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Melting, Blurring, Moaning

Annihilation as Narrative Adaptation to Planetary Crisis?

In Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation* and its eponymous 2018 film adaptation directed by Alex Garland, traditional narrative hierarchies and binaries disintegrate, both in thematic material and at the syntactic and (in the film score) musical levels. Words are written with fungus, a bear screams with a human voice, a woman sprouts stems where her veins should be, and a monstrous, flower-like mouth roars humanoid doubles into being. This article applies three lenses to explore this example of narrative genre as a cultural adaptation to the Anthropocene crisis: first, a multispecies perspective of the 'weird' storytelling that de-centers the human perspective in order to foreground sensory subjectivities; second, an adaptation studies approach that includes this tradition's implicit biological connotations; and finally, a musicological analysis of the film score's unsettling materiality.

1. Introduction

In the novel and the film version of Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, distinctions between "human" and "other" break down: written language manifests as fungal growth in the novel's mysterious Area X, and, in the novel's own pages, punctuation often melts into free-associative description. In the film score, downward *glissandi* or musical slides blur the traditional scale, with a waterphone adding to the soundtrack's strangeness. Though *Annihilation* does not refer directly to global warming, it reflects a sense that humankind's home planet is becoming uncanny and disorienting. The novel and film have been read, and rightly so, as Anthropocene fiction and an expression of dark ecology in a broad sense (Morton 2016, Trexler 2015), but our discussion pursues an even more specific understanding that reflects the annihilation of species traits and hierarchies, making space for a multi-voiced, multispecies landscape that only its human witnesses find nightmarish.

This diffuse rather than linear narrative reflects a dual form of adaptation, not only from novel to film but also in a biological sense, applied partly metaphorically here, as human storytelling evolves to deal with a world that no longer makes sense. The call for "a better story," as part of humans' adaptation to a warming planet, has been notable in climate policy discourse and its journalistic outlets since the early 2010s (cf. O'Sullivan 2019). More recent efforts to enlist climate fiction or "cli-fi" in encouraging greater environmental care (cf. Jordan 2019) have also tended towards prescriptive or activist work rather than mere descriptive interpretation. As we trace narrative elements that estrange familiar

ecosystems, categories, and relationships, we are aware that creative work can escape its author's intent and take on an organic life of its own. When *Annihilation* appeared in 2014, its author did not view it as "cli-fi" at all but later realized the adaptive potential of written text, as the novel evokes the disorientations of a rapidly warming planet (cf. Woodbury 2016).

Our project tests this potential in terms of genre and material elements of the novel and film. In order to analyze *Annihilation*'s two versions in the context of the Anthropocene condition, we will consider the 'weird' genre, in which conventional binaries break down; multispecies aspects of the narrative, particularly in the film version; and the implications of 'adaptation' both as a cultural analytical device and as a biological term. We will then examine the soundscape of the film as a material embodiment of disintegrating hierarchies and binaries, with a special focus on the film's climactic scene.

2. *Annihilation* as 'Weird' Fiction

Beginning with the question of *genre* (a term that here could retain a little of its biological etymology), it is clear that the novel belongs to the genre of the New Weird and borrows from, or adapts, several other genres as well. *Annihilation*, and its sequels in the Southern Reach trilogy, include aspects of the spy-novel, the crime thriller, the melodrama, the ghost story and the gothic, not to mention science fiction, plant horror and the cosmic or even cataclysmic horror genre as well, in that it tries, and fails, to communicate "the incommunicable" (Stableford 2007, 71). The combination of the genre-traits above with imaginatively applied scientific terms (mutation, refraction), as well as the scientists participating in the expedition (a biologist, a psychologist, an anthropologist and finally an additional 'surveyor') is part of the intense yet detached tone of a 'weird' text like *Annihilation*. The text itself is a "transitional environment" (VanderMeer 2014, 10) like those its protagonist investigates.

In Jeff and Ann VanderMeer's "Introduction" to *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (2011), they introduce the 'weird' as a literary genre. Quoting Lovecraft, the VanderMeers point to "a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread" and a "malign and particular suspension or defeat of […] fixed laws of Nature" (xv). In this understanding, all the above-mentioned narrative genres and forms find their own little place, combining into this weird and fantastic fiction that avoids both "zombies, vampires, and werewolves" (xvi) while still leaning on the "temporary abolition of the rational" (VanderMeer / VanderMeer 2011, xv). The 'pulp' aspect of genre fiction, including the overtly lush descriptions in *Annihilation*, has proven adaptable to the deadly serious Anthropocene condition, perhaps even beyond its author's original intent.

Images of melting, blurring, and dissolving permeate the narrative. At the end of the novel, the biologist experiences an alien being's "catastrophic molting"

(VanderMeer 2014, 193), mainly through violently operatic sound described in the text. As the biologist finds her own identity melting amid the great crescendo of this flower-like creature, she recalls a giant starfish she encountered in her earlier research, known as the "destroyer of worlds" (VanderMeer 2014, 174).[1] The biologist discovers a strange birthing of Doppelgängers (including her husband's) that results from the alien's creative-destructive shedding, a phenomenon the film version explores at greater length. She survives this encounter – barely – and reveals that the entire novel has been her own journaling, left to rot in the compost pile with previous scientists' records. How it has survived to reach the reader's hands is left unexplained. Unreliable as the narrator may be, this rotting of language furthers the process of identity- and dichotomy-dissolution throughout the novel.

One way *Annihilation* relates to its 'weird' and hybrid generic heritage is its confrontation with the idea that the world consists of autonomous, distinguishable entities that can be meaningfully set apart from each other or arranged in scientifically or philosophically / religiously justified hierarchies. It is no accident, of course, that the female protagonist, the biologist, has specialized in "transitional environments" (VanderMeer 2014, 10), which open the general discussion in the book on the precarity of stable borders, or even stasis and identity as such. These "transitional environments" are found practically everywhere in the novel, beginning with the biologist's childhood obsession with the sterile swimming pool that, as the happy result of her parents' neglect, turned into a vibrant and thriving ecosystem (VanderMeer 2014, 43). On the novel's larger level, as opposed to the limited dimension of the small swimming pool, Area X in its entirety is probably a "transitional environment," changing in itself, and changing everything that comes in contact with it and its moving borders; we will explore below how this relates to adaptation in the biological sense.

VanderMeer has chosen a literary style that complicates any clear distinctions between diegetic and non-diegetic elements, and between imagined impressions of the biologist versus 'objective' conditions of the environment or even her memories.[2] It is utterly unclear what is actually, objectively, going on in the *Annihilation* universe. Apart from the constant blurring of these distinctions throughout the novel, an even more bewildering effect is produced by the final revelation that the entire novel is actually the biologist's field report or journal, even if experienced readers have noted this and suspended their disbelief earlier in the text. Logically, this form makes all content and any stylistic traits in the work a tell-tale sign of the (unreliably) narrating biologist. The use of dramatic descriptive language, if one reads back through the novel, shows a self-conscious narrative voice in the act of transcribing her experience and even taking aesthetic pleasure in it.

Apart from this choice of narrative technique, the novel is further characterized by an obsession with language and communication, and not only among humans. Like the 2016 film *Arrival*, based on a 1998 story by Ted Chiang, *Annihilation* foregrounds communication by unknown species, in forms yet unknown to linguistics as well. This novel's crucial theme is particularly obvious in all the

events related to the writings on the wall, in the "mind-boggling structures [that] dot the landscape, such as a lighthouse and its ghostly negative, a tunnel-like hole in the ground with a staircase" (Makai 2016, 89), the so-called 'tower'. All that happens in this inverted tower relates to language, perhaps in an upside-down reference to the biblical Tower of Babel or to the strange inverted cone trespassed by Dante's alter ego in the *Divine Comedy*. The writing on the wall is first believed to be "vine", then "fernlike moss" but turns out to be "symbiotic fruiting bodies from a species unknown" (VanderMeer 2014, 26) with spores that contaminate the biologist's body, making her immune to hypnosis. Already at this point, language is directly related to the ecological sphere.

Though the fungal text is revealed in the sequel[3] to be human-generated (by a former preacher named Evans, later transformed into the Crawler), it appears not merely as a cognitive, communicative phenomenon but as a physical, invasive, and uncanny device. The semantic content of the spores formed as letters, which Makai (2016) has reconstructed in its entirety (it occurs in fragments throughout the novel), consists of a very complex and high-strung rhetorical text consisting of biblical-sounding tonalities strangely infused with a kind of deep ecological message. The result is a message preaching the interconnectedness of nature, man, fire and death, offering a multispecies vision: "Chillingly, the Biological Sentence suggests that the partial, human cognitive faculties have to go, as well as the subjectivity we have come to recognise as unique among living beings" (Makai 2016, 99).

3. *Annihilation* as Multispecies Film

The plotline of VanderMeer's novel is difficult to summarize and actively defies the notion of a straightforward, linear narrative. The film solves this adaptational challenge with three main strategies: naming its characters (making the plot easier to follow, and possibly facilitating identification with the characters), focusing on the marriage story (which is a recognizable and not too complex conflict), and sending the protagonist to a clear destination in the climactic conclusion (offering speed and direction to the storytelling). At the same time, the film remains weird in other ways, with a visual genealogy borrowing from Lovecraftian cinema (for instance *Absentia* [2011] and *Under the Skin* [2013]) as well as from Tarkovsky's *Solaris* and *Stalker* (with human doubles and a mysteriously alien 'Zone,' respectively), the 1979 *Alien* (with its extraterrestrially invaded character also named Kane, like Lena's husband and his double in *Annihilation*), and the 2016 *Arrival*, with its complex forms of alien communication and temporal disorientation. Most notably, as film lends itself to audiovisual renderings of animal and plant perception and multimodal communication more easily than text, this version amplifies VanderMeer's storyworld into a multispecies fantasia.

In the film, the novel's obsession with written signs is almost left out. The biologist, now named Lena, experiences dissolving dichotomies and hierarchies

through visual softening and aural decay. One by one, expedition members fall prey to strange hybrid creatures or yield to genetic refractions occurring in their bodies. The physicist finds her veins turning to xylem and watches her arms sprouting stems, as she drifts off into the humid woods to join what might be an antelope with blossoms for antlers. As the narrative progresses and reaches a terrifying climax in the lighthouse, Lena realizes that her husband's double birthed in Area X has returned to her, while his original body is left charred by a suicidal explosion in the lighthouse. The creature that lives underneath the lighthouse (here an Alien, a version of the novel's Crawler) births a second Lena, too, in an A.I.-inflected, violent and beautiful dance sequence choreographed by Israeli dancer Bobbi Jene Smith. Lena breaks free and blows up the lighthouse with a grenade, shattering the coastal landscape in a cascade of light. At the end of the novel, the biologist vows to leave all she knows behind and stay, to surrender to all the ambiguities of Area X, as "the last [human] casualty of both the eleventh and twelfth expeditions" (VanderMeer 2014, 195). The novel's ending is uncomfortably open. The film's last scene contains its own ambiguity, in Lena's double-husband's empty-looking eyes as they embrace, eyes that resemble hers, leading some fans to question whether Lena or her double escaped the Shimmer (Braessler 2018).

Both novel and film destabilize given ideas of what constitutes a species, and also who or rather what is 'subject' or 'object,' thus offering fictional forms that parallel what Bruno Latour theorized as a broader repertory of actants to include humans as well as nonhumans (Latour 2004, 75-77). Most typical, perhaps, is the Tower in VanderMeer's novel, which has a heartbeat and a voice. In the plot and following more conventional ways of reading text, the unruly and undecipherable agencies of Area X are utterly destructive, producing anxiety, insanity, and death. If the novel and film versions of *Annihilation* are read in Latour's context of a human-nonhuman collective, the narrative unsettles subject-object polarity in favor of an "actantial mediation of place" in which "the nonhuman infiltrates both the storyworld and the characters' psychology" (Caracciolo 2018, 185), not only in damaging ways but also in the sense of possibilities and cross-fertilities. Not only do nonorganic forms become lifelike, but there is also a clear tendency towards what looks like hybridization (in the novel, a dolphin with a human eye, a face that looks like a horseshoe crab, the biologist's own growing phosphorescent glow). In scientific terms, hybridization may be defined as "the process of interbreeding between individuals of different species […] or genetically divergent individuals from the same species" (Wittler 2002). In the storyworld of *Annihilation*, interbreeding is not the cause of these mutations; they result from a genetic refraction leading to metamorphosis. The changes are rapid, sometimes terrifying, as in an attacking bear who takes on its victim's screams, and sometimes beautiful, as in the scientist whose arms grow stems and blossoms. Whether these mutations result from a need for accelerated adaptation is unclear, as is the question of what environmental pressures might drive such radical interspecies shifts.

Allowing for some mystification about cause-and-effect dynamics in Area X, the film's climax-scene addresses its transformative liminality directly, in a small but significant soliloquy by the zombie-like Ventress / psychologist, uttered in her monotone voice: "It's not like us. It's unlike us. I don't know what it wants. Or if it wants. But it will grow… until it encompasses everything. Our bodies and minds will be fragmented into their smallest parts until not one part remains. Annihilation" (Garland 2018, 1:32:23-44). This frightening and abject horror is the adverse version of species-crossover: the panic of being contaminated, taken over and destroyed by the other. Possibly, this fear lies behind the entire strategy of society in confronting the growing and threatening Area X. But when read and viewed in tandem, the novel and film press, in different ways, for – if not an unequivocally positive – then at least a less terrifying version of hybridization and multispecies mutation. The final seconds of Ventress's life, following her comment above, attest to this: after having expressed her fears of being taken over, or perhaps being made part of a hostile adaptation, she accepts her annihilation in a beautiful and ecstatic vision of speaking (or rather, breathing) light, which takes her over completely. Her 'annihilation' is as close to convulsive, liberating, epiphanic transformation as it is to mere death.

This core scene, where the word 'annihilation' is finally uttered, expresses the double nature of adaptation and multispecies existence. Perhaps this is the point of the 'new weird' in fiction, which addresses a natural world that eludes categories of 'other' or 'familiar.' In their treatment of VanderMeer's ambivalent dystopia in *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction*, Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari note that "the novels [VanderMeer's *Southern Reach trilogy*] suggest that ecological thought can only proceed if we give up those deep connections we feel to the natural and social world" (2020, 192). This paradoxical "defamiliarization of the human" in terms of "engagement" with its perceived environment (ibid., 197) does not mean returning to old ideas of human superiority or attempting Frankensteinian manipulations (cf. Latour 2011, 24). As Amitav Ghosh puts it, "climate change events […] are too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous, and too accusatory to be written about in a lyrical, or elegiac, or romantic vein" (2016, 32f.). In order to approach the "uncanny intimacy of our relationship with the nonhuman" (ibid., 33), the uncanniness must be faced before a new kind of intimacy can occur.[4] In both the novel and film versions of *Annihilation*, narrative conventions yield to a more melting, disorienting sphere of action, showing that even in works not explicitly addressing climate crisis, Earth is no longer a 'normal' place in which to live.

4. Adaptation in Media and Biology

In our discussions of novel and film we have mainly, if implicitly, taken for granted the fundamental idea of adaptation studies, namely that adaptation is about transforming aspects of a source text into another medium. This position

has been discussed and criticized but only seldom dismissed, even by the most well-informed contemporary adaptation or media transformation scholars (for instance Elleström 2014; Leitch 2017; Albrecht-Crane / Cutchins 2010). However, this particular constellation of novel and film offers the possibility of thinking about adaptation in a new way: not only as the transfer of content and form between media types, but also in a metaphorical sense as fitting in, finding new life-forms with host organisms in host environments with new affordances. In their climate policy critique *Climate Leviathan*, Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright (2018) note the dangers of easily assigning 'adaptation' to human systems: "simply to claim that 'society must adapt' is to represent social responses to climate change […] in a way that makes these adaptations seem natural and functional" (71). That said, and without denying the urgent and practical threat of global warming, applying the term metaphorically can aid in understanding storytelling as a plastic form that can respond to a changing and disorienting world.

If we take a step back to Linda Hutcheon's influential *A Theory of Adaption* (2006), this work renewed and summarized the field of adaptation studies, opening it to a broad spectrum of adaptations in its own right, leaning on as well as inspiring neighboring fields, such as intermedial theory (as exemplified in Elleström 2014).[5] Hutcheon, like several adaptation scholars before her, problematized a narrow understanding of adaptation as simply a director's transport of elements from one singular source text to a resulting film. She criticized 'success' as being measured in terms of fidelity to the source,[6] but, like most critics, she nevertheless maintained that adaptation is basically a media transformation. At the same time, Hutcheon did hold onto a surprisingly daring idea of adaptation studies that has remained a little bit under the radar, namely to take the biological concept of adaptation seriously. This Darwinian motif, brilliantly represented in Spike Jonze's *Adaptation.* (2002), a very loose adaptation of a Susan Orleans book, was not lost on either Robert Stam (2005) or Hutcheon, who several times stressed the possibility of understanding adaptations across media as a form of Darwinian mutation. "I was struck", Hutcheon says, by the

> obvious analogy suggested [in *Adaptation.*] by Darwin's theory of evolution, where genetic adaptation is presented as the biological process by which something is fitted to a given environment. […] Stories also evolve by adaptation and are not immutable over time. Sometimes, like biological adaptation, cultural adaptation involves migration to favorable conditions: stories travel to different cultures and different media. In short, stories adapt just as they are adapted. (Hutcheon 2006, 31)

Borrowing Richard Dawkins' ideas of the cultural 'meme,' Hutcheon is interested in adaptation's function in the cultural sphere – like the biological adaptation process – as it relates to "continuous mutation, and also to blending" (Dawkins quoted in Hutcheon 2006, 32). 'Memes,' for Hutcheon, are ideas or stories, and "each adapts to its new environment and exploits it, and the story lives on, through its 'offspring' – the same and yet not" (ibid., 167). While the biological metaphor may diverge into negative connotations of vampirism or parasitism (where vital resources are sucked out of originals, or hosts), Hutcheon

prefers, in her final chapter (and in Bortolotti and Hutcheon 2007), a more edifying notion of adaptation: "Evolving by cultural selection, traveling stories adapt to local cultures, just as populations of organisms adapt to local environments" (Hutcheon 2006, 177).[7]

We argue that adaptation may be understood, to sum up, not only as a media transformation, that is, as the transport of form and content from one medium to another, but also, and sometimes more productively, as the movement of ideas or stories for their own survival. To extend the metaphor, this occurs by mutation and replication through new environments and thus by finding new host bodies, which in many cases mean new media.[8] Seeing the *Annihilation* novel-to-film adaptation in this light would mean, at least as an interpretive thought experiment using the "homology" between culture and biology (Bortolotti and Hutcheon 2007, 444), to considering VanderMeer's text as a Latourian actant, as a cluster of cultural memes (form and content traits), that together constitute the novel's aesthetic setup, as if developing (replicating and mutating) with an urge to survive, to breed. Of course human actors (in both senses), writers, screenwriters, directors, cinematographers, composers, and choreographers move the work forward, but this does not diminish its capacity to respond to shifting cultural tides as human imaginations do. In our adaptation analysis conducted above, we have traced the ways in which characters, plot and certain themes question the role of director and writer Alex Garland as the agential force conducting the adaptation. Visual and sound motifs, like the sentences in VanderMeer's novel, seem to take on lives of their own. In the modified Darwinian perspective on adaptation, with memes as Latourian actants, the question could be: in which ways can important parts of the novel survive in another cultural and formal 'biotope,' or medium, like the cinema?

We remarked earlier that changes in plot and characters, with the addition of an action-packed ending, are some obvious ways to facilitate the transport of basic aspects of the novel into the medium of film. But what about the constellation of ideas that we considered perhaps most pervasive in the novel, as both form and content patterns that dominate all choices at all levels, namely the dissolving of dichotomies in favor of a world infused with a multispecies perspective? How can such a vision be transported into film? The bio-adaptation metaphor allows us to consider the fact that, while the basics of plot and character are relatively unproblematic to carry across the media-specific differences between novel and film, multispecies thinking lies, so to speak, on a deeper level of the film and is not immediately transferable. As noted above, adapting multispecies form and thematics to film takes advantage of that medium's audiovisual richness, particularly in the embodied directness of sound, which functions at other semiotic and semantic levels[9] than most aspects of the novel. As in well-known examples like *2001 Space Odyssey* and *Star Wars*, musical motifs heighten the film's kinetic movement while sometimes alerting audiences to thematic material; in the adapted *Annihilation*, the film's sound does additional work in creating an eerie soundworld that attracts and estranges at the same time.

5. Sounding Strange

Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation* is already obsessed with sound. In the text, the female narrator exploring Area X hears a "low, powerful moaning at dusk" (VanderMeer 2014, 5) and a throbbing quality in the tower / tunnel that houses what she calls the Crawler. Later she hears an emotion-laden 'aria' in her own head (not unlike the world-destroying, operatic music first heard internally by the title character in Lidia Yuknavitch's 2017 *Book of Joan*) and finally a "staticky buzzing sound" that builds to an almost unbearable intensity, revealing its own "melody and rhythm" in a synaesthetic assault with "a texture and a weight" (VanderMeer 2014, 171). But sound in the novel is of course restricted by the affordances of written text: it can only be represented by way of verbal signs. In the film version, which lacks the novel's focus on such written signs, Geoff Barrow and Ben Salisbury's score carries associative signals that do surprising semantic work, evoking the invasive boundary of the Shimmer, or Area X in the novel, and the destructive-creative forces inside it.

Musical heteroglossia – layers of different musical genres and instrumental soundworlds in complex constellations[10] – inhabits the film from its outset. Folksong-like guitar strumming yields to a wobbling hum that drones under the opening sequence and continues through the film. This drone is not electronically produced but comes from a waterphone, what Barrow calls "this hippie kind of Californian weird instrument that you pour water into" (Beta 2018, n.p.). The instrument often works so subtly, it may not register until it builds with added suggestions of distant thunder, for example when Lena and Ventress observe the border of the Shimmer. Later, when Lena looks out at this mysterious 'transitional environment', the thundering begins to sound literal and diegetic – perhaps even emanating directly from the Shimmer. In this way, it recalls what has been called spectral music, the method of re-scoring instrumental sound based on sonographs or on mathematically generated patterns (cf. Fineberg 2000). In this case, the waterphone music also sounds spectral in a non-human, ghostly sense.

As the research team begins to understand the refractory genetic leakage occurring all around – and, soon, within – them, what Stacy Alaimo calls "transcorporeality" among "body, substance, and place" (2016, 77) becomes embodied onscreen in beautiful and terrifying vulnerability. As noted above, this is especially clear in the dramatic scene of Ventress's transformation and destruction, when the sound that invades her later emanates from the Alien / Crawler. "The exposed subject," Alaimo writes, "is always already penetrated by substances and forces that can never be properly accounted for" (2016, 5). Thus, even if the sounds are both justified diegetically (as Barthesian reality effects) as well as commercially (amplified for their sometimes scary or at least anxiety-producing effect on audiences), they play an additional and more interesting role: the sounds blur boundaries and mix up dichotomies.

This blurring occurs in the extradiegetic (or background) musical score, for instance in the film's repeated Crosby, Stills & Nash song "Helplessly Hoping." The song's lyrics are about one, two, and three people – a referential suggestion of hybridizing and doubling, in an early scene when Lena and Kane's double reunite unexpectedly as she paints their bedroom. Splitting and blurring occur in the soundtrack's wordless sonorities as well, particularly late in the film, when Lena confronts her own double and destroys the lighthouse where the Alien enacts its genetic mutations. Here, choral voices divide from a central pitch and strings slide downward in the thick *glissando*[11] familiar to Netflix viewers as a trope that signals creepiness, from the German horror series *Dark* to the gone-viral *Bird Box*.[12] This pattern not only breaks down distinctions between musical tones along the scale but also carries associative signals that can be thought of partly as *a priori* in an embodied sense (messy downward-sliding patterns kinetically evoking disintegration) and partly as cultural (these same descending patterns connoting sorrow in European musical tropes).[13]

As shown above, the sounding world of *Annihilation* is both part of and co-producer of a tactile and even haptic dimension in the film, that is, an intermedial and synaesthetic production of perceptions where several sense-categories coincide and overlap. This is particularly clear in the violently climactic scene when the Alien appears and seems to generate new life-forms with its pulsing, buzzing electronic 'song.' It is helpful to remember that, in addition to haptic film qualities such as "pixel density," "graininess," or "overexposure" (cf. Marks 2000, 172-175), a dense musical score fills its soundspace with palpable pressure waves, whether generated from speakers or live instruments. In this case, the result is a heightened, almost psychedelic sensory overload. Mark Fisher's take on Lovecraftian 'weird' aesthetics also applies in this Alien scene, suffused with "the inextricability of pleasure and pain" (Fisher 2016, 17).

In the film's climactic scene of doubling and dance, a snake-like, flower-like presence emerges from underground. The Alien appears deceptively briefly in this sequence, for about a minute; its presence is so over-saturating and even psychedelic in its explosive color scheme, it seems to take up more time and space in the film than it actually does. As it opens blinding folds of what could be a mouth or reproductive organ, it blasts a distorted, throbbing, four-note pattern that sounds as iconic as the cosmic five-tone melody in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. This electronic 'voice' almost seems to utter syllables, or at least almost recognizable vowels. It also recalls the melody fragments accompanying Ventress's bodily 'annihilation' in the previous scene, as a sonic multispecies crossover.

Though these four notes have sounded more subtly in the soundtrack to this point, they still come as a shock when sung into sudden, diegetic life – meaning that (although diegetic / non-diegetic borders are often blurry, as in Ventress's death scene) the film score is now part of the narrative action rather than background accompaniment. This musical pattern's implicit duple rhythm (two stressed beats per measure) and electronic texture hint at dance music, foreshadowing the eerie choreography to come. Lena's machine-gun fire does nothing to

damage the Alien or the humanoid double it births. The sound is overwhelming, as the strange four-note 'song' expands into a multisensory experience, sonic and haptic at once, and even suggests other senses; this aural experience might even evoke the "smell of rotting honey" the biologist finds overwhelming in VanderMeer's novel (2016, 25).

The Alien's multisensory utterance creates a second Lena who mirrors Natalie Portman's every move in a violent and somehow beautiful dance. The A.I. aesthetic of the faceless Doppelgänger, as soft as it is shiny, heightens the music's digitally distorted lushness, conflating the organic and the mechanical. The chorale of human voices returns, seeming to slip and divide in response to the movements onscreen, yielding a pulsing, repeating string slide not unlike the alien radio signal in the 1997 film *Contact* and, again, echoing the downward *glissando* in other eco-horror productions. When Lena's Doppelgänger finally burns to death as her husband already has, and as the conflagration takes the lighthouse and its surrounding hybrid life-forms with it, the waterphone, strings, and electronica merge in luxuriant collapse.

6. Conclusion

In this article we have tried to apply three lenses in order to explore how *Annihilation*, novel and film, can be understood as an example of narratives that work as cultural adaptation to the Anthropocene crisis. The three lenses are a multispecies approach, adaptation studies with its biological connotations, and musicology, which contributed to an analysis of the film score's unsettling materiality: together we have tried to better understand the unusually de-centered human story – that is, a story leading towards a fictional other.

By way of our particular approach we hope to have demonstrated that turning toward the 'other' or the 'alien' in *Annihilation* is not a gathering toward unity of voice or species but rather what Mikhail Bakhtin termed "centrifugal" movement toward greater diversity (1981, 272). It is a spreading outward from the single pitch that begins the soundtrack's drone, from same-species reproduction, and from given notions of the 'real' that Lena's research team brings to the Shimmer – which then splinters them to bits. It is a reminder that the human voice is only one of many voices, part of "a world that *speaks*" through what we call "howling winds" and "chattering brooks" (Abram 1996, 81f.), not to mention the multiplicity of animal voices. Somewhat paradoxically, in its invading, out-spreading impulse, the weirdly powerful genetic force at work in Area X / the Shimmer is as destructive as it is creative, assimilating human bodies even as they mutate into unknown animal or plant forms.

In 'becoming what it encounters,' be it human bodies' binary structure or the earthly confusions those humans face, the strange force in *Annihilation* remains alien. 'Weird' is no less so for functioning as a narrative genre that has itself

adapted (both through and beyond the efforts of its own storytellers) to an increasingly threatening world. For all the current impulses toward interspecies intimacy in the environmental humanities, otherness resists. Humility in the face of the uncanny is one entrance point for better apprehension – if not exactly understanding – of the Anthropocene condition, to which fiction has been responding for several decades now, becoming stranger all the time.

Since *Annihilation* appeared onscreen in 2018, other strange botanical forms have taken up residence there, to very different effect. Jessica Hausner's disturbing 2019 film *Little Joe* updates the 1950s plant horror genre with stark primary colors and cold lab-like spaces, in which genetically engineered plants evolve to infect humans with spores, turning them into horticulturally devoted zombies. This film's soundtrack avoids the lush, disintegrating textures that have become more familiar than discomfiting thanks to *Annihilation*, *Dark*, and *Bird Box*; instead, an electronic, even clinical whine invades the film's environment, along with a Japanese flute and the percussive textures of Chinese opera. Meanwhile, Alex Garland's sci-fi HBO series *Devs* premiered in 2020: here the lush visual vocabulary of *Annihilation* has been significantly downplayed and replaced by strangely cool and estranged environments, signaling the change of interest from bodily and biological weirdness to the ostensibly non-corporeal adventures of artificial intelligence. The series hosts a score by *Annihilation*'s Ben Salisbury and Geoff Burrow, who have expanded their eerie repertoire to include white noise, minimalist electronica, and silence, very much in line with the series' themes. This shift in aesthetics shows that creative filmmakers will continue to work against audiences' expectations, to foster a sense of strangeness in an increasingly estranging world.

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[1] The name recalls J. Robert Oppenheimer's famous words, quoting the Bhagavad Gita, "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds," after watching his creation, the atomic bomb, first detonate in 1945.
[2] As such, much of the 'weird' fiction clearly qualifies as what Tzvetan Todorov famously defined as 'fantastic literature' (Todorov 1975).
[3] Because the screenplay was completed by Alex Garland before VanderMeer wrote the two sequels to the novel, the film makes no references to the human origins of the Crawler / Alien (cf. Braessler 2018).
[4] Ghosh refers to the 'romantic' not in the literary sense, linked closely to the uncanny in nineteenth-century literature from Jean Paul to Poe, but in the more commonplace sense of 'romanticizing' nature. In Freud's terms, the 'Unheimliche' or 'uncanny' refers not only to what is familiar and yet alien, but also to the re-surfacing of repressed aspects of one's childhood belief system (cf. Freud 1919).
[5] Hutcheon's notion of adaptation can be rephrased into an intermedial formula saying that adaption studies analyses the dynamics between 'transmedial features' on the one hand and 'medium-specific features' on the other (cf. Bruhn 2016).
[6] For important trends in adaptation studies, see "Introduction: Back and there again" in Bruhn, Hansen, Gjelsvik 2013. For the question of "success" and fidelity, see Bortolotti and Hutcheon 2007.

[7] Along the same lines Hutcheon also mentioned the existence of qualitatively disappointing adaptions which are the ones that are not able to differentiate themselves sufficiently as to become works of their own, and instead become mere, lifeless copies (Hutcheon 2006, 9, 20) – perhaps a parasite, in the negative connotation of the term.

[8] For a discussion of the questions of agency inherent in such an understanding, see Leitch 2013.

[9] While the philosophical question of meaning in music is beyond this article's scope (see, for further reading, Kramer 2002), we focus here on the film soundtrack's material aspects, with attention to their cultural associations and kinetic effects.

[10] Mikhail Bakhtin's term 'heteroglossia' refers specifically to diverse voicings in a text but can be useful when applied to intermedial works as well (cf. Bakhtin 1981, 354, 379, 383).

[11] A *glissando* is a glide upward or downward along the musical scale. It is familiar on the piano or harp but can also occur in string instruments, by sliding the bow across the strings. If the slide is 'carrying' the musical line toward a definite pitch goal, it can also be referred to as *portamento*.

[12] This pattern has only become commonplace since 2017 but does have forerunners in Hitchcockian string 'shrieks,' Krzysztof Penderecki's descending strings in *The Shining*, and a similar pattern in the 2007 film *There Will Be Blood*, in scenes depicting the sliminess of oil in early 20th-century Texas.

[13] One such trope is the *lamento* or 'step of sorrow' descent of half tones that signalled death in Baroque music and has been adapted by many composers since that time.