The motif of the dark forest and the ghastly artist's or theoretician's relation to it can be thought about in various ways. The obvious one is regarding the forest as *the other*, being usually so distinctly separated from the world of people – the village – or what philosophers call *the same*. But the affective meaning of this otherness is never univocal, quite the opposite really. The surrealist Max Ernst once wrote a short text titled *What is a Forest?* about his childhood encounters with this other and what for him those forests represented: "They're wild and impenetrable, they're black and rust-red, debauched, worldly, teeming with life, diametrical, dissipated, cruel, passionate and lovable, without yesterday or tomorrow." In the midst of all those characterizations, one thing is certain: "The forests gobble up the horizon." When entering a forest, conceptual thought fails us, a sheet of night covers the enlightened mind and lets it speechless, worthless in a situation not suitable for it. In the paintings of Max Ernst a forest becomes a wooden two-dimensional wall, a dark and black impenetrable and indestructible conglomerate. *Phusis* loves to hide, supposedly said Heraclitus, and plant is "an obscure non-object: obscure, because it ineluctably withdraws, flees from sight and from a rigorous interpretation; non-object, because it works outside, before, and beyond all subjective considerations and representations" (Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, Colombia University Press, 2013, p. 28). The forest holds power over the horizon, no light can enter it. But what is this gobbling up of the horizon?

(I)

In this hides the answer to the conclusion of the Western ontotheological tradition, the conclusion condensed in the thought of G. W. F. Hegel. After trying for so long to know it all and then with Hegel actually knowing it all – securing the identity of identity and non-identity, uniting union and non-union – philosophy could finally let itself *not know*. It seems strange for philosophy – the supposed love of wisdom – to settle for not-knowing. But let us say it for once: With this philosophy heaved a sigh of relief. Having in front of us the whole Hegelian system of *e v e r y t h i n g* – and still knowing that it's not *really* everything. The only thing left for us is not to try to encompass everything, but try to look for or even make up the unencompassable. Philosophy got closer to art than to science. Letting nature be the other and the other be once again unopen, letting it devour the horizon and be asked questions in its night. Some of this otherness obviously stayed in our homes, where the animals and the plants still resemble us. We still lead the carefully chosen path for the vine to climb up the house and the cats eat around the same time as we do. But there comes a time of an intrusion of this otherness, even in our own homes. Think of the situation Derrida wrote about in his book *L'animal que donc je suis*: "Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us? What animal? The other. I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am*—and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment." (Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 3–4) The eyes are saying that there is no one there, except there is someone and at the same time that *it* is accusing us — *You are the other; in yourself there is this same otherness, if that would not be the case, there would be no embarrassment, there would be no resemblance between the two of us*, can be read in the eyes of the cat. We can now see that the impenetrable forest of Max Ernst is just a projection of his sexuality. In fact: Everything about the other is a projection. So, whatever is impenetrable *for us* is in fact the impenetrable *in us*. The other is often thus rightfully portrayed as a sort of a monster, taking in account that *mon-*

I Max Ernst, *The Embalmed Forest*, Oil on Canvas, 1933.

strum, etymologically speaking, means "that which reveals", as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reminds us in his influential essay *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)* (1996). There is therefore nothing strange in the fact that the question that has risen in Derrida, while being seen naked by a cat, was: *Who am I?* Similarly, but not exactly the same, in Scott Smith's novel *The Ruins* (2006), Stacy, the last surviving character, knowing that the invading plant is inside of her, asks herself: *Am I still me?*

Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. Animal is the other, OK. But can plants and forests *truly* be considered as the other? Or are they "too insignificant and mundane to even deserve the appellation *others*." (Marder 2013, p. 2) But isn't this insignificance the main, crucial point of the other? If it is not insignificant for us, it is not truly other, for it is filled with *our* significance, with ourselves. In this essay I would like to point out the contribution of the horror genre to giving the insignificant and mundane forest its Otherness.

That being said, let us dive in the thing itself, that is through personal experience of course. In these days I feel useless. In fact — I am useless. The pain in my upper back has been killing me for three days in a row now, latching me onto the bed, which in my suspicion is the one actually responsible for this condition. The bed is old and I spend way too much time on it, sometimes making it my own personal studio. In moments like these one is forced to reappropriate his position on *uselessness in itself* in hope of finding a justification for the past few days. The meaning of useless knowledge and the lazy unmoved mover, ὃ οὐ κινούμενον κινεῖ – imagine his backpain, huh? – has been put forth by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, officially making it of fundamental importance for philosophy. Today everybody is writing about the need to slow the fuck down, the Green New Deal just isn't enough, we need a serious re-thinking of the evergreen concept of growth, and the degrowth movement is doing just that. But slowing down typically means already hearing the rumbling and coughing of the motor in its misfunctioning, leaving life and being behind. In this concernment about Being being left behind and in dealing with everything useless, the question is not anymore what one can do with the useless thing. This thing is after all utterly useless, the revelation leaving some gasping for air ("Does such a thing as a useless thing *actually* exist?" ask the salesmen in panic.) A different kind of question arises from it: Can the useless do something with us, to us?

Anyway, the time spent in bed should be my time spent in the woods, a time to think of the meaning of the motif of the dark forest. But maybe staying in bed and staying in the forest are not absolutely distinct situations …

So, what does being useless have to do with the horror and terror of the forest? As it seems, quite a lot. Let us read a few words from Georges Bataille's book *Guilty:*

> In the depths of the woods, as in a bedroom where two lovers are undressing, laughter and poetry are set free. Outside the woods, just as outside the bedroom, useful activity goes on; each person is a part of it. But inside the bedroom, each person withdraws from useful action: and when we die, each of us withdraws from the possibility of action…In the woods my craziness rules as sovereign…Who could suppress death? I'm setting fire to a golden bough; flames of laughter can be heard within, licking at it.
>
> Bataille, *Guilty*, Lapis Press, 1988, p. 117–118

Useful activity is thus far from the forest, far from nature, as usefulness abstractly means being useful for capital, and the beginning of capital is in the process of privatizing the means of production, which originated in what Marx called *the primitive accumulation of capital*: substantially keeping the worker as far away as possible from his source of life, abstracting him from nature, pointing to the exchange value of everything, neglecting the use value, while still being useful – for accumulation of profit. What is useful is abstracted into money, the capitalistic abstraction *par excellence*, which has – as Marx wrote in his *On the Jewish Question* – "robbed the whole world – both the world of men and nature – of its specific value" (*Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, *1843–44, Vol. 3*, International

Publishers, 1975: 172). Therefore, the usefulness for capital is something different from – let's call it – primitive, originative usefulness of a thing. But still: both of them are mere abstractions. Using other life as a thing – for food and other products – means to abstract, relate to the ontic and not the ontological specificities of living beings. Let us do a Hegelian spin here: Returning to the forest means not abolishing abstraction; no, it means returning to an even greater abstraction, to the godly abstraction, and this is what art of horror points out to. The great abstraction being: we are all the same. This really is a great abstraction, leaving out every real and concrete characterization and saying you and I, *we are the same*, especially in death. In a horror film anyone can be a victim of the murderous hillbilly, the mythical creature from the depths of the woods, or a victim of the forest itself, of what it can sometimes do to one's own sanity. No relying on material wealth or social connections can save you. As in eroticism, the forest – as a bed during sexual intercourse – is a place of establishing continuity. Let's turn first to eroticism: "The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity. […] The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives." (Bataille, *Eroticism*, City Lights Books, 1986, p. 17) In an erotic act, lovers are – literally, but more importantly, symbolically or even, so to say, ontologically – naked in front of each other. This radical openness is the gate to continuity, leaving behind the discontinuity of our personal-selves. And Derrida adds, again in connection to the episode with his cat, that "in these moments of nakedness, as regards the animal, everything can happen to me, I am like a child ready for the apocalypse" (Derrida, 2006, p. 12). Apocalypse as a destruction of our own subjectivity and as a process of un-covering (*un-kaluptein*) the ontological base of that subjectivity. So, from the great abstract phrase *we are all the same* we continue to a radically un-abstract one: In the forest *we are all becoming-One*; the forest is a place of "our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is" (Bataille, 1986, p. 15), a primal place of "desire to incorporate everything" (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Vintage Books, 1968, p. 347). In his latest film *Liberté* (2019) (fig. 2), Albert Serra also finds this space of oneness and continuity, the space of bracketing usefulness and with it also class distinctions in the forest; there is perversion there, yes, but no humiliation whatsoever. This is where the forest invites us when it roars – *join us* …

(II)

Horror movies on spoiled teenagers – usually coming from economically privileged families –, going to the woods, getting killed one by one by a psychopathic killer, is not a movie of revenge of the neglected, abjected or the return of the other. These killings are usually meaningless and you can sometimes hear non-fans of the horror genre say – "*But … why? This just doesn't make sense!*" It really doesn't, that's the point. Entering a forest means entering a different world, which is meaningless in a sense, its logic coincides with Hegel's *bad infinity*, linear growth, growth and nothing more, without sublation, without a higher state. Containing this uncontrolled growth of the plant means making it as useful as possible, the same goes for people – the other in us has to be controlled for specific reasons that for example Foucault writes about a lot (fig. 3). This ontophythological attribute of the plant is a frightening one; the meaninglessness of its growth can be as scary as a smiling clown, who seems to be hiding his true intents, holding a beautiful flower in one hand and a knife in the other – behind his back, of course. There has to be *something* behind this meaningless growth of the plant and if this something is hiding, then it must be truly evil.

There is actually nothing meaningful there, so we can confirm Derrida's claim that "the flower is in (the) place of zero signification." (Derrida, *Glas*, University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 31) But

II A still from: Albert Serra, *Liberté*, 2019.

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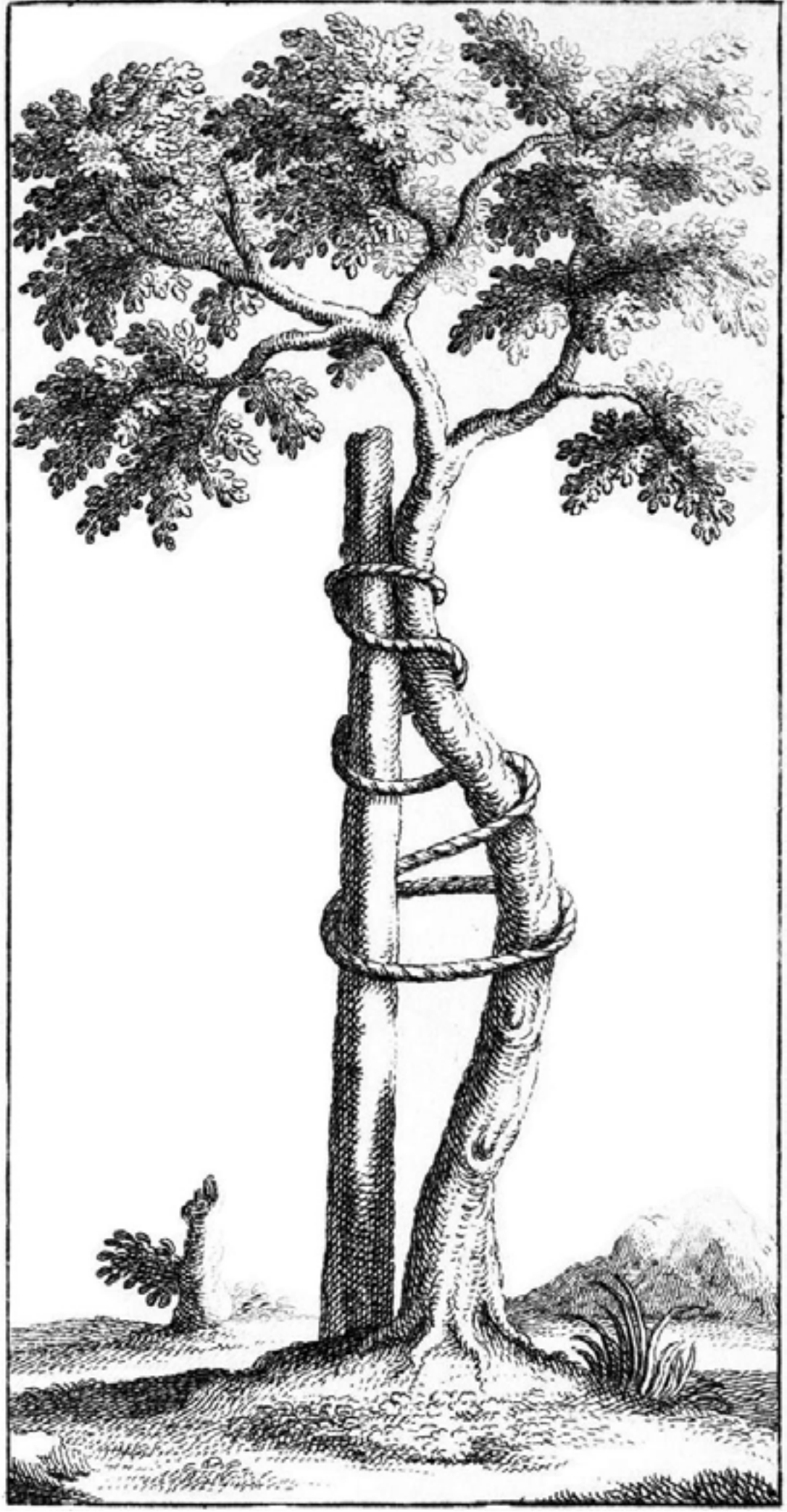

don't let this *zero* make you think of some sort of nihilism. It leads us – on the contrary – closer to the concept of sovereignty, to the non-servile and non-subordinate, and with that to a different structure of time. "We don't see the sovereign moment arrive, when nothing counts but the moment itself. What is sovereign in fact is to enjoy the present time without having anything else in view but this present time." (Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Zone Books, 1991, p. 199) This is the time of the forest: *present* is the only time it knows. From this comes uselessness: if there is no past, the sense of usefulness cannot be achieved, as it is derived from past experience and repetition. Without future there is no need for the useful; why would there be such a need? Nothing *should* be achieved, so why and how be useful? This leaves the forest with the present. However, the so-called uselessness does not lead to passiveness, but to expenditure, to pure poetry and laughter, to sovereignty, to pure doing, to being like "water in water" as Bataille put it. In this kind of films, even sacrifice doesn't have a meaning – it is pure expenditure, a confirmation of life.

The typical anxiety that comes with this existential revelation of sole existence and nothingness is in the horror genre sometimes transformed into laughter. Think of the cult classic *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981). Not only are the evil forces of nature laughing all of the time – their roars feel like razorblades, cutting through our eardrums, don't you think so? – the audience is also the one doing the laughing. It is not only that we laugh at the silliness and stupidity of the protagonists, but also at the fact that …*in the woods my craziness rules as sovereign*… The woods are alive, they are full of life (fig. 4). This sovereignty is given back to us is the woods, by the woods. For the person getting killed it maybe doesn't feel like it, sure, but for the audience this is a confirmation of the fact that they are not really an abstraction, a work force, a tool, but a useless part of the useless All, and a sovereign part even, for "nothing sovereign must ever submit to the useful" (Bataille, 1991, p. 226). Maybe in this case useless as an antonym of useful is a bit harsh. Let us rather use Deleuze's definition of (the useless) life as *complete power, complete bliss*, or maybe *acquiescentia in se ipso,* Spinoza's *being at rest in oneself* which of course includes also an expansion of the self.

Let me now rest for a bit, my back is killing me.

(IV)

III From: Nicolas Andry, *Orthopædia*, 1741.
IV Stills from: Sam Raimi, *The Evil Dead*, 1981.