncanniness of confused boundaries, of entities coming “unbound from their categorization into ‘things,’” becoming strange unknowable presences that horrify through the “menace of pure and simple presence.” At the same time, it is a kind of cold horror at *the uncanniness that we are*, at the alien presence of the pre-personal body, in light of which the self is “depersonalized” even as it “remains present,” living on as an unfamiliar familiarity, while signaling a “collapse not only in the experience of self but in the cosmos itself” (Trigg *The Thing* 37). As such, the uncanniness that Trigg describes seems to constitute a kind of *ontological* uncanniness: an uncanniness which resides at the very heart of existence, insofar as that which exists always exists simultaneously as *that which it is* (i.e., the familiar self) and *other than that which it is* (i.e., the unfamiliar other) at

one and the same time.<sup>93</sup> It is an uncanniness that troubles the ontological distinctions by which we orient ourselves in the world, exposing the ontological as itself *unheimlich*, a haunting presence residing within that which is most intimately familiar. And it is precisely this uncanniness which pervades our contemporary situation, following on from the disorientation of the crisis of modernity and the end of the modern world.

### *Uncanny Disorientation, Hybridity, and the Crisis of Modernity*

Having provided an overview of some of the major contributions, past and present, to conceptualization of the uncanny, we are now in a position to outline how *uncanniness* will be understood for the purposes of this dissertation, and how it relates to the disorientation which follows the crisis of modernity and the end of the world, as outlined in previous chapters.

For the purposes of this dissertation, we will understand uncanniness to be an affective feeling of creeping, eerie strangeness or horror, similar in kind to anxiety and existential angst, that results in (and is provoked by) a loss of orientation and meaning—specifically, the loss of meaningful orientation provided by inhabiting a familiar world, in which things seem to make sense. Living in such a world results in a sense of *intellectual mastery*: the feeling that we can make sense of things in the world because the network of meaning that constitutes our world is adequate to understanding any given thing within it, allowing us to orient ourselves in relation to

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<sup>93</sup> This connection between uncanniness, disorientation, and the ontological echoes Martin Heidegger's investigations into fundamental ontology, as briefly summarized in the following passage from his *Introduction to Metaphysics*: "man ceases to be at home. In his exile from home, the home is first disclosed as such. But in one with it and only thus, the alien, the overpowering, is disclosed as such. Through the event of homelessness the whole of the essent is disclosed. In this disclosure unconcealment takes place. But this is nothing other than the happening of the unfamiliar" (167). For a more robust account of the connection between ontology and uncanniness in the work of Heidegger, see: Katherine Withy's *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*.

entities that seem familiar and known. However, this sense of intellectual mastery and orientation can be *disrupted* when things that seem familiar and known within the context of our world are defamiliarized and cast into a new light, revealing that they are *other* than what we understand them to be. Similarly, intellectual mastery can be dissolved when we are faced with something that adamantly resists neat categorization within our familiar network of meaning, but which is not completely alien, insofar as it straddles several familiar (but seemingly mutually exclusive) categories of understanding. In such moments, our sense of intellectual mastery is interrupted and replaced by a sense of *intellectual uncertainty*—the sense that things in our world are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar at once—which manifests affectively as a feeling of *uncanniness* and *disorientation*, a creeping sense of strangeness and horror that leaves us unsure of how to orient ourselves in relation to things. This is horror not of the unknown, but of the *unknowability of that which is known*. It is the fright and anxiety felt when that which has been familiar and comfortable returns to us as something radically unfamiliar; when our familiar world of meaning is exposed to be unknowable within its own system of sense-making; a feeling of being lost and disoriented within a world that seems unchanged, yet no longer makes sense.

Such experiences of uncanniness may be limited and temporary, confined solely to a particular object or entity, and overcome when that entity is *made sense of*, thereby becoming assimilated back within the familiar system of meaning that constitutes a world *for us*. But uncanny disorientation can also be experienced as a more global phenomenon, constituting a state of *ontological and existential crisis* in which our world breaks down and its familiar system of meaning is rendered *meaningless*. In such instances, the uncertainty which disrupts one's sense of intellectual mastery in a familiar world is not localized to a particular moment or object that can be reassimilated back into a habitual network of meaning (as in Jenstch's various

examples), but rather constitutes *a total suspension or dissolution of the world* through the revelation of the fundamental *groundlessness* of the ontological divisions upon which that world is founded (most notably, the division between subject/object, self/other, life/non-life). This is a sense of ontological uncanniness, a horror at the very nature of existence as groundless, or as grounded upon nothing. And again, such instances are experienced affectively as a *feeling* of uncanniness and disorientation: the creeping strangeness and anxiety of existing without grounds, and the disorientation of being without a world of meaning by which to orient oneself. Importantly, however, ontological uncanniness differs from more limited or localized forms of uncanny feelings insofar as it is not as easily overcome through the reassimilation of a particular object within one's overall network of familiar meaning, or the reinstatement of orientation after a moment of loss. Rather, ontological uncanniness lingers on as an oblique sense that something about existence is *not quite right*, that the familiar world is no longer familiar, and that one's existence is irrevocably lacking in normative orientation. It is this ontological form of uncanniness that I will focus on in this dissertation, and that I will term *uncanny disorientation*.

Against much past interpretation of the uncanny, however, I will also interpret uncanniness not as a property inherent to some objects or possessed by some subjects, essentially. Rather, I wish to put forward an *affective* understanding of uncanniness as something that arises and circulates in the relation between bodies, objects, and their world (or lack thereof). On this interpretation, there is no content proper or inherent to the uncanny beyond unfamiliar familiarity and resistance to integration within the system of meaning that constitutes a world—that is, there are no particular objects or subjects that are inherently or essentially uncanny, there are simply certain *conditions* that make uncanniness more likely to arise and circulate as an affective feeling. And it is my contention that the conditions that produce uncanniness are

particularly prevalent, intense, and widespread in our current moment. Specifically, it is the crisis of modernity, the dissolution of the modern world brought on by the undeniability of hybridity and the subsequent disorientation experienced by modern subjects, which provides ideal conditions for the widespread circulation of uncanniness.<sup>94</sup>

As previously outlined, modernity constitutes a project of sense-making and orientation through the activity of *purification* (i.e., the construction and enforcement of strictly defined ontological categories, within which any given entity can be sorted) to the exclusion of *translation* (i.e., the production of hybrid entities that transgress the categories created by purification), which results in the construction of a *modern world* (i.e., a network of meaningful relationships that provide orientation on the basis of purified categories). Individuals are thrown into this world, to which they eventually become accustomed as the network of pre-constructed meanings, purified categories, and the activity of purification itself become habitual and *familiar*. Subsequently, the individual for whom this world becomes habitual (i.e., the subject who becomes *invested* in the modern project of purification and the system of meaning it provides) becomes constituted as a *modern subject*. However, as the modern project proceeds, that which it excludes, represses, and forgets (i.e., the activity of translation and the hybrid objects it produces) proliferates just below the surface of the purified ontological categories produced through purification, until such time as it re-emerges, at a scale that is *undeniable*. This re-emergence to awareness of hybridity and translation follows the model of Freud's return of the repressed—the repressed content of modernity re-emerging to haunt the modern project that has repressed it—and throws the modern world into crisis by challenging its very foundational constitution, thereby threatening *the end of the world* (i.e., the end of *modernity* as a coherent

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<sup>94</sup> Conversely, the recent increase in concern over conceptualizing the uncanny can be read as a response to the widespread proliferation and circulation of feelings of uncanniness under the conditions of the crisis of modernity.

network of meaning and sense-making). In turn, this return of the repressed that threatens the dissolution of the modern world is experienced by the modern subject as a feeling of *uncanniness* and *disorientation*. The familiar modern world is suddenly rendered strangely unfamiliar (yet not totally alien) as intellectual uncertainty regarding the newly re-emerged hybrid objects proliferates and the supposed mastery of the modern subject is undermined, throwing them into a state of disorientation as the familiar network of meaning by which they have oriented themselves is dissolved in light of widespread hybridity.<sup>95</sup>

Importantly, this dissolution of the modern world through the re-emergence of hybridity feels uncanny to the modern subject *precisely because they are modern*—that is, insofar as they remain invested in the modern constitution as a way of making sense, of having a world. In many ways, the modern network of meaning remains intact, yet it is inadequate to understand the hybrid objects that have become increasingly prevalent as a result of its own sense-making activity, which resist being made sense of through the familiar, purified categories of modernity. The modern network of meaning thereby becomes a kind of *relic*, persisting on past its own expiration into a state of incomprehensibility. For, as the theorist Mark Payne explains:

The relic is what should no longer be present in the present, as the leftover from some prior life world, but yet, as the uncanny persistence of what should no longer be here,

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<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, this process by which the modern world is rendered uncannily unfamiliar by the very constitution of modernity itself was anticipated by Friedrich Nietzsche in a set of notes, written between 1884-1886, critiquing the scientism of modernity. He writes: “Science—the transformation of nature into concepts for the purpose of mastering nature—belongs under the rubric ‘means’ ... The development of science resolves the ‘familiar’ more and more into the unfamiliar:—it desires, however, the reverse, and proceeds from the instinct to trace the unfamiliar back to the familiar. *In summa*, science is preparing a sovereign ignorance, a feeling that there is no such thing as ‘knowing,’ that it was a kind of arrogance to dream of it, more, that we no longer have the least notion that warrants our considering ‘knowledge’ even a possibility—that ‘knowing’ itself is a contradictory idea” (*The Will to Power*, n. 610, 608, pg. 328). This formulation of the tendency for the modern constitution to dissolve the familiarity of the world into unfamiliarity (i.e., uncanniness) through the very processes by which it attempts to render the world familiar, regular, predictable, knowable, etc. will be relevant to our investigation of *nihilism* as the subjective condition following from the uncanny disorientation of the world’s dissolution in the next chapter.

continues to message us in its own, distinctive way. The relic is a modality of communication that operates as a supervenient channel, a ghost channel, whose presence is no longer explicable according to the logic of the discourse network (55).

The modern constitution and its purified ontological categories, which once functioned as familiar signposts by which modern subjects could orient themselves, become, in the crisis of modernity, relics of a life world that no longer exists (and perhaps *never* existed): a set of signs or cyphers that can no longer be decoded. In this way, modern subjectivity becomes like an outdated map of a place that no longer exists. We cling to the map in the hope that it will guide us home, toward something familiar; but the map can only ever make us more lost, since it no longer functions as an accurate representation of that which confronts us—and perhaps it never did. This is a case of the old orientation of modernity ceasing to make sense yet being retained on the basis of a world that is constantly being undermined and dissolved by its own disavowed structure. It is a form of disorientation that is experienced as *uncanny* because it is provoked by a kind of doubling—the map and the world, a place and the memory of a place—that remains undecidable. Things (re)appear as both *familiar* (by in many ways retaining their position within the familiar modern network of meaning) and radically *unfamiliar* (by increasingly resisting categorization within this familiar schema) *at the same time*. The world is gone, and in its place, a strange facsimile has appeared.

There are thus two primary levels of uncaninness to the disorientation which marks the crisis of modernity: first, the very structure of the crisis mirrors Freud's account of the "return of the repressed," which he associates with the uncanny. Modern subjects engage in purification while denying (and thereby repressing) the associated activity of translation; when the hybrids produced through translation become undeniable, they return to consciousness as the repressed

content of the modern world, and thus as uncanny presences. The structural uncanniness of the crisis of modernity thereby leads to a second order of uncanniness: that hybrid objects are *themselves* uncanny to the modern subject. By occupying a position of undecidability and “intellectual uncertainty” (because they span more than one purified category), the hybrid object is both familiar and unfamiliar at once within the ideational schema of modernity. This is not to say that hybrid objects are, by nature, uncanny—that they possess some essential quality of uncanniness—but rather that they *produce* uncanniness as an affective state when placed in conjunction with the modern subject, for whom hybrid objects appear as “strange strangers...whose strangeness is forever strange” yet “not so unfamiliar... [because] uncanny *familiarity* is one of the strange stranger’s traits” within the orienting framework of the modern constitution (Morton 124). Hybrid objects are thus experienced as uncanny because we (as modern subjects) assume that they do not or cannot exist. Rather, we assume ontological purity in our interactions with things in the world: the only things that exist are things that we can sort into purified ontological categories and anything that cannot be conceptualized within the framework of modernity does not exist, cannot exist, cannot be real. But what the undeniability of hybrid objects challenges us to accept is the reality that things can *exist* without conforming to the ontologically pure categories by which we understand them. This is why hybrid objects are uncanny, and why they seem so disturbing: they are both real and unreal at once, both existent and resistant to neat categorization within the orienting framework of the modern constitution.

Yet the uncanniness of the modern subject’s encounter with hybrid objects also opens onto a third dimension of uncanniness within the crisis of modernity—namely, the *ontological* dimension. As mentioned previously, ontological uncanniness represents a more enduring and global experience of uncanny feelings, a sense that existence itself is somehow *not quite right*,

that the familiar world is no longer familiar, or that normative orientation has been completely lost. Such uncanny feelings differ from the more localized form of uncanniness that arises in the modern subject's encounter with undeniable hybridity, insofar as it cannot be overcome through the reassimilation of a particular object (or set of objects) within one's overall network of familiar meaning. Rather, ontological uncanniness lingers on, seeming to pervade the totality of our existence, because it arises in response to the dissolution of the modern world *itself*. By calling into question the existence and feasibility of all our ontological categories—indeed, of the ontological altogether—the end of the modern world confronts us with the *there is*: that brute facticity of the anonymous, pre-personal materiality which acts as the groundless ground of all our attempts to make sense of things, to make things meaningful, to make a world *for us*. This confrontation with the brute facticity of existence, absent any world or framework of meaning that would make it make sense is, in turn, experienced by the modern subject as both profoundly *disorienting* and intimately *uncanny*. The modern subject is lost and afraid, trapped in a funhouse full of “mute intruders” that seem weirdly familiar yet infinitely strange, with no signs to guide their way out, no way to make sense of the presences that haunt them, and ultimately, no way to understand *themselves* in relation to the entities they encounter. In the end, the modern subject becomes just another mute intruder, another strange presence haunting an absent world, a meaningless existence. Uncanniness permeates reality from top to bottom.

But this uncanny disorientation is also profoundly distressing insofar as it is eerie, frightening, weird, lacking in the giddy excitement of potentiality. One wants to find a way out—to flee, to escape, to find a way back to a state of comfortable familiarity and mastery. Yet the uncanniness that pervades the modern subject's existence seems inescapable. No matter where one turns, uncanny objects loom, rejecting assimilation into a world of meaning that is no longer

available. The ontological uncanniness of the crisis of modernity offers no opportunity for escape, no means for a return to the comfortably homey world of modernity or the orientation that it once provided. Uncanniness simply cannot be avoided, turned away from, or overcome by the modern subject, because it is *everywhere*, pervading *everything*, penetrating to the very core of the modern subject themselves. And this is the affective situation that the modern subject is trapped in today: an experience of uncanny disorientation that is profoundly discomforting, that prompts a desire to flee, to escape, while providing no means by which to do so. The modern subject remains disoriented, stuck in the uncanny nightmare of a world evacuated of worldliness, of meaning. Living on after the end.

### *Conclusions*

As we have seen throughout this chapter, the crisis of modernity and its attendant forms of normative and phenomenological disorientation can be productively conceptualized in terms of uncanniness. Not only are disorientation and uncanniness historically conjoined in past theorizations of each phenomena, but the particular *kind* of disorientation that results from the dissolution of the modern world seems especially primed to elicit feelings of uncanniness. As such, while the phenomenological experience of disorientation is capable of eliciting a range of affective responses, it is my contention that the disorientation of modern subjects in relation to the crisis of modernity is, specifically, an *uncanny disorientation*: an experience of disorientation for which *uncanniness* forms the affective content. In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate how and why the disorientation produced by the dissolution of the modern world should be interpreted as uncanny in its felt, affective dimensions. However, I have yet to explain the significance of this uncanniness. Why does it matter that the contemporary disorientation of

modern subjects is felt as *uncanny*? What does the widespread circulation of feelings of uncanniness in the wake of modernity's dissolution *do*? What kinds of ethical, political, and aesthetic responses follow from such feelings of uncanniness, and why should we be interested in these responses?

In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to address these questions, first by arguing that the affective experience of uncanny disorientation in the dissolution of modernity prompts a turn towards *nihilism* in the modern subject (i.e., a sense that contemporary existence has become *meaningless*) while also leading those same nihilistic subjects to seek an escape from the meaninglessness, uncanniness, and disorientation of their lives. I will then examine some of the ways in which the nihilistic modern subject attempts (and fails) to regain some sense of meaning and mastery over the world by reorienting towards political, ethical, and aesthetic projects based upon the modern constitution. The next two chapters will therefore be dedicated to examining a mode of subjectivity that I will call *nihilism in bad faith*, followed by three case studies outlining the types of activity that uncanny disorientation leads the nihilist in bad faith to engage in.

“Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this *uncanniest* of all guests?”

(Friedrich Nietzsche *The Will to Power*, emphasis added, n.1, 7)

“The lesson of horror is nihilism. Pure absolute nihilism.”

(James Ellis 110)

## Chapter 4: Nihilism

At this point, to say that we are living through an age of widespread nihilism feels like a banal platitude. Indeed, philosophers, theologians, artists, and radicals have all been announcing the advent of nihilism for at least the past two centuries.<sup>96</sup> And yet, a renewed interest in nihilism as both a philosophical problem and existential condition appears to be taking place in all quarters. From philosophers (like Eugene Thacker, Ray Brassier, Peter Pal Pelbart, and Gianni Vattimo) to contemporary phenomenologists (like Dylan Trigg) to aesthetic theorists (like Shane Weller and Fred Moten) to neo-reactionaries (like Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin) to communization theorists (like *The Invisible Committee* and *Monsieur Dupont*) to queer anarchists and xenofeminists (like the *baeden* collective, Laboria Cuboniks, and Alys Rowe) to afropessimists (like Calvin L. Warren, Frank B. Wilderson, III, and Jared Sexton) to post-left, post-anarchist, and anti-civilization theorists (like Aragorn!, Lucrezia, Serafinski, Peter Lamborn Wilson, Alejandro de Acosta, and the anonymous author of *Desert*), *nihilism* and its attendant

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<sup>96</sup> For example, in a note from 1888 for his unfinished manuscript on *The Will to Power*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes: “What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*” (*The Will to Power*, 3). But by that point, the Russian nihilists had already explicitly taken up nihilism as both a political and cultural movement for at least the preceding twenty years (Moser 4-47), while in Germany, both Friedrich Jacobi and Max Stirner had discussed the nihilistic implications of German Idealism during the late-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, respectively (Carr 13-14).

affects are currently the subject of an immense degree of theoretical speculation and political conflict.

Following the contemporary philosopher Ray Brassier, we might posit that this sustained interest in nihilism is the result of a lack of thoroughgoing investigation—the reality that we have yet to think nihilism through to its ultimate conclusions, thus leading nihilism to represent not so much “an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity” (x). Conversely, we might follow Keiji Nishitani’s more existential line of thought and conclude that nihilism is simply a perennial problem to be confronted and overcome on an individual level: an inescapable aspect of existence that manifests transhistorically, across cultures and traditions of thought (3-4). Or, drawing on Karen L. Carr’s historical overview of the concept, we might conclude that nihilism is, in fact, a recent phenomenon, but has become such an ingrained part of (post)modern life and philosophy that it appears to be eternal while simultaneously devolving into a banal talking point rather than a living problem (138-140).

In any case, it seems apparent that nihilism, as both a concept and condition, is simultaneously *overdetermined* and *underdetermined* in its theorization. It is an idea which has been discussed, critiqued, and explained endlessly; a concept which seems only to have proliferated in use over the past two centuries, but which endures as a “speculative opportunity” in the present; a condition that continues to plague us, as it has yet to be fully lived through or overcome, but which, by its very structure, also resists any fixity of meaning, thereby creating the potential for infinite interpretation. As such, any discussion of nihilism’s present manifestations—its current structure, affects, effects, and meaning(lessness)—would seem to be both pertinent and *passé*, a concurrently *timely* and *untimely* project.

Keeping this in mind, my intention here will be to investigate the specific dimensions of nihilism *today*, as a particular product of the crisis of modernity. Given the depth and breadth of past interpretation, as well as the myriad forms that theoretical discussions of nihilism have taken over the past two centuries, any contemporary explanation of nihilism can only ever hope to be partial and will inevitably overlook some of its aspects while focusing on others. An in-depth or complete explanation (if such a thing were even possible) of the historical use and development of nihilism as a concept is beyond the scope of this dissertation, nor would it be particularly useful or timely, given the plethora of conceptual genealogies that have already been written on the topic.<sup>97</sup> The purpose of this chapter will therefore not be to perform a complete overview of what nihilism *is* in its many varied dimensions, but rather to offer a particular interpretation of nihilism as *the predominant mode of subjectivity that arises from the affective complex of uncanny disorientation, which in turn has been prompted by the dissolution of the modern world.*

Thus far, we have seen that the contemporary condition for those of us who have been invested in the modern constitution is one of *worldlessness*: a situation in which the modern world has become inoperable as a result of the undeniable omnipresence of hybrid objects. Furthermore, I have also posited that the general phenomenological experience of worldlessness is one of *disorientation*: an inability to find our way in a world that has been stripped of the familiar meanings and orientation devices of the modern constitution. Those of us who live on after the end of the world thus live in a constant state of disorientation. But this is disorientation of a particular kind; for, as we have seen, disorientation is a phenomenological state that can

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example: Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*; Karen L. Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*; Bülent Diken, *Nihilism and The Impossible Society of Spite: Revisiting Nihilism*; Peter Pål Pelbart, *Cartography of Exhaustion: Nihilism Inside Out*; Shane Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism and Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of All Guests*; Nolen Gertz, *Nihilism*; and Aragorn Moser, *Boom!: Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

produce a wide range of affective responses, from discomfoting horror to giddy nausea. It has thus been necessary to examine the particular affective content of the general phenomenological disorientation that results from the end of the modern world. To that end, I have offered a reading of *uncanniness*—an eerie and unsettling sense of simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity, homeliness and unhomeliness—as the predominant affect that results from the disorientation of worldlessness. Rather than opening up possibilities for creative renewal, free exploration, or reorientation, the specifically *uncanny* disorientation of worldlessness seems to trap us in a nightmare realm of disturbing presences and “mute intruders,” haunted at every turn by a world that reappears as intimately familiar yet radically resistant to the meanings and interpretations that once made it a familiar world *for us*. As I have argued, *uncanny disorientation* thus seems to describe what it feels like to live on after the end of a world. I have therefore proposed that uncanny disorientation is the predominant affective complex of our contemporary condition, which is marked by the dissolution and inoperability of the modern world in the face of undeniable hybridity.

Following these investigations into our contemporary condition, this chapter will aim to connect our present situation of *worldlessness* and *uncanny disorientation* to current concerns over the proliferation of *nihilism* by positing a certain form of nihilistic subjectivity as the ultimate outcome of the crisis of modernity. As I have already stated in the conclusion to the previous chapter, it is my contention that nihilism as a mode of subjectivity is the primary effect produced by feelings of uncanny disorientation. In that chapter, we saw that *uncanniness* constitutes a kind of creeping horror or anxiety at the *groundlessness of existence* and the *meaninglessness of once-familiar things*. Similarly, *nihilism*—in its existential and alethiological dimensions—is intimately connected to experiences of groundlessness and meaninglessness, as

well as the affects that accompany those experiences. Indeed, a pessimistic and despairing attitude toward the apparent meaninglessness of existence would seem to constitute the basic kernel of nihilism in its various forms. And yet, nihilism continues to be conceptualized almost exclusively in relation to either affective experiences of despair and pessimism or epistemological and metaphysical questions about the meaning of Being, while the connection between experiences of *nihilism* and *uncanniness* remain largely unexamined, despite the apparent connections between these two phenomena.<sup>98</sup> By contrast, this chapter will seek to directly investigate the connections between *nihilism* and *uncanny disorientation* in order to illuminate the nihilistic aspects of the crisis of modernity.

Through an engagement with both contemporary and classical theories of nihilism, I will outline a vision of nihilism as a particular mode of *subjectivity*, connected to, but separate from, the affective and epistemological phenomena that prompt it. Historically, nihilism has often been conflated with its attendant affects and effects—particularly, *pessimism*—to the point that a pessimistic philosophical attitude has sometimes come to be used as a synonym for nihilism, or vice versa. I would contend, however, that this conflation is a mistake. While pessimism and nihilism are undoubtedly connected (and may or may not in fact be inseparable) they are also, importantly, distinct phenomena. Nihilism cannot be simply reduced to a feeling of pessimism, nor does a pessimistic outlook or philosophy necessarily equate to a nihilistic attitude toward the world. Rather, I will argue that feelings of pessimism, despair, angst, horror, depression, hopelessness, and uncanniness represent affective spurs toward a nihilistic mode of subjectivity. These affects, rather than being nihilistic in themselves, are the irritant around which the black

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<sup>98</sup> The major exception to this tendency to overlook the connection between uncanniness and nihilism is Shane Weller's *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of All Guests*. However, Weller is primarily interested in the uncanny as a literary or aesthetic phenomenon rather than as an affective condition. As such, his work also tends to overlook some of the important connections to be made between nihilism and uncanniness as *affect*.

pearl of nihilism forms. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between *nihilism* and *the affective experiences which prompt it*, even as we recognize that these affective experiences may be an integral and inseparable aspect of nihilism itself.

Returning to Friedrich Nietzsche's seminal conceptualization of nihilism in certain notes from *The Will to Power*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and other late texts, I will first outline a vision of nihilism as a simultaneously affective, epistemological, and (anti)metaphysical condition that finds expression through a particular mode of subjectivity—an illness of the will, or a will to *nothingness*, that manifests as a kind of “*thirst for annihilation...the violent impulse to escape*,” as Nick Land once described it (*The Thirst for Annihilation* xxi).<sup>99</sup> At the same time, I will also argue that Nietzsche, while often seeming to conceptualize nihilism as a kind of transhistorical metaphysical principle, more acutely grounds nihilism in *modernity* and poses it as a predominantly *modern* phenomenon and problem, a result of modernity's simultaneous replacement and continuation of the defunct Platonic-Christian “will to truth” that ultimately leads to its own self-dissolution. Having put forward this reading of nihilism as a product of the modern constitution and its breakdown, I will then turn to later theorizations that have elaborated on the Nietzschean conception of nihilism—particularly, Gilles Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's

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<sup>99</sup> Concern over “the subject” or “subjectivity” may seem (at best) an outmoded topic for theoretical reflection. Like nihilism, subjectivity is something of an overdetermined and *passee* concept—the quaint illusion of a bygone era, whose death has been announced repeatedly over the past two centuries. Yet, as Ulysse Carrière notes: “If we still ask ourselves the question of the subject, we do so primarily out of historical concern—or perhaps out of habit, in the same way we say ‘the sun rises’ when we all know it's the earth that moves around the sun. But we ask it, once again, until we no longer have to. The theory of the subject can only be a theory of *subjectivation*, i.e., a theory of how subjects are *produced*. Today, we set out from the certainty that capital and its state stopped producing subjects long ago, that the liquidation of the subject is a given. What remains, as an atavism, is *subjectivity*” (“Vandalizing the Subject”). We continue to ask the question of the subject—of how subjects are produced, and to what effect—*until we no longer have to*. Note also, once again, the metaphor of the sun supposedly “rising,” though this is in conflict with our knowledge of heliocentrism: a metaphor previously used to describe both the experience of *disorientation* and the experience of *uncanniness*. Perhaps we continue to ask the question of the subject precisely because we are living through an age of uncanny disorientation, in which the disappearance of the subject coincides with its diffusion into everything, everywhere?

work in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*—to articulate a distinction between what Deleuze (following Nietzsche) terms “passive” and “active” forms of nihilism, or the tendency for nihilistic subjects to wallow *passively* in their reactive will-to-nothingness as opposed to *actively* taking on the negation of old values and interpretations as a self-directed project.

It is my contention that the nihilistic mode of subjectivity that forms in reaction to the widespread affective feelings of uncanny disorientation that are in circulation at the end of the modern world should be read precisely as a form of *passive* nihilism incapable of overcoming itself by moving beyond its own will-to-nothingness through active negation. More specifically, I will describe the nihilistic mode of subjectivity that predominates in our contemporary era as one of *nihilism in bad faith*: a form of passive nihilism that, while clearly *acknowledging* its own will-to-nothingness, simultaneously tries to *escape* any confrontation with its nihilistic tendencies through an attempted *reorientation* toward the values and interpretations of modernity that have *produced its nihilistic tendencies in the first place*.

In this chapter and the one that follows, I will thus outline a conception of nihilism in bad faith that will simultaneously stand in continuity and contrast to both past and current understandings of nihilism. To truly understand the re-emergence of nihilism as a problem and phenomenon of contemporary interest, we must attend to its current manifestations within the context of the crisis of modernity. And to do so, we must contend with nihilism in bad faith and its relation to affective feelings of uncanny disorientation. As such, the following chapter will be dedicated to offering a robust understanding of nihilism as it presents itself *today*, after the end of the world, as *nihilism in bad faith*. We will then be in a position to understand not only the subjective type that emerges as a product of the uncanny disorientation of the dissolution of

modernity, but also the political, ethical, and aesthetic *effects* wrought by this mode of subjectivity, which will be examined in subsequent chapters.

*What Nihilism Is (Not)*

But to begin our investigation into nihilism's contemporary instantiations, it may be helpful to first define what nihilism *is* (or rather, *is not*) through an engagement with past interpretations of nihilistic attitudes, philosophies, and politics. It should be noted, however, that this is no simple task. Like uncanniness, *nihilism* is a concept notoriously resistant to definition, precisely because indefinability and non-being constitute two of its primary features. If anything, nihilism "is" an encounter with the indefinable nothingness at the heart of existence—a nothingness which represents the absence or nullity of being itself—and therefore *is nothing*: a lack, an absence, a nihility.<sup>100</sup> As such, all of the slippery complexity inherent in any attempt to speak of *being* only compounds when trying to speak of nihilism as the *absence* of being, or as an encounter with nothingness.<sup>101</sup> Yet, we continue to speak, proving that it is possible to define (at least obliquely) that which *is not*, even while recognizing that any such definition will be limited, incomplete, troubled, and inadequate: a sidelong view, a glimpse from the periphery that does not entirely capture the thing in its complex simplicity. In short, to write on nihilism is to

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<sup>100</sup> This fundamental truth—that *what is* is based on nothing, that nothingness resides at the very heart of being—is most succinctly and poetically expressed in the *Tao Te Ching*, which says: "Heaven and earth and the ten thousand things are born of being. Being is born of nothing" (n. 40, 50). It is also expounded upon more fully and verbosely by thinkers like Martin Heidegger (see: *An Introduction to Metaphysics* or Wither's *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*), Jean-Paul Sartre (*Being and Nothingness*), and Keiji Nishitani (*The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*).

<sup>101</sup> Calvin Warren notes this difficulty in his work *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* where he writes: "Since nothing is also a paradox, both *outside* Being and as an opening of Being, one could *only approach it through a set of allegories*. In other words, we can never fully understand nothing with our metaphysical instruments, even with the most rigorous destructive or deconstructive procedures—something of nothing always escapes" (20).

risk contributing to the overdetermination of the concept. But precisely because it is indeterminate (and, in some sense, indeterminable), there is always something more to say. The task is thus to try to think nihilism through to its ultimate conclusions in the hopes of discovering some new insight.

However, the complications inherent to producing a definition of nihilism are further exacerbated by the sheer volume of texts which have been written on the subject. As mentioned previously, the past two centuries have seen a kind of paranoid obsession with diagnosing and forecasting nihilism's onslaught, and more recently, theorists and philosophers have taken a renewed interest in announcing its arrival as an inextricable part of the contemporary, (post)modern condition. The result is that much (perhaps *too* much) has already been said about nihilism, and any attempt at definition risks simply retreading old ground. Moreover, the simple fact that so much has been written on the topic means that any conceptualization which attempts to do justice to the totality of nihilism's past theorizations will necessarily produce irresolvable contradictions and confusions. Engagement with the concept necessitates a choice: the choice of which thinkers to draw from, which traditions to accept, and which conceptual nuances to jettison or pass over in silence. Obviously, I am not exempt from this choice. The purpose of this section will thus be to provide a brief overview of how *I* have chosen to conceptualize nihilism: what I find to be the most salient aspects of the concept, given my engagement with past and current literature, rather than an attempt at a complete overview of the history of nihilism's theorization.

To that end, we may briefly define nihilism in its most basic aspects as a particular epistemological or alethiological problem that arises from the ontological groundlessness of existence: it is both an interpretation of (all) things as *meaningless*, as well as *a will to*

*nothingness*. An *interpretation* and a *will*; but specifically, an interpretation and will prompted by a certain confrontation with reality—the reality that there is no truth, no essence, no Being that grounds the ever-shifting becoming of the world.<sup>102</sup> As such, *nihilism* in its most basic form is an encounter with *nothingness*, with the *nothing*, the abyss of being that acts as the (non)ground of existence.<sup>103</sup> At the same time, nihilism is not simply a passive reaction to this encounter with nothingness: again, it is a *will* and an *interpretation*, a will to nothingness and an interpretation of meaninglessness.

To further illustrate this point and deepen our definition, we can follow Karen L. Carr in her systematic approach to defining the concept by dividing the broader category of nihilism into five discrete sub-categories, each of which highlights one of nihilism’s primary features.

According to Carr, nihilism in its broadest sense can be roughly divided into: *epistemological nihilism*, “denial of the possibility of knowledge” (17); *alethiological nihilism*, “denial of the reality of truth” (17); *metaphysical/ontological nihilism*, “denial of an (independently existing) world” (17-18); *ethical or moral nihilism*, “denial of the reality of moral or ethical values” (18); and *existential or axiological nihilism*, “the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that follows

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<sup>102</sup> We may think back here to our previous discussion of Hannah Arendt’s conception of a world proper to humanity: for Arendt, the basic problem of human existence is to have been thrown into a world of change and contingency. Her solution to this problem is *politics* and *orientation*: the capacity for human beings to create a relatively stable world *for us* upon the ever-shifting ground of material reality and temporality, which is the broader world which we have been thrown into by virtue of our birth. Nihilism, in this sense, is an encounter with the reality that the world *for us* is built upon a ground which is constantly shifting and changing, which *itself* is grounded upon nothing—that is, that the basic foundations of a world *for us* are always already absent.

<sup>103</sup> The writer, philosopher, and literary critic Maurice Blanchot once alternately claimed that it is properly within the interminable tension, the restless movement, *between* nothingness and being that nihilism resides. Moreover, he claimed that, rather than being a universal ontological condition, nihilism is specifically an experience of those who have *lost a world*. In a commentary on the philosophy of Camus, he writes that nihilism represents a “region that is announced by extreme suffering, by extreme affliction, by the desolation of shadows; a region approached in life by all who, having lost the world, move restlessly *between* being and nothingness: a swarming mass of inexistence, a proliferation without reality, nihilism’s vermin: ourselves” (179). This idea, that nihilism occurs in the wake of having lost a world, will later be important for our reading of contemporary nihilism in the wake of the modern world’s self-dissolution.

from the judgement, ‘life has no meaning’” (18). As such, we might think of nihilism as a metaphysical problem (or, rather, a problem *for* metaphysics), an ontological or existential question about the ground(lessness) of being, an epistemological problem of truth and meaning, an affective condition of pessimism and hopelessness, a theological problem regarding the absence of God, a problem concerning the lack of sufficient grounds for moral or ethical values, or some combination of any or all of the above, depending on what has prompted one’s encounter with the groundlessness of existence and how one interprets that experience. At the same time, we can see that what cuts across these sub-divisions of the concept is a tendency toward *interpretation*: a judgement about the possibility of knowledge, the reality of truth, or the existence of meaning and value. Nihilism, in its broadest sense, involves taking a position on the world, on things *in* the world, or on the totality of existence itself. Specifically, it involves taking a *negative* position with regards to the things it interprets: to be nihilistic means to interpret things in the negative (i.e., to deny their truth or existence), and to cast a judgement based on that negative interpretation (i.e., to judge that, because things lack truth or existence, they are therefore meaningless) (Diken 22-30). But it is important to keep in mind that this negative relation to the world does not come from nowhere, even if it emerges from nothingness. Again, nihilism is precisely a by-product of an encounter with the groundlessness of existence. That is to say, the negative interpretation of nihilism is spurred by a recognition that one’s existence (or perhaps the whole of existence) rests upon *nothing* (Nishitani 2, 20).

We may also note that, on Carr’s reading, nihilism’s negative interpretation of reality is once again intimately tied to *affect* and *feeling*—“the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness,” meaninglessness, pessimism, despair, etc.—even while being irreducible to any of these feelings or affects. This is because, as mentioned previously, nihilism as *will* and *interpretation* arises

from an encounter with the nothingness that is the non-ground of existence, a recognition that our existence is ultimately built upon and supported by nothing. But this recognition is not necessarily a product of sense perception or rational cognition and does not always (or even mostly) come about through a conscious examination of our lives. Rather, the encounter with nothingness takes place at the *affective* level of the body, as a feeling that is produced through mutual contact and impression between a body and its world, which may or may not be perceived consciously or cognitively. We might think here of Heidegger's claim that Being is only ever perceived peripherally, through certain *moods* that make us aware of our ontological foundations: we catch glimpses of it in moments of boredom, of angst, or uncanniness, rather than through the intellect or through epistemological investigation (Lange 18). In this sense, nihilism is a reaction to an encounter with Being that takes place when we *feel* certain moods or emotions: an interpretation of meaninglessness and a will to nothingness that follows from an emotional (rather than intellectual) perception of Being's groundlessness.

However, it should also be remembered that *affect*, in the contemporary sense, is not exactly synonymous with either Heideggerian moods or emotional states as we might conventionally understand them. As discussed previously, affect must always be conceived as that which arises in the relation between bodies and their world—through the mutual impression of our bodies onto our environment (or other bodies) and our environment onto our bodies—rather than as discrete psychological or emotional states that reside purely within individual bodies (Ahmed *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 25-27). In this way, affect (as opposed to mood or emotion) is something not contained or possessed by individual entities, but which circulates *between* bodies, and exists in the intimate contact of bodies with their world as relays for feeling, sensation, and emotion (Ahmed "Affective Economies" 120-122). On this affective reading,

then, the negative interpretation of nihilism can be thought of as a kind of virulent reaction to certain affective stimuli: there are particular affects produced when a body encounters the aporia at the heart of existence (specifically, as I have argued, feelings of uncanniness and disorientation) which in turn provoke a nihilistic reaction—a reaction which, when sustained, can perpetuate itself into a form-of-life, a mode of subjectivity, or a way of being.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that, just as *affect* is not synonymous with emotions or feelings, *subjectivity* is not fully synonymous with the affective forces that always accompany and shape it. As we have seen thus far, nihilism itself cannot be equated to an affect or feeling, but is rather an attitude, perspective, or interpretation of the world. In this way, nihilism can be said to be epistemological rather than ontological or affective, even as it contains ontological and affective dimensions, insofar as subjectivity cannot be divorced from existential experience, and our interpretations of the world cannot be divorced from our affective feelings *about* the world. Nihilism as a mode of *subjectivity* must therefore be distinguished from the affects that may accompany, prompt, or lead to it, as such affective experiences precede, in some important sense, the development of nihilistic consciousness or subjectivity. The subject of nihilism first *feels* an emptiness at the centre of their existence before coming to *interpret* existence as meaningless and to *will* the negation of that meaninglessness as a sustained life project.

But what of this second half of the nihilistic equation: the *will to nothingness*? While Carr's account provides an in-depth overview of nihilism as an epistemological and alethiological phenomenon—that is, as a problem of interpretation, or an interpretation of reality as empty, non-existent, meaningless—she does not engage with this second aspect of nihilism as a form of *will*. This is perhaps unsurprising given the generally low regard in which the concept

of the will is held by many contemporary philosophers and theorists. At best, “will” tends to be viewed as an outmoded way of conceptualizing agentic capacity—a holdover from Medieval Christian philosophy, which developed a conception of the will in order to explain the possibility of sin and justify a vision of moral choice in which one can recognize their duty to obey God’s commandments yet still act sinfully—while the existence of a faculty called “the will” through which human agency is exercised has been doubted since at least the time of Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza, when a more mechanistically determinate vision of causality came into fashion among enlightened thinkers. Indeed, as Hannah Arendt notes in her thorough investigation of *willing* as a faculty of the mind, the non-existence of the will seems to be the most agreed-upon idea in the entire history of western thought. Yet this seemingly universal agreement—so rare among philosophers—is also perhaps a solid reason for doubting the validity of their dismissal of the will; another being that such dismissals have almost universally been put forward precisely by *philosophers*, who, as professional thinkers, may have a stake in the suppression of the will in favour of another faculty of the mind (namely, *thinking*) which has historically been the philosopher’s purview (Arendt *The Life of the Mind: Willing* 28-35).

Against such totalizing rejections of the will, I will instead follow the work of several thinkers who, while acknowledging the limitations and aporias of past conceptions of the will, attempt to think through the problem of agentic capacity without reducing it to a simple matter of mechanistic causality. More specifically, I will draw on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt, Sara Ahmed, Jane Bennet, and contemporary thinkers working in the field of new materialisms to argue that the will, while not a faculty of unconditional freedom or choice, does exist as a kind of tendency inherent to matter itself that works toward a unification of the various forces internal to any given body. On this conception, the will is intimately linked to the

formation of *subjectivity* as a sense of unity and integration possessed by an individual subject (or, as Nietzsche would have it, the *fiction* of a unified subject). In relation to the will-to-nothingness that characterizes nihilism, it is precisely this will which produces the nihilistic subject, or a nihilistic form of subjectivity: a unification of the subject around an interpretation of existence as meaningless and the will to negate that which is without meaning.

But the question remains: What do we mean by *will*? What is “the will,” such that we can speak of a will-to-nothingness as an inherent and integral part of nihilism?

### *Nihilism as the Will-to-Nothingness*

To begin, we can note that the will being posited here under the term “will-to-nothingness” is not the will as classically formulated by the history of philosophy, or as spoken of in colloquial speech by the phrase “free will,” as a kind of faculty of choice and freedom inherent to the human subject by virtue of either the structure of the mind or divine providence. As already mentioned, such conceptions of the will have been thoroughly critiqued and rejected by thinkers from Hobbes and Spinoza to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche who have seen in this conception of the will a kind of phenomenological error in perception: a tendency of the human being to project backwards once an action has been taken or a deed accomplished, to imagine a free and unconditioned “doer” behind the deed—the subject of free will who, having assessed the variety of possible courses of action, freely chooses which one to take (Arendt *The Life of the Mind* 23-28). Against such conceptions of the will, past thinkers have almost universally posited a more deterministic vision of causality, again claiming that the will constitutes an error of perception that reads intention into beings and events that are, in reality, mechanistically determined by outside forces.

Perhaps the most famous formulation of this critique is put forward by Baruch Spinoza, who, in a 1674 letter to G.H. Schuller, quips that if a stone thrown through the air was capable of thought or perception it would, while in motion, think

that it is endeavouring, as far as in it lies, to continue in motion. Now this stone, since it is conscious only of its endeavour and is not at all indifferent, will surely think it is completely free, and that it continues in motion for no other reason than that it so wishes. This, then, is that human freedom which all men boast of possessing, and which consists solely in this, that men are conscious of their desire and unaware of the causes by which they are determined (*Complete Works* 909).<sup>104</sup>

For Spinoza, then, the will is simply an illusion produced by consciousness: a tendency for conscious beings to interpret their actions as freely undertaken, rather than the pre-determined effects of previous causes. Yet, as Arendt notes in her examination of the willing faculty, such rejections of the existence of the will seem to commit the same kind of error that they critique, projecting backward through time after an action has ceased and back-filling causal reasons to explain the choices made or the actions taken, thereby interpreting those choices as the inevitable products of a strictly deterministic universe (136-140).<sup>105</sup> Whether one interprets an

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<sup>104</sup> Nearly two centuries later, Arthur Schopenhauer would respond to this statement, writing in the first volume of his *World as Will and Representation*: “Spinoza says...that if a stone thrown flying through the air were conscious it would think it was flying of its own will. I only add that the stone would be right. Projectile thrust plays the same role for it that motive does for me; and what in the case of the stone appears as cohesion, gravity, persistence in the assumed state is, in its inner essence, just what I recognize in myself as will, and what the stone would also recognize as will if it were to attain cognition too” (151). While confirming the existence of something we perceive as will, Schopenhauer here largely remains in alignment with the critiques of will put forward by his predecessors. On this account, the will exists but is merely a function of a mechanistically determinate causality. As such, the will is not a faculty of free choice or invention but is instead simply the experience of effects following inexorably on from their causes.

<sup>105</sup> Moreover, we might note with Jane Bennett that: “The machine model of nature” upon which such critiques of the will rely “is no longer even scientific. It has been challenged by systems theory, complexity theory, chaos theory, fluid dynamics, as well as by the many earlier biophilosophies of flow that Michel Serres has chronicled in *The Birth of Physics...Yet the popular image of materialism as mechanistic endures*” (91).

action as the result of free will or determinate causes, one is still simply *interpreting* the action in terms of a causal relation—an interpretation that is applied after the fact, and which cannot be strictly factually proven or disproven.

Against such total rejections of the will as non-existent we can thus say that, at least subjectively, the will exists as a *feeling* or *perception* of agency, even if such perceptions lack “truth” in a scientific schema of causality. Or, as Sara Ahmed states in her examination of willfulness: “Willing is a matter of how we are affected” (Ahmed *Willful Subjects* 76). On this reading, then, the will is neither a faculty of pure freedom or spontaneity, nor is it a mere illusion of consciousness. Rather, following the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, we might conceptualize the will as an affect and orientation that is interpreted as a subjective faculty after the fact: “in all willing there is firstly a plurality of sensations, namely, the sensations of the condition ‘*away from which* we go’, the sensation of the condition ‘*towards which* we go’, the sensation of this ‘*from*’ and ‘*towards*’ itself, and then besides, an accompanying muscular sensation, which, even without our putting in motion ‘arms and legs’ commences its action by force of habit, directly we ‘will’ anything” (Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* 530-531). Note the language of “towardness” and “awayness” being mobilized in this passage and the connections that Nietzsche draws between the movement of the body towards/away, the affective experience of “sensations,” and a perception of will. As will be recalled from our previous discussion of (dis)orientation and its relation to affect, such relations of “towardness” and “awayness” and our bodily perception of those relations are precisely what constitute an *orientation*. As such, on Nietzsche’s schema, the will is the feeling or sensation of taking on an orientation, a relation (whether spatial or normative) of towardness and awayness that manifests as a particular set of actions in line with that orientation. The sensation of taking on an orientation is then interpreted *ex post facto* as an

act of will, a decision or choice made by the subject and enacted via the agentic faculty of the subject's own will (Nietzsche *The Will to Power* n. 370-371, 199-200).

In line with much contemporary work on affect, Nietzsche thus argues that we always *feel* before we *act* or interpret, and that it is these feelings which prompt our actions and interpretations, rather than a faculty of "free will." However, we tend to perceive this relationship between feeling and acting *backwards*, falsely convincing ourselves that how we feel is actually a result of how we act, and that our interpretations of the world are made independently of our feelings about the world. Conversely, Nietzsche says: first we feel, then we create an interpretation for why we feel the way that we do, which in turn prompts us to act in particular ways and take on particular orientations. The "will" is one such interpretation that is imposed backwards upon this process: we are moved to perform actions by how we are affected, then interpret ourselves as having willed those actions, as enacting a "free will," unconditioned by affect. But this "free will" is nothing more than the event of being moved on the basis of feelings, sensual experiences, or affects (*Twilight of the Idols* 38-53).

Nietzsche makes clear that this retroactive interpretation is a "fiction" created by the subject (who is also themselves a fiction) to explain their feeling of will, but this does not mean, as his philosophical predecessors would have it, that the will or the act of willing is non-existent (*The Will to Power* n. 488-490, 269-270). Rather, to return to Ahmed, we can say that the will amounts to "an experience a subject has of itself as bringing something about, whether or not the subject is bringing something about. It is possible...to experience oneself as willing something that one does not bring about" and "it is the very normative assumption of a faculty of will that creates the impression of a subject that is behind an action" (*Willful Subjects* 24, 25). The will is thus the experience one has of their agentic capacity, of "bringing something about" or of taking

on an orientation, even if we do not actually bring anything about in the act. Moreover, it is this perception of the feeling of willing, along with our interpretation of it in terms of a faculty of the will that belongs to us as a subject, that in fact *produces* the subject as the fiction of a coherent and unified entity. On this conception, the will (or the *perception* of willing) is what forms and molds the subject, what subjectivity emerges out of. It is the force that gathers and binds together the various contradictory tendencies of a being into the singular, individuated, coherent system that is the subject (*Willful Subjects* 81-83). Or, as Nietzsche argues: the idea of “the will” is a means of healing and covering over the inherent split in being, the fact that any given entity is composed of a multiplicity of independent parts, forces, drives, or tendencies that can only nominally be said to constitute a singular, unitary being (*The Will to Power* n. 485, 268-269). The fiction of the will thus makes the multiplicity of our existence seem singular. It creates the impression of a coherent subject out of the multiple contradictory tendencies that each of us embodies by attributing the various actions of those bodies to a “will” and interpreting them as the result of a singular sovereign entity (*The Will to Power* n. 515-520, 278-281).

This act of interpretation—which smooths over the fissures and tensions of being under the façade of subjectivity—may or may not be a necessary illusion according to Nietzsche, for whom the invention of subjectivity constitutes a kind of evolutionary survival mechanism, a means of ensuring the continued life of the subject by bringing its various forces to bear upon a singular project (*The Gay Science* n. 110 & 127, 169-184). Yet he is also clear that mere survival—the simple continuation of biological life processes—cannot be the end toward which the will or subjectivity tends. Instead, he famously proposes *power* as the goal of all willing, the end toward which all things strive (*The Will to Power* n. 640-715, 341-381). For Nietzsche, then, the subjective unification which takes place under the guise of the will is simply one means

toward achieving an increase in power—a tactic that has historically been quite successful in achieving its end, but which is far from the only (or even best) path to power, and is no more “true” or “real” or “right” than any other means to the same end (*The Will to Power* n. 566, 302). The will is thus a necessary (or at least efficacious) error of consciousness by which the various forces that compose the subject are brought together under the sign of subjectivity. What this necessary error obfuscates, however, is: first, the reality that *all entities are composite* and composed of a multiplicity of (often contradictory) parts, forces, drives, tendencies, etc.; and second, that all these various components—although multiplicitous and often existing in contradictory tension—are, in fact, *all directed by the same underlying drive toward the same overarching goal*: namely, an increase in *power*. This underlying drive is what Nietzsche dubs *the will to power*, by which he means the tendency of all things to seek an increase in their own range of power and influence, their agentic capacity, or their capacity to *do* and to *be* more broadly (*The Will to Power* n. 552, 297-300, *Genealogy of Morals* 107).

Importantly, however, while Nietzsche believes the will to power to be the singular drive behind all things, he is also clear that this drive can be expressed in a variety of different, seemingly counterintuitive, ways. As such, the will to power is *not* (as a vulgar reading of the term would suggest) simply a desire for domination or mastery over others, and, in fact, can take the form of self-effacement, submission, or the desire to lose oneself in a greater cause (*The Will to Power* n. 774-776, 406-407). Rather, the most important aspect of the will to power for Nietzsche is the element of *overcoming*: the feeling of overcoming an obstacle or resistance that marks an increase in capacity, an increase in one’s range of movement, growth, influence, or ability to affect the world (*The Will to Power* n. 616-617, 330-331). Such overcoming can take the form of surmounting or eliminating external obstacles, but it may also take the form of an

overcoming of the self, a growing-beyond one's own capacities or identity, or the submission and organization of the various tendencies of the body into a unified entity. The will and the subject—or the illusion of a subject who wills—is thus itself an effect of an underlying will to power insofar as it involves the organization of multiple forces under the direction of a dominant drive (*The Will to Power* n. 561, 303).<sup>106</sup>

On this reading, “willing” or “willfulness” are therefore not qualities that belong to or reside within the subject as a self-contained entity. Rather, willfulness is a tendency or drive inherent to all matter. The “illusion” of the will, as propounded by modern philosophers and reconceptualized by Nietzsche, means simply that the self-contained *willing subject* does not really exist, not that will *itself* (as an orientation, an affective sense of one's agency, or a unifying force of subjectivization) lacks reality. As such, the conception of will being proposed here offers a way to address the problem posed by philosophers who reject the will's existence, claiming that it is just an illusion of consciousness which obfuscates mechanistic causal determinism.

For example, we might return to the thought experiment proposed by Spinoza of a rock being thrown through the air which, if it could think, would believe that it was causing or willing its own movement, rather than simply being subject to the force of gravity. What the Nietzschean and new materialist conception of will outlined here proposes is that: Spinoza's rock would think that it is willing its own movement because it *is*—at least to some degree, given the weak agentic

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<sup>106</sup> Obviously, the idea of a singular, universal drive that underpins all existence and motivates all action is precisely the kind of metanarrative that has been thoroughly critiqued and rejected by most postmodern theory and poststructuralist philosophy over the past century. As such, it might be tempting to simply refuse Nietzsche's conception of the will to power as a misguided holdover of modernity: a misstep in his thinking akin to the very errors in thought and perception that the concept is meant to replace. Yet it should be noted here that, broadly speaking, Nietzsche's insights regarding the multiplicity of the subject and the agentic capacities inherent to matter are supported by much contemporary work in affect theory, new materialisms, and the natural sciences. See, in particular: Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* for a vision of materiality that aligns nicely with Nietzsche's conception of the will to power. Additionally, we might also critique Nietzsche's universalizing tendency to position the will to power as the singular drive undergirding existence as such while still acknowledging the usefulness of the concept for explaining certain modes of behaviour and the process of subject formation.

capacity inherent to all things (Bennett 20-38). The rock's matter is *willful*, even if it lacks consciousness or subjectivity. The difference between the rock and the human subject is simply that the underlying will to power of each—the expression of each one's agentic capacity—takes a different form and intensity. Similarly, while we can think of subjectivity broadly as a product of the will, we may also note that this process of subjectivation takes different forms depending on *how* the underlying will to power is being expressed. Or, alternately: different subjects can manifest different modes of subjectivity, different orientations, different commitments, different interpretations of existence, even as these different modes of subjectivity all arise from the unification of forces represented by the will and are driven by an underlying will to power.

With this conception of will as the unification and orientation of the subject, we are now in a position to return to our discussion of nihilism as will-to-nothingness, which initially prompted this extended digression into an investigation of the will in general. It will be recalled that our discussion in this chapter began with a definition of nihilism as an *interpretation* and a *will*—an interpretation of the world as meaningless and a will that orients the subject toward nothingness, toward the negation of what *is* on the basis of its meaninglessness. Following the conception of the will just outlined, we can further define this orientation toward nothingness as a particular manifestation of the will to power: a will that unifies the various forces, drives, and tendencies of the subject into a mode of subjectivity oriented toward nothingness and negation as a means of increasing its feeling of power. Nihilism is thus the form of subjectivity that emerges from a will-to-nothingness.

But what exactly is this will-to-nothingness? How does it come about? How does it express itself? And what relation does it have to the dissolution of the modern world or the affective state of uncanny disorientation outlined thus far?

To begin answering these questions, we should once again recall that nihilism initially arises from an affective encounter with nothingness, from the subject's recognition that their existence (or existence in its totality) rests upon nothing: the recognition that there is no ground to being, no foundation to the extant, and that we are (in the words of Nietzsche's infamous madman) simply "plunging continually...backward, sideward, forward, in all directions...straying as through an infinite nothing" (*The Gay Science* n. 125, 181). This encounter with the lack of ontological grounds, however, is not necessarily experienced consciously by the subject, but is instead felt *affectively* at the level of the body. How this affective encounter with the nothingness at the heart of existence is felt or interpreted by the subject can vary, but as I have argued in the previous sections of this dissertation, *uncanny disorientation* constitutes one of its primary manifestations today. The encounter with nothingness is *uncanny* insofar as it prompts a feeling of creeping strangeness, a sense that something about the world is not quite right, not quite familiar, despite remaining seemingly unchanged; it is *disorienting* insofar as this creeping strangeness makes it difficult (if not impossible) to rely on one's past interpretations, past values, or past knowledge as a reliable basis for navigating the world. This uncanny disorientation then leaves the subject feeling terrifyingly lost in a world (or, more accurately, the lack of a world) that no longer appears to make meaningful sense, in that it is no longer interpretable through the categories once used to organize it into a world *for us*.

Returning to the question of the will-to-nothingness, we can recall Nietzsche's claim that we first *feel* (or are affected) before we *act* or *interpret* (that is, before we *will*). How we are affected therefore conditions how we orient ourselves and subsequently how we enact our agentic capacity or how we express the will to power. This is then interpreted as an act of will

that is ascribed to a coherent, unified, sovereign subject, which in turn *produces* the very fictional subject to whom a will has been ascribed. In the case of uncanny disorientation, feelings of uncanniness and disorientation are prompted by the dissolution of the modern world and the unavoidable presence of hybrid entities; these feelings then move the bodies that are affected by them to act and orient themselves in a particular way,<sup>107</sup> which is then interpreted as the will of a self-contained subject; this interpretation of the actions of the subject in terms of will then produces the very subject it imagines: the subject affected by uncanniness and disorientation.

It is my contention that this subject produced by the affective experience of uncanny disorientation is a specifically *nihilistic* subject insofar as the will expressed through their formation is a *will-to-nothingness*: an orientation toward the nothingness that grounds being combined with an attempt to negate the world as it *is* in response to its meaninglessness, its horrifyingly uncanny non-familiarity. Nietzsche defines this orientation towards nothingness and its accompanying propensity for negation as “the European form of Buddhism—*doing No* after all existence has lost its ‘meaning’” (*The Will to Power* n. 55, 37). But while the will-to-nothingness may be expressed through many disparate types of activity (or different ways of “*doing No*”), its range of action is consistently marked by a tendency toward *negation* as a means of attaining a feeling of *power* and *control*. As such, Nietzsche largely critiques the will-to-nothingness for its propensity to turn *inwards*, taking the form of “self-vivisection, poisoning, intoxication, romanticism,” or, when directed *outwards*, “the instinctive need for actions that turn the powerful into mortal enemies (as it were, one breeds one’s own hangmen)” each of which represents “the will to destruction as the will of a still deeper instinct, the instinct of self-

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<sup>107</sup> It should be remembered that disorientation constitutes more than simply the *lack* or *absence* of an orientation. Rather, it is its own phenomenological state, such that we can say that *disorientation* is itself a form of orientation: an orientation toward/away from *nothingness*. Hence my claim in Chapter 2 that the orientation of existence today can be characterized as a generalized state of disorientation.

destruction” (*The Will to Power* n. 55, 37).<sup>108</sup> Even more severely for Nietzsche, this form of the will-to-nothingness represents the total rejection and denigration of *life itself*, as in the “Christian, Buddhist, Schopenhauerian” formula: “better *not* to be than to be” (*The Will to Power* n. 685, 364). The nihilistic subject, oriented toward nothingness and interpreting the extant as meaningless on the basis of this orientation, develops a will-to-nothingness as *negation*—a drive to negate that which is meaningless precisely for its meaninglessness—which eventually extends to the entirety of existence, or life itself.

To return to our initial definition, we can thus say that nihilism represents a mode of subjectivity marked by an *interpretation* of the extant as meaningless and a will to *negate* that which exists on the basis of its meaninglessness. It is a negative judgement cast against existence, against life, against everything that *is*, accompanied by an orientation toward nothingness and a drive toward negation. Moreover, as we’ve seen, it is a mode of subjectivity that is first prompted by a *feeling*, an affective encounter with the nothingness that grounds being which, occurring in relation to the dissolution of the modern world, takes the form of *uncanny disorientation*. Hence Nietzsche’s description of nihilism in the first note from *The Will to Power* as “the uncanniest of all guests,” which, against the conventional reading, can be interpreted as both *a description of nihilism itself as uncanny* and *an acknowledgement that uncanniness constitutes the affective spur around which a nihilistic mode of subjectivity takes form* (n.1, 7).

But what are the consequences of this nihilistic mode of subjectivity? What kinds of actions and effects follow upon the formation of the nihilistic subject, and how does this relate back to the contemporary condition of living on after the end of the modern world? With the

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<sup>108</sup> For Nietzsche, this largely results from the overall weakness of the subject of nihilism and their inability to negate the external conditions that have prompted their nihilism in the first place. The tendency to turn negation inward results from the drive to increase power running up against an inability to overcome external conditions.

understanding of nihilism as a mode of subjectivity marked by an interpretation of meaninglessness and a will-to-nothingness prompted by an affective encounter with the nothing that grounds being (as outlined thus far), we are now in a position to start answering these questions. However, this will also require a further investigation into the *subjectivity* of the nihilist, specifically. To that end, the following section of this chapter will be dedicated to describing the particular characteristics of the subject of nihilism as initially outlined by Friedrich Nietzsche and later elaborated upon by thinkers ranging from the early twentieth century work of Martin Heidegger, Leo Strauss, and Theodor Adorno through the post-1968 theory of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Jean Baudrillard, up to the work of contemporary theorists like Nick Land, Roberto Esposito, Peter Pal Pelbart, Eugene Thacker, Gianni Vattimo, and Calvin L. Warren. Starting from Nietzsche's initial proposition that the human is an inherently *interpreting* and *willing* creature, we will then investigate what happens to the subject whose capacity to will and to interpret is frustrated by the dissolution of the modern world. From this investigation, we will further follow the reinterpretation of Nietzsche undertaken by Gilles Deleuze to distinguish between two types of nihilistic subject—the subject of *passive nihilism* and the subject of *active nihilism*—in order to argue that the subject of nihilism today, as formed by an affective experience of uncanny disorientation, constitutes a particular kind of nihilist: namely, the *nihilist in bad faith*.

*Nietzsche on the Will to Truth and the Subject of Nihilism*

While certainly not the first thinker to identify the problem of nihilism, Friedrich Nietzsche has undoubtedly been its most influential interpreter.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, it is seemingly impossible to discuss nihilism as a subjective, metaphysical, theological, or alethiological condition without a sustained engagement with Nietzsche's thought on the matter. Yet, if all discourse on nihilism gravitates toward Nietzsche as a kind of inescapable conceptual black hole, it is simply because, having lived nihilism through to its ultimate conclusions, he embodied and expressed nihilism's contradictory tensions to an extent that was unmatched by either his contemporaries or his commentators. This is, in fact, an interpretation that Nietzsche himself expounded, as when he claims in a note from *The Will to Power* to be "the first perfect nihilist of Europe who...has even now lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself" (3).<sup>110</sup> And yet, in the end, Nietzsche was unable to produce a complete or coherent text on the topic of nihilism (even though he evidently did *plan* to write such a text as part of his "*Revaluation of All Values*" [*The Will to Power* xvii-xx]), leaving his final views on the subject a matter of speculation for later scholars. As such, there is no straightforward way to approach the idea of nihilism in Nietzsche's corpus, just as there is no simple way of

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<sup>109</sup> Perhaps non-coincidentally, the term "nihilism" was first introduced by the philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi in reference to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and Spinoza's deterministic philosophy more specifically. Jacobi believed that all rationalism eventually leads to nihilism and that a fideistic return to faith and revelation is a necessary corrective to Enlightenment rationality. It will also be recalled that it was Jacobi's claims regarding the supposed Spinozism of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing which prompted Kant to write his essay on the necessity of orientation in thinking. Both Jacobi and Kant appear to have been concerned about the potential nihilism of Enlightenment rationality, though their responses to this problem differed drastically.

<sup>110</sup> Or, as Jean Rollin wrote in the second issue of the radical philosophical journal *Acéphale*: "In a world in decomposition, that is freezing gradually into the mere contemplation and presence of its end—whose actions, the moment they come about, destroy everything they have extracted that was conducive to living, the voice of Nietzsche rises up, full of incitement and provocation...Everything that is for us condemned to die a miserable death, our civilization, thus seems to offer certain new possibilities—the human and cosmic wave that ebbs, like the sea, to return. The presence of Nietzsche is enough to change this difficult demise into the dawn of a new birth" (55). Nietzsche remains relevant for us today as a kind of prophet of the present. Living "at the peak of modernity" (Löwith 110), through the late stages of the collapse of the modern world, he already foresaw its coming dissolution and mapped, with startling clarity, the existential and subjective conditions that would follow its end—that is, the very conditions in which we find ourselves today. In this way, Nietzsche was correct to presume that he was writing the "history of the next two centuries" (Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 3).

approaching the concept of nihilism in general, and any attempt to do so will inevitably involve a level of interpretation and selective reading that surpasses the kinds of interpretive work typically required when engaging with a thinker's corpus. With these difficulties in mind, I will attempt to offer one such interpretation here, focusing on Nietzsche's statements regarding nihilism from his late works (*The Genealogy of Morals*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, and *The Will to Power*) to construct a theory of the causes and effects of nihilism as a particular mode of subjectivity that haunts modernity, and which has only further proliferated with the dissolution of the modern world.

So, what does Nietzsche have to tell us about nihilism as a form of subjectivity?

To begin to understand this, we can return to our initial definition of nihilism as an *interpretation* and a *will*. Nietzsche, too, views nihilism as a problem of interpretation and will—specifically, a form of interpretation and will that leads to the devaluation of *life* in favour of a *world beyond* or a *world to come* that is ultimately self-defeating. As he explains in an extended note from 1888:

Man seeks 'the truth': a world that is not self-contradictory, not deceptive, does not change, a *true* world—a world in which one does not suffer; contradiction, deception, change—causes of suffering! He does not doubt that a world as it ought to be exists; he would like to seek out the road to it...*In summa*: the world as it ought to be exists; this world, in which we live, is an error—this world of ours ought not to exist... What kind of man reflects in this way? An unproductive, suffering kind, a kind weary of life... The belief that the world as it ought to be *is*, really exists, is a belief of the unproductive who *do not desire to create a world* as it ought to be. They posit it as already available, they seek ways and means of reaching it. 'Will to truth'—*as the impotence of the will to*

*create...* ‘Will to truth’ at this stage is essentially an art of interpretation: which at least requires the power to interpret. This same species of man, grown one stage poorer, no longer possessing the strength to interpret, to create fictions, produces *nihilists*. A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning: the pathos of ‘in vain’ is the nihilists’ pathos—at the same time, as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists. Whoever is incapable of laying his will into things, lacking will and strength, at least lays some *meaning* into them, i.e., the faith that there is a will in them already. It is a measure of the degree of strength of will to what extent one can do without meaning in things, to what extent one can endure to live in a meaningless world *because one organizes a small portion of it oneself* (*The Will to Power*, n. 585 A, 316-318).

For Nietzsche, then, the initial basis of nihilism is what he calls the “will to truth”: an orientation toward objective “truths” as the foundational value of all life and a drive to discover the underlying truth of things as a means of establishing the meaning of existence. Nietzsche views this will to truth as the fundamental drive behind the entire history of philosophy, religion, and science hitherto, as each has attempted to reveal some kind of indisputable truth behind the ever-shifting, ever-changing, ever-becoming appearances of reality: whether this takes the form of unchanging metaphysical, moral, or ontological principles; undeniable theological proofs of the divine origin of existence; or unbreakable laws of the physical universe. As such, the will to truth has undoubtedly been a powerful force within the history of human civilization, and continues to impel theoretical, religious, and scientific speculation in the present, despite

critiques being levelled against the category of “truth” by postmodern, poststructuralist, and analytic philosophers repeatedly over the course of the past century.<sup>111</sup>

The problem with this will to truth, according to Nietzsche, however, is that there simply are no stable, unchanging, universal “truths” beyond the shifting and becoming of the apparent world—no metaphysical principles grounding material reality; no divine origin for existence; and no unbreakable laws of the physical universe. Rather, all that *is* is what *becomes* and what *appears*. As such, all things are subject to change, making eternal, universal truths a structural impossibility (“Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks” 108). Or, as Nietzsche himself famously states in another note from 1888:

Against positivism, which halts at phenomena—‘There are only *facts*’—I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact ‘in itself’: perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing. ‘Everything is subjective,’ you say; but even this is interpretation. The ‘subject’ is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is.—Finally, is it necessary to posit an interpreter behind the interpretation? Even this is invention, hypothesis. In so far as the word ‘knowledge’ has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is interpretable otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.—‘Perspectivism.’ It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm (*The Will to Power* n. 481, 267).

In other words: meaning does not exist as a “fact” but merely an *interpretation*, with the understanding that things can always be interpreted otherwise. There is no stable, universal

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<sup>111</sup> We might also read the modern constitution—with its unrelenting drive to produce ontologically purified categories to the exclusion of hybridity—as itself an expression of the will to truth.

meaning behind the appearances of things or their basic factual reality, but only various shifting interpretations as to their *possible* meanings. Moreover, these interpretations are guided not by knowledge or even a subjective will (in the conventional sense) but, again, by the *will to power*—the drive to extend one’s capacities that positions each of us “For” and “Against” various phenomena, orienting us “towards” or “away” from the things we interpret. On this reading, the will to truth is simply one interpretation, one mode of interpreting the world, which can take many different forms and has become dominant at various times throughout history. But it is also an interpretation that posits itself as the *only* interpretation, thereby denying its own status as interpretation by positioning itself as definitive *truth* (*The Will to Power* n. 55, 35).

This, for Nietzsche, constitutes both the strength of the will to truth as an interpretation as well as its fundamental flaw: in positioning itself as the singular, definitive interpretation of existence, the will to truth is able to suppress all other possible interpretations; but at the same time, it also, inevitably, runs up against the limitations of its own power of explanation—the reality that there are no definitive truths or meanings behind the ever-shifting appearances of the world. In seeking definitive, unchanging, universal truths, the will to truth flounders. The truths that it discovers are exposed to be partial and contingent interpretations through the very drive to truth that first prompted their discovery. And the subject possessed by the will to truth, who has oriented themselves on the truths discovered by that will, is left *disoriented*. For the

everlasting and exclusive coming-to-be, the impermanence of everything actual, which constantly acts and comes-to-be but never is, as Heraclitus teaches it, is a terrible, paralyzing thought. Its impact on men can most nearly be likened to the sensation during an earthquake when one loses one’s familiar confidence in a firmly grounded earth. It takes astonishing strength to transform this reaction into its opposite, into sublimity and

the feeling of blessed astonishment” (Nietzsche “Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks” 108)—a strength which the subject of the will to truth generally lacks precisely because they have become dependent upon the will to truth as a means of orientation.

As such, Nietzsche says: the will to truth is, in reality, a *will to deception* insofar as this will is incapable of engaging with the world *as it is* and instead must imagine the world as it *ought to be*, or as it would need to be in order for universal, unchanging, definitive truths to exist (*Beyond Good and Evil* n.2, 517-518). Since no such truths can exist in this world (as it is marked by becoming, appearance, perpetual change, etc.), one must posit another, different world behind or above the world as it is, in order to believe in the existence of definitive truths in the first place. This is the metaphysical world of Being or Forms in Platonic philosophy, the afterlife or heaven of Christian theology, the stable universe of Newtonian physics, the world of transcendent concepts or ideas in Kantian philosophy, Hegel’s universal history, the Marxist dream of communism as an end to historical transformation, or the liberal dream of an end to history—each of which, for Nietzsche, constitutes a vision of the world as it *ought to be*, as produced by the will to truth in response to the *lack* of definitive truth apparent in the world as it *is*. Yet, the world as it ought to be is also an invention of the will to truth, a fiction with no basis in the existence of the world as it *is*, and as such, it also inevitably falters under the will to truth’s own drive to discover definitive, universal truths. The subject of the will to truth, in their attempt to access the truth of the world as it ought to be, discovers that *no such world exists*, and subsequently, that there is no truth to be discovered behind the constant change of the world as it is.

At which point, Nietzsche says, *nihilism* emerges: “The repudiated world versus an artificially built ‘true, valuable’ one.—Finally: one discovers of what material one has built the

‘true world’: and now all one has left is the repudiated world, and one adds this supreme disappointment to the reasons why it deserves to be repudiated. At this point nihilism is reached” (Nietzsche *The Will to Power* n. 37, 24).<sup>112</sup> Having rejected the world as it *is* in favour of an imagined world as it *ought* to be, the subject of the will to truth is left with nothing but existence, which they have already judged to be *false* and *meaningless*. Because more than just an interpretation of existence, the will to truth is also a judgement *about* existence: namely, that existence is meaningful only insofar as universal, definitive truth can be discovered in it. Truth, in a sense, makes existence meaningful. The world as it ought to be is the meaning of the world as it is, which, in itself, *is nothing* (since it is devoid of universal, unchanging truths). The collapse of the will to truth in light of the non-existence of the world as it ought to be thus results in a judgement of meaninglessness: without the possibility of being *true* (in the sense defined by the will to truth), existence is meaningless. And as we have already seen, nihilism is nothing more than this judgement against existence as meaningless, coupled with a will-to-nothingness that seeks to negate the world as it is on the basis of that meaninglessness. Or, to return to our initial quotation from Nietzsche: “A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning: the pathos of ‘in vain’ is the nihilists pathos—at the same time, as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists” (*The Will to Power* n. 585 A, 318).

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<sup>112</sup> By contrast, Gilles Deleuze argues in his work on Nietzsche’s philosophy that the will to truth, in its denial and deprecation of life in the name of some supposed higher value (i.e., truth, the true world, the world beyond), is already a form of nihilism, insofar as it nihilates the value of this world (i.e., life) in favour of a “true” one. The recognition of the falsity of these higher values then leads to a second form of nihilism in which “only life remains, but it is still a depreciated life which now continues in a world without values, stripped of meaning and purpose, sliding ever further towards its nothingness” (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 148). For Deleuze, this is the difference between what he calls *negative nihilism* and *reactive nihilism*. This distinction will be discussed further in the next chapter on active versus passive nihilism.

In pursuing the will to truth, the subject judges that the existent is deficient because it is lacking in truth. Subsequently, they posit that the world ought to be otherwise, insofar as it *should* conform to the subject's standards of truth. The subject of the will to truth then projects this conception of a true world outwards into a vision of the world as it ought to be, but the will to truth itself soon drives them to acknowledge that this vision is also a fiction and is no more "true" than what exists. This, in turn, leads the subject of the will to truth to the conclusion that there simply *is no truth*—that truth cannot exist, and thus existence is without meaning, since "meaning" has been tied solely to truth—thereby transfiguring the subject of the will to truth into the subject of *nihilism*, who denies that truth can exist at all and subsequently judges the world as it is (which is the only world left) to be meaningless.

As such, nihilism "is not primarily a disbelief in truth, rather nihilism is the result of a belief in truth of a certain kind. The belief in a truth that is based upon a realm of absolute and unchanging beings is a belief that ultimately leads to the weary despair of nihilism" (Michael Grenke in von Boxel 3). The very belief in truth (of a universal, unchanging kind) leads the subject of the will to truth to the nihilistic realization that such truth simply cannot exist and the subsequent judgement that the world as it does exist is without meaning or value. This realization that neither universal truth nor the world that such truth would require can exist then leads—as with the dissolution of the modern world—to an experience of *disorientation* and *uncanniness*, in which the subject of the will to truth no longer possesses the means to orient themselves in relation to a world that they have conceived on the basis of a belief in truth. And it is this plunge into uncanny disorientation that prompts the conversion of the subject of the will to truth into "one of the uncanniest monsters: the 'last will' of man, his will to nothingness, nihilism"

(Nietzsche *On the Genealogy of Morals* 122), or, more specifically, *the subject of nihilism*, whose subjectivity has been unified and organized by the will to nothingness.

### *Nihilism and the Crisis of Modernity*

In fact, we can read the dissolution of the modern world as itself one example of this self-destructive process of the will to truth. The modern world, built upon an assumption of the possibility of purified ontological categories, is simply one of the latest manifestations of the will to truth: a vision of the world as it ought to be, with all things in their place, separated into their self-contained ontological zones, with no overlap or hybridity. Such a world, of course, cannot exist, which is revealed through the will to truth of the modern constitution itself. By denying the existence of hybridity in favour of the “truth” of purified ontological categories, the modern constitution only serves to proliferate hybrid objects to the point of undeniability, thereby causing the modern world to collapse, leaving the modern subject disoriented in a worldless world full of uncanny presences. The most uncanny of such presences being the modern subject themselves, who both undeniably exists yet no longer *can* exist under the conditions that have prompted the dissolution of the modern world—a fissure in being which the will-to-nothingness works to smooth over by gathering and organizing the various drives of the once-modern subject into a mode of subjectivity that seeks nothing but negation (i.e., nihilism).

It must be noted, however, that Nietzsche does not conceptualize the self-dissolution of the will to truth or the subsequent disorientation and uncanniness that arises from this self-dissolution primarily in relation to the decline of the modern constitution or end of the modern world. Rather, he reads this process of self-dissolution as part of an ongoing historical process, one which has played itself out at various times throughout the history of human development,

and which has culminated in what he calls the “death of God,” or the decline of the “moral-theological prejudice” that has dominated all human thought and culture thus far (von Boxel 10-16). For Nietzsche, this “moral-theological prejudice”—or the tendency to posit eternal, unchanging, absolute moral, theological, and philosophical categories (such as God, Being, or deontological moral principles)—has historically been a means of forestalling the onset of nihilism from arising as a by-product of the decline or “degeneration” of cultures. He variously locates this tendency in the development of Buddhism, Platonic philosophy, Stoicism, and Christian morality, all of which, he thinks, represent attempts to reconcile the subject to the suffering inherent to existence by ascribing a meaning to that suffering and providing an orientation to the sufferer, who is led to direct their attention toward a world “beyond” the material (i.e., nirvana, the world of Forms, the inner world of contemplation, or heaven) in order to distract from the meaninglessness of their negative experiences and the decline of their cultural world (Nietzsche *The Will to Power* n. 461 pg. 253-254 and *Twilight of the Idols* 29-41; Deleuze *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 34; Löwith 50).

Most significant in this regard, however, is the development and decline of Christian morality and its “ascetic ideal,” which has been the most powerful and enduring interpretation of suffering to date and has long been the most effective means of suppressing and re-directing nihilistic impulses, even as it has prepared the way for the most virulent forms of nihilism ever experienced (*Genealogy of Morals* 162). For, according to Nietzsche, Christian morality initially developed as an *antidote* to early experiences of nihilism in the Ancient world, as a way to posit universal values and truths while also conceptualizing a world of meaning against a nihilistic interpretation of the world as meaningless. The moral-theological interpretation of existence posited by Christianity ascribes meaning to the world as it is (which, otherwise, would be

meaningless) by interpreting the subject's suffering as necessary and deserved, while simultaneously orienting them away from the world as it exists toward the world as it ought to be, thereby forestalling a nihilistic recognition of the meaninglessness of existence.

However, as a manifestation of the will to truth, this Christian response to nihilism has ultimately been self-defeating. By positing the possibility of a stable ground for universal truth, Christian morality also prompts a will to truth, a will to discover the hidden meaning behind appearances which inexorably leads to the discovery that there is no truth behind the appearance of things, no hidden meaning beyond the interpretations we impose upon the world. This is what Nietzsche calls the “death of God”—a death which is, in actuality, a *murder*, as it is the will to truth prompted by Christian morality itself which “kills” God (or makes honest belief in a monotheistic conception of God impossible) and leads to the dissolution of the Christian interpretation of the world (Nietzsche *The Gay Science* n. 125, 181). The death of God and decline of the moral-theological interpretation of the world, in turn, prompts a renewed experience of nihilism. The old antidote to nihilistic pessimism having lost its potency, nihilism begins to reassert itself with a vengeance, as the subject who had previously oriented themselves on the basis of Christian morality and the “ascetic ideal” is plunged into disorientation and uncanniness.<sup>113</sup> Or, as Nietzsche explains:

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<sup>113</sup> We should note that, for Nietzsche, the death of God implies a kind of generalized *disorientation* for those who have participated in the murder (i.e., modern subjects). In his most famous formulation of this event—the infamous aphorism of the madman who announces God's death to a dubious audience of unbelievers—Nietzsche has the madman exclaim: “Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Wither is it moving now? Wither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, n. 125, 181). Here, the death of God is attributed not only to atheism or liberal secularism, but to modern science, which has “unchained this earth from its sun,” thereby plunging its inhabitants into the “infinite nothing...of empty space.” Moreover, this unchaining of the earth from its sun produces a general sense of disorientation: “Wither are we moving?...Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down?” By killing God, we have not only done away with the Christian

the belief in the absolute immorality of nature, in aim- and meaninglessness, is the psychologically necessary affect once the belief in God and an essentially moral order becomes untenable. Nihilism appears at that point, not that the displeasure at existence has become greater than before but because one has come to mistrust any ‘meaning’ in suffering, indeed in existence. One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain (*The Will to Power* n. 55, 35).

Nihilism therefore arises from the ashes of the moral-theological interpretation as a “psychologically necessary affect” that takes the form of a negative judgement against the “aim- and meaninglessness” of existence and its attendant experiences of suffering.

Yet, there is another, secular interpretation of the world waiting to take the place of Christian morality, promising to provide structure and meaning in the absence of God. This is, of course, the modern constitution: an interpretation of the world which developed alongside, and in conjunction with, the Christian interpretation, without necessarily relying on its foundations in God and a metaphysical beyond. As Christian morality wanes in the face of the death of God, the modern constitution offers itself as an escape from the abyss opened by God’s absence, a way to reorient oneself in relation to a world rendered meaningless without Christian morality to guide one’s way. Faith in modernity comes to replace faith in an outmoded Christianity, but today, the cycle continues.<sup>114</sup> Just as Christian morality undermines itself, leading to an experience of

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interpretation of the world, but have also decentered the human from the cosmos—a decentering that wipes away the horizon, and leaves us straying, disoriented, through an infinite nothingness.

<sup>114</sup> Alternately, Gianni Vattimo argues that “In Nietzsche’s philosophy, God dies precisely because knowledge no longer needs to arrive at ultimate causes, humanity no longer needs to believe in an immortal soul, etc. Even if God dies because he must be negated in the name of the same imperative demand for truth that was always considered one of his own laws, the meaning of an imperative demand for truth itself is lost together with him. Ultimately, this is because the conditions of existence are by now less violent and, at the same time, less prone to pathos” (*The End of Modernity* 24). This seems like a gross misreading of the contemporary situation, which is marked by intense forms of both violence and public pathos (or what Elizabeth Anker, following Nietzsche, would

nihilism in the wake of the death of God, the dissolution of the modern world once again plunges the modern subject into a nihilistic abyss. For, as Nietzsche writes, we are experiencing the “nihilistic consequences of contemporary natural science (together with its attempts to escape into some beyond). The industry of its pursuit eventually leads to self-disintegration, opposition, an antiscientific mentality. Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the center toward *X*” (*The Will to Power*, n. 1, 8), cast into a state of disorientation, with no centre around which to orient.

Today, nihilism is experienced in the contradiction produced by the end of modernity: we are still modern—we can no longer be modern—we never were modern. The modern world is no more. It has become impossible. It has been revealed to have always been impossible. Yet it is also the only orientation one has. It is impossible to continue to be modern, and yet one *is*. One becomes disoriented. The world reappears as both homely and unhomely, the same yet radically unfamiliar, uncanny. One is torn asunder by the tension of the contradictions at the heart of one’s existence. There is great pain, great suffering, discomfort, fear, terror, and pessimism in this uncanny state of disorientation, and these affects are the precursors to *nihilism*: a judgement against the world as meaningless and a will to negate that meaninglessness.

More than simply a consequence of the death of God and decline of the moral-theological Christian interpretation of existence, then, we can say with Calvin Warren that nihilism is a particular crisis of modernity. The universal narratives and grounds of legitimation that once secured meaning for the modern world had lost integrity. In the absence of a metaphysical grounding of social existence, we were left with a void—a void that

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call “orgies of feeling”). The modern constitution continues to hold its appeal precisely because it represents a non-theological framework of “truth” by which to orient in the world. Unfortunately, much like God, the modern world is now dead, killed by its own will to truth in the form of the self-dissolution of the modern constitution.

dispenses with metaphysical substance, even as this substance unsuccessfully attempts to refill this void. Nihilism, then, presents itself as the philosophical reflection of social decay; it offers politico-philosophical death (the death of ground) as the only ‘hope’ for the world (“Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope” 224).

This is because, according to Nietzsche, the “death of God” represents less the overcoming or destruction of moral-theological interpretation of the world than its transformation into a new mode: the atheism, scientific positivism, humanism, and rationalism of modernity, which preserves the kernel of the old interpretation (i.e., the will to truth) while giving it a new form and object. The supposed atheism and rationalism of the modern constitution in fact constitutes the most advanced form of the moral-theological interpretation to date—the Christian-Platonic “will to truth” followed through to its (pen)ultimate conclusion, the abolition of God. What follows is the “advent of nihilism,” which will play out over the “history of the next two centuries” as the dissolution and self-destruction of the will to truth itself. Having gotten behind the truth of God and annihilated the façade of the moral-theological interpretation, what must now be interrogated is its kernel and essence, the will to truth. What is the cause of the will to truth, which now (under the modern constitution) manifests itself in terms of reason, science, and technological progress? What is its truth? What is its *value* and *effect*? (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 159-161).

The twentieth century saw various interrogations into (and dissolutions of) this will to truth: from Freud’s discovery of unconscious irrational drives behind the modern subject’s supposed rationalism, to the existentialist and phenomenologist’s discovery of the abyss upon which Being rests, to Adorno and Horkheimer’s dissolution of Enlightenment rationality into just one more myth amongst others, to Foucault’s interrogations into the construction of epistemic

regimes, to Lyotard's critique of metanarratives, to Derrida, Rorty, Vattimo, and Baudrillard's various attacks on truth and reality itself—all of which functioned, in their own way, to undermine the modern constitution, precisely through a rigorous application of its own underlying drive: the will to truth, which ends by abolishing all pretense to truth as an object of value or of reality. This, in turn, has facilitated the dissolution of the modern world and its constitution—that interpretation and orientation which, having arisen out of the ashes of the moral-theological interpretation, for a time served as the *only* (or hegemonic) interpretation—and ushered in the advanced forms of nihilism that the Platonic-Christian interpretation (and its modern variant) worked to mitigate. Today, we live in the wreckage of the world built on that interpretation, gnawing away at its scraps as its nihilistic vermin (Blanchot 179).

### *Conclusions*

The issue here, as Nietzsche indicates, is that the human being has formed itself, through its genealogy and evolution, into an interpreting being. In short, we are interpreting creatures: to be human is to interpret things and to seek meaning within them. We simply cannot do otherwise. Historically, this need for meaning was fulfilled by the will to truth, which posited truth and the world as it ought to be as the meaning of existence. But with the self-dissolution of the will to truth and the modern world composed from it, it becomes apparent that *all* interpretations are (and have always been) equally groundless, based upon *nothing* but our own perceptions, preferences, and orientations, and so all equally devoid of meaning in the sense required by our psychological need to interpret. This revelation of the groundlessness and subsequent meaninglessness of existence is prompted by the dissolution of the modern world, insofar as the modern world and its constitution (which is based upon the will to truth) has, until

relatively recently, been the dominant, hegemonic interpretation of reality. When this interpretation collapses under its own weight, it is revealed to be grounded upon nothing, leaving the subject who had previously been oriented by the modern world without a way to interpret or read meaning into the world. This absence of a means by which to interpret the world, in turn, causes *all* interpretations—and, further, the very act of interpretation itself—to appear false and meaningless (Nietzsche *Twilight of the Idols* 39-41). Yet, again, because of our constitution as interpretive creatures, we cannot live without interpreting. And it is this tension between the lack of a viable means of interpreting the world and the physiological-psychological need to interpret that enervates the modern subject and causes them to experience existence pessimistically, as a curse and burden without escape or solution, and thereby to interpret and judge life itself in the negative, despite the fact that, as Nietzsche writes: “Modern pessimism is an expression of the uselessness of the *modern* world—not of the world of existence” (*The Will to Power* n. 34 23). And as we have seen, this negative judgement against existence is the first aspect of nihilism.

The second aspect of nihilism is, again, the will to nothingness. And this will to nothingness comes about through a similar process as the negative judgement against life. For, according to Nietzsche, the human being is not only an interpreting creature but also a *willing* one. This means that, in the same way that we cannot help but interpret the world around us and seek meaning within it, we also cannot help but *will* things in relation to that world, based upon our interpretations of it. Or, as Nietzsche famously formulates this need to will: “the human will...[would] rather will *nothingness* than *not* will” (*Genealogy of Morals* 97). The issue, however, is that the will requires an interpretation in order to guide it—it needs an interpretation to tell it *what* to will, some set of values or judgements to orient it toward a goal or purpose. And this, historically, is what the will to truth in its various guises (whether Platonic, or Christian, or

scientific, or modern) has provided: an interpretation of the world that guides and orients the will in its willing towards particular goals that are posited as meaningful and thus worth pursuing. However, when such an interpretation is *lacking*—as is the case in the dissolution of the modern world and its will to truth—we cannot simply *stop* willing, because again: the human being would “rather will *nothingness* than *not* will.” As such, our will becomes aimless and disoriented. Since there is no interpretation to tell us what to will, we begin to will nothingness, to orient ourselves toward nothingness and to will the negation of what *is* in favour of *nothing*. And this constitutes the second aspect of nihilism, the will-to-nothingness as a will to *negation* (of life, of the world) as a mode of action.

In this sense, nihilism is itself a particular orientation: an orientation toward negation, or toward the nothingness that grounds existence, which has been prompted by the pessimistic feelings of disorientation and uncanniness that arise from the dissolution of the modern world. For, as we will recall from the previous section, Nietzsche is clear that one first *feels* before they interpret or will an action: that affect precedes orientation, and that the phenomena of the will amounts to the feeling of taking on an orientation. This feeling of taking on an orientation, in turn, is the force that produces the subject as a coherent and unified entity, the subject of a will and an interpretation. In the case of nihilism, then, one’s subjectivity is unified and organized on the basis of a will and an interpretation that orients the subject toward negation and nothingness, prompted by the negative affective experience of uncanny disorientation at the end of the world.

Faced with the persistent discomfort and horror of uncanny disorientation, one tries to escape or negate that which has prompted those feelings of discomfort and horror in the first place—namely, *existence* or *life itself*, an encounter with the groundlessness of which acts as the spur toward feelings of uncanniness (as discussed in the previous chapter). As such, nihilism is

more than simply a pessimistic philosophy or attitude toward the world, but is instead *a mode of subjectivity that organizes the whole of one's being*—a mode of subjectivity which combines a general interpretation of meaninglessness (i.e., that all things are without meaning because they are lacking in definitive truth value or ontological grounds) with a general will-to-nothingness (i.e., a negative orientation toward life, existence, or the world that manifests through negation as a form of action). Moreover, it is the predominant mode of subjectivity that marks the end of modernity and the decline of its world. The subject of modernity who can no longer be modern becomes the subject of nihilism.

However, despite the semi-durable and persistent nature of nihilism as an orientation that unifies and organizes one's subjectivity, Nietzsche is also insistent that nihilism is a condition to be *passed through*, like a sickness that ultimately makes one stronger—a necessarily *temporary* condition. To remain in a state of nihilism is simply to perpetuate the sickness: a possibility which Nietzsche believed leads to passivity, a lack of will, and finally, death. This, however, does not mean that nihilism is in itself “bad,” or that it does not have its uses. Again, Nietzsche saw nihilism as a sickness that, in the end, *makes one stronger* in the process of recovery. Nihilism is only a problem if one valorizes the sickness itself, rather than the strength that comes after; or, alternately, if one is overwhelmed by the sickness and fails to recover (Löwith 110-112). A more appropriate metaphor might be a wildfire: the wildfire may not itself be desirable, but through its destruction, it does clear the ground for new life. Similarly, nihilism represents the destruction of old values and systems of belief, clearing the ground for the construction of something different. Its will-to-nothingness and orientation toward negation, when turned against the values and beliefs that prompted one's nihilistic subjectivity in the first place (e.g., the will to truth, the moral-theological interpretation of Christianity, scientism, or the modern constitution), can

function as the first step toward what Nietzsche calls the “revaluation of all values,” or the creation of a system of values and beliefs that work to *enhance* life rather than undermine and deny it. For Nietzsche, then, the value of nihilism lies in its destructive function, or its tendency toward the negation of what has come before, as it is this act of negation that allows for the possibility of something new and (arguably) better to form (*The Will to Power* n.1054-1056 544). What matters most in this process is the positing of new values, willing new projects once the ground has been cleared through negation. To remain in nihilism is to be consumed by the flames, rather than to sprout new life from the ashes. But without the clearing away of the old through annihilation, the new cannot emerge. As such, nihilism is to be affirmed, but affirmed only as a *temporary* condition, a means to something else that comes after.

Importantly, however, the destructive annihilation of the old that takes place under conditions of nihilism—the clearing of ground for new life—is not guided by any kind of coherent vision of the future, or of what is to be willed in the wake of the nihilistic clearing. To have a plan, a set of principles to posit in the “after” of nihilism would be no different than the redemptive theology of Christianity, socialism, or liberal visions of “progress”—all of which Nietzsche criticized as manifestations of the will to truth that leads to nihilism in the first place. Nihilism, by contrast, *has no plan*. It has no vision or grand scheme for what should come after the destruction of the old systems of value that prompted its arrival. It is the absence of all plans for the future, because it asserts that *there is no future*. Or, as Lise von Boxel claims: “nihilism today denotes disbelief in the human potential to be or grow into new, enhanced and more vital forms of itself. It is disbelief in the possibility of a *genuine future* for the human being” (104-105).

It is only in the aftermath of nihilism, when its negating and destructive capacities have been exhausted, that one can even begin to posit something new. As such, as Nietzsche argues, nihilism is a necessarily temporary condition, a mode of subjectivity that one takes on for a time but ultimately passes through in the process of becoming strong enough to posit new values for oneself—a process that Nietzsche himself claimed to have lived through to its ultimate conclusion, as the “first perfect nihilist of Europe” who had left nihilism “behind, outside himself” (*The Will to Power* n. 3, 3). Otherwise, if maintained as a permanent condition, nihilism leads only to death or the perpetual destruction of all existence, including the nihilistic subject themselves, ending in a passivity of the will that cannot posit new projects for itself once the ground of previous values has been cleared.

The meaning and value of nihilism as a mode of subjectivity is thus ambiguous. On the one hand, nihilism is a necessary precondition for the creation of a new system of values that is capable of orienting thought and subjectivity in a way that is not ultimately self-negating. On the other, nihilism risks perpetuating the disorientation of the subject, thereby leading to a passivity of the will that ends in death and self-destruction. Which path nihilism takes will depend upon how it manifests as a mode of subjectivity—for, as Nietzsche himself makes clear, nihilism as a form of subjectivity can be further divided into two broad types: *active nihilism* and *passive nihilism* (or, as the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, following Nietzsche, later defined them: *active* versus *reactive* nihilism), each of which corresponds to the different paths that nihilism can follow.

This distinction between active and passive nihilism is not ontological in nature. It is not a difference in kind or being, but largely a difference in terms of aim, effect, and the direction of the will-to-nothingness. For, as Nietzsche claims, the will-to-nothingness (like the will to power)

can be pursued in a variety of different ways, some of which are more *active* while others are more *passive* or reactive. The difference between active and passive forms of nihilism is thus entirely a matter of *how*—through what means, what forms of activity—the will to nothingness is pursued. In the following chapter, I will thus outline the distinction between “active” and “passive” expressions of nihilism, as initially drawn by Nietzsche and later elaborated upon by Gilles Deleuze, in order to argue that the predominant form of nihilism today—or the form that nihilism takes for the modern subject after the end of the modern world—is a particular form of passive nihilism that I will call *nihilism in bad faith*.

“The true nihilists are the ones who oppose nihilism with their more and more faded positivities, the ones who are thus conspiring with all extant malice, and eventually with the destructive principle itself. Thought honors itself by defending what is damned as nihilism”

(Theodor Adorno *Negative Dialectics* 379-381)

“Attempts to escape nihilism without reevaluating our values so far: they produce the opposite, make the problem more acute” (Friedrich Nietzsche *The Will to Power* n. 28, 19)

## Chapter 5: Nihilism in Bad Faith

Thus far, we have examined nihilism as a mode of subjectivity prompted by affective experiences of uncanny disorientation and marked by a generalized interpretation of meaninglessness and a will-to-nothingness. However, as we’ve seen, this nihilistic will and interpretation can be directed in a variety of ways, toward very different ends. For, as Nietzsche claims, nihilism as a mode of subjectivity can manifest as both an ascetic will to self-negation or as an outwardly directed will to negate the social, cultural, and existential forces that have prompted one’s experience of nihilism in the first place. As such, as Karl Löwith explains in his interpretive work on Nietzsche, the “death of God” and dissolution of the modern world results in a situation where “man finds himself in a problematic ‘*interim state*,’ and nihilism can mean two things: it can mean a symptom of the enervation of the will of an emptied existence, but on the other hand, it can be a first sign of the strengthening of the will and of a willed destruction—a nihilism of *passive* weakness or of *active* strength, like all symptoms of decadence” (emphasis added, 50). On this schema, experiences of nihilism can be broadly divided into two general

categories: a *passive* nihilism of weakness, enervation, and self-negation of the will, or an *active* nihilism of strength and willed destruction, in which the will-to-nothingness is directed outward, toward the world, rather than inward, toward the self.

But we must remember that this distinction between active and passive forms of nihilism does not constitute a binary opposition of two ontologically distinct terms. Rather, active and passive nihilism are two possible expressions of the same phenomenon, two manifestations of the multifaceted hybrid entity that is nihilism. Similar to the way in which general phenomenological experiences of disorientation can produce a range of affective responses (the predominant one today being uncanniness, as previously discussed), the subjective experience of nihilism can result in “passive” or “active” modes of existence. Importantly, however, these are not two independent responses, two completely distinct modes of being; instead, active and passive forms of nihilism draw on the same resources, the same affective experiences of pessimism, despair, meaninglessness, uncanny disorientation, and negation, but put them to different uses. Whereas passive nihilism reacts to these affective experiences with resignation, hopelessness, and a purely reactive will-to-nothingness, active nihilism uses these same affective resources for different ends: to negate in the service of affirmation, to destroy in the service of creation. Or, as Lucrezia explains in their careful interpretation of Gilles Deleuze’s work on Nietzsche:

The passive, incomplete form of nihilism characterized by negation, reactionary forces and a will to nothingness is...overcome through an active nihilism which seeks out the destruction of all old values in order to make way for the affirmation of difference...the transformation of negativity into affirmation and difference which Deleuze and Nietzsche are calling for, is conceived of as active nihilism...The negative is said to become a

power of affirming when it is no longer at the service of reactive forces but instead 'is subordinated to affirmation and passes into the service of an excess of life.' The negative here is neither denied nor suppressed but is rather put to use as the force which desires destruction and thus, through an active nihilism, leads to affirmation. This is how we can understand the function and the force of negation (9).

In this sense, active and passive expressions of nihilism are not two completely separate forms of subjectivity, but instead represent two modes, manifestations, or stages of an underlying tendency toward negation—with passive nihilism representing a truncated form of the will-to-nothingness in which negation is directed inward, toward the self, the will, and ultimately against life itself, whereas active nihilism constitutes the completion and overcoming of nihilism through the transfiguration of this same will-to-nothingness into an affirmation of life against the world. As such, the language of active and passive denotes two possible expressions of the same subjective type: the subject of nihilism.

Yet differences also exist within the categories of passive and active nihilism, as neither is schematically predetermined and each may manifest in a variety of ways. For example, passive nihilism's will-to-nothingness may manifest as a pure passivity marked by pessimistic despair and depression; or it may manifest as a reactive tendency towards suicide, a desire to negate suffering by negating life; or it may manifest through a weakness of the will that submits itself completely to another who directs the nihilistic subject as an absolute authority. Similarly, active nihilism may manifest in a variety of ways: as the creative destruction of neoliberal capital; or the genocidal schemes of neo-reactionaries who would marry the dynamic technical innovation of capitalism to a kind of neo-feudal authoritarianism; or as the anarchic destruction of current socio-political formations, not for the sake of a preformulated future, but simply to open the

possibility for new valuations, new interpretations, and new modes of being. Used in this way, active and passive are therefore neither moral nor ideological categories, as each may manifest in ways that can be judged positively or negatively from the perspective of a particular set of values. Instead, the terms active and passive are meant to denote certain tendencies in how the interpretation and will of nihilism is expressed through the nihilistic subject.

But what, precisely, distinguishes active from passive forms of nihilism? If both are expressions of an underlying mode of nihilistic subjectivity, then how do we discern the active nihilist from the passive? And why make this distinction in the first place?

It is my contention that such distinctions are necessary in order to fully understand the ways in which nihilism manifests today, after the end of the modern world, in response to the uncanny disorientation that plagues the still modern subject. More specifically, I will argue that the nihilism of today primarily appears in a passive mode that I will term *nihilism in bad faith*. But to properly understand the difference between these contrasting instantiations of nihilism, we must first turn to the work of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who elaborates upon the importance of the active/passive distinction in his careful interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy.

#### *Active and Reactive Forces—the Deleuzian Interpretation*

For Deleuze, active and passive (or, more accurately, active and reactive) are qualities possessed by the various forces that come to inhabit and animate the subject—for example: affect, interpretation, or will—all of which, as we saw from Nietzsche, are expressions of an underlying will to power. These forces, in turn, work to produce subjectivity as such: the body possessed primarily by active forces will manifest an active form of subjectivity, whereas a body

possessed primarily by reactive forces will manifest a passive form of subjectivity. The difference between these forms of subjectivity is thus determined by the quality of the forces which primarily affect them, active or reactive. However, the qualitative difference between active and reactive forces is principally observed through the activity of the subjects they produce, with active and reactive forces prompting manifestly different forms of action by orienting and directing the subject's activity in particular ways. The terms active and passive are thus a means of speaking about the types of activity produced by the various forces (active or reactive) underlying subjectivity, which can only be distinguished through the activity that they prompt in the subject as the outward manifestation of an otherwise unconscious will to power. Subjective activity is therefore the central feature of active and passive forces, and the point at which they can be distinguished as such.

Against a literal reading of these terms, however, Deleuze locates the difference between active and passive forces not in their relative levels of activity or passivity, but instead through their relation to *action* and *reaction*. For Deleuze, passive forces are not passive in the common sense of a total lack of activity, but rather in the sense that they are purely reactive, acting reflexively in response to external stimuli (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 118). Active forces, by contrast, involve a more active (or at least a less reactive) relation to stimuli: what Deleuze calls "selection," or the capacity to select between stimuli to respond to, and how to respond to them (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 68-71). Counterintuitively, this may make the subject inhabited by active forces appear less active than the subject of passive forces, insofar as the active subject has the capacity to withhold their action, to choose whether or how to (re)act to external stimuli, whereas the passive subject does not—they simply react. On this reading, passive forces are therefore not marked exclusively by passivity (they may, in fact, prompt great paroxysms of

activity in the subject they inhabit) and, conversely, active forces are not marked exclusively by activity (as they may lead the subject to withhold their action). Rather, the subject of active forces “acts his (*sic*) reactions, everything in him is active or acted” whereas the subject of passive forces “does not re-act” as they are “no longer able...to act a reaction” (Deleuze *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 134, 111-114). The qualitative distinction between active and reactive forces is thus a matter of *action* versus *reaction*: the active subject is able to truly *act* their actions (including their reactions, which are re-acted) because they have the capacity to select whether and how to act (including whether and how to act their reactions to stimuli), whereas the passive subject can only passively *react* to whatever affects them because they are entirely possessed by reactive forces and thus lack the capacity for selection, which is also the capacity for action. More succinctly, we might say: the active subject is able to *act* while the passive subject can only *react*.

Moreover, following Nietzsche, Deleuze further conceptualizes this distinction between the subjects of active and passive forces in terms of *strength* or *power*. Applying a Spinozist conception of affect and power to his reading of Nietzsche, Deleuze proposes that power, in the Nietzschean schema, is a matter of *what a body can do* or its *capacity to affect and be affected*. On this reading, a subject’s strength is not determined by physical prowess or the ability to dominate and subjugate others, but rather by their capacity for *affection*—the extent to which they are able to affect and be affected by the people and things that they encounter. The subject of *strength* has a greater capacity to be affected, whereas the subject of *weakness* is lacking in that capacity. Or, expressed slightly differently: the strength of a subject is determined by *what their body can do* in terms of the range of affection that it is capable of. Strength and weakness are thus measures of power in the sense that power is an index of how far a given body has

extended its capacity to affect and be affected, or what it can do (Deleuze *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 61).

In terms of active and passive forces, the subject of strength is the subject of active force. This is because, on Deleuze's reading, the hallmark of active force is to take a body—a subject, a life—to the limit of what it can do, maximizing its capacity to affect and be affected in a particular way. As such, "Every force which goes to the limit of its power is...active" and active forces are simply those which go to the limit of their power (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 59). Possession by an active force is thus also the precondition for strength, insofar as strength is a measure of power, or what a body can do: its capacity for affection. Possession by reactive forces, on the contrary, is a sign of weakness, in that reactive force not only fails to take a body to the limit of what it can do but also separates the subject from their power by suppressing the body's capacity to affect and be affected. Rather than simply *weakness* or a lack of power, then, the mark of reactive force is its tendency to separate active forces from what they can do, preventing active forces from going to the limit of their power, thereby converting active forces into passive ones, sapping their strength and making them weak (in the sense defined above). This is what Deleuze calls the "becoming-reactive of forces," which he alternately terms *nihilism* (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 64-65).

On this account, nihilism is thus primarily defined through its relation to reactivity and reactive force, rather than its connection to the will-to-nothingness or an interpretation of meaninglessness. This does not mean, however, that Deleuze abandons any conception of the will-to-nothingness in his interpretation of Nietzsche or his discussion of nihilism. Rather, he locates the relationship between nihilism and the will-to-nothingness in reactive force itself. For Deleuze, reactive forces are an expression of the will-to-nothingness as a manifestation of an

underlying will to power. The will to power, in turn, is that from which all the various forces which come to possess and animate the subject derive.<sup>115</sup> Both active and reactive forces are therefore expressions of the will to power, though they differ in *how* they express that underlying will to power—through *negation* or *affirmation*.

Reactive forces, on this schema, are aligned purely with *negation*. This is because reactive force is always an expression of the will-to-nothingness, insofar as the will-to-nothingness is a negative *reaction* to that which has provoked it (e.g., the feelings of uncanniness and disorientation that follow from the end of the modern world). Taken to its extreme, this negative reaction of the will-to-nothingness manifests as *nihilism* in the form of *ressentiment* (reactive negativity turned outward against the strong or powerful), bad conscience (reactive negativity turned inward against the subject themselves), asceticism or self-denial (reactive negativity turned against the body), and eventually the denial of life itself (reactive negativity turned against the whole of existence). Again, this is what Deleuze calls the becoming-reactive of forces: the separation of active force from its power, the subject from strength, the body from what it can do.

Active forces, by contrast, express themselves through *affirmation*. By taking a body, subject, or life to the limit of what it can do—its greatest capacity for affecting and being affected in a particular way, its power and strength—active force manifests through a capacity for *action* rather than mere *reaction*. And this capacity for action, in turn, is distinguished from reaction by its alignment with *affirmation* rather than negation. Where the subject of reactive force can only react negatively by attempting to *negate* that which has provoked its reaction, the

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<sup>115</sup> Within the broader context of Deleuze's work, we might also define this as the relationship between the *virtual* and the *actual*. For a more in-depth discussion of these concepts, see: "The Actual and The Virtual" from the collection *Dialogues II*, as well as "1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible..." from *A Thousand Plateaus*.

subject of *active* force is able to *affirm*: to select between things in the world, values, or courses of action, and positively affirm that which enhances life and strength, that which is capable of taking the subject to the limit of what they can do. Moreover, affirmation is *creative*, capable of creating its own values to affirm, whereas negation can only negate that which exists. This, for Deleuze, explains why reactive force is always and exclusively expressed through negation rather than affirmation, and why the will-to-nothingness aligns with reactive forces: because, in the case of both reaction and negation, there must first exist something to negate, to react *against*. The reactive subject is thus incapable of either creation or affirmation—in order to act, they *must* negate—whereas the active subject can both affirm what exists and create values of its own.<sup>116</sup>

Importantly, however, active force is also capable of negation, but the negating activity of active force is a negation or destruction of the existent that ultimately takes place through *affirmation*. For, as Deleuze argues, active forces are only destructive or negative from the point of view of reactive forces. The affirmation of self, of one's own created values and interpretations against those modes of existence which suppress and negate life—this is what the subject of reactive forces views as negation, as a threat to their way of being, grounded as it is in

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<sup>116</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre famously describes this mode of reactive subjectivity as a form of *bad faith*, as when he writes that: “consciousness is not restricted to envisaging a negation. It constitutes itself in its own flesh as the nihilation of a possibility which another human reality projects as its possibility. For that reason it must arise in the world as a *No*: it is as a *No* that the slave first apprehends the master, or that the prisoner who is trying to escape sees the guard who is watching him. There are even men (e.g., caretakers, overseers, jailers), whose social reality is entirely that of the *No*, who will live and die, having forever been only a *No* upon the earth. Others, so as to make the *No* a part of their very subjectivity, establish their human personality as a perpetual negation. This is the meaning and function of what Scheler calls ‘the man of resentment’—the man who is a *No*...The kinds of behavior which can be ranked under this heading [negation] are too diverse, we risk retaining only the abstract form of them. It is best to choose and to examine one specific attitude which is essential to human reality and which is such that consciousness instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself. This attitude, it seems to me, is *bad faith*” (Jean-Paul Sartre *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* 137-138). What Sartre here calls bad faith, I have described as passive nihilism. I will elaborate on the connection between these two concepts in the following section of this chapter.

*ressentiment* and a will-to-nothingness that ultimately seeks to negate life. From the point of view of the reactive subject, the active subject is terrifying in their power of affirmation, which is interpreted by the reactive subject as a purely destructive form of negation, as they are incapable of recognizing the affirmation which drives the active subject's negation (Deleuze *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 56). Positively positing one's own difference or one's own values *against* a passive submission to existent values is seen as a form of violent negation and destruction by those still invested in the dominant values of the past or present: those who passively go along with things, and whose activity is entirely constituted by reaction to external stimuli. The reactive subject thus reacts with hatred and *ressentiment* toward active forces because they interpret those active forces as a negation of their own way of being. And in this, they are not necessarily incorrect. For the subject of active force pursues negation in the service of affirmation, negating that which negates or hinders life and the expansion of power in order to affirm their own values and strength.<sup>117</sup> As such, active forces can both affirm and negate (through affirmation), while, as we've seen, reactive forces can only act through negation. And so, taken to its limit, the negative activity of active force culminates in the negation of reactive forces, which Deleuze calls the *becoming-active of reactive forces*, or the will-to-nothingness turned back against reactive force itself—an *active* form of nihilism.

#### *Active v. Passive Nihilism*

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<sup>117</sup> We might think here of Mikhail Bakunin's infamous statement that "the passion for destruction is also a creative passion." The conception of active nihilism put forward here aligns with Bakunin's statement insofar as active nihilism negates through affirmation, destroys through creation, or in order *to* create.

Having outlined the distinctions drawn by Deleuze between activity and reactivity, affirmation and negation, and nihilism as the becoming-reactive of active force or the becoming-active of reactive force, we are now in a position to differentiate between *active* and *passive* forms of nihilistic subjectivity. At the most fundamental level, the difference between active and passive nihilism is a matter of the underlying forces that animate the subject, with *active nihilism* being animated by *active force* and *passive nihilism* being animated by *reactive force*.

On this schema, passive nihilism is primarily a reactive response to the negative affective stimuli that prompt the subject's nihilism in the first place (i.e., pessimism, despair, disorientation, and uncanniness). As the subject of nihilism, the passive nihilist responds to these feelings through an interpretation of meaninglessness and a will-to-nothingness. But more specifically, in the case of passive nihilism, this will-to-nothingness is pursued through the impossible attempt to *will nothing* or to *not will at all*. But, as Nietzsche has stated, the human being cannot refrain from willing, thereby making this attempt not to will an impossible task for the reactive subject. Instead of becoming "passive" in the sense of being entirely inactive, the passive nihilist instead turns their will-to-nothingness inward, resulting in forms of self-negation and psychological self-mutilation. Paradoxically, this may in fact involve an intense amount of activity, but it is a form of activity aimed at negating the will itself, as well as the self that is an expression of that will. More importantly, it is a form of activity that is purely *reactive* in its aims and negativity. In trying to negate the will itself through an act of will, the will-to-nothingness of the passive nihilist becomes *reactive*: it fails to actively pursue projects or posit values in place of the values and interpretations which have been negated (i.e., the will to truth, as expressed via the modern world and its constitution), but instead merely reacts negatively in response to any and all forms of stimulus or affect. The passive nihilist thus wallows in despair and pessimism,

moved solely in reaction to the negative affects they experience from existing in a worldless world of uncanny disorientation.

At its most extreme, the negative activity of passive nihilism involves a reaction against the whole of life or existence. Judging life to be meaningless, and experiencing great suffering in the form of pessimism, despair, and uncanny disorientation as a result of this negative judgement against life, the subject of passive nihilism attempts to negate that suffering by doing away with *life itself*—particularly through various forms of self-negation. The passive nihilist attempts to eliminate their own vitality in an attempt to prevent further suffering. Ultimately, this results in what Deleuze, following Nietzsche, calls *passivity*: the willed extinction of humanity through an attempt *not* to will, *not* to interpret, *not* to posit values of any kind, which Nietzsche alternately associates with Buddhism or the German bourgeoisie of his day. However, as we've discussed, Nietzsche is also insistent that it is impossible for the human being not to will or to interpret. And so, even the nihilist whose will-to-nothingness has passed into passivity is still vivified through the impossible tension between their attempt to passively pass away into oblivion and their basic human need to will, culminating in a situation of *pure reactivity* wherein the only actions undertaken by the passive nihilist are *negative reactions* against the things that happen to rouse their will.

For Nietzsche, this passive form of nihilism represents nihilism in its most basic, primary form.<sup>118</sup> It is the first stage of nihilism, the form that first afflicts the nihilistic subject in the wake

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<sup>118</sup> Deleuze complicates this conception of passive nihilism by positing three separate stages of the passive nihilistic impulse. The first is what he calls *negative nihilism*, which represents the depreciation and denial of the value of *life*. This form of nihilism has been made manifest primarily through metaphysics and Christian morality—depreciation of the life of *this* world in favour of an imagined world beyond. The second stage of nihilism he calls *reactive nihilism*. This is the nihilism of the death of God, in which the world beyond and all higher values are reacted against and negated through a denial of their existence. Finally, the third stage is what Deleuze calls *passive nihilism*: nihilism as manifested as a will to extinction, the passive passing away of life and humanity, as undertaken through a denial of the will itself. This is the nihilism of Nietzsche's *last man*, or of a kind of vulgar

of affective experiences like uncanny disorientation and the initial interpretation of existence as meaningless. However, Nietzsche is clear that while passive nihilism is the most fundamental (and thus predominant) form that nihilism can take, it is also preliminary to *another* form of nihilism that is capable of *overcoming* nihilistic subjectivity all together. For while one may remain in a state of passive nihilism indefinitely by converting it from an affective reaction into a durable form of life, it is also possible to move beyond this first phase of nihilism by transmuting the negative, reactive will of passive nihilism into an *active* form of will—one which creates its own values, its own projects, and is subsequently *pro-active* rather than *reactive*, acting from its own impulse rather than purely in reaction to external stimuli. This is what Deleuze calls the becoming-active of reactive forces, and what Nietzsche terms *active nihilism* (*The Will to Power* 9).

This second stage of nihilism represents the will-to-nothingness made *active* rather than reactive: when the will no longer attempts to negate itself (an impossible task), or even to negate the uncanny disorientation and other negative affects that are the basis of the subject's nihilism, but instead becomes oriented towards the negation of all that negates or impedes *life*. In this way, active nihilism is ultimately *affirmative* in its will-to-nothingness, as even in its acts of negation it seeks to *affirm* life and all that enhances life by negating that which impedes the expansion of vital energy. Or, as Deleuze explains in his work on Nietzsche: the active nihilist affirms life while recognizing that to “*affirm is not to take responsibility for, to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives*” through “the warlike play of difference, affirmation and the joy of destruction” rather than “the labour of opposition or the suffering of the negative” (185, 191). As such, unlike the passive nihilist, the subject of active nihilism does not seek to do away

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Buddhism. For the sake of brevity, and because I do not find Nietzsche to make such fine distinctions in his discussions of nihilism, I have chosen to represent these three forms as one under the concept of *passive nihilism*.

with suffering, even as they experience the same negative affects of pessimism, despair, and uncanny disorientation. Instead, the active nihilist *affirms* their suffering as a necessary and unavoidable part of life, as something which must be lived through as a means to more life, or an expanded vitality. The negative activity of the active nihilist is thus ultimately affirmative insofar as it seeks to negate that which negates life for the purpose of positing new values and new interpretations in the absence of the modern world and its will to truth. The negation of negation becomes the fuel for the creation of something genuinely new. For Nietzsche, this stage represents the completion of nihilism: a nihilism which culminates in its own negation, as the will-to-nothingness has become strong enough to posit its own values without having to rely on an externally provided interpretation that claims to be universal, immutable, and unchanging (as in the case of the will to truth in its various manifestations, including the modern constitution).

The capacity to *affirm*, even through negation, is thus what sets active nihilism apart from its earlier passive stages, which must be passed through and overcome in order to reach the stage of active nihilism. The primary difference between passive and active nihilism is, of course, *activity*—but more particularly, the *act of creating values* or positing goals by which the activity of the will-to-nothingness can be guided and oriented (Deleuze *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 185-186). On Nietzsche's schema, the passive nihilist is "passive" insofar as they are *non-creative*, specifically in relation to creating and positing values for themselves. Having previously relied on the will to truth and modern constitution as the primary set of values by which to orient their activity, once this source of orientation is gone, the nihilist is left without any values by which to guide their activity whatsoever. This is, as previously described, the state of *uncanny disorientation*. But from this state of valuelessness and disorientation, the passive nihilist does

not attempt to create a new set of values by which to guide their activity. Instead, they merely *react* negatively to whatever happens to affect them.

By contrast, the active nihilist is creative in the sense of being able to posit new values by which to orient their activity. Even if that activity is, as with the passive nihilist, an expression of the will-to-nothingness and negation, the active nihilist is able to direct their negating activities towards projects that ultimately *affirm* the values that they have created and posited for themselves out of the vacuum left by the dissolution of the modern world. In other words, out of the disorientation and uncanniness experienced in the wake of the dissolution of the modern world, the active nihilist is able to forge a new orientation insofar as their nihilism *itself* becomes an orientation toward the world—one capable of transmuting the negative affects that have prompted their nihilism into a project of negation that ultimately *affirms* life against the various forces that would seek to suppress or negate it. Or, as the *baedan* collective explains in a correspondence published in the second issue of their journal of queer nihilism:

While there are several ways to approach nihilism, for now we could say that nihilism means an orientation toward reducing what exists to rubble rather than toward a way through it. For us, this approach corresponds to a strategic interpretation of the situation, a provisional understanding that, firstly, what we are faced with is not yet rubble but structures (and so why concern oneself with navigating a path that has not been opened), and secondly that all attempts, however marginal, at radicalizing and even destroying these structures may result in their improvement (234).

For *baedan*, then, nihilism constitutes an orientation of negation toward the structures that compose our world—those various signposts that Hannah Arendt argued constitute a world *for us*, but which, in the wake of the dissolution of modernity, now loom as uncanny presences,

strangely familiar yet radically unfamiliar and completely incapable of providing any coherent orientation toward existence—on the basis that those structures impede our capacity to *live*, to express our vital capacities or to affirm life as a basis for new values (Payne 35). Instead, those structures, in failing to provide an orientation and thus prompting in us a sense of uncanny disorientation, produce a form of nihilism that is actively antagonistic to life: a *passive* nihilism that seeks to negate life and vitality in order to end or avoid the suffering caused by uncanny disorientation (and all the other negative affects that attend the dissolution of the modern world). As such, I would argue that what *baedan* describes simply as “nihilism” is, in actuality, a form of *active* nihilism that works to transmute passive nihilism into an orientation of negation toward the very conditions that have produced one’s nihilistic subjectivity in the first place, thereby working toward the overcoming that Nietzsche viewed as the ultimate culmination of nihilism itself.

The problem of nihilism today is that the ability to complete the movement of nihilism has been forestalled by present conditions. The affective experience of living in a worldless world full of disorienting, uncanny presences prompts a passive form of nihilism, while also making it difficult to move beyond passive nihilism into active negation. As a result, passive nihilism abounds, without the possibility of moving into a more active state that could eventually overcome nihilism all together. Rather, the passive nihilist remains in the initial stages of nihilism indefinitely. This is because passive nihilism is immanent to the present situation after the end of the modern world, in which existence has been reduced to the hopelessness of an eternal present without past or future. Disoriented and unable to posit new values or interpretations by which to guide their actions, the passive nihilist is reduced to a kind of presentism, acting solely in reaction to whatever affect happens to possess them in the moment

(Van Boxel 103). As such, they exist without a viable past or future in which things could be (or could have been) radically different from present conditions. Instead, the passive nihilist displays a kind of total submission to present social, political, economic, and existential realities as a means of survival, because both past and future have been shuttered to them. Their actions, while negative, can only reproduce and reaffirm what already exists, as they are undertaken solely in reaction to the existent and are aimed *inward* toward the goal of self-negation.

Active nihilism, by contrast, tries to rupture the existent all together through a movement aimed at neither past nor future but solely at *the negation of present conditions*. For, as the political theorist Leo Strauss once claimed, active nihilism represents “the desire to destroy the present world and its potentialities, a desire not accompanied by any clear conception of what one wants to put in its place,” but simply “the rejection of the principles of civilization as such” (359, 364). Rather than reconfirming what already exists through reactive forms of negation aimed inward toward the self, the subject of active nihilism instead directs their negative activity outward, toward the conditions that have prompted their nihilism in the first place. Importantly, however, this negation of present conditions is not ideologically motivated, nor is it guided by a pre-established or transcendent set of values external to the subject of active nihilism themselves, such as the will to truth and its attendant ideological frameworks. Nor is the active nihilist’s negative activity aimed at negating the world as it *is* in favour of an imagined world as it *ought* to be. Instead, the negation of present conditions and values is undertaken *purely for its own sake*. For as the anarcho-communist collective Monsieur Dupont argue in their text on *Nihilist Communism*:

Loss of hope, cynicism, pessimism—these are the open-eyed modes of consciousness appropriate to present conditions. There are no solutions, no good prospects, no chance of

improving your lot. Things are going down; we're all going down together. Everything is decay and defeat, the world is grey. Big, good men are laid low by weasly small men. Treachery wins out time and time again: true-hearted intention is twisted to further the purpose of despair. These are the blackest days. And so, if we cannot win, if defeat by the powers of darkness are certain, what then of our rejection of the bad days? Nothing is changed; an illusion is crushed—that is all. Resistance is not a bet made, Pascal style, in the hope of making a fortune in the future—it is an unavoidable burden, a fate, a curse upon our miserable band. Shall we then hear no more uplifting songs from the activist camp, no more group patriotism, no more positivity, no more 'together we can do it.' Let us find in...defeat...the absolute truth of...existence...With no prospect of victory we still go on because the resistant position is not dependent on either political victory or lifestyle choice, it is an unavoidable chore. Without illusions we must proceed, our consciousness hardened (148-149).

Active nihilism, then, involves a resistance to the existent that is not oriented toward the future or organized around the hope of making things "better." Rather, the active nihilist resists and attacks present conditions simply from a need to destroy that which negates life, even if resistance is ultimately groundless and futile. In this way, active nihilism represents a form of what the anarcho-nihilist theorist Serafinski calls "concentration camp resistance" (19-37): a form of political dissidence that they identify with the acts of resistance undertaken by the prisoners of Nazi concentration camps who found ways to resist their captors and the lifelessness of camp life, not from a sense of hope or the belief in a better future, but simply out of the necessity for resistance, to try to negate the forces that were working to negate them.

For Serafinski, as for Monsieur Dupont, this type of hopeless resistance represents a condition of active nihilism appropriate to contemporary conditions which, like the concentration camp, offer no hope or possibility for the future, but instead trap us in an endless present of worldlessness and capitalist realism, in which it is “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,” in part because the world *for us* has already ended (Fisher 1-11).

Similarly, the black nihilist and afro-pessimist theorist Calvin Warren advocates for a form of active nihilism that would pit itself against what he calls the “politics of hope,” which he associates with the entire structure of the political itself, insofar as political action remains oriented toward a perpetually deferred future of emancipation and freedom. For Warren, this perpetual deferral of politics into the future through the category of “hope” is particularly insidious in as much as it functions as a ruse designed to keep black people attached to a system from which they are constitutively excluded—a political and social system which is, in fact, founded upon the infinite eliminability of black bodies. The politics of hope continuously pushes the promise of black emancipation into the horizon of the future, encouraging (in the context of the United States) African Americans to vote, to participate in the political process, to struggle for a change that will never actually arrive, because the entire system of meaning upon which the political is founded rests upon an ontological anti-blackness. In response, Warren proposes a “black nihilism” which would reject the politics of hope—thereby rejecting the political as a whole—and would seek nothing but the destruction of the metaphysical system upon which the political itself is founded, positing nothing in its place. For, as he argues:

either one lives in bad faith—the ‘optimistic’ and politically hopeful belief that anti-black structures can be transformed to provide vitality to blackness, despite all evidence to the contrary—or one lives as the pathogen (i.e., socially pathological) and risks increased

vulnerability to violent state apparatuses...Perhaps this ‘pathology’ is a way of speaking otherwise when other forms of discourse are inaccessible; the nihilist might have to assume an anti-grammatical enunciation to express the inexpressible (Warren “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope” 241-242).

For Warren, as for Serafinski and Monsieur Dupont, then, present conditions necessitate a form of active nihilism—one which rejects the deferred promises of a hopeful future of emancipation in favour of active revolt and negation in the present, not in the hope of “improving” current conditions, but simply in resistance to a metaphysical system founded upon the infinite murder of black bodies.<sup>119</sup>

In a similar vein, the contemporary theorist Andrew Culp points to the hopelessness of present socio-political conditions as a spur to both active *and* passive forms of nihilism, stating that:

Cynicism, depression, and hopelessness fill reservoirs unleashed against Empire in revenge for the wounds it causes. Dangerous emotions pose a threat, not just to those who bear them but their source, Empire—the political imperative is to channel them. This should not be understood as an uncritical celebration of alienation or a politics of *ressentiment*. But these dangerous emotions are not unhealthy reactions to a sound world; they should be everyone’s natural reaction to the terrible situation facing us all. To throw them away would only rob some subjects of the only thing Empire has ever given them. So instead of avoiding their terrifying energy, dangerous emotions can be made political by giving them an orientation...This politics can become reactionary, as when it is used to restore a lost time or attack abstraction with stubborn disbelief. But once politics is

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<sup>119</sup> The connection between nihilism, anti-black racism, and the politics of white supremacy will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

freed from the demands of preservation, reproducibility, and repetition, innovation, difference, and singularity begin to flourish (136-137).

Both passive and active nihilism are thus forms of *reorientation* undertaken in response to the *disorientation* of living on after the end of the modern world. Their primary difference lies in *how* the subject is reoriented, and toward what ends. Both constitute reorientations *away* from the past and future *toward* the present, but each orients itself towards the present differently—with passive nihilism wallowing passively in present conditions by turning its impulse to negation inwards, while active nihilism orients itself negatively toward present conditions, turning its negative impulse outward against things as they currently exist.

We must remember, however, that passive and active nihilism are also representative of particular subjective types, insofar as nihilism is itself an organization of subjective forces around a will-to-nothingness and interpretation of meaninglessness. Within the scope of Nietzsche's thought more specifically, the distinction between active and passive nihilists roughly equates to what he calls the "last man" and the "overman" (*Übermensch*)—the two subjective types that may arise from the "death of God," the degeneration of Christian morality, and (eventually) the dissolution of the modern world.

The "last man" is Nietzsche's passive nihilist: one who is oriented entirely toward the present, who is incapable of creating values, positing goals, or aiming for something beyond themselves (which would require an *overcoming* of themselves) because they act solely and entirely through *reaction*, reconciling themselves to present conditions as a means of negating the will, and who thereby "represents the greatest danger for all of man's future" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 213). Such subjects have their "little pleasure for the day...and little pleasure for the night" but are "careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing." They go to work, "for work is a

form of entertainment” but “one no longer becomes poor or rich” because “both require too much exertion.” Similarly, they refuse to rule or set rules for themselves, choosing instead to follow the dictates of whoever deigns to rule them (or, barring the presence of one who leads, simply follow the dictates of the crowd), because “Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion. No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 18). In short, the “last men” are *passive* in relation to the conditions of their lives, even as they can be roused and mobilized to great outbursts of productivity and action. They simply do not mobilize that activity of their own will or on the basis of their own sets of values, both of which are suppressed and negated through a total submission to the present. Instead, the last man acts *reactively*, reacting to whatever external stimuli happens to affect them at a given moment, going with the crowd, swayed by the circulation of affect within the masses, engaging in what Elizabeth Anker, following Nietzsche, calls “orgies of feeling”: an attempt to escape feelings of powerlessness (like uncanny disorientation) through an intensification of other forms of affect, like melodrama, race hatred, hope, or “cruel optimism” (Anker 15-17, Berlant 23-49).

By contrast, the “overman” represents an *overcoming* of present conditions and their stultifying influence over us: the self-overcoming of the human condition toward something more-than (or other-than) what has constituted human life thus far. As such, the overman is pure futurity. They cannot exist under present conditions and must overcome those conditions in order to come to be. For, as Deleuze describes:

The overman is defined by *a new way of feeling*: he (*sic*) is a different subject from man, something other than the human type. *A new way of thinking*, predicates other than divine ones; for the divine is still a way of preserving man and of preserving the essential

characteristic of God, God as attribute. *A new way of evaluating*: not a change of values, not an abstract transposition nor a dialectical reversal, but a change and reversal in the element from which the value of values derives, a ‘transvaluation’ (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 163).

The overman is thus *not* the subject of active nihilism (who engages in a *revaluation* rather than *transvaluation* of values, thereby remaining fundamentally human even in their negative orientation) but is instead what follows upon the heels of an actively nihilistic orientation. In other words, *the overman is the result of the active overcoming of nihilism*. It is only once the present conditions that produce nihilism have been negated that the overman may emerge. And this requires an actively nihilistic orientation—for, as we have seen, the passive nihilist is incapable of overcoming their own nihilism. It is only through an active nihilism that ends in negating its own nihilistic tendencies that nihilism itself can be overcome. The active nihilist, through their negative orientation toward present conditions, thus clears the ground for the emergence of the overman.

Notably, however, while Nietzsche saw traces of the last man in his own time, he is also clear that both the last man and the overman are meant to be profiles of subjective types that will manifest in the *future* as a result of the cultural exhaustion and “European nihilism” that he saw following from the death of God. Whether either type of subjectivity would come to be in the future was pure speculation on his part, though he seems at turns hopeful and pessimistic about the possibility of overcoming nihilism. What I contend here, over one hundred years on from Nietzsche’s speculative predictions, is that the subject of passive nihilism has indeed become manifest and that it is, in fact, the dominant mode of subjectivity of the present.

As we have seen throughout the dissertation thus far, the affective condition of uncanny disorientation that follows on from the end of the modern world prompts the formation of nihilistic modes of subjectivity. Yet this does not mean that the nihilistic subjects produced by feelings of uncanny disorientation are able to overcome their nihilism by moving from a passively nihilistic state to one of active nihilism. As both Nietzsche and Deleuze make clear, one may persist in the state of passive nihilism indefinitely. The transition from passive nihilism to an actively nihilistic orientation is not a given. And despite the attempts made by anarcho-nihilists, afro-pessimists, contemporary philosophers of nihilism, and others to move beyond passive nihilism or to actively work to negate the social, political, and ontological structures of existence that produce nihilism in the first place, those structures of existence remain in place. We continue to be modern subjects, despite the end of the modern world. We continue to subscribe to the modern constitution, despite its inoperability. We exist in a state of disorientation, haunted by the uncanny presence of structures and frameworks that no longer make sense, precisely because, as Ray Brassier has argued, we have yet to think or live nihilism through to its ultimate conclusions. Passive nihilism continues to plague us indefinitely because we have yet to engage in the negation of that which negates us. The contemporary subject is, and remains, the subject of passive nihilism.

More than this, however, current manifestations of passive nihilism take on the structure of what I will call *nihilism in bad faith*: a form of nihilistic subjectivity that perpetuates itself through a recognition of its own nihilistic tendencies and an attempt to escape those tendencies through a reorientation toward the very same social forces that have produced widespread nihilism in the first place (namely, the modern constitution). In the next section of this chapter, I will outline a conception of nihilism in bad faith in order to argue that it represents the

predominant mode of nihilism today. From this conception of the current structure of nihilism, we will then be in a position to analyze contemporary aesthetic, social, and political trends as products of this form of nihilistic subjectivity, and the affective experiences that underpin it.

*Nihilism in Bad Faith*

While any discussion of nihilism today must engage with the history of its past theorization—as I have tried to do here through my particular reading of Nietzsche and Deleuze—it is also important to recognize the ways in which contemporary manifestations of nihilism differ from its past instantiations. Nietzsche, for example, made his observations about the emergence of nihilism from within a context in which the death knell of modernity had barely begun to echo (Nietzsche himself being one of the first to sound it), and in which the modern constitution was still very much operative. Today, the world in which Nietzsche encountered the first examples of his “last man” is no longer extant. We live among its wreckage. Our conditions are no longer those of Nietzsche’s nihilists.

And yet, as I have argued here, the affective experience of living on after the end of the modern world remains conducive to the production of nihilistic subjectivity, perhaps even more so than the socio-historical and political conditions of Nietzsche’s “last men.” A question thus remains as to how nihilistic subjectivity presents itself *today*. What are the predominant features of contemporary nihilism? How does the will-to-nothingness express itself through today’s nihilistic subjects? What kinds of (re)activity do such subjects undertake, and what kinds of projects—political, social, aesthetic—does nihilism orient them toward?

As I have argued in the previous section, the nihilism of today is still very much a form of passive nihilism. We have not yet found a way to convert the passive nihilism of reactive force

into an active nihilism aimed at affirmative negation, despite some minor and individual attempts to the contrary. For, as Theodor Adorno once said: “A thinking man’s true answer to the question whether he is a nihilist would probably be ‘Not enough’” (*Negative Dialectics* 380). As such, the widespread nihilism produced by the uncanny disorientation of modernity’s self-dissolution remains *passive*. But again, this passive nihilism cannot be the same as the nihilism of Nietzsche’s “last man,” which was essentially an expression of the nihilism of *modernity*. Having undermined the world from which the last man arose, today’s nihilist is of a fundamentally different character. More specifically, contemporary manifestations of passive nihilism take on the quality of what I will call *nihilism in bad faith*.

But what is nihilism in bad faith, and how does it differ from past forms of passive nihilism? To begin to answer this question, we can first turn to Jean-Paul Sartre’s classic conception of “bad faith” from *Being and Nothingness*, in which he describes bad faith as a particular attitude that one takes toward an unavoidable and ineliminable part of their being: an attitude of denial and escape which, in its very structure, cannot help but acknowledge that which is being denied, even as one denies it. Or as Sartre himself writes:

I can in fact wish ‘not to see’ a certain aspect of my being only if I am acquainted with the aspect which I do not wish to see. This means that in my being I must indicate this aspect in order to be able to turn myself away from it; better yet, I must think of it constantly in order to take care not to think of it. In this connection it must be understood not only that I must of necessity perpetually carry within me what I wish to flee but also that I must aim at the object of my flight in order to flee it. This means that anguish, the intentional aim of anguish, and a flight from anguish toward reassuring myths must all be given in the unity of the same consciousness. In a word, I flee in order not to know, but I

can not avoid knowing that I am fleeing; and the flight from anguish is only a mode of becoming conscious of anguish...*I am anguish in order to flee it*. This attitude is what we call *bad faith* (82-83).

On this reading, nihilism in bad faith would represent an attempt to *flee* a confrontation with one's own nihilistic tendencies "toward reassuring myths" which, at the same time, relies on an *acknowledgement* of nihilism in order to flee it. Rather than being passively directed by an unacknowledged, underlying will-to-nothingness *or* attempting to overcome nihilism through the transfiguration of that will-to-nothingness into active negation, the nihilist in bad faith simultaneously acknowledges *and* seeks to deny their own nihilism through an escape into the myths of purification without translation that form the basis of the modern constitution. In turn, this nihilistic escape into the reassuring myths of modernity represents, as Sartre's contemporary Albert Camus once claimed, "a prolonged endeavor to give order, by human forces alone and simply by force, to a history no longer endowed with order" (*The Rebel* 221)—an endeavor which is ultimately self-defeating. In short, the nihilist in bad faith tries to turn away from a recognition of their own nihility by returning to modernity and modern subjectivity, even while recognizing that this is an impossible project, as the constitution of modernity is self-undermining and *itself* leads back to nihilism. In this way, contemporary nihilism is in *bad faith* insofar as it reinforces itself through the very act of turning away from itself toward the "reassuring myths" and unachievable dreams of the modern constitution.

Whereas previously it was possible to remain ignorant of nihilism, contemporary life has become so thoroughly invested by the will-to-nothingness that it has become impossible to deny the basic nihilism of our existence. Just as the crisis of modernity has made the hybrid objects produced by the modern constitution undeniably present to consciousness, the widespread

affective experience of this crisis (i.e., uncanny disorientation) has rendered nihilism an inescapable aspect of our current situation. As we have seen, nihilism is not simply an external object that can be turned away from, but a mode of subjectivity internal to selfhood. More specifically, nihilism today constitutes what Jean Baudrillard has called an “end-of-world subjectivity,” in which:

the subject—the subject as agency of will, of freedom, of representation; the subject of power, of knowledge, of history—is disappearing, but it leaves its ghost behind, its narcissistic double, more or less as the Cat left its grin hovering. The subject disappears, gives way to a diffuse, floating, insubstantial subjectivity, an ectoplasm that envelops everything and transforms everything into an immense sounding board for a disembodied, empty consciousness—all things radiating out from a subjectivity without object; each monad, each molecule caught in the toils of a definitive narcissism, a perpetual image-playback. This is the image of an end-of-world subjectivity; a subjectivity for an end of the world from which the subject as such has disappeared, no longer having anything left to grapple with. The subject is the victim of this fateful turn of events, and, in a sense, it no longer has anything standing over against it—neither objects, nor the real, nor the Other (Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared? 27).<sup>120</sup>

At the same moment that subjectivity—specifically, modern subjectivity, or the modern subject—disappears due to the self-dissolution of the modern world, it simultaneously becomes diffused into everything, everywhere. We are still modern; we can no longer be modern; we have

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<sup>120</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe a similar state of being in their examination of the “body without organs” in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They write: “Flows of intensity, their fluids, their fibers, their continuums and conjunctions of affects, the wind, fine segmentation, microperceptions, have replaced the world of the subject. Becomings, becomings-animal, becomings-molecular, have replaced history, individual or general” (162). A world without subjects and subjects without a world. Such is the state of contemporary reality.

never been modern. In the age of the crisis of modernity, modern subjectivity both *disappears* and *remains* as a ghostly trace, an uncanny figure haunting an absent world. And this mode of subjectivity—a subjectivity that is simultaneously nothing and nowhere yet encompasses all things within itself—is precisely *nihilism* in its contemporary manifestation at the end of the world.

This is because nihilism, as a mode of subjectivity, is conditioned and produced by the external structures of contemporary existence—structures which, since the time of Nietzsche’s initial warnings about “European nihilism,” have become *global*. For, as the French communization theorists of The Invisible Committee claim, Nietzsche’s “discussions of ‘European nihilism’ were not vain talk. Indeed, nihilism is an article that’s been exported so successfully that the world is now saturated with it...one could say that what we now have above all is the globalization of nihilism” (28). As we have seen, this global saturation of the world by nihilism is precisely the result of the crisis of modernity and its attendant affective experience of uncanny disorientation. The world *itself* has become uncanny and disorienting, reappearing as a mute intruder incapable of guiding or orienting the actions of its once modern subjects. And this uncanny disorientation, produced by the worldless world we find ourselves in at the end of modernity, leads directly to passive nihilism. What this means is that: nihilism is *everywhere*. It is both external and internal to the contemporary subject, simultaneously. There is no turning away from it, no orientation that will allow one to escape the nihilistic reality of life after the end of the world. Yet the affective structure of nihilism demands that we turn away, that we attempt to flee from the uncanny horror of the situation that we find ourselves in by trying to reorient in relation to familiar signposts. But such a reorientation is immediately revealed to be impossible, as it is those familiar signposts that are themselves the uncanny, (un)familiar presences that haunt

contemporary life. Much like the structure of modern subjectivity after the end of the world (we are still modern—we can no longer be modern—we have never been modern), today’s nihilist is caught in a kind of double bind: nihilism is unavoidable, yet one cannot *be* a nihilist. For, as Baudrillard writes,

it would be beautiful to be a nihilist, if there were still a radicality...But it is at this point that things become insoluble. Because to this active nihilism of radicality, the system opposes its own, the nihilism of neutralization...We are in the era of events without consequences (and of theories without consequences). There is no more hope for meaning. And without a doubt this is a good thing: meaning is mortal. But that on which it has imposed its ephemeral reign, what it hoped to liquidate in order to impose the reign of the Enlightenment, that is, appearances, they, are immortal, invulnerable to the nihilism of meaning or of non-meaning itself (*Simulacra and Simulation* 107).

What Baudrillard describes here is precisely the crisis of modernity: an “era of events without consequences,” of appearances without meaning, of widespread nihilism without the capacity to live nihilism through to its ultimate conclusions. For as the possibility of meaning within the framework of the modern constitution dissolves, what we are left with is brute materiality, facticity, the world stripped of meaning, looming as an uncanny presence no matter where we turn. Hence the emergence of nihilism in *bad faith*: one cannot deny, or ignore, or escape the nihilism of contemporary life (since meaninglessness and uncanny disorientation pervade existence), yet one must flee from it toward the “reassuring myths” of the modern constitution and its promise of purified ontological categories of meaning, precisely because (as Nietzsche pointed out) we are *interpreting* creatures—we can’t help but seek meaning within the meaninglessness of existence. However, this flight from the nihilism of contemporary life toward

the familiar signposts and ontological categories of the modern constitution amounts, in the end, to “aim[ing] at the object of my flight in order to flee it,” since it is the self-dissolution of the modern constitution which has *itself* produced the experience of nihilism being fled from in the first place (Sartre *Being and Nothingness* 82). Rather than overcoming nihilism through an active, affirmative negation of the conditions that have led to the nihilism of contemporary life, the nihilist in bad faith instead paradoxically tries to escape nihilism through a conscious reinvestment in the very conditions of nihilism. This form of passive nihilism therefore takes on the structure of bad faith, insofar as:

the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. Thus the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here. Bad faith on the contrary implies in essence the unity of a *single* consciousness...bad faith does not come from outside to human reality...the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. Or rather, I must know what the truth is exactly *in order* to conceal it more carefully—and this not at two different moments, which at a pinch would allow us to re-establish a semblance of duality—but in the unitary structure of a single project (Sartre *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* 139).

The subject of passive nihilism today recognizes the meaninglessness of existence, the haunting uncanniness and disorientation of contemporary life, the inescapability of hybrid objects at the end of the modern world, yet *they try to escape it anyway*—despite the fact that the

nihilistic subjectivity that these conditions produce (which is the very thing being fled from) is itself internal to the subject who is trying to escape it.<sup>121</sup> The nihilist in bad faith tries to hide this “displeasing truth” from themselves behind a “pleasing untruth”: a renewed faith in, and reorientation toward, the purified ontological categories of the modern constitution (which, as we have seen, has already proven itself untenable by rendering itself inoperable). But in doing so, the nihilist in bad faith simply perpetuates the nihilism that they are attempting to flee by reproducing the conditions of hybridity, uncanniness, and disorientation that are the primary source of nihilistic subjectivity today.

As such, rather than overcoming itself through an active negation of present conditions or a passive slide into extinction, *nihilism in bad faith* manifests through great paroxysms of feeling and energy aimed solely at *escape*: an escape from the uncanny disorientation of the present into nostalgia for a non-existent past, renewed forms of purification in the present, or fantasies of a physical flight from the worldlessness of the present to another world in the future. But again, the fundamental problem with these attempts to escape the uncanny disorientation of nihilism is that the attempt to flee *itself* perpetuates the subject’s nihilism. The nihilist of bad faith must aim at the object of their flight (i.e., worldlessness, uncanny disorientation, nihilism) in order to flee it; they must *be* their anguish in order to escape it. But in being the very thing that they are trying to escape, escape becomes impossible. Rather than evading the clutches of nihilism and the anguish of uncanny disorientation, the nihilist in bad faith bolsters their own nihilistic tendencies into a kind of metastable existence, a durable form of subjectivity, a way of life. For, as Sartre explains in relation to bad faith:

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<sup>121</sup> Theodor Adorno offers a striking description of the nihilist in bad faith when he writes in a note from *Minima Moralia*: “In pursuing yonder what they have lost, they encounter only the nothing they have. In order not to lose touch with the everyday dreariness in which, as irremediable realists, they are at home, they adapt the meaning they revel in to the meaninglessness they flee” (242).

Even though the existence of bad faith is very precarious, and though it belongs to the kind of psychic structures which we might call ‘metastable,’ it presents nonetheless an autonomous and durable form. It can even be the normal aspect of life for a very great number of people. A person can *live* in bad faith, which does not mean that he does not have abrupt awakenings to cynicism or to good faith, but which implies a constant and particular style of life (*The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* 139-140).

As a particular form of passive nihilism prompted by an inescapable situation, nihilism in bad faith perpetuates itself into a durable form of subjectivity, incapable of either fleeing its own nihilistic tendencies or overcoming them through active negation. Instead, the nihilist in bad faith wallows in the discomfiting affective state of uncanny disorientation, pessimism, and despair, while simultaneously attempting to reorient themselves toward the familiar signposts of the modern constitution, engaging in whatever activity promises an escape from their present condition of worldlessness, disorientation, uncanniness, and nihilism. As we have seen, however, these attempts at escape are a fool’s errand as, in the attempt to flee their nihilistic condition, the nihilist in bad faith (like the uncanny figures described previously) is returned to themselves, over and over, again and again, caught in a perpetual state of disorientation that continuously brings them back to where they’ve started.<sup>122</sup>

“Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this *uncanniest* of all guests?”

The call is coming from inside the house.

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<sup>122</sup> Nihilism in bad faith thus mirrors the structure of the return of the repressed, as outlined by Freud in his interpretation of *the uncanny*. Nihilism in bad faith perpetuates the feeling of uncanniness by *itself* becoming an uncanny object to be fled from.

Throughout this chapter, I have presented a particular conception of nihilism as an interpretation of meaninglessness and a will-to-nothingness that takes on the structure of a durable mode of subjectivity in response to affective experiences of despair, pessimism, and the uncanny disorientation caused by the crisis of modernity. Drawing on the long history of nihilism's past theorization, alongside the conceptual work I have done in previous chapters, I have further argued that nihilism constitutes the primary mode of subjectivity in the wake of modernity's self-dissolution and subsequent end of the modern world. The basic condition of contemporary life is one of nihilism, as the uncanny disorientation of the crisis of modernity drives the still-modern subject toward an interpretation of meaninglessness and a will-to-nothingness that constitutes the essence of nihilistic subjectivity. More specifically, however, this contemporary will-to-nothingness manifests as a form of *passive* nihilism ruled by reactive force, insofar as the capacity to transfigure nihilism into an active mode of negation has been foreclosed by widespread conditions of worldlessness, uncanniness, and disorientation, which inexorably return the subject back, over and over, again and again, to the present state of nihilism. I have thus contended that nihilism today takes on the specific structure of *bad faith*, in which nihilism is simultaneously acknowledged (because undeniable) and denied (because unlivable) in the same moment, within the unity of the nihilistic subject themselves, producing a situation in which the nihilist in bad faith attempts to flee their own nihilism by reorienting themselves toward the purified ontological categories of modernity, thereby perpetuating the nihilism of the present by reproducing its basic conditions and causes.

But how does this flight from nihilism take place? How, specifically, does the nihilist in bad faith attempt to flee their own nihilistic subjectivity? Through what types of action or activity? And in what form might we identify the nihilist in bad faith today?

In my examination of contemporary subjectivity as a particular type of passive nihilism, I have contended that the nihilist in bad faith seeks to escape their nihilism through a reorientation toward the “reassuring myths” of the modern constitution, with its purified ontological categories of meaning and denial of the possibility of translation or hybridity. These particular “myths” appeal to the passive nihilist of today in part because of their presence to hand (as part of the inoperative ruins of the modern world amongst which we live) but also because of their promise of familiarity to still-modern subjects. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter on uncanniness, it is precisely this air of familiarity that makes the now inoperative signposts of modernity so frightfully uncanny, leading the nihilist in bad faith (who seeks to escape their feelings of uncanniness and disorientation through a reorientation on the basis of these familiar signposts) back to where they started, mired in nihilism and uncanny disorientation. Reorientation toward the purified categories of the modern constitution thus represents an integral part of the contemporary nihilist’s bad faith and what sets the nihilist in bad faith apart from other types of passive nihilist, like Nietzsche’s “last man.”

How this attempted reorientation on the basis of the modern constitution takes place, however, is largely indeterminate and cannot be predicted in advance. As Naomi Klein writes regarding certain attempts at reorientation in the face of pervasive uncanniness: “There are many different ways to try to outrun our shadows” (229). Like the experience of disorientation—which, as we saw in previous chapters, can be felt in a number of different ways—the act of *reorientation* can take a variety of forms, depending on how the subject attempts to escape their

particular experience of nihilism. We may find examples of nihilism in bad faith and its attempted reorientations in phenomena as disparate as: climate change denialism (and its attempt to reestablish a firm ontological distinction between nature and humanity); wellness culture (and the hard distinctions it draws between the natural and artificial, health and illness, pathology and normality);<sup>123</sup> conspiracy thought (and its strict dichotomy between us and them, good and evil, innocence and insinuation); the “politics of hope” (and its attempts to reorient dissent toward more conventional forms of electoral politics, as outlined by Calvin Warren); anti-trans and LGBTQ2S+ legislation (and the desire to reinforce binary conceptions of sex and gender); the *endriago* subjects of border towns and national sacrifice zones (who take on the hybrid role of “economic entrepreneur, political entrepreneur and violence specialist,” acting “in radical and illegitimate ways for their own self-affirmation” in a bid to “establish themselves as valid subjects with the possibility of belonging and ascending” within a society divested of such possibilities [Valencia 3, 4, 7, 114]); or the *endriago*’s uncanny doppelgänger in the imperial core, the grindset influencer (who likewise try to shape themselves into socially and economically valid subjects by taking on the role of *homo economicus*, submitting themselves gleefully to the logics and discipline of neoliberal capital in order to achieve an illusory status of success); as well as any number of other subjects who have attempted to find meaning through an orientation toward still-modern values.

Moreover, these various attempts at reorientation have *themselves* become hybridized, crossing over and combining in unexpected ways that only add to the disorientation and

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<sup>123</sup> In his work *The Cartography of Exhaustion: Nihilism Inside Out*, the philosopher Peter Pál Pelbart specifically cites the “bioascesis” and over-investment in the body displayed by contemporary health and wellness culture as one of the primary expressions of nihilism today. See, in particular: Chapter 1 on “Life, Body, Power”.

uncanniness of contemporary life.<sup>124</sup> The naturopathic yoga instructor who denies the reality of climate change. The conspiracy theorist who engages in a perverted form of the politics of hope, dreaming of the day that the supposedly corrupt politicians will be arrested by the very government agencies that they control. The grindset influencer who uses their platform to spout anti-trans rhetoric.<sup>125</sup> Again, these hybridized forms of reorientation only serve to reinforce the generalized disorientation and uncanniness of contemporary life, returning the nihilist in bad faith back to the very conditions that prompted their flight from nihilism in the first place. For, as discussed in the previous chapter on the self-dissolution of the modern constitution, it is the attempt to orient ourselves on the basis of the purified ontological categories of modernity which itself causes hybrid entities to proliferate. As such, the nihilist in bad faith, in attempting to escape the causes and conditions of their nihilism, only works to proliferate those very conditions. And the cycle continues.

Having established a conception of nihilism in bad faith, its attendant affective experience of uncanny disorientation, and its underlying causes in the dissolution of the modern constitution and end of the modern world, we are now in a position to examine some particular examples of the way in which nihilism in bad faith currently manifests, and what consequences this may hold for us today. To that end, I will conduct three short case studies aimed at exploring the aesthetic, social, and political impacts of nihilism in bad faith on contemporary life.

Beginning with an examination of the renewed aesthetics of nostalgia that seems to dominate

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<sup>124</sup> We may even go so far as to say—as theorists like Homi K. Bhabha, Nestor Garcia Canclini, and José Esteban Muñoz have claimed—that “Within late capitalism, all subject citizens are formed by...‘hybrid transformations generated by the horizontal coexistence of a number of symbolic systems’” (Muñoz 5).

<sup>125</sup> Naomi Klein has recently described such hybridized forms of subjectivity and unlikely political alliances as “diagonalism,” a term translated from the German *querdenken*, which has been used to define the “worrying alliances between New Age health obsessives, who are opposed to putting anything impure into their carefully tended bodies, and several neofascist parties, which took up the anti-vaccination battle cry as part of a COVID-era resistance to ‘hygiene dictatorship’” (101-102).

both mainstream and alternative media, I will use a close study of the recently developed genre of vaporwave music to demonstrate how current forms of nostalgia take on the structure of nihilism in bad faith, both critiquing the nihilistic realities of the present while orienting toward a time when those same nihilistic tendencies were present. Next, I will study the recent resurgence of overt white supremacist rhetoric and the rising coalitional politics of far-right and liberal-left activists to argue that these political tendencies represent the rise of nihilism in bad faith, insofar as they aim to reestablish the ontological distinction between white and racialized bodies that acts as the metaphysical foundation of modernity in a bid to escape the meaninglessness and horror of the present. And finally, I will examine the recent interest in the prospect of Mars colonization as an attempt to escape the earthly (and human) condition of nihilism and uncanny disorientation in order to establish a new world among the stars.

These three case studies will constitute the next three chapters of this dissertation, followed by a short conclusion in which I will summarize the theoretical framework established throughout this project and indicate avenues for its further application.

“Passive nihilism is characterized by strands of fatalism or by melancholic nostalgia for lost foundations” (Calvin L. Warren “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope” 238)

“Global capitalism is nearly there. At the end of the world there will only be liquid advertisement and gaseous desire. Sublimated from our bodies, our untethered senses will endlessly ride escalators through pristine artificial environments, more and less than human, drugged-up and drugged down, catalysed, consuming and consumed by a relentlessly rich economy of sensory information, valued by the pixel. The Virtual Plaza welcomes you, and you will welcome it too” (Adam Harper “Vaporwave and the Pop Art of the Virtual Plaza” and the About page for r/Vaporwave)

## Chapter 6: Nostalgia

As I have attempted to show throughout this dissertation, the present crisis of modernity constitutes a generalized experience of phenomenological *disorientation*: a disorientation marked by intense feelings of uncanniness and a turn toward nihilistic modes of subjectivity in the wake of the end of the modern world. Yet, contrary to the widespread disorientation of the present, one might instead claim that our present moment is, in actuality, characterized by an overwhelming orientation toward the historical (or mythologized) *past*.

Examples of this reorientation toward the past abound: from calls to “Make [Blank] Great Again,”<sup>126</sup> to the fetishization of past political figures and forms (from Ronald Regan and

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<sup>126</sup> It is important to note that this is not only an American (or even North American) tendency. As Javier Solana of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party recently noted: “The European Union has a dangerous case of nostalgia. Not only is a yearning of the ‘good old days’—before the EU supposedly impinged on national sovereignty—fuelling the

Margaret Thatcher on the right to the Soviet Union and its iconography on the left), to the revival of retro fashion trends from bygone eras, all of which represent what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has characterized as a global turn from the traditional utopias of modernity (which have always been envisioned as a kind of elsewhere occupying the *future*) toward what he calls “retrotopia,” or a supposed goldmine of potential social, cultural, and political possibilities located not in the indeterminate future but in the abandoned projects of an imagined past (1-12). Nowhere is this current turn toward the past more evident, however, than in the realm of *art* and *aesthetics*, which has become increasingly reliant on the reboot, the remake, the return to past forms, past genres, and past franchises as the raw material for what can only be characterized as an obsessive reliving of that which has already taken place.

Indeed, today’s culture industry seems afflicted by what the music critic Simon Reynolds has dubbed *retromania*: the obsessive rebooting, remaking, retelling, and recycling of past cultural products into “new” works of art, which manifest as popular culture’s “addiction to its own past,” a repeated return to the pop culture trends of yesteryear. For example, we might note that: “of the 49 films scheduled to be released in 2024, more than half are sequels, spin-offs or additions to existing franchises like Marvel, DC and *Mad Max*,” while popular streaming services (like Netflix, HBO Max, and Disney+) largely traffic in series based on existing properties (like *Game of Thrones*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Last of Us*, *The Karate Kid*, or *The Talented Mr. Ripley*) or nostalgia-tinged original creations that appeal to the viewer’s recognition of past trends (like *Stranger Things* or *Halt and Catch Fire*) (Jack).<sup>127</sup> But this recent tendency to

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rise of nationalist political parties; European leaders continue to try to apply yesterday’s solutions to today’s problems” (qtd in Bauman 7).

<sup>127</sup> This does not even include the recent spat of period dramas produced for both film and television, which similarly turn toward an overly aestheticized and mythologized past, but would expand our discussion beyond the scope of this chapter.

look back upon the past for artistic inspiration is not just the purview of Hollywood. Rather, the attitude of today's culture industry could be summarized in a line from one of the most acclaimed pop albums of the past decade—namely, Charli xcx's *BRAT*, itself an homage to club and pop music of the early 2000s: "Sometimes, I just wanna rewind / I'd go back in time to when I wasn't insecure / [...] Sometimes I really think it would be cool to rewind / [...] Wanna turn back time to a different time" ("Rewind").

More specifically, we might say that pop culture today suffers from the "global epidemic" of *nostalgia*—a term originally coined in the late-seventeenth century by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer as a diagnostic category for the kind of chronic, pathological homesickness experienced by various peoples displaced through the social, cultural, and economic developments of early modernism (e.g., colonialism, war, the rise of trans-national industrial capitalism, etc.), but which has since come to signify a vague sense of yearning for the past (Boym 3-11). Particularly, during the early-modern period, nostalgia came to be viewed as a kind of communicable, emotional disease afflicting soldiers, colonial subjects, and other displaced peoples longing to return home to a place they might never see again.

Over the course of the intervening centuries, however, nostalgia has become much more closely associated with the longing for a (real or imagined) *time past*: a time when things were supposedly better, more stable, invested with meaning, or possibility, or sense. This form of nostalgia has long been considered to encapsulate the modern condition itself, as a kind of distillation of modernity's simultaneous fetishization of progress and grief over the traditions, cultures, and places that have been lost in modernism's singular push toward the future. In fact, as many artistic and political commentators—like Svetlana Boym, Kathleen Stewart, and Andreas Huyssen—have noted, nostalgia for lost foundations may represent the primary

*aesthetic* and *affective* mode of modernity, the modern aesthetic category *par excellence*, to the point that one might feasibly claim that modernism itself constitutes an *aesthetics of nostalgia*.<sup>128</sup>

How then do we explain the recent resurgence and predominance of nostalgia as a particular aesthetic and political mode? If nostalgia is *the* aesthetic mode of modernity, and we are (as I have argued) living in the wake of the modern world's dissolution, then why is pop culture today seemingly locked into a nostalgic fetishization of its own past forms and content?

As I will argue in this chapter, the nostalgia of today's pop cultural products is, in reality, a *nostalgia for nostalgia itself*—or what I will call *nostalgia for nothing*. What the aesthetics of nostalgia signal today, amid the ruins of the modern world, is not so much longing for lost foundations, or even a time when things were better or significantly different from the present (as Bauman's "retrotopia" would have it), but rather a longing for a time in which that kind of nostalgic feeling was still *possible*, when the past *could be* imagined as a place in which the conditions of life were significantly better (or at the very least different) than they are at present. Today, no such past can be faithfully imagined, in large part because of modernity's relentless liquidation of past cultural, social, and political forms in favour of the modern constitution, which has rendered all past forms—including itself—untenable. And yet, a nostalgic longing for the past still dominates our collective cultural imagination, as revealed through the near-total dominance of the nostalgia aesthetic across popular culture today. How then to explain this seeming contradiction: the simultaneous incapacity to believe in a past that was significantly

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<sup>128</sup> Homi K. Bhabha makes a similar connection between the early-modern tendency toward cross-cultural exchange through processes of displacement and feelings of unhomeliness (or *uncanniness*) that prompt an experience of nostalgia for a lost home or "world," particularly in the work of Goethe, who Bhabha claims longed for "the possibility of a world literature [arising] from the cultural confusion wrought by terrible wars and mutual conflicts" (16-17). As we will see, the contemporary aesthetics of nostalgia are prompted by similar feelings of uncanny disorientation and a desire for the return of a familiar world in which one can feel at home.

better or different from the present *and* a collective nostalgic longing for past cultural and artistic forms?

It is my contention that this nostalgia for nothing—the longing for a time that can no longer even be imagined to have existed—can be explained through the theoretical framework I have established thus far, as an expression of nihilism in bad faith and its attendant affective experiences of disorientation and uncanniness.

### *Nostalgia, Disorientation, and Vaporwave*

In fact, nostalgia has itself often been read as a reflex *against* disorientation: an attempt to establish some solid ground from which to orient oneself when all other means of spatiotemporal orientation have fallen away. For, in its modern formulation, nostalgia is an attempt to *recreate a world*, to “reassemble a broken history into a new whole.” But the “world created there is a world unnatural and unreal; it resembles fiction or dream,” an uncanny simulacrum of something real that once existed—or, often, something that never existed (Stewart 236). Nostalgia today, at the end of the modern world, performs a similar function: it is an attempt, in response to the uncanny disorientation that pervades contemporary existence, to reestablish some sense of orientation, some ground from which to move or to gain one’s bearings in relation to the uncanny presence of an inoperative world.<sup>129</sup> But the world that this nostalgia attempts to return to, which

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<sup>129</sup> Similarly, Bauman claims that the current turn away from utopia toward what he calls “retrotopia” has been prompted by the hybridity and precarity of an increasingly globalized world. He does not, however, do much to investigate the affective dimensions of this increasing hybridity or its effects on the modern world and constitution. Instead, he takes as a given that some kind of return to modernity (or its abandoned utopian projects) could be possible, and that the turn toward retrotopia represents a truncated and disorganized attempt to do so. By contrast, it is my contention that such a return is impossible (given the inoperability of the modern world) and that, moreover, the nostalgic longings of our present moment do not actually view the past in terms of a lost potentiality, but are instead a manifestation of *nihilism in bad faith*—an attempt to flee the uncanny disorientation of the present that, by necessity, takes aim at that which it is trying to flee in order to flee it.

grounds its attempts at reorientation, is *precisely the inoperative modern world from which it is trying to escape*. In this sense, the contemporary nostalgia aesthetic takes on the structure of *bad faith* insofar as it aims at that which it attempts to flee precisely in order to flee it. More than this, I will argue that current forms of nostalgia are, in fact, an expression of *nihilism in bad faith*, specifically in as much as they display a recognition of the meaninglessness and hopelessness of the imagined past toward which they orient, while still attempting to flee the uncanniness of the present on the basis of that orientation.

In this regard, the prototypical example of contemporary nostalgia's nihilism in bad faith is the alternative musical and aesthetic genre called *vaporwave*. Emerging as early as the late-2000s, but only consolidating and gaining traction as a particular aesthetic genre in the early-2010s, *vaporwave* names a particular style of music and visual art characterized by the sampling and recycling of musical tracks and digital imagery, primarily from the late-1980s to the early-2000s, in a way that emphasizes the banality, interchangeability, and overall haunting quality of the mass produced corporate culture of this era. Or, as Born and Haworth describe it:

'Vaporwave' is a pun on 'vaporware,' the name for commercial software that is publicly announced but never goes into production; its first reported use was in an anonymous 2011 blogpost, a review of the album 'Surf's Pure Hearts' by the little-known artist Girlhood (Harper 2012). When the term came to more widespread attention, it was as an unexplained hashtag accompanying anonymously uploaded soundfiles, images, GIFs and other media. The media posted under this tag were distinctive in audiovisual style. Musically, they included samples of derided music sourced from the Internet and then re-uploaded with little in the way of modification: 1980s 'muzak,' soul and funk, advertising soundtracks for consumer electronics, luxury hotels and other icons of consumer

capitalism, computer game soundtracks and sonic idents. Visually, they featured anachronistic juxtapositions of images of Greek and Roman antiquity with 1990s computer graphics, isolated Japanese cityscapes, leisure advertisements, images of luxury apartments and other signifiers of global capitalism (79).

More than just recycling the audial and visual products of late-twentieth century consumer culture, however, vaporwave artists also reproduce the artifacts, glitches, and noise of the technology originally used to create and consume the cultural products they sample. From the hiss and warp of cassette tapes, to the skipping quality of scratched CDs, to the pixelation, blur, and digital artifacting of early 3D video games and virtual reality spaces, vaporwave artists use the detritus of the aesthetic products they plunder in order to remix, remake, and recontextualize those same products into something new: a haunting simulacrum of the pop culture they so meticulously reproduce, which haunts precisely insofar as it both faithfully replicates *and* denies its source material in the same gesture.

The overall effect of this uncanny re-presentation of our immediate cultural past is a visual and auditory aesthetics of *disorientation*. Jumbled, confusing, non-linear, and warped, with its loops, hard cuts, skipping, jumbled order, tape warble, and excess reverb, the aesthetics of vaporwave are purposefully disorienting, subverting audience expectations by taking muzak and recutting or reordering it in a way that denies the generic conventions of conventional pop. The typical vaporwave track is characterized by verses that never end and choruses that never arrive—or perhaps come too soon, bursting through the sonic landscape in the middle of a verse, interrupting a stanza, reappearing in the middle of another song like the skip on a scratched CD. The result is a feeling that the ground has shifted beneath one's feet; of being stuck in a loop without beginning or end; or of walking down a familiar street on which everything has changed

(or a shopping mall corridor in which all the shops are abandoned). It is hard to maintain one's bearings in relation to a work of vaporwave music, even as its component parts produce a sense of uncanny familiarity and nostalgic longing for something that was once intimately known.<sup>130</sup>

Indeed, it is quite telling how often the words “disorientating” and “uncanny” are used to describe vaporwave. Commentators, fans, and cultural critics alike seem to unanimously agree that works of vaporwave not only evoke feelings of uncanniness and disorientation, but that these affective components are precisely the appeal of the genre, what sets it apart from both its prior retro predecessors and the various other genres of nostalgic pop culture that it has subsequently inspired (like future funk, hyperpop, and nostalgiacore). Rather, vaporwave creators purposefully attempt to evoke the uncanny, to give concentrated expression to the general affective state that already pervades reality, thereby both expressing and reflecting our current condition even as they harken back, nostalgically, to a supposed time before this uncanniness took hold. As a rule, works of vaporwave are simultaneously *uncanny* and *disorienting*, an echo of the past that speaks to the disorientation and uncanniness of the present, a sonic and visual representation of the disorientation in which we live after the end of the modern world. As such, despite its indie status and relative absence from the mainstream media landscape, vaporwave is *the* aesthetic genre of uncanny disorientation. It is the most concentrated and potent way that the affective experience of the present has been translated into artistic expression, and as such, it represents a perfect aesthetic distillation of the crisis of modernity, with its attendant experiences of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith.

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<sup>130</sup> Paul Morely writes of the “directionless direction” of contemporary music, in which pop music does not aim at much of anything or try to revolutionize styles in the way it had done previously. Vaporwave seems to be the culmination and nadir of this disorientation: aiming toward the past without really aiming toward anything at all. Just wandering, aimlessly, through its own reverberated fantasies (Reynold 424).

Moreover, vaporwave constitutes a prime example of the contemporary nostalgia aesthetic more broadly, which similarly traffics in the cultural detritus of the recent past, often in ways that emphasize the uncanniness and disorientation of the artistic products and properties it revives. It is my contention that the seemingly ambivalent relationship to past pop culture embodied by vaporwave is representative of contemporary forms of nostalgia in general, and that, moreover, it highlights a connection between current bouts of nostalgia and the forms of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith that I have argued to be the predominant phenomenological, affective, and subjective conditions of the present. Vaporwave, in this sense, constitutes a perfect encapsulation of the underlying nihilism, disorientation, and uncanniness driving our nostalgic turn toward the past. I will therefore examine vaporwave as a prototypical case study for what I have called *nostalgia for nothing*, or the kind of virulent, obsessive nostalgia for a time when nostalgia was still possible that characterizes so much contemporary pop culture. Through my examination of vaporwave, I will then argue that the nostalgia for nothing which it embodies constitutes one particular (though widespread) reaction to the uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith prompted by the end of the modern world.

### *Nostalgia for Nothing*

But why nostalgia for nothing? How is this contemporary turn toward past cultural forms related to the affective, subjective, social, and political phenomena we have examined thus far in this dissertation? And why is this significant?

On the one hand, it seems evident that current bouts of nostalgic longing are simply an extension of the ongoing epidemic of nostalgia that has plagued modernity since at least the seventeenth century. But unlike those earlier expressions of the disease, contemporary

manifestations of nostalgia harken back *not* to a time in which the world could be imagined whole and untouched by the ravages of modern progress, but instead to a time when *the modern world had already ended* and the effects of that ending were already being commented upon. Whereas, in the 1990s, the children of Baby Boomers longed nostalgically for the (largely imaginary) social, cultural, and political potentialities embodied by the countercultural movements of the 1960s, today we look back with longing on the hyper-capitalist neoliberalism and postmodern disorientation of the 1980s and 1990s: a time when it was already being claimed that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism,” precisely because the world of modernity had already entered into dissolution under the weight of its own contradictions (Jameson “Future City”). Nostalgia today still longs for a past in which a vision of the future felt possible—when it was possible to envision a future for the human race—but it orients us toward a time when the futures being imagined were, precisely, *dystopian*.<sup>131</sup> As such, what contemporary nostalgia longs for, in the end, is simply a different version of the dystopian present that it so desperately tries to escape through its projection into the past: a cyberpunk dystopia that feels more livable (or at the very least, more aesthetically pleasing) than the virtual boredom and uncanny disorientation that plagues the present.

More broadly, however, we can say that nostalgia has historically longed for a lost sense of community, belonging, and social integration ostensibly undermined by the modern march of progress, with its concomitant tendencies toward urbanization, industrialization, and cultural

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<sup>131</sup> It is perhaps telling how many of the recent nostalgia-tinged remakes and reboots of Hollywood films from the 1980s and 90s fall into the genres of dystopian science fiction, post-apocalyptic fantasy, and cyberpunk—such as *Bladerunner 2049* or the recent entries into the *Mad Max* franchise—which themselves were already commenting (rather pessimistically) on the alienating social realities of late-stage neoliberal capitalism and the death of the modern world. Contemporary nostalgia harkens back to a time when the uncanny disorientation and nihilism of the crisis of modernity *was already being felt*. Its longing is for a culture that was already plagued by the very problems it is seeking to escape. And, most importantly, *contemporary works of nostalgic art seem cognizant of this fact*, but continue to fetishize this past, regardless.

homogenization. By contrast, contemporary nostalgia aesthetics forego this longing for organic social integration entirely, orienting us instead toward the images and soundscapes of postmodern alienation and isolation: a TV set playing test patterns to an empty room; the 8-bit sounds of low-res video games; corporate muzak echoing through an empty mall.

Taking vaporwave as our prime example, we can note how the nostalgic associations evoked by works in the genre are almost universally experiences of *alienation* and *social disconnection*: wandering through a closed or deserted shopping mall; watching late night infomercials in a fit of insomnia; playing console video games alone in your room on a rainy afternoon.<sup>132</sup> Similarly, many commentators have pointed to a characteristic lack of *people* as one of vaporwave's primary features. If human voices or figures do appear in a work of vaporwave, they are almost universally solitary: a lone figure wandering through an empty and frictionless environment designed to facilitate the flow of affect and capital, rather than bodies or subjects. The typical vaporwave track is either lyricless, or slowed down, sped up, pitch-shifted, and distorted through the application of reverb to such a degree that any human voice within it becomes incomprehensible, rendered inhuman and uncanny in quality.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, the visual aesthetic of vaporwave—which traffics in oversaturated and digitally distorted images of empty malls, infinite virtual landscapes, outmoded technology, and highly stylized consumer products—typically lack any kind of human presence or subjective stance.<sup>134</sup> In this way,

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<sup>132</sup> For example, a popular category of YouTube video consists of compilations of vaporwave tracks paired with imagery typical of the genre—empty malls and office cubicles, deserted city streets at night, television sets playing to empty rooms, either computer generated or ripped from vintage VHS tapes—titled things like “Navigating the Eternal Mega Mall,” “LATE NIGHT WORK // Nostalgic Officewave,” or “It’s 1996 and you’re a kid thinking about your future”.

<sup>133</sup> The most widely recognized and commonly cited example of this technique is the track “Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing” from the album *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus, which consists of a slowed down, pitch-shifted, chopped and screwed version of Diana Ross’ “It’s Your Move”.

<sup>134</sup> A cursory search of the vaporwave tag on the microblogging platform Tumblr (where the vaporwave aesthetic initially gained traction in the early 2010s) returns several still images of empty luxury pools from the 1990s, a faded and oversaturated GIF of the Windows 98 logo, a looping clip of a 1990s ad for Japanese VHS and Beta tapes,

vaporwave evokes the feeling of inhabiting an end-of-world subjectivity, as described by Baudrillard: producing real feelings (of uncanniness, of disorientation, and of nostalgia), but with *no subjects*. The vaporwave aesthetic is pure affect without object. No personal narrative or details, no reference to interiority. Just a floating sense of feeling—of nostalgia, uncanniness, disorientation—that pervades *everything* but can be located *nowhere*.<sup>135</sup>

This is because, unlike the utopian longings of older forms of nostalgia aesthetics, today's nostalgia (as pre-eminently represented by vaporwave) does not look backward to an imaginary golden age of organic social unity or connection. It instead focuses exclusively on the prime years of neoliberal capital: the late-1980s-to-early-2000s. Again, vaporwave here acts as the prototypical example of the current aesthetics of nostalgia, and in doing so, can tell us something about contemporary nostalgia more broadly. Specifically, vaporwave's focus on the cultural and technological products of the late-1980s-to-early-2000s—that period so famously characterized as the “end of history” and the ascendancy of “the last man” by Francis Fukuyama—coupled with its characteristic uncanniness, disorientating production, and lack of subjectivity, points to the reality that nostalgia no longer constitutes a yearning for organic unity, social integration, or political potentiality, but instead merely longs for an *escape* from the current realities of modernity's end. Ironically, however, this attempted escape simply returns the subject of nostalgia to a time when the modern constitution had already proven itself untenable. The past that contemporary nostalgia orients us toward is the very dissolution of modernity and hyperreal

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and a 3D rendered model of a 1980s shopping mall filled with palm trees, ferns, and an ancient marble statue. None of these images contain a human figure.

<sup>135</sup> This tendency has also bled over (to a lesser degree) into more mainstream cultural works, particularly in the realm of horror film and television. Characteristic examples include films like *It Follows* (2014), *Skinamarink* (2022), *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024), and *Late Night with the Devil* (2023); streaming television series like *Stranger Things* (2016-2025) and *Fear Street* (2021); as well as video game series like *Five Nights at Freddy's* (2014)—which also spawned a film of the same name in 2023—and the entire genre of analog horror. It is similarly telling that the nostalgia aesthetic pervades so much contemporary *horror*, given the strong connection between the genre of horror and feelings of *uncanniness*.

consumerist hell that the still-modern subject is trying to escape in the first place. If nostalgia is meant to provide orientation and meaning to an existential situation seemingly lacking in both, the nostalgia mobilized by contemporary pop culture is for an existential situation that was *just as meaningless as the present*.

Indeed, many commentators on the current retro trend in both politics and aesthetics have characterized these trends as *hauntological*, in the sense that they project backwards into the past in search of lost futures, squandered possibilities, or unused potentialities that still “haunt” the present, waiting to be rediscovered (Fisher *Ghosts of My Life*, Lindsay “Disaster Theory,” Reynolds *Retromania*, etc.). But what these commentators tend to overlook is that the imagined futures of the particular period being referenced by contemporary works of nostalgic art were, themselves, overwhelmingly *dystopian*—an expression of the pessimistic nihilism and cultural exhaustion of the end of modernity, best summarized by the 1980s punk slogan (culled from The Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen”): *no future*. The prelapsarian utopian past of contemporary nostalgia was *already* the postlapsarian dystopian future of modernity. It was already hyperreal in its own time; already a product of the collapse of the modern world and the shift into “postmodernity.” And genres like vaporwave recognize this. Contemporary nostalgia cannot possibly be a longing for a lost framework of meaning, because the culture it is nostalgic *for* did not even attempt to embody such a framework. Whereas the countercultural movements of the 1980s and 1990s tried (and failed) to resist the nihilism of postmodern consumer culture through a turn toward something more “raw” or “real” (as in the case of punk, grunge, and rave aesthetics), or to convert that nihilism into a more active form of social and political negation (as in the case of post-punk and no wave music), genres like vaporwave instead express a desire for the passive nihilism that those countercultures rejected. What vaporwave (and contemporary

nostalgia more broadly) longs for and orients itself toward is precisely this nihilism: a time when the future could be still be imagined, but the future being imagined was horrifically apocalyptic.

In part, this is because genres like vaporwave (unlike its generic predecessors: the “plunderphonic” sampling of late-80s/early-90s producers such as Negativland and John Oswald, or the tape-warp, vinyl scratch, and reverb heavy ambient-electronica labeled *hauntological* in the early-2000s by critics like Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher) plunders samples from neither its immediate pop-cultural milieu nor an (imagined) idyllic past lived through by its creators, who, as Nowak and Whelan have shown, are largely young, white, suburban North Americans. Instead, vaporwave draws almost exclusively from late-80s/early-90s pop culture, corporate muzak, and Japanese city pop for its sounds, and late-90s/early-2000s digital iconography for its visual aesthetic: cultural products from a time and place that vaporwave creators have no immediate, organic connection to.

Additionally, vaporwave lacks both the cynical edge of plunderphonics (which pointedly lambasted the soullessness and stupidity of mainstream pop culture of the 1980s and 1990s) or the rose-coloured nostalgia for lost utopian potential produced by those artists considered “hauntological” by various art critics and academics. Instead, vaporwave almost exclusively samples music that was never meant to be listened to in the first place—mall elevator music and hold muzak, department store advertisements and corporate training videos, commercial jingles and QVC broadcasts. Such muzak was meant to blend into the background in order to circulate certain affective states conducive to commerce and cannot possibly hold any sincere emotional or genuine nostalgic connection for anyone, except insofar as it produces a kind of synthetic nostalgia by evoking vague recognition in being indistinguishable from other non-offensive pop music of the era, all of which bleeds together into one indistinct mass of utter banality. Or, in

instances when vaporwave music samples actual pop songs of the era that it harkens back to, it does so in an ambivalent way, neither cynically poking fun at the song's corporate soullessness nor fetishizing it as a portal into a simpler time. Instead, the generic conventions of vaporwave work to render familiar (or quasi-familiar) pop jams into uncanny versions of themselves: instantly recognizable, yet weirdly unfamiliar. In this way, vaporwave rejects the traditional forms of nostalgic longing embodied by other retro aesthetics by neither making fun of the past nor trying to reproduce it in earnest. Instead, it presents us with a kind of fun-house mirror version of our recent history that evokes both nostalgic longing and uncanny horror *at the same time*.

Moreover, vaporwave (and the contemporary aesthetics of nostalgia more broadly) itself constitutes a form of nihilism in bad faith, insofar as it again orients itself toward a past in which the nihilism of modernity had already fully blossomed: the postmodern corporate culture of the 1980s/90s.<sup>136</sup> As such, in trying to escape the present state of uncanny disorientation and widespread nihilism that pervades contemporary reality, the nostalgia aesthetic of movements like vaporwave have simply oriented themselves towards *an earlier form of nihilistic pessimism*, creating a kind of nihilistic feedback loop in which one attempts to *flee* nihilism by embracing and orienting *toward* it—which, as will be recalled from the previous chapter, is precisely the structure of *nihilism in bad faith*. Taking on the structure of nihilism in bad faith, contemporary nostalgia tries to flee the uncanniness, disorientation, and nihilism of the present by *taking aim at the object of its flight in order to flee it* (Sartre *Being and Nothingness* 82-83).

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<sup>136</sup> A characteristic example here would be the various vaporwave playlists on YouTube entitled things like “office 1988” or “LATE NIGHT WORK // Nostalgic Officewave ~ Calm Vaporwave,” which combine ambient vaporwave tracks with faded, VHS-warped images of 1980s office environments to evoke the sense of being a corporate executive working late in an empty office tower.

In this way, contemporary nostalgia is precisely *nostalgia for nothing*: a form of nostalgia which embodies the nihilistic will-to-nothingness in its turn toward the cultural vacuity and ontological emptiness left behind after the end of the modern world. And vaporwave is the crowning example of such passively nihilistic nostalgia: the nostalgia for nothing. Both creators and participants in the genre acknowledge that the world these works harken back to never existed. And yet, they evoke a sense of nostalgia for something lost, something experienced, anyway. Vaporwave orients us toward a past that is absent, that exists nowhere and nowhen, that *is nothing*—a vacuum left by the collapse of the modern world—and in doing so, it embodies the uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith that prompts these bouts of nostalgia in the first place.

#### *Nihilism in Bad Faith as Nostalgia for Ruins*

In practice, this form of nihilism in bad faith manifests as what the cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen has called “nostalgia for ruins” (8). In trying to escape the horror prompted by the wreckage of modernity, nostalgia today fetishizes the ruins of modernity (i.e., the cultural products and detritus produced by the collapse of the modern world) and seeks a return to their imagined past. But as Huyssen points out, this obsession with ruin is itself a product of modernity, a wholly modern aesthetic that has been in operation since at least the end of the eighteenth century. Vaporwave is simply the most recent manifestation of this thoroughly modern nostalgia for ruins, the ruins in question being the technological waste and cultural debris of late capitalism, as represented by that most uncanny of all postmodern ruins: *the abandoned mall*.

Indeed, so-called “dead malls” hold a kind of pride of place within the aesthetics of contemporary nostalgia—to the extent that entire YouTube channels can dedicate themselves to

documenting and exploring malls that are either entirely abandoned and closed to the public, or which have so little traffic and commerce that they are essentially “dead,” empty spaces.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, vaporwave often draws on an idyllic version of the 1980s shopping mall for its aesthetic inspiration, with glittering images of (typically empty) malls acting as album art for musical tracks that emulate the sonic experience of wandering aimlessly through the consumer spaces of late capitalism: looping snippets of recycled muzak drowned in reverb to produce the echo of a song being piped into the cavernous space of a suburban mall.<sup>138</sup> Such depictions purposefully evoke feelings of uncanniness by rendering the familiar, bright, and gleamingly generic non-space of the shopping mall (which all look and feel the same, regardless of their physical or regional location) into something oddly unfamiliar: a dead, cold, empty ruin invaded by the materiality and particularity of its own physical structure. And this evocation of the uncanny points to the nihilism in bad faith which motivates such depictions in the first place.

To the historical period that vaporwave is nostalgic for (i.e., the late-1980s to early-2000s), the shopping mall represented the space of socialization *par excellence*; a kind of hyperreal social space that offered the closest thing to organic community available: the coming-together of bodies in one physical location, if only for the purpose of circulating commodities.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> The most famous example of this phenomenon is Dan Bell’s “Dead Mall Series” on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@ThisisDanBell/videos>

<sup>138</sup> See, for example, the album *Palm Mall* by Cat System Corp. (written as 猫 シ Corp.), which depicts a digitally rendered 3D mall food court studded with palm trees for its album artwork and contains tracks with ironically nihilistic titles like “I consume, therefore I am” and “Veni, Vidi, Emi” (I came, I saw, I acquired).

<sup>139</sup> We should of course note that the mall has never been the utopic space of frictionless consumption that contemporary nostalgia makes it out to be. As Lauren Berlant pointed out in relation to Queer Nation’s staged “kiss-ins” at suburban malls in the early 1990s, the shopping mall has, from its inception, consistently functioned to exclude and suppress certain types of bodies in order to shape a very particular (i.e., white, young, middle class, heterosexual) public, by simultaneously shoring up norms of gender, sexuality, and race, while also excluding queer and racialized bodies from its neoliberal fantasy of pure economic consumption (“Queer Nationality” 163-180). These aspects of the mall are often covered over in the smooth, neon vision of the past presented by nostalgia aesthetics like vaporwave. But, as we will see, they also come back to haunt these visions through the uncanny glitches and disorientation that seep into any such depiction.

This space has since been replaced by social media—an entirely digital, smooth, non-topographic cyberspace—which simply extends the hyperreal aspects of the suburban mall, its generic placelessness and lack of meaningful human activity, by transporting them into the realm of the digital, leaving behind the physical space of the mall to deteriorate into ruin. As such, part of the nostalgia of vaporwave is precisely nostalgia for the *tangible*: the material ruins of the mall; the physicality of a space in which to gather and circulate; as well as the more intrusive elements of the physical media that belong in that space (e.g., the warp and warble of cassette tapes, the skipping of a scratched CD, the pop and hiss of a dusty record, and all the other breakdowns in material function that render physical media present-to-hand).

At the same time, however, vaporwave ironically floats in a completely digitized space: the genre is, at its core, a product of the internet and tied inexorably to cyberspace. Most vaporwave music does not have a physical manifestation, has not been pressed to vinyl or transferred to tape or CD—the very defunct mediums whose flaws it attempts to emulate—while the general aesthetic of vaporwave plays up the non-physical, digital nature of the genre, in contrast to the more tangible facticity of the ruins it depicts. 3D renderings of marble busts float in a seemingly endless digital void, punctuated solely by low-polygon models of shopping mall fountains, plastic pillars, and linoleum floors, conspicuously lacking in any kind of human figure or perspective.<sup>140</sup> Clips of corporate muzak, inoffensive pop, shopping mall announcements, and TV news broadcasts are looped, slowed, pitch-shifted, and washed out in reverb to give the sense of wandering through the cavernous recesses of a dead shopping centre.<sup>141</sup> In this way,

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<sup>140</sup> See, for example, the album art for *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus—perhaps the most well-known and widely recognized of all vaporwave albums.

<sup>141</sup> See, for example, the album *Luxury Elite* by Saint Pepsi, which mixes samples of 80s pop music, telephone hold muzak, and television advertisements to evoke the feeling of a late-night infomercial on the Home Shopping Network. Similarly, the album *News at 11* by Cat System Corp. samples clips from VHS recordings of news programs and television advertisements that aired the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 (prior to the attacks on

vaporwave represents a (quite genuine) nostalgic longing for the frictionless consumer space of the suburban mall while simultaneously pointing to the impossibility and fiction of that longing. In vaporwave, the supposedly smooth, utopic space of the mall is constantly being interrupted, undercut, and fragmented by the skipping, scratching, warping sounds of the medium's decay. The mall is in ruins. Its empty husk transfigured into an endless maze of inaccessible consumerist pleasures where *one is never finished with anything* (Deleuze "Postscript on the Societies of Control" 5).<sup>142</sup> Samples loop, skip, repeat, drone on in an endless repetition that emulates nothing so much as uncanny disorientation: the inability to find one's way out of a horrifyingly familiar situation. The abandoned mall becomes an inescapable labyrinth.<sup>143</sup>

Vaporwave's nostalgia for ruins thus constitutes a form of *nihilism in bad faith*, as the ruins that are longed for are *themselves* the uncanny presences that have created the need to escape from the present in the first place. As the vaporwave aesthetic itself makes clear: the mall is not, and never was, the utopic space of guiltless consumerism and socialization that it was claimed to be. Rather, it was just as void of meaning and social possibilities as its cyberspace replacements. And yet, through its nostalgia-tinged recreation of the aesthetics of post-modern late-capitalism, vaporwave attempts to flee the meaninglessness, uncanniness, and disorientation of the ruins of modernity precisely by reorienting its audience *toward* those ruins. In this way,

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the World Trade Centre) mixed with calm, inoffensive hold music to evoke a nostalgic longing for the (supposed) peace and prosperity of a pre-9/11 America, envisioned as a kind of innocent, prelapsarian consumerist paradise.

<sup>142</sup> We should also remember here Nietzsche's description of the man of *ressentiment* and nihilism as a "dyspeptic" who "cannot 'have done' with anything" (*On The Genealogy of Morals* 58).

<sup>143</sup> While not technically a work of vaporwave (though heavily inspired by the same generic elements and tendencies), the most characteristic popular example of this phenomenon is perhaps the third season of Netflix's hit series *Stranger Things*, in which a newly opened suburban mall becomes the site for a manifestation of "the Upside Down"—the uncanny alternate dimension that repeatedly threatens to break through into the placid 1980s reality of the series' fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana. The entire premise of *Stranger Things* is ripe for interpretation using the theoretical framework of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith that I have established here, but is beyond the scope of this case study. I trust that attentive readers will be able to develop those connections themselves.

vaporwave (and contemporary nostalgic art more broadly) aims at what it tries to flee precisely in order to flee it.

*Nostalgia for Nothing as Nihilism in Bad Faith*

At the same time, it would be a mistake to view vaporwave as a critique of the soulless corporate culture it emulates and reproduces. Rather, it is clear (from both statements made by vaporwave artists as well as the works produced by those artists themselves) that vaporwave is, at best, an ambivalent tongue-in-cheek reproduction of the time and place it nostalgically represents, and that the nostalgic element of the genre is undertaken in earnest. Indeed, while commentators like Joshua Carswell (“World of Ecco: A Look Back at Chuck Person’s Eccojams Volume 1.”) interpret vaporwave’s nostalgia-tinged orientation toward an imagined golden age of unbounded consumerism as being laced with a kind of nascent political critique, such interpretations seem to cut against the stated intentions and desires of vaporwave creators and audiences themselves, who express a much more ambivalent relationship to this kind of critical function. As Whelan and Nowak show in their ethnographic work on vaporwave as a genre community, many (if not most) members of the online vaporwave community explicitly *reject* these interpretations of the genre as a form of anti-modern or anti-capitalist critique, viewing such interpretations as an imposition by outsiders onto works that are, in actuality, much more uncertain in their relationship to the corporate aesthetics that they plunder (455-461).

In reality, vaporwave as a genre has no inherent ideological content, nor does it take on a particular political perspective or orientation. While many have tried to read the genre as either a form of redemptive leftist critique or a product of reactionary right-wing movements, the music itself seems resistant to any neat political interpretation—particularly in its general lack of

coherent or discernable lyrical content. Moreover, while some creators in the genre attempt to use its aesthetic as a means of transmitting specific political content (as in the case of sub-genres like “Fashwave” or “Trumpwave”), for the most part, vaporwave tracks remain devoid of any particular political messaging whatsoever, while its creators often express a certain hostility toward ideological interpretations of their work (Cole 304). Rather, the critical aspect of vaporwave (if indeed it has one) is expressed primarily through its sedimentation of the affective experience of the present moment, in which uncanny disorientation and passive nihilism abound in the ruins of the modern world.

In fact, vaporwave seems simply to reproduce what it would supposedly critique. It does not so much criticize the culture that it comments on as it merely reflects the feeling of living on after the end of the world. And this may in fact be vaporwave’s greatest strength: acting as an aesthetic distillation of the affective experience of our present. But by simultaneously trying to escape what it represents through a nostalgic longing for a past in which the decentered human world still (ostensibly) existed, vaporwave also gives in to the impulse of *nihilism in bad faith*, turning away from what it wishes to escape precisely by turning toward it. Rather than expressing a particular political orientation toward the world (or lack thereof) from which it arises, vaporwave instead plays with the *possibility* of having an orientation while remaining ironically aloof and largely directionless, thereby giving expression (while also contributing) to the generalized disorientation of modernity’s dissolution.

In this way, instead of soothing or denying the uncanny disorientation of the present, contemporary works of nostalgia art instead tend to *reproduce* feelings of uncanniness and disorientation—the very feelings that have elicited a nostalgic longing to flee into the bygone past in the first place. And once again, vaporwave constitutes the characteristic example of this

phenomenon. With its disorienting lack of direction or perspective and uncanny reproduction of the technical glitches of yesteryear's cultural detritus, vaporwave faithfully reproduces the very uncanny disorientation and end-of-world subjectivity that its nostalgic element is (ostensibly) fleeing. The ruins that form the basis of contemporary nostalgia—abandoned malls, tape hiss, CD skips, TV static, VHS fuzz, muzak, and low-polygon 3D renders—speak to modernity's inoperability, its failures, the transitoriness of its power and the futility of seeking control on the basis of its ontologically purified foundations. Yesterday's cutting-edge technology and culture, with its promises of ease and prosperity in a frictionless world of global capital at the end of history, reappear in today's nostalgic imagination as a set of fractured ruins riven with technical glitches and built-in faults, the flotsam of a world that has already broken down.

Moreover, these ruins speak to the fears of modernity itself: the fear of hybridity, of nature overtaking culture, of the material world reasserting itself, breaking through the carefully constructed categories used to render the chaotic world of becoming into a world *for us*, exposing that this world has never been *for us*, that our existence is no more necessary than anything else, and that our being rests upon *nothing*.<sup>144</sup> Orienting toward the ruins of modernity—particularly, the technical and material misfires of its pop cultural products—evokes such fears, thereby raising the spectre of uncanniness, disorientation, and nihilism that a nostalgic orientation toward the past is seeking to flee in the first place.

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<sup>144</sup> According to Jean-François Lyotard in his essay "Can Thought Go On Without a Body?" this is *the* unanswered challenge of modern thought—that which modernity must suppress in order to engage in its project of purification without translation. Or, as he writes: "I'm talking about what's X'd out of your writings—matter. Matter taken as an arrangement of energy created, destroyed and recreated over and over again, endlessly. On the corpuscular and/or cosmic scale I mean. I am not talking about the familiar, reassuring terrestrial world or the reassuring transcendent immanence of thought to its objects...In 4.5 billion years there will arrive the demise of your phenomenology and your utopian politics, and there'll be no one there to toll the death knell or hear it...With the disappearance of earth, thought will have stopped—leaving that disappearance absolutely unthought of" (*The Inhuman* 9).

Importantly, however, while trying to escape the nihilism of the present through a nostalgic orientation toward the past, works of contemporary nostalgia art (as well as the artists who create them) *clearly acknowledge the meaninglessness, uncanniness, and disorienting nature of the cultural period from which they draw*. For example, as we've seen, vaporwave self-consciously gives itself over to the passive nihilism of late capitalism, embodying its willlessness (or, more accurately, its passive will-to-nothingness) and end-of-world subjectivity through a kind of floating, ethereal pop that goes nowhere and does nothing, trapping the listener in an endless loop of seemingly affectless sound space. Yet, at the same time, vaporwave's affective content closely resembles what I have described as uncanny disorientation: a strange unfamiliar familiarity, in which every song sounds almost identical to the one before (and, more broadly, nearly identical to more recognizable pop hits of the 1980s and 90s), yet weirdly distorted to reject any actual recognition. In this way, vaporwave's version of nostalgia is *itself* uncanny: both genuinely longing for a non-existent past *and* nihilistically recognizing the meaninglessness and dystopian nature of the past that it longs for *in one and the same gesture*.

By simultaneously acknowledging the nihilistically dystopic consequences of late capitalism and neoliberalism while still investing in the unrealized (and unrealizable) dream of a capitalist world of pure, unfettered consumption, vaporwave emulates the structure and activity of capitalism itself, which deterritorializes with one hand what it reterritorializes with the other (Deleuze and Guattari *Anti-Oedipus* 257); or of modernity, which, under the guise of purification without translation, proliferates hybrid objects that cross the neatly separated ontological zones it creates. Under the glossy veneer of a quasi-critique of the nihilistic and anhedonic life of late capitalism and modernity, vaporwave hides a barely-concealed longing for the causes of that condition.

In fact, genres like vaporwave work to *reproduce* the conditions of modernity—that is, purification without translation and the proliferation of hybrid objects—through the very conditions of their own production.<sup>145</sup> For example, vaporwave both expresses and embraces the dissolution of the boundaries between “online” and “offline,” between the “digital” and the “real” world, through its digital sampling and manipulation of analog physical media and virtual recreations of topographical locations (like the mall, the nighttime city-scape, or the empty bedroom) in cyberspace. Similarly, the genre also breaks down boundaries between producer and audience, subject and object, as works of vaporwave are created by anonymous, pseudonymous avatars “with long and unpronounceable strings of symbols and characters for names” that “pass for ‘subjects’” who may or may not be real (Born and Haworth 79). The dissolution of such purified boundaries—between subject and object, producer and consumer, virtual and physical, digital and analogue—is part of what marks vaporwave as a genre, even as it expresses a kind of ambivalence toward the disorientation and loss of clarity that this dissolution produces.<sup>146</sup>

In this way, the anonymity of vaporwave’s production mirrors the absent end-of-world subjectivity of the nihilist in bad faith. It attempts to embrace this floating, subjectless mode of subjectivity, but in doing so, covers over the conditions that have given rise to that mode of subjectivity in the first place. Its nostalgic reproduction of an idealized non-place in a

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<sup>145</sup> More accurately, we might follow Nicholas Morrisey’s suggestion that vaporwave can be read as a form of *metamodernism*: an aesthetic term used to describe contemporary forms of art that oscillates between modernist sincerity and postmodern irony, seeking to return to a more modern medium of expression while also retaining a certain level of detachment from it. In this way, metamodernism mimics the structure of bad faith: aiming for the “reassuring myths” of modernity while disavowing those myths in the same gesture.

<sup>146</sup> Some recent commentators have described genres like vaporwave, that rely on a kind of unfettered access to the entire history of recorded materials, no matter how obscure, via the internet, as a form of “super hybridity,” mashing together seemingly incongruous sounds, imagery, effects, and affects from the entire history of pop culture’s past. This form of “super hybridity” kicks postmodern kitsch and bricolage into overdrive, leading to an aesthetic of “immersion, entanglement, sudden rupture and repeated breakdown” (Hiro Steyerl qtd in Reynolds 412). We might also read this super hybridity of artistic genres as a symptom of (and, in turn, a contributing factor to) the crisis of modernity which, as discussed throughout this dissertation, results from the proliferation into undeniability of hybrid objects that straddle the line between multiple supposedly exclusive ontological categories.

mythologized past provides a space of orientation for the nihilist in bad faith who is otherwise lost in a worldless world of disorientation. But the non-place that vaporwave creates as a site of orientation is, in reality, simply an extension of the nihilist in bad faith's "daily experiences under late capitalism rather than an escape" from them (Guignon 175). And this attempted escape through reorientation brings the nihilist in bad faith back to what they were initially trying to flee: uncanniness, disorientation, and the meaninglessness of life amongst the ruins of the modern world.<sup>147</sup>

Yet, it is precisely to escape an encounter with the nothingness at the heart of being (as revealed through the self-dissolution of the modern constitution) that this reorientation toward an imagined past is undertaken. Again, in this way, the nostalgia evoked by vaporwave is an example of nihilism in bad faith, which attempts to flee the subject's encounter with nothingness by intentionally aiming at the object of its flight. Vaporwave embodies the paradoxes and tensions of nihilism in bad faith by disavowing the conditions that make it possible while simultaneously cementing, reifying, and fetishizing those very conditions. The nihilism in bad faith of vaporwave manifests through its being both "symptom of and quasi-homeopathic antidote to the omnipresent intrusions of enforced global connectivity" (Cole 317). It is an attempt to cure the poison of the crisis of modernity with a hyper-concentrated version of the poison itself.

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<sup>147</sup> A return which, again, mirrors Freud's description of the *return of the repressed* as a source of uncanny feelings, as in his example of wandering aimlessly through Venice and unconsciously returning, again and again, to the town's red-light district. By trying to flee the disorientation, uncanniness, and nihilism of present reality through the aesthetics of nostalgia, the nihilist in bad faith is returned, inexorably, to the very thing they are attempting to escape.

As we've seen, nostalgia is a powerful affective force that inhabits the nihilist in bad faith. But the nostalgia of today carries with it a dimension of uncanny disorientation, as it is primarily born of the uncanniness and disorientation produced by the crisis of modernity. Contemporary nostalgia is a product of the impossibility of being modern any longer. If nostalgia is the affective component of modernity, then current bouts of nostalgia, taking place as they do after modernity's end, are a kind of nostalgia *for* nostalgia, or a *nostalgia for nothing*. In the same way that modern subjectivity persists on through the crisis of modernity even after the modern constitution has been rendered inoperable, a nostalgic longing for the past continues to plague the contemporary subject, even while such longings have become impossible, simply because there is nothing left to long for: no home, no world *for us* to return back to or orient toward.

Vaporwave—and the broader nostalgic impulse that it represents—is thus a form of nihilism in bad faith. It embraces the nihilism of postmodern hyperreality while simultaneously trying to *escape it* through a nostalgic reorientation toward a past time when the hyperreality of postmodernity still felt novel, cool, exciting, and filled with future potential (even if that future potential was a kind of glossy cyberpunk dystopia). Inhabiting the disappointingly real dystopia of life at the end of the modern world, vaporwave's creators and fans long for a return to a point when that dystopia was still on the horizon—a point of speculation and anticipation, rather than reality. *But the emergent hyperreality of the 1980s and 1990s was just as nihilistic as present reality.* As such, vaporwave's nostalgic aesthetic is both visually and sonically haunting, creepy, unsettling in its unreality (or hyperreality) and vacuity. Like the experience of wandering through a defunct and abandoned shopping mall, surrounded by things that have outlived their purpose or meaning, vaporwave evokes a sense of uncanny familiarity and disturbing disorientation that

mirrors the very nihilistic sense of uncanny disorientation from which it nostalgically longs to flee. The hopeless nihilism and uncanny disorientation of the present cannot be escaped via this form of nostalgia. If anything, contemporary forms of nostalgia only *intensify* the affective and subjective conditions outlined in this dissertation.

In trying to flee from the horrors of modernity's self-dissolution by orienting toward its ruins, the nihilist in bad faith simply reproduces the very logics of modernity that led to its self-dissolution in the first place. The kind of contemporary nostalgia embodied by vaporwave is just another form of nihilism in bad faith: trying to reorient itself on the basis of the modern constitution while that same constitution works to produce the widespread nihilism and uncanny disorientation that has prompted the nihilist's need for reorientation to begin with. It is a perpetual loop of uncanniness, disorientation, and meaninglessness that keeps the nostalgic subject trapped within an experience of passive nihilism, unable to overcome their own nihilistic tendencies through the transformation of that nihilism into an active negation of past or present conditions. The nihilist in bad faith instead uses nostalgia as a means of avoiding the difficult process of converting passive nihilism into active negation by trying to flee from present realities into an imagined past. But as we have seen, this attempted escape simply perpetuates the very conditions of uncanniness, disorientation, and nothingness that the nihilist in bad faith is trying to flee, leaving them to wallow in an unending form of passive nihilism, a feedback loop of uncanniness, disorientation, and nihilistic subjectivity.

The consequences of this endless nihilistic loop are various. But in particular, we might note the characteristic lack of political content or orientation on display in contemporary works of nostalgia art, like vaporwave. This seeming absence of a clear political perspective or drive is the mark of contemporary nostalgia's passive nihilism, which would rather flounder helplessly in

uncanniness and disorientation than will a positive political project. At the same time, however, we should remember that passive nihilism does not necessarily denote a lack of activity on the part of the nihilist, and that the will would rather will *nothing* than not will at all. Indeed, we might instead read the lack of political content in a work of vaporwave as the active suppression of political perspective, the will turned backward against itself in an attempt to negate its own capacity to will. Similarly, we might view the contemporary nostalgia aesthetic's longing for a time when the modern world had already been rendered inoperative and meaningless as a form of the nihilistic *will-to-nothingness*: an attempt to will nothing by uncritically orienting the nihilist in bad faith toward the most vacuous elements of postmodern corporate culture.

The point here, however, is that the nihilism in bad faith that pervades contemporary life, while being a form of passive nihilism, in actuality works to motivate various kinds of activity—even if that activity is, as a rule, *reactive*. In the case of vaporwave (and contemporary nostalgia art more broadly), this (re)activity takes the form of an obsessive recycling, remaking, and reassembling of the pop culture products of our recent past—a reassembly which, in turn, works to perpetuate the nihilism of the present by reorienting us toward a time when the modern world had already rendered itself inoperative. In the following chapter, I will turn our attention to another form of activity through which this nihilism is made manifest: namely, the contemporary rise in overt white supremacist movements across the globe.

“Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations. You, don't be afraid. I said that it was intended that you should perish in the ghetto, perish by never being allowed to go behind the white man's definitions, by never being allowed to spell your proper name” (James Baldwin qtd. in Farley 491)

“Meaning itself is an aspect of anti-blackness, such that meaning is lost for the black; blacks live in a world of absurdity, and this existential absurdity *is* meaning for the world. Meaninglessness is really all there is (or we could say that ‘real’ meaning for the world is utter meaninglessness)...the meaninglessness of anti-black violence is the ‘crypt-signifier’ that organizes the modern world and its institutions. Any ‘meaning’ that is articulated possesses a kernel of absurdity that blacks embody as ‘fleshy signs’...What the black nihilist does is bring this meaninglessness to the fore and disclose it in all of its terroristic historicity”  
(Calvin Warren “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope” 227)

“There is no world without Blacks, yet there are no Blacks who are in the world”  
(Wilderson III *Afropessimism* 41-42)

## Chapter 7: White Supremacy

It is becoming increasingly apparent that we are witnessing a global resurgence in white supremacy. In a 2020 report presented before the US Congress, Assistant Director of the FBI Counterterrorism Division Jill Sanborn stated that “Racially/ethnically motivated violent extremists were the primary source of all ideologically-motivated lethal incidents and violence in 2018 and 2019 and have been considered the most lethal of all domestic violent extremists since 2001,” clarifying in a statement before the House Appropriations Committee in 2021 that the “top threat we face from DVEs [Domestic Violent Extremists] continues to be those we categorize as racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists, specifically those who advocate for the superiority of the white race” (Sanborn qtd. in Paul 2330, Sanborn 2021). In a similar statement before a 2019 Senate Committee On National Security and Defence, the head of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) David Vigneault commented that his agency has been increasingly preoccupied “with the threat of violent right-wing extremism and white supremacists,” with then-Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland following Vigneault’s statement with her opinion that “white supremacy is one of the biggest risks facing Western democracies” today (Tunney). Indeed, in a recent study on the contemporary rise and normalization of white supremacist discourse, the social scientist Joshua Paul estimates that “six percent, or eleven million, of the two hundred million whites in America have beliefs that would classify them as white nationalists with twenty-seven percent expressing feelings of white victimization, twenty-eight percent of white identity, and thirty-eight percent of white solidarity,” further noting that North American white supremacist movements have largely taken inspiration from various European ethno-nationalist movements, particularly the “European New Right” and “French New Right,” with Bernd Reiter drawing similar connections between white supremacist

ideology and the global rise of right-wing populist leaders over the past decade (Paul 2340-2345, Reiter 2).

Yet, while this global re-emergence of white supremacist ideology is not entirely divorced from the long social and institutional history of white supremacy, recent scholarship on white supremacist mobilization indicates that contemporary manifestations of overt or “extreme” white supremacy differ significantly from past instantiations, making it necessary to study the particular factors driving this current resurgence.<sup>148</sup> It is my contention that the contemporary resurgence of overt white supremacy is part of an ongoing pattern of reaction to the threat posed to the racial hegemony of whiteness by the crisis of modernity.

As many critical historians of race have shown, “whiteness” as a category of identity is a thoroughly modern concept, emerging from the race science of seventeenth-and-eighteenth century Europe in an attempt to construct a biological hierarchy of different “races” out of dubious anthropological evidence (Painter 59-103, Kendi 15-30, Somerville 15-38, Strings 67-99). Indeed, such racial hierarchies, while lacking any substantive basis in biology or anthropology, are foundational to the modern world, constituting one of the primary ontological distinctions upon which modernity has been organized.<sup>149</sup> Thus, as Ta-Nehisi Coates writes:

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<sup>148</sup> See, for example: Cameron D. Lippard, J. Scott Carter, and David G. Embrick’s 2020 edited collection *Protecting Whiteness: Whitelash and the Rejection of Racial Equality*, 2020; Laura J. Kwak’s 2020 article “Problematizing Canadian Exceptionalism: A Study of Right-Populism, White Nationalism, and Conservative Political Parties”; Joshua Paul’s article “‘Because for us, as Europeans, it is only normal again when we are great again’: Metapolitical Whiteness and the Normalization of White Supremacist Discourse in the Wake of Trump” from 2021; Brian Van Brunt, et al.’s 2023 textbook on *White Supremacist Violence: Understanding the Resurgence and Stopping the Spread*; Bernd Reiter’s 2025 article “Aggrieved White Men and the Danger They Pose to Democracy and Peace,” etc.

<sup>149</sup> As Terrence Keel explains in his work on nihilism, race, and the critical study of science and religion: “Scientific racism—along with the settler ontologies that draw distinctions between white and native, living and inanimate, and the world as it appears and the biological laws set into motion by some unmoved mover—has given us the language to imagine race as the product of forces outside the control of social conventions. Racism within the biological and medical sciences is the belief that the health, behavior, and physiological traits of an individual are shared by other people who are thought to belong to the same population. Collectively, people in this race inherit who they are, what they look like, and their likelihood of illness and health from their family and their ancestors.

race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming ‘the people’ has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy.

Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the pre-eminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible—this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.

These new people are, like us, a modern invention (7).

“Race” therefore orients existence for modern subjects—particularly those who have been able to successfully claim a white racial identity and the social privileges and power that follow from such an identification. Whiteness provides an orientation to the world that, because it is the dominant orientation, fades into the background, becoming an invisible part of the world (Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology* 131-132). It is only when the world upon which this orientation has been based becomes inoperative that whiteness itself comes to the fore as something that needs to be asserted, protected, or reestablished in its position of dominance. For, as Ashley Jardina claims in relation to white group identity: “the salience and assertion of a dominant group identity is *reactive*; it is an effort to defend the group’s position within a stratified system” (emphasis added 36). White supremacy and white nationalism are just such reactive group formations, which occur when whiteness is (or is perceived to be) under threat.

My contention is that the current occurrence of this reaction has largely taken place in response to feelings of uncanny disorientation that arise when the modern world has been

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Scientific and medical racism creates the impression that the biological characteristics or the genes we receive ultimately determine the course of our lives, not the society that sustains or discriminates against those lives. It also creates the belief that races can be augmented only indirectly—namely, through eugenic elimination or curation. According to this view God/Nature create race, not humans. The conservation or elimination of these races by scientists or white nationalists is an act that remains within the moral universe of this firstly Christian and now scientific interpretation of the world” (52-53).

rendered inoperative, and that it is a manifestation of the subjective condition that I have termed nihilism in bad faith. It is not my intention, however, to present uncanny disorientation, nihilism in bad faith, or the crisis of modernity as a kind of singular “cause” of white supremacist attitudes or actions. As most contemporary scholars of white supremacy indicate, there is no singular predictor for who might hold white supremacist beliefs or what such beliefs might lead individuals to do. Rather, the emergence of overt white supremacy generally results from a combination of factors—economic, social, psychological, and affective—that are not the same for all white supremacists at all times (Simi et al. 307-308). As such, my claim in this case study is *not* that the affective feelings of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith produced by the crisis of modernity have single-handedly *caused* a contemporary resurgence in white supremacy, but simply that it is one factor among others which can help to explain how and why white supremacist beliefs and actions might emerge in the present, and why more overt forms of white supremacy have begun to reassert themselves today, despite growing social attitudes regarding the irrelevance of race to politics (Embrick et al. 4, Doane 33-35, Kwak 1170-1172).<sup>150</sup>

As we will see, white supremacy is not a new or novel phenomenon. Nor is it solely the product of the decline of the modern constitution and subsequent rise of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith. Rather, it is my claim that the affective experience and subject formation prompted by the end of the modern world has contributed to a recent resurgence in

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<sup>150</sup> For example, “National polls reveal that a large chunk of white Americans believe that racism against blacks is a thing of the past but are concerned that whites are now the new targets of racism (Gallagher 2008; Gallup 2019). Also, a majority of whites now say they are satisfied with how blacks are treated (51%) and that blacks are treated fairly at work (67%), in neighborhood shops (76%), in restaurants, bars, theaters, or other places of entertainment (76%), in interactions with police (52%), and in getting health care from doctors (77%)...As the sociologist Herbert Blumer has argued (1958), despite few personal experiences and overwhelming amounts of research to suggest otherwise, whites perceive that their economic, political, and social group position in America is threatened by ever-growing nonwhite populations” (Embrick et al. 4). Similarly, as Laura J. Kwak has shown in the Canadian context, “persistent racial violence was and continues to be framed as anomalous, isolated incidents unrepresentative of Canadian character, rather than as embedded in the social and political fabric of the nation” (Kwak 1172).

outright white supremacist movements, rhetoric, and attitudes that follows the pattern of what David G. Embrick, J. Scott Carter, and Cameron D. Lippard have titled “whitelash” (6); or the reactive racism that has periodically occurred in response to changing political conditions and perceived shifts in the social position or privilege of whiteness. It is my contention that the theoretical framework that I have established throughout this dissertation can be a useful tool for understanding contemporary forms of “whitelash” as it has occurred in Canada, the United States, and Europe over the past decade.

### *What is White Supremacy?*

As mentioned previously, white supremacy—as a metapolitical structure and organizing ideology—is not a new phenomenon, and contemporary manifestations of white supremacist identity, ideology, and activism exist as part of a continuum of beliefs, actions, and socio-political structures that can be traced back to the earliest developments of modern concepts of racial hierarchy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet, as recent scholarship contends, current forms of white supremacy also exist in distinct contrast to past forms, insofar as contemporary white supremacy utilizes symbolic, material, and affective resources that diverge markedly from more “classical” instances of racial ideology or white supremacist activism, making the current resurgence of overt white supremacy appear novel or “surprising”—particularly within a social landscape that had begun to consider itself “post-racial” or “colour blind” (Doane 33-35, Paul 2331, Charles 197-209, Simi et al. 299-301). To properly study the causes and effects of this contemporary resurgence of white supremacy, it will thus first be necessary to define how “white supremacy” is being conceptualized for the purposes of this case study, how current forms of white supremacist ideology and activism differ from past

instantiations, and how these contemporary modes of overt white supremacy relate to the theoretical framework of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith outlined in previous chapters.

Following the recent work of Brian Van Brunt et al. on contemporary white supremacist violence, we can begin by briefly defining white supremacy as an adherence to “one or more of the following philosophies: 1) whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they might co-exist; 2) whites should live by themselves in a whites-only society; 3) white people have their own ‘culture’ that is superior to other cultures; [and] 4) white people are genetically superior to other people” (11). Additionally, following Tema Okun’s influential work on “white supremacy culture” we can further identify nine characteristics of white supremacy as a broader social or cultural formation, including: fear, perfectionism, binary thinking, denial and defensiveness, a perceived right to comfort and fear of conflict, individualism, the fetishization of progress, worship of the written word, and an undue sense of urgency (Okun). For the purposes of this dissertation, white supremacy will thus be conceptualized as a particular ideological orientation toward the world which involves: taking on a white identity (or an identity *as white*, an identification with *whiteness* as a racial concept), positioning whiteness as either *superior* to other categories of race or *under threat* from non-white others, and generally aligning with the characteristics of white supremacist culture outlined by Okun—particularly, the perceived right to comfort, fear of conflict, and binary thinking in the form of purification without translation. Additionally, once again following the work of Van Brunt et al., no distinction will be made between “white supremacy” and “white nationalism” in this chapter, as “nationalism and supremacy are one and the same in that they both view whites as superior to all others and, as such, believe that a white nation must prevail” (10).

From this brief definition of white supremacy, we can see that the ideological formation of white supremacy “is far more encompassing than simple racism or bigotry,” as most “white supremacists today further believe that the white race is in danger of extinction, owing to a rising ‘flood’ of non-whites” who appear within the purified ontological categories of the modern world as hybrid objects that threaten to disrupt that world’s coherence by eliminating the ontological distinction between white subjects and non-white others (Van Brunt et al. 10-11).

At the same time, however, it is important to note, along with Ashley Jardina, that “not everyone possesses a strong group identity, even when they can be objectively categorized into a particular group. We know that a majority of white Americans, for instance, do not possess a strong racial identity” (92-93). Moreover, as recent studies have shown, white racial solidarity and group identity cannot be definitively attributed to any other demographic factor, including things like: age, gender, economic class, geographical location, level of education, or political leanings. Rather, “white racial solidarity is more likely to be embraced by individuals with a particular personality profile—those who cling to tradition, who are less open to new experiences, who support hierarchy and authority, and who are resistant to interruptions of the status quo” (Jardina 114). And while such personality traits may, at times, be associated with lower levels of education, higher age brackets, living in a rural locale, subscribing to conservative political beliefs, or performing certain expressions of masculinity, they cannot be definitively correlated with any of these factors (Jardina 91-117). As such, the stereotype of the white supremacist as an un-(or under-)educated, elderly, conservative, working class man living outside the urban core is largely a mischaracterization or myth that works to obscure the ways in which white supremacy manifests throughout the white population, and amongst some non-white people as well.

In reality, “most individuals associated with white supremacist groups appear as nondescript, generic, average US citizens who do not fit neatly into any” conventional stereotypes about white supremacists, while the current “demographic composition” of white supremacist activists “has expanded to include Asian, Black, and Hispanic/Latino individuals” (Simi et al. 301-311).<sup>151</sup> We must therefore be clear that white supremacy—in either its “classical” or contemporary manifestations—cannot be imputed to any singular group, ideology, or position on the so-called political spectrum. In fact, it is precisely this narrow focus on particular, individual actors or political parties that obscures how white supremacy actually functions, what its basic tenets and motivations are, and how it continues to retain its power as a guiding metapolitical force.

Part of why the contemporary resurgence of overt white supremacism and its manifestation in seemingly politically incoherent figures like the so-called “alt right” or President Donald Trump remains so baffling and incomprehensible to many commentators is precisely because such commentators continue to understand white supremacy according to conventional, established political categories of “left” and “right,” “liberal” and “conservative,” etc., whereby racism and white supremacy are largely (if not exclusively) figured as the purview of the “right” (who are positioned as fundamentally in opposition to basic liberal values of

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<sup>151</sup> This is why I have chosen to focus on *overt* white supremacy specifically in this case study, rather than whiteness, white identity, or white nationalism more broadly. While all white people (or people who can be “objectively categorized” into whiteness as a racial category) benefit from the dominance and hegemony of white supremacy culture and systemic white privilege, not all white people possess a strong attachment to whiteness as an identity, or feel that whiteness is something that needs to be protected, maintained, or preserved. And this is significant insofar as it helps to explain why some white individuals subscribe to white supremacist beliefs, or engage in overt acts of white supremacy, while others do not. It is my contention that alignment with whiteness as a group identity and a culture of white supremacy determines, in part, whether or not one will turn toward white supremacist movements in reaction to feelings of uncanny disorientation, as part of the subjective experience of nihilism in bad faith.

democracy, tolerance, social progress, etc.) while the “left” is ostensibly protected from white supremacist attitudes (precisely because of its subscription to the aforementioned liberal values). In reality, however, such left/right, liberal/conservative distinctions are simply one more product of the modern constitution’s project of purification without translation, which positions “left” and “right” as ontologically purified political categories without overlap or hybridity, while creating the very conditions for political hybridity to proliferate. The collapse of the modern world has simply exposed the extent of this hybridity of political positions, rendering it undeniable. As such, the continued insistence on attributing overtly racist and white supremacist attitudes solely to one of these ontologically purified categories (the “right”) to the exclusion of another (the “left”) is just one more attempt to maintain or reestablish some semblance of a familiar modern world—an attempt which is, ironically, structurally indistinguishable from the white supremacist call to “Make [Blank] Great Again” or to “Reject Modernity [and] Return to Tradition” (Adam).

Instead, it might be better to understand contemporary forms of white supremacy as an example of what Naomi Klein has recently dubbed “diagonalism,” which describes the current emergence of political movements that collapse conventional distinctions between “left” and “right,” “liberal” and “conservative,” “progressive” and “reactionary” in favour of hybrid forms of subjectivity and unlikely political alliances that largely defy the ontologically purified categories of modernity, baffling those who continue to subscribe to such categories (101-102). On this reading, white supremacy becomes a kind of hybrid political position that borrows elements from a plethora of different ideological positions while remaining grounded in the modern constitution and its attendant affective and subjective modes, as outlined previously. In the following section of this chapter, I will elaborate upon this conception of contemporary white

supremacy to show that the current resurgence of overt white supremacist rhetoric, policy, and activism is a product of the uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith that follow the end of the modern world.

### *The Contemporary Resurgence of White Supremacy*

But to begin to understand how the current resurgence of white supremacy constitutes a form of nihilism in bad faith, we must first outline the ways in which contemporary forms of white supremacy differ from more “classical” or traditional forms of racial ideology.

As Pete Simi, Robert Futrell, and Adam Burston note in their recent sociological meta-analysis of US white supremacist activism from the 1980s to the present, overt or “extreme” white supremacy is not a new phenomenon, and continuities exist between older, more traditional white supremacist movements of the past and the current resurgence of white supremacy (299). Yet, the past decade has also been characterized by a “growing diversity of white supremacist groups along with a new generation of leadership and organizations” as the “emergence of the alt-right signaled a general effort among a segment of white supremacists to rebrand their ideology in a way that might seem new and distinct from past iterations of white supremacy and thus less threatening,” with the “use of digital spaces, including various social media platforms” being “critical to persistence and resurgence, especially in terms of promoting ‘inter-ideological mingling’...allowing white supremacists to circulate narratives to a broader audience and connect somewhat divergent strains of white supremacy along with other adjacent forms of right-wing extremism” (Simi et al. 301). As such, this contemporary political reassertion of white identity and white supremacy represents what Ashley “Woody” Doane calls a “‘new white nationalism’ as a distinct racial ideology that has emerged to contest ‘color

blindness' in the political and public sphere" (33). Such forms of "new white nationalism," rather than returning to pre-Civil Rights era forms of "classical" racism, can instead be viewed as "a mash-up of elements of color blindness and white supremacy that has been adapted to the present context," in which the basic structure of the world has remained grounded in white supremacy, even as nominal legal and social gains have ostensibly created greater "racial equity" in a supposedly "post-racial" world (Doane 35).<sup>152</sup>

Similarly, Joshua Paul has argued that, while it appeals to an already extant base of white supremacist attitudes, beliefs, and structural privileges, the contemporary "alt right" and far-right represent a fundamentally new form of white consciousness, which he terms "metapolitical whiteness." This metapolitical whiteness is essentially

an outgrowth of nihilistic internet troll culture [which] promotes pro-white racial consciousness and publicly celebrates white pride by disarticulating whiteness from domination, often re-presenting white Americans as disadvantaged and disenfranchized. It draws on longstanding white supremacist histories, revives, extends and moves them back to the political centre. Unlike the explicit pro-white ideology of traditional white nationalisms, it charts an 'alternative' political ideology using tenets of white nationalism as its foundation and fusing them with ironic comedy and differentialist racism (2331).

In this way, even as contemporary manifestations of white supremacy draw upon pre-existing racial biases and forms of structural racism, they also represent a fundamental shift away from past forms of overt racism to a more nihilistic and "ironic" form of white supremacist ideology.

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<sup>152</sup> For an important discussion of how this kind of "post-racial colour-blindness" functions in Canada to mask ongoing structures of white supremacy and colonialism, see: Laura J. Kwak, "Problematizing Canadian Exceptionalism: A Study of Right-Populism, White Nationalism, and Conservative Political Parties." *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, 10, 6, 2020, 1166-1192.

Many contemporary white supremacists readily acknowledge that their racism is a reactionary product of a fundamentally nihilistic culture, yet they simultaneously deny their own nihilism, claiming to be reacting *against* the nihilism of post-modern society even as they lean upon an “ironic” attitude of nihilism toward what they frame as the sacred idols of modern political life: political correctness, race blindness, ideals of equality, Enlightenment rationality, etc. Their nihilism is thus *nihilism in bad faith*, insofar as it takes on the structure of aiming at that which one is attempting to flee in order to flee it (Gordon 8). In trying to escape the nihilism of contemporary culture at the end of the modern world, the new white supremacists themselves adopt a mode of subjectivity steeped in nihilism—a passive form of nihilism that is incapable of overcoming what it seeks to flee because it relies upon a nihilistic form of subjectivity in its very flight from nihilism. The most that contemporary white supremacists can do is regurgitate a slew of already-established racial stereotypes, white supremacist slogans, and reactionary talking points under the guise of “irony,” thereby reorienting the subjects of white supremacy toward an ostensibly bygone era of modernity (when one could proclaim such racist rhetoric openly) even while claiming that era to be dead and gone, killed by the very post-modern nihilism that the white supremacists adopt in their nihilistic reaction to the end of modernity. As such, contemporary white supremacist rhetoric often focuses on a “return” to an imagined past in which whiteness was supposedly unthreatened and unchallenged by “modern” conditions, as seen in the popular slogans to “Make [Blank] Great Again” or to “Reject Modernity, Embrace Tradition” (Adam).<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Wendy Brown makes a similar point in her recent work on nihilism *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* where she writes that: “The combination of neoliberalism’s deprecation of the political and the social and a desublimated, wounded white masculinity together generate a disinhibited freedom, one symptomizing ethical destitution even as it often dresses in religious righteousness or conservative melancholy for a phantasmatic past. This freedom is paradoxically expressed as nihilism and against nihilism, attacking and destroying while faulting its objects of derision for the ruin of traditional values and order. It is freedom unbridled and uncultured, freedom to put a stick

Yet, as we've seen previously in relation to the aesthetics of nostalgia, the imagined past that is longed for by contemporary white supremacists is, in fact, *modernity itself*—the world of the modern constitution, in which purified ontological distinctions between racial categories were still possible to believe in and enforce. White supremacists wish to escape the effects of modernity precisely by returning *to* modernity, a time in which the modern constitution was still operative. In turn, this desire to escape the conditions of (post)modernity by returning to a supposedly lost “tradition” primarily manifests as a reassertion of the ontologically purified racial categories fundamental to the modern constitution, motivated by feelings of fear and victimhood around “replacement,” or the idea that white identity (and thus whiteness itself) is being undermined, threatened, eroded, or replaced by a supposed influx of non-white others (Reiter 3).

As a study of the rhetoric and discursive strategies used by white supremacist channels on YouTube undertaken by Douglas C. Charles indicates:

the appropriation of victim status [amongst contemporary white supremacists] was common, and whites were portrayed as besieged and beleaguered. Terms like *protect*, *preserve*, *defend*, *liberate*, *standing up for themselves*, and *fighting for what is theirs* were all used to describe white nationalists. In contrast, immigrants and nonwhites were said to be *invading*, *attacking*, *shouting*, *infecting*, *encroaching*, *stealing*, and *committing more crime* (202).

Similarly, Simi et al. conclude that

*threat* stands as a particularly salient factor driving [white supremacist activism (WSA)] at micro, meso, and macro levels. In fact, we see perceived threats as a unifying principle

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in the eye of accepted norms, freedom from care of the morrow. This is the freedom remaindered by nihilism, in the making for centuries and intensified by neoliberalism itself” (172).

that catalyzes WSA across time and space. White supremacists perceive threats from multiple sources that range from individual racial enemies to demographic shifts that portend white genocide to a Zionist occupied government and a global Jewish cabal seeking a tyrannical new world order, [with contemporary white supremacists framing their activism] as driven by apocalyptic perils, such as the survival of the white race (emphasis added 310).

In this way, overt white supremacy is a fundamentally *reactive* political orientation—one which is primarily based in a form of passive nihilism and *ressentiment* arising, in our contemporary moment, out of feelings of uncanny disorientation and the loss of a coherent world. Or, in other words, for the white supremacist, “the [non-white] ‘other’ acts, and the [white] ‘us’ reacts” (Charles 202).

As I will demonstrate, contemporary white supremacy can thus be understood as a reactive displacement of the fear prompted by uncanny disorientation onto racial others, or an imagined threat of being “replaced,” the dissolution of the self, and the loss of the privileged position of whiteness. It is an attempt to flee the recognition of oneself as *nothing*, of human existence as founded upon *nothingness*, or the experience of *worldlessness*, by reestablishing firm ontological boundaries between supposed “races,” between the white self and the racialized other. This attempt is self-defeating insofar as it attempts to reestablish the world of modernity through the very means that led to the dissolution of the modern world in the first place (namely, purification without translation). Similarly, it draws upon already-established purified ontological categories of race in its attempt to reestablish a world in which the modern subject can feel properly oriented. The fear of nothingness, or of the uncanny worldless world one finds oneself in at the end of modernity, is displaced onto the racial other and is reconceptualized as a

fear of the dissolution of the purified borders between racial categories. Moreover, this displacement of feelings of uncanny disorientation onto the racialized other and attempts to reestablish purified ontological boundaries between racial categories constitutes a form of *nihilism in bad faith*, insofar as contemporary forms of white supremacy tend to acknowledge their own basis in the crisis of modernity while simultaneously attempting to flee that recognition by projecting the cause of modernity's crisis outward onto the imagined threat of non-white being.

It is telling, for example, that the increased presence of non-white people and institutions within majority white neighbourhoods constitutes a major predictor of white supremacist attitudes, indicating that the mere *existence* of non-white bodies within majority white spaces is perceived by many as a *threat* to whiteness itself—a threat which requires the bolstering of white identity and power in response (Simi et al. 308). For, as David Dietrich has argued, newer forms of white supremacy and white nationalism have not only focused on the removal or segregation of non-white people from “white” spaces but have also begun to advocate for the creation of white ethnostates—an argument based in “the belief that the races are inherently different and unequal and cannot coexist. White nationalists argue that the white race is being destroyed through racial mixing and can be saved only by creating a separate white state,” because, for the new white nationalists,

victimization is central to how they frame their movement. They perceive several sources of victimization from the outside, including not only minority races but also whites who advocate diversity and multiculturalism, so-called race traitors. These sources of victimization include intermarriage, minority population growth, an (allegedly) growing minority crime rate, increasing immigration, and whites losing jobs to minorities, [and

thus the] recruitment and mobilization strategy for white supremacist activism boils down to creating and instilling a white identity—that is, developing the consciousness of white people as ‘Whites,’ who are defined as a class of victims (Dietrich 152-153).

Contemporary white supremacists thus try to flee the “threat” posed by non-white others (or those not aligned with “whiteness” as a racial identity category) by attempting to put people—both white and non-white—back “in their place,” into the ontologically purified zones of modern racial categories that have been undermined by the crisis of modernity. This, it is hoped, will prevent the possibility of hybridity, exchange, or intermingling (i.e., translation) between different racial categories of people. Because, for the white supremacist subject, non-white existence is *itself* a form of hybridity that needs to be eliminated in order to escape the uncanny disorientation of the crisis of modernity. But as we have seen, it is precisely such attempts at purification without translation that allow hybridity (or the perception of hybridity) to proliferate into undeniability, meaning that it is the white supremacist’s insistence on racial purity *itself* which produces the feelings of uncanny disorientation that prompt their experience of nihilism.

In the following section of this case study, I will further elaborate upon the white supremacist’s need to preserve the non-white other’s presence, even as they desire the elimination of non-white racialized subjects, as part of the nihilism in bad faith of contemporary white supremacy. Following the work of contemporary Afropessimist thinkers and theorists of black nihilism, I will focus upon the existential logics of anti-black racism in particular to explain how contemporary white supremacy manifests and functions more broadly.<sup>154</sup> While I do

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<sup>154</sup> I will primarily be drawing on the work of Calvin L. Warren, Frank B. Wilderson III, Fred Moten, Jared Sexton, Hortense J. Spillers, Lewis R. Gordon, Anthony Paul Farley, and Saidiya V. Hartman, specifically, though other thinkers and theorists of anti-black racism have also informed my understanding of this subject.

not wish to suggest that white supremacy solely (or even primarily) takes the form of anti-black racism to the exclusion of other forms of racism, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiments (as if a hierarchy of oppressions or racisms could ever be productive) I will be taking “black” and “white” as the ontological poles of the white supremacist imaginary, upon which modern ideas of “race” have been constructed. This is not to exclude other racial categories, experiences of racism, or racialization from the discussion; nor is it meant to deny the structural ties and intersections between white supremacy, racism, colonialism, misogyny, sexism, orientalism, Islamophobia, transphobia, homophobia, and anti-queerness. White supremacy manifests in a variety of ways across different contexts, acting as the structuring logic behind various instances of colonialization, racialized violence, misogyny, xenophobia, trans exclusion, etc. However, it is beyond the scope of this project to map these various intersections in their specificity.

Instead, the remainder of this chapter will aim to examine the resurgence of white supremacy as an explicit metapolitical project in relation to experiences of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith at the end of the modern world. This will necessitate a more focused analysis of the internal structural logics of white supremacism and its relation to the theoretical framework that has been established in previous chapters of this dissertation—an analysis which will necessarily fail to directly address every aspect or manifestation of white supremacy. As such, again, this case study will focus primarily on anti-black racism as the fundamental core of contemporary white supremacy from which various forms of white supremacist ideology and activism stem, while also acknowledging the ways in which white supremacy affects non-white racialized people more broadly.

As outlined by the seminal work of Lewis R. Gordon and Anthony Paul Farley, anti-black racism constitutes a form of bad faith in which the white supremacist subject tries to exclude or eliminate the very thing which founds and sustains their own existence *as white* (or aligned with whiteness): namely, the black racialized subject (Farley 493, Gordon 75). For, as Calvin L. Warren, Jared Sexton, and Fred Moten have argued, the modern world has been constructed upon a racial hierarchy in which white *being* has been positioned as ontologically separate from black *(non-)being*, while also being dependent upon the suppression and denial of black being for its own existence (Warren *Ontological Terror* 6-8, Sexton “Unbearable Blackness” 162, Moten 741-743).

For example, Warren contends that, within the racial and ontological categories of modernity, black ~~being~~ is marked by non-being—a non-being which grounds the being of “the human” by existing as *available equipment* (an object, a tool) rather than as a human subject (*Ontological Terror* 5-8). As such, the black “subject” is encountered by the human as *nothing*, as the nothingness which grounds human being by contrast. For the human subject, such encounters with the nothing are experienced as *horror*, or what Warren calls “ontological terror” (a version of which was discussed at the end of Chapter 3), “the terror that ontological security is gone, the terror that ethical claims no longer have an anchor, and the terror of inhabiting existence outside the precincts of humanity and its humanism,” which Warren conceptualizes as a form of Heideggerian anxiety over one’s ontological status *as human*: an existential terror which must either be *confronted and overcome* or *escaped from* by fleeing into inauthenticity and bad faith (*Ontological Terror* 4, 9). Anti-black racism and violence constitute one such attempt to flee the ontological terror of the nothingness of being by first projecting that nothingness onto the figure of the black body and then attempting to eliminate that body through various forms of

anti-black oppression. In the purified ontological schema of modernity, the black (racialized) body thus comes to signify *nothing*, constituting the *nothingness* upon which *being* (which is subsequently figured as the exclusive possession of white subjects) can ground itself, acting as an orientation device for the white subject. Positioning the black body as *nothing* allows the white body to form itself in space through negative reaction: whiteness is defined as that which is not black, which is *not nothing*, which has *being* (Warren “Onticide” 403-404).

This already constitutes a form of passive nihilism and reactivity, wherein the white subject cannot posit themselves from out of their own being but can only exist in reactive relation to something else, something external that it reacts *against*: namely, the black body.<sup>155</sup> However, as the modern world begins to collapse under the weight of its own production of hybrid entities, this reactive subject-formation starts to become untenable, as black subjects begin to occupy the position of *being* previously reserved for whiteness, thereby exposing the *nothingness* upon which white being has been founded. The black subject’s coming-into-presence confronts the white subject with the hollowness of their own existence—the fact that their *being* rests upon *nothing*—and white supremacy forms as a reactive attempt to reestablish the white subject’s being by once again relegating nothingness to the outside of whiteness, projecting it onto the figure of the black (racialized) other (Warren *Ontological Terror* 9, 21).<sup>156</sup>

This reactive formation of the white supremacist subject also takes on the structure of bad faith, however, as the white supremacist attempts to exclude or eliminate the black subject from

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<sup>155</sup> Or, as Frantz Fanon writes: “Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (90).

<sup>156</sup> This white supremacist project can take many forms, from legal or physical segregation, apartheid, redlining, gerrymandering, or “white flight,” to the over-policing, sentencing, and incarceration of black bodies, to lynching and other forms of terroristic white violence—all of which attempt to put black racialized bodies back “in their place,” outside of the world of whiteness and being.

their world, even as black (non)-being is foundational to that world. The white supremacist requires the black subject to be both present *and* absent simultaneously, as it is the black subject's absence which grounds (white) existence and the black subject's presence (as nothingness) which allows whiteness to posit itself as *being* by contrast. The white supremacist thus desires to eliminate the black racialized other while also needing to preserve them in order to maintain a conception of self which has been defined purely in reaction to the racialized other. If the genocidal dreams of the white supremacist were to come true, they would disappear alongside the non-white racialized people they dream of eliminating. The white supremacist therefore cannot overcome the uncanny tension that they both dream of the other's extinction while needing to preserve the other's presence in order to exist. These uncanny feelings, in turn, become a kind of affective feedback loop which requires the white supremacist to both maintain and eliminate the object of their terror simultaneously by aiming at that which they wish to flee (the black body) in the very attempt flee it (Farley 492-93).

In this way, the non-white subject's very presence is perceived as a hybrid object intruding upon the ontologically purified space of the (once) modern world, figuring in the white supremacist imaginary as the *cause* of their uncanny disorientation—a source of discomfoting feelings which the subject of white supremacy wishes to escape.<sup>157</sup> This perception of the non-white subject as a hybrid object and cause of uncanny disorientation, in turn, prompts the formation of nihilism in bad faith as a durable form of subjectivity that seeks to flee the perceived source of uncanny disorientation precisely by aiming toward it. The white supremacist

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<sup>157</sup> This can also help to explain the contemporary white supremacy's obsession with "globalization" and its negative effects. This obsession is, in reality, a paranoid fear of the hybridity created by the crossing and breakdown of borders—the drift, movement, breakdown, and recombination of cultures that results, in part, from the physical movement and migration of bodies, objects, products.

becomes obsessively paranoid about the supposed threat of non-white racialized others, fixating upon the idea of their own victimization at the hands of those formerly excluded from the realm of personhood by the ontological framework of a now-defunct modern world, and forming what Wendy Brown has called “wounded attachments” to their own status as victims—a reactive need to both remove *and* preserve the perceived source of injury in order to maintain one’s identity as a (white) wounded subject (*States of Injury* 52-76).<sup>158</sup>

Similarly, in a recent study on the “Paradoxes of Dehumanization,” David Livingstone Smith conceptualizes the processes of dehumanization as a result of the presence of certain human subjects provoking an affective experience of *uncanniness* by simultaneously occupying the space of the human and the non-human *at the same time* (Smith 43). By being categorized within two fundamentally opposed purified ontological categories at once (the human and the non-human, being and non-being, etc.), such subjects meet all of the relevant biological, intellectual, and conceptual criteria for being human while simultaneously lacking the requisite metaphysical or ontological criteria to be considered *properly* human within the circuits of the modern world—namely, *being*, which in the categories of modernity is also singularly associated with *whiteness*. As such, as Frantz Fanon famously claims: “The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (90). Yet, the black subject is clearly human and, moreover, claims their humanity within both the ontological and liberal political-legal categories of humanity, thereby crossing the purified ontological boundaries that constitute the modern

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<sup>158</sup> It is also important to note that, for Brown, such wounded attachments constitute a form of *ressentiment*, which, it will be recalled from our previous discussion of nihilism in bad faith, is a central component of passive nihilism, according to Nietzsche. The white supremacist’s wounded attachment to their own status as “victim” is one such manifestation of *ressentiment*, insofar as it involves projecting one’s own sense of weakness, victimization, and injury outward in the form of blame onto an external other, who comes to figure as the imagined source of one’s injury. For the white supremacist, this external other is the figure of the non-white subject, who is imagined to be both an infinitely powerful threat to white subjects (and whiteness more broadly) *and* incredibly weak in comparison to a supposedly strong, rich, and powerful white racial identity.

world and appearing as uncanny, indeterminate presences within the eyes of the “white man” or the modern subject.<sup>159</sup> Dehumanization, on this account, occurs as a reaction to the feelings of uncanniness provoked by such hybrid subjects, as an attempt to relegate them back to the ontological category of non-being, thereby resolving the uncanny tension produced when an object in the world cannot be definitively categorized within the ontological schema of that world.

For both Warren and Smith, the dehumanization of the black subject is thus metaphysical rather than literal, conceptual, or biological. In the purified ontological schemas of modernity, blackness is placed on the other side of humanity, as ontologically distinct from the human. The positioning of black people as an inferior, sub-human, or non-human species (or race) by modern racial science is simply a *post facto* justification for the more fundamental metaphysical partitioning of blackness from humanity. By being conceptualized as *nothingness* and relegated to what Warren (following Frantz Fanon) calls the “zone of non-being,” black subjects are constitutively barred from human *being* within the purified ontological categories of the modern world (Fanon xii). Yet, their physical presence and participation *in* the world also marks these black subjects as being-in-the-world and thus as *human*, as human *beings*—a category which, in the ontological schema of modernity, is meant to be reserved for white subjects. And it is this tension between being ontologically absent (i.e., relegated to the realm of non-being and thus

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<sup>159</sup> As the historian Nell Irvine Painter has pointed out, the modern conception of “race” has been challenged and disputed since its inception during the European Enlightenment of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, though a more popular and widespread re-evaluation of racial science did not occur until the advent of the First World War, despite the legal, social, and political gains made by enslaved and colonized people of colour across the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (311-342). In any case, it is clear that, even at the height of their power and popularity, modern biological and anthropological conceptions of race have been challenged and resisted, and non-white subjects have been perceived as human, even by those modern subjects who subscribe most ardently to the purified ontological categories that would relegate non-white racialized people to the “zone of non-being.” The breakdown of the modern constitution simply proliferates the frequency and extent to which non-white subjectivity and being is perceived as a form of hybridity (both human/non-human, being/nothingness, present/absent, etc.) and thus *uncanny* and *disorienting* for those subjects who still subscribe to its tenets.

figured as *nothingness*) and yet undeniably present (i.e., being-in-the-world for others) that provokes a feeling of *uncanniness* in the modern subject, who—in the case of the white supremacist—responds by engaging in processes of dehumanization that are meant to return the black subject back to the zone of non-being, thereby allowing the modern subject to regain their own orientation on the world.

For, as Ian Williams indicates in his work on race and disorientation, the uncanniness provoked by the undeniability of black being also produces a profound sense of *disorientation* for those subjects invested in the racial categories of modernity (37). Indeed, Sara Ahmed makes a similar claim in her work on *Queer Phenomenology* when she writes that

an effect of being ‘out of place’ is also to create disorientation in others: the body of color might disturb the picture—and do so simply as a result of being in spaces that are lived as white, spaces into which white bodies can sink... The ground into which we sink our feet is not neutral: it gives ground to some more than others. Disorientation occurs when we fail to sink into the ground, which means that the ‘ground’ itself is disturbed, which also disturbs what gathers ‘on’ the ground (160).

It is my contention that the modern world itself was constructed to be one such “white space” and that the presence of non-white racialized bodies in that world signals, for many modern subjects, the loss of that which has historically “grounded” and oriented them: the ontologically purified racial categories of the modern constitution. More specifically, following Calvin Warren and his Afropessimist interlocutors, we can say that it is the exclusion, denigration, and elimination of black bodies in particular—through their positioning as *nothingness* within the purified categories of modernity—which has acted as the metaphysical ground of the world. It is only through the ontological (if not physical) *absence* of black ~~being~~

that such a world can exist to provide an orientation for its subjects. And so, as Frank B. Wilderson III claims: “There is no world without Blacks, yet there are no Blacks who are in the world” (*Afropessimism* 41-42).

However, as the world of modernity breaks down and the purified ontological categories of white/black, being/non-being, human/non-human, presence/absence, etc. lose coherence under the weight of their own hybrid objects, black bodies begin to enter the world as more than just bodies or “available equipment,” but as *subjects* with ontological presence. And it is the presence not only of black *bodies* but of black *subjects*—subjects who lay claim to being more than simply “available equipment” through their ontological presence in the world—that disturbs the still-modern subject for whom “there are no Blacks who are in the world,” throwing them into a state of disorientation that is experienced, at the affective level, as a disconcerting sense of uncanny terror. For, as Lewis R. Gordon explains in his seminal work on *Bad Faith and Antiracism*:

The obvious flaw in this logic built upon an identity relation between whiteness and Presence is that all human beings are present and, being human, are also beings to whom and in virtue of whom the world is presented. They are also simultaneously absent. The ontological situation of humanity hasn’t changed under the interpretation of blacks as Absence and whites as Presence. What happens here is an affective appeal to an imaginary, ‘magical’ version of the world that suits the desired duality. This magical appeal is antiracism (103).

The “white space” of the modern world was (and is) one such “imaginary, ‘magical’ version of the world” in which metaphysical presence belongs solely to white subjects while metaphysical absence can be relegated to black bodies who figure, in the modern imaginary, as

*nothingness*. In reality, however, *all* beings are simultaneously absent and present, as our existence is grounded upon nothing and nothingness lodges itself in the very heart of being.

Subscription to the modern constitution and its ontologically purified categories of presence/absence, being/nothingness, white/black in the form of antiblack racism thus constitutes a form of *bad faith* insofar as “the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth,” yet “the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. Or rather, I must know what the truth is exactly *in order* to conceal it more carefully” (Sartre *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* 139). The antiblack racist and white supremacist attempt to hide from themselves the “unpleasing truth” of existence—that all being rests upon nothing, that the human being is both present and absent, being and nothingness simultaneously—behind the “pleasing untruth” of the modern constitution: the idea that purification without translation is possible, that being and nothing can be ontologically separated, and that there is a class of beings (i.e., white people) who figure as pure human being and another class of people (i.e., non-white racialized people) who exist as pure nothingness. And as we have seen throughout the course of this dissertation, when the “pleasing untruth” of the modern world begins to dissolve, the modern subject is thrown into an affective state of *uncanny disorientation* from which *nihilism in bad faith* emerges.

### *Conclusions*

Today, the modern world has ended, yet the subjects of modernity (and, I would argue, those who desire to *be* modern subjects, those who desire to be brought into the fold of human being within the ontological framework of modernity) continue on as if such a world still existed.

The black subject, as hybrid object, continues to provoke horror for the modern subject not only because they represent the nothingness that grounds being, but also because they confront the modern subject with the inoperability of their world: the fact that the (modern) world has already ended, that the metaphysical holocaust has already taken place (and continues to take place, over and over again), revealing that *all* being rests upon *nothing*.

Having been confronted with the nothingness that resides at the heart of being through the breakdown of purified ontological categories in the crisis of modernity, the modern subject experiences a profound sense of uncanniness and disorientation, and in response to these discomfiting feelings, many begin to develop the form of subjectivity that I have described as *nihilism in bad faith*: a recognition of the nothingness at the heart of existence coupled with an attempt to flee that recognition through modes of activity that, in reality, reproduce the very conditions that caused the crisis of modernity (and thus the recognition that being rests upon nothing) in the first place. It is my contention that the contemporary resurgence of overt white supremacy constitutes one such attempt to escape the consequences of modernity's dissolution by returning to its purified racial and ontological categories and attempting to reproduce or reenact them in the present.

White supremacy, and the bolstering of white identity, is a reactive response to the perceived loss of blackness as the nothing upon which the white subject grounds itself. The white subject *is* because the black subject *is not*. When the black subject gains some semblance of being, the white subject is put into crisis, the stability of their very existence threatened by the loss of its ontological grounds. Ironically, the black subject's coming-into-being confronts the white subject with the nothingness at the heart of their own existence—the fact that their being rests upon nothing. It is only by placing the black subject back into their “proper” place (the

“zone of non-being”) that white subjectivity can regain its being, through the comforting reassurance that nothingness is *outside* of being, rather than at its heart; that blackness is ontologically separate from whiteness and thus cannot corrupt the supposed purity of white being with its nothingness. Blackness must be placed below and outside of whiteness as the ground upon which whiteness rises in order for it to exist.

The breakdown of purified ontological categories that occurs in the crisis of modernity thus threatens white subjectivity by dissolving the distinction between (white) being and (black) nothingness in ways that force a confrontation with the nothingness that resides at the heart of all being. This confrontation, in turn, prompts feelings of uncanny disorientation for those subjects whose identity and sense of place in the world has been dependent upon a contrast with black non-being, which in turn produces the subject of nihilism in bad faith. The still-modern subject tries to escape such feelings through a reorientation toward the purified racial categories of black and white, which manifests in various forms of white supremacist rhetoric and activism that attempt to reconstruct the modern world by reinforcing white identity while putting non-white racialized people back “in their place,” whether through imprisonment, execution, deportation, white supremacist terrorism, or the creation of a white ethnostate.

It is important to recognize, however, that such attempts at reorientation through putting people back “in their place” are not confined to the terrestrial horizon. Rather, in recent years, one of the primary attempts at reorienting human existence has been through plans to reach the fabled Archimedean point of modernity by establishing self-sufficient human colonies on Mars. In the next chapter, I will outline how these extraterrestrial colonization plans, like the nostalgia for nothing and resurgence of white supremacy discussed in the previous two chapters, can be understood as a product of uncanny disorientation and an expression of nihilism in bad faith.

“The nihilistic consequences of contemporary natural science (together with its attempts to escape into some beyond). The industry of its pursuit eventually leads to self-disintegration, opposition, an antiscientific mentality. Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the center toward *X*” (Friedrich Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 8)

“None of our people involved...Molotov the spaceship before that bitch is taking off / It always seems the poorest persons are people forsaken, dawg / No Washingtons, Jeffersons, Jacksons on the captain’s log / They’d rather lead us to the grave, water poisoned, deadly smog / Mass unblackening, it's happening, you feel it y’all? / They’d rather see we in a three-by-three structure with many bars / Leave us where we are so they can play among the stars / We’re taking off to Mars, got the space vessels overflowing / What, you think they want us there?”

(A Tribe Called Quest “The Space Program”)

“The extinction of the sun is a catastrophe, a mis-turning or over-turning (*kata-strophe*), because it blots out the terrestrial horizon of future possibility relative to which human existence, and hence philosophical questioning, have hitherto oriented themselves...*Everything is dead already*” (Ray Brassier 223)

## Chapter 8: Mars Colonization

On September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016, SpaceX CEO Elon Musk unveiled his plans to build self-sustaining human colonies on Mars, claiming in his TEDtalk-style presentation that permanent human settlements on the red planet will be a reality within the next fifty to one-hundred years.

Starting from the position that Mars colonization is both possible and desirable, Musk focused his presentation on the technical challenges of getting human beings to Mars safely but affordably, claiming that, by reusing space shuttles and mining fuel materials from Mars itself, it will be possible to make the trip to Mars an attainable reality for anyone who wishes to go (“Elon Musk’s Speech at SpaceX 2017 Event”).<sup>160</sup> Of course, SpaceX is not the only organization planning to establish Martian colonies in the near future. In 2017, the United Arab Emirates announced their Mars 2117 project, outlining a series of missions to be undertaken over the next 100 years to establish their own self-sustaining city on Mars (Grove 1033-1035). Similarly, from 2011 until its bankruptcy in 2019, the private Dutch organization Mars One developed a plan to colonize Mars by the year 2032, going so far as to vet 100 potential colonists from an application pool of over 200,000, with the stated intention of training astronauts for the first manned mission to Mars by 2023—a plan which was highly criticized for its unfeasibility, and which (obviously) never came to fruition (Tutton 519-520). This failure on the part of Mars One, however, has not prevented other institutions and organizations (including NASA and the US-based Mars Society) from developing plans and technologies meant to send astronauts to Mars by the 2030s, or from developing other space colonization plans, as in the case of Jeff Bezos’ Blue Origin, which intends to deliver astronauts to Earth’s moon in the near future (David).

Noticeably absent from these very public plans, however, is any consideration of the wider ethical, existential, or political implications of such interplanetary colonization projects. The proposals put forward by SpaceX, Mars One, and Mars 2117 contain no real thought regarding the political or ethical impetus for their projects, no discussion (beyond vague gestures

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<sup>160</sup> Musk’s conception of “affordability” is questionable, however, given that he defines his ideal cost for a ticket to Mars at the median price of a house in the United States—roughly \$200,000 per ticket—which immediately raises questions as to who could actually afford to go to Mars.

toward “great leaps forward” for human-kind) of why Mars colonization suddenly appears to be such a desirable goal, and no adequate consideration for the complicated legal and environmental questions that plague any attempts at space exploration. Rather, the public plans of these organizations tend to focus on technical issues: How do we get human beings to Mars? Is it even possible? What technology can be used to make the trip affordable? How do we sustain human life once we arrive? But the unraised and unacknowledged questions seem much more pressing: Why have we, somewhat so suddenly it seems, become interested in space colonization as a project for the human race?<sup>161</sup> Is the colonization of Mars simply a technical matter—the next inevitable step on the unending path of technological progress—or is there an underlying impetus behind this recent renewal of interest in space exploration? Moreover, what can this renewed interest tell us about the state of our contemporary world and the forms of subjectivity that it produces? What kind of person finds these space-age dreams appealing, and *why*?

Such questions remain unasked (and thus unanswered) by both the organizations developing plans for space colonization as well as the growing academic literature discussing these plans. Rather, the vast majority of literature on Mars colonization and space exploration focuses on questions of *feasibility* rather than motivation, intention, or purpose. Works debating the technical challenges of potential extraterrestrial colonies abound, with experts arguing the

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<sup>161</sup> The dream of colonizing other planets is not new, of course. As De Witt Douglas Kilgore notes in his book *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*, the idea of creating extraterrestrial human settlements has existed since at least the late-1800s, with societies dedicated to furthering the cause of space exploration arising as early as the 1920s and 1930s (1-11). However, much like the overt forms of white supremacy examined in the previous case study, the dream of space colonization has experienced a strong resurgence over the past decade, with the rise of private enterprises dedicated to making such dreams a reality. As further evidence of a renewed cultural interest in space exploration, we can also think of the recent spat of Hollywood Blockbusters that have cashed in on romantic fantasies about extraterrestrial travel and settlement, including: *The Martian*, *Gravity*, *Interstellar*, *The Space Between Us*, *Ad Astra*, *Passengers*, *High Life*, *Moonshot*, *Mickey 17*, and *Hidden Figures*. The point here being that, while the idea of colonizing outer space is not new, it has taken on a renewed force and trajectory in recent years.

merits and demerits of different terraforming methods, political and organizational structures, and ecological practices for sustaining human life in an environment hostile to terrestrial existence.<sup>162</sup> Less common, but still thoroughly discussed, is the *ethical* question of Mars colonization. Again, while few in comparison to works discussing the technical feasibility of space exploration, an entire academic niche has developed around the ethical issue of colonizing other planets, with authors and academics across a variety of fields—from philosophy, to the social sciences, to environmental and legal studies—debating whether or not it is (or would be) *right* or even *legal* to establish human colonies on far-flung worlds.<sup>163</sup> Almost non-existent, however, is any work examining the basic *motivations* behind Mars colonization: the question of *why* this dream of colonizing other worlds persists, despite the technical challenges, ethical questions, and massive use of resources that pursuing such dreams would entail. Indeed, while many of the works discussing the possibilities and difficulties of extraterrestrial colonization touch upon the reasons why the colonization of other planets may seem desirable or even necessary to many, these reasons are also largely taken at face value, with little thought as to what makes this line of reasoning appealing, motivating, or “reasonable” in the first place.

Thus, the purpose of this case study will not be to debate the relative merits or complications of space colonization, whether from an ethical, ecological, economic, legal, or political perspective. Many academics from a variety of disciplines have already engaged in such debates and thoroughly explored the topic. In contrast to the vast public and academic literature

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<sup>162</sup> See, for example: *Terraforming Mars* edited by Beech, Seckbach, and Gordon, “Complexity Model and Mars Colonization” by Harris and Wonglimpiyarat, or “Urban Futurism: Exploring the Viability of Self-Sustaining Mars Colonies as a Solution to Climate Change and Overpopulation” by Makanadar.

<sup>163</sup> See, for example: “An Eco-Critical Approach to Mars Colonization” by Calanchi et al., “On the Legality of Mars Colonization” by Fitzmaurice and Henderson, “Planetary Pandemonium: Legal Comparisons and Concerns Regarding SpaceX’s Mars Colonization Claims” by Jacob Caldwell, “Mars Colonization: Beyond Getting There” by Levchenko et al., *The Ethics of Space Exploration* edited by Schwartz and Milligan, and *Social Foundations of Space Exploration* by James A. Dator.

on the subject, my concern in this chapter will instead be with the underlying *drive* and *motivation* behind the dream of extra-terrestrial settlement. Whether or not it would be possible to establish human colonies on Mars is largely secondary in this discussion to the question of *why* anyone should (or would) want to establish such colonies in the first place. As such, while I will reference the debates which have occurred in academic and scientific literature regarding the potential challenges inherent to establishing human settlements in outer space, I will not be weighing in on that discussion. Rather, the focus of this case study will be the much less discussed question of what drives the desire for Mars colonization in the first place.

It is my contention that the theoretical framework of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith that I have established throughout this dissertation is a useful heuristic for understanding what motivates the contemporary push for space exploration and Mars colonization. In this chapter, I will therefore apply the concepts of uncanny disorientation, nihilism in bad faith, and the crisis of modernity to examine the recent intensification of interest in extra-terrestrial settlement, focusing specifically on statements made by both professional and popular advocates for space colonization regarding the motivations and desires behind such projects.

### *Space Exploration and the Archimedean Point of Modernity*

To begin to understand the connections between the crisis of modernity, experiences of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith, and the project of space exploration, however, I believe we should first return to the work of the political theorist Hannah Arendt, whose conception of *worldlessness* (and what it means to have a world in the first place) informed our investigation into the crisis of modernity and the dissolution of the modern world in Chapter 1.

In particular, we should turn our attention to the curious Prologue of Arendt's central work of existential and political theory, *The Human Condition*, in which she prefaces her discussion of the ontological conditions of political life with an examination of the 1957 launch of Sputnik I, the first human-made object to be sent into space. In this short Prologue, Arendt presents one of the first (and only) serious discussions of the basic motivations behind the development of space flight, and as such, her discussion of what the launch of Sputnik I represented in relation to social and political life will be an invaluable touchstone for our discussion of contemporary Mars colonization plans.

Responding to statements made by American reporters and Russian scientists at the time of Sputnik's launch, Arendt begins her discussion by speculating as to what she sees as the underlying drive to launch human-made objects (and, eventually, humans themselves) into space: namely, the desire to free humanity from the bonds of their earthly condition. And so she writes on the first page of her Prologue that

In 1957, an earth-born object made by man was launched into the universe... This event, second in importance to no other... would have been greeted with joy if it had not been for the uncomfortable military and political circumstances attending it. But, curiously enough, this joy was not triumphal; it was not pride or awe at the tremendousness of human power and mastery which filled the hearts of men... The immediate reaction... was relief about the first 'step toward escape from men's imprisonment on the earth.' And this strange statement, far from being the accidental slip of some American reporter, unwittingly echoed the extraordinary line which, more than twenty years ago, had been carved on the funeral obelisk for one of Russia's greatest scientists: 'Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever' (*The Human Condition* 1).

Following these statements, Arendt goes on to claim that the dream of escaping our “imprisonment on the earth” is a particular expression of the underlying drives of *modernity*: the dual fantasy of, on the one hand, dominating and controlling nature, and on the other, emancipating the human species from the contingencies of existence. The basic presupposition of these dreams is that humanity is uniquely positioned in the universe to be a creature that *liberates itself* from the various limitations and restrictions imposed upon it by nature.<sup>164</sup> Unlike every non-human thing in the universe, human beings are supposedly capable of abstracting themselves from these natural conditions, and of taking up a position outside of them—an Archimedean point from which all the universe can be surveyed and, subsequently, controlled. This, for Arendt, is what is expressed in the desire to launch human beings into space: the dream of reaching that Archimedean point, free from being mired in our Earth-bound existence, from which we can then emancipate ourselves from our basic condition of contingency.

But this desire to free ourselves from our terrestrial conditions has certain consequences for life here on Earth. For, as Arendt writes, “The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition...The human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms” (*The Human Condition 2*), including, of course, other human beings. The desire to escape the earth is thus, more fundamentally, a desire to escape our relation to the living, to other creatures on Earth, and to each other. It is a desire to escape life itself, which, for

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<sup>164</sup> For a contemporary example of this attitude, see the work of Robert Zubrin—an American aerospace engineer who has been one of the most vocal proponents of Mars colonization since the early-1990s. In articles like “The Significance of the Martian Frontier” and “Why We Earthlings Should Colonize Mars!” Zubrin presents a fairly standard liberal vision of historical and technological progress steeped in Enlightenment-era sentiments regarding human beings’ capacity to overcome our own limits and the limitations of “nature” more broadly. Similarly, while concerned about the ecological and political implications of Mars colonization, in their article “An Eco-Critical Cultural Approach to Mars Colonization,” Calanchi et al. present a vision of extra-terrestrial settlement as a means of transcending or overcoming the basic limits of “human nature”—one which is, paradoxically, also driven by a supposedly “natural” need on the part of humans for territorial and resource expansion, on their view.

Arendt, constitutes a decidedly anti-political attitude, as politics is first and foremost driven by the condition of human plurality, “the fact that men, not Man (*sic*), live on the earth and inhabit the world” (*The Human Condition* 7). The dream of escaping the bounds of our earthly existence is thus primarily a dream of escaping *ourselves*, or our political commitments to each other, as conditioned by our position on Earth.

But more than this, we can also say that such dreams constitute a classic form of *passive nihilism*, as examined in relation to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche in Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation. As will be recalled, Nietzsche defines nihilism as a kind of pathological sickness with life, a hatred of life itself, and the reactive desire to either escape from, or mire oneself in, the contingency, pain, and suffering of existence (as opposed to overcoming these aspects of life through the active pursuit of strength and vitality, which can include a destructive form of *active nihilism*). On this reading, Arendt’s conception of the underlying drives behind space exploration seems to align with Nietzsche’s conception of passive nihilism insofar as the desire to launch human beings into space is motivated by a hatred of, and wish to escape from, the most basic conditions of life itself (i.e., contingency, limitation, earth-bound existence, etc.).

However, as Arendt points out, taking on an Archimedean point from which we can view, dominate, and emancipate ourselves from “nature” and our earthly conditions also produces unintended consequences. While escaping the bounds of the earth may seemingly allow for unprecedented control over our lives, it also functions to *expose* our contingency and the non-centrality of human life in the universe. More than emancipating us from the human condition, the discoveries of modern science call into question the human all together. In essence, what the escape from Earth to the stars—that crowning achievement of modern science—actually achieves is the dissolution of the meanings produced by the modern constitution, or that network

of meaning which, for Arendt, constitutes a world *for us*—a properly human world capable of orienting us in relation to the various phenomena that we encounter in the merely physical world of contingency (Arendt *Between Past and Future* 17-40). Modern science (as a particular expression of the modern constitution) is thus self-defeating, as it undermines the very frameworks of meaning that produced it in the first place: the modern world and the modern constitution that sustained it (Arendt *The Human Condition* 2-3, 6). Through this self-dissolution of the modern world, humans are displaced from their central position in the hierarchy of being and exposed to be superfluous to an indifferent universe, which in turn produces a profound sense of uncanny disorientation in those subjects who still subscribe to the modern constitution, leading them to take on a subjective condition of *nihilism*, as previously defined.

On Arendt's schema, the dream of space colonization and exploration is thus an ironic and tragic project: a project motivated by the desire for human meaning that, in the end, only functions to render human life meaningless by exposing us to our own radical contingency. This radical contingency—the basic fact that things in the world are constantly shifting and changing, that we are limited and dependent, and that we can never be fully in control of the conditions of our life—cannot be avoided or prevented, but only ameliorated by orienting ourselves toward the creation of a relatively stable and durable world with others, according to Arendt. And the fantasy that we could escape this contingency by reorienting ourselves toward outer space, or an Archimedean vantage point from which we could gain leverage over the conditions of our existence, is just that: a fantasy, doomed to fail, as it returns us to the very contingency that we sought to escape.

Arendt's conception of the basic motivations for launching manmade objects into space thus mirrors the structure of what I have called *nihilism in bad faith* insofar as it involves an

attempt to escape from an experience of human contingency and meaninglessness by aiming at the very thing that prompted that confrontation with our existential groundlessness in the first place: the attempt to reach an Archimedean point outside of nature through the creation of ontologically purified categories placing human being in opposition to the natural world, which it attempts to control and overcome through scientific innovation. Space exploration continues this project of ontological purification without translation in its most extreme form by literally attempting to separate human beings from their “natural,” earthly condition and placing them into an environment antithetical to human existence, which will supposedly achieve that Archimedean point outside of life.<sup>165</sup> But ultimately, again, such projects only return us to the experiences of disorientation, uncanniness, and nihilism that prompted the flight from our earthly condition in the first place, by divorcing human beings from the context of meaning that has served to orient us, thereby exposing the basic contingency and groundlessness of our existence.

However, Arendt’s critiques of space exploration were developed during the first stages of what would eventually become the “space race” between the Soviet Union and the United States, prior to the successful delivery of human beings outside of Earth’s atmosphere, at a time when the development of space-faring technology was closely tied to both the ideological project of nation building and an expansion of military capacity for the world’s two major superpowers. Since that time, thousands of human-made objects have been launched into space from over a dozen different nations (several of these objects having successfully landed on Mars) and

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<sup>165</sup> Arendt’s solution to this problem—to reorient human life back toward that shared network of meaning that constitutes a world *for us*—does not necessarily escape from being a form of nihilism in bad faith itself, however. For even as Arendt rejects certain aspects of the modern condition by attempting to reorient her readers toward earlier, Ancient modes of political life, she still reproduces the modern constitution’s purification without translation by conceptualizing the world as an exclusively *human* mode of existence, separate from all non-human (and even many human) forms of life. As outlined in the earlier discussion of active vs. passive nihilism, this kind of nihilism in bad faith can only be overcome through an *active* form of nihilism that would do away with the modern world and its constitution entirely, as the first step toward creating something genuinely new.

hundreds of human beings have made the trip outside of Earth's atmosphere, many of whom have experienced the seemingly anti-nihilistic "overview effect," in which astronauts self-report an "overwhelming emotion and feelings of identification with humankind and the planet as a whole" upon viewing Earth from outer space (Yaden et al. 1). Similarly, the basic motivations and plans for space colonization have changed over the intervening decades since Arendt put forward her initial conception of the nihilism of modern science underlying the space race. Unlike the launch of Sputnik I in 1957, the current development of spacefaring technology is largely being undertaken for commercial purposes rather than national or military expansion, with many of the major players in space flight now being private enterprises rather than national or international agencies.<sup>166</sup> At the same time, the ambitions of these space flight organizations have shifted, from the desire to launch people and objects into orbit around the Earth or to land on Earth's moon, to primarily focusing on the creation of long-term settlements on the planet Mars.

How, then, have the motivations behind space flight, exploration, and colonization changed over the past seventy years? What has driven the contemporary resurgence in dreams of living in outer space? And are these dreams still an expression of nihilism? Or have the current plans for Mars colonization overcome their seemingly nihilistic origins?

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<sup>166</sup> An interesting exception to this rule is the Mars 2117 project being developed by the United Arab Emirates. As Nicole Sunday Grove argues in her examination of the project, Mars 2117 constitutes a kind of nation-building exercise that views Martian settlement primarily as a form of territorial expansion while also using the future prospect of Mars colonization as an excuse for solidifying autocratic and authoritarian rule over its current territories on Earth (1035). Yet, Mars 2117 differs from earlier modern projects of nation-building and imperial territorial expansion insofar as it is grounded in a desire for *escape* rather than the actualization or expansion of an already extant settlement. But these plans also retain a distinctly modern vision of historical progress and anticipation of a future state in which the socio-political problems of the present will be resolved, and as such, they are able to appeal to the sensibilities and desires of those still-modern subjects who wish to escape the uncanny disorientation and nihilism of present reality through a return to the modern constitution.

In order to understand the basic motivations and drive behind the contemporary resurgence of space exploration (and Mars colonization in particular) as a kind of ideological goal to be pursued, we should first note that such ideas have a long history in both the public imagination (through works of science fiction and popular science) and the scientific community (through the development of technologies and plans by various real-world scientific organizations), in the genre of writing that De Witt Douglas Kilgore has dubbed *astrofuturism*—itself a hybrid genre of speculative fiction and technical writing that blends fiction and reality, science and imagination, application and theory, by blurring the boundaries between science fiction and science fact through its close connections to engineering projects funded by governments and private enterprises (Kilgore 2).

As Kilgore notes, astrofuturism is a thoroughly modernist perspective, originating in the late-nineteenth century through the works of science fiction writers like H.G. Wells and Jules Verne before developing into what William Sims Bainbridge has called the “pro-space movement” in the fields of technical engineering and astronautics. This “pro-space movement” has been active in some form since at least the 1920s and fetishizes the idea of social and technological progress by envisioning space colonization as the only possible way for humanity to “progress” or “develop” beyond its current capacities and limitations (Kilgore 6).<sup>167</sup> However,

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<sup>167</sup> Interestingly, while astrofuturism is (as the name would imply) largely a future-oriented perspective, it also has a complex relationship with nostalgia, insofar as it both rejects nostalgia by trafficking in aspirational visions of the future while also drawing on a nostalgic longing for the past (in particular: the wild west, the American frontier, and now, the golden age of the space race) as an impetus for its visions of a future society. In this way, astrofuturism collapses neat temporal distinctions between past, present, and future to create a kind of hybrid temporality that occupies all three positions at once. For a more in-depth discussion of the role of nostalgia in the development of space-faring technologies and plans for space colonization, see: Jeanette Alden Estruth’s article “From the Gold Rush to the Colonization of Mars: How Silicon Valley Imagines Away the Working Class,” as well as Nicole Sunday Grove’s discussion of how the Dubai-based Mars 2117 project draws upon the imagery of past

it was during the “space race” of the 1950s and 1960s that this astrofuturist ideology truly gained prominence, beginning with the lead-up to the launch of Sputnik I in 1957 and culminating in the Apollo 11 moon landing of 1969. During this period, plans and dreams of space exploration and colonization exploded into the public consciousness, with the first full-scale plan to colonize Mars (complete with “detailed mission architecture”) developed by the German-American aerospace engineer (and former Nazi Party member) Wernher von Braun in 1952 (Tutton 519).<sup>168</sup>

Since that time, the idea of creating human settlements on Mars has only gained in popularity and appeal, with science fiction works like Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy and Andy Weir’s *The Martian* doing much to plant the seed of Mars colonization as a supposedly feasible aspiration into the public consciousness, while aerospace engineers and physicists like Robert Zubrin and many members of the nonprofit Mars Society have continuously promoted the development of technologies to facilitate the eventual establishment of Martian settlements. But it is only recently that “advancements in technology have made settlement increasingly plausible after the space pessimism that set in after the 1980s” (Grove 1035). Indeed, as mentioned previously, the past decade has seen a surge in both the development of organizations planning to colonize Mars and the popular demand for such plans. But what has driven this resurgence in astrofuturism? And what can it tell us about the conditions of contemporary reality that these plans to colonize Mars are being taken seriously, not only by fringe scientists or fans of science fiction, but also by major corporations, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations across the globe?

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scientific achievements during the “Islamic Golden Age” of the eighth to thirteenth centuries to justify and mobilize individuals toward its promised, anticipatory achievements in the future (“Welcome to Mars’: Space Colonization, Anticipatory Authoritarianism, and the Labour of Hope” 1043-1044).

<sup>168</sup> We can also note that von Braun worked closely with Walt Disney from 1955-1957 to produce a series of films that popularized the idea of human space travel for Americans, demonstrating the overlap between science fictional entertainment and astronautical engineering that marks astrofuturism as a particular ideology.

It is important to note that the desire to colonize space does not appear to be exclusively or primarily ideologically motivated. As researchers like Kilgore and Gunderson et al. indicate, astrofuturists have always—from the very first inklings that space colonization could be possible—taken a variety of political positions to justify their dreams of traveling to another world. For example, in contrast to much of the *current* push toward space colonization (which is often driven by naked economic self-interest on the part of tech billionaires) there exists a long tradition of more liberal or even socialist astrofuturisms, as represented by figures like Kim Stanley Robinson, Robert Zubrin, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Samuel R. Delany. As such, the desire to colonize space does not seem wholly tied to any one particular ideological or political position, and instead tends to cross the boundaries of ideology and the so-called left/right political spectrum, to create novel alliances between for-profit capitalist ventures for resource extraction in outer space and those organizations and individuals who are driven by more high-minded ideals of establishing a just and equitable society away from Earth.<sup>169</sup> Yet, as discussed previously, these disparate examples of astrofuturist dreams of space colonization all seem to share a basic motivation in their desire to escape from our terrestrial bounds. And more specifically, contemporary manifestations of Mars colonization schemes seem almost universally driven by a sense of the imperative need to preserve the human species in the face of the threat of mass extinction (from climate change, nuclear holocaust, natural disaster, etc.).

As such, to understand what is driving the current resurgence in astrofuturist dreams, we must first examine the basic motivations underlying the current plans for Mars colonization as well as their popular appeal. To do so, we can look to statements made by the proponents of

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<sup>169</sup> Like the contemporary nostalgia aesthetic and resurgence of white supremacist movements examined in the previous two chapters, then, astrofuturism might also be read as an example of the phenomenon that Naomi Klein calls “diagonalism,” or the unlikely alliance and drift of ideas across the traditional left/right political spectrum.

interplanetary settlement to get a better sense of *why* the idea of colonizing Mars is appealing to many, and what the basic drives toward establishing human colonies on the red planet actually consist of. And so, to begin, we should examine some statements made by individuals who have displayed a complete investment in the project of space colonization, from both a professional aerospace engineering standpoint as well as a more popular, lay perspective.

In particular, I have chosen to examine statements from a variety of sources, both professional and popular, that are representative of a more broadly expressed sentiment among contemporary astrofuturists: the belief that, because conditions on Earth have become somehow untenable or unlivable, Mars colonization represents the *only possible means of survival* for humanity as a species. I have drawn these statements from publicly available talks, presentations, articles, and interviews given by proponents of off-world settlement, as well as academic articles examining the currently extant plans for colonizing Mars. While these statements do not represent the full range of opinions or perspectives on the subject, they do provide a representative sample of the broader motivations underlying Mars colonization as a social, economic, and political project. I have therefore attempted to select statements from individuals who are representative of a range of political or ideological positions on the need for Mars colonization but who express a shared rationale for their various positions—namely, that conditions on Earth (whether existential, economic, or ecological) have become such that terrestrial life is no longer meaningful or even viable, necessitating the move from Earth to Mars.

In the following section of this chapter, I will examine these statements as the basis for applying the theoretical framework of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith established throughout this dissertation to the phenomenon of Mars colonization and the current resurgence in astrofuturist aspirations.

The first statement to be examined comes from the CEO of SpaceX himself—Elon Musk—who, in the introduction to his 2016 presentation on the feasibility of Mars colonization, asked:

why go [to Mars], right?...I think there are really two fundamental paths. History is going to bifurcate along two directions: One path is we stay on Earth forever, and then there will be some eventual extinction event—I don't have an immediate doomsday prophecy—but eventually, history suggests there will be some doomsday event. The alternative is to become a space-faring civilization and a multi-planet species, which I hope you would agree that is the right way to go (1:45-2:20).

Musk's rationale for space colonization thus amounts to the idea that humanity has an imperative to become what he calls a "multiplanetary species" because, if we fail to do so, the human species will eventually go extinct on Earth. More than this, however, Musk positions Mars colonization as the only real alternative to the possibility of mass extinction, presenting history as a bifurcated path that will inevitably lead either to human beings becoming a "space-faring civilization" or to the mass grave of humanity.<sup>170</sup>

This prediction, of course, participates in the modern project of purification without translation by presenting these two scenarios as ontologically separate realities without overlap

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<sup>170</sup> Interestingly, the arch-modern philosopher Immanuel Kant (whose work on orientation/disorientation was discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation) makes a similar prediction regarding the teleological trajectory of history in his *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*: that human nature is such that, over time, human societies will be led into increasing conflict until such time that we establish "perpetual peace" through the formation of a cosmopolitan state, or we engage in a war of extermination ending in the total extinction of humanity.

or the possibility of compromise. However, the greater issue with Musk's rationale for the future colonization of Mars is its essentially nihilistic outlook on the potential for life on Earth. As we will see, this recognition of human life's inherent contingency (as represented by anxieties over the possible extinction of humanity through natural disaster, political conflict, etc.) constitutes a nihilistic attitude shared by many other proponents of Mars colonization as part of the reasoning behind their astrofuturist plans. But for now, it is enough to note that Musk's statement regarding the need to preserve human society through the colonization of other worlds masks a more generally nihilistic attitude toward the prospects of human existence—one which takes on the structure of *nihilism in bad faith*, as defined in previous chapters.

To better understand the nihilistic impetus behind Musk's Mars colonization schemes (and plans to establish human colonies in outer space more generally), however, we can turn our attention to a statement made by another proponent of space colonization who echoes many of the same sentiments expressed by Musk while also connecting those sentiments to broader anxieties about the meaninglessness of our Earth-bound existence. This second statement comes from an interview with Taylor Rose Nations—a chemist who applied to be a candidate for Mars One's colonization project before its eventual bankruptcy—for the podcast and radio program *This American Life*. As part of the interview, Nations plays a clip from her application video for Mars One to help explain why she would like to be part of the team of astronauts that will be sent to establish its first Martian colony. The video is framed as a glimpse into the dystopian future. Nations pretends to be recording a video-diary entry in the year 2085, after ecological conditions on Earth have become almost unlivable. As vaguely disturbing ambient music plays in the background, she intones:

Things on earth are getting worse every day. With the rising sea levels, we're all forced to live so close to each other, and disease is spreading rampantly. We've got no food, we've got no drinking water left—what is available is being hoarded by those with money.

People are dying in the streets of dehydration and starvation. The hurricanes are coming almost constantly now, and there's no escaping them. I fear that the end is near. Why did we not do something about this while we had the chance? Why did we not expand beyond earth? *Why did we not go to Mars?* (50:50-52:00).

Once again, from this statement it is clear that, like Elon Musk, Nations' desire to colonize Mars is driven by an anxiety over the contingency of human life on Earth, with Mars colonization being framed as an opportunity to “do something” to escape a dystopian future of scarcity and unpredictability. More specifically, Nations' application video draws on common anxieties around the concept of global warming (e.g., melting ice-caps, rising sea levels, more frequent natural disasters, etc.) to advocate for an *escape* from the worst effects of anthropogenic climate change.

However, rather than simply being a “natural” or inevitable reaction to such anxieties, Nations' desire for escape is representative of reactions to uncanny disorientation and the nihilism in bad faith discussed in previous chapters. Indeed, as outlined in the first chapter of this dissertation, *climate change* constitutes a prime example of the type of hybrid hyperobject produced by the modern constitution, which have come to dissolve the coherence of the modern world by making the hybridity that modernity attempts to ignore undeniably present. This undeniable presence of hybridity has in turn led to a widespread feeling of uncanny disorientation, in which still-modern subjects experience an affective state of uncanny anxiety in relation to those hybrid objects that have asserted themselves into undeniability and the

disorientation experienced as a result of the modern world's dissolution. These feelings of uncanny disorientation then crystalize into the mode of subjectivity I have called *nihilism in bad faith*, which prompts the still-modern subject to attempt to escape the recognition of their own ontological groundlessness by *aiming at the object of their flight in order to flee it*. In the case of Nations' desire to colonize Mars, this involves an attempt to escape from the Earthly conditions that have caused a recognition of the groundlessness of her existence (i.e., climate change) by literally removing herself from those conditions and fleeing to Mars.

The problem with such escape plans, of course, is that they inexorably lead the subject back to the very thing that they are trying to escape—in this case, the nihilistic recognition of the universe's indifference to human existence. In the case of Mars colonization schemes, this involves fleeing from one set of tightly circumscribed and nearly-intolerable physical circumstances to place oneself in another. Because the reality that aspiring Mars colonists like Nations tend to elide in their discussion of the reasons for space colonization is that the living conditions for colonists on Mars would be just as difficult, if not more so, than what will exist on Earth, even given the worst effects of climate change.<sup>171</sup> If conditions on Earth have made human existence intolerable, the harsh conditions of living on Mars will not be any more tolerable. Moreover, the impetus behind the astrofuturist desire to colonize Mars is the same modern constitution and dream of purification without translation that produced the intolerable Earthly conditions that these aspiring Mars colonists wish to escape from. As such, the attempt to flee from those conditions through a reinvestment in the very project that produced things like

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<sup>171</sup> We might also think here of Friedrich Nietzsche's insistence that passive nihilism is an expression of what he calls the *ascetic ideal*, or the desire to deny one's life and vitality as a means of avoiding suffering (*On the Genealogy of Morals* 97-163). The desire to colonize Mars, which by even the most optimistic accounts would involve an extremely ascetic existence for the initial colonists, appears to be an astrofuturistic expression of this form of nihilism.

anthropogenic climate change in the first place will do nothing but return us to that which we are trying to escape.<sup>172</sup>

Beyond the desire to escape the worst effects of global warming, however, proponents of Mars colonization also often suggest that the colonization of Mars will provide human life with a kind of existential *meaning* or *purpose*. For example, at the end of her interview for *This American Life*, Nations states that: “[living on Mars] will suck, I’m sure. But you...get to know that your life is about something bigger than just...paying your bills and living and dying and being boring,” thereby revealing a desire for some meaning or purpose that is somehow lacking from her current existence, and which can ostensibly only be grasped by colonizing Mars (55:32-55:47). Similarly, in the introduction to a more recent presentation on the feasibility of space colonization, Elon Musk has stated that one of the primary reasons to colonize Mars is that “fundamentally, the future is vastly more exciting and interesting if we are a space faring civilization and a multiplanetary species than if we’re not” (“2018 Elon Musk Gives Updates on Mission to Mars” 0:17-0:22).

Such statements, rather than simply expressing the opinion of two particular individuals, are instead representative of a broader attitude shared by many astrofuturists: that life on Earth is somehow boring, meaningless, or not worth living, while life on another planet would be exciting and existentially satisfying. In this way, the desire to colonize Mars is not simply a wish to escape from the materially immiserating effects of phenomena like climate change, but also to flee the lack of metaphysical meaning or purpose in contemporary life on Earth. For the

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<sup>172</sup> Perhaps the most striking example of this reality being the plan, put forward by several different proponents of Mars colonization, to instigate on Mars the same processes that have produced climate change on Earth, as a way to make the Martian atmosphere more Earth-like. Or, to put it simply: the idea is to produce global warming on Mars as a way to escape global warming on Earth. For an example of this type of plan, see: Robert Zubrin, “Why We Earthlings Should Colonize Mars!” *Theology and Science*, 17, 3, 2019, 305-316.

proponents of Mars colonization, Mars represents not only a solution to the social, political, ecological, or economic problems of the present, but also a *hope for the future*, that colonizing Mars will allow us to flee the ontological groundlessness of existence which has been made undeniable by the self-dissolution of the modern world. In fact, in interviewing a number of potential candidates for the (now defunct) Mars One project regarding their motivations for applying to be members of the non-profit's first manned mission to Mars, Richard Tutton notes that many of the candidates expressed a sentiment similar to that shared by Nations and Musk: that the potential for Mars colonization provided them with a feeling of *hope*, and that they were motivated by a desire for a better, more equitable, and more "united" future for human civilization, which would provide their lives a sense of meaning and purpose (Tutton 533-534).

However, as we've seen in the previous two case studies, nihilism in bad faith can also be expressed through a kind of hopeful longing, whether for an imagined past in which hope for the future still felt possible (as in the case of contemporary nostalgia aesthetics) or for a world devoid of racial "impurity" (in the case of the resurgence of white supremacy, which also involves a certain nostalgic desire for an imagined past). What makes such instances of hope a form of nihilism in bad faith is their basis in a desire to escape from the recognition of our ontological groundlessness, prompted by affective feelings of uncanny disorientation and the dissolution of the modern world. And as we've seen from the statements examined thus far, the subject whose hope for the future has become invested in the project of Mars colonization is similarly motivated by a desire to escape the sense of meaninglessness and impending catastrophe endemic to a planet facing not only ecological disaster, social and political conflict,

and existential apathy, but also the lack of a world of sustained meaning to make sense of these disasters, which could orient existence for these still-modern subjects.<sup>173</sup>

Such sentiments are further reinforced by the third statement I have chosen to examine here, from an article by Dacia J. Ferris—a supporter of Elon Musk and SpaceX, who writes under the moniker “AstroJane” for a news site dedicated to updates on projects from Tesla and SpaceX. In an article with the argumentative title “Yes, we deserve to colonize Mars and keep our ‘light of consciousness,’” Ferris attempts to defend Musk’s space colonization plan, arguing that Mars colonization is more than just a fantasy; rather, it is necessary for human survival. She writes: “Eventually the Earth will no longer be able to host human life as we know it, suffering from some sort of malady which will wipe out our species. Pick your poison: Asteroid attack, the Sun’s Earth-engulfing expansion, or even climate change. Something will bring us down, someday, *unless we are proactive in our approach to survival*” (Ferris). And, of course, Ferris’ vision of being “proactive in our approach to survival” entails establishing colonies on Mars, which she envisions as the only possibility for preserving humanity’s “light of consciousness” in the face of radical contingency and the possibility of extinction.

Beyond the issue of survival, however, Ferris also argues that

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<sup>173</sup> Similarly, Kilgore discusses how, often, astrofuturism and dreams of space colonization function as a form of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism,” with many marginalized and exploited people whose life chances are severely circumscribed by currently existing systems of power gravitating toward the possibility of space travel as an object of (false) optimism and hope—one which, ironically, prevents the achievement of actual socio-political, or even personal, subjective change in circumstance (21). In fact, from its very inception in the various societies for interplanetary travel that formed in the 1920 and 1930s, astrofuturism has always focused more intently on disseminating inspirational narratives about space flight and colonization than it has been on actually developing the technologies necessary to make such dreams into a reality (Kilgore 32-33). For the astrofuturist, the *dream* of space colonization is therefore more important than any plan to actually achieve it—just as, for those who suffer from cruel optimism, the preservation of the fantasy object sustaining one’s optimism is more important than actually achieving the good life that the object represents and stands-in for. Astrofuturism thus, in part, works to keep certain people in a situation of perpetual stasis, dreaming ahead to a future that will never come and which prevents them from having a future all together.

[space] colonization is more than just a survival plan: It's a tool for evolving our consciousness towards a value system which includes 'conscious consumerism' by default... Taking the human race into deep space is so much more than 'exporting' our consumerism once we've outgrown its birth place. It's evolving who we are, increasing our awareness, and forcing us to understand the environments we will depend on and cannot risk taking for granted ("Yes, we deserve to colonize mars and keep our 'light of consciousness'").

Critiquing the idea that Mars colonization may be unethical, or that human beings do not "deserve" to colonize other planets due to our mismanagement of resources and ecosystems on Earth, Ferris instead presents the idea that space exploration and colonization has the potential to force human beings to "evolve" or develop beyond our current hyper-consumerist culture to become more eco-conscious and socially aware. And as we will see, Ferris is not alone in her promotion of this idea. In fact, the idea that space colonization represents a kind of *end* toward which human society is necessarily progressing, or a means for achieving said end, is a common trope amongst advocates for colonizing Mars.

For example, we can look to another statement made by the aerospace engineer Robert Zubrin, who has been a fierce proponent of Mars colonization since the 1990s, from his article "Why We Earthlings Should Colonize Mars!" In this article, Zubrin presents the issue of Mars colonization as a conflict between two competing ideas or broad ideologies: a Malthusian anti-space ideology that positions human existence as a perpetual conflict over limited resources on a singular finite planet versus a progressive, humanistic, and scientific ideology that believes in technological innovation as a means for human beings to overcome both our inherent and external limitations. The first of these ideologies, according to Zubrin, is profoundly nihilistic,

anti-human, and anti-life, was the driving force behind all of the ills of the twentieth century (including: Nazism, colonialism, racism, and both the first and second World Wars), and opposes space colonization on the mistaken belief that it would be a waste of the finite resources available to humanity. The second of these ideologies, by contrast, is inherently life-affirming, believes in human dignity and exceptionalism, and promotes the exploration of space on the belief that it represents the next step of human progress or evolution, which will allow us to overcome the problems posed by living on a single planet with finite resources (by extracting resources from *other* planets, meteors, etc.) (316).

Interestingly, however, Zubrin promotes this second ideological position using arguments that echo the statements of Musk, Nations, and Ferris, claiming that the project of Mars colonization provides an opportunity for humanity to “progress” along a kind of teleological line of development, while also injecting meaning and excitement back into human existence by allowing us to transcend our current spatial and existential limits. Or, as he writes:

This feat, the terraforming of Mars from its current lifeless or near-lifeless state to a living, breathing, world supporting multitudes of diverse and novel life forms and ecologies, will be one of the greatest and noblest enterprises of the human spirit. No one will be able to contemplate it and not feel prouder to be human. People will go to Mars for many of the same reasons they went to colonial America: Because they want to make a mark, or to make a new start, or because they are members of groups who are persecuted on Earth, or because they are members of groups who want to create a society according to their own principles. Many kinds of people will go, with many kinds of skills, but all who go will be people willing to take a chance to do something important with their lives. Out of such people are great projects made and great causes won. Aided

by ever-advancing technology, such people can transform a planet and bring a dead world to life (“Why We Earthlings Should Colonize Mars!” 308-309).

What astrofuturists like Zubrin and Ferris fail to recognize, however, is that *both* of these ideological positions are a product of the modern constitution (the idea of two ontologically purified ideological categories in perpetual conflict itself being the basis of purification without translation) and that the supposedly “life-affirming” ideology of humanism and scientific innovation (driven by what Theodor Adorno would call “instrumental rationality”) was just as responsible for the atrocities of the past as the supposedly Malthusian, social Darwinist ideology that it is meant to oppose (Gunderson et al. 6).

Neither Zubrin nor Ferris provides any real rationale as to *why* Mars colonization would be more humanistic, life-affirming, or “progressive” than remaining on Earth and attempting to apply technical innovation to the problems of climate change and social inequality on this planet. Instead, they simply present the colonization of Mars as the pinnacle of human achievement, or as a kind of desired goal of the ideological position that they support. In this way, astrofuturists like Zubrin, Ferris, Musk, and Nations completely ignore the fact that almost all innovations in space flight were first developed for military applications during and after the Cold War (and not out of a sense of humanistic solidarity), that the development of these “innovations” has involved some of the same atrocities that they position as the purview of the ideology that Zubrin opposes (such as violent resource extraction and rocket testing on colonized lands), and that many of the most vocal and active proponents of Mars colonization as a project are those who subscribe to the very form of ideology that Zubrin positions as “Malthusian,” nihilistic, and anti-life.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> In this way, as Gunderson et al. point out, the motivations and justifications for space colonization are not even “rational” on their own grounds. Rather, the authors claim that astrofuturist plans are based upon a kind of “irrational rationality,” positioning themselves as “rational” plans for the protection of a future humanity under threat from climate change, natural disaster, declining resources, etc. while, in reality, employing a form of

In reality, astrofuturism is itself a thoroughly modernist philosophy, fetishizing the idea of social and scientific “progress” while envisioning space colonization as the only possible way for humanity to “progress” beyond its current stage of development—a fact which is reinforced by the final statement that I have chosen to examine in this chapter, from the political scientist and director of the Hawaii Research Centre for Future Studies at the University of Hawaii, James A. Dator. Similar to Nations and Musk, Dator positions a lack of excitement or cultural cache as the main obstacle to space exploration and colonization, nostalgically longing for the early days of astrofuturist speculation and the Space Race, when outer space was presented by science fiction authors and space agencies alike as the next frontier of human exploration (itself being a kind of nostalgic desire for the days of Westward expansion and Manifest Destiny) (Dator 32-39, Estruth 69-72). What the space agencies of today lack, according to Dator, is that form of excitement and desire which drove early advancements in spacefaring technology. And this lack of excitement is a problem precisely because space colonization is the goal toward which human civilization inevitably progresses, it being the only thing that will allow us to overcome or transcend our inherently destructive human nature.

Dator thus presents his readers with a particular story of human evolution and history—reminiscent of the kinds of fictive pre-histories invented by early-modern philosophers and political theorists to justify the newly-emergent governmental systems of capitalism and the nation-state during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—to justify the idea that space

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instrumental rationality that is, in the end, *irrational* in its reduction of human life to a means rather than an end. While ostensibly taking the preservation of human life as its end goal, astrofuturism reduces human survival down to an instrument to be wielded in the quest to achieve interplanetary settlement, without being able to justify how or why the colonization of Mars is a better or more viable option for preserving the human race than the myriad of other projects that could be pursued.

exploration and colonization are a necessity for the progress of humanity.<sup>175</sup> Writing in *The Human Foundations of Space Exploration*, he claims that:

For most of human history—for tens of thousands of years—humans lived in small bands and tribes as nomadic hunters and gatherers, living off the land as we roamed. Moving out of Africa, humans eventually came to occupy every spot on Earth, from the most barren to the most lush; from the coldest to the hottest. Although many of us may be stick-in-the-mud homebodies, as a species, we have been migrants, travelers, tourists, eager to know what is over the next hill and beyond the next ocean—eager, and fearful. As we grew in numbers we became increasingly destructive of the natural environment that sustained us as wanderers. Once all new lands were discovered, other humans followed until there were so many people that Earth could no longer sustain our hunting and gathering ways. Our options were to go extinct or transform, culturally and technologically. Some of us learned to settle down, inventing agriculture with the domestication of animals, plants and women. Civilization was born, along with dominating hierarchies of government, schools, religion, and war. As we wandered and especially after we settled down, we observed the lights in the darkened skies, and made up stories about what they were and what they meant, which helped tell us who we were and why (33).<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> The most famous of these fictive pre-histories is, of course, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality." However, whereas Rousseau openly admits that the history he presents is a product of his imagination (based on purely on "reason" to construct a vision of what could have been the case prior to recorded history), Dator simply presents his historical account as fact, despite providing no real evidence to support it.

<sup>176</sup> Interestingly, we can note how this story about the development of human civilization in some sense aligns with our earlier discussion of orientation/disorientation—particularly, Kant's conception of how we initially orient ourselves in space, as well as how one becomes *disoriented* through the dissolution of a world. According to Kant, one of the primary forms of disorientation occurs when we develop an orientation based on our perception of seemingly fixed phenomena in the world (such as the relative position of stars in the sky) but are no longer able to rely on those phenomena to accurately orient us. Similarly, Arendt presents the fixed set of meanings that constitute a world *for us* as orientation devices that, when lost, cast us into a state of disorientation. Dator's

The conclusion to be drawn from this oversimplified and condensed account of human pre-history is, according to astrofuturists like Dator and the other individuals discussed here, that the only way to overcome the problems caused by our essentially destructive human nature (which inevitably leads us to wander, explore, and exploit resources to the point of ecological collapse and extinction) is to lean into our natural tendencies, to “transform, culturally and technologically,” by inventing *new* ways to exploit the land and expand our reach through dominating hierarchies. According to this story, the threat of impending climate catastrophe (as represented by the hyperobject of “global warming”) indicates that we have once again run up against the limits of our own human nature, leaving us no option but to develop new technologies to overcome our limitations and the problems we have caused ourselves (and the rest of the planet)—the “obvious” solution being, of course, to launch ourselves into space and start all over again on another Earth-like planet, the nearest available one being Mars.

In this way, the proponents of Mars colonization (whether ethically eco-minded or not) tend to put forward a contradictory rationale for leaving Earth, claiming it to be both a function of (human) nature *and* a transcendence of natural limits or laws, simultaneously. Space colonization, we are told, is simply the inevitable extension of the innate natural tendency of all biological species to expand their territories in search of new resources, more space, etc. Yet the expansion of the human territory into space is also a transgression of the limits imposed upon our Earthly existence by nature. The space colonist is thus driven *by* human nature to “transcend” or *overcome* human nature, to be both a “natural” creature *and* a creature outside of “nature” at the

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simplified story of human social evolution collapses these two ideas by claiming that the systems of meaning that have constituted a world for us arose “after we settled down” and “observed the lights in the darkened skies,” making up “stories about what they were and what they meant, which helped tell us who we were and why” (33). For Dator (and the other astrofuturists discussed in this chapter), colonizing Mars provides an opportunity to restart, recapture, or return to this process of orientation and meaning-making from a new vantage point (i.e., the surface of Mars) after the dissolution of the modern world has cast us into a generalized state of disorientation.

same time. The desire to colonize space is thus, ironically, a desire for hybridity—a desire to occupy two ontologically purified categories at once, to be both inside and outside nature at the same time, or to be “natural” and “unnatural” simultaneously.

The idea that space colonization is simply an extension of some natural human “need” for exploration and conquest, however, belies a more cynically nihilistic motivation: that human existence is essentially *meaningless* without the kinds of grand, exploratory projects that the colonization of Mars represents. As we’ve seen, proponents of space colonization tend to frame their missions as providing meaning or purpose to human life—and not only for those involved directly in the project, but to humanity as a whole. The idea being that current social conditions of generalized malaise, political division, uncanny anxiety, and existential disorientation are the product of a lack of central focus—a cause or a project to rally around—which can only be fulfilled via a mission to Mars. For the proponents of Martian colonization examined here, leaving the Earth’s surface to settle on the red planet, even if only achieved by a small number of people, will somehow miraculously unite humanity as a whole and act as a catalyst for greater social, political, economic, and ecological change on Earth. But the generalized malaise and existential dread that these astrofuturists wish to escape through the colonization of Mars are, in reality, the product of the crisis of modernity and its accompanying affective feelings of uncanny disorientation, which have prompted a recognition of the emptiness of human existence—the fact that being rests upon nothing, that there is no inherent meaning underlying the ever-shifting appearances of the world, and that the universe is entirely indifferent to human existence. And this ontological groundlessness cannot simply be overcome by launching ourselves into space.

*Conclusions*

What is interesting about the statements as to the basic motivations behind space colonization efforts examined here (which are not particularly atypical of supporters of space colonization in general) is that they all provide essentially the same rationale for the necessity of establishing Martian colonies: that there are forces emerging (or already extant) in our contemporary reality that place the existence of human life, as a species, in jeopardy—forces (like climate change, impending natural disaster, social and political conflict, etc.) that render human life radically contingent insofar as they confront us with the possibility of our own extinction. This confrontation with the possibility of human extinction, in turn, has seemingly rendered life on Earth meaningless, by exposing the groundlessness and contingency of life itself. In essence, human existence is under threat from things beyond our control and the only solution is to escape our precarious Earthly condition by colonizing Mars, which will somehow reestablish the meaning of our existence by positioning humanity *outside of or beyond* the forces that have made our lives contingent.

The contemporary resurgence of astrofuturism and plans to colonize Mars thus express the same basic desire identified by Hannah Arendt at the very beginning of the space race: to escape from life itself by positioning ourselves at that Archimedean point beyond those conditions which render life contingent, fragile, and ultimately meaningless. Only this time, such desires have been kindled by an undeniable recognition of the inherent groundlessness of existence and the feelings of uncanny disorientation that plague the still-modern subjects of a now defunct and inoperative modern world. In this way, as we've seen, the proponents of Mars colonization suffer from a form of *nihilism*, prompted by the uncanny disorientation that has followed from the dissolution of the modern world and the undeniable presence of hybrid hyperobjects.

Yet this nihilism also acts in *bad faith* insofar as the current plans for Mars colonization are primarily motivated by a desire to *escape* those conditions that have confronted us with the ontological groundlessness of human life while simultaneously *reproducing* those same conditions by reinvesting in the modern project of purification without translation, this time by establishing new human societies on Mars in the hopes of achieving the very-modern dream of emancipating humanity from our “natural,” Earthly conditions. For, as Gunderson et al. note, “the underlying rationality for space colonization is of the same kind that led us to our current predicament of looking for a new planet” (5)—namely, the modern constitution.

This double move of the proponents of Mars colonization—acknowledging the radical indifference of the universe to human life while simultaneously articulating a fantasy of escape that could avoid the nihilistic consequences that follow from such an acknowledgement—is a clear expression of nihilism in bad faith. It is a form of nihilism that refuses to stay with its consequences, that fails to think through the implications and possibilities of the universe’s indifference to our existence, and instead chooses to reinvest in the defunct dreams of modernity. The fundamental problem with this form of nihilism, however, is that instead of confronting the problems it acknowledges through an attitude of active destruction, it instead imagines an escape from the uncanny and unsettling effects of hyperobjects (like global warming) through human ingenuity, with space once again acting as a fantastical Archimedean point from which we might gain leverage and control over the forces that render human life contingent.

But as Arendt argued with regards to the space race of the 1950s, such fantasies represent nothing more than a desire to escape from the basic conditions of existence: the commitments, responsibilities, and contingencies that each person is subject to by virtue of living on the same Earth. Instead of facing the existential consequences of hyperobjects like global warming, the

nihilist in bad faith plans an escape to the stars, where they will (somehow, supposedly) be able to gain mastery over their own lives. The main issue, of course, is that these fantasies of mastery and control have always been just that—fantasies. The technical innovations of modernity have not emancipated us from our basic condition of contingency but have simply produced new forms of precarity and new forces that expose us to our own limited being, and reinvesting in these modern dreams through the colonization of Mars will produce the same results.

The blind nihilism of contemporary space colonization schemes is easily exposed if, instead of taking on a position of nihilism in bad faith, we instead try to live and think through the ultimate implications and possibilities of nihilism. Such a project is advocated by the contemporary philosopher Ray Brassier, who, in his book *Nihil Unbound*, frames nihilism as a “speculative opportunity” (xi)—an opportunity to think and live through the knowledge that the universe is indifferent to our existence, rather than avoiding this knowledge through fantasies of escape. For example, Brassier encourages us to live in the knowledge that 4.5 billion years from now, our Sun will explode and destroy any life remaining in this solar system. An escapist orientation to this knowledge, motivated by nihilism in bad faith, might resemble Ferris’s statement that: “Eventually the Earth will no longer be able to host human life as we know it...[because of] the Sun’s Earth-engulfing expansion...*unless we are proactive in our approach to survival* [and establish colonies on Mars]”. But if we take on the position of nihilism and actually think through the consequences of “the Sun’s Earth-engulfing expansion,” it becomes immediately apparent that the future explosion of the sun reveals, inescapably, the universe’s total indifference to our existence. Despite what Ferris may believe, living on Mars is not going to save humanity when the sun explodes. It will make little difference if we are living on Mars or on Earth, we will be destroyed either way. Nor will establishing colonies on Mars preserve us

when, in some far-flung future, the universe itself implodes in the reversal of the Big Bang (Brassier 223-230).<sup>177</sup>

As such, instead of fantasizing about an escape to Mars through a position of nihilism in bad faith, perhaps we should take Brassier's advice and stay with the trouble: to think through the reality of our utter contingency, rather than trying to avoid it by escaping to an imagined Archimedean point amongst the stars. This would involve finding ways to live in and through the uncanny experience of occupying a world of hybrid hyperobjects like global warming, which reveal the radical uncertainty and finitude of our existence on this Earth, while also taking on a more actively nihilistic orientation toward the remnants of that modern world which has produced those experiences of nihilism and uncanny disorientation in the first place. The alternative seems to be a reinvestment in modern fantasies of mastery and control, which will undoubtedly reproduce the very problems that it seeks to escape.

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<sup>177</sup> Similarly, Jean-Francois Lyotard calls this "the sole serious question to face humanity today...In 4.5 billion years there will arrive the demise of your phenomenology and your utopian politics, and there'll be no one there to toll the death knell or hear it. It will be too late to understand that your passionate, endless questioning always depended on a 'life of the mind' that will have been nothing else than a covert form of earthly life. A form of life that was spiritual because human, human because earthly—coming from the earth of the most living of living things. Thought borrows a horizon and orientation, the limitless limit and the end without end it assumes, from the corporeal, sensory, emotional and cognitive experience of a quite sophisticated but definitely earthly existence—to which it's indebted as well" (*The Inhuman* 9). Escaping to Mars will do nothing to change this reality.

## Conclusion

I began this dissertation by noting that the people in my life have recently been expressing feelings of uncertainty and disbelief at the unpredictability of contemporary reality. In the time that I have been writing, such feelings seem to only have deepened. When we talk about current events, my friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances still express a kind of shock and incomprehension at the state of the world, and more than ever, they seem lost and confused as to what is to be done. Some have opted for quietude, others have turned inward to practice self-care, and some others have thrown themselves into the task of activism, in its various forms. But, in general, it seems as though the tendency is toward *passivity* (in the sense outlined by Deleuze)—even when that passivity takes the form of armchair activism or the pursuit of projects that return us, inexorably, to the defunct modern constitution.

In the time that I have been writing this dissertation, we have lived through (and are still living through) the COVID-19 pandemic, and the various social, political, and ethical problems that pandemic has posed. In many ways, the pandemic merely confirmed my suspicions regarding uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith. Now, it seems as though everyone has a story to tell of an uncle, aunt, parent, friend, co-worker, who has become (or has revealed themselves to be) a nihilist in bad faith. Indeed, much of the conspiracy thinking and COVID-driven activism of the past five years seems ripe for interpretation through the lens of the theoretical framework I have established here. I leave it to the attentive reader to perform such interpretive work for themselves, however.

My task in this dissertation has been to provide the tools that will allow for such interpretations to be made, by producing concepts and theories that might help us to understand our contemporary situation. For as Deleuze and Guattari once claimed: the task of philosophy is

simply to produce new concepts, or transform old concepts into new ones (*What is Philosophy?*). As such, the purpose of this dissertation project has been, primarily, diagnostic. Through an investigation of both past and contemporary work on affect theory, phenomenology, and nihilism, I have attempted to theorize what it *feels* like to live in our present moment, and what such feelings lead people to *do*, culturally, socially, and politically. To that end, I have argued that present reality is marked by an affective feeling of *uncanny disorientation*, prompted by the dissolution of the modern world and its purified ontological categories in light of the undeniable hybridity of existence, and leading, ultimately, to the reactive formation of a form of subjectivity I have termed *nihilism in bad faith*, in which contemporary subjectivity is formed around the simultaneous recognition that being rests upon nothing, as well as a desire to flee from that recognition. I have then applied this theoretical framework of uncanny disorientation, the dissolution of modernity, and nihilism in bad faith to explain three contemporary phenomena that embody the particular aesthetic, political, and cultural moment in which we live.

My intention, however, has not been to limit my analysis to just these three particular case studies. Rather, my hope is that the concepts and theoretical framework I have established here can contribute something to the further study of contemporary life, in all of its multifaceted dimensions. In some ways, I believe this work has already begun. I see echoes of my conceptions of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith in both popular memoirs produced during the pandemic (like Naomi Klein's *Doppelganger* or Ian Williams' *Disorientation: Being Black in the World*) as well as recent works of social and political theory (like Wendy Brown's 2019 and 2023 books on nihilism). Going forward, however, I intend to join in this work by applying my concepts to further case studies. In particular, I am interested in the ways that uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith have manifested throughout the COVID-19 pandemic,

specifically in the form of new types of conspiracy thinking that have created unlikely alliances between traditional anti-semitic, anti-black, and anti-queer conspiracy theories and what Peter Pál Pelbart has called the “bioascesis” of the contemporary wellness industry. Similarly, I would like to apply the concepts of uncanny disorientation and nihilism in bad faith to a study of the current resurgence of virulent anti-trans rhetoric and policy, and its connection to the resurgence of white supremacy outlined in Chapter 7. Additionally, I am also interested to examine the ways in which various groups—from the theorists of Afropessimism to certain forms of anarchist activism—have taken on the task of developing an active form of nihilism that could potentially combat or transform the nihilism in bad faith outlined here into something productive of a new way of life.

Such projects, however, are for the future. In some ways, the problems and concepts outlined in this dissertation are already past. Today, we are faced with new problems.

We are still modern. We can no longer be modern. We have never been modern.

To work, then.

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