

Magnus Lillemark

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Sublime Aesthetics and Affect in *Annihilation* and
Mad Max: Fury Road

Master's thesis in Film- og videoproduksjon

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Faculty of Humanities
Department of Art and Media Studies



NTNU

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ABSTRACT

The cinema audience's increasing knowledge and level of concern around climate change challenges filmmakers of climate fiction. The classic Hollywood catastrophe/adventure narrative can to the modern viewer appear naïve or to be making light of a topic that the scientific community agree is severe. This affects the choice of visual and affective approach climate-aware filmmakers can take when presenting encounters with natural and unnatural phenomena or entities affected by climate change and trauma. This paper considers the aesthetic and emotional dimensions in these sorts of cinematic confrontations in an attempt to isolate their dramatic function and message. To gain insights into these areas, this study utilizes close readings and comparisons of a selection of cli-fi narratives, analyzed through the lens of existing theoretical fields in aesthetics, affect theory and other ecologically minded areas within the humanities. These readings and analyses reveal approaches and techniques that foreground the dramatization of the emotional inner life of characters, coupled with a tendency towards employing sublime and gothic aesthetics. One finds the affective pull of these films to center on traditionally negatively charged emotions of guilt and mourning, while still facilitating cathartic messages of how to move forward in human to non-human coexistence.

FOREWORD

I'd like to thank my fellow students for the words of motivation, my family for the loving ones and Julia Leyda for every single one of the remaining ones.

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INTRODUCTION



Figure 1: *The sublime in god mode in The Day After Tomorrow, 2004. Twentieth Century Fox.*

In Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow*¹ (2004), the touchstone for the film side of cli-fi, there is a sweeping CGI shot of the Statue of Liberty drowning, her torch a metaphorical flame threatened to be doused by the surging Atlantic 'ocean. As viewers, we're levitated around this spectacle, not from any character's point of view, but as if we are in some sort of god mode. It is a pure, visceral visualization of what this fantastical event would *look* like, but arguably not what it would *feel* like for any living thing that happened to be there. As Niklas Salmose (2018) writes in his article "The Apocalyptic Sublime", these sorts of depictions might "open up an opportunity for feeling the true angst of the destruction" (p. 1423), but it is still a materialistic and iconographic kind of destruction and is bereft of a succinct point of view, "oddly outside the dramatic narrative structure and serves more as a paratextual, universal apocalyptic image" (ibid).

These kinds of moments portray catastrophic encounters with sublime forces. In the shot depicted above one could argue that it is in fact the audience members, not the characters in the story, that are on the other side of the encounter: we are the true witnesses, the survivors of the disaster. The victims then are manmade objects, or as Salmose puts it, "items symbolizing the coherence of the world which we take for granted" (p. 1421), lost through violent, sudden and

¹ From here on referred to as *TDAT*

catastrophic change. These moving images, sometimes whole scenes, give a lot of weight to destruction, instead of death. They tap into our fear of losing the world constructed by us, not the fear of the end of humankind itself.

This is not to say no relatable, albeit fictional, life is impacted or have closer encounters with the sublime in this or similar Hollywood blockbusters that in some way deal with climate change. Nor that these sort of shots or sequences might not serve a storytelling function, as in creating suspense and raising the stakes for when this deadly and destructive phenomenon actually reaches the human characters the film has set up as our invested interests. One can even argue that Emmerich's continual fascination with the destruction of American buildings, monuments and symbols and the way this is portrayed suggests that there is a critical and somewhat political mind at work, even if the instrument used to communicate this may be on the blunt side. One can even point to a single moment in *TDAT* where all these three values are in play, namely when Dennis Quaid's character is seconds away from snap freezing, and before jumping to safety he turns and sees a fluttering American flag instantly frost over and go rigid: identifiable character in danger, tension-building spectacle and American symbol affected. The main difference in this scene is that we see the character see this, in some shots positioned in the direct POV of the character. We are in human mode rather than god mode.



Figure 2: Dennis Quaid in human mode in *The Day After Tomorrow*, 2004. Twentieth Century Fox.

I do not intend for these opening paragraphs to be read as ridicule of *TDAT* and its ilk.

There is indeed genuine entertainment value in achieving what Alexa Weik von Mossner (2013), in her article "Facing *The Day After Tomorrow*", refers to as "strong visceral and emotional impact on its audience" (p. 103), engaging emotions through

spectacular destruction: "The powerful evocation of a breathtakingly beautiful but suddenly also threatening and threatened natural landscape elicits awe in us for the sheer beauty of the images and sadness for a vulnerable ecological space" (p. 106). Portraying both the beautiful and

threatening at the same time does work as an emotional stimulant, like balancing sweet and savory in a meal. It is in other words affectively powerful. The question is how precise of a statement this emotional charge can be said to be. Is it simply emotion for emotion's sake, awe to inspire awe, horror to inspire horror? And as a combination of these two affects; sublimity to inspire sublimity?

This thesis aims to analyze cinematic dramatizations of various human to non-human encounters in cli-fi narratives and to identify what affective modes and charges are employed and how this is achieved. I will be looking at the visual and narrative language employed in scenes from films where characters come “face to face” with the horror and beauty of climate change, and how this relates to existing concepts within eco-theory. Specifically, I will do close readings of, and comparisons between Alex Garland's *Annihilation* (2018) and George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road*² (2015) and their portrayals of fictional characters perceiving, feeling and reacting to the change, suffering, loss and/or death of both human and non-human bodies as a result of climate trauma. I will then attempt to assess what these dramatizations offer to discussions surrounding the different ways we as a species perceive, process and react to climate crisis.

As both a teacher and practitioner of film production with an interest in theories of aesthetics, affect and film reception I will not only draw on sources within traditional film studies, but also a broader range of insights and theory to reflect my position. This will allow me to find concrete answers and make observances that better relates to my own work and teaching. There are multiple avenues of analysis within several fields of theory that I have not pursued, even though I find they would have much to say about the material of the films. In particular, looking at these works through the lens of gender and post-colonialism would undoubtedly prove fruitful, but while I do touch on themes related to these fields, I have had to restrict my optics for this particular paper.

² From here on referred to as *MM:FR*

In the following subchapters I will give an overview of the theoretical groundwork from which I will draw on in my analysis in later chapters.

UNNATURAL DISASTERS – Sublime Cli-Fi and Want See

When portraying the ecological sublime, the Hollywood adventure/disaster film aesthetic often skews external and distanced (read god mode) in its formalistic approach, as it is challenged by the “gloomy magnitude” (Salmose: p. 1418) of it all. As in the aforementioned example with the Statue of Liberty in *TDAT*, director Emmerich is charged with the task of encompassing a wholly massive and transcendent event inside of the cinematic rectangle, while having state-of-the-art computer-generated imagery at his fingertips. Who can really blame him for resorting to Salmose’s “paratextual, universal apocalyptic” images in the face of that?

But one consequence is that the characters’ truthful perception and experience of the event is either forestalled or excluded altogether. The audience is reacting to something directly; the characters often are not or feel too far removed from the action. Again, the audience knowing more than the characters is the foundation for suspense, granted, but these moments do not feel framed and weighted for this function. They feel like spectacles in and of themselves. When the mega-storm system starts funneling subzero temperature air directly from space down onto Manhattan, it is treated as the payoff to a setup and withholding, not as an inciting or narrative propelling incident for our main characters to react to. The buildup and following release of tension here tells us that the film has been dying to show us this: *this is what you came to see*.

Using the external, god mode aesthetic is at a fundamental level telling, not showing us, why we should be engaged. It is foregrounding events, not reactions to events. It is targeting our base humanity, the type of influence which sparks an innately human compulsion, namely the old Hollywood term *want see*. Mark Cousins (2017), in his book *The Story of Looking*, writes:

Want see...undermines the polite idea that human beings are civilized and self-improving. It explains why traffic slows as it flows past road traffic accidents. It kicks in when reality is losing its realness. It hurls up psychic materials as a memento mori to our socialized, evolved selves....it shows that consciousness is fascinated with its own demise. (p. 368)

As I will elaborate on in later chapters, *want see* as an inclination can be understood in more forgiving and even dramatically effective terms. But this description cuts to the core of why

some of Hollywood's cli-fi films over the years can horrify today's climate crisis aware audience for all the wrong reasons, namely their fascination with spectacular destruction and its unrealistic portrayal of something that is becoming excessively plausible. It injects an expanse between the viewer and our potential future reality. We are left marveling at its fantastic sublimity from a safe distance. Like gods.

A central question in this thesis concerns the potential effect granted by choosing a visual approach that positions the audience closer to the characters and hones in on their processing of and reactions to encounters with the sublime: an audience experience that is had vicariously through a character's perception, affect and reaction, in other words, through empathy. It would not be our spectator's awe at the events *told* to us, but the *character's* awe we felt.

But in the age we find ourselves in, the epoch a growing number of scholars and scientists are calling the Anthropocene "in which humans have become the major force determining the continuing livability of the earth" (Tsing et. al. 2017: loc. 144) coherence is already something that is becoming increasingly harder to achieve.

UNDERSTANDING THE OVERWHELMING – Uncanny Hyperobjects and Slow Violence

The human mind is not built to completely fathom something so massively impactful as climate change. Susanne Leikam and Julia Leyda (2017) suggest in their introduction to the forum *What's in a Name* that "human brains simply aren't 'wired' to cope with problems on such large spatial and temporal scales" (p. 30) and quote George Marshall's "Don't Even Think about It" (2014) where he says: "climate change contains none of the clear signals that we require to mobilize our inbuilt sense of threat" (p. 3). We can perceive the phenomena that are caused by it, its symptoms, but not the thing itself.

This is the nature of the sublime: a quality of overwhelming greatness. And also the nature of *hyperobjects*, the now ubiquitous term coined by philosopher Timothy Morton (2013), that relate to phenomena that "so massively outscale us" that "we can't point to them directly" (loc. 296). Morton uses the fitting example of Immanuel Kant's raindrop when discussing this gap between thing and phenomenon:

Isn't this similar to the rift between weather, which I can feel falling on my head, and global climate, not the older idea of local patterns of weather, but the entire system? I can think and compute climate in this sense, but I can't directly see or touch it. (loc. 287)

So, in this sense, one reason why one might feel *TDAT* and other climate-oriented disaster films often step outside the character point of view is because it is futilely trying to depict a hyperobject. You can almost sense the fervent fascination with creating physically impossible super wide shots of uncanny weather systems causing literal holes in the sky.

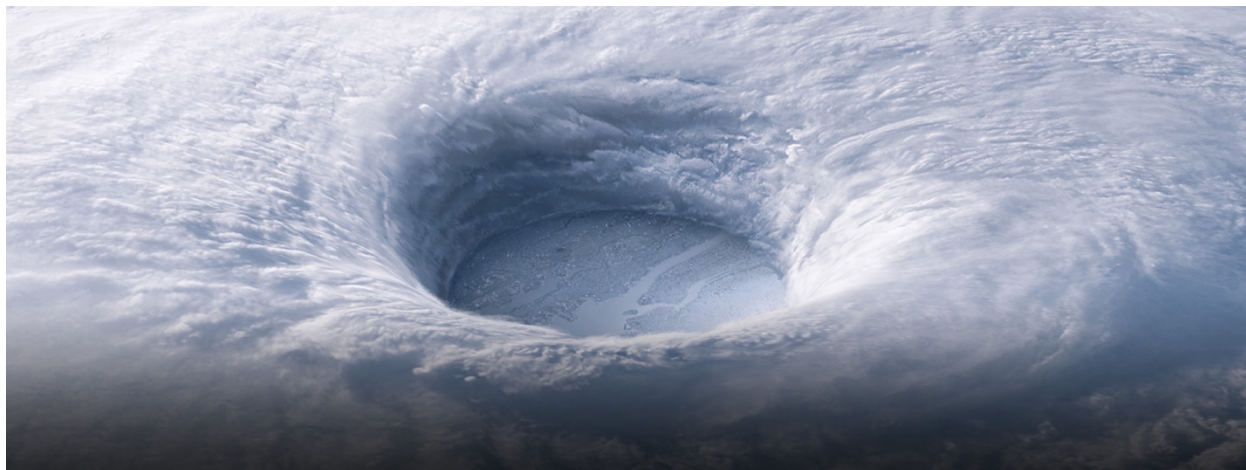


Figure 3: Hyperobject in space in *The Day After Tomorrow*, 2004. Twentieth Century Fox.

This unfamiliar in the familiar, unhomely and homely, or *unheimlich* in Sigmund Freud's parlance³, if executed well can indeed create potent dread, as it taps into deep psychological fears. Our home changing into something unrecognizable is a collectively recurring nightmare. And these kinds of hauntings are often what artists and entertainers mine for their artistic output. As Ailise Bulfin (2017) points out in her article "Popular Culture and the 'New Human Condition'": "different eras are characterized by sets of over-arching concerns..." that are "...evident in the era's popular culture" (p. 3). Whether or not climate change will "attain the status of an overarching metaphor or master-narrative" (ibid) like the atomic bomb did in the arts and entertainment output of the 50's, there is little doubt that it is on many artist's minds.

However, god-mode is more than a handy way to portray the widespread anxieties of the current moment. Salmose's "gloomy magnitude," its enormous scale and finality, is just one aspect one has to take into account in fiction when dealing with climate change. A maybe even trickier challenge is "representing and transmediating a scientific phenomenon of...infinite temporality" (2018: p. 1418), namely that of *deep time*. Again we face the impossible task of encompassing something unfathomable. *Deep time* as a concept puts history in a geological scale instead of an

³ Rod Giblett, *Psychoanalytic Ecology: The Talking Cure for Environmental Illness and Health*. Routledge, 25. feb. 2019. (p. 8)

anthropocentric one. Robert Macfarlane (2019) describes it in terrifyingly succinct terms in his book *Underland*:

Deep time is the dizzying expanses of Earth history that stretch away from the present moment. Deep time is measured in units that humble the human instant: epochs and aeons, instead of minutes and years. Deep time is kept by stone, ice, stalactites, seabed sediments and the drift of tectonic plates. Deep time opens into the future as well as the past. The Earth will fall dark when the sun exhausts its fuel in around 5 billion years. We stand with our toes, as well as our heels, on a brink. (p. 14)

Climate change is not a sudden disaster. For most of us in the real world, its perceived mobility is glacial. Its impact has to be traced through deep time. And even thinking about deep time, as interesting as it may be to ponder, boggles the mind in both its temporality and consequence. So how does one even begin to mediate it for dramatic narrative purposes, and specifically for a two-hour feature film?

In Salmose's view, when discussing *TDAT*, "the format of the blockbuster action-adventure cli-fi film rearranges the sense of deep time very conveniently..." managing to "visualize what Rob Nixon has called 'slow violence' within a few hours running time" (p. 1419).

In later chapters in this thesis, we will see how other films not necessarily within the classic blockbuster action-adventure cli-fi film subgenre, and most prominently *Annihilation* (Garland, 2018), utilizes the narrative tropes and the unconstrained scientific liberty of the sci-fi and horror genres to skip this hurdle of deep time and slow violence to be able to tell a taut, effective and contained cli-fi story. A consequence of this might be that one has to compromise stringent accuracy or prognostication of climate science, but as Weik von Mossner (2017) puts it: "While both climate science and cli-fi are developing future scenarios that may or may not be accurate, the latter has the artistic license to imagine climate risk in ways that are more easily perceptible, intelligible, and concrete" (p. 29).

Unfortunately, scale and temporality are not the only concepts we are struggling to grasp in the Anthropocene. The aforementioned *slow violence*⁴ leads us to consider the victims of said violence, and how these entities that are most affected by climate change are represented in cli-fi: the disenfranchised and subaltern, be they human, animal or plant life. This comparison in itself points to a corruption of humaneness, a dehumanization, the negative connotations of the word "dehumanize" already containing the implication that human is somehow better than non-human. And at the same time the inherent demarcation also shows a disregard of how all life is connected to each other.

⁴ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard university press. 2011.

HUMAN, MORE OR LESS - EcoGothic Monsters & Ghosts and Anthropomorphic Aesthetics

Up until now I have discussed the implications of Salmose's apocalyptic sublime aesthetics and mode of storytelling with corresponding emotional charges, exemplified by *TDAT*. Having argued its challenges in dealing with the subject matter of climate crisis, this thesis will from here on feature more varied audiovisual qualities and narrative tools available to climate fiction. The films that I will analyze later offer a broader and, at the same time, slightly off-kilter range of affects and visuals, at least in comparison with the run-of-the-mill Hollywood blockbuster. In particular, I will introduce the sensibilities and function of the *gothic mode*, as I have found that its distinctive affective aesthetic seems apt to influence cli-fi stories in particular. And in no other area of interest does this become more apparent than when discussing human to non-human connections.

In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, editors Tsing et al. (2017) ask the question, "What if all organisms, including humans, are tangled up with each other?" (loc. 3060), in their introduction to the book's second part, "Monsters of The Anthropocene". Further reading suggests an answer strongly in the affirmative, and continues to posit that when faced with challenges of how to orient oneself in a world of "environmental damage" with "nature suddenly unfamiliar," it might benefit to be influenced by "sensibilities from folklore and science fiction—such as monsters and ghosts" (loc. 3085). On the surface, employing these concepts of ghosts and monsters might feel like casting a negative light on entities affected by climate change. But the writers further nuance these terms: ghosts are seen as "traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade" (loc. 144), and monsters as wonders, both of "symbiosis and the threats of ecological disruption" (loc. 3078). The editors and contributing authors point to this double meaning of monsters, and the importance of keeping both in mind: "...on one hand, they help us pay attention to ancient chimeric entanglements; on the other, they point us toward the monstrosities of modern Man. Monsters ask us to consider the wonders and terrors of symbiotic entanglement in the Anthropocene" (loc. 3085).

These same points are articulated from a slightly different angle by editors Smith and Hughes et. al. (2013) of *Ecogothic*, in which various writers “explore the Gothic mode in literature and film through theories of ecocriticism” (loc. 147). Here, gothic fiction is described and contextualized thusly:

Antiquated settings with haunting ghosts or monsters and deep, dark secrets that are the mysteries behind them, albeit in many different incarnations, continue to intimate what audiences most fear in both the personal subconscious and the most pervasive tensions underlying Western culture.
(ibid)

These sentiments recall the of previously presented “master narrative” as discussed by Ailise Bulfin. There is a feeling of *trouble lurking* in these subjects, of something not being quite right. It is in trying to portray this wrongness that the gothic mode feels appropriate.

Gothic storytellers’ interest in the concept of humanity in monsters and monstrosity in humans, or the viewer’s capacity for empathizing with monsters, is not a new phenomenon and has in no way been dependent on the rising awareness of environmental issues or the building academic writing on said subject. Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818), where man tampers with nature and creates a nameless monster innocent of its own monstrosity who is promptly chased away to the ends of the world, is widely considered the first sci-fi story ever written, as well as one of the most famous gothic works. And coming from a self-proclaimed fan and creator of gothic fiction of the more recent variety, we have Guillermo del Toro’s film *The Shape of Water* (2018), where a deaf woman and an imprisoned creature from the Amazon (billed as “Amphibian Man”, but nameless in the film) fall in love. This story might not portray a man-made monster in a strict sense, but few pieces of popular entertainment go further in entangling the human and non-human (albeit humanoid) and celebrating the deconstruction of othering based on appearances, ability or circumstance.

In stories monsters can be monstrous through what they look like and/or their actions.

Frankenstein’s creature and Amphibian Man not only share not having a “proper” name, they are both monsters purely in an aesthetic sense, fantastical others to which injustice and subjugation

is dealt by shallow and self-righteous humans unable to see anything beyond the monsters' non-humanness.

Strongly connected to the gothic aesthetic and, as we shall see, to the aesthetic of the films that will be discussed, is the concept of *the grotesque*. The term is usually used in relation to bizarre, fanciful and incongruous aesthetics of bodies. Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund (2013) add that:

...grotesque bodies are, at times, incomplete, lacking in vital parts, as they sometimes have pieces cut out of them: limbs are missing, to be replaced sometimes by phantom limbs, and bodily mutations become dominant traits. In some cases, grotesque figures combine human, non-human, animal and...vegetable attributes. (p. 2)

To establish traits and tropes of the grotesque I will discuss later, I turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal book *Rabelais and His World* (1984), in which he points to particular grotesque qualities, united by the qualities somehow standing in violation to natural laws. Important to this thesis are the following aspects: *unstoppable change and metamorphosis, doubleness, contradiction and ambivalence*.

Concerning *unstoppable change, hybridity and metamorphosis*, Bakhtin touches on notes of entanglement when noting that "the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits..." (p. 26). We will see this come in to play when analyzing *Annihilation* in particular.

Doubleness, contradiction and ambivalence is also essential, as Bakhtin states that "the essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life" (p. 62). We will revisit these terms more in my analysis, especially in relation to *MM:FR*.

These tropes all arguably sound scary or repulsive in an aesthetic sense, but Bakhtin situates the grotesque classically as used for humor, saying that laughter is "...the characteristic trait of every expression of the grotesque" (p. 38). But, as commented by Robert D. Zaretsky (2017) in his essay "Return of the grotesque": "Is it possible, though, that in our own time, the grotesque has become the terrifying?" In relation to this thesis the answer is *yes*. As I will expound upon later,

in light of the reorienting of the terms *monster* and *ghost*, climate change, the ecogothic, it is my belief that filmmakers are already using the grotesque tropes and traits established above to render ecologically conscious stories that lean on the terrifying and other affects formally seen as contradictory to the traditional humorous aspects of the grotesque.

At this point it becomes necessary to define and delimit my use of the term “aesthetics.” I have chosen to follow the lead of anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose from her contribution, “Shimmer – When All you Love is Being Trashed,” to the aforementioned *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, where she wants to think of aesthetics in terms of “lures that both entice one’s attention and offer rewards,” and, as she explains, in a “nontechnical way” to best be able to “discuss things that appeal to the senses, things that evoke or capture feelings and responses” (loc. 943). As we see, Rose is conscious of aesthetics as perceivable “things” that trigger emotional reactions and she is more concerned with function than discussions of quality. My aim is to lean towards this field of affect and emotion in reaction to aesthetic encounters, which I already have touched on in relation to the concepts of empathy and the sublime, but I will continue to establish more in the next subchapter.⁵

⁵ Furthermore, aesthetics in Rose’s sense does not contain itself solely to visual stimuli. I feel I would be remiss to exclude the impact of sound and music altogether in a paper on an audiovisual medium, so I simply won’t. That said, the heaviest analytical focus of this thesis will be on the visual realm of storytelling.

SEEING NONHUMAN EMOTIONS – Dethroning Kinds of Looking, Nature and Affect Theory

...looking is not just everything we have seen, it is how we have seen it and what we have done with that seeing. Looking is also apprehension of space; it is walking, detection, longing, dissection and learning. It is our visual shocks, the way our emotions are triggered by the visual world. It is the number of times we have looked at a child or partner or sibling, plus the feelings that looking caused us to have, plus how we stored those feelings, plus how we access them now.
(Cousins: p. 7-8)

The Cousins-quote above elucidates the complexity in the act of looking and emotions attached to it. What do we feel when we see the palpable effects of climate change in real life? How about when we watch films that we know are fiction depict climate change and its victims? And how does it feel different when the filmmaker lets us see from various perspectives, as in the earlier established god mode, as opposed to human mode?

In Cousin's historical and transmedial account of all things "looking," he affords us a concept to use when perspectives are radically changed, namely that of *dethroning*. Copernicus "dethroned the Christian Mediterranean" (p. 55), he posits, referring to his discovery that Earth is not the center of the universe. This observation introduced humility to seeing and "taught us *From where are you looking?* is one of the best questions we can ask" (ibid).

So, theoretically curious filmmakers are asking: where do you put the camera and what do put in front of it if you are trying to show non-humans that inspire empathy? How does one dethrone *anthropocentrism*, the conviction that our species is the most important one, in the *Anthropocene*, the era where our species is a major factor in the transformation of the planet's climate?

These questions bring us back to the concepts of entanglement of and interdependence between human and non-human living entities, or in another word, *nature*. The history of this hyper-ambiguous term, *nature*, is fraught with discussions of meanings and definitions, discussions that

this thesis will not take part in.⁶ For these purposes I will restrict my understanding of the term to a *New Keywords* designation of nature by Tony Bennet et. al. (2013) which “denotes all matter that exists in the world without the intervention of human agency or activity” (p. 236), and distinguishes “human operations from **natural forces** (emphasis by author)” (p. 237). I utilize this definition, knowing that its premise is tenuous: in the Anthropocene, what worldly matter can be said to be left untouched by the hands of humanity? And there is an argument to be made that *homo sapiens* has become its own natural force. Nevertheless, keeping those caveats in mind moving forward, I believe this distinction between human and nature still provides clarity as to what I am referring to when discussing nature.

And yet, even this definition points to the dichotomy of humans and everything else, their separateness, and in an extrapolated sense, humanity’s elevation above the other. The challenge with which this thesis is most concerned is the depiction and narration of the sublime in nature, these awe-inspiring aspects which we intellectually consider outside ourselves, looking down on them from our throne. Salmose (2018) points to a logical inclination for filmmakers to adapt a specific aesthetic regime of the sublime when facing this challenge, as discussed earlier in relation to *TDAT*, that of “a mix of *fascination* and *awe* in the face of a geological force” (p. 1419). But, quoting Martin Guinard-Terrin (2016), he continues by qualifying this particular inclination, further regarding the sublime feeling as misleading because, “this peculiar aesthetic regime was formulated at a time when the overwhelming spectacle of ‘nature’ was seen as a separate and remote phenomenon from its observer” (p. 184).

Fascination and *awe*, then, are arguably emotions or affects that may partly stem from our othering of nature, our distancing ourselves from it. Although they may be appropriate for a disaster film in which humans are victims of "nature" gone awry, they may also play into the more troubling aspects of “want see”.

⁶ For an overview about nature as a term, see *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. 2013.

But as we have seen, provoking these feelings and thoughts can be viscerally affective and cinematically useful. The question then is *what sort of* affective mode eco-cultural material is charged with and to what end. Where *TDAT* produces awe, dread and sublimity in its god mode portrayal, other films testify to the effectiveness of portraying and provoking different kinds of emotions and affects.

At this point it becomes necessary to clarify some terms and perspectives with regards to emotion, affect and their function in cinema.

Affect—our automatic, visceral response to a given film or sequence—and emotion—our cognitive awareness of such a response—are, in the words of Carl Plantinga, ‘fundamental to what makes film artistically successful, rhetorically powerful, and culturally influential.’ Without doubt this is also true for films that are implicitly or explicitly concerned with environmental issues and themes. (*Weik von Mossner 2014: p. 1*)

Weik von Mossner’s quote above, by way of Plantinga, from the introduction to her book *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology, and Film*, points to a distinction between affect and emotion, terms that often are used interchangeably and with many fluid definitions.

However, for this thesis such distinctions are not necessary. The operative definition here comes from Nicole Seymour and her book *Bad Environmentalism* (2018). She does not inject the same clear divide between affect and emotion, but rather goes as far as saying that all the different definitions are irrelevant to her work within affect theory (loc. 390). Instead she aligns herself with Kathleen Stewart and Sianne Ngai, respectively, in the consideration of affect as the “‘pull’ that objects, people, or memories ‘exert . . . on us’” and as “comparable to ‘tone’ or ‘disposition’” and further adds “sensibility” (loc. 397). The ‘pull’ mentioned here may seem like a nebulous term, but is clarified more in that a production such as a film “...makes multiple, sometimes conflicting, demands: inciting us... to despair and to hope, toward gloom/doom and toward optimism, toward anger and toward love” (loc. 405). *Pull* is the feelings that the film asks of us, what they are trying to provoke. *Tone*, *disposition* and/or *sensibility*, then, are the cinematic storytelling and aesthetic tools that are employed to provoke these feelings, to put it simply.

I will be utilizing the concept of pull and the latter tonal understanding of affect in the analysis forthcoming. Specifically, in chapters 1 and 2, I will investigate the kinds of looking, both provoked in the viewer and portrayed by characters, in the selected films, and further how this affects the given emotion or affective charge of a scene or sequence, and sometimes individual shots. In these chapters I will also go further in exploring affects and emotions beyond fascination and awe and others discussed in relation to *TDAT*.

So, to sum up the line of reasoning I am to follow in my analysis: these films are merely “infused” by material from a factual, scientific and intellectual realm, and are drawn primarily from a space of affect. Then what visual and narrative strategies, articulations and expressions, are employed when telling stories in the realm of climate trauma, change and destruction? What form does this meaning-making take?

Before my analyses I will give a brief description of each film’s plot and an explanation for why I believe them to be particularly relevant for my thesis.

In the ensuing two chapters I will analyze and interpret the in-fiction audiovisual representation of human and non-human entities in these films and how these they are looked at, both by other entities within the film and through the lens of the camera through aesthetic, formalistic and structural choices: how the characters look at each other and their surroundings. This is not restricted to animal, plant or human life, but includes also, in the true spirit of the non-human, landscapes and settings. I will, also, drawing from the aforementioned representation, acts of looking and encountering, try to isolate how certain scenes are charged with affect.

Lastly, in my conclusion, I will compare and summarize my findings.

THE FILMS

ANNIHILATION - PLOT SUMMARY

Based on Jeff Vandermeer's novel of the same name and his *Southern Reach* trilogy, Alex Garland's film *Annihilation* (2018) uses a frame narrative where quarantined biologist Lena (Natalie Portman) recounts events to interrogator Lomax (Benedict Wong). Jumping back in time, we find Lena dealing with the guilt of having been unfaithful to her husband Kane (Oscar Isaac), who has disappeared on a military mission. Kane's mysterious return and sudden deadly illness leads her on her own journey into a governmentally quarantined marshland dubbed "Area X". Lena and four other women scientists and soldiers venture through "The Shimmer," a landscape undergoing rapid mutations, hybridizations, grotesque mimicry of life forms and corruption of known physics. Lena is attempting to find a way to save Kane's life, but the drama turns inward for all the characters as the dangers and otherworldliness of Area X starts affecting them as well, changing them all and picking them off one by one. In the end there is only Lena in the lighthouse from where the change emanates, coming face to face with an alien force mimicking her perfectly, whose presence she is eventually able to dispel by a raging fire. She returns to Kane, who is dying no longer. But neither of them is who they used to be. They have changed.

MAD MAX: FURY ROAD - PLOT SUMMARY

The fourth installment in the Mad Max-franchise, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015) finds the legendary loner Max (Tom Hardy) haunted by past mistakes in desolate post-apocalyptic wastelands. He is captured by "warboys" dying from radiation sickness, led by the local warlord Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne), ruling with an iron fist from up on high in the "oasis" of the Citadel. When Furiosa (Charlize Theron), one of Joe's imperators, absconds with his five captive wives, Max is taken along for the chase after them, used as a source for healthy blood by warboy Nux (Nicholas Hoult). Eventually all teaming up, Furiosa leads Max, Nux and the Wives through the desert, Immortan Joe's forces on their heels, towards The Green Place, a haven Furiosa remembers from her childhood. But when it turns out this place too has become nothing but

desolation, a group of older women its only survivors, Max convinces all of them to return to the Citadel, flanking the approaching enemies and taking over the city. Although they suffer heavy losses this plan succeeds, and with Immortan Joe and his horde destroyed, Furiosa and the Wives can ascend to lead the people of the Citadel, as Max disappears in the crowd, his demons still not entirely gone.

RELEVANCE

Both *Annihilation* and *MM:FR* were produced within the Hollywood system, and both were, at least from the outset⁷, meant for a wide cinema audience. Locking them, or any film for that matter, exclusively within the field cli-fi is of course an academic exercise. Regarding genre, *Annihilation* can be called a sci-fi horror film, *MM:FR* a dystopian action film. In terms of subject matter, *Annihilation* can be said to be as much about the process of “surviving” mental health issues⁸, while its world undergoing rapid climate change functions as both an engaging setting and a macro level reflection of characters’ inner lives. *MM:FR*, debatably a film with less cerebral aspirations, has been hailed as a “call to dismantle patriarchies”⁹, its feminist bent broadcast as director George Miller invited Eve Ensler, author of *Vagina Monologues*, on set to talk with the cast during filming¹⁰.

This thesis will not shy away from any of the subjects that may on the surface seem unrelated to climate issues. This is because I believe many of them to be distinctly not so. It is in fact part of their appeal to me that both these films are wholly humanistic works, every facet reflecting and refracting the complex whole of climate trauma as experienced and felt by human beings. At the same time, they have plenty of spectacle that sometimes borders on Salmose’s “apocalyptic sublime”, and certain moments in *MM:FR* can at times be eerily reminiscent of *TDAT* and its like.

⁷ For more on *Annihilation*’s altered release strategy: [The Guardian - Annihilation](#)

⁸ For an in depth essay in this vein: [Film Crit Hulk - Annihilation & The Horrors of Change](#)

⁹ For more: [The Guardian - Mad Max: Fury Road](#)

¹⁰ [Time - Mad Max: Fury Road - Eve Ensler interview](#)

Another aspect that I find interesting in both works is that they seem saturated by themes of “corruption” and “haunting”. They both present monsters and ghosts in various guises and with different narrative functions, often subverting tropes of their given genre. In addition, I posit that their story elements and aesthetic choices draw heavy influence, consciously or not, from the gothic mode and the grotesque, which is a specific area I am interested to explore further.

I believe this exact combination of qualities will afford me the best opportunities to explore and compare affect, aesthetics and functions of non-human representations and their encounters with humans in cli-fi cinema.

I have chosen to view the non-human in these films through the lens of monsters and ghosts, inspired by *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Tsing et. al. 2017). Here I am employing both the traditional and the broader understanding of these terms discussed earlier: monsters as “wonders, both of ‘symbiosis and the threats of ecological disruption’” (loc. 3078), and ghosts as “traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade” (loc. 144). And as there are plenty of them in both films, I am forced to narrow them down to a select few that I deem will bear most fruit in analysis and discussion. My analysis in Chapter 1 will concern “monsters” in *Annihilation*, Chapter 2 “ghosts” in *MM:FR*. Each chapter is split into two self-contained sections dealing with different dramatic and thematic material.

So, the questions that drive my analysis of the two films are: what and who are the sublime circumstances and entities in the selected cli-fi films? What choices are made in representing the form and nature of these characters, lifeforms and landscapes? How are these entities looked at through the lens of the camera and how do they look at each other? And most importantly: what can we interpret from the way the characters emote and the affective pull the films employ through aesthetic, formalistic and structural choices from an ecological and climate change standpoint?

CHAPTER ONE – MONSTERS OF RELENTLESS CHANGE

In the Anthropocene, the so-called new normal—or what I prefer to conceptualize as the new abnormal—life is characterized by uncertainty, unpredictability, genuine chaos, and relentless change. (Albrecht 2016)



Figure 4 (composite): *Humanity and the sublime in Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

The three images above are taken from the first three minutes of *Annihilation*, all within the same minute. Respectively, they depict Lena, a confused and confined woman; a ball of fire hurtling through space towards the Earth; and a cancer cell about to divide. There is beauty and terror here. There is the capacity for both life and destruction, or better yet, *annihilation* in all these entities. They are all catalysts for change and are themselves everchanging.

The sublime, we have established, is described as having a quality of greatness. But this not constrained to physical size. It also encompasses the physical, moral, intellectual, metaphysical,

aesthetic, spiritual, or artistic. To be referred to as sublime is not necessarily to be categorized as huge in stature, but to inhabit the power to both compel and destroy. A microscopic cell can compel and cause as much destruction as a fiery object falling from the sky. Or a human being. The difference lies in their nature and form.

And as Alex Garland puts it in *The Making of Annihilation* (Jon Mefford, 2018), in relation to the alien in *Annihilation*: "...the form of the alien is informed by the nature of the alien." In other words, the design and aesthetic of a creature, entity or setting is to a large degree steered by its nature. The lifeforms and landscapes in films each serve varied and distinct storytelling functions which its aesthetic must help convey.

The bewildered witnesses and casualties in *Annihilation* are left to deal with this very visceral change happening before their eyes; change of world, self and scientific and personal constants. The creatures and growths that bloom and lurk in the marshlands of Area X bring to mind the tropes of change from both the sublime and the gothic grotesque, namely *doubleness*, *hybridity*, *metamorphosis*, and, as we shall see next, *obscurity*.

THE ALLURING OBSCURITY OF THE SHIMMER AND THE ALIEN

Deborah Bird Rose (2017) provided this thesis with its operative understanding of the word *aesthetic*, elaborated in her essay “Shimmer – When All You Love is Being Trashed.” Here she delves into nature of angiosperms, or flowering plants, whose “way of life is to entice...invite, or lure, others through their dazzling brilliance of color, scent, and shape...” (loc. 909). At the root of her concept lies the Australian aboriginal Yolngu term *bir'yun* used in relation to a specific aesthetic, which translates into “brilliant” or “shimmering” (loc. 950). She writes:

Brilliance actually grabs you. Brilliance allows you, or brings you, into the experience of being part of a vibrant and vibrating world. When a painting reaches brilliance, for example, people say that it captures the eye much in the way that the eye is captured by sun glinting on water... the eyes of the beholders captured and enraptured, the ephemeral dance of it all. It is equally a lure: creatures long to be grabbed, to experience that beauty, that surprise, that gleaming ephemeral moment of capture. (loc. 957)

Even though it is perhaps a coincidence that Alex Garland names the barrier that contains the wrongness of Area X “The Shimmer,” it is fitting nonetheless.¹¹ In *Annihilation*, the lure the alien antagonist presents certainly captures the eye and enraptures the characters, as well as the viewer. Conversely though, if meant as an invitation, the following encounters that happen in the film are presented in a far less positively charged way than the symbiotic relationships angiosperms seek according to Rose, at least for the characters within. But there is also an interesting, sublime tension between enticement and obscurity in the film, both in the way the antagonistic force presents itself, the way the characters react to them and the way the film presents said phenomena and encounters.

In the following analysis I will study these presentations through a close reading of two sequences in particular, seen in context with the rest of the film. I aim to find and isolate affective pulls, tonal sensibilities and ways of looking. I will do this through the lens of Rose’s *shimmer* coupled with the gothic and sublime aesthetic function of *obscurity*, and how this speaks to the concepts of the non-human other and the ambivalent and dispassionate nature of

¹¹ Author Jeff VanderMeer does not name it so in his novel, but the word is still used in describing phenomena related to it.

the natural world. Finally, I will come back to Rose and how her thoughts on encounter and transformation can put the otherwise terrifying prospect of dealing with a corrupted nature in a more hopeful light.



Figure 5: Tease of the Shimmer in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

The first sequence we will look at is the introduction of “The Shimmer”. After having seen a teasing montage of the arrival of the alien presence in the beginning of the film, and knowing that Lena’s journey will result in multiple deaths and uncertainty, added to that her husband Kane coming back from the area suffering massive organ failure, the image above (fig. 5) is the first we see of what is causing all this devastation and suffering. In one moment, Lena is in a sterile cell, telling Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh) that with her knowledge of microorganisms she might be able to help. The next we suddenly hard cut to this shot with thunder rolling. But something is off about the sound, muted, warped. We track sideways, following Lena’s trajectory passing through what seems to be a lab which glass and machinery partially obscure a horizon of strange light and color. We are withheld a clear perception of it, adding mystique and tension: its obscuration is alluring. In the parlance of Mark Cousins, the camera engages in *detection looking* (2017: p. 44), hunting clues.



Figure 6: Soft reveal of the Shimmer in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

Lena exits to a viewing platform and we are now allowed to see the above (fig. 6). At first it is almost hard to put together the pieces, as the unfamiliarity of the iridescent slo-mo static in the tree line is somehow infecting the clouds above and marshland below with its uncanniness. The sun is too bright, its rays refracted. The swamp is given a diorama tilt shift effect, like it's a miniature. Again, clarity is being withheld for narrative tension with these effects, but they are also cluing us in to the nature of the phenomenon, its transformative power.



Figure 7: Reflection of the Shimmer in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

In the next shot (fig. 7 above) we see this power reflected in Lena's eyes, refracted colors eerily tinting her eyes. She cannot comprehend what she is seeing, the hues bouncing off her. In fear

and awe, she takes shallow breaths, eyes darting to and fro, up and down, unable to look at all of it.

And then, finally:



Figure 8: Reveal of the Shimmer in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

A close look at the barrier, defying gravity by oozing upwards in bulges and waves. The colors are beautifully saturated and harmonized, but also horribly unnatural and ominous, like an oil slick on water.¹² We also see patterns repeating, fractals of white crests continuously transforming: now an almost-face, in the next second something abstract. The mystery now revealed, we have gone from Cousin's *detection looking* to *abstract looking*, a stream of movement, shape and hue that seem to "serve no rational purpose" (p. 80).

Through these shots we are given a slow reveal, strictly following Lena's perspective and her reactions. One could argue that the last composition is cheating this perspective, that we're too close to it in relation to Lena's position, that we are in fact verging on the god mode reveal tactic of *TDAT*. But I would counter that we are still in Lena's eyeline of the Shimmer, and that the camera gradually moving closer to this weird phenomenon pulls us into an even more subjective

¹² Jeff VanderMeer Tweet, 2:08 AM, Jan. 4, 2020: "The Shimmer is in every little pool of water near every gas station in America."

experience. We are not floating around trying to encompass: we are narrowing in. As a matter of fact, we don't necessarily learn that much more what the Shimmer is, how it functions and what this means for our characters. We only see more up close what it looks like. Adding on, over the last shot we hear Dr. Ventress throw out the various hypotheses they have about its nature, none of them conclusive. And the Shimmer itself is a barrier, distorting what lies beyond. Obscurity upon obscurity upon obscurity.

Given that it is a horror movie, the sublime of *Annihilation* is often a construct aimed to provoke terror. The sublime non-human in this film is portrayed in large part as unknowable and unfathomable. It was in fact an important aspect for Garland to achieve. In *The Making of Annihilation* (2018) he says in relation to the Alien's reveal in the film's climax:

The idea was to have an alien that was truly alien, that was not like us in any way. It needed to have a kind of otherness...If the alien wants to eat you, it's easier...this thing is not motivated by any of the things that motivate us. It may not actually be motivated by anything. It might be like a spore or a mushroom, or a cancer.

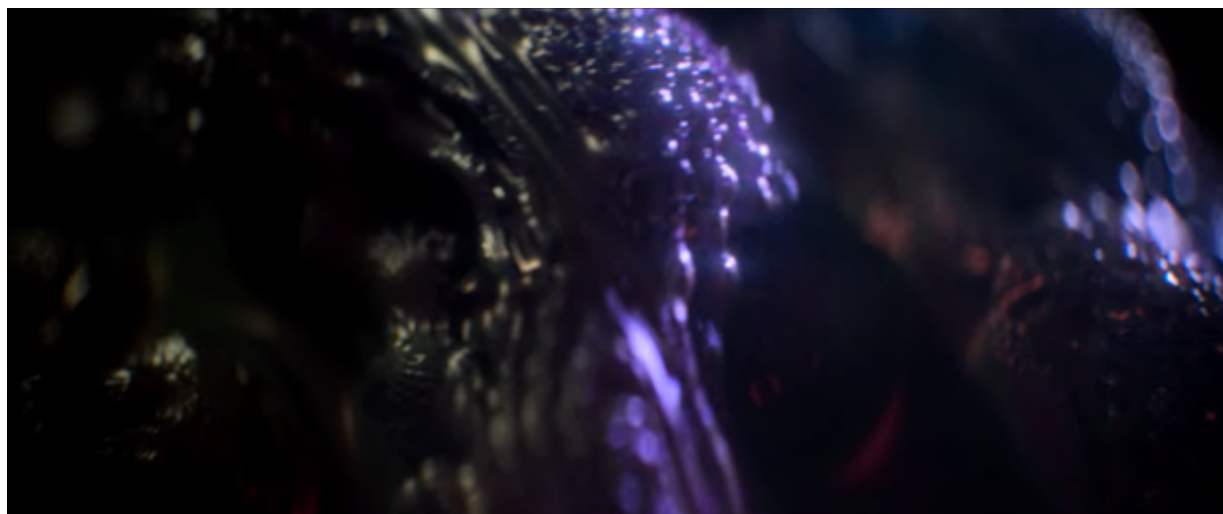


Figure 9: Close-up of the everchanging Alien in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

This is the Alien's nature: unmotivated uncanniness, both as it pertains to the creatures and the places it corrupts. And to repeat Garland's quote: "...the form of the alien is informed by the nature of the alien." Given that the Shimmer is described as "effectively a radiating effect" from the alien presence in the Lighthouse, Garland chose to imbue the Shimmer with the same

qualities and aesthetics; everchanging, abstract, its morphing based on a specific 3D fractal set called *Mandelbulb*, creating what the production designer Mark Digby calls “interesting, almost gothic structures” (Mefford 2018).

Neither Garland nor Digby mention climate change as an inspiration for this uncanny portrayal of the Alien other, and by extension the Shimmer. Even so, as agents of relentless change the nature of these entities crystalizes a terrifying idea (or fact) of climate trauma: it is not an attack, it is merely “natural” cause-and-effect related processes based on laws of physics and mathematics. To wit, nearing the end of the film, interrogator Lomax tells Lena:

“It came here for a reason. It was mutating our environment. It was destroying everything.”

To which she answers:

“It wasn't destroying. It was changing everything.”

There is no purpose, including no goal of destruction, and no real enemy, except maybe ourselves and how we choose to react. This is in its own way a sort of dethroning of anthropocentrism, in rejecting our need for it all to make sense to us, to have purpose that we understand, for the “alien to *want* to eat you”.

Interestingly though, through its choices of layering its nature and form in obscurity, by having the camera and narrative perform and invite *abstract looking*, *Annihilation* clearly and wilfully *others* the Alien and the resulting changes to organic life. I believe the choice of showing that its origin is in fact otherworldly (something the novels obscure to a much larger degree) from minute two of its running time is also in service of this.¹³ We cannot understand this overwhelming, sublime thing, this hyperobject from space.

But as we see later in the film, we *can* overcome it. We just have to be willing to change as well. Several characters invite change throughout the film, to different degrees. For team member

¹³ In addition to the sequence alluding to panspermia, or even sperm finding the egg: the creation of life.

Josie (Tessa Thompson) depression has already made her scar herself. She tells Lena: “Ventress wants to face it. You want to fight it. But I don’t think I want to do either.”

And in the end, she chooses to stop resisting and becomes one with the change around her, turning into plants imitating the human form. The way the scene is played tonally, hushed and calm, Josie is communing with nature, at peace.



Figure 10: Josie becoming plant in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

Furthermore, in the climax, the second sequence I’ll look at in this section, both Dr. Ventress and Lena have bitten the alluring bait of the Lighthouse and come to ground zero of the corruption. And there they both encounter the uncanny alien force and, in very different ways, change forever.

To set up and understand Ventress’s and Lena’s change we need to first witness Lena’s husband’s. Lena arrives inside the lighthouse and finds a camera pointing at a burnt-out husk of corpse. She watches the recording of her husband Kane, who sat where the immolated body now slumps, low in the frame. He rambles, but calmly:

“I thought I was a man. I had a life. People called me Kane. But now I’m not so sure. If I wasn’t Kane what was I? Was I you? Are you me?”



Figure 10: Kane ending in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

As he asks this, he looks off camera at someone behind it. He continues:

“My flesh moves like liquid. My mind is cut loose. I can’t bear it. I can’t bear it.”



Figure 11: Lena witnessing change in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

In solemn horror, Lena is starting to connect the causal link between the two shapes in her vision: the one on the monitor and the one in the room.

Kane seems to find some resolve, a solution. He hefts something, says:

“You ever seen a phosphorous grenade go off? Kind of bright. Shield your eyes. If you ever get out of here, you find Lena.”

Then a familiar voice behind the camera replies:

“I will.”

Lena knows what is about to happen but cannot look away. Kane pulls the pin out of the grenade and counts down. He erupts in brilliant light, the intensity of which is too much for the camera’s sensor to capture: a photon hyperobject. As the chemical reaction of phosphor trails off, we can see Kane glowing from within with colourless fire, flares in the camera lens heightening the sense of uncontainable light. And as Kane turns to cinders, into the frame steps the person he was talking to - another Kane, healthier looking, though giving off a colder vibe. This event is a twisted version of the Phoenix myth: not really rising from the ashes of his former self, but we shall see it is maybe not a coincidental motif.



Figure 12: Kane reborn in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

Lena immediately turns off the recording, aghast. But she doesn’t have time to properly process this, as she hears strange moans and howls coming from the impact crater that leads down further into the ground under the Lighthouse. She follows the sounds into a cramped tunnel.

Lena finds Dr. Ventress in a cavern, already transforming. Skin has grown over her eyes. She rambles too, as if in a sort of rapture, mad poetry:

“It’s the last phase. Vanished into havoc. Unfathomable mind. Now beacon. Now sea.”



Figure 13: No bright exit for Dr. Ventress in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

Dr. Ventress notices Lena and reminisces about their previous interactions, that she at that time needed to know what was in the lighthouse:

“That moment has passed. It’s inside me know.”

Lena, assault rifle hefted, wary:

“What’s inside you?”

Ventress, grabbing her stomach, in pain. An ominous drone enters the soundscape:

“It’s not like us. It’s *unlike* us. I don’t know what it wants. Or if it wants. But it will grow, until it encompasses everything. Our bodies and our minds will be fragmented into their smallest parts until not one part remains.”

An almost unrecognizable violin starts a dirge as we pull away from her, her last word:

“Annihilation.”

To rapturous orchestral crescendo, Ventress convulses, a pulsating glow moving upwards inside her torso and a stream of light and particles spews out of her mouth, filling the room with her smallest parts in ordered, swirling patterns as her form disintegrates.



Figure 14: Dr. Ventress annihilated in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

This mirrors Kane's ending, down to the importance of light and turning into particles. But no new Dr. Ventress steps into frame. What is different about her? We didn't see what happened in the cavern before Lena entered, how Dr. Ventress handled her encounter with the alien. What did she do to not be "reborn" like Kane was, and like Lena is about to be?

The answer might be found in another concept that Rose presents in relation to *shimmer*, that of *reciprocal capture*. Quoting Isabelle Stengers (2010), Rose explains the term as "'an event, the production of new, immanent modes of existence' in which neither entity transcends the other or forces the other to bow down" (loc. 922). Perhaps Dr. Ventress is completely annihilated, not transformed, because she wanted so desperately to know what the alien was, to face it, to shatter its walls of obscurity: not so that she could understand, but so that she could control it, transcend it, force it to its knees. Maybe she was dethroned because she was not interested in "a process of encounter and transformation, not absorption, in which different ways of being and doing find interesting things to do together" (ibid).

Then, Lena's encounter. As Josie said before she became one with the change, Lena set out to fight the monster. But perhaps having seen what happened to Kane and Dr. Ventress, or perhaps by virtue of who she truly is, what happens next is a study in human to non-human connection and the transformative potential of true mourning.



Figure 15: Lena mesmerized by total annihilation in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

As the floating pieces of what used to be Dr. Ventress drift by Lena, she is spellbound by witnessing them split into two identical shapes: cell division, a natural biological process made unnatural by its scale. A process she is intimately familiar with being a biologist, but she cannot fathom this.



Figure 16: Lena staring into the void in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures

The particles zoom away from her and coalesce into a Mandelbulb: a form of pure mathematical abstractness, yet here feeling eerily concrete and present, a warm inviting light at its centre. A

lure of obscurity so capturing that instead of fighting it as maybe Lena had intended, she stares into it, awe winning over her instincts, *want see* in full effect.

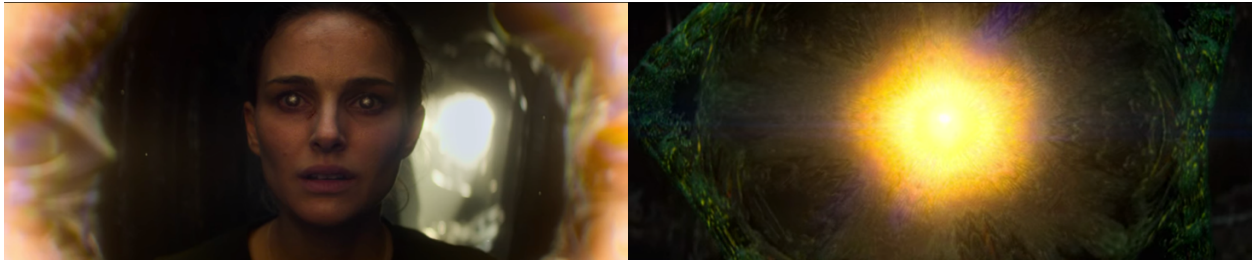


Figure 17 (composite): Points of view in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

And then we are inside the void looking out at her, setting up a singularly uncanny shot reverse shot (fig. 19 above). Is this (left) a POV-shot? Are we actually seeing what the alien force is seeing, the void staring back? Can it even see? We notice the light at the end of the tunnel behind Lena. A brighter, more natural light than the void (right), but not as alluring.

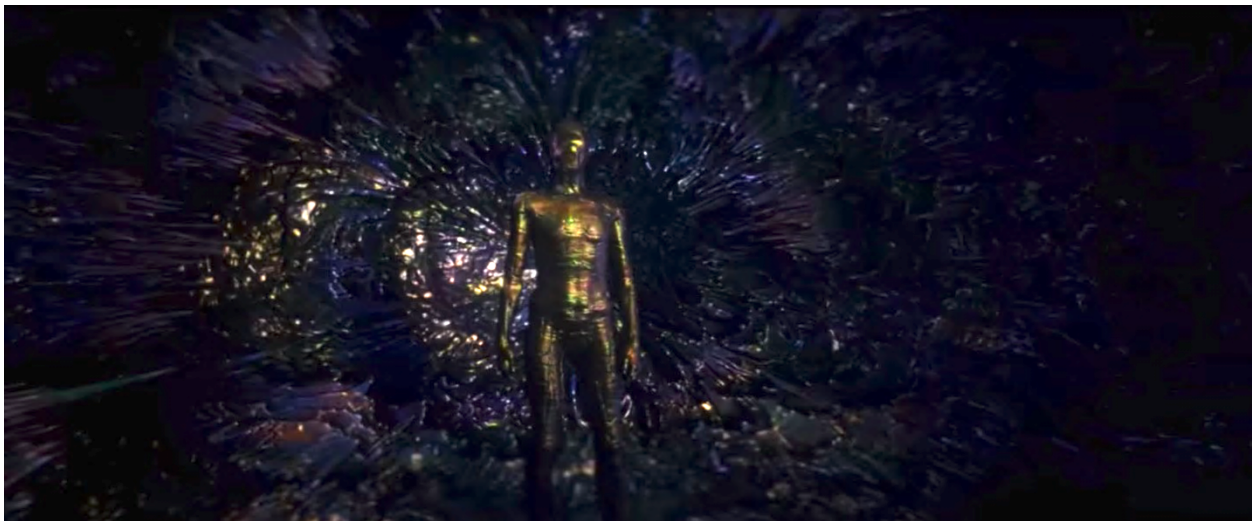


Figure 18: Peacock of iridescent darkness in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

Then a single drop of Lena's blood floats into the Mandelbulb, where it starts duplicating, shimmering, the process speeding up exponentially, as is the nature of this being: shattering the tenets of deep time. And from this process a human shape forms: black, but reflective and iridescent, the rest of the Mandelbulb stretching out behind it in a dizzying display of oily, alluring feathers. And this scares Lena. Where the totally unfamiliar and abstract shape brought curiosity and wonder, this uncanny, too human form makes her empty her magazine at it in a

warrior cry. But the bullets do nothing. So, she runs, back up the “birth canal” to the much more familiar light at the end.



Figure 19: Stand-off in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

But it is there waiting for her, barring her way, imitating her every move, mirroring. Lena is confrontational, scared. She tries to strike it with the camera tripod, but is struck down. The form does not hurt her, only lies down beside her. Lena tries to run.



Figure 20: No escape in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

But the form smothers her against the door. She can't breathe. They both collapse on the floor in total synchronicity.

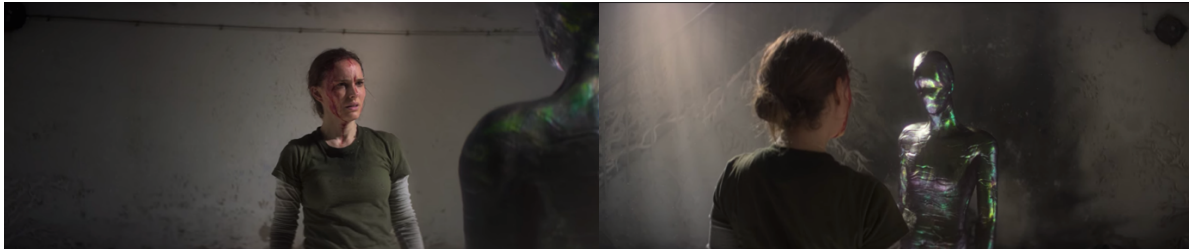


Figure 21 (composite): Over-the-shoulder in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

When they rise, Lena is done fighting and trying to escape. She, in a sense, engages in dialogue. Her face is no longer wide-eyed in awe, no longer strained in fear, but rather questioning, wanting to understand. The sense of a dialogue occurring is also reflected in the use of over-the-shoulder shots, common in scenes where two characters are engaged in conversation. There is no talking here, though, but arguably there is communication, connection. They regard each other as Lena inches towards Kane's corpse.



Figure 22: Connection and destruction in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

But when they finally touch in a non-combative way, it is when Lena places an incendiary grenade in the other's hand. And as Lena guides the other hand to it, the form transforms yet again.

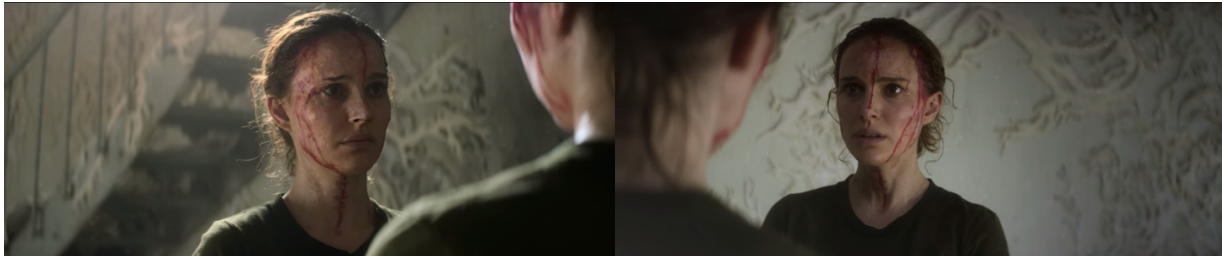


Figure 23 (composite): Reflection as connection in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

It now mimics Lena perfectly, no longer giving off that oil slick iridescence. Only its expression is that of a sad resignation, depressed, whereas Lena is shocked. The frighteningly uncanny of the form made of black, shimmering refraction has become truly reflective. No longer unfamiliar. It has become a mirror.

As established earlier, we cannot truly know what this alien wants or even if it wants. It mimics, duplicates, mutates all it comes in contact with without stating its intent. But we can as viewers acknowledge that what it is doing is detrimental to other life on the planet, at the very least human life. It is causing pain and death. It is truly sublime in its capacity for both beauty and destruction. But significant to my reading: humankind is no different, nor is what we call nature. Though we see our forms and nature's as different, other, we are all the same.

One can imagine Lena contemplating this in the moment above, making it only that much harder to do what she must do next.

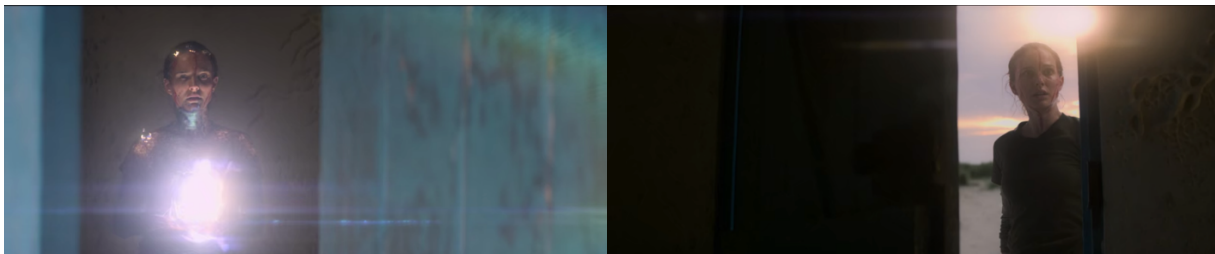


Figure 24 (composite): Self-destruction as transformation in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

Lena pulls the pin on the grenade and flees. The other Lena seems dazed as it combusts. Outside the door Lena looks back and finds the other looking back. The symmetry of these two shots side-by-side (fig. 26 above) compounds their connection: the two Lena's, the sun shining and the phosphor burning, the crack in the door. Lena's emotions seem torn between relief and grief. This is both self-destruction and violence.

But out of this destruction hopefully something new will arise. In the introduction to *Mourning Nature* Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman (2017) talk of successful mourning of non-human victims of climate change, also citing Judith Butler (2004):

... 'successful' mourning and grieving does not come from the full substitutability or the forgetting of what was lost; rather, mourning is about transformation: 'one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss.' (p. 12)

The close reading I've done in this analysis situates the alien presence as a representation of humankind's destructive nature and points to its inherent pointlessness and futility, but also our connection to non-human life. These selves, our alluring and obscure oil-slick selves, when cast aside are to be mourned as a loss: not changed out and forgotten but accepted as the transformative power that can facilitate change for the better.

We will never be the same. But in many ways that matter, no matter how obscure, all of us *are* the same.

THE PERFORMATIVE ENTANGLEMENT OF THE MUTATIONS



Figure 25: Organic graffiti in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

“More mutations...malignant, like tumors.”

This is Lena’s reaction to the image above (fig. 25), as a biologist who has devoted her academic study to the life cycle of the cell. Cancer is a thematic through line in *Annihilation*, another everchanging spreading force motivated by nothing but its own growth, in Bakhtin’s phrasing in regard to the grotesque: “an as yet unfinished metamorphosis” (1984: p. 24). Without context, as with the barrier of the Shimmer, one could objectively look at this pattern of multicolored growth and find beauty. In the shot preceding this we glimpse a bare splash of color on the opposite wall (another tease in allure and obscurity) and could mistake it for the graffiti art that covers countless similar grey concrete walls around the world. But like the oil slick “Shimmer”, it does not feel right. In full reveal here, the way it has spread and grown so vast feels invasive and one wonders in horror if it will ever stop. You can almost see it grow and imagine what it would do to a body if it is somehow infectious.

And five minutes later we need no longer imagine.



Figure 26: *Exploded body art in Annihilation, 2018. Paramount Pictures.*

After finding and watching a gruesome video of a soldier with his bared insides writhing and wriggling like slick snakes, the group of women find his body in a dried-up swimming pool. It is like seeing a deep time diorama of a body sapped of life exploding; a mustard yellow shockwave framing the wasp nest blast site where the lower body sags; the upper body like a mantel piece on its arch, hair a crystalized purple to compliment the yellow. Wrongness radiates outwards, hijacked bone cells branching like capillaries. Where the more saturated growth earlier (fig. 25, previous page) could remind us of vivid organic graffiti, this bleached iteration that includes human material is an art installation of repulsiveness, death writ large, even without the skull that tops it.

This monster is a grotesque hybrid and a mutation. It is at once static and horribly evolving. Its nature is to take everything that has form and change it relentlessly, turn it inside out, to such an unnatural degree that any human would find it repulsive. In her contribution to the collection *The Gothic World* (2014), “Gothic Visuality in the Nineteenth Century”, Elisabeth McCarthy quotes David J. Skal as he describes Gothic fiction’s “dark energies” as “shape-changing entities that move in the modern imaginations like dream-carvings on a dark carousel. With each revolution they mutate and evolve, the better to hold our attention” (p. 342). McCarthy adds that this elucidates the fact that Gothic horror “both in its depictions and as a genre itself, [if] not only

invites mutation, it thrives on it, and in particular, it thrives on making that mutation visible” (ibid).

This monster is a visual and visceral interpretation of the mutative nature of forces like cancer, on the microscopic scale, and climate change on the macroscopic scale, given perceptible form. It is “mak[ing] amorphous calamities visible,” to borrow a phrase from Nicole Shukin (2012) emphasizing the role of artists in this endeavor.

But as with the Shimmer and the Alien, there is no evil at work here. And however repulsive and unnatural the aesthetics of this creature or hybrid of creatures are, we the viewer and the characters within are still transfixed by it. I posit that the fact that my own instinctive connotations are drawn towards works of art in the case of these two tableaux is telling. They are both presented on a canvas, of sorts, a surface drawing the eye.



Figure 27 (composite): Lena appreciating art in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

So, even though the alien forces at work in the Shimmer might not be creating these displays with any sort of purpose behind it, artistic or otherwise, my analysis suggests that the film almost certainly is. It is drawing attention to itself in this way so that we truly see, “the better to hold our attention”.

Why visualize this phenomenon in such a performative, almost theatrical way? Is it purely a case of combining beauty and horror for visceral effect, like discussed in the introduction?

The performativity of the repulsive here is reminiscent, sometimes to an uncanny degree (see fig. 28 below), of how murder scenes were staged by fictional mass murderer Hannibal Lecter and in turn how they were visualized on the TV show *Hannibal* (Fuller, 2013-16).



Figure 28: *Murder theatre in Hannibal*, 2014. NBC.

Barbara Braid writes about “The Bizarre Performative Murders in ‘Hannibal’” (2016), explaining that “the bizarre theatre of murder stretches before the viewer’s eyes in order to perform the murderer’s identity” (p. 252). In the same way, we can surmise that the different forms taken by the alien presence in *Annihilation* are performances of its identity, i.e. its form is revealing its nature.

But where Hannibal Lecter is a deranged killer creating self-indulgent “art,” the growth displayed on the walls of Fort Amaya is merely changing what is around it, “transgress[ing] its own limits” (Bakhtin: p. 26). Based on the nature of the alien that we arrived at in regards to the Shimmer and the Alien in the previous subchapter, affirmed by Garland’s comments from the behind-the-scenes-featurette, I believe the alien is not prone to, as Hannibal Lecter is, “communicate his twisted message to the onlookers” (Braid: p. 254). One may ask what is more terrifying: such repulsiveness performed out of volition or indifference.

These scenes make for visually original, horrifying and, yes, even beautiful cinema. But I argue that it evinces a more than visceral effect. It is consciously drawing attention to its own performativity, to highlight the otherwise unseen horrors of mutation in all scales and materials. It is giving in to the “compulsion to visualize the mutation of a society as a whole, as well as that

of an individual within it” (McCarthy 2019: p. 342), even though it might clash with the otherwise established nature of the monster responsible. It is enticing the viewers’ *want see*.

Because after looking at this mutation on the pool wall for a while, we forget that we are actually looking at a dead body. A human being. As a low-ranking soldier¹⁴, though, he is subaltern, outside the hierarchy of power, sent by his superiors to be ravaged by the slow violence of an ecosystem that no longer plays by the rules of nature. He has become but part of a purposeless display. He is a nameless victim and we look at his remains and are momentarily repulsed and awed, then we promptly forget him when the next atrocity occurs. He has become part of the monster. But as already discussed, monsters “help us pay attention to ancient chimeric entanglements” and “point us toward the monstrosities of modern Man” asking us “to consider the wonders and terrors of symbiotic entanglement in the Anthropocene” (Tsing et. al. 2017: loc. 3085).

This sequence is making ecological death visible. When we look at this mutation, entangled, absorbed, but not in symbiosis, we are forced to look into the void of ecological disaster and truly consider who its victims are and marvel at the monsters it would make all of us.



Figure 29: *Memento mori* in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

¹⁴ The character’s name is not uttered. The actor who plays him, Sammy Hayman, is credited as «Mayer» on IMDB.com.

CHAPTER TWO – GHOSTS OF IRRETRIEVABLE HOMES

The rootless and powerless survivors in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015) are dealing with voids of their own. A climate catastrophe has already happened, resulting in a population experiencing widespread loss of empathy, social justice and the power or ability to impose change in their own lives and others'.¹⁵

Change forced upon the human body as seen in *Annihilation* exists here as well, but with a different form and nature, as the mutations and other kinds of alterations have already happened and are results of events setting up the story, not the antagonist itself. Often in films in general, especially horror films like *Annihilation*, the scariest thing about change is the experience of seeing and feeling the transformation happen step by step, when we can still glimpse the humanity there undergoing something awful. There is potential for an immediate, visceral and sublime horror in the perceptible, undeniable knowledge of the difference in the before and how it is changing and how it can't be stopped. We imagine what it feels like, the powerlessness of becoming something we're not: monsters.

Therefore, in many cases, seeing the result without the process can sometimes look and feel too othered, distant, or even ridiculous to serve specific purposes of affect, and may in fact lead to undesired emotional responses. One might experience elation where there should be terror, as may be the case when one watches *An American Werewolf in London* (Landis, 1981), whose harrowing transformation sequence from man to wolfman still to this day could make ones skin crawl, while the visuals of the fully fledged werewolf (fig. 30 below) just as easily might

¹⁵ There are allusions to a nuclear war having happened and radiation illnesses abound, so even though this does not clearly align the traditional ecological crises, for the purposes of this thesis the focus is put on the aftermath having the quality and texture of a climate catastrophe.



Figure 30: *Horror and the ridiculous in An American Werewolf in London, 1981. Universal Pictures.*

provoke chortles instead of chills.¹⁶ But, arguably, an even worse result would be to not elicit any emotional response whatsoever.

In the case of *MM:FR*, affective reactions might include sadness and pity for the disabled that are seen throughout¹⁷ or similar pity giving some space for animosity as well for the Warboy half-lives with their animalistic behavior and fervent, bizarre ritualistic brotherhood. There is also the downright camp, carnivalesque, hyper-masculine goofiness of the design and behavior of characters such as Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne) and The Doof Warrior (iOTA) that are bound to put some audiences off while entertaining others (fig. 31 below).

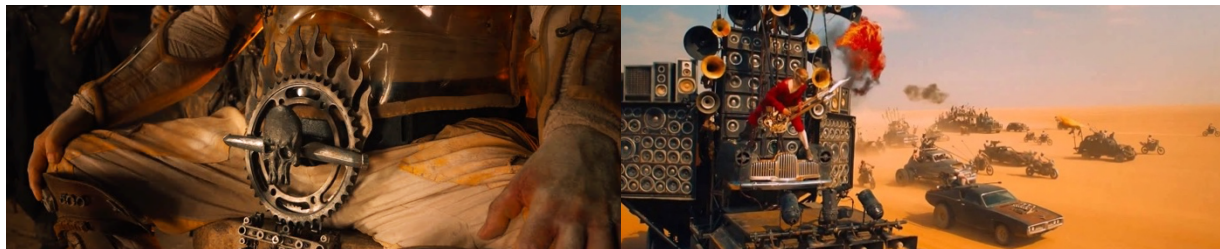


Figure 31 (composite): *Rustpunk camp aesthetic in Mad Max:Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.*

But no matter how much emotion they may evoke, in contrast to *Annihilation* these corporeal “monsters” in *MM:FR* never really reach a level of ecological sublimity, having the power to compel or destroy us. Unlike how obscurity functions in *Annihilation*, the camp aesthetic and

¹⁶ Using a horror-**comedy** with dated special effects to prove a point about the effectiveness of horror might be unfair to the film, but this is meant purely as a visual example.

¹⁷ For more: Stobbart, D., 2019. Mad Max and Disability: Australian Gothic, Colonial, and Corporeal (Dis)possession. *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, 6(1), pp.64–72. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.20>

performances are too unveiled, too broad. They serve a different function. This film's monsters fit more, as noted by Kathryn Hampshire (2017), within David Punter and Glennis Byron's definition of monsters in their article "The Monster" (2005) where that which is "explicitly identified as that society's logical and inevitable product: society, rather than the individual, becomes a primary site of horror" (p. 266). Hence, the monsters of *MM:FR* function more as reflections and warnings of socio-political tendencies, "the devastating effects of violence, unfettered masculinity, and out-of-control consumption" (Hampshire: p. 182).

The sublime in *MM:FR* then is not portrayed by its monsters, but rather by ghosts of loss: family, homes and landscapes. The past haunts the characters as their memory combats the unreconcilable present. They struggle in different ways to move on in a world transformed, but where they still sense "traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade" (Tsing et. al. 2017: loc. 144). The main protagonists do not stare in awe and horror at the world crumbling before them. Instead, where they now see only dust and ruin, they ache to see their past undone or returned to them.

THE ROMANTIC HAUNTINGS OF MAD MAX

“Settlers here can survive, but they can never truly belong. They cannot stake a claim: they must keep moving and, in *Fury Road*, move they do.” (Ben Wilkie, 2015)



Figure 32: *Road Warrior Above a Sea of Dust* in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, 2015. Warner Bros.

However fast the characters eventually move in *MM:FR*, the first in-narrative image we are presented with (fig. 32 above) is a dead still Mad Max Rockatansky (Tom Hardy). His back is to



Figure 33: Caspar David Friedrich's "*Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*" of 1818

us and his rust-dusted muscle-car. He stares into the barren, sfumato landscape of post-apocalypse Earth.

An art historian might look at that image and conceivably think of this painting (fig. 33, left). *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* is one of the most well-known works of art from the era of Romanticism, which was an “attitude or intellectual orientation that characterized many works of literature, painting, music, criticism and historiography in Western civilization over a period from the late 18th to the mid-19th century”¹⁸, overlapping that of gothic fiction.

Mark Cousins speaks of it thusly: “In Romantic art, human figures

¹⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica

are usually small, dwarfed by a landscape or a ruin, and often seen from the back, looking out into space” (p. 222). In figure 32 above, Max is staring into both a landscape and a ruin.

The visual motif of the solitary male figure gazing in awe across sublime Nature is known in Romantic painting as *Rückenfigur*. Julia Leyda remarks in her article “Face Forward: Gender, Survival and the Revisionist Rückenfigur in Big Little Lies” (2019) that in having a character observe the sublime with us “we are drawn into their act of looking, even as we are involved in our own act of looking at them”. In other words, these kinds of images and shots draws attention to the act of looking itself.

Then what is Max, this introspective romantic hero, looking at? And how is it making him feel?

In this analysis I aim to answer this question and investigate what aesthetic choices are made and emotive pulls are employed and to what purpose. As we shall see, the emotions that are boiling beneath Max’s surface are given audiovisual life through ghostly, subjective visions. These brutal apparitions, how Max responds to them and ultimately alters his reaction to them may lend us a perspective on preparing and dealing with the emotional and interpersonal turmoil and aftermath of climate crisis. As it turns out, the portrayal of Max’s psychological and emotional states resonates in interesting ways with thoughts put forth by environmentalist writers, particularly as it pertains to such affects as guilt, grief and mourning.



Figure 34: Max and duplicity in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

Back to the first scene. The camera descends slowly. A girl's, ghostly voice:

“Hello? Where are you?”

Max doesn't stir. A two-headed lizard scurries across rock in the foreground, then towards Max.

The girl again, overlapped with a whispering woman, they both plead to him:

“Where are you, Max?”

He does not answer, but tells us in voiceover:

“Here they are again. Worming into the black matter of my brain.”

The most important reason for diving into Romanticism in this section of the thesis concerned with ghosts and lost homes, besides its similarities and connections to the gothic mode, is best put into words by, again, Mark Cousins, as he discusses the motif of visual depth (z-axis) in Romantic art: “Romanticism was the movement of the z-axis. Its ruins express a longing for the past, or decay” (p. 222). In this scene, our introduction to Max and the film, he is staring longingly into the deep past represented by barren decay, the ruins of lives gone.

The girl and the woman return¹⁹:

“Help us, Max. You promised to help us.”

Again, he does not answer, but expertly stomps the lizard underfoot and flicks it up into his hands to take a bite, says in his most gravelly voice:

“I told myself they cannot touch me.”

¹⁹ The most likely interpretation here is that these voices belong to Max's wife and daughter who died in the first film in 1979, an event that put Max on the path of the character he is here three installments later. It is, however, never stated in text.



Figure 35: Romantic beauty in smoke in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, 2015. Warner Bros.

He turns his head having heard something and we cut closer: the past he was staring into is now shrouded in utterly romantic mist, a Turneresque beauty in smoke. His past is gone, in ruins. His hauntings cannot touch him. But he cannot touch them either. And as our hero devours the only other living thing nearby raw:

“They are long dead.”

Then he runs.

But a minute later he is captured, his pursuers having flipped his car. As he crawls out of the wreckage, dazed, moments seem to freeze and merge, a *ghosting* effect, his experience of current reality, and thereby ours, warped. The soundscape is hushed and similarly aethereal. His voice-over returns:

“I am the one who runs from both the living and the dead. Hunted by scavengers.

Haunted by those I could not protect.”

Then this:



Figure 36: Compelling specter in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

A nightmare flashes in. Unreal. Expressionistic. A child, turning towards us, towards Max, as an unstoppable armada of monstrous vehicles are about to run her over. Eyes wide in horror, the whites of them the brightest thing in the shot, straight down the lens. This is one Max could not protect. In his daze and having been stopped from his running, not being able to look away, Max is now seeing, not only hearing, his ghosts. And they are staring right back at him. Compelling him to help them.

The rusty red sky flashes white, then:



Figure 37: Malicious specter in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

A whip-fast ghost close-up, eyes now flared open in accusation, terrorizing. Again, straight to camera, to Max, to us. The image is teal and blurred, in the starkest contrast to the preceding, as if we're under water, drowning in regret. Four frames of this, and we're back to the running child as she is inexorably run over.

Flash back to reality as Max crawls away from his wreck, being surrounded by shadows shrouded in pale, orange dust. Then one last flash:



Figure 38: *Tropy elegy in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.*

Max, mourning. As a sculpture this would be a *pietà* motif, a bereaved lady Mary holding the dead body of Christ. In the film, Max is performing the omnipresent cinematic trope of holding a dead or dying body slightly off the ground, as if the unnaturally orange earth is a factor in her death. Here the trope is used as shorthand for the emotion of mourning, as all we get is a rushing crane down on the girl's bloodied face. We never see the reverse angle of Max's face, as this is his memory of the event filtered through him, and the last thing he wants to look at here is himself. We only get to see his stark, black hair and clothing, already dressed for mourning, his shadow the darkest thing in the shot.

The frenetic way these subjective flashbacks are presented fill the moments with kinetic, emotional energy. And not just the pain for what happened, but for what that in turn has turned Max into. As he says next, his aggressors pinning him down, Max reduced to nothing but a lizard underfoot:

“So, I exist in this wasteland.”

And then (fig. 39, below) it is Max with his back to us again, but this time he is being hauled towards the landscape, away from us.

“A man, reduced to a single instinct: survive.”

And just as we fade to black, under heavy clouds lit vermillion by a setting sun there is a glint off of something on rocky plateaus in the distance, featuring what looks like man-built cranes, a tantalizing foreshadowing of where they are taking him: civilization.



Figure 39: Future ruins in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

And in this moment, three deep, sinister orchestral hits stab the soundscape, as if a monster antagonist has been introduced. This visual and aural way of foreshadowing doom certainly has to do with things not looking good for our established hero. There is tension for us in not knowing exactly what awaits him up ahead while still guessing that it can't be good.

But through this we also get the sense that civilization is somewhere Max has been trying to avoid at all costs. And as we see further on in the story, he is a character that has no interest in other people, a classic romantic hero. Max is not just running from the past. He is also dreading the future exactly because of said past, maybe feeling, as Glenn Albrecht puts it in his chapter on

*solastalgia*²⁰ in *Mourning Nature* (2017), an “anticipatory grief and mourning for that which is currently under stress and will most likely pass away in the foreseeable future” (p. 295). It’s as if the established, social life of any community is no longer possible for Max because he can only foresee more ruin. He is, in a psychiatric term, catastrophizing.

By referencing thoughts presented in *Mourning Nature* I do not suggest that we should interpret that what Max is implicitly mourning is nature: the death of the non-human world. First of all, he’s not really mourning: one could say he is in grief, but he’s *running away* from mourning, suppressing the grief. Secondly, I believe the source of his grief and regret are in fact the human lives taken from him and his inability to stop it from happening, and that this isn’t designed to be a subtext metaphor for him mourning the ruin of nature. However, I find it fascinating that the excessively subjective portrayal of his emotional foundations, that are the ghostly forces that drive him, are mirrored in writing by ecological thinkers concerned with the affective aspects of climate change. The reasons why Max is averse to forming any sort of connection to other survivors or communities is the same as why environmentalist Bill McKibben, by way of Phyllis Windle (1992), despite loving the woody mountain in view from his house, resists getting to know it better, as he puts ever so poignantly:

The end of nature probably also makes us reluctant to attach ourselves to its remnants, for the same reason that we usually don’t choose friends from among the terminally ill... The winter woods might be perfectly healthy come spring, just as the sick friend, when she’s sleeping peacefully, might wake up without the wheeze in her lungs. (*McKibben, in Windle 1992, 364*)

Max runs from the living and the dead, never staying still, no attachments. The ruin of the landscape only conjures sublime ghosts threatening to compel and destroy him. And the prospect of civilized life threatens to create more ghosts to haunt him.

²⁰ To be revisited in deeper detail in the next section.



Figure 40 (composite): *Grotosques in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.*

And as Max attempts to escape the Citadel moments later in the film, the nature and form of his hauntings reach peak grotesque and horror. While barreling down dark, earthen corridors, the film sped up and the frame rate jitterily high, he has to run through these visions (fig. 40 above) appearing before him, telling him that he let them die. Their visages are chimeric, doublefaced: they live, but are dead, their death rotting away their living human form in just the brief moments we see them. Where earlier we were given different shots for the living, pleading girl and the terrorizing, spectral one, here they transform almost instantaneously, boils and bones erupting from withering flesh. They also morph in and out of each other. I posit that these hauntings are particularly and quintessentially grotesque, as Bakhtin notes on the indispensable trait of ambivalence: “For in this [grotesque] image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis” (p. 24).

It is interesting that this psychological horror-scape is presented during an already ferocious and action filled escape attempt. For one, it is elegantly effective storytelling, accomplishing many things at once on both the story and character level: dramatizing backstory and exposition while cluing us in to Max’s tenacity, physicality and will to survive in the present, but also compounding the already alluded to fact that Max is quite literally running away from his grief and regret. This girl (fig. 41 below), perhaps the same one that got run over earlier, tells him straight out to “stop running”, but he waves her away and barrels on. And at one point the Warboys have him caught under water, and it is the hallucination of the same girl stabbing



Figure 41 (composite): Girl, ghost and grotesque in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

her ghostly eyes at him that seems to give him the strength to get out of the grasp of his captors. The negative emotions he carries with him actually help him escape immanent peril, here ghostly white young men, radiation poisoned half-lives, their death just a matter of time: his past as ghosts pushing him to avoid future ghosts. In a way he is avoiding the transformative effects of loss as detailed in relation to Lena's journey in *Annihilation*: he is resisting mourning-as-transformation.

The subjective vocal addresses and straight to camera accusations throughout these sequences that make up the film's first five minutes are harrowing hauntings, starting as whispered elegies and ending in monstrous, grotesque guilt trips. We are visually and aurally entangled in Max's emotional instability, his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: not his mere memory of trauma, but him reliving it in the moment.

I believe these visions touch upon that quality that the writers of *Ecogothic* asserted as paramount in gothic fiction, in that they are intimating "what audiences most fear in (...) the personal subconscious" and perhaps also "the most pervasive tensions underlying Western culture" (p. 14). Because if there is in fact a shared sense brewing among us all that it's already too late to alter the dark path that anthropogenic climate change has put us on, as many if not most climatologists have stated, then we might all end up as Max. We will all be in grief over lives and life lost. We will all regret not doing more to stop it from happening.

But hopefully we will also have the chance to be more like the Max that eventually changes himself. His visions keep appearing throughout the film in moments where he is in situations that force him to contemplate if he should fight or make friends, or if he should have done more when tragedy has struck. Then, in true Romantic fashion, Max eventually gets his hero moment.

Later, Furiosa asks Max to join them on a trek across the barren salt plains that presumably is what used to be the Pacific Ocean, seeing no other hope. We the viewer in turn hope the time

that Max has spent with these people has changed him, given him the ability to coexist, commune. But alas, he says he'll make his own way. Then adds as Furiosa walks away:

“You know, hope is a mistake. If you can't fix what's broken, you'll... you'll go insane.”

She has no answer for this. She has her own ways of mourning, as I will discuss later.



Figure 42: Max and fog revisited in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

The following scene, we meet Max as we first met him: from behind, machinery flanking him, his view of the sublime enshrouded in mist. Except this time, there is a tail of dust behind Furiosa's group starting their journey across the salt.

As in the very first scene of the film voices come to him, the girl from the beginning:

“Where are you, Max?”



Figure 43: Max engages in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner bros.

And now, having spent time with the people racing off in the distance, having seen Furiosa deal with her own mourning head on, he turns, seeking the voice. Where in the beginning he ignored and ran away from his ghosts, he is now actively confronting them.

“Help us. You promised to help us.”

He then turns back towards the group leaving on what he knows is a hopeless, futile search for a home across a vast dead sea. And there we get this lightning quick vision:



Figure 44: Ghost punch in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

The girl from before slings her hand towards his head with a grunt. Quick, like a shot.

Then a flicker of the following, barely perceptible:



Figure 45: Dark premonition in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

An unknown figure, eyes wild in the slits of his battered black mask. The image seems distorted, manipulated in a way that distinguishes it from the one with the girl: *this is something else*.



Figure 46: Max flinching in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

Then back to reality as Max holds his hand to his forehead, as if struck. He's looking almost straight down now, clouds overhead grey, ominous, foreboding. He is truly facing his ghost, though he might not like all that it wants to convey. But he does not run. He keeps his eyes on the girl.

She takes her hand away, again sped up to an unnatural pace and walks off. This has never happened before. We've seen plenty of Max turning his back to his vision, but never the other way around: it's finally got his attention. Max looks at his hand, as if surprised that he's not hurt.

21

Then he looks off into the distance.



Figure 48: Ghost mirage in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner bros.

The girl now appears as a shadow on the desert plain. Quite like a *mirage*, which notably is a true optical illusion, not a hallucination. She stands in the direction of where Furiosa and her group are speeding away, his past and future both ahead of Max. The girl says, pleading like a bored kid annoyed with how slow her father is, disappointed in his inaction:

“Come on, pa. Let’s go.”

²¹ The vision in this scene turns out to be a premonition. Later in the final chase sequence, the man in the black mask fires an arrow at Max. He flashes to this vision and raises his hand to his forehead in the same way and thereby stops the arrow from penetrating his head. The reason why Miller chooses to have the ghost warn Max about this very specific moment, giving his visions practical clairvoyance in addition to functioning as a force that warns through hauntings in a more general sense, remains unclear to me. It does solidify the ghosts as an agent of well intention towards Max, but functions more as foreshadowing for the audience than dramatizing Max’s emotional state and arc.

The next shot is him on a bike catching up to the others. We don't see him decide anything, go through any emotional change, he's finally simply paying heed to his ghost instead of running away from it. As co-writer Nico Lathouris puts it when explaining what the story is about: "...a man running away from his better self, whose better self catches up to him."²² (23:48) Max has chosen to coexist with his specters.

Max convinces Furiosa to try another way, one maybe even more hopeless and futile, but that maybe fixes something that is broken, that can prevent them from going insane as well. Because it is too late for Max. He has grown enough now to face his ghosts and heed their urgings, but he is too broken to transform-through-mourning as Lena did in *Annihilation*, still too restless to remain in civilization after it's all over, his ghosts not yet satisfied. One could say he is taking on a *resistant mourning*. Cunsolo and Landman (2017) describe this affective act taking on "overt political and ethical form" (p. 14), paraphrasing both Clifton Spargo and Patricia Rae, "...resistant mourning is mourning that refuses consolation, and consciously chooses to hold on to the feelings of pain and grief to spur a sense of responsibility for the loss... an ethical protest against the larger structures of injustice and oppression that trivialize and minimize the death and loss of some bodies" (ibid). And maybe, as he gives Furiosa one last look and turns his back and walks away from her and the Wives ascending the Citadel taking with them as many as the lift can carry, he has recognized that this is not his place anyhow. As the Wives have told us, men like him killed the world. And as Hampshire (2017) writes, through the way Max acts towards Furiosa in particular, "*Fury Road* highlights Max's recognition that masculinity's violent domination is the problem, not the solution" (p. 183).

As Max knows: there is more to fix and it needs to be done now, a sentiment echoed every day by environmentalists and scientists. We cannot be overwhelmed by the sublime might of nature or the potential of its ruin. Or there will be never-ending grief.

²² "Mad Max: Fury Road in Conversation with George Miller" | GRAPHIC. Sidney Opera House Archive.

THE IMMEDIATE SOLASTALGIA OF FURIOSA

While Max spends most of the film wanting to merely continue, to stay alive, his past haunting him, Furiosa wants and believes in something better, her place of birth and childhood gilded in her mind. But her home of Many Mothers is revealed to be rusted like everything else. Here too grief and mourning are to be the operative emotions, the difference being that they are felt by someone more able to confront and give release to them. Furiosa's emotional interior is not presented through ghostly visions plaguing her, but is rather written on her body, in an absent limb and a brand burnt into her flesh. Her sublime is instead found in landscapes changed beyond familiarity.

In the following subchapter I will be keying in on Furiosa's encounters with and response to things absent and present and how a reading of her perspective relates to a discussion of how to move forward in the Anthropocene with the changes that have happened and will continue to happen. In particular, two sequences where she encounters the sublime function as interesting comparisons in how they are portrayed aesthetically and structurally: one where sublime nature is perceptibly present, and one where it both is and simultaneously not.

But first we need to establish Furiosa's place in the world.



Figure 49: *Furiosa branded in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.*

As with Max, the first we meet Furiosa we see her back (fig. 49 above). Not as a *Rückenfigur*, a motionless solitary figure swallowed up by sublime Nature, but up close to her neck so we instantly see that she is branded property. As she walks away from us, she is slowly revealed to also be missing an arm from the elbow down, a prosthetic that looks like it's made from spare car parts filling the blank space. She walks past waiting, skeletal Warboy half-lives, and there is no acknowledgement of presence on either side. She belongs here in the Citadel, and yet does not. We do not know it yet and she does not emote it, but like Max, this is a place she desperately wants to be away from.



Figure 50: Skeletons and phantom limbs in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

As she diverts from her planned supply run, absconding with Immortan Joe's "prized breeders", a chase ensues. When it's looking most grim for them, we come to the first example of encounter with the sublime. First, we only glimpse vertical sand frothing in the horizon beyond the warring vehicles, but before we can ascertain what exactly it is that they are heading into, we get a buildup consisting of various reaction shots (some of which are seen in fig. 51 below).

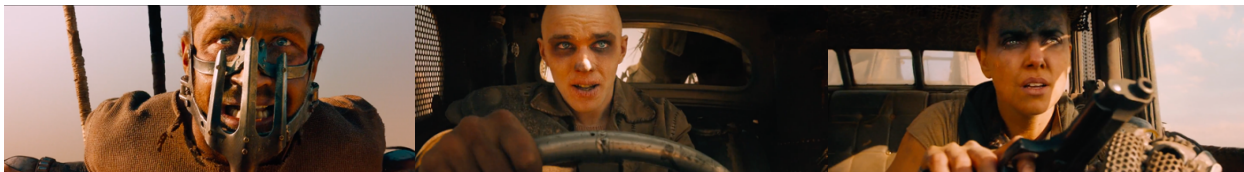


Figure 51 (composite): Spielberg-faces when facing the sublime in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

We the viewers see these faces react to something behind the camera. Their mouths are halfway open in awe and fear. They look up at it, eyes high in the frame of the shots, the yet not revealed presence seeming to weigh down on them.



Figure 52: *Apocalyptic sublime in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.*

What is noteworthy here is that Furiosa sees this sublime storm (fig. 52 above) and drives straight into it. The presence of this very present, sublime phenomenon does not stop her in her tracks or force a deep emotional response out of her: it only emboldens her. In it she sees an opportunity for salvation, escape. The imagery and aesthetic are spot on Salmo's *apocalyptic sublime*, the camera even zooming backwards and backwards trying to encompass this hyperobject but failing to.

However, what it succeeds in is dramatizing the greatness of Furiosa's will and desperation to shake their pursuers by visualizing the immense sublimity of the storm, its formal beauty paired with its potential for destruction. Because, in contrast to *TDAT* e.g., the presentation of this storm does not feel like the lone end-all-be-all provocateur of the emotional reaction of the audience. It is not saying that *this is what we are here to see*. The buildup and final reveal are meant to strengthen our view of Furiosa's resolve. By choosing to enter a storm so perceptibly catastrophic, a facet of her character is revealed. She is brave, she is determined, her cause is worth it.

The absence of a major affective reaction from her is telling. At least when seen in contrast with the second sequence.



Figure 53: Chekov's grotesques in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, 2015. Warner Bros.

For setting up said sequence it is necessary to include the above (fig. 53). Having outrun the armada chasing them, Furiosa, the Wives, Max and Nux drive by night through a marsh-like territory. Very different from the swampland in *Annihilation*, it still presents its own dark, gothic and grotesque tonal markers: silhouetted crows, gnarled trees and roots, and bizarre stilted creatures whose form if lit better than here one cannot even begin to contemplate.

The placement and pacing of this scene codes it as what we would call *transport*: sparing the viewer the passage of time, the changing landscape indicating that our party is moving on, as if belonging to a montage. But its evocative aesthetic and bizarre content has the potential to stop a viewer in their tracks. The level of detail, the sense of otherworldly doom and inhospitality makes it feel like something other than just letting the audience know that we're on the move, that there is progress. When we cut away from it, we feel like there perhaps should have been more there. And, of course, as we see later, there is.

Past the marshes they traverse dry desert once more. Then someone sees a shimmer, something twinkles alluringly in a tower in the distance. Furiosa hefts binoculars and inspects, and what she sees sparks memories.

“I remember something like that.”



Figure 54: Shimmer in the desert in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

They go to it. A naked woman is in the tower hung with shards of mirror. Max is not fooled, it's bait, a lure. Furiosa exits and approaches regardless. She proclaims herself as a Vuvalini of the Many Mothers, among other titles. The naked woman ululates, and motorcycles converge on the war rig. They are all women and the lure meets heads with Furiosa as another says:

“There is something in the eyes. Perhaps it is Jobassa's child.”

They ask about Jobassa, Furiosa's mother, and she tells them she died on the third day of their capture. A revelation to which all the older women perform a ritual of absence, extending their right hands and lightly grasp the air and pull the nothing that is there to their heart. Furiosa repeats the gesture, as if half-remembering a fond memory.

The Wives come and are inspected by the other women. Furiosa says she can't wait for them to see home. The Green Place.

A Mother, confused:

“But if you came from the west, you passed it.”

Furiosa does not understand. One of the Wives says:

“The crows. That creepy place with all the crows.”

A dawning coming over Furiosa as the Many Mothers explain, their voices blending and reverberating in Furiosa's perception, perhaps the most subjective we ever get with this character:

“The soil---we had to get out—the water was filth—poisoned, it was sour—crows came—we couldn't grow anything--.”

The wives start asking questions, but at this point they are background, unimportant. We stay on Furiosa, her look wandering, searching. Her eyes seem to find a point of interest and she starts walking, dazed. In the musical score haunting strings splay out disaster. Furiosa stops, her exhale all we hear. Then she lumbers on, Wives and Many Mothers keeping back, sensing her distress and need for privacy, perhaps.

The last face we see before she is all alone is Max, still in the rig, following her with his eyes, face inscrutable as always. But is it empathy we want to sense from him?



Figure 55: Furiosa losing limb in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

Furiosa stumbles over a perfect dune roiled by gusting winds, discarding her prosthesis in the dead sand, the thing built from scrap meant to cover over the absence of her arm. The strings in the score ache. She falls to her knees, the strings start to cry and she screams.



Figure 56: *Furiosa and sublime absence in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.*

This moment is a perfect example of dramatizing loss, not simply destruction. As Furiosa is realizing her home is irrevocably lost, we stay on her processing and emotional venting: a release. She is not directly perceiving the ruins of the Green Place and we the viewers have never even seen how it used to look, but it somehow still resonates sublimely. She is remembering and aching for what was, emoting and then reacting outwardly. We don't see the *apocalyptic sublime* that is affecting her. But we witness her confronting it head on, screaming back in its face. The camera is low to the ground, wind whipping the sand around her and past us as she howls, her one remaining hand empty: a *pietà* with an absent body. The cinematic trope and shorthand for mourning of holding the body of a loved one is doubly impossible: she cannot touch it and does not have the limbs to hold it. The orchestral music pulls on every possible minor note to wrench all emotion out of the moment. This could very well feel like an overwrought melodramatic moment where one can sense the filmmaker trying too hard to manipulate our emotions, and indeed, for many audience members that may very well be the case.

There is a word for Furiosa's affective pull here, if not her outward reaction: solastalgia. Glenn Albrecht who came up with the term explains in his contribution to *Mourning Nature* (2017):

Solastalgia was created by me to fill a gap in our language of Earth-related emotions where people experience a deep form of existential distress when directly confronted by unwelcome change in their loved home environment. Solastalgia sits among closely related experiences of Earth-associated trauma,

distress, grief, mourning, and melancholia that unfortunately are now often connected to escalating occurrences of acute and chronic environmental desolation. (p. 292)

This solastalgic moment with Furiosa does not cut away to reactions from the others, but we know they are all there watching. As the emotions wind down, we move away to view Furiosa's relatively tiny form on the dune, the sun beating down on her (fig. 57 below).



Figure 57: *Furiosa alone?* in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, 2015. Warner Bros.



Figure 58: *Max sharing a moment* in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, 2015. Warner Bros.

It is revealed to be Max's POV as we cut to him in the rig again, holding his eyes on her. Although stone-faced as ever, we sense our suspicion is confirmed: empathy from a person who has locked himself off from other people. But he does not flash to any visions, no ghosts. This

outpouring of emotion from Furiosa does not induce his own visions of traumatic grief or guilt, as we have seen earlier events of this nature would. He is perhaps experiencing the same as her, vicariously, without it calling forth his demons.

It does however, help change his mind. Later, leaving Max behind, Furiosa, the remaining wives and the Many Mothers race across the dead Pacific in search of a new home. Max catches up to them and suggests going back, taking over the citadel.

Furiosa slides into contemplativeness as the others discuss Max's current level of sanity.

Someone asks:

“What's there to find at the Citadel?”

Max pointedly looks at Furiosa, says.

“Green.”

Co-writer and illustrator of *MM:FR* Brendan McCarthy singles this out as a great message of the film: *changing* the oppressive place *into* the green place, instead of chasing a mythologized past. “...change where you're at and stop looking for a place out there”²³ (45:55). What I believe the filmmakers are touching on here, as it relates to Furiosa's quest, her solastalgia and the ultimate solution they find, is the importance of a stark, but necessary realization that the home you remember is gone forever. It is futile to maintain that gilded image as a goal to strive for. The aesthetic of the former Green Place, the place now populated by crows and creatures on stilts is, I believe, purposefully gothic: nightmarish, obscure and intangible. Who could ever imagine living there, trying to make life there work? That evergreen place we called home is irreversibly gone.

Additionally, the simple nostalgia represented by the Green Place is also representative of the very values the Wives and Furiosa are revolting against, echoing the conservative rhetoric we hear in the real world today where a past golden age is sentimentally consecrated. Immortan Joe has built a small empire on this hallowing of the past, nurturing in his followers a fanatic,

²³ “Mad Max: Fury Road in Conversation with George Miller” | GRAPHIC. Sidney Opera House Archive. 2015.

religious devotion to automotive relics and motifs morphed with Norse mythology to create a chimeric death cult.



Figure 59: Petroworship in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, 2015. Warner Bros.

Their God is V8, an engine, and in their death throes Warboys spray paint their open mouths with chrome, the most revered and nostalgic finish, since practically everything else in this world is rust. Petroleum, or “guzzaline” as it is termed here, is high commodity. This infatuation with everything connected to motor vehicles situates Immortan Joe as a personification of the qualities mourned for in Stephanie LeMenager’s term “petromelancholia”. The term introduced in her book *Living Oil* (2014), is described as “the grieving of conventional oil resources and the pleasures they sustained” (p. 102). This kind of nostalgia speaks to a point made by Marinette Grimbeek (2017) when discussing doomsday narratives:

It is [further] problematic that many of these apocalyptic visions rely on a variety of nostalgia that implicitly advocates a return to what is seen as a more benevolent past, before the widespread use of pesticides or when anthropogenic climate change still could be reversed, and by implication to a time when humans had little perceptible impact on nonhuman nature. . . . it deprives most of humanity of agency, leaving it at the mercy of some *deus ex machina*.” (p. 20)

Through his warped, patriarchal and reactionary ideology Immortan Joe is clinging to ancient sources of power, refusing to accept their destructive nature, glorifying them instead of looking

ahead. When such an affective glorification of the past is established in the hearts and minds of people it takes away their ability to act, making it easier to write off the present as a loss, rather than fight for it and the future.

The opposition to this, then, a realization which Furiosa and the others must come to, is that the real productive way forward is through accepting what is lost and then making your own changes that leads to the better. But even though we're not going to get anywhere better looking backwards, one still has to mourn losses there to be able to move on. Donna Haraway (2017) writes in "Symbiogenesis, Symptiosis, and Art Science Activisms for Staying with the Trouble," her contribution to *Arts of Living on an Endangered Planet*:

To live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological–cultural–political–technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses. (loc. 3586)

Furiosa has no problem mourning, she does not run from it as Max does. She shed everything in the sand dunes when she learned the Green Place was gone and carries herself differently afterwards. Some black emotion has stuck to her, like the blanket she swathes herself in the night before they start across the ocean. But what about the other aspects Haraway mentions: joining forces, reconstituting refuges and further recuperation and recomposition, beyond the act of mourning?

This is what Max's plan gives them: a productive way forward. When he offers them this, the group of mostly women stand in the wasted pulverization of what used to be where the west



Figure 60: Toxic Reef, Scottsdale Public Art. Photo Courtesy of The Institute For Figuring by Alyssa Gorelick

coast of Australia plunges into the Pacific Ocean. They might actually be standing right where the Great Barrier Reef used to be. This is a stunning coincidence or synchronicity, as Haraway in her article talks about an Art Science Activist project called Crochet Coral Reef (fig 60, left). As a way to fight for the reef, the project was started by Christine and

Margaret Wertheim, twins born near the now dying mega organism. The project has (at the time of Haraway's writing in 2017) drawn in "about eight thousand people, mostly women, in twenty-seven countries" that "come together to crochet in wool, cotton, plastic bags, discarded reel-to-reel tape, vinyl jelly yarn, plastic wrap, and anything else that can be induced to loop and whirl in the codes of crocheting" (loc. 3626). According to Haraway "the makers of the reef practice multispecies becoming-with to cultivate the capacity to respond, response-ability" (loc. 3639). This is a practice mirrored by what Furiosa and the others are about to attempt with Max's plan: a coming-together to reconstitute a new society built on life-affirming and communal values. A response, not an escape.

They of course have a final, violent clash with the old powers to go through before they can turn the oppressive, awful place to a green, loving place. But it is only fitting as a recurring theme: the apparently dichotomous not excluding one another, but appearing together with heightened effect, the sublime's both beauty and horror at the forefront. Haraway also echoes this emotional push-and-pull when she says that "crocheting with this trash feels to me like the looping of love and rage" (loc. 3654). An affective mix of true revolt.

In the end Furiosa finds her new home in the place she was trying to escape. They return to the Citadel with the corpse of automotive warlord Immortan Joe as a hood ornament. Seeing this, the young Warboys overthrow their seniors to let them up and the Milkmaids release the water that has been kept from the masses. And as Max slips away we see a battered, but elevated Furiosa. Her prosthetic cobbled together from old car parts was lost while serving its purpose as the instrument that killed of the old-world regime that wrongfully glorified petroculture's permanence and power. Her stump is a tangible presence of loss, but also an absence of denial. Nothing new and green can grow where one clings to the old and rusted.



Figure 61 Furiosa Rising in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

CONCLUSION

In this conclusion I will compare the aesthetics, affect, kinds of looking and their interpreted function uncovered and discussed in the previous chapters. In looking at these elements together I will attempt to distill the different ways the films capture the sublime event of confronting and encountering the ecological others and what insights one might take from them.

Based on the most prevalent tendencies within my findings, and to maintain a clear analytical focus, I have isolated three main, broad aspects or themes from which I will structure this comparison: *human mode*, *gothic othering* and *guilt and mourning*. Starting with what they have in common, I will then expound on the various ways in which the films deviate from each other: their different sensibilities, affective pulls, perspectives, ways of looking and so forth.

HUMAN MODE

I didn't want to have a strong environmental message in the sense of it being didactic... That's totally pointless; you don't change anybody's mind that way. But by getting really close in an interior, you might make people think about certain issues a little differently. (Jeff VanderMeer, Wired.com, 2016)

As stated in the section on the films' relevance, I view both *Annihilation* and *MM:FR* as wholly humanistic works. In their choices of execution regarding how they look and feel, as well as how they make and transmit meaning, they put a distinct emphasis on the human characters within the story's experience of climate trauma. In this way, they to a greater degree engage the human mode of audiovisual storytelling instead of the god mode of standard disaster/adventure cinema discussed vis-à-vis Salmose and the apocalyptic sublime. They accomplish this through, in large part, focusing more of their emotional weight on the interior lives of the characters. As we have seen from the analyses, exterior forces or conflict that arise either stem from and/or echo in some way their inner turmoil. This way their presence and agency in the story takes on more meaningful and resonant themes when confronting, encountering or entangling with the non-human entities.

But within these humanistic themes one can point to how the stories differ somewhat. *MM:FR* to a higher degree emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships: human connection. One could

argue that the way in which Lena in *Annihilation* is dramatized portrays her in the same lonely and broken realm as Max. But where Lena's sub-textual conflict ends up focusing more on her relationship with herself and the environment she is in, symbolized by her fighting her own double in the climax, Max's arc traces a line from solitude to being able to empathize and do good for and with other people. In this sense, *MM:FR* emphasizes the role of cooperation between human beings, while *Annihilation* speaks more to the idea of humans living with different aspects oneself and connection to the non-human world.

This is crystalized through the films' disparate use of subjective mode: the way we are cinematically clued into the characters mental and emotional state and basis for where they are at presently. They both choose to allow us to see Max's and Lena's past.

The difference is that in *Annihilation* it is done through standard flashbacks to Lena's life with Kane or her life with him missing. These scenes are presented as memories from her life that resonate in some way with what she is going through on the mission. Her memories never penetrate into the present as haunting visitations²⁴ (as they do in *MM:FR*), instead they capture her loneliness through her isolated existence in a house that used to be a home for two. They are tableaux of living with oneself. The flashbacks look exactly like the rest of the film and do less to affect the narrative propulsion, but still manages to fill the whole screen with melancholic moments that flesh out her characters inner life.

Max's past, however, is very much present in the now as they are hauntings of past people: his more or less chosen loneliness being encroached on, invaded. Max's visions tear expressionistic holes in our current reality, corrupting it and spurring him on.

²⁴ A very similar house to Lena and Kane's does seem to appear magically in the abandoned village the group comes to inside Area X, but this is not presented through Lena's point of view and she does not take note of the fact. It is ghostly symbolism meant for the viewer alone.



Figure 62 (composite): Flashback vs. haunting in *Annihilation* (2018, Paramount Pictures) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015, Warner Bros.)

These portrayals in human mode of the past being a part of the present speak to different aspects of dealing with climate trauma, foregrounding guilt as a relevant emotion. What they share is a message of *living-with*, be it with yourself or others: of the possibility of reciprocal capture, of creating “new, immanent modes of existence” (Stengers: p. 35).

GOTHIC OTHERING

The concept of reciprocal capture makes its presence felt in this next theme as well. In light of my analyses I am even more comfortable positing that gothic aesthetics and tones permeate the fiber of both works.²⁵ The obscurity, mutation and hybridity given to the form and nature of the alien presence in *Annihilation*, as well as Max’s grotesque hauntings and the exaggerated otherworldliness of the ruins of the Green Place, all engender the gothic staple of the terror in the unfamiliar and unknowable. This purposeful othering of sublime entities and environments obstruct efforts at finding these aforementioned “new modes of existence”, hindering an easy path to *living-with* “in which neither entity transcends the other or forces the other to bow down” (Tsing et. al.: loc. 922). Instead they inspire a fight or flight-instinct in the characters, thereby delaying the true encounter and confrontation needed for reciprocal capture.

Perhaps the most “visible” area where the two films are different in their visual style is in their place on the spectrum of realism vs. expressionism, mostly due to the nature of the non-human entities that are encountered and the point of view from which we are looking at them.

²⁵ Here I come up against a problem in academics of recognizing that something belongs within an established aesthetic realm or genre, because it is often based on a feeling: you know it when you see it. In this thesis, I can and do attempt to connect tropes, themes and concepts that one can legitimately place in the gothic mode, but some of these connections just has a feeling attached at the other end that is difficult or impossible to put into words.



Figure 63: *Scientific looking* in *Annihilation*, 2018. Paramount Pictures.

On their fact-finding-mission with assault rifles, Lena and her team of warrior scientists encounter a myriad of uncanny lifeforms. Unless these beings show indisputable and immediate hostility, which most of them do not, or when these are rendered harmless, Lena engages in what Cousins terms *scientific looking* (p. 144). This outlook is built on the scientific principle of neutral, grounded curiosity without bias or seeking to gain anything other than knowledge: "...in its ideal form [it is] not about appropriation. It is not possessive. Its aim is enrichment in ways that are other than material" (p. 146). In this sense, scientific looking is apt for reciprocal capture, and the way these scenes are shot and imbued with contemplative energy anchors the feeling of realism: of observation. True, these assuredly unrealistic creatures are colonizing the real world and the camera sometimes is placed where characters might not fit (fig. 63 above), but our viewing perspective stays in said reality. What we see is all there. We never breach the veil of observational fact. But as Lena make her observations using the scientific principles she knows and understand, she always ends up bumping up against the confounding impossibility of what she's observing. So, though realistically portrayed through the scientific looking of Lena, the non-human beings maintain the gothic glow of indeterminacy.

And even the moments of violent confrontation between the humans and non-humans in *Annihilation* never reach the frenetic, spectral realm of expressionistic aesthetic that *MM:FR* does. Max early on clues us in on his own broken nature, how entities of unreality has colonized

him, “worming their way into the black matter of [his] brain.” His ghosts from here on out are presented as hyper-visceral superimpositions on reality, the subjective lens through which he experiences the wasteland world: other characters in this world cannot observe the same phenomena. In the majority of the film Max avoids confrontation with his ghosts, engaging in no type of looking at all.



Figure 64: Superimposed grotesque in Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015. Warner Bros.

Similar to *Annihilation*, their form and nature are either too foreign and/or seemingly malicious to the characters that no true encounter takes place until the very end when they choose to “stay with the trouble”, to borrow and paraphrase Haraway’s term (2017). The othering of the non-human through partly gothic sensibilities and the way the characters move past them can be read as an encouragement to look beyond the surface when encountering the non-human in the Anthropocene, to engage in scientific looking and to truly confront the scary and unfamiliar.

GUILT AND MOURNING

Ecological losses differ in important ways from human deaths. In particular, we are often complicit in these losses, if only by virtue of living in the Anthropocene. We must mourn not only what we have lost, but also what we have destroyed. While individual deaths and even extinctions occur naturally, most environmental losses are caused by human activity. When one feels complicit (directly or indirectly) in the loss being mourned, guilt entwines with sorrow, complicating the grieving process (Menning 2017: p. 39-40)

Neither film explicitly blames any of their characters for the ecological loss the world has been dealt. But, as films that focus on the interior lives of humans, there is plenty of affective resonance in the guilt lingering in these interiors that echo the sentiments put forth by Nancy Menning in the quote above from her contribution to *Mourning Nature*.

My close reading finds that both films seem to be noticeably laden with affective dimensions of mourning as well. This makes for effective drama, as guilt makes mourning even harder, as Menning says. Lena's guilt over her infidelity in part spurs her on her journey, coloring her motivations throughout, but in the end, she must move on to mourning the person capable of the atrocity the guilt is based on. Max, inspired by Furiosa, finally engages in resistant mourning after driving himself crazy with guilt and regret. These emotions connect with the need for true confrontations discussed in the section above: Lena and Max both find a way to move on from loss and guilt through embracing and emoting grief, facing it head-on and accepting the change that results from it. And they seem better for it.

But, arguably, Furiosa has a slightly different, almost reversed, arc. She starts out with hope for change, for herself and others to be safe in the Green Place, but when learning that it is gone, she vents her solastalgia and grief on the sand dune, howling into the void. It is presented in the film partly as an equally important turn for Max, as seeing her react in this way elucidates his own inability to mourn properly. Furiosa's emotional act leaves her changed, but there is despair in the new Furiosa, an emotion that sends her off on a hopeless and foolhardy trek across the salt, bringing everybody with her. If Max had not come to present them with the option of taking the Citadel back, it is not hard to foresee a future where Furiosa would be wrapped in guilt, having brought everybody to their death. Her transformative mourning was perhaps a blinding one, despair and sorrow allowing her to see neither the danger in her chosen path onward nor the potential promise in others.

If this thesis were more focused on the topic of gender, one could recognize in this portrayal the toxic trope of the sentimental female letting her emotions get the best of her and thereby rendering herself unable to save the day, clearing the way for the stolid, dispassionate male instead to show the way. It is a stale cliché in a film that otherwise subverts similar triteness.

Still, the scene plays out in a strikingly tempered and collected way. It is not the blustery, hypermasculine call to arms one might expect: there is a calm suggestion from Max, followed by a quiet deliberation from Furiosa. They are both vulnerable, open. That this is the way that their final stand is taken, not by war cries, but by a collective somberness, sets an elegiac tone to the films climax: the removal of Immortan Joe and his horde, the retaking of the Citadel, becomes an act of mourning. It articulates a potentially effective affective way to approach climate trauma. In this way it reflects the words of Jessica Marion Barr in “Auguries of Elegy – The Art and Ethics of Ecological Grieving” (2017), her contribution to *Mourning Nature*. As she addresses the potency of elegiac artworks, she says they have the potential to “give voice to feelings that many of us have but do not know how to express, the emotional dimensions of an unimaginably vast loss. This can be part of a process of healing...cathartic articulation of individual or collective pain...” (p. 217).

EPILOGUE: CATHARSIS

In traditional conventions of cinematic storytelling *confrontation* is sewn into the fabric of drama: it brings catharsis, a release of tension, of joy, of fear. It has been so since the advent of the medium, as Cousins explains: “Seeing human emotions on a vast scale was cathartic. It afforded a surrogate emotional life. Proxy grief and joy were available for the price of a movie ticket” (p. 276). In this sense, films are showing us what needs to happen. We need to truly confront the realities of climate change, and these films might be showing us a way to do that. And regarding the films analyzed herein, one comes away with the warning that for any kind of healthy, productive outlook and agency after encountering the ecological sublime to take place, one needs to confront these facts:

- All life is inextricably linked: when one is affected, so are we all.
- We must keep in mind who the already suffering victims of climate change are.
- There is work to be done and we cannot let the trauma transfix us.
- Mourning loss is essential to moving forward, but so is actually moving forward, not a new backward.

Climate change is, as we have seen, slow. It is unfortunately, for most, dull, at least in the time of writing this in 2020. I hesitate to minimize this huge global crisis, but it is simply put a massive PR-problem for activists and political forces fighting for awareness and action. By utilizing grotesque aesthetics and engaging the pull of a wider range of affects sublime awe such as horror, angst, disgust, grief, powerlessness, despair, uncertainty, paralysis, desolation and regret, and the condensing time of modern storytelling, I believe filmmakers are able to transcend this barrier. Not as injection theory behavior changers, but hopefully faster than climate change itself.



Figure 65 (cropped composite): Facing each other in the end in *Annihilation* (2018, Paramount Pictures) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015, Warner Bros.)

Both of the films studied in this thesis end with two people looking at each other. In *Annihilation* they embrace before the credits roll, in *MM:FR* they share an understanding nod before they part. They are all unsure of what is going to happen next in a precarious future. They are not alone.

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