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# CHROMOPHILIC ANNIHILATION

## Posthuman Prisms and New Materialist Refractions of Reality

ABSTRACT

While the film's title might suggest otherwise, *Annihilation* (Garland, 2018) is not about the nullification of existence. Rather, it deals with a refractory re-creation of reality, in which colour plays a pivotal part. The manner in which this film creates a novel kind of being (not only) human presents rich avenues for exploring how *colour* is deployed in imagining 'the posthuman.' *Annihilation*'s iridescent 'Shimmer' envisions a life-altering alien force which seems to devour the world as we know it. This article analyses how *Annihilation*'s hallucinatory, weird colour-scapes conceptualise a posthuman state of existence which relentlessly *refracts* each and every aspect of life, calling into question what it means to be human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate, dead or alive. In investigating how *Annihilation*'s peculiar use of 'prismatic' colour functions within David Batchelor's concepts of 'chromophobia/-philia,'[2] while analysing the film's chromatic alien refraction in light of the new materialist theories of Karen Barad and Donna Haraway, this article fashions a protraction of the notion of chromophilia in which the ontology of colour itself gains a posthuman connotation. In Batchelor's argument about chromophobia, colour is delineated as dangerously 'other,' and even as alien. This rationale is aligned with the 'enlightened' humanist discourse which values shape over colour, integrity over chaos. Yet, it is also intimately connected to its counterpart—chromophilia—a discourse that revels in colour's refractory qualities and can be linked to the 'digital.' To illuminate the thus far unexplored topic of 'posthuman colour,' the article argues that Annihilation demonstrates how chromophilia can encompass an inherently posthuman and new materialist 'essence.'

KEYWORDS: *Annihilation*, film analysis, chromophilia, chromophobia, posthuman colour, new materialism

## CATACLYSMIC SCIENCE FICTION, POSTHUMANISM AND NEW MATERIALISM

The way the film *Annihilation* figures a new kind of being human, while forwarding a salient stance about mutation and life, warrants an exploration of how the posthuman is imagined within contemporary cinema. This article aims to analyse how the film visually conveys the figure of the posthuman, arguing more particularly that its depiction of the posthuman in relation to its colour-scapes challenges us to reorient our thinking, as the film synthesises an allegorical critique of our anthropocentric biases. *Annihilation* is the newest film from director Alex Garland, who previously gained critical acclaim with his 2014 sci-fi film *Ex Machina.* As a filmic text, *Annihilation* constitutes a mesmerizing mosaic, reassembling and refracting multiple bits and pieces from different cultural texts, specifically within the science fiction genre. Famous sci-fi films like *Stalker* (Tarkovsky, 1979), *Alien* (Scott, 1979), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968), are some of the works Garland references in order to create his own unique tale of apocalyptic planetary transformation. *Annihilation* envisages a new kind of not-only-human nature which is intensely saturated by colour and shares kinship with the theoretical strands of posthumanism and new materialism.

Disaster animates writing, speculation, thinking of the End; it prompts us to profoundly ponder our current condition. The realm of science fiction has historically been a fertile ground for these nuclear meditations. Sci-fi typically poses radical 'what if scenarios' that find their roots within the anxieties present in a certain society and extrapolates them through the fantastical simulations it produces. These cultural texts could be read as metaphoric mirrors of ourselves, sometimes through a distortion, other times through crystallization of a certain condition. Generally, these reflections pose a critical interrogation of some intrinsic myth of humanity, through positing the myth as a problem first and then exploring where that leads us to.[3] In the case of *Annihilation,* the mirror not only figuratively but also literally crystallizes and even *refracts* the human condition into a posthuman state.

The figure or the notion of the posthuman, as philosopher Francesca Ferrando argues, "destabilizes the limits and symbolic borders posed by the notion of the human."[4] Dichotomies like human/animal, human/machine, and

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2 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

3 Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (Oxford; Peter Lang, 2016), 375.

4 Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 5.

human/nonhuman in general are "re-investigated through a perception which does not work on oppositional schemata. [Similarly], the posthuman deconstructs the clear division between life/death, organic/synthetic, and natural/artificial."[5] Posthuman theory generally questions the perception of human nature as universal and hegemonic, while overthrowing the Enlightenment legacies in particular, which ingrained a hierarchical discourse of exceptionalism of the rational human subject[6] into the fabric of western society. Since the late 1960s it unfolded as a philosophical and political project, originating within and after Postmodernism, and by the 1990s it turned into an epistemological one as well. "Posthumanism is a 'post' to the notion of the 'human,' located within the historical occurrence of 'humanism' . . . and in an uncritical acceptance of 'anthropocentrism,' founded upon . . . speciesist assumptions."[7] Especially this latter concept is relevant for our discussion of *Annihilation*'s posthuman nature, as the film envisions a radical alteration of what species demarcations entail.

The film's stance can also be aligned with a new materialist view of nature–a strange (re)turn to an otherworldly material nature where the boundaries between technology and the organic continuously merge and (re)mix. New materialism (a term coined in the 1990s) presents "a theoretical turn away from the persistent dualisms in modern and humanist traditions whose influences are present in much of cultural theory."[8] Both new materialism and posthumanism challenge anthropocentrism by "question[ing] the stability of an individuated, liberal subject, [advocating] a critical materialist attention to the global, distributed influences of late capitalism and climate change."[9] In *Annihilation* hybridity and impurity prevail as formerly discrete demarcations of human life are uprooted and scattered across a novel posthuman mosaic of sorts. *Annihilation*'s 'prismatic' colour refracts anthropocentrism by going against what we could call 'humanist' colour. Scrutinizing the ways in which *Annihilation* produces evocative instances of otherworldly colour and terrifying transformations, this article highlights how the film prompts a shift away from anthropocentric thought.

5 Ferrando, 5.

6 Ferrando states that both the 'human' and 'humanism' have been sustained by "reiterative formulations of symbolic 'others,' which have functioned as markers of the shifting borders of who and what would be considered 'human': non-Europeans, non-whites, women, queers, freaks, animals, and automata, among others, have historically represented such oppositional terms" (*Philosophical Posthumanism*, 24).

7 Ferrando, 24.

8 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin "Interview with Karen Barad," in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, eds. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), page 48, quoted in Kameron Sanzo, "New Materialism(s)," *Critical Posthumanism*, April 25, 2018, https://criticalposthumanism.net/new-materialisms/.

9 Kameron Sanzo, "New Materialism(s)," *Critical Posthumanism*, April 25, 2018, https://criticalposthumanism.net/new-materialisms/.

*Annihilation* motivates us to rethink the ways in which life is structured, not unlike the manner in which Bruno Latour's 'network,'[10] Tim Ingold's 'meshwork,'[11] Andrew Pickering's 'mangle,'[12] and Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's 'assemblage'[13] rethink life's matter. These theories share the idea that our existence is not predicated upon fixed qualifiers but rather emerges in continuous flux as an embroidery of fluidity, exchangeability, connectivity and unpredictability. Feminist theorist Karen Barad's strain of new materialism in particular becomes relevant when analysing *Annihilation*'s posthuman condition. Barad's 'diffractive methodology' re(con)figures the notion of agency and posits a sense of self which is internal to the entangled quantum world within her 'agential realist account.'[14] She proposes a radical shift in concepts which usually anchor our understanding of existence, like matter, change, causality, time, space, bodies, subject, object, and individuality. This dazzling framework of thought will be returned to towards the end of this article, after the specific working of *Annihilation*'s posthuman condition is expounded more fully.

## ADAPTING AND ASSEMBLING ANNIHILATION

Figure 1.
Protagonist Lena and her team enter *Annihilation*'s iridescent Shimmer.[15]

10 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

11 Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Routledge, 2011).

12 Andrew Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency and Science* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

13 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

14 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007). In this work in particular Barad develops her agential realist account and diffractive methodology.

15 "Annihilation (2018) – Official Trailer – Paramount Pictures," December 3, 2017, Video, 01:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=890p78l90F0.

"It wasn't destroying. It was changing everything. It was making something new."[16] This line, uttered by protagonist Lena (Natalie Portman), explicitly verbalises that *Annihilation* is not about absolute destruction. In this scene, a military official interrogates Lena after she returned from the 'Shimmer' (Figure 1), an alien environment that came into existence after a meteor crashed onto a lighthouse on the southern coastline of Florida, and then expanded exponentially, threatening to take over the entire globe. The military took great precaution to prevent the general public from knowing about the 'infected' area, which they designated as 'Area X,' but they could only guess as to what the Shimmer's nature entails: a religious event, an extraterrestrial event, a higher dimension, or something else entirely.

Multiple top-secret expeditions had been sent into this extraterrestrial terrain before Lena entered it, and except for her now dying husband Kane (Oscar Isaac), who is held at the same military facility she is interrogated in, no living thing returned alive. The facility is stationed outside the area's outer fringe and Kane, a special forces soldier, will perish soon from internal organ failure due to his exposure to the electromagnetic Shimmer. Lena, a biology professor and former soldier herself, entered the Shimmer after her husband had unexpectedly returned, after being missing for a year and presumed dead. Upon his return, he fell ill and together with Lena, was taken by the army men to the facility, where Lena recounts her story not only to the military official but also to us, spectators.

The film is based on Jeff VanderMeer's bestselling *Area X: Southern Reach Trilogy–Annihilation; Authority; Acceptance.*[17] The author is often hailed as one of the exemplars of 'weird fiction,' a subgenre of speculative fiction which combines both physical and existential terror while deploying elements of fantasy as well as science fiction tropes.[18] Garland took up much from the first part of the trilogy for his filmic adaptation, including the title, but the film does not follow the narrative of any part of the trilogy. Rather it condenses the outlandish elements of the three novels into a visually stunning composition which revels in all kinds of lavish colours. The way the main characters in the film are depicted largely coincides with how VanderMeer gives flesh to his protagonist and her female colleagues, but quite some plot twists have been altered or abridged.

16 *Annihilation,* directed by Alex Garland (2018, Skydance Media and DNA Films), Time Code: 01:45:05.

17 Jeff VanderMeer, *Area X: Southern Reach Trilogy–Annihilation; Authority; Acceptance* (FSG Originals, 2014).

18 Something that can be called 'the aesthetics of the weird' seems to have arisen within current cultural texts (in film and literature) in tandem with a strand of theorizing 'the weird' as a specific kind of affect within contemporary critical thought. Both trajectories focus on estranging and altering conventional modes of perception and experience.

A notable difference is that in the book the protagonist's husband already died from organ failure when she enters Area X to retrace his last steps. Also, the uncanny figure of the 'crawler' is absent from the film, while the inward-spiralling reversed 'tower' that lurks beneath the lighthouse in which this creature crawls is entirely different in the film. Womb-like catacombs with vaginal-shaped shafts leading towards its inner cavern, reminiscent of H. R. Giger's artwork for *Alien,* define this space (Figure 2). A subdued allusion to the tower is made in the film by using the name 'Lena' (short for Magdalena), whereas in the trilogy she is an unnamed character only referred to as 'the biologist' or 'ghost bird.' *Annihilation* does not necessarily reference the biblical figure, but points towards Magdalena's Hebrew origin, connoting the word 'tower.' This meaning is not arbitrary, nor is the fact that Lena is not merely a biologist, but one specializing in studying cancer cells, a life-cycle which is akin to the Shimmer's functioning. Cancer radically alters DNA, growing and mutating at an exponential rate, as the opening shots of the film display, just like the Shimmer drastically alters all DNA present in the infected and exponentially increasing Area X. Although the film is not an 'accurate' adaptation, it does draw on the same conceptual structures that lie at the heart of the trilogy.

Figure 2.
A womb-like cavern with vaginal-shaped shafts.[19]

Adapting such an outlandish, albeit bestselling, story for the big screen was contentious. Paramount allegedly held back a global release due to the conflicting outcomes of the test screenings as the preview audiences apparently found

19 "Annihilation (2018) – Official Trailer – Paramount Pictures," December 3, 2017, Video, 02:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=890p78l90F0.

the film too 'weird' and intellectual.[20] Fearing low revenues, the production company did not release the film theatrically worldwide, but only in America, Canada and China, while the rest of the world got a Netflix release. But perhaps because *Annihilation* did not get a global release, Garland did not have to compromise and could endow his film with all the colourful and weird splendour he could fathom. All kinds of shimmers, shines, neon-glows and crystalline flickers are featured in the film to animate the Shimmer's life-altering alien force. Yet, *Annihilation*'s aesthetics go well beyond the mere surface level of formal design and it is within its specific chromophilic visualization of the refractory re-creation of life that the film's true transgressive potential lies.

If one boils down *Annihilation*'s basic premise to its bare narrative essence, it might not seem very revolutionary: an alien force from outer space intrudes upon the life on Earth and changes everything. The archetypal space-invader narrative does not constitute anything new amongst envisionings of the end of the world after a cataclysmic disruption. However, the specific manner in which *Annihilation* assembles its particular apocalypse is quite unique, albeit the film does reference other cultural texts, such as Tarkovsky's ground-breaking sci-fi epos *Stalker*. Both films feature a group who ventures into a cryptic extraterrestrial terrain that appeared on Earth after a meteor impact, 'Area X' or 'The Zone,' in which the supernatural alienation of nature and the human self play a pivotal role. Within these earth-scapes an even more mystifying core resides: *Stalker*'s 'The Room' and *Annihilation*'s 'Lighthouse.' Both films end with an ambiguous finale which leaves the spectator bewildered, contemplating a metamorphosis of all substance of our existence.[21] There are also striking similarities between Garland's *Annihilation* and H. P. Lovecraft's short story "The Colour Out of Space" (1927), which is not surprising per se as it is commonly known that VanderMeer continues the Lovecraftian tradition of weird fiction, but for our purposes here it is salient to note that the particular focus these fictional works share is the importance of alien colour and chromatic otherness.

20 Nicholas Tufnell, "'Annihilation': Is the 'New Weird' too weird for Hollywood?," February 23, 2018, https://www.cnet.com/news/is-annihilation-movie-based-on-jeff-vandermeer-new-weird-book-too-weird/.

21 In "Technological and Posthuman Zones" (*Critical Posthumanism*, 2018), R. L. Rutsky states that the so-called 'posthuman performativity' involves not only a transformation of human identity, but a "broader re-conception of the entire environment—natural, cultural, technological" in which human beings are complexly implicated. No longer conceived as subject to human use and control, these posthuman zones are "often cast as ambiguous, inhuman, alien, or simply weird." These zones are biotechnological: they alter humans, animals, and the environment in invisible and unpredictable ways.

## POSTHUMAN PRISMATIC COLOUR IN *ANNIHILATION*

Figure 3.
Human-floral-fungal mosaic assemblage.[22]

*Annihilation*'s story is fragmentarily presented through subjective flashbacks, and the narration is restricted to the protagonist. The film's plot resists any succinct summary–Lena's diegetic experiences of Area X are even more refractory than the narrative structure that shows these weird occurrences. The entire environment within the Shimmer has gone berserk: different species of plants intermix their usually distinctive structures into one new conglomerate whole. Not only plant-life took on this unruly hybridizing quality; also fungal, animal and even human life forms are affected by the Shimmer's transmutations which produce stunning new chromatic composites of life (Figure 3). Faun-like deer with bark-like antlers endowed with fluorescent flowers, and prehistoric bear-like monsters with exposed craniums who adopt their victims' last cry in their death-roar populate Area X (Figure 4).

The way the Shimmer operates is expounded halfway through the film. The magnetic forces within this alien zone literally *refract* all waves and particles in the environment. One of Lena's crew members explains that she first thought their radio-waves were blocked by the Shimmer, but then realized they were in fact refracted. Not only light gets deformed into the fantastical rainbow hues that seep into Mother Nature, but also all previously discrete units of DNA of various species are scattered and remixed into new syntheses. The Shimmer *is* a prism, it refracts not just radio-waves or light-waves, but also animal DNA, plant DNA, all DNA, including human DNA.

22 "Annihilation (2018) – Official Trailer – Paramount Pictures," December 3, 2017, Video, 02:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=890p78l90F0.

Figure 4.
Transmutated 'deer' and 'bear.' [23]

All living species are refashioned within the Shimmer, immanently altering the traditional categories of what life on Earth entails. All matter becomes susceptible to radical change at its very core, as former demarcations of species types disappear, including the hierarchies that usually structure them. Humanoid shaped 'plants' (Figure 5) and crystalline 'trees' only seem to be the beginning of this planetary metamorphosis. The manner in which this recreation of life takes place is deeply embedded within the extreme colour-scapes *Annihilation* materialises. From the first moment the spectator enters the Shimmer with

23 "Annihilation (2018) – Official Trailer – Paramount Pictures," December 3, 2017, Video, 01:24; 02:03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=890p78l90F0.

Lena and her crew, we know immediately that we are not in 'normal,' human territory anymore. A huge multicoloured wall of what seems like feather-light translucent oil counter intuitively cascades up towards the sky.

Two distinct types of iridescent colour-scapes exist in *Annihilation*'s diegetic world. In the first part of the film an ethereal milky-white opalescent chromatic register manifests itself, which is prevalent in most outdoors 'nature' sequences within the Shimmer. The second is a menacing oily-black polychromatic register, which is featured in the concluding scenes inside the lighthouse, where Lena encounters a shiny, sleek alien figure[24] which morphs into her doppelgänger. Both these posthuman colour-schemes contrast sharply with the human hues of the 'normal' world outside the Shimmer. Film scholar John Belton argues in "Painting by Numbers" that black-and-white imagery versus colour instances in films such as *Sin City* (Miller, 2005) and *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998) operate within distinctly different diegetic registers. The colour instances function as "hallucinatory fragments of colour that exist in a diegetic limbo–neither quite inside the story space nor outside of it."[25] Furthermore, Belton claims that "colour manipulation poses a potential threat to our traditional understanding of chromatic and achromatic colour systems and their creation of a credible narrative space."[26] One could transpose this argument onto the outlandish colours of *Annihilation* and argue that, in comparison to the 'normal,' human hues outside Area X, both posthuman iridescent colour-scapes operate in a similar fashion.

Figure 5.
Humanoid shaped 'plant.'[27]

24 This oily female alien references another sci-fi film which recently gained a cult status: *Under the Skin* (Glazer, 2013).

25 John Belton, "Painting by the Numbers: The Digital Intermediate," *Film Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2008): 62.

26 Belton, 61.

27 "Annihilation (2018) – Official Trailer – Paramount Pictures," December 3, 2017, Video, 01:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=890p78l90F0. These 'plants' not only have humanoid shapes, they in fact are the missing members of previous expeditions into Area X; their bodies have transformed into plants themselves.

The milky-white opalescent chromatic register as well as the oily-black polychromatic register (seen as two complementary iterations of one and the same polychromous posthuman vernacular) together form an alternative, alien diegetic idiom that differentiates itself from the normative, naturalistic, photo-realistic and often desaturized colour-scheme that one might designate as a 'humanist' chromatic mode. Both colour-scapes are decidedly otherworldly, but the 'white' version functions as a gateway that leads us from the humanist world further and further into the posthuman heart of darkness. *Annihilation* splices its alien prismatic colours gradually into the more familiar humanist diegetic register, increasing the estranging intensity of its polychromatic gradient drastically as we approach the lighthouse. The deeper we enter into the Shimmer, the more its mutating chromatic excess manifests itself.

*Annihilation*'s chromatic otherness can be placed into a productive conversation with artist and writer David Batchelor's discussion of 'chromophobia.' In his book *Chromophobia* (2000), Batchelor argues that a societal anxiety about the 'contamination or corruption through colour' has been prevalent since ancient times, specifically in Western culture. He urges his readers to see that colour is trapped within a set of rigid, constraining dichotomies. As he defines chromophobia, he analyses two distinct ways in which colour in Western culture traditionally has been demonized by means of othering it and/or trivializing its essence:

> Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity. [The] purging of colour is usually accomplished in one of two ways. In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some 'foreign' body .... In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic. In one, colour is regarded as alien and therefore dangerous; in the other, it is perceived merely as a secondary quality of experience, and thus unworthy of serious consideration. Colour is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both. [Colour] is other to the higher values of Western culture. Or perhaps culture is other to the higher values of colour.[28]

The decisive binary informing this discourse is that between the East and the West. This tandem can however be extended to a surplus of traditional oppositions–progressive/primitive, masculinity/femininity, rationality/emotion, normal/exotic, culture/nature, good/bad, self/other, human/alien. Within

28 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 22–23.

these oppositions one category always has the upper hand; the binaries are bound together by normative, hierarchical power relations.

This article proposes to protract these sets of binaries with the humanist/posthumanist dichotomy, as considered specifically within the theoretical framework of Philosophical Posthumanism,[29] in order to ultimately dismantle the dictating dualisms. Ferrando states that in order "to postulate a post- to the human, the differences which are constitutive to the human, and which have been historically erased by the self-claimed objectivity of hegemonic accounts, have to be acknowledged."[30] Philosophical Posthumanism not only conceptualizes itself as post-human, but also as a post-dualism and as a post-antropocentrism, as it allows for a "relocation which is aware of speciesism and of the devastating effects of anthropocentric habits."[31] This approach is indebted "to the reflections developed out of the 'margins' of such a centralized human subject, because of their emphasis on the human as a process, more than a given, inherently characterized by differences and shifting identities."[32] Humanism, on the other hand, has been sustained by reiterative hierarchical formulations of symbolic others, structured as dictating dualisms that keep which ever 'other' the normative category of the human has 'othered,' trapped in the realm of the devious and the dangerously trivial.

To return to Batchelor, he thus analyses the 'fall' into colour as a fall into the unconscious, into otherness, and consequently this is seen as a loss of the 'self.' In a passage which discusses the utterly contradictory discourses surrounding the notion of colour, he states:

> Colour is both a fall into nature, which may in turn be a fall from grace or a fall into grace, and against nature, which may result in a corruption of nature or freedom from its corrupting forces. Colour is a lapse into decadence and a recovery of innocence, a false addition to a surface and the truth beneath that surface. Colour is disorder and liberty; it is a drug, but a drug that can intoxicate, poison or cure. Colour is all of these things, and more besides, but very rarely is colour just

29 Philosophical Posthumanism is "a recent development of Critical and Cultural Posthumanism, which arose within the field of literary criticism" (*Philosophical Posthumanism*, 2). Ferrando defines Philosophical Posthumanism as "an onto-epistemological approach, as well as an ethical one, manifesting as a philosophy of mediation, which discharges any confrontational dualisms and hierarchical legacies" (*Philosophical Posthumanism*, 22).

30 Ferrando, 5.

31 Ferrando, 186.

32 Ferrando, 5.

> neutral. In this sense, chromophobia and chromophilia are both utterly opposed and rather alike.[33]

In Batchelor's delineation of the hegemonic discourse of chromophobia, colour-in-general is condemned as an ominous other and even as alien. Chromophobia, according to Batchelor, falls in line with an 'enlightened' humanist discourse which values shape over colour, integrity over chaos, form over indeterminacy. However, the way in which the chromophobic discourse typifies colour is highly schizophrenic. As the quote above shows, it endows colour with both positive and negative traits, it figures colour as a mesh of supposedly irreconcilable dualisms. The chromatic discourse seems to manifests itself as a head of Janus with both chromophobic and chromophilic face. Yet, this two-sidedness does not constitute a clear-cut dichotomy at all: "Chromophobia might not really have its opposite in chromophilia; chromophobia might be seen as simply chromophilia's weak form. [C]hromophobia recognizes the otherness of colour but seeks to play it down, while chromophilia recognizes the otherness of colour and plays it up."[34] Chromophilia thus can be said to lie at the far end of a discursive colour spectrum and abolish hierarchical dualisms, while revelling in colour's refractory qualities which are—as we shall see in the next section—linked to the notion of the 'digital.'

## THE CHROMOPHILIC FALL INTO DIGITAL COLOUR

This article suggests that the chromophilic discourse entails an inherently posthuman stance and a new materialist view of nature. Especially the relationship of colour to the rationale of human language is of interest to our discussion of chromatic otherness in *Annihilation*. To this end, a passage where Batchelor quotes art critic Charles Blanc's (1813–1882) chromophobic discourse is highlighted:

> This is a strange image—colour as the language of nature—but it is crucial, as Blanc goes on to make clear: "Intelligent beings have a language represented by articulate sounds; organised beings, like all animals and vegetables, express themselves by cries or forms, contour or carriage. Inorganic nature has only the language of colour. It is by colour alone that a certain

33 Batchelor, 71.
34 Batchelor, 71.

> stone tells us it is a sapphire or an emerald . . . Colour, then, is the peculiar characteristic of the lower forms of nature."[35]

This chromophobic outlook on crystals, gems and precious stones is crucial, as *Annihilation* prominently features such seemingly inanimate objects. The womb-like cavern, where most of the perplexing film finale takes place, comprises shiny surfaces which seem to be completely composed of precious stones. Furthermore, the above-mentioned crystalline trees are a distinctive feature of the film while the entire Shimmer itself could be designated as a gem-like, shimmering natural environment where all beings, all things present, do not adhere to a set organization for they morph continuously. According to Batchelor, gems often stand in for colour-in-general, as they convey the notion that colour is active, alive, projecting, and that light appears to shine from within.[36] He further mentions how writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley explained the place of precious stones in the so-called 'literature of paradise': "it was not in itself the rarity of these stones . . . it was, again, their colour. For this colour—intense, heightened, pure, unqualified—offered a glimpse of the 'Other World,' a world beyond Nature and the Law, a world undimmed by language, concepts, meanings and uses."[37] *Annihilation*'s gem-like Shimmer also seems to consist of such an almost celestial space, a natural world beyond the nature of man, illuminated by the splendour of indeterminate formlessness and chromatic hybridity.

Batchelor goes on to comment on Blanc's and Huxley's very distinct yet kindred views on the 'language of gems':

> For both men, gems and shiny things are significant because they represent that which exists beyond the reach of language. In fact, Blanc does describe gems as a kind of language, but it is a paradoxical, metaphorical and mute one, the language of the formless, a language entirely alien to human consciousness. For Huxley, precious stones are precious because they "may remind our unconscious of what it enjoys at the mind's antipodes". For both, in different ways, these shiny objects are unspeakable.[38]

Both Blanc and Huxley figure a kind of polarisation between language and colour. However, Blanc tries to anxiously keep these poles apart in stark opposition, whereas Huxley's chromophilic stance sees the dive into colour as a heavenly liberation from the restrictive structure of language. For Huxley "our main problem is that we have fallen out of colour and into line, writing

35 Batchelor, 25.
36 Batchelor, 74.
37 Batchelor, 75.
38 Batchelor, 76–77.

and language."[39] Batchelor argues that to attend to colour is "to attend to the limits of language. It is to try to imagine, often through the medium of language, what a world without language might be like."[40] *Annihilation* imagines a posthuman world which falls 'back' into colour and out of the humanist integrity of shape, form and line. The 'language' of *Annihilation*'s posthuman nature is one of formlessness as it entails unceasing transformation, trying to imagine, through the visual language of cinema, what a world without species boundaries and humanist hierarchies would look like. *Annihilation* attends to the limits of human language and its normative structures by adorning itself with an abundance of *digitally* generated colours which cinematically convey its 'unspeakable' nature.

Here we turn to Batchelor's concept of chromophilia and the shift from analogical to digital colour. He states that the analogical colour circle dominated the understanding/use of colour in art, establishing relationships *between* colours, but also implying "an almost feudal hierarchy among colours—primaries, secondaries and tertiaries, the pure and the less pure."[41] With the digitalization of colour, which Batchelor links to the colour chart, the previous seamless spectrum of the analogical colour circle (which comprised an undivided whole, a merging of one colour into another) became something that consisted of individuated, fragmented and plural 'colours,' captured in discrete units where "there is no mergence or modulation; there are only boundaries, steps and edges. Analogical colour is colour; digital colour is colours."[42] Batchelor directly links the digitalization of colour in art during the industrial post-war era "to the experience of modernity. These colours are more the colours of things than atmospheres. More urban colours than the colours of nature. Artificial colours, city colours, industrial colours."[43] I would suggest another shift in colour may be in effect, when it comes to the 'hyper-digitization' of colour of the past decade, and *Annihilation* adheres to this second shift in colour in a posthuman and new materialist way.

The Shimmer assembles its colour-scapes in such a manner that the modernist sharp edges of urban, industrial colour once again get blurred, but this time into a diffracted, indeterminate colour spectrum. The individuated plural colours of the digital colour chart are now intricately entangled with one another in a postmodern convalescence. The waves of colour that engulf us in *Annihilation* are hyper-digital glimmers of otherness which are as refractory as they are scattered. This is not the almost feudal hierarchy of the analogical colour circle where the different colours blur into one another according to "a geometry of triangulation and a grammar of

39 Batchelor, 79.
40 Batchelor, 79.
41 Batchelor, 105.
42 Batchelor, 105.
43 Batchelor, 106.

complementarity."[44] As with the modernist digitalized colours, there are no more hierarchies within this postmodern version of hyper-digital colour, but the colours also do not relate to each other as discrete units. Rather the hyper-digital colours intermix in dazzling, irreverent ways. This vibrant hybridity which thrives on shimmers, shines, reflections and refractions, revels in a strange (re)turn to an otherworldly nature where the boundaries between technology and the organic are mixed on a cellular level. It is a fall into colour where hybridity and impurity prevail as the formerly discrete digital colour units and the formerly distinct units of human life are intertwined within a novel posthuman and postmodern mosaic. This constitutes a powerful loss of the self which uproots hierarchical humanist dualisms through its chromatic mutations.

## ANNIHILATION: WITHOUT EMPTINESS IN EXUBERANT COLOUR

As one can comprehend more fully now, *Annihilation* is not about the absolute annihilation of existence; it is about creating something radically new. The word 'annihilation' is composed of two parts which antithetically annul each other while fortifying the word's meaning too. Its primary definition means 'to reduce to utter ruin or nonexistence'—to annihilate is to reduce something into nothing. However, the Latin term 'nihil' (= nothing) is prefixed by *an-*, which designates that the word that follows is not (or is without) the concept stated behind *an-*. 'An-nihil-ation' literally means 'not nothing,' and conveys the 'lack of nonexistence.' It connotes something that is inherently *without emptiness*. In its origins, the process of annihilation entails 'a becoming of something' rather than 'a reduction to nothing,' even signalling a peculiar form of lavish excess. Within the mechanisms of destruction resides the potential for unbridled creation itself; the making of something radically new.

Yet the common connotation of the word 'annihilation' does signify the extinction of everything, and this underlying linguistic and philosophical paradox also lies at the film's core. *Annihilation* intricately conceptualizes a more-than-human, other-than-human, posthuman state of existence which relentlessly refracts *all* life and calls into question what it means to be human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate, dead or alive. It systematises a crystalline and almost cancerous structure of being, which exudes a towering form of mutating growth of everything that is present in our earthly existence. The undiscriminating force projecting out of the lighthouse encapsulates all life with its megalomanic metamorphosis, and this extreme presence of the lack of nonexistence annihilates the rational human world with its hierarchical structures and anthropocentric selves. Yet this an–nihil–ating force does not

44 Batchelor, 105.

reduce reality to sheer nothingness, it in fact entails a radical state of being immanently without emptiness in exuberant colour, a profound 'reworlding' of sorts, as feminist cyborg-scholar Donna Haraway[45] might call it, which (re)-assembles life as it refracts it.

Here we should stress the importance of *Annihilation*'s specific visualization of its speculative apocalypse. Haraway states in "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin": "It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts."[46] She argues for a re(con)figuration of the concept of kin and kinship between all earthlings as 'kinds-as-assemblages' instead of framing life in the restrictive categories of species, to overcome the menaces of our current age.[47] Haraway, in her new manifesto of sorts, urges: "If there is to be multispecies ecojustice . . . it is high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species."[48] This unravelling can be set on by "the webs of speculative fabulations, speculative feminism, science fiction, and scientific fact."[49] The way Haraway calls forth her 'Chthulucene,'[50] an epoch she envisions following the Anthropocene,[51] is profoundly embedded in fiction as a form. "Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems. [W]e need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections."[52] Moreover,

45 Haraway's seminal "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991) is a critique of what she perceives as 'binary feminism.' The second-wave feminism in her opinion adheres to the same matrix present within patriarchal society, which it wants to overcome. For her binary feminism merely reverses the hegemonic categories of feminine and masculine and thus still feeds the same power structure it tries to abolish. Haraway instead calls for an implosion of all binaries by evoking the mythical figure of the cyborg: an ironic, political, literal and metaphorical weapon. By incorporating all the possible dichotomies, Haraway's cyborg implodes all normative binaries that structure patriarchy's heteronormative matrix.

46 Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 160. This particular article formed the basis for Haraway's latest book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke UP, 2016).

47 Haraway, "Making Kin," 162.

48 Haraway, "Making Kin," 161.

49 Haraway, "Making Kin," 160.

50 Haraway's Chthulucene refers to a process of reworlding. She insists "that we need a name for the dynamic ongoing sym-chthonic forces and powers of which people are a part, within which ongoingness is at stake" ("Making Kin," 160).

51 The Anthropocene is Earth's most recent geological time period, characterized by the overwhelming (mostly negative) impact human-influenced processes have had on the planet as a whole.

52 Haraway, "Making Kin," 160.

she argues that "renewed generative flourishing cannot grow from myths of immortality or failure to become-with the dead and the extinct."[53] The science fiction of *Annihilation* forms one of these infringing figures which holds the potential to unravel the ties of genealogy, kin and species, as it systematizes a kind of ecological system that goes beyond the normative category of the human, by going beyond species boundaries as it goes beyond hierarchical colour-schemes too.

*Annihilation* prompts us to conceptualize a trans-species recreation of life which portends to an-nihil-ate the distinctive and hegemonic category of the 'human' by ways of its prismatic posthuman colour. It seems that *Annihilation* is making a kind of kindred claim to the post-anthropocentric one Haraway advocates: "No species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called modern Western scripts, acts alone; assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too."[54] *Annihilation*'s reassembling force seems to resurge to us from out of our own minds, while refracting life in a crystalline manner; forcing us to radically rethink our conceptualization of our human selves by ways of its iridescent splendour as it harnesses achromophilic liberation from humanist hierarchies.

## REFRACTING OURSELVES WITH AN AGENTIAL CUT

In *Annihilation* our normative human existence is nullified by an alien force which functions as 'a prism of light *and* life' that remixes, doubles, copies, rewrites and reassembles all life through its unyielding *refractions* of our reality. The word 'refraction' has multiple definitions. In physics: "the change of direction of a ray [e.g., light, sound, heat] in passing from one medium into another in which its wave velocity is different."[55] In ophthalmology: "the ability of the eye to refract light that enters it so as to form an image on the retina."[56] In astronomy: "the observed altered location, as seen from the earth, of another planet due to diffraction by the atmosphere."[57] All these definitions could be relevant to *Annihilation*, as the film intrinsically deals with the mutation of entities in diverging manners through an encounter with an other, in which not only the nature of these entities but also the normative perception

53 Haraway, "Making Kin," 160–61.

54 Haraway, "Making Kin," 159.

55 *Dictionary.com,* s.v. "Refraction," accessed November 30, 2020, https://www.dictionary.com/browse/refraction.

56 *Dictionary.com,* s.v. "Refraction," accessed November 30, 2020, https://www.dictionary.com/browse/refraction.

57 *Dictionary.com,* s.v. "Refraction," accessed November 30, 2020, https://www.dictionary.com/browse/refraction.

they have of themselves are altered in the process. The etymological root of 'refraction' stems from the Latin word 'refractio(-onis),' which translates into a rupture or separation of things. 'Re-fractio' is a noun derived from the past-participle stem of 'refringere' (re = back/anew/again + frangere = to break up), and thus has a common lineage with the word 'fringe': outer edge, a margin, a periphery, a border. We could discern the word's meaning as operating by means of re-setting boundaries, re-distributing demarcations, and in the process of separating new assemblages are carved out. By being attentive to what the previous margins reflect in a fashion which aligns itself with a posthuman, post-dualist and post-anthropocentric stance, it is this kind of refraction that forms *Annihilation*'s re-creating life force; the Shimmer *cuts* things as much 'apart' as it cuts things immanently 'together.'

Herein we could see *Annihilation*'s refraction as operating in a kindred manner to Barad's notion of the 'agential cut.' This is a cut that does not slice entities into an opposition, like the separation of dead and alive, subject and object, human and nonhuman, but rather this agential cut "enacts a *local* resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy."[58] This kind of cut 'jointly cuts together,' just as filmic frames are spliced together within the cinematic apparatus;[59] just as species are cleft together on a cellular level by the Shimmer—while the previously discrete modernist colour units of the colour chart are spliced together in *Annihilation*'s diffracted colour-scapes. *Annihilation* hybridises its hyper-digital colours into a posthuman chromophilia which harnesses the irreverent and indeterminate potential of the loss of the rational anthropocentric self.

As stated earlier, *Annihilation*'s re(con)figuring of the categories of life falls in line with a particular new materialist way of thought, most famously theorized in Barad's diffractive quantum thinking. Both in Barad's perception of the universe as a quantum entangled world and in *Annihilation*'s Shimmer, there are no inherent boundaries anymore, not for the human body, not for the sense of self or for 'nature' in general. Barad's new materialist 'essence' of nature seems to be that there is no stable or fixed nature of essence, there is no absolute core within existence, there is no outside of nature. All is *of* the world, *of* the universe. Everything, all matter including 'us,' is intra-connected.[60] Existence itself comprises only 'phenomena' which are entangled in ever-changing assemblages. The diffracted states in which these phenomena exist are iteratively performed with each 'agential cut' which momentarily enacts a delineation

58 Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. S. Alaimoand S. Hekman (Indiana University Press, 2008), 133 (emphasis in original).

59 The 'technique' of editing splices, cuts, assembles or merges images together, as the term 'montage' connotes (used for the practice of editing in certain strands of film theory, esp. Sergei Eisenstein and the Soviet Montage).

60 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 133.

of boundaries with continuously different 'roles' and no set hierarchies or dualisms. Because all former categories of life are not fixed anymore, notions like agency, causality, individuality and subjectivity are to be appreciated as continuously in flux and in 'intra-action.'

*Annihilation*'s agential refraction assembles, it cuts through the segregating categories of hierarchical species life as it cuts together refractory colour-schemes and establishes unruly intra-actions between new indeterminate forms of mosaic life. *Annihilation*'s refraction is something that literally 're-fringes,' it reorders the borders of light while transforming formerly conventional boundaries of life. In the film we as a refracted human figure can potentially become entangled with all the categories and forms of life by means of its cataclysmic and cancerous chromatic refraction. *Annihilation*'s alien force indeed operates like cancer; it is a part of you, it is you, it is 'alive,' but it refracts a towering form of mutating growth, it makes something other out of you, transforming you in the process by making something radically new. The annihilation of *Annihilation* does not entail a breaking up of older taxonomies, rather it encompasses a refractory resetting of fringes, an endless entanglement of former borders, genetic as well as chromatic. What was at the margin becomes all-encompassing and ubiquitous, just like its entrancing prismatic colour-scapes.

In cinematically and chromatically re(con)figuring this kind of thinking—an indeterminate, crystalline, cancerous, refractory and refracting kind of logic of light and life—*Annihilation* presents us with an infringing perspective which allegorically could liberate us from the annihilating anthropocentric state we are currently in. If one reorders the borders and hierarchies in which we are traditionally structured to think, feel and see, one might see a tumour growing from human cells potentially as a new composite of life instead of a devastating disease. One could perhaps see the ecologically disastrous state we are in as presenting regenerative disruptions, or a pandemic as a cataclysmic reset. Perhaps this kind of thinking sounds extremely crude and mean-spirited if one realizes that these occurrences are taking countless human lives all over the globe. Nevertheless, I suggest that *Annihilation*'s allegorical criticism is not trying to advocate a destructively nihilistic vision of the human kind, but on the contrary, the film tries vigorously, in all its refracting chromatic splendour, to revive a fertile framework of thought which can imagine a flourishing future for *all* of life's matter. It does so, as the sci-fi genre generally does, by envisioning a radical, in this case an *an-nihil-lating* 'what if scenario' which finds its roots in the anxieties present in our current society, and extrapolates it through the fantastical assemblages it produces.

To enter this infringing state of mind we have to recognize that the disaster has already happened, that placing the rational human subject with its suffocating hierarchies and its cancerous drive towards exponential growth at the very core of the universe, at the expense of all other kinds of marginalized

'others,' utterly destroys life on Earth without any promise of some form of cataclysmic regeneration. We have to realise that concepts like individuality, subjectivity and agency are not fixed markers which solely belong to the human condition. They do not exclusively coincide with the category of the human species as we have figured it till now within our normative humanist discourse which aligns itself with a toxic anthropocentrism that is presently annihilating our planet—albeit in a less swift but therefore also less cataclysmic manner. The fall (back) into colour, the loss of the discretely unified category of the human self through chromophilia does not constitute a loss of existence. It might only constitute an annihilation of anthropocentric dictating dualisms, while it simultaneously assembles a potent posthuman potentiality of entanglement. This is the kind of 'refringing' *Annihilation* refracts through its chromophilic prism. ⊡

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