Annihilation (Alex Garland, 2018), Images of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the Possibility of a Future Without "Us"

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Abstract

This article explores how digital images may articulate more-than-human worlds. I begin with Alex Garland's New Weird film *Annihilation* to discuss the ways in which it breaks down the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, picturing an anti-anthropocentric world in which life flourishes without caring for "us". I engage with the film's story as well as the computer-generated effects that dissolve the human into flows of matter, drawing conceptual convergences. By referring to Gilles Deleuze's third synthesis of time in relation to digital images, I argue that the film can be seen as presenting us with aesthetic articulations of an open and inhuman future to come – of wondrous yet terrifying flourishings of life after "us" humans. Following the environmental concerns of VanderMeer's eponymous novel, from which the film was adapted, I discuss how the film, significantly, evokes imagery of cellular cancerous mutations, contaminations, and post-apocalyptic flourishings of wilderness in spaces that were once inhabited by humans. The final part of this article offers some initial considerations on how *Annihilation*'s concerns are momentous. In particular, by exploring resonances between the film and popular images and discourses from the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I hope to show how the film – which may be seen as depicting a pandemic of sorts, affecting human and nonhuman entities alike – can illuminate aspects of the present moment.

Keywords: *Annihilation*, Weird, Anthropocene, COVID-19, CGI.

Introduction

In 2020, at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the Internet flow of things some curious images began to crop up: Welsh sheep seemingly enjoying a playground wheel, dolphins zooming through the canals of Venice, happily drunken elephants passed out in a field somewhere in China. Some of these images were real, some were not. Some were "fake news", misplaced and misrepresented – curious inaccuracies through which we formulated stories of nonhuman flourishing in "our" absence.

Online, we produced and, in turn, watched *a world without "us"*.

At the same time, in March 2020, I was starting to put together some notes on Alex Garland's *Annihilation* (2018), the cinematic adaptation of Jeff Van-

derMeer's eponymous New Weird novel (2015a)[1]. In the film, in an unspecified region of North America we only know as Area X, a meteorite-like object has fallen onto earth and caused some mysterious transformations to take place in the surrounding environment. Lena, a biology professor and veteran, volunteers for the next exploratory mission into Area X after her husband is the first person to ever return from it, albeit in critical conditions. From the outside, the area appears surrounded by "the Shimmer", a wall of liquid-looking and rainbow-coloured matter – a strange border which expands slowly but surely. Once inside Area X, Lena and her team venture into its strange wilderness. The Area appears as a swampland populated by hybrid life forms. These, Lena observes, are anomalous in many ways: they are inter-species, if not inter-kingdom, crossings, and develop rapidly, randomly, and inexplicably. All that lives in the area is affected by this mutations, swept up in flows of genetic exchanges. Early in the expedition, the team comes across the body of a member of a previous mission, exploded and pinned to a wall by what looks like colourful lichenous and fungal growths which extend from his stomach outwards and onto the concrete. Lena realises that humans are not exempt from the transformations which are reformulating life in Area X: its flows of matter do not care for the human and blur its bodily boundaries with other species. Life and death entwine: as nonhuman life flourishes, the human contemplates its own visceral fragility.

In *Annihilation*, Lena witnesses, as it unfolds, *a future without "us"*.

In this paper, I begin with *Annihilation* and the ways in which the film breaks down the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, picturing an anti-anthropocentric world in which life flourishes without caring for the human. By engaging with its story as well as the computer-generated effects which dissolve the human into the flows of matter, and by referring to Gilles Deleuze's third synthesis of time to think about digital images, I will argue that the film can be seen as presenting us with aesthetic articulations of an open and inhuman future to come – of wonderous yet terrifying flourishings of life after "us" humans. The story of *Annihilation*, originally inspired by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (VanderMeer, 2015b), is a story of climate change and anthropogenic contaminations – of more-than-human enmeshments, a changing planet, and the possibility of human extinction. In VanderMeer's novel, if the forces of environmental change which erupt in Area X are of alien origin, they are also a clear metaphor for human-made ones. The author's environmental concerns are, then, kept alive in Garland's adaptation: the film, significantly, insistently evokes imagery of cellular cancerous mutations, as well as post-apocalyptic flourishings of wilderness in spaces that were once inhabited by humans.

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[1] This paper is part of ongoing work on Garland's film. For the part of this work that has already been published, which I also reference in this article, see Giuliani (2023). In this paper, I sketch out a further extension of my thinking about the film.

In the final part of this paper, I will offer some initial considerations on how the perspective the film offers onto an inhuman future is momentous. In particular, by exploring resonances between the film and popular images and discourses from the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I hope to show how the film – which may be seen as depicting a pandemic of sorts, affecting human and non-human entities alike – can illuminate aspects of the present moment.

Digital Images of Inhuman Futures

As I have argued elsewhere (Giuliani, 2023, p. 108), the way in which, in *Annihilation*, bodies are remixed and re-mattered, as it were, is strongly evocative of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becoming, as elaborated in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Here, Deleuze and Guattari (2013) describe becomings as instances of symbiosis, assemblage, and alliance which "bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation" (p. 278). Becoming is a transformation not based on reproduction or representation: it is a nonlinear movement unbound from pre-determined flows of progression and regression; a permanently impermanent state of material relation and transformation which "produces nothing other than itself" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 277). While an in-depth discussion of becoming is beyond the scope of the current paper, I want to reiterate that it is my argument that *Annihilation*, like the concept of becoming and anthropogenic climate change, invites us to contemplate a world of entanglements and relations, in which the human loses its long-standing status as an isolated and privileged entity in the world (Giuliani, 2023)[2]. At the same time, as I have argued in the same article, in *Annihilation* the process of disintegration and becoming-other of the human is matched by a process of becoming-digital (Giuliani, 2023): a digital film, it sees the digitally captured human body turned into manipulable data so that, quite pragmatically, becomings and transformations may become visually possible[3]. In this paper, I argue that the film's images articulate a future without us.

Theorists of digital cinema have already begun to trace connections between digital images, contemporary media culture, and future-oriented thinking. D. N. Rodowick (2007), for instance, writes that "synthetic or digital expressions always have an air of science fiction about them" as they "anticipate a future world that has already emerged in the present" (p. 176). In her discussion of "neuro-images", Patricia Pisters (2015), in turn, notes that "we have entered a period in which we, collectively, predominantly think from a fu-

[2] For in-depth commentary on anti-anthropocentrism in Deleuze and Guattari see, for example, Beaulieu (2011), Ruddick (2017), and Stark (2017).

[3] In a short article, Toby Neilson (2020) also notes that, while in certain films about environmental trouble there is a tendency to distinguish between recorded humans and computer-generated nonhuman entities, *Annihilation*'s peculiarity lies in its blending of the two through the use of CGI.

ture-perspective," (p. 127; see also Pisers 2011; 2012) according to a temporal flow that moves from the future into the present. If Rodowick (2007) insists that the futural quality of the digital has to do with a feeling of frustration with respect to our inability to "attain the more nearly perfect (future) knowledge of computers and computer communications" (p. 176), Pisters (2015) rather emphasises "a sense of openness of the future with respect to expectancy and archiving" (p. 128). For Pisters (2015, p. 8), this kind of thinking is to be understood in relation to what Lev Manovich (1999) calls the "database logic" of remixing which permeates digital image culture. Databases and their operations, she argues, have fundamentally to do with a view of time that is rooted in the future: "Remixing and re-ordering are things that one does from future points of view, in *the third synthesis of time*", which "cuts, assembles, and (re)orders from the virtual of the past and the future to create something new" (Pisters 2015, p. 128, emphasis added). Pisters connects the operations of databases and digital culture to a particular way of seeing time that matches what Deleuze (1994) calls, in *Difference and Repetition*, the "third synthesis" or "empty form" of time. Rooting her argument in Deleuze's *Cinema* books (2013a; 2013b) as well as *Difference and Repetition*, she argues that, while what Deleuze calls the "movement-image" can be associated with his first synthesis of time (of the present) and the "time-image" can be associated with the second synthesis (of the past), what she names the contemporary "neuro-image" is an expression of the third synthesis of time, or of the future as eternal return (Pisters, 2011; 2015). Pisters' (2011) broader argument, which concerns itself with films that picture "directly [the] mental landscapes" of the characters (p. 110) while adopting a remixing logic, takes a rather different direction from the one that is pursued in this article[4]. However, her work offers useful insights: the point of view "from the future" that Pisters discusses is fundamentally related to a number of future-oriented phenomena of contemporary culture, from the proliferation of surveillance and prevention strategies to – and this is particularly relevant to my discussion – the question of the future of planet Earth (Pisters, 2012; 2015). I ask, where else can the third synthesis of time be found? How else can digital images articulate the world according to a similar futural logic? To what ends?

In the third synthesis of time, developed by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* via Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, the past and the present are dimensions of the future, in a synthesis that "cuts, assembles, and orders from them, to select the eternal return of difference" (Pisters, 2012, p. 139). As the past and the present reoccur, they "return" but not as the same, instead giving birth to the "absolutely new itself", which is a "repetition […] by

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[4] Pisters' discussion of the futural temporality of "database logic" mostly focusses, by carrying out a more strictly Deleuzian film analysis, on the formal and narrative "impurities" of films that combine the moving-image and time-image regimes.

excess" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 90). Return, from the point of view of the future, is mediated by "the intermediary of metamorphosis" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 90) – the truly new (the unfathomable, the unthinkable, the unpredictable) can only come to be through multiplication, variation and incessant change, and infinite assemblages of what was already there, which becomes a dimension of what is to come. Thus, the third synthesis of time "affirms everything of the multiple, everything of the different, everything of change" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 115) – in other words, it is the time of becoming. The third synthesis of time as eternal return also brings with itself the tension between life and death that, as I have hinted above, is distinctive of the philosophy of becoming: Daniel Voss (2013) explains that, while becoming necessarily carries a destructive potential and has a "lethal impact", it also, and most importantly, "manifests a positive and productive power" by bringing "the abandoned subject to a point of meta-morphosis, when all its possibilities of becoming are set free" (p. 207). This open-ended, horrifying but flourishing, future of change and metamorphosis is that which we see in *Annihilation*, but it is also the prospect of our own extinction – imagined as making way for nonhuman life to continue without us. At the beginning of *Difference and Repetition*, when Deleuze (1994) writes that "[this] should have been an apocalyptic book (the third time in the series of times)" (p. xxi), he associates the third synthesis of time with the kind of end-of-the-world speculation, the thinking at the limits, that philosophy and science fiction should, in his view, preoccupy themselves with. I argue that *Annihilation* relies on digital images as belonging to the third synthesis of time to undo the human and open it up to something *else*. This dissolution takes place, in the film, on the brink of the apocalypse – at the limit of a well-known, all-too-human world, and against the background of environmental collapse. The film and its images, then, ask of us that we imagine the end of *our, human,* world – which is what we did, in that spring of 2020.

Looking at Images of the COVID-19 Pandemic through *Annihilation*

Annihilation's visions of empty human dwellings, populated exclusively by wildly growing vegetation and nonhuman animals because of the diffusion of an infectious force, possess a striking resonance with the images of empty cities which circulated at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. I want to suggest that the environmental impetus and interest in contamination of *Annihilation*, while born out of concern for the BP Oil Spill, may speak to other events linked to anthropogenic climate change–chief among them, and the topic of this last section of my paper, is the Coronavirus pandemic.

The burgeoning effects of the Shimmer on planet Earth, leading to a re-articulation of the human's position within it, resonate with questions, posed by scholars of critical posthumanism and New Materialism, about nonhuman

agencies and their destabilising effects on the world as "we" know it. Jane Bennett (2010), in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, argues that to consider the vital agency of nonhuman entities may illuminate the existence of a lively world of broad and shifting assemblages. In a short passage, she mentions viruses as the kind of nonhuman agent which may turn all-too-human worlds upside-down, writing, "Can an avian virus jump from birds to humans and create havoc for systems of health care and international trade and travel?" (Bennett, 2010, p. 107). If Bennett's comments are prescient, this is because the COVID-19 pandemic is surely not the first major viral event to enter the course of human history. Here, however, I want to linger on two of the specific ways in which Coronavirus called for anti-anthropocentric thinking and posed the question of a world without us, and suggest that these may be illuminated by *Annihilation*. Firstly, if pandemics may be nothing new, the intensity of the digital mediation of Coronavirus and its aftermath is unprecedented, and thus constitutes a specific reason for attention from media scholars. Images of the pandemic and their online circulation arguably became, to borrow Elizabeth Ezra's (2017) words, one of "the ways in which humans are prosthetically engaged with life beyond the human in the global age". Through *Annihilation*, I have considered modes of becoming-other of the human in conjunction with its becoming-digital, as well as the post-anthropocentric potential of the digital remix and "database logic". Now, I use them to discuss images of the pandemic. Secondly, I argue that the affective ambiguity, or tension, that pervades *Annihilation*, in which horror and wonder are mixed and which is typical of New Weird fiction (Ulstein, 2017), also chimes with, and thus speaks to, the multitude of emotional responses that accompanied the online circulation of images of empty human dwellings during the pandemic.

In this last section, I want to delineate some initial thoughts on the potential relevance of *Annihilation* to the present moment, by looking at the images of nonhuman flourishings within emptied-out human dwellings which circulated on social media at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic as laboratories of worlds and futures without "us". I will do so here in the form of a few questions and provisional reflections.

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How did we become-other and -digital during the COVID-19 pandemic? Firstly, it is worth noting that the Coronavirus pandemic was part and parcel of the Anthropocene. The diffusion of SARS-CoV-2, a zoonotic virus (World Health Organisation, 2021, p. 82), was sparked by and at the same time brought to the fore the complexities of already existing more-than-human material entanglements (Gibbs, 2022). At the same time, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also entered new becomings. We became-virus as it circulated within our bodies, and as we witnessed ways of living and dying with it. We became-virus

as potentially dangerous carriers, capable of affecting others. We also became-virus in some kinds of potentially dangerous popular environmental discourse, which asked, echoing a famous monologue from *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999), if it is "us humans" who are, in fact, *the* virus – are "we" the dangerous parasites of planet Earth? At the same time, we also became-digital or, perhaps more correctly, our becoming-digital intensified. We were asked to share our data for research and contact tracing: our (infected) bodies were turned into information – "*bits of life*", to use Nina Lykke and Anneke Smelick's (2008) figuration. We became-digital as we watched the pandemic unfold on a variety of home screens and, at the same time, turned to those same screens to seek solace and connection at a distance. Our affects became entangled with digital devices and moving images: Netflix and TikTok became places of respite.

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Does the remix logic of "viral" pandemic images articulate a kind of thinking about the future? The images of animals wandering in formerly human dwellings became a pandemic sensation: the question of the relationships and boundaries between humans and nonhumans went "viral", as it were. Videos of playful Welsh sheep, photographs of deer wandering the streets of Nara, penguins enjoying a walk around an aquarium, and ducks in the squares of Paris were circulating on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, and shared again and again by news outlets. Some of these were real, some were cases of misinformation: the videos of dolphins reclaiming the canals of Venice, Italy were in fact shot in Sardinia, and the news of corn-wine-drunken elephants passed out in fields somewhere in China were quickly debunked. The existence of these images was informed by the workings of database logic as described by Pisters: they were continuously remixed and reworked, assembled in Twitter threads and YouTube compilations. In some cases, as "fake news", some of these images returned not as the same, but recontextualised and carriers of new meaning. The various logics of remixing that animated the circulation of these images, I argue, conjoined with their content, solidified into a kind of future-perspective and became a way to collectively imagine and work through the affects of a future without "us".

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How does it feel *to imagine a world and future without "us"?* It is not a concern of this paper to evaluate the veracity of the reports in question: what interests me is the way in which these images without humans – a version of what Joanna Zylinska (2017) might call "nonhuman photography" – carry the imagination of a world after the extinction of the human. If fear and horror were pandemic affects, what seemed to be circulating along with these images was also a kind of sense of wonder and relief at the prospect of "rewilding": in

an article for the *New York Times*, Helen Macdonald (2020) argues that these images offered "comfort". She writes that, while the COVID-19 pandemic is a consequence of anthropogenic climate change and thus adds to already-circulating anxieties, these reports "work against such corrosive forms of cynicism and despair." (Macdonald, 2020) This leads me to another question:

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Are the world and future pictured by Annihilation *utopias or dystopias?*[5] The kind of relief at the sight of nonhuman life doing "its thing" in "our" absence carries a risk: that of falling into the ecofascist fantasy of a planet Earth that is "purging itself" from humans as a virus (Klein, 2020). Some questions of an ethical and (bio)political nature emerge: What about those who are *actually* dying? What about the *embodied* experience of being exposed to the virus? And *who*, exactly, is exposed, at risk, and dying? To what extent COVID-19, as it encounters a world, becomes a form of violence perpetrated on certain bodies rather than others? The violent (under)tones of this kind of discourse are noted by Macdonald (2020) herself, as she writes that

> One particular slogan, with variations, appears repeatedly in comments: 'We are actually the virus to our Mother Earth, and coronavirus is just an antibody.' Wildly misanthropic and scientifically incoherent, it is a sentiment that has been circulated approvingly by white supremacists keen to blame immigration and overpopulation for the world's ecological ills.

Even without descending into ecofascism, the question of how far anti-anthropocentrism could go is a pressing one for critical posthumanism. Cary Wolfe, interviewed by Ron Broglio for *Angelaki*, words this well as he asks, "are we then supposed to allow anthrax, and Ebola virus, and Hanta virus, and S.A.R.S., and so on, to achieve their creative flourishing even if it means, you know, a 70 percent die off of the human population?" (Wolfe as cited in Broglio, 2013, p. 184). In a roundtable with Wolfe, Claire Colebrook also asks a particularly helpful question in this respect, when she wonders about the viability of a flat ontology in which "I speak as if from nowhere" (as cited in Anthropocene Curriculum, 2013, 17:16). While answering these questions is far beyond the scope of this paper, I do want to suggest that *Annihilation* may have a suggestion to make, which is neither utopian or dystopian: the film, with its tones typical of the New Weird genre, with its entwining of life and death, suggests that generative possibilities are to be found only by harnessing affective tensions. For thinking about open and non-anthropocentric worlds and futures, we may need *both* terror *and* wonder.

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[5] I would like to thank Elisabetta Di Minico for posing this question to me.

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