

Irruption and *Annihilation*¹

“Yet we must look around us still more thoroughly and contemplate the narrower and wider sphere [*Umkreis*] within which we dwell, daily and hourly, knowing and unknowing, a sphere that constantly shifts its boundaries and suddenly is broken through.”

Martin Heidegger²

In piety to the classics *Annihilation* begins with a bolide crash;³ this time into a lighthouse on the coast of the Florida Panhandle. The story thereafter trudges through a swampy *Lake Placid* meets John Carpenter’s *The Thing*. Yet with its central image of ‘The Shimmer’ *Annihilation* does a worthy job envisioning Heidegger’s version of dualism; something which might be supposed not to exist given his warnings against other forms of it.

In lectures of 1923, for example, Heidegger wags his finger at a certain perennial dualism:

“This schema must be avoided: *What exists are subjects and objects*, consciousness and being – being is the object of knowledge – being in the authentic sense is the being of nature – consciousness is an ‘I think,’ thus an ego, ego-pole, center of acts, person – egos (persons) have standing opposite them: beings, objects, natural things, things of value, goods. [And thus that] The relation between subject and object needs to be explained and is a problem for epistemology.⁴

Again in 1925 he starts out questioning the inveterate opposition of real to ideal and works himself up into mocking the very notion of thematic oppositions:

¹ 2018; dir. Alex Garland, screenplay by Alex Garland; based on the novel by Jeff VanderMeer (2014).

² *Introduction to Metaphysics* (tr. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt 2000) 37: *Doch wir müssen uns noch vielfältiger umsehen und des engeren und weiteren Umkreises gedenken, darin wir uns täglich und stündlich, wissentlich und unwissentlich aufhalten, eines Umkreises, der ständig seine Grenzen verschiebt und plötzlich durchbrochen wird.*

³ A canonical feature of *The Thing from Another World* (1951), *Invaders from Mars* (1953), *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), *The War of the Worlds* (1953), and *The Blob* (1958) among others. In each the tale (*fabula*) if not the telling (*sujet*) starts with a bang.

⁴ *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity* (tr. John van Buren 1999) 62.

“Maybe it is time to ask ourselves whether it is a real question at all, or whether there is something fundamentally wrong with it or with our understanding of it, or even whether Plato really meant anything like that. Perhaps this seemingly profound question about bridging the gap between the real and the ideal, the sensible and the non-sensible, the temporal and the timeless, the historical and the suprahistorical, is only a foolish undertaking that doesn’t even care to ask whether one actually thinks these ‘opposing pairs’ as simply and easily as such lists make it seem: real and ideal, sensible and non-sensible, being and validity, historical and transhistorical, temporal and timeless. Nonetheless, this foolishness gets the semblance of a justification as follows. First you invent these two regions, then you put a gap between them, and then you go looking for the bridge. ‘Take the gap and build the bridge’ – that’s about as clever as the old instruction: ‘To make a gun barrel, you take an empty space and put some steel around it.’”⁵

What instead then?

“Basically we are in a situation where we have to see these two separate orders or fields or spheres or regions as coming together in unity: that which has being and that which has validity, the sensible and the non-sensible, the real and the ideal, the historical and the transhistorical. We have not yet apprehended an original kind of being in terms of which we could understand these two fields as possible and as belonging to that of being.”⁶

Every fan knows the sequel – Heidegger will expound that unity as Dasein, being-in-the-world, an original kind of being: “Self and world belong together in the single entity, the Dasein. Self and world are not two beings, like subject and object, or like I and thou, but self and world are the basic determination of the Dasein itself in the unity of the structure of being-in-the-world.”⁷

So *Being and Time* contrasts Heidegger’s notion of worldhood with “a case at the opposite extreme,” that of Descartes, whose ontology of the world is the “traditional one,” “still the usual one today.”⁸ Cartesian ontology is nowhere more obvious than in the procedure – “still customary today” – of “setting up knowing as a ‘relation between subject and object.’”⁹ Only in such an epistemological subject-object schema, the

⁵ *Logic: The Question of Truth* (tr. Thomas Sheehan 2010) 76-77.

⁶ *Id.* 77.

⁷ *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (tr. Albert Hofstadter rev. ed. 1982) 297.

⁸ *Being and Time* (tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson 1962) 133.

⁹ *Id.* 87.

dualism Heidegger has been railing against all this time, “can the problem arise of how this knowing subject comes out if its inner ‘sphere’ [*inneren »Sphäre«*] into one which is ‘other and external’, of how knowing can have any object at all, and of how one must think of the object itself so that eventually the subject knows it without needing to venture a leap into another sphere [*in eine andere Sphäre*].”¹⁰

He keeps bashing the sphere imagery for another couple of pages until finally he relents with Okay, Dasein *is*, like, ‘inside’ if we understand ‘world’ as Dasein’s habitat, so to speak:

“Nor is any inner sphere abandoned [*ein Verlassen der inneren Sphäre*] when Dasein dwells alongside the entity to be known, and determines its character; but even in this ‘being-outside’ [*»Draußen-sein«*] alongside the object [*beim Gegenstand*], Dasein is still ‘inside’ [*»drinnen«*], if we understand this in the correct sense; that is to say, it is itself ‘inside’ as a being-in-the-world which knows.”¹¹

And thus in Division II: “*That inside which [Worinnen] existing Dasein understands itself, is ‘there’ along with its factual existence. That inside which [Das Worinnen] one primarily understands oneself has Dasein’s kind of being. This kind of being is its world existingly [Dieses ist existierend seine Welt.]*”¹²

Dasein is an original kind of being because its *Umkreis*, its *Sphäre*, its projected *Welt* is something new in nature. “With the existence of human beings there occurs an irruption [*Einbruch*] into the totality of beings, so that now the being in itself first becomes manifest, i.e., as being, in varying degrees, according to various levels of clarity, in various degrees of certainty.”¹³ This irruption is the fundamental occurrence of the as-structure, of the dimension of the possible in general;¹⁴ that is of meaningfulness, sense-making, *Bedeutsamkeit*.¹⁵ “*Presence of the world is the worldhood of the world as meaningfulness [Bedeutsamkeit]. . . . We have thus*

¹⁰ *Id.* 87.

¹¹ *Id.* 89.

¹² *Id.* 416.

¹³ *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (tr. Richard Taft, 5th ed. 1997) 160.

¹⁴ Section 76, *passim*, of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (tr. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker 1995).

¹⁵ Thomas Sheehan: “With the appearance of human being, meaning dawned in the universe, and nothing has been the same since. For the first time in the 13.7 billion years of the cosmos, things were no longer just ‘out there’ but instead became meaningfully present (*anwesend*).” “Astonishing! Things Make Sense!” 1 *Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual* 1 (2011); <http://www.heidegger-circle.org/Gatherings2011-01Sheehan.pdf>

characterized the world as defined by the structure of meaningfulness [*die Struktur der Bedeutsamkeit*].”¹⁶

But if Dasein’s world is meaningfulness, and if not everything is Dasein, then what about unDasein? Heidegger’s dualism emerges right here. The fundamental character of the ‘for the sake of,’ *der Umwillen*, belongs to world,¹⁷ Dasein’s world; not to Nature, the Universe, the Real, the Out There. Heidegger calls all that business the “incomprehensible pure and simple [*das Unverständliche schlechthin*].”¹⁸ Incomprehensible not because we cannot gain, in Holton’s phrase, a “more inclusive, more powerful grasp on natural phenomena”¹⁹ (we can and do); but because nature is unmeaning, *unsinnig*, absurd. That is to say nature, as the incomprehensible, is “the entity which simply does not have the character of Dasein at all, while Dasein is the entity which is comprehensible [*verständlich*] in principle. Since understanding [*das Verstehen*] belongs to its being as being-in-the-world, world is comprehensible [*verständlich*] to Dasein insofar as it is encountered in the character of meaningfulness [*Bedeutsamkeit*].”²⁰

Meaning-making makes the difference between us and the rest of the universe; we are the other of its unmeaning:

“Meaning is an *existentiale* of Dasein, not a property attaching to entities, lying ‘behind’ them, or floating somewhere as an ‘intermediate domain’. Dasein only ‘has’ meaning, so far as the disclosedness of Being-in-the-world can be filled in by the entities discoverable in that disclosedness. Hence only Dasein can be meaningful [*sinnvoll*] or meaningless [*sinnlos*]. That is to say, its own Being and the entities disclosed with its Being can be appropriated in understanding, or can remain relegated to non-understanding. . . . all entities whose kind of Being is of a characteristic other than Dasein’s must be conceived as unmeaning [*unsinniges*], essentially devoid of any meaning at all. . . . And only that which is unmeaning [*das Unsinnige*] can be absurd [*widersinnig*]. The present-at-hand, as Dasein encounters it, can, as it were, assault [*anlaufen*] Dasein’s Being; natural events [*Naturereignisse*], for instance can break in upon us [*hereinbrechende*] and destroy us [*zerstörende*].”²¹

¹⁶ *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena* (tr. Theodore Kisiel 1985) 213, 242.

¹⁷ “On the Essence of Ground,” in *Pathmarks* (ed., tr. William McNeill 1998) 121-122.

¹⁸ *History of the Concept of Time* 217.

¹⁹ Gerald Holton, “On the Role of Themata in Scientific Thought,” 188 *Science* 328, 334 (1975).

²⁰ *History of the Concept of Time* 217-218.

²¹ *Being and Time* 193.

Sheehan's trope pulls all this together into one image:

“We are a hermeneutical field of force, like a magnet that draws things together into unities of sense insofar as these things are connected with a possibility of ourselves as the final point of reference. *Anything outside the scope of our embodied hermeneutical ken does not make sense.*”²²

Which returns us to *Annihilation*. After the bolide crashed into the lighthouse a nacreous bubble formed over the impact site. It has been expanding steadily since and now takes in many square miles of territory. Imminently then, as a character says, “We’re talking cities, states.” Those tasked with investigating it call it ‘The Shimmer.’ The Shimmer is uncanny, ‘not of this world,’ “outside the scope of our embodied hermeneutical ken.” Several teams of soldiers have entered The Shimmer to try to discover what is causing it. With one exception none of the soldiers has returned, and the revenant has no memory of what happened to him inside The Shimmer. Moreover once a team enters The Shimmer radio contact is lost and those outside are unable to receive report of what the investigators find. What’s going on in there?

Yet another team enters The Shimmer. The four scientists and a paramedic (all women) encounter uncanny biota: many different sorts of flowers blooming from a single plant, “like they’re stuck in a continuous mutation;” deer-like creatures with flowers sprouting from their antlers; a huge alligator (did I mention *Lake Placid*?) with teeth in concentric rows like a shark’s; a bear-like predator that mimics the last screams of its human victim.

Eventually the team hits upon the hypothesis that not only does The Shimmer “refract radio waves,” preventing radio contact with the outside, it also “refracts DNA;” that is, somehow, chops it up and recombines it into the – to human eyes – senseless results they see around them – shrubberies with human body plan, etc. Jennifer Jason Leigh’s character says, “It’s destroying everything.” Natalie Portman’s character replies, “It’s not destroying, it’s making something new.” The Shimmer is appropriating the local DNA to make new ‘sense’ – new lifeforms – from indigenous species. In the process, *pace* Portman, it is destroying a great deal, including her colleagues and the teams who preceded them.

Making monsters out of bits and pieces on hand is not new, of course. *Frankenstein* jumps to mind, and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and the Martian hilarity in grafting

²² Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (2015) 125 (my emphasis); <https://religiousstudies.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/making-sense-of-heidegger-a-paradigm-shift.pdf>

human heads onto the bodies of small dogs (*Mars Attacks!*). But in all these the *bricoleur* is Dasein or Daseinish (those Martian cut-ups). Whereas whether the entity in *Annihilation* ‘has care (*Sorge*)’ is unknown and from all indications unknowable. In debriefing the survivor who has managed to destroy The Shimmer the questioner asks: “What did it want?” The survivor replies: “I’m not sure it wanted anything . . . I’m not sure it even knew I was there.” The debriefer concludes, “You really have no idea what it was.” And neither do we. The question of its intentionality, of whether it was *Naturereignis* or *Daseinlich*, must “remain relegated to non-understanding.”

The antecedent of ‘it’ in the above-quoted exchange is the ‘thing from another world’ which our heroine ultimately confronts inside the lighthouse. That thing – the McGuffin all the teams have been searching for – is the most innovative and appealing ‘visual’ in the movie. We’re given to understand that this was the generator of all the uncanny phenomena within The Shimmer.

Of Dasein’s world-making, *Weltbildung*, Heidegger says: “The world is something which the ‘subject’ ‘projects outward,’ as it were, from within itself. . . . So far as the Dasein exists a world is cast-forth with the Dasein’s being. To exist means, among other things, to cast-forth [*vorher-werfen*] a world.”²³ After its fashion the Shimmer-generator is casting-forth a world by its rapid recombination of DNA resulting in an ecosystem quite alien to the native. With or without intentionality the Shimmer-generator is projecting a new world.²⁴ The Shimmer-generator thus has broken through our ambit of sense, *Umkreis*, and irrupted into being-in-the-world; imposing its own radically other ‘sense.’

Wittgenstein conjures this image:

“The evolution of the higher animals and of man, and the awakening of consciousness at a particular level. The picture is something like this: Though the ether is filled with vibrations the world is dark. But one day

²³ *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* 168.

²⁴ As in *The Prion Blob from the Hubble Flow* ?? “Prions are **unprecedented** infectious pathogens that cause a group of invariably fatal neurodegenerative diseases mediated by an **entirely novel** mechanism. . . . Prions are **devoid of nucleic acid** and seem to be composed exclusively of a modified isoform of PrP [a constituent protein of normal mammalian cells] designated PrP^{Sc}. . . . it is now becoming widely accepted that prions are elements that **impart and propagate variability** through multiple conformers of a normal cellular protein. Such a mechanism must surely not be restricted to a single class of transmissible pathogens. Indeed, it is likely that the original definition will need to be extended to encompass other situations in which a similar mechanism of information transfer occurs.” Stanley B. Prusiner, “Prions,” 95 *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* 13363 (1998) (my emphasis); <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC33918/> I.e., as nasty as they are these cooties have a shakier title to ‘alive’ than even the viruses, which at least have ribonucleic acid.

man opens his seeing eye, and there is light. What this language primarily describes is a picture.”²⁵

A picture of discontinuity, darkness broken through by light, light irrupting into darkness. A picture of Heidegger’s basic thema,²⁶ the discontinuity that is being-in-the-world. The stone – all of non-living nature – is worldless. The animal is poor in world.²⁷ Only Dasein is world-making, *weltbildend*. Wherefore “the animal is separated from man by an abyss [*Abgrund*];”²⁸ *a fortiori* an abyss obtains between Dasein and inanimate nature. Dasein is world-making only because it ‘stands in the clearing.’ The clearing, *die Lichtung*, the open, *das Offene*, *Geworfenheit*, *Ereignis*, etc. – all these words metaphorize the discontinuity of meaning with unmeaning. Among its other formulations of this fundamental discontinuity *Being and Time* pointedly describes it as the unity of *ecstases*.²⁹ Then there is the mark of discontinuity between inauthentic and authentic being which Heidegger calls the “moment of vision,” *die Augenblick*.³⁰ This *Augenblick* repeats at the individual-scale the “look into the light of a possible making-possible” at the scale of Dasein; the discontinuity that makes Dasein Dasein.³¹ And at its

²⁵ *Philosophical Investigations* II.vii (tr. G.E.M. Anscombe 2d ed. 1958).

²⁶ The term of art which Gerald Holton expounds in *op. cit.* and in *Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought: Kepler to Einstein* (rev. ed. 1988).

²⁷ By Heidegger’s lights all living things have *Befindlichkeit*: “A stone never finds itself [*befindet sich nie*] but is simply on hand. A very primitive unicellular form of life, on the contrary, will already find itself, where this disposition [*Befindlichkeit*] can be the greatest and darkest dullness, but for all that it is in its structure of being essentially distinct from merely being on hand like a thing.” *History of the Concept of Time* 255. And *Wozu*: “even a vegetable lives its not-too-bright life in terms of an end-for-which.” *Logic: The Question of Truth* 129. What about prions? Is the essential difference from merely being on hand like a rock made by the presence of nucleic acid?

²⁸ *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* 264.

²⁹ “The phenomena of the ‘towards . . .’, the ‘to . . .’, and the ‘alongside . . .’, make temporality manifest as the *έκστατικόν* pure and simple. *Temporality is the primordial ‘outside-of-itself’ in and for itself*. We therefore call the phenomena of the future, the character of having been, and the Present, the ‘ecstases’ of temporality. Temporality is not, prior to this, an entity which first emerges from *itself*; its essence is a process of temporalizing in the unity of the ecstases.” *Being and Time* 377.

³⁰ “That *Present* which is held in authentic temporality and which is *authentic* itself, we call the ‘moment of vision’. This term must be understood in the active sense as an ecstasis. It means the resolute rapture [*Entrückung*] with which Dasein is carried away to whatever possibilities and circumstances are encountered in the Situation as possible objects of concern, but a rapture which is *held* in resoluteness.” *Being and Time* 387.

³¹ “Projecting as this revealing that pertains to making-possible is the proper occurrence of that distinction between being and beings. The projection [*der Entwurf*] is the irruption [*der Einbruch*] in to this ‘between’ of the distinction. It first makes possible the terms that are distinguished in their distinguishability. The projection *unveils the being of beings*. For this reason it is, as we may say in borrowing a word from Schelling, the look into the light of a possible making-possible in general. The look into the light [*der Blick ins Licht*] tears darkness as such along with it [*reißt die Finsternis als solche herbei*], gives the possibility of that dawning of the everyday [*Dämmerung des Alltags*] in which at first and for the most part [*zunächst und zumeist*] we catch sight of beings, cope with them, suffer from them, and enjoy ourselves with them. The look into the light of the possible [*der Lichtblick ins Mögliche*] makes whatever is projecting [*das Entwerfende*] open for the dimension [*offen für die*]

characteristic scale World itself discontinuously changes by way of the ungrounded, spontaneous *Seinsgeschicke* – “dispensations of the clearing” in Sheehan’s phrase.³²

All of which leaves us with this intriguing opposition of themata: Heidegger’s phenomenological thema of the fundamental discontinuity between Dasein and nature – a dualism – as against the scientific thema of the unity of nature; a monism which enfolds **all** things human,³³ including the irruption of Dasein as *Naturereignis* to be investigated and explained.³⁴

As for deciding between the members of this thema/antithema pair, Holton’s research has led him to conclude that

“thematic questions do not get solved and disposed of. . . . themata are not proved or disproved. Rather, they rise and fall and rise again with the tides of contemporaneous usefulness or intellectual fashion [or *Seinsgeschick*?]. And occasionally a great theme disappears from view, or a new theme develops and struggles to establish itself—at least for a time.”³⁵

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Dimension] of the ‘either/or’, the ‘both/and’, the ‘in such a way’, and the ‘otherwise’, the ‘what’, the ‘is’ and ‘is not’. Only insofar as this irruption has occurred do the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and questioning become possible.” *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* 364.

³² *Making Sense of Heidegger* 257.

³³ “Perhaps the most persuasive characteristic of modern science from its beginnings has been simply the generally accepted thema of the unlimited possibility of *doing* science, the belief that nature is in principle fully knowable. . . . all the paths have been vaguely thought to lead to a goal, an understanding of *one* nature . . .” Holton, *Thematic Origins* 18-19.

³⁴ Heidegger calls that an ‘ontological perversion,’ *ontologische Verkehrung*. *Being and Time* 293. On the viscerality of thematic attachment Holton records that “In a letter to Pauli, Heisenberg wrote: ‘the more I ponder about the physical part of Schrödinger’s theory, the more disgusting [*desto abscheulicher*] it appears to me.’ Schrödinger, on his side, freely published his response to Heisenberg’s theory: ‘I was disgusted [*abgeschreckt*] if not repelled [*abgestossen*].” *Thematic Origins* 117. At odds in this case were the respective attachments to the continuum thema (Schrödinger) and to the discreteness thema (Heisenberg).

³⁵ *Id.* 45-46.