# REVIEWS

# THE THING: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF HORROR

*By Dylan Trigg. Hants, UK: Zero Books, 2014.*

REVIEWED BY MIKE THORN

Dylan Trigg's *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror* is aptly titled: it names itself outright as both horror and philosophy, and it is at this intersection of genres that the book's most exciting work takes place. In formal terms, it indeed recalls a well-paced horror novel, with premonitory epigraphs gesturing to the destabilizing and, yes, horrifying contents within. Dissociation results from these introductions, and tension builds. Fitting, then, that the gradual unfolding of Trigg's phenomenology itself achieves a similar result: first unease, then discomfort, and finally an eruption of horror, which culminates in the closing chapter (intercut throughout by scene descriptions from John Carpenter's *The Thing* – an apt counterpart). This kind of content-in-form rigor underlines the complex phenomenology within, which serves as both a vital entry-point and a divergence for new horror scholarship. The text's destination is a stirring one: "we have encountered the unhuman realm manifest precisely at the edge of experience," Trigg tells us, "as that which evades language, reshapes subjectivity, and, finally, establishes itself as that most familiar thing – *the body.*"[1]

How does he bring us there? The book begins with a powerful claim, that the history of phenomenology (and, in fact, of philosophy more widely) has long been hampered by subject-centric, anthropomorphic focus—broadly exemplified by post-Kantian commitments to the Heideggerian phrase, *being-in-the-world*; Trigg clearly delineates his opposition to these limits, writing that "the phenomenological tradition, once a beacon of integrity, has become emblematic of a failure in thought to think outside the subject" (Trigg 2014, 3),

1 Dylan Trigg, *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror,* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 146.

and he aligns this failure with the above-mentioned Heideggerian schematic. Anticipating pre-emptive assumptions, the book states outright that it is *not* a work of posthuman theory. In fact, it takes open issue with the now-long-standing belief that posthuman study is the only alternative to the philosophical barrier of narcissism (a term that Trigg deploys without hesitation). Trigg makes it clear that, in his project, "human experience is a necessary point of departure for philosophical inquiry" and that, as such, "beyond humanity, another phenomenology persists."[2] Thus, the text promptly situates itself in the phenomenological tradition, and maintains that position throughout; to do so, it predominantly picks up the trail left in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's elliptical late work, and finds peripheral context in the works of both Emmanuel Levinas and F.W.J. Schelling. In the early stages of the study, a question arises: is it possible to stage an *unhuman phenomenology*, as he describes? The text resolves the question quickly (although initially in silhouette, the way an author of horror fiction might first describe the narrative's threat): the answer is *the body*. Irrevocably bound up in the body is Trigg's titular horror; indeed, the text states clearly that one of its main efforts is "to demonstrate phenomenology's value by conducting an investigation into the horror of the body."[3]

In the context of Trigg's thought, however, the body itself undergoes substantial and necessary reframing. In unhuman phenomenology, the body is *not* defined by the subject, nor by the sociocultural-historical conditions in which it is inscribed. These foundational distinctions are, in fact, inevitable consequences of Trigg's project. The body, moreover, is not necessarily human at all, and Trigg also makes this clear at the outset: "What survives the end is a thing that should not be, an anonymous mass of materiality, the origins of which remain obscure. The thing is no less than the body."[4] As such, the body carries with it an anteriority—invisible but always-present—that remains fundamentally *unknowable* to the subject, and the conclusion is inevitable: the self and the body are inherently distinct from each other. They are, in fact, divided—but bounded in their division, belying a convenient Cartesian schematic: "If we were to invoke the Cartesian method of doubt to arrive at a foundational ground to account for this matter," Trigg writes, "then we might reformulate the cogito less in terms of an *I think* and more in terms of

2 Trigg, *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror,* 5.
3 Ibid., 4.
4 Ibid.

an *It lives.*"[5] As such, this phenomenological frame always finds its gravity in the substance of horror. The text then foregrounds itself with this challenging framework: how to imagine phenomenology without the subject? How to imagine the body without the self? And how, exactly, can we define this anterior alterity? These inquires, although tracing back to Trigg's philosophical project, pose similar questions for the field of horror studies: how can we study horror while radically decentring the self? Recalling here John Clute's entry of "Affect Horror" in *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror*, another question arises: can a genre that is entrenched in affect reconstitute its affective qualities outside the realm of the human? If so, does affect theory carry with it the potential for unhuman observations as well?

These questions are too large to take up here, but Trigg's text encourages them nonetheless. His project does arrive at its own end-point of sorts, and that end-point is aptly and unavoidably Lovecraftian: *The Thing*'s conclusion brings the macrocosmic to the utterly cosmic, positioning the Earth as body and the blackness of the cosmos as that still-unthinkable anteriority. Through a nuanced reading of Lovecraft's novella *The Shadow Out of Time*, Trigg's phenomenology develops form, but the macrocosmic suggestions only develop into their final shape during the closing chapter. It is through the move to the macrocosmic, then – which reveals itself alongside the described unfolding of Carpenter's film, *The Thing* – that the text arrives at its stirring conclusion: "to speak of the horror of the body, is also to speak of the horror of the cosmos."[6] And it is here that Trigg's phenomenology reveals its infinite relationality; its horror lies in the masking of a deep past rather than in any threat of futurity. To gravitate this relational terror, Trigg names the unnameable as *the flesh*, and herein lies the necessity of Carpenter as filmic resource. Here and elsewhere, Trigg's aptitude for cinematic examples lends both weight and clarity to his phenomenological practice – who better than Carpenter to demonstrate the anteriority and unrecognizability of the cosmos? And what better films than those comprising Carpenter's self-titled, thematically-linked "Apocalypse Trilogy" (*The Thing*, *Prince of Darkness*, and *In the Mouth of Madness*)?[7]

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 146.

7 As a brief aside, it is worth noting here that Carpenter now considers his 2005 *Masters of Horror* entry, *Cigarette Burns*, to be part of that same "Apocalypse" cycle (I had the opportunity to ask him a question about the trilogy during his visit to the 2013 Calgary Comic &

My main point here, however, is a laudatory one: Trigg stages his philosophical project *within* horror, and he makes it clear that it could be no other way. That is, *The Thing*'s philosophy cannot coherently exist without the available articulation of horror cinema and fictions. And while the *affect* of horror is itself connected to the subject (a tension that I gestured to previously), Trigg finds a way of temporarily dislocating the self-centred potentiality so often affixed to the genre itself. It makes perfect sense to lend close attention to horror's psychological and subjective traits when acknowledging the genre's underpinning of affect; horror lends a very genre-specific insight into the self, the social, and the historical. However, as Trigg demonstrates here, there also resides within horror a capacity that extends far beyond the limited parameters of the self, and not only in terms of its posthuman iterations. *The Thing* affirms that we can effectively theorize the horror of the unhuman, without reclaiming that horror in reductively "human" terms. Referring back to Carpenter, I find in his films' horror an implicitly phenomenological thread that underpins *the body* (according to Trigg's definition of the word) much more readily than any sociohistorically-anchored *self*. Trigg addresses this point, peripherally making note of *Christine* and *The Fog* in addition to the aforementioned Apocalypse works. In addition to those filmmakers and authors cited by Trigg (he also draws from J.G. Ballard, Thomas Ligotti, Georges Franju, William Friedkin, and many others), we might use his phenomenological practice to read the works of Tobe Hooper, Kathe Koja, Stephen King, Richard Matheson, Rob Zombie, Kiyoshi Kurosawa… the list continues.

What exists in *The Thing*, then, is not merely an exceptionally new phenomenological frame; and it *is* a new frame, one that belies the posthuman term to locate unhuman theory. To this reader, the text's most valuable offering is its exploration of horror within philosophy, and vice versa. In comparison to the theories that underlie, say, Eugene Thacker's nihilistic *In the Dust of this Planet*, Trigg's horrific phenomenology is inescapably a theory of

Entertainment Expo, and he corrected me when I left *Cigarette Burns* out of the self-contained "trilogy"). It would be compelling, then, to see Trigg's phenomenology of horror conceived within *Cigarette Burns*, which depicts cinema destroying its spectators. On the note of Carpenter, it is also exciting to see Trigg acknowledge *Prince of Darkness* as the auteur's most underrated work; if I have any qualm with Trigg's text at all, it is simply that the reading of this particular film – while tightly designed and informative – is so brief. *Prince of Darkness* is the lynchpin of Carpenter's philosophy, aesthetic, and horror: it is Carpenter's purest cinema.

*life*. The fear inherent to his reading is not one of morbidity, or of prescient apocalyptic dread (an important, but altogether different stream of thought). Instead, the fear in Trigg's work is a dislocation of the self; it is a distinguishing of the self from the body, and an absolute othering of the body-in-itself. To explicitly conceptualize this notion, Trigg turns to Levinas to suggest that "any anxiety experienced is not simply underscored with the knowledge that one day we will die," but rather "it is the 'anonymous state of being' that marks a constant threat against the contingency of *being a subject*" (Trigg 2014, 48, emphasis added). This section is where Trigg's work veers closest to the previously-mentioned first volume of Thacker's *Horror of Philosophy* sequence: Trigg mobilizes Levinas' concept of *il y a* ("there is"), which imagines the world-without-us.[8] However, Trigg conceptualizes "the night, which becomes synonymous with the 'very experience of the *there is*'"[9] as the flesh that constitutes our always unreachable shadow of existence. As mentioned above, the suggestions in Merleau-Ponty's later works also lend philosophical foundation to this effect; in the realm of horror, Cronenberg's work provides yet another entrance. The Canadian auteur's Freudian proclivities delimit his works' applications to this phenomenology, though, and the endpoint can be none other than the one at which Trigg arrives. The endpoint is necessarily John Carpenter, and this marks an exciting moment for horror scholarship. There's philosophy *in* horror, this text tells us, and there's horror in philosophy, too.

8 Trigg, *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror,* 49

9 Ibid.