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Wounded Thinking of the Wounded World

Nihilism and Global Warming

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Abstract

The article claims that one of the most important tasks of thinking today is global warming. Can it be analyzed as another form of nihilism: not as nihilism of the meaning of life, but as a new kind of nihilism of human and nonhuman life itself? Could global warming be analyzed as a kind of "objective nihilism" tied to the active nihilism of humankind that causes it and to the passive nihilism of humankind that endures it, rather than acting against it? This article attempts to explain "the objective

nihilism" of global warming with the help of Maurice Blanchot's term "disaster," by showing how it leads to the nihilistic attitudes of despair and indifference. It also asks how the lucidity of nihilism can be turned into a force.

Keywords: objective nihilism, global warming, world, catastrophe, Maurice Blanchot.

Ranjeno razmišljanje o ranjenem svetu. Nihilizem in globalno segrevanje

Povzetek

Članek ugotavlja, da je ena najpomembnejših nalog današnjega razmišljanja globalno segrevanje. Ali ga lahko analiziramo kot še eno obliko nihilizma: ne kot nihilizem smisla življenja, temveč kot novo vrsto nihilizma človeškega in nečloveškega življenja samega? Ali lahko globalno segrevanje analiziramo kot neke vrste »objektivni nihilizem«, povezan z aktivnim nihilizmom človeštva, ki ga povzroča, in pasivnim nihilizmom človeštva, ki ga prenaša, namesto da bi ukrepalo proti njemu? Članek poskuša »objektivni nihilizem« globalnega segrevanja razložiti s pomočjo izraza »katastrofa« Mauricea Blanchota, tako da pokaže, kako vodi v nihilistično držo obupa in brezbrižnosti. Vprašanje je tudi, kako je mogoče osvetlitev nihilizma spremeniti v silo.

Ključne besede: objektivni nihilizem, globalno segrevanje, svet, katastrofa, Maurice Blanchot.

According to Copernicus Climate Change Service, June 2024 is the 12th consecutive month where global temperatures have reached 1.5 °C above pre-industrial averages. On some days in November 2023 and again in February 2024, temperatures rose to +2 °C above pre-industrial levels (Murphy 2024). Yet, in COP 21, in 2015, most of the states of the world pledged to prevent the global temperature rise beyond 1,5 °C above pre-industrial levels. As temperatures keep rising, this aim has clearly been lost.

Should philosophy, today, not face the calamity of global warming? Should it not engage with the contradiction between the active nihilism of humankind as a whole, which has led to the objective nihilism of global warming, and the passive nihilism of inaction in view of global warming? I think so; and this is why, in my paper, I will ask: what is called nihilism in the epoch of global warming? Is global warming an extreme of nihilism or is it, on the contrary, a reality, which obliges us to overcome our habitual everyday nihilism?

1. What is nihilism?

In a small text published in the Collège International de Philosophie seminar proceedings *Traversées du nihilisme* (*The Crossings of Nihilism*), Jean-Luc Nancy explains Nietzsche's distinction between active and passive nihilism by making a distinction between *destruction* and *extinction* (Nancy 1993–1994). The sense of nihilism oscillates in the ambiguity between active forces of destruction and passive exhaustion of forces until their extinction. Nihilism "itself," he says, the "extreme of nihilism," lies in this in-between, in which we need to decide, not between active and passive nihilism, but on the interpretation of their in-between. This decision can fall on endless destruction:

> […] nuclear terror, destruction by wars, famines, illnesses, increasing growth of population, alternance of devastation and its palliatives, loss of sense and supplements of soul […]. It is not by chance that *ex-termination*—in the sense of ending without end, annihilation without *nihil*—is the keyword of the age of nihilism. *Interminable extermination*, ordinary state of affairs. (Nancy 1993–1994, 106.)

However, when it comes to the question of *nihilism*, the core of this interminable extermination is not the extermination of *life* in all these forms. The core problem is the extermination of *sense*, which, then, motivates the extermination of life. This is why Nietzsche hints at two ways of deciding against extermination. One of them consists in creating new sense, new values, perhaps a new religion beyond the old one. Responding to the problem of the loss of sense by creating a new idol is the easiest answer. The other one of them consists in experimenting the "extreme of nihilism," making a step into nothingness. That does not mean anything like *accelerating extermination*. On the contrary, that means understanding that sense is not something that we *have* or *do not have*, it is something that we *are*. As Nancy says elsewhere: "We do not have the sense, we are the sense." Sense is not the *sense of* existence, it is *existence* itself: "Every existing singularity, that is to say, every individual or collective, instantaneous or prolonged, configuration of existence, is such an 'introduction of sense.'" (Nancy 1993–1994, 111.) This is where Nancy joins Gianni Vattimo's idea that nihilism is actually the reverse side of the freedom of existence. "Accomplished nihilism," says Vattimo, "like Heidegger's *Abgrund* […], presents itself at the same time as our only possibility of freedom." (Vattimo 1987, 33.)

I believe that Nancy and Vattimo are right in their re-formulations of the question of the sense of human life: the experience of nihilism purifies experience so that it becomes possible to discover the liberty of existence itself in this very world. But I also think that for us, today, this is only the first step on the long path of "the crossing of nihilism." For us, the problem is much bigger, not the exhaustion of sense, but the concrete tendency of exhaustion of both *human and nonhuman life*. More precisely, the sense of human life is now a lesser problem, while the greater problem resides in the relation of human life to the totality of nonhuman life, upon which it depends. Human life is deeply affected, I would say *wounded*, by the deterioration of the planetary lifeworld. This is why the question of nihilism for us perhaps is not a simple question of destructive and exhausted *human* forces anymore. It is a question of the erosion of *nonhuman* life, of the entire planetary biosphere that is wounded by the destruction and exhaustion of conditions of all life; because this destruction was not intended by the humankind, it nonetheless was caused by it anyway.

The question is, then, how can we think through this other nihilism, which has no name yet, but which looms on the horizon as a kind of an *objective*, *natural*, *material*, or *real nihilism* of the planetary lifeworld as a whole.

2. Disaster

Is the deterioration of the conditions of all life a *nihilistic* event? In what follows, I will first re-interpret the ill-fitting term "objective nihilism" in terms of the *disaster* of the world, undergoing global warming. Then, I will show how it fits with the question of nihilism. (I could speak more generally of the nihilism of the Anthropocene, but the clarification of this much-debated theme would lead us to a side-track, so I concentrate on its most striking aspect, global warming. I believe that it is the most thought-provoking of all things today: what Heidegger calls *das Bedenklichste*; cf. Heidegger 1993, 370.)

Today, everybody knows what global warming is: the scientific work of the *Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change* (IPCC) can be taken as a relatively uncontroversial starting point, the main results of which are already known by enlightened citizens. For an accessible update, it is easy to read the last IPCC summary for policymakers. My question is not what global warming is, but what is its existential signification. The hypothesis I develop here (and in a forthcoming book) is that, instead of explaining it in habitual terms of catastrophe, it needs to be rethought as an unprecedented *disaster*, of which we have an equally unprecedented *impersonal experience*. Both of these terms—*disaster* and *impersonal experience*—need philosophical clarification, and this is what I propose to do in the following. In the end, I will ask if and how they can contribute to "the crossing of nihilism"?

Why the term "disaster"? From a scientific point of view, global warming is a *measurable evolution* of the planetary climate system. It is from the everyday existential viewpoint that it represents an *immeasurable disaster* that destabilizes our social and natural lifeworlds. It is not literally an end of the world: it is a deleterious erosion of the world that appears disastrous, because, in addition to wounding the planetary lifeworld, it also wounds and even *paralyzes* thinking. We only ever want to live like before, but we know that precisely by living like before we make it impossible to live like before. Such

a conflict is paralyzing—and this is why, on a collective level, "humankind" appears so impotent before the disaster.

In public debates, global warming is often characterized in terms of *catastrophe*. Of course, nobody likes catastrophes. This is why the climate scientists' discourse, warning about dangerous developments, is frequently contradicted by different "climate denialists," "climate reassurists," and even what climatologist Christophe Cassou calls "climate-I-don't-give-a-damn-ists" (Goar 2023). In addition to this, there are also philosophers who refuse "catastrophic thought" in general, because it is depressing, like, for example, Michael Foessel (2013) who rejects "catastrophism," when it becomes hysterical "apocalyptism," which does not notice that the thought of the catastrophe is the end of thought. Writing on climate change, Ted Toadvine also rejects apocalyptic descriptions of global warming (2024, 235–239). On the other hand, in a distant echo of Hans Jonas's "heuristics of fear" (Jonas 1984), Jean-Pierre Dupuy fashions an "enlightened catastrophism," which promotes a reasonable use of unreasonable fears (Dupuy 2004). These approaches rely on enlightened reason, without paying sufficient attention to its limits: while some reduce real dangers to psychological weaknesses, others do not really tell how to handle the contradiction of its injunction of trying to reason terror. What I would like to do, instead, is to take fears and anxieties tied to global warming seriously. I think that fear has its reasons that reason does not see, and that we really need to clarify the reasons of fear. I think that the word "disaster," in the precise sense first formulated by Maurice Blanchot in *L'écriture du désastre* (*The Writing of the Disaster*), is precious, because it allows me to avoid the usual term "catastrophe."

What does Blanchot mean by "disaster"? One should understand this term in contradistinction to Heidegger's thinking of the *Ereignis*. To put it very shortly, *Ereignis* is for Heidegger the event that gives the possibility to think; even nihilism itself can be such an event. In *Was heißt Denken?*, he says that the human being can think, insofar as the possibility of thinking is already given to it (Heidegger 1993, 369). This possibility is *das Bedenklichste*, "the most-thought-provoking." This awkward expression, "the most-thought-provoking," is shorthand for Heidegger's fundamental claim that, before we can even start thinking, *there is* something to be thought; we think, because

this something *calls* us to think. The "most-thought-provoking"—what gives itself to be thought—is fundamentally the sense of being or, as Heidegger puts it in 1952, when the work was written, *Ereignis*, the "event" that we render here simply as the gift of time and the gift of being (Heidegger 1972, 5). We do not need to go any further into the arcane of the right interpretation of *Ereignis*, but I would like to attract attention to the *mode*, in which *Ereignis* gives itself to think. Firstly, it precisely *gives* itself, and this "gift" possibilizes all thinking. There is something to be thought, and it calls us to thinking. Secondly, it is a gift without presence, because, although it gives itself to be thought, it gives itself as question that withdraws the possibility of fixing an answer.

But here, Heidegger leaves us on the verge of something he does not bring to the end. The writer who has drawn the most radical consequences of the event of thinking is Maurice Blanchot. In his book *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot radicalizes the idea of thinking as potency that can also remain impotent, and of "the most-thought-provoking" as a possibility that can also remain non-realized, because he conceives a very tight idea of a potency that never turns into a possibility and of "the most-thought-provoking" that turns into an *unthinkable*, in which there is nothing to think, or thought loses its powers; his example is not nihilism, but one of its most extreme manifestations, the Holocaust. Blanchot describes an awareness that is not a capacity that somebody—a Poet or a Thinker—could hold on to, because in Blanchot's case there is not *anybody* left who could be capable. The very last remnant of an "I" disappears in anonymity, in which there is no more "I" who thinks. Thinking still happens to somebody, but this somebody cannot be identified; it cannot even identify itself. Powerless, impotent, less than passive, it is nothing more than the kind of wakefulness that accompanies insomnia, when one is incapable of sleeping and totally exposed to what Blanchot calls the lucid second night behind the first night of reparative dreams (Blanchot 1989, 163, 167, 184).

> Something wakes: something keeps watch without lying in wait or spying. The disaster watches. When there is such watching—when sleeping consciousness, opening into unconsciousness, lets the light of the dream play—then what watches (the wake, or the impossibility of sleep at the heart of sleep) does not illuminate with an increase of

> visibility, of reflecting brilliance. Who watches? The question is obviated by the neutrality of the watch: no one watches. (Blanchot 1995, 48–49.)

Even when no one is there, there is a watchfulness to what comes. And what comes? Not the possibility of *questioning* that Heidegger took to be the beginning of thinking, nor a possibilizing event of *Ereignis*, which Heidegger sometimes likens to the passing of a God, and which is, with or without gods, the event of sense. *The Writing of the Disaster* is the very contrary of such a promise of sense—after all, it is also a book about the disaster of the Holocaust as unthinkable; as also Adorno and Lyotard think, it defies the very possibility of thinking. Only the disaster is there, and it does not bring the possibility of a new sense of the world, on the contrary:

> It is not thought that the disaster causes to disappear, but rather questions and problems—affirmation and negation, silence and speech, sign and insignia—from thought. Then, in the night without darkness, that has no sky, in the night heavy with the absence of the world and withdrawn from all self-presence, thought watches. (Blanchot 1995, 52.)

Yet: "[t]he disaster is the gift" (Blanchot 1995, 5), in the sense that the disaster is still something that, by just watching, calls to think, even though the inherited means of thought fail to address it meaningfully. To think about the disaster, both enlightened reason, dialectical reason, and even phenomenological thinking are *powerless*. So how to be up to the disaster? In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot explores extreme ways of being wakeful to what is given, not as "the most-thought-provoking," but on the contrary as an *unthinkable*: it is an impossibility of thinking that still imposes itself to thought. Blanchot thinks that the disaster cannot be described via positive acts of thinking, because it is also a disaster of known ways of *thinking*. Blanchot does not think it possible to bypass the disaster of thinking, but he describes the element of powerlessness, to which thinking is now exposed. He calls this element the *night*, not the first night that is only the reserve and resource of day, but the second night of impersonal insomnia. In this insomnia, the night is awake, and the sleepless is exposed to the night, without having the strength

to close the eyes to it or to clarify it. Here, the thinking of potency finds its summit in the extreme impotency.

3. Disaster of global warming

Now, obviously, Blanchot did not develop the notion of disaster, in order to speak about global warming—like many of his contemporaries, he was unaware of it and probably inclined to reject ecological questions—, so the term cannot be transposed directly onto our time. Blanchot thought disaster with reference to a finite human community, albeit one that has lost its consistency, whereas global warming is a planetary techno-natural event that concerns everybody. Keeping these limitations in mind, I believe that Blanchot's term "disaster" is useful in the task of thinking about global warming. It helps us articulate three important features of global warming.

Firstly, Blanchot's term "disaster"—*dés-astre*, which literally means *evil star*—differs from human tragedies and catastrophes, because it is not a thought-provoking event that clarifies the sense of human life, it does not add to our understanding of life, but a frightening event that strikes us as *unthinkable*. "The disaster," says Blanchot, "depriving us of that refuge which is the thought of death, dissuading us from the catastrophic or the tragic, dissolving our interest in will and all internal movement […]" (Blanchot 1995, 3), "[…] is the unknown name for that in thought itself that dissuades from thinking of it […] the thought of the disaster […] overflows every variety of thought, as the intense, silent and disastrous affirmation of the outside" (Blanchot 1995, 5). A disaster is not "inclined towards" humans, but it is just an overpowering impersonal event. Likewise, global warming is an overpowering impersonal event. It is a planetary natural process that results from the activity of human industrial civilization, without anybody intending it as such. It is not a human tragedy but a planetary disaster, insofar as it is not destined for any specific human individual or community, but befalls indifferently everybody, every living being.

Secondly, Blanchot says that the disaster is not a fact nor an event, it has no presence— "[…] not only because there is no 'I' to undergo the experience but because […] since the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there

cannot possibly be any experience of it" (Blanchot 1995, 28). Similarly, global warming cannot be experienced here and now. It is a kind of an event, but not like the event typically understood, that is, a remarkable happening that breaks history in two, like "the death of God" or the advent of "a Coming God." On the contrary, global warming is *unremarkable*. It does not appear as singular, because it takes place everywhere on the planet, and it does not appear as event-like, because its duration counts in centuries and millennia. Of course, it is not really the natural process itself, it is our realization of it that constitutes an event for us. Yet our realization is not an advent of new truth, either, but just the gradual obsolescence of our inherited concept of the world, when we realize that maintaining the world we knew—by living like before—actually amounts to destroying the very world we try to maintain. The event of global warming provokes the "unworlding" of all finite homeworlds: it pushes them out of joint and shows their fault-lines, by showing how they rely on unforeseen events of planetary techno-nature. It is not easy to stop seeking the sense of one's life in the familiar homeworld and start seeking it in the entire planetary techno-nature, instead. This requires changing all coordinates of traditional thinking of the world, including the classical phenomenological concept of the world. I will discuss these changes in detail elsewhere, but I can say very quickly that thinking through the event of global warming breaks through the traditional phenomenological coordinates of the world: the *locality* and the *historicity* that are the classical coordinates of the world's *finitude*. Although global warming is revealed by universalist science, it also reveals the planet as a finite place; its finitude, however, overflows the traditional notion of finitude and calls for a new understanding of it. The dimensions of planetary finitude are no more locality and historicity, but what I have elsewhere called the planetary *displace* (Lindberg 2018) and what Ted Toadvine has called the *deep history* of nature (Toadvine 2024). Planetary techno-nature is not local, because it takes place everywhere in the dimension of technological, economical, and ecological globalization. It is a *displace* both in the sense that it is a non-place where no one can dwell (*Bauen*, *Wohnen*, *Denken*) as well as in the sense that it is a place appearing only in terms of displacements and transitions of human beings, goods, energy, information, etc. Such a place is an uninhabitable dimension of general unhomeliness and alienation. Similarly, planetary techno-nature

cannot be inserted into a historicity, but it evolves along the nonhuman *deep history* of nature. Human historicity tends to become a story that moves from our past towards our future; this is how it understands global warming either in nihilistic terms of collapse and catastrophe of human societies or in term of progress and anti-catastrophism. Deep time does not care about such narrations, it does not predict future doom and salvation, because its disasters only operate neutral change. — For the reasons of brevity, I cannot develop these terms or their transcendental conditions any further here, but I wanted to name them, in order to show how the entire philosophical edifice is touched, when the concept of the world is rearticulated through the concept of global warming.

Thirdly, global warming does not happen to anybody in particular but to everybody as an anonymous mass. Like the Blanchotian disaster, global warming is a curious calamity that destroys the "I" who could undergo the experience and plunges us into impersonality and anonymity of the Heideggerian "the they" (*das Man*). Actually, the question of the way, in which the impersonal disaster of global warming affects human thinking, is multi-layered, because what happens in scientific thinking and what happens in existential thinking do not amount to the same. Scientific thinking has shown its power in the discovery of global warming. However, one cannot experience this scientific fact personally; according to the climate historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, this is why people tend to be indifferent towards global warming (Chakrabarty 2009). But I think that in this particular case the impersonal scientific studies become existentially significant. Actually, they *do* affect us existentially, but they do this in a specific kind of *impersonal affective mood* (*Stimmung des Man*). An "impersonal affect" sounds paradoxical, but is central to the understanding of the particular existential situation that global warming engenders.

It seems to me that the impersonal affect arisen by global warming first affects people in two ways, which are actually two sides of the same affect. One has been described by Catherine Malabou who, following Chakrabarty, has said that the Anthropocene, of which global warming is the most imposing aspect, is mostly met with *indifference*: indifference would be the most common affect towards global warming, and this makes change difficult (Malabou 2017). But it seems to me that this is only one side of the coin.

Global warming can also cause *despair*—and indifference is one way of dealing with despair. I do not understand despair as a pathology that should be cured (as if young peoples' climate anxiety was a pathology. Is global warming not rather a planetary pathology, to which young and also older people react in a healthy manner?) Instead, I understand despair in the specific existential sense given to this affect by Claude Romano in *L'événement et le monde* (*Event and World*) (although Romano does not speak about global warming, but only of personal experiences). Despair is, according to Romano, a painful apathy, in which I cannot appropriate things that happen to me, but I sink into an impersonal groundless anonymity, in which "'I' am there without being there, in an impersonal stupor, where suffering, at its peak, becomes almost painless" (Romano 2009, 104). Impersonal pain is painless, because there is no "I" to whom suffering happens. This painful-painless despair is caused by a specific modality of the world, in which "the world no longer becomes world [it does not *world* anymore, when 'to world' is understood as a verb: *le monde ne mondanise pas*, *die Welt weltet nicht*]," it is impossible to be interested in the world or integrate events in and as a world (Romano 2009, 104). Romano continues:

> […] despair manifests a dimension of human adventure that Heidegger did not pay attention to, a pre-personal dimension that existential analytic left aside, because it started from existence, which is for itself (*umwillen seiner*), and postulated a selfhood (*jemeinigkeit*) […], on the contrary, despair testifies to the fundamental anonymity of human adventure. (Romano 2021, 165; my translation, since the passage is missing from the English translation.)

This anonymity is very close to the impersonal insomnia that Blanchot describes in *The Space of Literature*.

However, while the disaster, in Blanchot's thinking, leaves the human being stunned and paralyzed, perhaps still nihilistic, in Romano's thinking there is a way out. Romano analyzes affects, such as sadness, despair, and fear, not as pathologies, but as fundamental ways of relating to the events that de/constitute the world. A world is for him a certain articulation of the world. When an event occurs, a world articulation is disjointed and disarticulated:

the event is something that does not fit in. What Romano calls *the human adventure* consists in reconstituting and rearticulating the world after an event has disarticulated it. The task of thinking is this new articulation of the world disarticulated by the disaster. This does not mean healing and mending the world so that it becomes the same as before. On the contrary, the disaster is deeply destabilizing, because we know that the world will never be the same again. It is a disaster of thinking that finds itself at a dead end, when it realizes that, if it continues to orient life as before, it becomes impossible to live like before.

So, the world really needs to be *articulated*, *constellated*, *composed* differently. As Jacques Derrida remarks, real invention is *the invention of the other*. It is the realization of something that, until now, appeared *impossible*; not the continuation of the past but a rupture with it. When thought sees the coming days only through the lens of impossibility, it sinks into indifference and despair. But when it sees *the need for a future*, despite its impossibility, it arms itself with *courage*, in order to demand the impossible. Although, by definition, one cannot *know* what the future will be, one can still *imagine* it; indeed, imagination opens the way to thinking the impossible (future). Of course, one cannot count on imaginary futures alone. This is why one also needs to keep imagination in check by means of reason. Thinking towards the future is thus an incessant exchange between reason and imagination. Reason is *a technique of thinking*, a thinking that already knows how to think. Imagination refuses ready-made techniques; it reaches towards unexpected things that thinking deems impossible. Thinking is needed to test imagination, but for thinking to meet the challenge of imagination it must be able to let go of its routines and invent new techniques of operating. This is the real moment of invention, the moment, in which a former technique of thinking is overcome, and a simple possibility becomes reality. Invention occurs in this space between reason and imagination; it is their coincidence, the moment, in which impossibility becomes reality. I cannot provide examples of such *rational imagination* here, but I can say that they lead, among others, to the invention of ethics and politics of the planetary world.

4. The crossing of nihilism

To end, I would like to come back to my starting point, namely, the question of nihilism. I have tried to push nihilism to an extremity, where it is no more a question of the erosion of the sense of *human* life, but of the erosion of *nonhuman* life itself, as exemplified in the case of global warming. As it feels awkward to describe this extremity in terms of "nihilism" (should it be "objective," "natural," "material," or "real" nihilism?), I chose to describe it in terms of "disaster," instead. Now, *is thinking of disaster nihilistic?* In this case, it is simply realistic, insofar as thinking about the climate disaster consists in thinking about scientific facts as lucidly as possible. Unless, of course, nihilism *is* this realism. After all, Blanchot also said: "Science cannot but be nihilist; it is the meaning of a world deprived of meaning, a knowledge that is founded on the last ignorance." (Blanchot 1993, 146.)

The original formulations of nihilism concern the sense of *human* life; and although nihilism arises from the feeling of the loss of such a sense, in the end the crossing of nihilism amounts to an intensification of human life itself, as shown by Nancy and Vattimo. Now, I tried to show that, instead of intensifying human existence, the realization of the disaster of global warming tends to weaken the sense of human life, because it enhances the feeling of anonymity and impersonality. Is the discovery of this impersonality that shines through the affects of indifference and despair nihilistic: the belief that anything I do is meaningless, so I do not do anything, or that anything we do is hopeless? Or is it, on the contrary, the crossing of nihilism to the extremity, in which confusion and disorientation turn into *courage* to face the world as it is: disastrous, but also wonderous, and certainly worthy of all our efforts?

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