# Black Holes as the Cardinal Objects of Speculative Nihilism

by Ondřej Váša[1]

**Abstract**

How did black holes evolve into conceptual figures of speculative nihilism? This essay outlines the metaphorical convergences that recast these opaque astronomical entities as signature objects of "cosmic pessimism" in the work of thinkers like Eugene Thacker, Benjamin H. Bratton, and Ben Woodard.

**Keywords**: black hole, cosmic imagination, astronoetics, nihilism, speculative realism

I'm the wreck of you
I'm the death of you all
I'm the wreck of you
I'm the break and the fall
Soundgarden, Limo Wreck (*Superunknown*, 1994)

If we hadn't tracked down black holes in the depths of space, we would have had to invent them. Wait a minute… we *did* invent them! They emerged from the inhuman mathematics of relativity as speculative physical monsters that physics itself – despite the embryonic eighteenth-century intuition – initially refused to accept, denying them the right to exist (Bartusiak, 2015).

For good reason: black holes stormed the celestial stage as objects of "Lovecraftian horror", transforming the once-glorious stellar landscape into a "rather depressing picture of our galaxy being eaten alive", leaving physicists yearning for an orderly universe stranded with an "irrational

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belief that the world and universe are, must be, lawful" (Pournelle, 1978b, pp. 348-349). These "blood-mouthed wolfs" (Broxon, 1978, p. 283) "bend light and time" (Pohl, 1999, p. 298), and not just them: beyond the event horizon, even "space and sanity" are degraded into "meaningless terms" (Aldiss, 1989, pp. 225). Last but not least, these entities challenge the very concept of blackness itself, as their "terrible darkness" (Aldiss, 1989, pp. 224) is "blacker than evil" (Benford & Eklund, 1977, p. 62) and, against the backdrop of a universe illuminated by stars, they stand out as "purest black, unseeable, unknowable, a thing of madness". In a word: they are an "enemy" (Swanwick, 1981, p. 92).

It is true that black holes have entered our cosmic imagination in less gloomy light as well: as wormholes opening into wondrous parallel universes, or even as creators of better worlds from the dust of stars. Still, even today, they persist in scientific metaphor as "the weirdest things in the universe", as "monsters", "beasts", "nasty singularities" with "alien and brutal properties" (Phipps, 2020, pp. 21-22).

And they tend to look that way too. One need only think of the nowiconic behemoth in the scifi epic *Interstellar* (2014); the majestic cosmic monster of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018); or the more intimate, yet no less menacing omen in the sky, in the series *Hard Sun* (2018). These are joined by countless subtler black hole companions across art, short films, and visualizations of varying scientific rigour (Gamwell, 2025). Even a miniature black hole appears intuitively catastrophic – much like its metaphorical, sexualized incarnation in Charles Burns's comic *Black Hole* (1995-2005). In the end, a black hole doesn't even have to be near to be lethal, as in *High Life* (2018) – arguably the saddest film ever to host the phenomenon – where it awaits a little girl like an inhuman sacrificial altar.

No wonder they became favourites of "speculative nihilism", revered as saboteurs within the cosmic order. Nevertheless, this seemingly fated role was woven from a tapestry of fusions, initiated by an instinctive aesthetic decision.

Put very briefly, black holes entered culture as icons born from a colour adjective – bogeymen emerging out of the dark corners of a cosmic scrapyard. Who would wonder? The universe is black, holes are black; and the supermassive ones sit enthroned in the wombs of light like mementi mori, reducing stars to little more than trinkets of idealist or romantic imagination. And through this alliance with the black – hand in hand with the ongoing bankruptcy of the Enlightenment – they gained

the upper hand.

Stars demand faith. Their majesty rises and falls with the idea of better tomorrows toward which these beacons are meant to guide us, and their light resists any easy separation from the metaphors of knowledge or salvation. Black holes, by contrast, seem almost purposebuilt to indict any emotional investment in the cosmos, the darkest and most hostile corner of all. They outlive the stars only to become the wreck of them; murmuring like the incomprehensibly lame fate of everything.

"Where we are, you shall be. And where you are… is but a random point in a wasteland whose agenda bears no relation to yours". At least that is the message speculative pessimism claims to discern in the cosmic noise, invoking black holes as nihilistic *corpora delicti* for all futile pretensions to harmony and meaning.

That, I believe, warrants a brief flyby.

*(Con)Fusions*

Let's rewind the clock a bit, for the conceptualization of black holes outlined above aligns well with a longstanding tradition of aesthetic and philosophical reflections on

> a vast *abyss* of space
> So wide and deep that flashing thunderbolts
> Can neither in their courses traverse it
> Though they may fall through endless tracts of time,
> Nor by their travel make one whit the less
> The distance still to go (Lucretius, 1997, pp. 31-32, italics mine).

In other words, black holes slip naturally into the post-Lucretian contemplation of a merciless universe, where we may be sure that

> Heaven and earth likewise had their beginning
> And in destruction too will have their end (Lucretius, 1997, p. 144).

These bleak prospects filtered through the Victorian visions of indifferent freezing wastelands – whether in the Arctic or in outer space – and from there into modern judgments about the very "pointlessness" of the universe (Weinberg, 1993, p. 154), where "our number" – the existence

of humanity and life itself – "came up in the Monte Carlo game" (Monod, 1971, p. 146). Were we ever to venture across such immeasurable distances, it would only be to hear a verdict first whispered in the wilderness of the nineteenth century, and now reverberating through the icy cosmic desolation of our own age:

> This ground is not prepared for you. […] I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors. […] Why seek me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother? Shouldst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear (Thoreau, 2004, p. 64).

The fusion described above was naturally far more complex – just as the post-Lucretian secularized universe need not necessarily provoke moral skepticism. A classic example can be found in Bertrand Russell's reflections on the "abysses of space", "accidental collocations of atoms", or nature as an "unthinking Mother". Yes, it is true that "all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system" (Russell, 1983, p. 67). But this does not diminish the possibilities of human freedom, whose nobility arises precisely from the impossibility of outwitting the universe.

Primo Levi reflects in a similar vein: "Maybe we exist by chance", but "if the human mind has conceived Black Holes, and dares to speculate on what happened in the first moments of creation, why should it not know how to conquer fear, poverty and grief?" (Levi, 2002, pp. 214–215).

And yet: see how easily and smoothly we arrived at black holes?

Levi, of course, does not choose them at random. On the contrary, his anthology of key existential and scientific texts systematically leads toward them (Levi, 2002, p. 9). Levi is an optimist: the fact that "the human mind has conceived Black Holes" proves that "the heavens are not simple, but neither are they impermeable to our minds – they are waiting to be deciphered" (p. 214). But beneath this hopeful gaze lies a subtle tension, an unspoken contrast between black holes and the Big Bang. As the dark, implosive antipodes of radiant, explosive creation, black holes stand out as the true agents of a universe that is "hostile, violent, alien" (p. 214).

So why should we treat black holes merely as thorny cosmic problems, rather than as "the world's summit", where "the general darkness of the observable universe […] coincides weirdly with the singular negative mirage" of these voracious cavities? (Masciandaro, 2013, pp. 49-50).

If the universe is ultimately a kingdom of "caprice and disorder, eternally unintelligible", should these regents not already be ruling the heavens that, one day, will be "overcast and starless?" (Poincaré 1958, 88). Why not to venerate black holes as "the most vengeful things possible in the universe", that "take revenge on the also-vengeful world of chemistry?" (Morton, 2024, p. 139). As gigantic mouths that devour not only "that visible and gross light [of the stars] which strikes our bodily eyes, but a light far more subtile, which illuminates our minds?" (Poincaré, 1958, p. 85).

It would seem so. For if stars illuminate outer space as a realm of hope – where there is always somewhere else to go, a place beyond gravity's grasp, reachable only by light – then black holes testify to a noir universe.

**Black Hole is the New Black**

That would be another milestone on our journey.

At the modern crossroads, the universe is no longer just an abyss. It is "an abyss of *darkness*" (Monod, 1971, p. 170, italics mine; Brljak, 2025); and the "disconcerting vastness of the 'great outdoors'" (Gironi, 2010, p. 15) presents a "speculative opportunity" only insofar as it unfolds both before and within man as "an eternal and unfathomable blackness" (Brassier, 2007, p. 228).

François Laruelle's universe is also black, its blackness being "the radical of color […] entirely interior to itself and to man, […] the without-Ground which fixes light in the remote where man observes it". To "assist the Universe", to live up to the fact that man "is answered only by the Universe, being black and mute" (Laruelle, 2013, pp. 104-105), ultimately requires nothing less than the abandonment of all master concepts and images that reduce the boundless universe to this or that – nature, home, wasteland, resource – and subject it to selective rays that disciplined reason wields as pointers and canes. These concepts tame outer space into a manageable, domesticated World, shrinking its horizon to the down-to-earth survival that fundamentally denies the universe's

boundlessness. But man is to constitute himself from its darkness as an unrestrained being – or more precisely, as a figure of liberated and boundless thought of the night.

Laruelle certainly need not be read nihilistically; nevertheless, such a reading remains possible – if only because accepting such a relationship entails accepting "the unhuman orientation of deep space and deep time" (Thacker, 2012a, p. 68), whose philosophical consequence is "cosmic pessimism, a pessimism of the world without us", accompanied by the notion of "doom" that demands "humanity [be] given over to unhumanity in an act of crystalline selfabnegation" (Thacker, 2012a, pp. 68-70; Barber, 2013, p. 38).

It is easy to understand why, for a cosmic nihilist, black holes seem to have just the right colour, suffused with the mystical tones of "divine darkness" (Thacker, 2012b, p. 91) and the eerie glow of "black illumination" (Thacker, 2013). "Hence another possible meaning of the term 'black': Black = Cosmic. Or better, Black = Cosmic Pessimism" (Thacker, 2011).

Undoubtedly, part of their allure lies in the very phrase "black hole", which already sounds "lugubrious" (CrightonLyon, 2011, p. 266; Gironi, 2010). Given its culturally wellassimilated properties, the black hole becomes an ideal metaphor for withdrawn objects that elude discursive capture (Bryant, 2013, pp. 293-294). For Graham Harman, "'black hole' would be a good technical term for the sort of allusive, withdrawn object that Lovecraft so often loves to establish" (Harman, 2012, p. 276) – a notion he later extends to real objects in general. It also helps that black holes are not merely theoretical abstractions. They are objects we can point to, entities that seem to guard the universe's deepest secrets. They loom fantastically gargantuan – and they can even be photographed. That surely qualifies them as universal superstars.

But that is not the whole story. There is, of course, a long tradition of black objects symbolizing forms of negation; from black dogs, horses, and suns to the symbolic taboos of anuses and vaginas in rigid discourses, on to the somber metaphors of black holes of memory, depression, drives, or trauma – a lineage where our cosmic phenomenon fits more than readily (Kristeva, 1989; Crockett, 2007, pp. 37-50; Catren, 2011; Waldron, 2013; Eekhoff, 2022, pp. 37-53; Sperling, 2026). How could it not? These forms of imbalance threaten the stability of the inner world just as black holes disrupt the coherence of the outer one. For all their

evocative force, however, the parables invoked remain no more than metaphors – attempts to gesture toward the dynamics of an inaccessible centre that nonetheless governs everything around it.

With speculative realism, however, something's new. Black holes, as the sovereign objects of a universal blackness, are elevated from the realm of loose metaphors to the level of metonymic ordeals that everyone must sooner or later pass through.

## On a Highway to Hell

There is something revealing in black holes' ready affinity with Dantean imagination. Jerry Pournelle treats them as analogues of Mount Purgatory, the fateful destination of Ulysses – the archetypal role model of all future cosmic mariners (Pournelle, 1978a; Dante, *Inf.* XXVI:133). Michael Bishop, with Beatrice beside him, calls them "dark, entropic murderers" (Bishop, 1978, p. 303). In Disney's *The Black Hole* (1979), scientists bow before "the most destructive force in the universe […] just like from Dante's *Inferno*". For Susskind, crossing the event horizon echoes a plunge into Dantean hell (Susskind, 2008, pp. 36-37).

Yet the most compelling example comes from one of speculative realism's foundational texts, Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* (2006). There Meillassoux summons the image of Dante's Ulysses and his vortex-like fall at the moment of an epistemic passage into "the great outdoors" (Meillassoux, 2008, p. 63). Although the image is mediated through Mallarmé's reworking of the same motif in *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance* (1897), its message remains crystal clear: through mathematics we enter the "Kingdom of the dead", sinking into "the hells of the inorganic world – those deep, subterranean realms where life and subjectivity are absent". In other words, the "principle of materialism", which asserts access to an inhuman world beyond correlation with human consciousness, is intrinsically "infernal", and the logic of this journey is that of *descent* (Meillassoux, 2016, pp. 157-158; for an extended analysis of the Ulyssean motif, see Váša, 2023, pp. 124-127).

This speculative turn readily aligns with the broader tendency to resist the traditional philosophical veneration of the heavens. From Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Kant's starry sky *above* us, through Georges Bataille's mockery of astronomers who, like military officers, regiment the

heavens into mathematical order, to speculative realism, which instinctively avoids stellar imagery and instead gravitates toward the murky, Lovecraftian register of cosmic horror. If only because the stars present a splendorous spectacle: one that too easily imposes the idea of a world inherently correlated with the human mind.

Yet the same vortex draws in a vessel that appears to be charting an entirely different course: Ray Brassier's nihilistic "organon of extinction" (Brassier, 2007, p. 239). It is true that Brassier ultimately overturns Meillassoux's notion of the "ancestrality" of a nonhuman world, along with Sigmund Freud's understanding of the death drive as a "primordial pull *back* towards the inorganic" (Brassier, 2007, p. 235, italics mine). Instead, he theorizes the posteriority of extinction, the inevitable consequence of the universe's entropic dissipation – culminating, as already noted, in "an eternal and unfathomable blackness" (p. 228).

And it is precisely this collapse of the very conditions of sentience that inclines us toward an aesthetics of descent rather than elevation – toward going down instead of looking up. The key point is that "the posteriority of extinction indexes a physical annihilation which no amount of chronological tinkering can transform into a correlate 'for us', because no matter how proximal or how distal the position allocated to it in spacetime, it has already cancelled the sufficiency of the correlation" (p. 229). For this reason, extinction must be understood not as something awaiting us in a distant future – as the final page of the book of history – but as a "catastrophe (…) that has already happened" (p. 223): one that "turns thinking inside out, objectifying it as a perishable thing in the world like any other (and no longer the imperishable condition of perishing)" (p. 229). Brassier develops these originally Lyotardian insights into the conclusion that "extinction is real yet not empirical, since it is not of the order of experience" (p. 238). He advances this even further, arguing that thought can indeed "bind" extinction, but not by treating it as an object; rather, only as a form of trauma (p. 239). That is, as something already present – something that belongs to the regime of depth. If anything, the catastrophe in question undergoes a peculiar form of *catabasis* with respect to us, and we respond with a traumatically heightened intuition of a fall.

And if one of the decisive aesthetic moments of this *disaster* is the prospect that "every star in the universe will have burnt out, plunging the cosmos into a state of absolute darkness" (p. 228), then this is all the more reason to move beyond stellar metaphors associated with light.

But that is no simple task.

It no longer seems sufficient to "fling [yourself] toward the stars to reduce them to powder, one by one" (Cioran, 2010, p. 181). Reza Negarestani was right to criticize the "conservative solar image of thought," which obstructs the "unrestricted and abyssal reflexivity of the universe and its universal synthesis" (Negarestani, 2008a). More precisely, he was right to challenge the limited rebellion staged against this economy, and to experiment instead with Lovecraftian images of radical necrophilic bonds – relations governed by the logic of contagion and decay. This "philia" – unlike purposeful syntheses that remain bounded by their own ends – leads into "the unground where events or entities undergo a *descent* without stoppage" (Negarestani, 2003, italics mine).

One may attempt to subvert the classical image of stars as beacons or companions – remaking them as volcanic eruptions, or recasting the night sky as a field of candles in a Kantian cemetery desecrated by antiastral intercourse, as Georges Bataille once did. One may worship the sun as a bestial deity, as in Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* (2007). One may even dream, with Bernal, of "resolving itself entirely into light" and becoming conscious radiation (Bernal, 1929, p. 57). Yet even these gestures remain caught within the solar economy and its "parochial" machinery. Even the most determined solar rebels, eagerly embracing cosmic death, still play by stellar rules, offering their bodies to the blaze of life.

To truly defy the stars – to refuse to be drawn toward light, to resist submission to the mundane imperatives of survival, futile as they are – one must go a step further: the stars must be *degraded*.

And this is where black holes step in. Looking up to the stars is as foolish as a fish trying to leap above the surface in the belief that doing so will free it from the hook. To hurl oneself into a black hole, by contrast, requires only one thing: to go with the flow, knowing that this is the only course worth following. Black holes – or, more precisely, the devouring unknown that lies beyond the event horizon – function as metonymic objects of uprootedness, which simultaneously open within us as a traumatic anomaly that disrupts the system.

Nihilistic imagination does not treat black holes as mere opposites of stars or as their photographic negatives. Black holes do not outshine the stars; they arise from their collapse and failure. As ravenous, imploded centers of galaxies, they embody the cosmic ruin of our hopes and the quiet bankruptcy of our knowledge. Born from the structural logic of this

world, they exist only to criminally puncture it – and, as singularities hidden behind the event horizon, they inhabit the cosmos as something that neither belongs to this world nor concerns itself with it. They rule over nothing; instead, they negate everything.

The alwaysprovisional stars, perched on their dimestore luminous thrones, never reach the bottom of things. Black holes do. And as debased objects with an underside but no ground or seat to speak of, they descend all the way – and take the very idea of bottoms and thrones with them. They confirm that "the weird" is the authentic "cosmic reality" (Negarestani, 2008b).

## Sources of Inhumanity

It is true that neither Meillassoux nor Brassier mention black holes explicitly; however, their speculative readers readily deploy them whenever they wish to emphasize the "breakdown between the human and the environment in which it is enmeshed" (Thacker, 2012c, p. 140).

Black holes – understood as cultural objects – fit perfectly with Thacker's horror-inspired logic that "the indifferent" and essentially cosmic "unhuman is immanently 'within' the human as well" (Thacker, 2013); or more precisely, that "extinction can only be comprehended from within the tomb" (Thacker, 2018; Negarestani, 2008a). The "unhuman" or "extinction" cannot be thought from behind a glass window. It has to be thought from within, as something actively at work.

Hence, Schopenhauer and his notion of the "cosmic indifference of the Will" are compared to a black hole (Thacker, 2015, p. 41; Thacker, 2020, p. 28; Thacker et al., 2017, p. 312). Black holes come immediately to mind once we realize that "the cosmos is even more indifferent than we initially thought" (Thacker, 2018). They represent "the absolute density of non-being, absorber of all sound" (Thacker, 2014, pp. 179-180, 187), and serve as heroines of "anti-Christian visions of cosmic disaster, the infernal universe swallows God and everything else" (Thacker, 2012d, p. 91).

Naturally, Thacker is not the only one. Benjamin H. Bratton hails the famous 2019 photograph of a black hole, noting that its "darkness is absolutely empty," and that "part of what makes this image signif-

icant is that it signifies true nothingness." He anticipates this "terrifying image" of "anti-significance" and "undermining" to "absorb us and uproot us" (Bratton, 2019, pp. 7, 62-63).

Ian Bogost identifies "a strong link between inhumanity and alienness," considering aliens to be "the flipside of the inhuman," and describing them as "the deep-space black-hole source of inhumanity" (Bogost, 2014, p. 140).

Ben Woodard, for his part, greets black holes as "destructive singularities" and "deterritorialized digging machines" that "move through space and expand the yawning spatiality of space itself" (Woodard, 2013, p. 40).

These and similar observations hail black holes as the true and authentically cardinal objects of the universe. Not only because they are supermassive and "huge", or because they currently function as epistemic and aesthetic focal points of the universe, seemingly guarding its most profound mysteries. They have become favored references within speculative nihilism because they serve as unique *corpora delicti* of its inherent, radical inhumanity.

## Conclusion

The fusion described above, however, is also riddled with a whole series of shortcircuited "ifs". Here we can only repeat a variation of the critical question that Mary Midgley once posed to earlier moralizing uses of scientific metaphors and classifications (Midgley, 2003).

What makes black holes stranger objects than "the appearance of a fly on the speaker's nose" (Bataille, 1970, p. 184)? What makes them more cardinal than the birth of my daughter, or than the fact that Jesus Christ's crucifixion took place off the beaten track? What is it, exactly, that makes black holes terrifying? Is "being torn apart into atoms" (Tyson, 2007, p. 283) truly more horrifying or more bizarre than being hit by a laundry van?

Black holes are undoubtedly curious entities governed by unusual physics and mathematics. But the fact that they do not fit neatly into the current geometry of the universe does not automatically make them the James Deans of outer space – although, admittedly, the villain dressed in black is always cooler than Gregory Peck.

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