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“Everything and Nothing: The Horror of Meaning in *The Cipher*”

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Abstract

Kathe Koja’s strange horror novel *The Cipher* (1991) is a peculiar genre fiction that immediately attracts the attention of both horror connoisseurs and philosophers alike. It is at once a visceral, psychological horror and a theoretically intriguing dilemma. It follows the fascinating and horrific events that transpire after a disc of pure nothingness opens up in the protagonist’s home, consuming the lives of the characters just as it does the plot. This non-object pushes readers to discern its peculiar ontology but yields, as one would expect, *nothing*. This essay reads *The Cipher* through Martin Heidegger’s equally unorthodox version of the nothing (*das Nichts*), demonstrating how Heideggerian ontological thought can help to illuminate the novel’s strange nothingness, and how Koja’s novel can help us to see the horror inherent in Heidegger’s philosophy. It suggests that horror may be found not in the nihilistic lack of meaning but in our “imprisonment” in meaning.

Keywords: *The Cipher*, Kathe Koja, Martin Heidegger, ontology, weird fiction, nothing

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Everything and Nothing

The Horror of Meaning in *The Cipher*

KATHE KOJA's strange horror novel *The Cipher* (1991) is about nothing. At the center of the story is a sheer nothingness – a disk of pulsating blackness that appears from nowhere and is nothing: “a negativity, an absence, a lack. A depression” (84). The plot of the novel proceeds by circling the drain around this paradoxical void. Some characters react to it with fascination, others with horror, but everyone comes away from it changed. Yet, readers can foresee the story's conclusion from the very beginning: eventually this nothingness consumes the characters and their lives, as it does the plot. This non-object pushes readers to discern its peculiar ontology but yields, as one would expect, *nothing*.

The Cipher takes this negativity as its central theme and offers us little in the way of redemption or transcendence. It is a story of failure and destitution, burned out artists, and dead-end jobs. The protagonist, Nicholas, is a failed poet become assistant manager at the “video-hut.” When he isn't drinking himself into a stupor, he's allowing himself to be manipulated into something he doesn't want to do. “I had lived like a cockroach for so long,” Nicholas explains, “that a full tank, a full refrigerator were no longer even desirable: I mean, what would I do with it all” (6). One of the few things Nicholas is certain of is his love for Nakota, who, with equal certainty, would never reciprocate. Unlike Nicholas, Nakota is highly willful, spiteful, and sadistic. She is pale, sickly thin, with “fox teeth” and “insectoid” features (124). She has a gift for manipulation and never hesitates to use it to her advantage. “Nakota would rot differently than other people,” Nicholas tells us, and “she would be the first to admit it” – she has an “undreamed-of decay” inside her (1). Together, Nicholas and Nakota discover a disc of nothingness in the abandoned storage room of Nicholas' ramshackle apartment building. They sardonically name

it the “Funhole.”¹ It quickly becomes their self-destructive obsession, attracting a degenerate host of other thoroughly unlikable characters into its orbit.

The Funhole is described as a kind of *process*, but one that only causes mutations that lead to disturbing new forms. It does not destroy or accelerate disorder, but rather rearranges in such a way that things become worse; they are altered, degraded, but persist. Early on we get this description:

Black. Not darkness, not the absence of light but living black. Maybe a foot in diameter, maybe a little more. Pure black and the sense of pulsation, especially when you looked at it too closely, the sense of something not living but alive, not even *something* but some – process ... its edges were downhill and smooth. They asked for touch.
(2)

The Funhole has qualities that should not be. It isn’t darkness, but a living color with depth; it is a non-thing with only slippery and paradoxical qualities. It emits a variety of smells – from moist, humid stink to delectable sweetness – but Nicholas knows that their source is the void of the Funhole itself, not some other object deeper within (2). When Nakota drops a stone in, it never makes a sound. When Nicholas thrusts his hand in, he remarks that it is as “if you could touch an insubstantiality, a fever dream, rub hallucinations on your skin” (84). It is a “place where the rug stays permanently pulled out from under you” (193). This insubstantiality and paradox of qualities provokes all of the characters to metaphysical speculation: the Funhole is “reverse entropy” (116), “little big bang,” “god-thing” (28). Yet, we never really get any certain answers about the Funhole; in fact, as Nicholas leads us to believe, the very question may be meaningless.

With the enigma of the Funhole as its center, the plot slowly ticks toward the inevitable: entering the Funhole itself. Nakota spearheads several twisted experiments, which Nicholas reluctantly attends. Like curious children, they lower a jar of bugs into the hole, which returns changed: “an extra pair of wings, a spare head, *two* spare heads, colors beyond the real” (10). A mouse is ejected liquified, its bones contorted. A severed human hand “jauntily” (24) reanimates. When the two

¹The novel’s title was chosen by Kojia’s publishers as a more palatable name than “The Funhole,” which she had originally chosen.

lower a video camera into the hole, they are rewarded with “recorded blackness . . . a vortex of nothing” (34) – a tape that appears differently on each viewing and seems to have an uncanny ability to hold its watchers with rapt fascination. Perhaps most importantly, the first time Nicholas accidentally puts his hand into the Funhole, he is marked with a “dark stigmata” (79), a miniature Funhole in his palm that leaks smells and fluids. It links him further to the Funhole and marks him as the “chosen” ringleader to the others who are transfixed by the Funhole’s “megaweirdness” (116).

The Cipher is one of those peculiar genre fictions that immediately attracts the attention of weird-horror connoisseurs and philosophers alike.² It is at once a visceral, psychological horror and a theoretically intriguing dilemma, leading horror author Maryse Meijer to remark that it is “existentially threatening” (217) in a way few other horror fictions can be; it pushes up against the “limit of Logos” (220). For Michael Arzen, the Funhole is “a signifier without a signified – a sign denoting absence – a grammar without proposition – a language without meaning” (345). It poses a fundamental philosophical conundrum. As Koja herself comments, the Funhole is “something that stands in opposition to reality, but is the realist fucking thing you’ve ever seen” (2012). It is literary fiction playing at paradox. Readers are given no easy answers. As Steven Shaviro notes, the Funhole is “the one thing in the novel that we are obligated to take entirely literally, as the ontological basis for everything that is projected on it or that seeks to approach it” (2016, 220). It is not simple allegory or metaphor, but “emphasizes the sheer persistence of nothingness at the very heart of being” (226). The Funhole begs interpretation but is essentially nothingness, and resists the meaning applied to it. Readers are left to grapple with this absurd, horrifying, and mystifying problem: how can nothing exist?

Koja’s strange depiction of nothingness is difficult to grasp. It is radically involved in the world, yet it cannot exist in the world; it acts as a force of negation, but it does not destroy – only changes.

² *The Cipher* was the flagship novel in publisher Dell’s self-proclaimed psychological and cerebral “Abys” series in 1991. On the back of each novel in the series, they write “Abys is for the seeker of truth, no matter how disturbing or twisted it may be.” Designed to reinvigorate the downward trending and tropified horror genre at the time, the series takes its name after Nietzsche’s famous line from *Beyond Good and Evil* that “if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you” (Steffen Hantke, 2008, “The Decline of the Literary Horror Market in the 1990’s and Dell’s Abys Series,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 41.1: 62–63).

We find a similarly unorthodox version of nothingness in the work of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger offers us a metaphysically expansive view of the nothing that doesn't require any positive motion. Heidegger's nothingness is an anxiety infused force that severs us from the social and only reaches fulfilment in death. Unlike, for example, Hegel's "labor of the negative" – which renders negation a dialectically productive and teleologically oriented force – the vision of the negative that we find in both Heidegger and Koja is under no obligation to change things for the better. The nothing, for Heidegger, is not simply negation, but the origin of all negation. "Nihilating behavior" like "unyielding antagonism and stinging rebuke have a more abyssal source," Heidegger reasons, "than the measured negation of thought. Galling failure and merciless prohibition require some deeper answer. Bitter privation is more burdensome" (2008, 105). At the heart of nihilation and negation – failure, antagonism, rebuke, privation, but also meaninglessness and dialectical opposition – is a more ontologically primary nothingness which grounds them. "The nothing itself nihilates" – it is a *process* of nihilation (103). This, I argue, is also the nothingness we see at play in *The Cipher*. While Heidegger's nothingness can help us understand the Funhole, Koja's novel also gives us a way to bring out the horror in Heidegger's philosophy.

For Heidegger, the fundamental question of metaphysics and philosophy is about being and non-being: "why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?" (110) Why is there something or anything, rather than simply a nothing? This question must be asked in order to provide a ground for thinking and philosophy. The nothing (*das Nichts*) is not a mere rhetorical fluke or trick of language, but rather occupies an essential place in Heidegger's philosophical thought. We encounter it in the conceptual realm of pure logic as the metaphysical inverse of everything, that is, the world. Accordingly, it is with the recognition of the nothing that we are able to grasp the world in its totality as a system of meaningful relations: "the nothing is the negation of the totality of beings; it is nonbeing pure and simple" (97). It opens up dizzying metaphysical speculation and questions of being and non-being, of existence and non-existence. In this sense, the logical principle of non-contradiction proceeds from a recognition of the nothing, the most basic version of being and non-being: no thing can be nothing, and nothing cannot be a thing. While Heidegger entices us into metaphysical thought by asking why there is something instead

of nothing, Koja flips the question: why is there a *nothing* where there should be *something*?

While the nothing is understood as a logical category, Heidegger tells us, we also experience it personally in deeply felt moods or states of mind. Moods (*Stimmungen*) are more than just fleeting feelings. They are penetrating attunements to the world, just as vital as conceptual understanding and the knowledge we gain from our societies' discourses.³ More than conceptual knowledge, however, moods can give us direct access to the "brute *that-ness*" (Withy 2015, 1) of reality. Primarily, it is the mood of profound existential anxiety (*Angst*) that provokes an encounter with the nothing; with an authentic recognition of the nullity of death – "the possibility of the impossibility" (Heidegger 1962, 307) of being ourselves – we become anxious. In anxiety, we are open to our own structural nothingness and total freedom. The meaningfulness and significance of the world recedes from us, and we are faced with an uncanny moment of derealization and nihilism, shunted into nothingness (231-233). It is a detached state in which the sense of the world still remains, but all its meaning and significance feels foreign; I know what things are, but I don't understand their 'why'. Consequently, everyday things appear uncanny and strange, the same but somehow hollow or degraded. We no longer feel at home in the world, but rather uncanny (*unheimlich*) – the un-homely or not-being-at-home (*Nicht-zuhause-sein*) as Heidegger gives us (233). Appropriately, Nietzsche tells us, nihilism is "the uncanniest of all guests" (1968, 7). In this nihilism we separate ourselves from the meaning that we have been given to believe constitutes known reality, but also realize the potential for a return from the nihilism of the nothing – a new formulation of meaning.

Mood is central to *The Cipher*. When we occasionally leave the dilapidation and depravity of Nicholas' apartment, it's only to follow him to his soul crushing job at the Video-Hut or to attend an art showing for burnt-out and pretentious hipsters. The plot is a scarce, zig-zagging spiral punctuated only by the Funhole's bizarre antics. Mood is the real engine of the narrative. The novel's language rolls from one affectual state to another – contempt, rage, exhaustion, frustration, fleeting pleasure, troubled attraction, but always fascinating

³In this sense, the nothing is a psychological category more than an actual substance available to experience. Yet, for Heidegger and the tradition of phenomenology, the mind and the world are not separate entities. The world itself is a product of the mind's correlation to reality.

disgust for the Funhole. Nicholas is disgusted with himself, his life, the people he surrounds himself with – even his love for Nakota is based on his disgust for her. Yet, he is totally unwilling to change anything. “I was tired of hating myself,” he says, “but I was so good at it, it was such a comfortable way to be ... it requires very little thought or afterthought” (Koja 2020, 73). His moods lead to his action, or rampant inaction, more than any real intentional decision making. Even his decision not to commit suicide is informed by the surfacing of a new mood:

I remember thinking, Why, I’ve made a choice. I don’t want to be a part of this anymore, and I’m, I’m opting out. Imagine. An actual decision, and I was very much enjoying the novel sense of resolve and picturing, in a self-indulgent way, the manner in which the bullet would come flying up the barrel, when something new came to me: shame. (76)

After choosing to live, his big decision is simply to give himself to the Funhole and see what happens. Nicholas proceeds to set up camp in the storage room with the Funhole, outsourcing his choice to the whims of its nothingness. When faced with this fact, he denies even the possibility of choice: “freedom of choice,” he quips, “just like the beer commercials” (192). For Heidegger, we become anxious when are faced with death and the vertiginous burden of our own freedom; this is a chance for authentic action and to take responsibility for our lives. In the face of death, Nicholas, however, becomes ashamed, denies his freedom, and is returned to life through his own characteristic self-disgust.

After a particularly horrifying and grotesque encounter with the Funhole – when a severed hand momentarily reanimates – Nicholas is thrust into a contemplative, surreal, and mystical mood: everything “acquired a significance,” he says, and he was able to glimpse, “if not the meaning of patterns then patterns of meaning” (29). Nicolas feels that this deepened mood was “gifted somehow by the Funhole,” and is the result of his interaction with it. Much as for Heidegger, a trip through the nothingness of anxiety can revitalize the world with a new kind of authentic and deeply personal significance. An encounter with the meaningless void of nihilism is a necessary step to a genuinely meaning-laden world. Discussing Heidegger, David Krell

writes that “nihilism does not result from excessive preoccupation with the nothing. On the contrary, only by asking the question of the nothing can nihilism be countered” (2008, 91). The nothing, and the Funhole, do not cause nihilism – the flight of meaning. Rather, the nothing spurs nihilism and, at the same time, its overcoming; the nothing is more foundational than nihilism and negation. In this sense, the nothing is a wellspring of meaning and significance – “and the Funhole, never forget it, the wellspring of all situations” (Koja 2020, 204). It gives us the world in its totality as a system of meaningful relations. Crucially, for both Heidegger and Koja, this reinvigorated significance and meaning is not necessarily a good thing; it is not an easy redemption, and it does not ward off nihilism or its source, the nothing. While Heidegger does not argue that meaning is good without qualification, Koja goes one step further. She gives us an image of meaning rendered horrible and nauseatingly constraining. Nicholas’s mood of contemplative significance does not last long before he quickly lurches back into a radically meaningful hell of his own failures, self-hatred, and disgust.

While Koja’s novel is full of anxiety, her language is focused instead on disgust. Nicholas luxuriates in his disgust. His first-person experience is shot through with descriptions of his degraded bodily state, alcoholic nausea, poor hygiene, and his filthy “flophouse” apartment. He tells us that he had lived in depravity so long that a better life was like “a cockroach dreaming of the smell of disinfectant” (72). But this disgust is not purely repulsive; Nicholas relishes it. Interspersed throughout his stream-of-consciousness narration we get sentences like these: “out came a satisfying belch, big and round” (158). His bodily excretions are often described in detail. The rotting hole in his hand is constantly “seeping” fluids of varying viscosities, which he describes to us in nauseating detail. As Steven Shaviro observes, the novel’s “twitchy, thickly clotted language gives us a hypercharged poetry of ugliness, fragmentation, and wavering disgust” (2016, 218). One of the few positive attributes the Funhole has is its smell, which ranges from “garbage-rank” to “sweet” and “tasty” (47), often depending on Nicholas’ moods. “I have a thing for smells” (7), he tells us, and an intimacy with disgust. Aesthetically, beauty and nausea are often expressed in the same breath (10).

It is disgust that attenuates Nicholas to the Funhole: the smells, the fluids, the decay, the self-loathing. And it is disgust that pulls Nicolas

further and further into its void. While the nothing for Heidegger is encountered in the mood of anxiety, disgust is the medium by which Koja engages her portrayal of nothingness. Heidegger's existential anxiety is at once morbid, unsettling, and strange; yet, it provides the pathway out of the nothing. It calls us to individuate, make our own choices, and take responsibility for our actions and the facts of our lives. Existential anxiety is the experience of the nothing, but it is a fleeting and intermittent one. It shunts us into meaningless nihilism but then deposits us back into the world of meaning and significance, hopefully improved and more self-possessed. With *The Cipher*, Koja asks, what happens when someone doesn't return from the nothing? What happens when they make a home there?

Nicholas provides us with an answer. He is himself an "empty vessel" (209) – a nothing and a nobody – a literary personification of nothingness. He doesn't make many of his own choices and he barely has his own preferences, aside from the beer he drinks to cope: "when in doubt, get a beer" (130). Yet, he likes it that way; he confesses that "it's so easy to be nothing" (73). He spends the majority of the narrative seeking unity with the Funhole, slowly "fading" into it and trying to be alone with it, going so far as to live in the storage room and installing a lock to ensure his solitude. Only at the end of the novel does he realize his unity with the Funhole, when he asks us, "what if it is me?" (216)

Koja's novel suggests that when you remain in nothingness for too long, Heidegger's existential anxiety withers and is replaced with an *existential disgust* – a disgust with the world itself and a compulsion for nothingness. Rather than be led out of the nothing and into a renewed sense of meaning, as Heidegger would have, Nicholas prefers to languish in the nothing. He has no desire to be a self-possessed individual⁴ or to participate in the human collectivity – "it helps ... to be human in the first place" (95), he says of himself. He would rather sink into the oblivion of an easy nihilism than see that his life is inherently meaningful, especially as it becomes more horrifying every day. In the nothing, he is not really himself and not responsible for anything. Where existential anxiety turns us back to a

⁴In Heidegger's terminology, one becomes an authentic and self-possessed individual (*Eigentlichkeit*) through an encounter with existential anxiety (*Angst*) that wrests one from the safe, everyday world of the collectivity (*das Mann*). Responding resolutely to anxiety is a necessary step to developing individual identity.

meaning-charged world, existential disgust compels us to linger in the nothing.

Yet, the Funhole is still described as a kind of change. Both Nicholas and Nakota agree that it is some kind of process, that Nicholas himself is “becoming process” (152) as the Funhole eats away at him to form “something new” (191). For much of the narrative, we are given to believe that it is transformative *somehow*. The Funhole mutates everything it touches. It transforms the poor creatures unlucky enough to be exposed to it; it seems to have an affinity for art, animating the sculptures and pieces placed in its presence with a morbid kind of life. Of course, it also gives Nicholas his “stigmata” and some strange abilities that shock and awe observers – levitation, the ability to reach through a solid wall, and hands that melt steel and flesh – though none of these are within his own control. More than that, it does seem to cause a revolution in Nicholas’ life. Reflecting on his near suicide, he says: “I tried to kill myself . . . [and] it worked” (80). He does return with more purpose, though it is only a heightened zeal and acceptance for the dissipation of the Funhole. Words like “flux,” “Change, Capital C” (197) and transformation appear with increasing frequency as the novel reaches its fever pitch. However, this change does not appear to be dialectical; nothing positive is formed from the Funhole’s “nihilitating behavior.” It is simply a source of restless negation: “the endless rustle of nonbeing” (Shaviro 2016, 227).

What then is this *change* that the Funhole offers? Nakota begins to refer to it as “transcursion.” She thinks that the Funhole is some kind of portal, or “pathway” to a greater “becoming.” In a manic flurry, she says:

I know what this all means. I know about the gateways and the paths, I know that the Funhole’s just an avenue to change. To transcursion . . . a passage beyond limits; interpretation: a change effected so deep, so fundamental, that when you emerged on the other end . . . you would yourself be a process, an agent of the change. (177)

She becomes convinced that the Funhole is an avenue to near mystical transcendence and is an egress from her life into something more meaningful. Nakota desperately wants this change: “I’m the perfect candidate for a change. A becoming” (206), she explains to herself. She even becomes jealous of Nicholas’ disturbing connection to the

Funhole: “I want to be you” (123), she psychotically drones to Nicholas. Yet Nicholas isn’t as certain about his desires:

What do I want. I thought. Transformation? *Do I want, at all? And I knew that what I wanted most was not to know. Wanted instead to be ridden, not mindless but adrift, still, in the eddies of my helplessness, there is such peace in helplessness.* (77)

Characteristically, Nicholas doesn’t want the profound change that Nakota lusts after; he just wants to be the nothingness itself – ignorant, helpless, and empty. Like Nakota, the others that accrue around the Funhole proliferate theories about it, “one to a customer please, no pushing” (145), Nicholas condescends. They speculate that it is perhaps a “paranormal site,” the crux between “science and mysticism” (156), or some sort of religious phenomenon. Yet, through his connection to the Funhole, Nicholas is certain that its nothingness is beyond our comprehension and speculation; it is “the dark of a negativity that stood for nothing, nothing we could know ... [even Nakota’s] most trenchant speculations were less than the guesses of a fool ... meaningless” (143). He knows that the Funhole is nothingness and that it doesn’t *mean* anything. It’s not “paranormal” and it is not a pathway to “transcursion.” It just *is*.

The characters of *The Cipher* can’t seem to stop speculating about and theorizing the Funhole. Indeed, for Heidegger, we cannot *not* attempt to make sense of things, even something so anomalous as the Funhole.⁵ Even Nicholas has his theories about the Funhole’s nullity, though he is aware that they too are the product of his compulsive thought rather than genuine truths about the Funhole: “speculation becomes meaningless when it never blossoms” (194), he acknowledges. This incessant interpretation is, for Heidegger, a fact of the state of being human. To be human – the creature with *Logos* – is to be necessarily engaged in the act of interpretive sense-making. Even if we are hallucinating, dreaming, insane, or obviously wrong about the state of things, we are attempting to make sense of things and render them intelligible to ourselves in some way. When the

⁵In his book, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, Thomas Sheehan makes the case that Heidegger’s project begins with the question of Being, but is sustained by the question of sense and intelligibility. Whenever we have access to things in the world, we also have access to the meaningfulness of those things.

world is present, so is meaning. Even when faced with the nothing, we are compelled to interpret. This is why Heidegger says that we are “prisoners of meaningfulness” (*bedeutsamkeitsgefangen*), literally trapped or imprisoned by meaning (2013, 32-33). We may pass through the nihilism of the nothing, but there is no escape from meaning.

Heidegger refers to this entrapment within meaning as our *transcendence*. Like Nakota’s transcursion, transcendence is about our relation to the nothing. As human, we are “held out into the nothing” (2008, 103), Heidegger writes. In other words, we are “beyond beings” (103) insofar as our relationship to things determines their meaning to us. We are not, like animals, fixated by the force of our instincts. Yet, unlike transcursion, this “beyond” anchors us to the world. In Nietzschean fashion, we can create our own meaning, but it is limited by material fact. The nothing is the ground for this transcendence, which allows for the formation and reformulation of meaning: “only on the grounds of the original revelation of the nothing can human existence approach and penetrate beings” (103). This is why the nothing is only a brief step through nihilism in Heidegger’s thought. There is, then, no transcursion “beyond limits,” only a transcendence which traps us back within the world. The Funhole is not a “pathway” or portal to another world but a mirror to our own. As Nicholas concludes, for Nakota “there would be no transformation, no ultimate transcursion to fulfilment: she was just another insect, just another fucking bug, there were no signs and wonders to be given to her” (Koja 2020, 214). While our transcendence gives us the world, it does not promise that it will be a happy one.

In the final chapter of the novel, Nicholas decides to enter the Funhole, giving himself to it fully. “It really couldn’t get any . . . worse,” he reasons, “just more of the same, world without end, Funhole forever” (191). While it’s clear to Nicholas that Nakota’s transcursion is wishful thinking, he does seem to recognize Heidegger’s transcendence – that he can’t escape meaning or himself. In the final lines of the novel, Nicholas begins to fear that the Funhole is not a senseless and obliterating abyss, but perhaps a reflection of himself:

Worst of all, the darkest part of me suspects a truth so black it turns my nebulous fears of a Funhole somehow empowered and unleashed by my addition to the laughable specter of an underbed bogeyman: what if it *is* me? What if somehow I’m crawling blind and headfirst

into my own sick heart, the void made manifest and disguised as a hellhole, to roil in the aching stink of my own emptiness forever? Oh Jesus. oh God that can't be true. Because then I'd never stop thinking. I don't want to hurt anyone, but I'd rather it be anything but that.
(216)

By giving himself to the Funhole's nullity, Nicholas thinks he is escaping thought, choice, responsibility, and himself. Only when he has waited too long does it occur to him that it might be the very opposite; perhaps the nothingness of the Funhole leads to interminable meaning. When he finally gives himself to the Funhole, will he drift into oblivion, or will it send him into a radically meaningful hell of his own making? Disgusted by the world, Nicholas finds comfort in denying meaning and fleeing into naïve nihilism in the nothing, somehow finding a way to abide there. The only thing that would be more horrific than meaningless nihilism, for Nicholas, is being imprisoned in a meaning-filled world charged with horror. With *The Cipher*, Koja suggests that meaning itself can be worse than nothing, injecting a little horror into Heidegger's perhaps too-easy path from anxiety to meaning.

When the anxiety of the nothing dissipates, Heidegger maintains, we experience "the wonder of all wonders: *that beings are*" (2008, 90). This wonder is the wonder that beings are *at all* – that they are not *nothing*. It provokes the metaphysical 'why' that initiates philosophical thought: "only on the ground of wonder – the revelation of the nothing – does the 'why?'" loom before us (2008, 109), Heidegger tells us. Wonder, then, is the mood that we experience when we return from the nihilism of the nothing; the world presents itself in wonder. The Funhole provides a challenge to Heidegger's metaphysical wonder. Why do we feel wonder that the world exists? Why is it *wonder* that attenuates us to meaning? With *The Cipher*, Koja shows us that this wonder can just as easily be *horror*. If we must exist in a meaningful world – imprisoned, as Heidegger says – then that meaning must also contain the possibility of all horror. Indeed, without meaning, there can be no horror, only nothingness. Perhaps horror is not the nihilistic lack of meaning, but an inescapable, ever-present meaning. And, Nicholas shows us, perhaps nothingness is preferable.

There is a certain optimism embedded in this Heideggerian wonder, which is entirely at odds with the thoroughgoing pessimism and horror

of Koja's novel. In his *Short History of Decay*, pessimist thinker E.M. Cioran writes, in a passage reminiscent of Nicholas, that:

Having a horror of any action ... it is not so much events which vex him as the notion of participating in them; and he bestirs himself only in order to turn away from them ... he is a crossroads Ecclesiast who finds in the universal meaninglessness an excuse for his defeats. Eager to find everything unimportant ... he rejects everything – and everything rejects him. (2012, 81)

Nicholas turns away from the world – from everything – and takes refuge from his ragged and dejected life in the nullity of the Funhole, where he can escape choice and action. He is disgusted and repulsed by the horror that he sees in the world of action and meaning; he rejects *everything* for *nothing*. Koja's novel undermines the latent optimism in the Heideggerian sense of wonder, which he inherits from Plato: "wonder is the only beginning of philosophy," we read in the *Theaetetus*. She offers us the frightening hint that horror might also be a proper response to the metaphysical question: why is there something rather than nothing? If this is the case, what then could it mean that philosophy might begin in horror?

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