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"Isn't Self-destruction Coded into Us, Programmed into Each Cell?": A Thanatological, Posthumanist Reading of Alex Garland's Annihilation (2018)

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Abstract

As both a novel (VanderMeer, 2014) and cinematic adaptation (Garland, 2018), Annihilation has engaged posthumanist and ecocritical scholars seeking to answer to the demand for art forms to participate in the renegotiation of the grand narratives feeding the ongoing environmental crisis and chipping away at the liveability of Planet Earth. In my reading of Alex Garland's film, I discuss how its depiction of death adds to these discussions by challenging the human exceptionalism built into meaning-making processes, which have situated humans as above "nature," including death, by defining human life as more valuable than all other life. As an umbrella term covering these varied processes, I discuss biopower, which seeks to regulate life by forbidding death in humans and denying life to other kind of life forms. I locate Annihilation within films that make use of the cinematic mode of ecohorror, exploring human fears and anxieties relating to death and "monstrous nature" with an ecocritical twist. I employ film analysis and draw theoretically on thanatological and posthumanist discussions, as I reflect on the kind of understanding of death that arises in Annihilation and centre on the discussion of self-destruction and suicide in discussing the human character Josie's death in relation to the film's non-human actant, The Shimmer.

Keywords: *Ecohorror; biopower; death; suicide; cinema*

Introduction[2]

In Alex Garland's science fiction film *Annihilation* (2018), based on Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014), a zone is undergoing nature-defying transformations after a mysterious extra-terrestrial event. Hit by a meteorite and veiled from the authorities of state and science by a refraction of light named The Shimmer, the zone – "Area X" – is being reclaimed by forces that appear natural but defy nature's laws: the zone seethes with plants, beasts, and human remains that are undergoing mutations that are at once horrific and beautiful. In the film, the viewers see Area X through the eyes of Lena (Natalie Portman), a cellular biology professor who joins a scientific expedition led by the psychologist Dr Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh), along with three other female scientists: physicist Josie Radek (Tessa Thompson), geomorphologist Cassie Sheppard (Tuva Novotny), and paramedic Anya Thorensen (Gina

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Rodriguez). None remains unaffected by the Shimmer; indeed, they are all consumed by it in various ways. Some die violently, some are permanently altered, and some choose death.

In joining the mission, Lena is driven by a desire to understand what happened to her husband Kane (Oscar Isaacs), who had gone missing on a previous expedition and returned with a lost memory and an organism deteriorating from multiple organ failures. The film's narrative follows the expedition, punctuated by flashforwards of Lena, the only expedition member to return, being interrogated by the state authorities, and flashbacks from her past: memories with Kane and an extramarital love affair that fills her with guilt. In these and aforementioned themes, *Annihilation* has been described as addressing "depression, grief, and the human propensity for self-destruction" (Pile, 2018; cf. Bishop, 2018). Furthermore, the film could be argued to offer a meditation on death as an existential challenge to both humans and humanity: the mutations in Area X blur the borders between life and death, render fragile visions of life built around human exceptionalism, and unsettle traditional fear-driven visions of death as the "negation of life" (MacCormack, 2020).[3] In the same strain of thought as Deborah Rose, it involves "the idea that living things are bound into ecological communities of life and death, and further that these communities are fields of matter within which life is making and unmaking itself in time and place" (2006, p. 68).

This article discusses Western, human exceptionalist perceptions of life and death as they are made relevant by their representation in *Annihilation*. I employ film analysis and draw theoretically from thanatological and posthumanist discussions to reflect on the kind of understanding of death, especially in its self-willed forms, that arises in *Annihilation*. As a scholar situated at the intersection of death studies, ecological humanities, cultural studies, and film studies, I prioritize here the discussion of death as a challenge to human exceptionalism and to Western, patriarchal, and colonial processes of meaning-making, which have posited humans as above "nature" and its processes, including death, by evaluating (certain kinds of) human life as more valuable than other life. As an umbrella term covering these varied processes, I discuss biopower, which seeks to regulate life by forbidding death among humans (Foucault, 1990), and denying life to other kinds of life forms (Chen, 2012). Furthermore, I move toward perceptions of death by centring the discussion on self-destruction, which is central to the film. I focus on self-destruction's extreme form in suicide, a self-willed death, through a suicide-centred reading of the character Josie's death in relation to the film's non-human actant, The Shimmer. In *Annihilation*, suicide is one of the contemplated forms of self-destruction and is connected to the film's thematic consideration of life and death. This focus is justified by suicide's status in biopowered thought. In addition, there is relevance assigned to Josie's death as a suicide in *Annihilation*'s contemplation of humans' inevitable self-destruction.

As my expertise is in cultural representations of death and suicide, I define life – in the context of the argument in this article – as "a becoming, a process set in time," following Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan (2000, p. 98). Considering that I am writing my article as a cultural studies scholar interested in the power of representations, I discuss *Annihilation* as a film that can challenge Western-centric and human exceptionalist visions that, in the words of Jane Bennett, "feed human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and

[3] In this regard, *Annihilation* has often been approached as a metaphor for cancer or the cancerous logic of multiplication and destruction (e.g. Crewe, 2018).

consumption" (2010, p. ix). I argue that it is our approach to death and dying that needs altering if we wish to live more in tune with the planet, which has been rendered vulnerable by our death-denying actions.

Annihilation, Ecohorror, Biopower, and Cinema in the Posthumanist Turn

Both as a cinematic adaptation (e.g. Ben Hadj, 2021; Kjærulff, 2021) and literary trilogy (e.g. Kortekallio, 2019; Prendergast, 2017), *Annihilation* has engaged posthumanist and ecocritical scholars as a figuration answering the growing demand for film and television and other art forms to participate in the renegotiation of the grand narratives feeding the ongoing environmental crisis, with global warming, the sixth mass extinction, and loss of biodiversity chipping away at liveability on Planet Earth (e.g. Plumwood, 2002; Salmose, 2018). The original trilogy by VanderMeer has been examined as fiction "committed to decentralizing the human subject" (Kortekallio, 2019, p. 61) and "forward[ing] theoretical conversations about environmental ethics" (Prendergast, 2017, p. 335). Similarly, Garland's loose cinematic adaptation (Thompson, 2018) has been argued to "lead its audience to reflect on themes such as environmental degradation, disease, and climate change" (Kjærulff, 2021, p. 128) and to offer "a new perspective on the relationship between human and nonhuman" (p. 135). As film critic Lewis Gordon notes, "*Annihilation* exists at the vanguard of an emerging, radical eco-philosophy, one in which traditional distinctions between humans and non-humans are being deconstructed" (2018).

Central to posthumanist thinking is the deconstruction of binaries between human and non-human, culture and nature, alive and not alive. This is an impressive political aim. As a number of ecocritical and posthumanist scholars argue (e.g. Haraway, 2016; Morton, 2013), the only way for humanity (along with much of life on earth) to prevail in these times is to accept the entanglement of all forms of life as the basis for action. In my approach, I tap into these discussions from the perspective of death studies, asking what the film's posthumanist representation of the intermingling of death and life and of humanity and nature can do regarding posthumanist and ecocritical aims and frameworks. More specifically, I approach *Annihilation* as a film that makes use of the cinematic mode of ecohorror, exploring human fears and anxieties relating to "monstrous" nature's "existence outside human control" (Tidwell, 2018, p. 115) while "grappling with ecocritical matters" (Rust & Soles, 2014, p. 510).

Ecohorror as a cinematic genre and mode of storytelling precedes the current ecocritical and posthumanist turn and has thus also offered humancentric and ecophobic visions of nature turning against humanity (Rust & Soles, 2014). At the same time, it offers a genre prescription for examining such narratives that "present a more complex relationship between human and nonhuman" (Tidwell, 2021, p. 6, see also Rust & Soles, 2014) and "may also foster a posthuman environmentalism of co-constituted creatures, entangled knowledges, and precautionary practices" (Alaimo, 2010, p. 146, as cited in Tidwell, 2021, p. 6). As Christy Tidwell proposes, in paving the way for a posthumanist wave of ecohorror, it asks viewers to reconsider the historical fears of humans losing their place at the top of the hierarchy and acknowledging their interconnectedness with other life forms at the risk of simultaneously reinforcing these fears and categorical divisions (2018, p. 117).

One of the divisions often played with in ecohorror – and most horror – is the value-laden binary between life and death. Considering this binary's genealogy in Western thinking, Patricia MacCormack has recognized life's intertwining with "affirmation" and death's with

"negation" (2020, p. 139), with death defined as the cessation and negation of life and the rights and freedom related to living. Horror might well be the genre most occupied with maintaining this binary. According to Daniel Sullivan and Jeff Greenberg, horror films present this anxiety over death as the end of human existence "in its rawest form" (2013, p. 236), even as death, an unfathomable human experience, has been integral as a narrative device from cinema's very inception (p. 2). As elsewhere in our humancentric imaginations, here cinema also tends to be occupied with the deaths of individual human beings, with death pushed beyond the borders of both culture and nature, as individuals try to avoid death at all costs. Yet, the "art of generating breakdown" (Twitchell, 1985, p. 16) with regard to categories and boundaries is characteristic of all horror. If classical horror enacts this breakdown through monsters of varied kinds, body horror and contemporary ecohorror can be argued to participate in horror's transgressions by situating humans and their deaths in the middle of the forces from which they are tendentiously separated. In this sense, it shifts the focus from external threats to the monsters within, from death as the violent disruption of life to the natural processes of decay happening within every human body.

Reflecting the life-death binary, self-willed suicide in particular has presented a challenge to the Western thinking and cinema as an incomprehensible, unthinkable death (Kosonen, 2020b). As Roberto Esposito reminds us that the human propensity for self-preservation at any cost has been studied as "God planted in men" by Western philosophers like Locke (2004, pp. 63–64). How then could anyone wilfully reject life and choose an empty existence instead? That some people do has historically presented a challenge to forms of governance from the sovereign power of the church and the state to so called biopower, which is a normative power aiming at varied bodies' and their life processes' subjugation to apparatuses of knowledge and control. It is this biopower that I evoke as an umbrella term to cover diverse discourses participating in the definition, evaluation, and regulation of life and death. As defined by Foucault, biopower works through normative discourses produced by such institutions as jurisdiction and punishment, academia, military, writing, media, education, and healthcare (2000, p. 131), through which it seeks "to foster life or to disallow it to the point of death" (1990, pp. 138–139). In comparison to so-called sovereign power, which is more invested with taking life, biopower has a preventive focus on illnesses and other factors that "weaken life" (Foucault, 2003, pp. 243–244). Because self-willed suicide challenges this power, it is cited as a key factor in the transition from sovereign power's "right to kill" to the discursive and normative processes that hold living bodies under a tight rein (Foucault, 1990, p. 141).

In this article, I focus on suicide as an example of biopower's death-denying regulation, although biopower's grasp extends further than self-willed human death and the way this death both challenges and epitomizes the subjugation and normativization of (human) lives and deaths. As feminist and posthumanist scholars have noted, biopower is at play in the wide variety of Western-centric, colonial, and human exceptionalist processes where "livable" lives (Haraway, 2008) and "grievable" deaths (Butler, 2006), are defined. These definitions either allow or deny lives value and hierarchize human over nonhuman lives and certain human lives over others; in all instances, however, the aim is life's regulation. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben acknowledges a *bios–zoe* distinction that separates "unworthy" impersonal or non-human "bare life" (*bios*) from its "spiritual, civilized, and political" form in enfranchised human lives (*zoe*) (1998; see also Braidotti, 2013). At issue, then, is a power that refuses individual human's self-willed exits while caring little about othered humans' and non-human beings' deaths, even sanctioning enslavement, exploitation, and genocide (e.g. Esposito, 2004;

Mbembe, 2019; Wolfe, 2013). On top of the ladder stand the lives of white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgendered, and able-bodied and -minded "universal human beings" (Bauman, 1990, p. 8) in whose image the prevailing understanding of valuable, preservable life has been defined. Mel Y. Chen recognizes here the workings of "animacy hierarchy," according to which lives are hierarchized according to the human understanding of qualities such as lifeness, sentience, agency, ability, and mobility (2012). Out of these qualities, agency – or its denial – connects the discourses on the self-willed deaths of humans and the lives of non-human life forms. Against this background, the analysis below is structured largely around the agencies evident in both suicide and non-human life, which trouble the life-death binary from different directions, through readings of Josie's death and the mysterious Shimmer and its effects.

"Ventress Wants to Face It, You Want to Fight It": Josie Choosing Death

I turn now to *Annihilation* and its representation of the physicist Josie's death. Like the other expedition members, Josie is introduced to the viewers (and the protagonist Lena) at the Southern Reach research station the night before the expedition is supposed to set off. She is a shy, highly intelligent physicist straight from a Cambridge post-doc. As the expedition progresses, and the expedition members get to know one another as they traverse Area X, she is revealed as having a suicidal past. The Shimmer is transforming the expedition members, and some of their encounters with mutating nature turn fatal: both the geomorphologist Cassie and the paramedic Anya are killed by a mutant bear in successive scenes. Although Josie shoots the bear right after Cassie's death, it returns, dead but still mutating; crying for help with Cassie's dying voice, it kills Anya like it did Cassie. The next morning, Josie succumbs to Shimmer's power and gives up on life – at least in human form. After a discussion with Lena, she turns her back on humanity and walks into the forest, sprouting vegetation from the cuts on her arm.

Josie's death can be studied as a suicide in its self-willed nature – the character *chooses* assimilation into Area X, which in this case means death to her human life. All other expedition members initially fight against this force, even if the expedition is generally described as hopeless in terms of survival, the proverbial "suicide mission." Some members eventually end up choosing death either out of madness and despair (Lena's husband Kane, who lights a phosphorus grenade) or out of a desire for knowledge (the expedition leader Ventress, who integrates with the Shimmer), yet for clarity of argument, I focus largely on Josie's death. Through a reading of her "suicide scene" and complementary scenes, I tease out the agency denied to suicide in biopowered discourses and most cinematic representations.

Considering that in individualistic Western culture suicide is widely considered and has been defined as an individual solution displaying intentionality (Huebl, 2000; Jaworski, 2014, p. 20) and agency (Holmes & Holmes, 2005), it is remarkable – and symptomatic of its biopowered regulation – how monolithic a phenomenon self-willed death generally appears in our processes of meaning- and sense-making. Edwin Shneidman describes suicide as "one of those patently self-evident terms," whose self-evidence constantly bounces back from the "periphery of any satisfactory definition" (1985, p. 6). One of the self-evidences connected to suicide in the late 20th- and 21st-century West is the connection to states of mental illness, whose definition through lack of reason and excess emotion bounces back from the periphery

of suicide's definition as an "explicitly individual choice and act" (Holmes & Holmes, 2005, as cited in Jaworski, 2014, p. 19) and as "the act of taking one's own life; a voluntary, intended and self-inflicted act" (Huebl, 2000, as cited in Jaworski, 2014, p. 19). In a variety of discourses, suicidal people are characterized, in the words of Timothy Hill, "as in some way morbid, anguished, isolated and driven to end their life by some peculiarly internalized torment" (2004, p. 2). This medicalization explicitly connects the discourses of suicide to its biopowered regulation (Kosonen, 2020a; 2020b; Marsh, 2010).

Similar depictions of suicide also permeate Anglophone cinema: most films *with* or *about* suicide (Aaron, 2014, p. 47; see also Kosonen, 2015; Saddington, 2010) have adopted medical institutions' view of suicide as proliferating diagnoses or as other kind of assignment of these diagnoses to "the vulnerable" who, through their vulnerability, are denied intentionality and agency in their self-willed deaths (Kosonen, 2020a). A wealth of movies portray suicide in medical terms in particular. They frame suicide as an anomaly of the mind through diagnoses and stereotypical – even pejorative and stigmatizing – depictions of a variety of mental illnesses from depression to psychopathology (Stack & Bowman, 2012): a number of visual cues, dialogic descriptions, institutional settings, survival stories aided by medical professionals, and juxtapositions between reason and its lack abound (Kosonen, 2020a). Movies also frequently make use of the "victim trope" (Marshall, 2010), through which they produce "an essentializing notion of victimhood" (ibid., p. 70). As Joan Meyer argues of representations of queer youth suicide, they have "the tendency to remove any sense of agency from that group as a whole" (1996, p. 102, as cited in Cover, 2012, p. 3). And as my previous work with suicide cinema reveals, something similar could also be true in looking at 21st-century cinematic fiction's tendency to portray suicide as especially pertinent to the problems of girls and young women (Kosonen, 2020a; see also Aaron, 2014). In films, voluntary death continues to be constructed as generally feminized. Involved in this equation of girls or young women and suicide are not only female characters, but also their manifestation of the stereotypically feminine markers of passivity, affectivity, vulnerability, and irrationality (Kosonen & Greenhill, 2022ab).

These regimes of presenting suicide are in part also present in the character of Josie – soft-spoken, shy, feminine – but their presence does not signal her victimhood, weakness, or passivity. The reference Cassie makes to Josie's history of self-harm, for instance, happens in the terms of an attempt to feel, that defies the usual meanings. As Cassie and Lena are canoeing along a river in Area X, the former asks about Lena's reasons for joining the "suicide mission" and discloses the reasons of the rest of the team, from Anya's alcoholism to Josie's past: "This isn't exactly something you do if your life is in perfect harmony. We're all damaged goods here … and [Josie] wears long sleeves 'cause she doesn't want us to see the scars in her forearms." "She tried to kill herself?" "No I think the opposite, trying to feel alive."

Josie's death takes place when three quarters of the film has passed, and she and Lena are the last members of the expedition: Cassie and Anya have died, while Ventress has set out on her personal mission to find the lighthouse, where the Shimmer is suspected to have originated. The morning after Anya's death, Lena finds Josie sitting in the meadow and joins her. They discuss the reasons they have discovered for the mutations, which are also affecting them and Lena's husband, who was long subjected to the Shimmer, as the Shimmer refracts light and causes all life forms to blend and intermingle at the cellular level. They also disclose their horror at hearing Cassie's voice from the belly of the beast that killed her the night before.

Josie says: "It'll [The Shimmer] be in all of us.… I think as she [Cassie] was dying, part of her mind became part of the creature that was killing her.… To die frightened and in pain, and have that as the only part of you that survives. I would not like that at all." Josie blinks, and a close-up shows her tenderly fondling the cuts on her left forearm. They are pink, deep, and thick and are starting to sprout vegetation.

Next, in a half-shot that does not show her head, Josie rises and starts walking away, her blood vessels and joints suddenly visible through her skin. She stops and turns to address Lena: "Ventress wants to face it, you wanna fight it, but I don't think I want either of those things." As she turns away and starts walking into the forest-like growth of trees, the camera follows her from Lena's point of view and shows the vegetation sprouting from her cuts and the backs of her arms, growing thicker and thicker and even starting to bloom. The camera then assumes an impersonal perspective, alternating shots of Lena rising to follow Josie and Josie's feet disappearing behind the thick bushes. When Lena reaches where Josie had just been, Josie has apparently vanished into thin air. On the meadow that opens behind the growth of trees, there are several multicoloured flowering branches in the shape of humans, growing amid the remains of human habitation. This human-shaped vegetation was there the first day the expedition stopped at this place, and it is impossible to tell whether Josie has become one of the human-shaped branches or lost her human form altogether, becoming one with nature in another form. Through this scene, the soundscape is eerie yet natural and strangely beautiful, consisting of the sound of wind and strange hums in the distance that increase in volume at Josie's vanishing, lending a sense of wonder to the scene.

This scene challenges the usual ways suicide is represented, although Josie in her shy and vulnerable appearance is almost stereotypical as a suicidal female character, subjected to the medical gaze in her self-harm and feeling shame over its visible signs. But she also defies the stereotype in her clear intelligence, which signals a capacity for reasoned decisions. This ability also characterizes her approach to suicide, if her calm, unfearing assimilation into nature, devoid of all the drama and bodily violations that usually characterize depictions of suicide (Kosonen, 2020a), can be described as such. Her decision to neither fight nor face the Shimmer but to disappear into it without pain makes her death in human form an "explicitly individual choice and act," as Holmes and Holmes (2005) define suicide. And Josie's reflection on the tragedy that Cassie meets – of dying in fear and pain and eternally living on in that trauma – indicates that it is justified by this Stoic view of suicide as a sometimes-reasonable departure (*eulogos exagôgê*) from life (e.g. Englert, 1990): Josie has been in the Shimmer long enough not to have been affected, so her death in human form is inevitable. Even if she made it out of Area X, she would risk multiple organ failure, like Kane, while continuing further would only risk encounters with the Shimmer that she is not willing to undergo. As she tells Lena, she wants neither to face the Shimmer's source nor to fight it. She thus ends her life in human form in peace, becoming one with The Shimmer on her own terms.

The reading of Josie's death as a radical act of agency in relation to the ways death and suicide are usually depicted is prospectively reinforced by an earlier scene in which Lena and Ventress discuss the differences between suicide and self-destruction. Night has fallen, and they are guarding their current base from a watchtower, as Lena asks Ventress about the motives that drove Kane in the previous expedition: "Why did my husband volunteer for a suicide mission?" "Is that what you think we're doing, committing suicide?" "You must have profiled him, you must have assessed him. He must have said something." "So you're asking me as a

psychologist?" Ventress wonders, which Lena confirms. Ventress continues, "then, as a psychologist, I'd say you are confusing suicide with self-destruction. Almost none of us commit suicide, and almost all of us self-destruct, in some in way, in some part of our lives. We drink, we smoke, we destabilize the good job … and happy marriage. These aren't decisions, they're impulses. In fact, you're probably better equipped to explain this than I am." Lena, who has been feeling guilt over her extramarital affair, is taken aback: "What does that mean?" But instead of explaining this self-destruction in psychological terms, Ventress points towards the inevitability of death: "You're a biologist. Isn't self-destruction coded into us, programmed into each cell?"

Ventress's notion refers back to an early scene, where Lena and Kane are lying in bed days before Kane's expedition, and Lena mentions the Hayflick limit, after which the human cell population will stop dividing, preventing the aging human body from regenerating: "You take a cell, circumvent the Hayflick limit, you can prevent senescence. It means the cell doesn't grow old, it becomes immortal. Keeps dividing, doesn't die. We see aging as a natural process, but it's actually a fault in our genes." Lena's words reflect her own distaste towards death and aging, so familiar from death-fearing Western thought, imbued with fantasies of eternal life (and youth). In this light, Lena and Ventress's discussion seems to be not just about the differences and similarities between self-willed death and the more symbolic forms of self-destruction, but about the necessity of death that Lena as a biologist well knows but denies as a fault in the human genome.

This distaste and denial, presented in *Annihilation* as dialogue, can be argued to be reflected and reiterated in the grand narratives we tell, including most cinematic fiction. As Sullivan and Greenberg argue, "one of the most common ways in which cinema depicts death is as violent and 'unnatural'" (2013, p. 3). They also connect these violent spectacles – murders, car crashes, suicides, but rarely death from illness or old age – to the fantasy of immortality that also Lena describes: "Our cultural worldviews imbue the world with death-transcendent meaning and hold out the possibility of literal or symbolic immortality" (p. 7). In addition, suicide's status as a bad death, the ultimate "negation" of life, connects, as do its representations as marginalized and medicalized condition (Kosonen, 2020a). Michele Aaron even observes a gendered divide between feminized suicide and male characters "mortality-testing, death-defying, and martyr-invoking moments" (2014, p. 19). Yet the meanings given to suicide by *Annihilation* are contrary to the usual ones assigned by the biopolitical institutions of meaning-making. To me, the subversive nature of *Annihilation*'s takes on suicide and death is best illustrated by juxtaposing Josie's and Lena's relationships towards death as Josie describes them: Lena wants to fight it, Josie does not. And fight it Lena does in the film, whereas Josie goes without fear and pain, gracefully, through her own decision. It is worth noting here Josie's position as a racialized female character, rendered close to nature both by the discourses denying racialized people and women reason and by ecofeminist thought's recognition of humans' integral coexistence with the non-human nature they inhabit.

The Shimmer: Life in, After, and Beyond Death

It is now appropriate to turn towards The Shimmer – the film's non-human protagonist – and ask what it is and what it represents. The diegetic reasons given in the film by Ventress do not offer much to hold onto, as she terms the Shimmer "a religious event, an extra-terrestrial event, a higher dimension. We have many theories, few facts." That the Shimmer "is a prism,

that refracts everything" causing "giant waves in the gene pool," is the discovery made by Josie and the expedition, caused by their coming across the mutating nature in Area X: different species of flowers blooming from a single garland; vegetation that should not exist; a crocodile with teeth like a shark; two gazelles with blooming antlers moving like as if had a single consciousness; branches in human form; the bear screaming out in dying Josie's voice; a video left by the previous expedition showing one of the men's intestines writhing like worms and his gory remains growing from a wall of beautifully coloured fungi; and Lena's cells as seen through a microscope. Reflecting this explanation, the Shimmer is made sense of in terms of unnatural phenomena of light, and its origins visualized as a ball of multicoloured light hitting the Blackwater lighthouse. To the eyes of Ventress and Lena watching it from the research station, the Shimmer looks like a giant wall of visible light dividing the landscape, with rainbow-colored currents of air floating in different directions. From the inside, only the mutations and the subtle rainbow-coloured refractions of light directly separate Area X from the rest of nature, unless its transcendent lushness and greenness manage to mark it as a place where nature has overwhelmed human influence.

Does the Shimmer have a consciousness, a will, a purpose? Both Ventress and Lena, who encounter its source at the lighthouse in the film's climax, suggest that it does, indicating some sort of extra-terrestrial group mind familiar from the horrors of science fiction. Before exploding into a single ray of light, the stunned Ventress, who drops hints about having the Shimmer inside her, says, "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." And as Lena faces the exploded light coiling itself in the air in front of her, the Shimmer makes a clone of her, just as Kane is depicted as having been cloned in a video recording Lena had recently watched. This is the beginning of the final battle of the film, where humanity triumphs according to all the Hollywood tropes: Lena fights the clone and – as we are led to assume – destroys it and the entire Shimmer in a phosphorus grenade explosion. Yet in being interrogated at the Southern Reach station by the authorities of state and science, Lena assumes a sympathetic attitude towards the Shimmer. "What did it want?" "It was mutating, destroying. It was not destroying; it was changing everything, making something new." "What?" "I don't know?" The symbol of infinity, lemniscate, is visible on Lena's arms, and a gentle circling light comes alive in the eyes of both Lena (if she is indeed still Lena) and resurrected Kane as they hug one another, intimating that even if the threat has been overcome, they might not be entirely human, or the world safe from the Shimmer's effects after all.

Approaching the Shimmer from the point of view of death studies that is my perspective on the film, it is appropriate to ask whether it is not merely a vision of an extra-terrestrial threat to humanity, human-cultivated nature, or the relationship of the heterosexual couple around which the main plot revolves. Rather, in the film's depiction of the Shimmer as transcendent light and Area X as a lush, mutating nature overpowering everything humans have created, the Shimmer renders a metaphor of life, or its circle, including death. Here, referring to posthumanist thinking, Josie's death can be seen as "becoming-nature" in Deleuze's and Guattari's term (1987), and as becoming "vibrant matter" in Jane Bennett's terms. These theories are visually poignant in Josie's transformation from a human to a hybrid between human and vegetation and then to mere vegetation, as is the destiny of all humans: to become nature, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, to become mere formless matter from which other forms of life may grow.

Making sense of Josie's death in these terms and considering Shimmer a metaphor of death within life relates *Annihilatio*n's eco-horrific view of mutating nature to central problems in the Western relationship to death. Especially in its modern, medicalized, and institutionalized developments, Western death culture has been described as death-denying (Becker, 1973) and death-forbidding (Ariès, 1974).[4] In his classic philosophical argument "Death," Thomas Nagel (1979, pp. 1–11) connects this denial to the limits of humans' subjective viewpoint and imagination, along a similar binary that MacCormack witnesses in *The Ahuman Manifesto* (2020): (individual human) life as the greatest imaginable good, and death as the loss of this greatest good and therefore evil:

> On the one hand it can be said that life is all one has, and the loss of it is the greatest loss one can sustain. … But if death is an evil, it is the *loss of life*, rather than the state of being dead, or non-existent, or unconscious, that is objectionable. (Nagel, 1979, pp. 1, 3)

It could be argued playing a role in death's negation along these lines are anthropocentric notions of life, which often refuse to see "life" in forms of life other than human (Bennett, 2010). This anthropocentrism relates to the subjective viewpoint and its limits of imagining difference that Nagel recognizes. But as posthumanist scholars acknowledge, these limits are not merely cognitive or related to the limits of imagination, as Nagel proposes in another classic essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (1979, pp. 165–180). They also relate to human languages, philosophies, and the layers of cultural reiteration; that is, to various cultural aspects that set the boundaries for accepted shared imaginations and deny many things besides human's mortality, from human's animality to non-human animals' mind and emotions (e.g. Aaltola, 2010), and other non-human life forms' agency (Bennett, 2010; Haraway, 2016). From amidst this jumble of passivized matter, where all other animals toil, reduced to mindless beings governed by their primal impulses, only human life stands out as life worthy of living and grieving (Haraway, 2008, pp. 69–82; Butler, 2006).

How this relates to death is that its relationship to life is not oppositional. Even if it is pertinent to the Western death-denying "man" to oppose life and death as the value-laden binary pairs that Nagel and MacCormack identify, similar values do not apply in nature, which does not obey human-created rules, taxonomies, or binaries, and where death is necessary for life to happen. As Emanuele Coccia reminds us in *The Life of Plants* (2018), a metaphysical attempt to consider life and being from a non-human perspective:

> The world is not a place; it is a state of immersion of each thing in all other things.… Every living being is first of all what makes possible the life of others, a product of transitive life, which is capable of circulating everywhere, of being breathed in by others. The living being is not satisfied with giving life to a restricted portion of matter that we call its body; it also gives life especially to the space that surrounds it. That is where immersion lies – the fact that life is always its own environment and that, because of this, it circulates from body to body, from subject to subject, from place to place. (pp. 47, 67)

For Coccia, the shift from a human to a plant perspective means recognizing the intertwined, inter-dependent nature of life, circulating between and within life forms. This is also true when

[4] See also criticism of these (somewhat aged but still partially relevant) views by Walter (1994).

directing the same perspective from all life to humans, who, as Bennett reminds us, are constituted from "non-human forces operating both outside and inside the human body" (2010, p. xiv), from microbes to minerals. As Bennett describes this well-known yet easily passivized state of humans' existence as material beings composed of a variety of other material beings,

> my "own" body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated by and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. The crook of my elbow, for example, is a "special ecosystem, a bountiful home for to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria." (Bennett, 2010, p. 112, partly quoting Wade, 2008)

Bennett is far from the only thinker recognizing the entanglements between life forms that render human life more than human both in life and in decay. Indeed, this thinking has grown quite fundamental in recent new materialist and posthumanist thought (e.g. Alaimo, 2010; Barad, 2007). Furthermore, as feminist Indigenous scholar Kim Tallbear notes, these insights are not new to everybody; by contrast, they are central to the metaphysics of Indigenous cultures globally (2017). Similarly, it is precisely the Western, colonial, and nature-conquering project Deborah Rose (2006) critiques as the Death World (a term that originated with Hatley, 2000) that has pushed the entire planet into a state of imbalance through the human-centric striving for safety or simply more life. As she argues, "the will-to-destruction defiles life because it intervenes in life processes on the side of death, disrupting the shared work between the two" and "defiles death because it impedes the capacity of death to turn matter back into life" (p. 75).

Accepting this vital materiality and humans' interdependence with non-human forms of life is what Haraway calls for in *Staying With the Trouble* (2016), where she contemplates the necessity of learning to stay with the troubles of living and dying in a damaged planet affected by the human-caused sixth mass extinction and climate crisis. In Haraway's terminological suggestions, humans (too) ought to be seen as "humus" – that is, earth or soil formed of the dead matter of plants and animals – and the world humans live in as "compost" instead of "posthuman," inherently and comprehensively intertwined beyond humans' anthropocentric and subjective understandings of it. Compost could be conceived as dead matter giving life to other matter. From these perspectives, humans' natural role is to die and to "open up to the possibilities of mutation, of change, of death" (Coccia, 2018, p. 102), like the flowers Coccia discusses in this passage. And in these horizons of thinking, the loss of human life does not mean losing life or getting lost from life, although the continuation of life as decaying matter does not necessarily comfort individuals struggling with their own mortality.

Returning to *Annihilation* and its representation of Josie's death, using these theories makes it is easy to relate this self-willed assimilation to the non-human nature of Area X to a posthuman understanding of life and death as entangled and of human and non-human nature as interdependent. It can be argued that it is precisely through embracing this type of approach to death (and life) that Josie's death and the Shimmer challenge the life-death binary and its core components. As Cassie terms Josie's past self-harm as related not so much to wanting to die but to wanting to feeling alive by being assimilated into the lush ecosystem of Area X, Josie is certainly that – alive – although her decision looks more like death from the human-centric viewpoint. In this framework, it is reasonable to turn our attention to agency as the

one quality denied to both suiciding individuals and nature in their conventional representation. This marks the discourses associating self-willed death with victimhood and madness and can be witnessed in nature's passivized position at the bottom of the animacy hierarchy (Chen, 2012); that is, as unliveable and ungrievable life. It can be argued that in Josie's becoming nature, it is her agency, her cogitated action, conjoined with the vibrant materiality of her becoming, that in *Annihilation* renders death less frightening than it is in many other films about humans taking their lives or in ecohorror cinema, which traditionally features the idea of nature turning against humanity. As I argue, these types of representations are meaningful because they can thwart the human exceptionalist hubris in humans' death-denying striving for species immortality at the cost of all other life, as it is related to both humans' fear of death and their rendering of non-human life as somehow less alive.

Suicidal and Posthuman Agencies Beyond Death-Denying Scripts

Annihilation has already been discussed as an important narrative for the eco- and posthumanist mission from a variety of angles. For instance, as Emmanuelle Ben Hadj argues, "impacted by mutations just like the plants, alligators or bears that have been living in the bubble, the female team is knocked off their alleged biological pedestal and is forced to find their place in the adaptative cycle created by the extraterrestrial force" (2021, pp. 80–81). My thanatological reading of Garland's film has focused on this "adaptive cycle" as a representation of self-willed death and vibrant materiality that can challenge anthropocentric visions of life and death and of their ontological separation. As I argue, this is achieved through a representation displaying their inevitable entanglement and acknowledging agency, uniting both self-willed death and non-human life.

In my analysis, I have loosely posited *Annihilation* within the genre of ecohorror and used biopower as an umbrella term to cover the diverse, discursive, and normative ways of evaluating, regulating, fostering, and denouncing life. Especially considering suicide's regulation as the most extreme form of death denial and biopower, it is remarkable to see this death represented without the usual thanatophobia on film. There are many potential points of reference marking *Annihilation*'s divergence, but it makes sense here to compare it to M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008), another disaster film with ecocritical themes that employs the mode of ecohorror (see also Keetley, 2016). In *Happening*, humanity is threatened as vegetation – trees, bushes, plants – suddenly starts releasing toxins that cause humans to suicide, in a vision not overly different from Shimmer biologically mutating everything and merging humans with nature. In both films, humanity or the Anthropocene has been studied as the ultimate villain (e.g. Keetley, 2016; Kjærulff, 2021). Yet it is precisely the way death – in both instances, suicide – is represented that marks their difference: in *Happening,* suicides are affectively and diegetically marked as ominous, senseless, and bad, as is common in cinematic fiction. Josie's decision to "become nature" and the almost reverent affectivity of the scene stands in striking contrast to that more conventional view. It seems natural in much the way Rose describes death "from an ecological point of view, death is a return. The body returns to bacteria, and bacteria return the body to the living earth" (2006, p. 69).

I have presented this article with the underlying idea that films, alongside other collective figurations, matter, and I am not alone in this belief. "If our species does not survive the ecological crisis," writes Val Plumwood in an attempt to encourage environmental activism, "it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the

earth" (2002, p. 1). Referring to the power of film to affect attitudes toward death, Sullivan and Greenberg argue that "exposing people to images or thoughts of death – even outside conscious awareness – increases their subsequent psychological investment in aspects of their cultural worldview" (2013, p. 7). However, how this "exposure" is achieved – that is, what the representations are like – also wields an influence. With this note, my work has been driven by the idea that if conventional representations of suicide seek to stigmatize it and thus participate in the production of suicidal ontologies as unthinkable and shameful, we need new ways of thinking about and making sense of suicide. Similarly, recognizing the many fatalities caused by humanity and its anthropocentric, narcissistic life- and death-denying thinking, we need new ways to think about and make sense of dying and death more broadly, not just in its self-willed forms. *Annihilation* appears to achieve both. In the character of Josie, it shows how a self-willed exit can be peaceful and good and that, as Nagel writes while citing Lucretius, "it must be irrational to fear death, since death is simply the mirror image of the prior abyss" (1979, p. 7).

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