

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
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**ECO-HORRORS IN ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES: THE
ENVIRONMENT AS A CHARACTER IN *ANNIHILATION* BY
JEFF VANDERMEER**

MA thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014) through ecocriticism, eco-horror studies, narratology, and Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects. It explores how the environment in the novel is represented not as a passive background, but as an active narrative presence that shapes the plot, transforms characters, and challenges anthropocentric ideas of human control over nature. The thesis includes an introduction that contextualizes the novel and identifies a research gap. This is followed by a literature review, which covers previous studies of the novel and theoretical frameworks applied in the thesis. The close reading is divided into four parts focusing on the Border, Area X, the Lighthouse, and the Tower, showing how environmental agency becomes visible through transformation, bodily experience, unstable perception, and nonhuman communication. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the thesis.

Keywords: eco-horror, environment, hyperobjects, Area X, transformation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
INTRODUCTION	4
1.LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	9
1.1 Different perspectives of reading VanderMeer's Annihilation	9
1.2 Ecocriticism and the Human–Nonhuman Relationship.....	11
1.2.1Waves of Ecocriticism	12
1.3 Nature's Voice: Silence and Representation	14
1.4 Eco-horror as genre, meaning of AH	15
1.5 Space, the New Weird, and Hyperobjects	16
ANALYSIS: THE ENVIRONMENT AS AN ACTIVE NARRATIVE PRESENCE IN ANNIHILATION.....	21
2.1 Main Characters and Narration.....	21
2.2 The Border: Crossing into Transformation.....	22
2.3 Area X: The Environment as Hyperobject.....	27
2.4 The Lighthouse: Archives, Memory and Failed Control	33
2.5 The Tower: Living Script and Bodily Transformation	40
CONCLUSION	51
REFERENCES.....	55
Primary source.....	55
Secondary sources.....	55
RESÜMEE.....	58

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary era, defined as the Anthropocene, marks a period when human activity has become the dominant influence on the environment. Due to this, the rethinking of literature which represents nature is extremely significant. Traditional writing about nature is rooted in ideas of passive and stable landscapes, which is insufficient in a time of environmental crisis. The way in which the environment used to be depicted has changed to respond to the era of human dominance and the destruction of nature. Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* is an example of literature that offers a new perspective on the environment as no longer a silent background, but an active force that shapes the narrative and influences the characters.

Annihilation is a science fiction novel written in 2014 and is the first book of the Southern Reach series. The book is about Area X, which is an isolated, dangerous, and uncontrolled land. The novel follows the twelfth expedition into Area X and is narrated in the first person by an unnamed biologist, whose perspective frames the reader's experience of the environment. One of the central places the expedition encounters is a strange structure which the biologist calls the Tower, even though it is an underground construction descending into the earth. Another significant place is the Lighthouse, which contains a large number of records and journals written by members of previous expeditions. As the expedition progresses, the environment of Area X increasingly resists human understanding and control. By the end of the novel, the expedition has effectively collapsed, and the novel finishes with an open ending that completely blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman life. Throughout the narrative, Area X remains largely unknowable, resisting clear explanation and human control.

Annihilation has attracted attention since its publication in 2014 and was adapted into a film directed by Alex Garland in 2018. The film has become a cult favorite, even though it diverges from the original story. In 2014, VanderMeer's *Annihilation* won the Nebula Award and, in the same year, received the Shirley Jackson Award for outstanding literature in horror, psychological suspense, and dark fantasy. The novel was also nominated for the World Fantasy Award (2015), the Locus Award (2015), and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award (2015). The growing number of interpretations and critical responses to both the novel and its film adaptation demonstrates the text's openness to diverse readings.

Jeff VanderMeer is one of the leading figures in contemporary speculative fiction because of his ability to mix elements of science fiction, fantasy, and horror in his novels. His works are categorized within the "New Weird," a genre which is a type of urban, secondary-

world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping-off point for the creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy (Ersoy 2019). Instead of traditional folklore monsters, the novel is full of complex incomprehensible yet biologically familiar entities. In *Annihilation*, the familiar natural world becomes alien and threatening because of its influence and control over human lives, challenging anthropocentric ideas of human dominance.

While writing *Annihilation*, Jeff VanderMeer drew inspiration for the idea of Area X from a real-life location, namely St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in north Florida, where the author has hiked extensively for many years. Additional inspiration for the creation of Area X came from the 2010 Gulf oil spill, also known as the BP oil spill. The resulting environmental threat represents the legacy of what is still considered the largest marine oil spill in history, which began in the Gulf of Mexico approximately 66 kilometers off the coast of Louisiana. VanderMeer lives in Florida, on the Gulf's southeastern coast, and, fearing that the oil might contaminate the entire area, he expressed his concerns and anxieties through his literature. Another symbol in the novel inspired by a real-life place is the Tower/tunnel. VanderMeer notes on one of his personal social media accounts that, in the Sintra province of Portugal, there is a historic estate called Quinta da Regaleira, within which there is a 27-meter-long underground Tower connected to various tunnels and walkways by a winding staircase. This underground Tower is known as the Initiation Well, or the Inverted Tower (Ersoy, 2019).

Besides these physical and environmental places, the core inspiration for writing *Annihilation* is explained by VanderMeer as a vivid, hallucinatory dream which he had after dental surgery for the removal of three of his wisdom teeth. After this surgery, he had an intense dream of the Tower/tunnel and saw words on a wall, which he wrote down in the middle of the night and then fell asleep. In the morning, when he woke up, he had the first ten pages of the novel in his head as well. The rest of the novel, based on VanderMeer's words, was written in a semi-sleep state over a month. These specific circumstances while writing the novel, namely the author's feverish, hallucinatory state following a surgical procedure, suggest why Area X functions more like a dream or a biological process than a place that can be explained by science.

The literary significance of *Annihilation* lies in its resistance to clear genre classification. While VanderMeer's novels consist of elements of postmodernism and ecofiction, *Annihilation* most frequently takes place within the "New Weird" and contemporary eco-horror. This stylistic blending depicts the instability of the Anthropocene, where traditional categories are

no longer enough. As part of the Southern Reach trilogy, the novel has attracted significant critical attention not only because of the plot, but because of its challenge to anthropocentric modes of storytelling and its disturbing depiction of inhuman activity. By blending elements of science fiction, horror, and the New Weird, *Annihilation* occupies a distinctive position within recent literary responses to ecological crises.

My aim in this thesis is to analyze Jeff VanderMeer's novel through the combined lenses of ecocriticism, narratology, and eco-horror studies. While ecocriticism focuses on the relationships between humans and the environment, eco-horror shows the fear of uncertainty caused by environmental changes, and narratology helps to analyze how the story is structured. Two central research questions are: How does *Annihilation* depict the environment as an active character within the narrative structure? In what ways does VanderMeer's novel challenge traditional concepts of nature's silence and human control over the environment?

Despite previous analysis of Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* through ecocriticism, the question of the environment as an active agent is not yet thoroughly addressed. Previous analysis focused on the novel through the lenses of transgender transition (Nash 2022), the influence of open-world gaming structures (Clapp 2021), and the tradition of Lovecraftian cosmic horror (Allen 2024). However, most of the studies focused on characters' reactions to Area X, missing the question of the environment as a driving force of the novel. This thesis aims to fill this gap by shifting the focus from human experience to the agency of the environment, analyzing how Area X challenges ideas of human dominance.

To explore the research questions outlined above, the primary method of analysis will be close reading. The aim is to focus on the specific details of a passage or text to uncover the deeper meaning it represents. The environment in *Annihilation* communicates not using traditional language, that is why paying close attention to word choice, sentence structure, and tone is important for the analysis. To analyse how the environment is represented as an active narrative agent, four main places from the novel will be discussed. These include crossing the Border, as the Border in the novel serves as a place where invisible transformation begins; the Lighthouse, which represents human history, trauma, and the environment's resistance to being documented; the Tower, as a place where the biologist encounters the "living script" and the main point of her visible transformation; and the analysis of Area X itself. By applying the close reading method, the thesis will demonstrate how VanderMeer depicts the environment's active role in the narrative.

Although VanderMeer's *Annihilation* resist easy genre categorisation, this thesis analyses the novel through eco-horror because the source of horror in the novel is an autonomous and

uncontrolled natural force, rather than the visible consequences of human impact on the environment, which are central in Anthropocene horror. Nature in the novel is agentic; it transforms and acts, challenging the idea of its weakness and silence. Horror comes from the loss of control over the natural world, while in Anthropocene horror, nature is depicted as something damaged or reacting. In *Annihilation*, Area X is the cause of fear, which is described as something separate rather than caused by a human-induced ecological crisis. Nevertheless, the novel can be read through an Anthropocentric lens because it stages a world in which human centrality collapses and is replaced by a radically autonomous environment that renders humanity obsolete. This distinction is crucial for understanding how Area X functions not merely as a setting, but as a force that challenges human dominance.

Eco-horror is used to create strong emotions and show ecological problems in a more dramatic way. It also suggests that these problems may continue in the future. For instance, in *Annihilation*, Area X takes control over humans, which can be compared to real-life examples such as Chernobyl in Ukraine, where people have had to accept the rules of the environment in order to survive or avoid harm. The main idea is to show that nature is not silent; it communicates with human beings, but they often do not notice it or choose not to notice it. By examining how the novel gives narrative presence to the environment, this thesis highlights the potential of literature to rethink human–nature relationships and to challenge claims about nature’s silence and human dominance.

The theoretical foundation of this Master’s thesis combines several key concepts from environmental humanities in order to challenge the idea of the environment as a passive background of the narrative. *Annihilation* challenges Christopher Manes’ (1992) claim that Western traditions have constructed nature as voiceless—a cultural silence that makes the non-human world a passive object of human history. What appears as nature’s silence may instead reflect a cultural assumption that eco-horror narratives disrupt by presenting nature as an active force. However, Steven Vogel (2006) questions whether nature can truly possess a “voice” or whether such communication is always mediated through human perception. It raises the question of whether humans hear nature itself or merely their own interpretations of it. To talk about Area X and its influence, the thesis will rely on Timothy Morton’s (2013) concept of hyperobjects. Hyperobjects are defined as entities which are so massive and distributed across time and space that they exceed human perception. The main characteristics of hyperobjects are that they are non-local, viscous, involve different temporalities, are invisible to humans for a certain period of time, and exhibit their effects interobjectively. In this thesis, Area X is analyzed through the concept of the hyperobject, and the Lighthouse, the Tower, and the Border

as its manifestations and little parts. The emotional weight of interacting with such entities is analyzed through Timothy Clark's (2020) concept of ecological grief, which highlights the emotional dimension of environmental crises and the affective responses literature can evoke. Clark's concept of ecological grief describes the sense of loss and anxiety that come from the Anthropocene. The overall theoretical framework of the thesis is ecocriticism, which is defined by Pippa Marland (2013) as an interdisciplinary field exploring the multifaceted relationship between the human and the non-human. It emerges from the urgent need to reconsider attitudes to the environmental crisis and descriptions of nature, blurring the traditional boundaries between "nature" and "culture." Within this framework, the study focuses on the physical interactions in the novel through the lens of trans-corporeality, a concept originally suggested by Stacy Alaimo and synthesized by Marland. Trans-corporeality describes the human body as open, porous, and inextricably linked to its environment, which is the key concept for analyzing characters' transformations in *Area X*. Together, these theoretical perspectives help frame the analysis of how *Annihilation* represents the environment as an active narrative presence.

The thesis is divided into two main parts. The first part presents the theoretical and methodological framework of the study, drawing on ecocriticism, narratology, and eco-horror studies. In addition, it introduces existing research on the topic. The second part consists of a close reading and in-depth analysis of *Annihilation*, focusing on how *Area X* functions as an active narrative presence through spatial structures such as the Border, which marks the beginning of invisible transformation; the Tower, where the biologist encounters the "living script"; and the Lighthouse, representing human attempts to document and control the environment, and analyzing how the environment disrupts human understanding, agency, and control. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the research, highlighting how VanderMeer's novel rethinks the human-nature relationship. It addresses the research questions and suggests future research on the topic of VanderMeer's *Annihilation*.

1.LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In recent years, the eco-horror genre has attracted increasing attention in response to global crises such as natural disasters, pollution, pandemics and climate change. These narratives highlight growing anxieties about ecological collapse, and the fragility of human-nature relationships. Unlike traditional environmental literature, which often depicts nature as passive, non-active, harmonious, and non-threatening, eco-horror dramatically changes this perception, portraying it as unpredictable, emotional, and often dangerous. Within this genre, the environment is not merely a backdrop but is depicted as a character with its own voice and emotions—whether it resists, threatens, or mourns. These narratives, including Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*, increase the interest in eco-horrors within the environmental humanities, as they offer a way to understand and “communicate” with the environment, which plays a central role in the narrative.

1.1 Different perspectives of reading VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*

Before outlining the theoretical framework of this thesis, it is important to situate the study within previous scholarship on Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*. Existing readings of the novel have examined it through posthumanism, Lovecraftian horror, the New Weird, spatial narrative, and transgender studies. The incomprehensibility of Area X as a hyperobject leads to a psychological and physical confrontation that Sam Allen in her article *Surrendering the Self: The Posthuman World in Vandermeer’s Annihilation* (2024), explores through the tradition of Lovecraftian horror. Lovecraftian horror, also called cosmic horror or eldritch horror, is a subgenre of horror, fantasy fiction, and weird fiction that emphasizes the horror of the unknowable and incomprehensible more than gore or other elements of shock. Human characters often experience physiological torment and contamination in response to interactions with an unexplainable environment and complex creatures. While Morton describes the area itself, Allen focuses on people’s reaction to its influence and the fear of the unknown. Allen, in her article, talks about *Annihilation* as the best example of science fiction expanding the boundaries of our perceived human-centered world. She writes about humans over nature: “Their end goals for the expedition are ultimately self-interest or at least an increase in their

knowledge of the environment for the benefit of a governmental agency—contrasting to the biologist’s belief” (Allen 2024: 108). The main feature that only the biologist from the narrative has is that she does not change the environment or think the same way she used to in her normal life, in Area X she respects the “influence” of the zone and understands that here she is not the one setting rules. Allen also emphasized one big difference between Lovecraftian horror and *Annihilation*, which is Lovecraft’s sole ending for humans to be in death or endless torment, where VanderMeer only results to torment if the characters refuse to adapt to nature’s will (Allen 2024: 107). While Allen focuses on how humans respond to a posthuman environment, the role of the environment itself as an active narrative presence is not fully explored.

While most analyses of *Annihilation* focus on the character’s reactions to the Area X, or their fear of this place and how it divides life into before and after, an extremely interesting perspective on reading the novel was suggested by Jesse Nash in his article *I Am Not Returning Home”: A Transgender Reading of Jeff VanderMeer’s Annihilation* (2022). Nash writes about VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* from the perspective of the LGBTQ+ community offering a completely different understanding of the text. While Clapp (2021) describes the transformations that those who enter Area X undergo as “hideous” – and many of them certainly could be read this way – Nash offer instead that this transgender and transecological reading of the biologist’s transition is one we can read as a beautiful act of defiance against the expectations of transition narratives, when the biologist declares that: “I am not returning home” (VanderMeer 195) (Nash 2022: 250). Nash claims that this transformation can be on the one hand something terrifying and horrible as a big number of people perceive it after reading the book, but on the other hand it is a very important point of view that this transformation is a conscious choice and that Area X is not only destroying but suggests another perception of reality and the biologist accepts it and undergoes this “transformation”. In this case it is a gender transformation. The environment is taking control over a person’s mind and suggesting a new way of living, not specifically in a bad way, but as a new revealing of their own “body”. Nash citing Prosser, who outlines the archetypal story of trans autobiography which is built around four stages: “suffering and confusion; the epiphany of self-discovery; corporeal and social transformation/conversion; and finally the arrival ‘home’ – the reassignment”” (Nash 2022: 250). Making a parallel with the real world, the biologist hiding that she knows more and what she actually sees is like how a trans person may hide their gender identity for fear of violence. At the same time, not returning home may be a metaphor for finally finding the place where you belong, in gender studies it can be described as finally understanding who you are through

this transition. “By refusing to return home, the biologist has reached a rich narrative resolution, or a “re-imagination of trans becoming”” (Nash 2022: 254).

Previous scholarship on *Annihilation* demonstrates that the novel can be productively read through posthumanism, Lovecraftian horror, the New Weird, spatial narrative, and transgender studies. However, these approaches mostly focus on human responses to Area X, questions of transformation, or the instability of genre and identity. Less attention has been paid to the environment itself as an active narrative and how nature's voice is represented through transformations, spaces, affect and nonhuman communication.

1.2 Ecocriticism and the Human–Nonhuman Relationship

Ecocriticism is an umbrella term for a range of critical approaches that explore the representation in literature and other cultural forms of the relationship between the human and the non-human, largely from the perspective of anxieties around humanity's destructive impact on the biosphere. Pippa Marland, in her work *“Ecocriticism”* (2013) argues that the field emerged from a shared perception that we are living in a time of environmental crisis that requires us to reassess with some urgency our modes of being in the world (Marland 2013: 847). Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary, combining literature with ecology, philosophy and biology. It does not function within a vacuum of literary theory but brings together the humanities and the sciences which move beyond a primitive analysis of nature's beauty focusing instead on the scientific reality of environmental processes and the ethical questions surrounding the non-human world. By doing this, ecocriticism challenges the traditional boundaries between “culture” and “nature”, arguing that it is impossible to talk about these concepts separately. While humans are a part of nature, all cultural and historical events influence the environment as much as it influences human beings. The 1960s are largely seen as the decade that marked the beginning of the kind of environmental consciousness that provides the backdrop to ecocriticism (Marland 2013: 847). Ecocriticism has drawn attention to anthropocentric worldview where humans dominate all other life-forms. Cheryll Glotfelty points out why ecocriticism appears so late, and the main reasons are that the hot topics of the late twentieth century were race, class and gender, but at the same time it would never be suspected that the earth's life support systems were under stress. She claims that “you would

never know that there was an earth at all” (Glotfelty 1996: xvi). Humanities did not talk about the environmental crisis because it tended to be viewed as a scientific problem. There was a barrier between humanities and science.

While feminist or postcolonialist theories allowed marginalised groups to articulate their voices better, then the problem of voicelessness remains in ecocriticism: nature cannot speak for itself in the way people can. Feminism and postcolonialism helped make questions of “otherness” more visible. Ecocriticism extends these discussion to nature, which Western anthropocentric thought often presents as “the other”, which is colonised.

1.2.1 Waves of Ecocriticism

There are four main waves of ecocriticism. It is important to mention that there are no clear lines that separate the waves, but all the following waves are seen as a developments of and quarreling with precursors (Marland 2013: 851). The first wave, often described as “reinstating the real,” focused on literary representations of the material environment and on the forms of writing that could best convey an environmental message. In the first wave of ecocriticism, which developed mainly in the 1980s and 1990s, Lawrence Buell (1995: 7-8) formulated a checklist of four “ingredients” of an environmentally oriented work (Marland 2013: 848). The first one is: The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. This means that nature is not simply a background but a character that interacts with people and changes the story. Second, the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest, challenging ideas of anthropocentrism and human dominance. While previously people had an interest in nature only if it gave them something useful, now, for example, the tree itself is important because it is a part of life. Third, human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation, meaning that human actions toward nature have consequences and should be understood as ethically significant. The fourth ingredient is that some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text, meaning that nature should not be taken for granted because it is not fixed, but constantly changing. Forests will not be here forever, if people want them to be here, they should take certain actions to protect them. Nature changes, and even if it is not visible, the text should describe nature as a living and constantly developing and changing ecosystem. The first wave of ecocriticism was predominantly associated with the championing

of non-fiction nature writing (Marland 2013: 849). Nature writing described wilderness or semi-wildness and the beauty of nature and intensive connection to it. This approach has been described as “celebratory”, suggesting a relatively uncritical understanding of ‘nature’. Nature is the main character and the topic of delight.

The second wave, usually associated with the late 1990s and early 2000s, is characterized by debating ‘nature’. Ecocriticism’s second wave ushered in a more reflexive approach that provided the scope to address the complex intertwining of nature. ‘Nature’, and social and sexual politics, and that, as well as critiquing and reframing the forms that had already come under its scrutiny to reflect a more complex understanding of these interweavings (e.g. ‘post-pastoral’ ‘new, nature writing’ and ‘ecopoetry’), did indeed turn to the novel– and to new novelistic additions to the canon– to explore the ways in which self-conscious textuality might articulate the complex entanglement of self and world, social and environmental history (Marland 2013: 851). During the second wave nature is not perceived simply as “grass and the sky” it is intrinsically linked to politics. While in the first wave humans are observers, the second one shows the interactions of human and nature. It becomes impossible to distinguish where “human ends and nature starts”.

The third wave, which developed in the early twenty-first century, is defined by the paradigm of “eco-cosmopolitics,” which shifts the focus from local environments to “world citizenship”. Now it is important to feel the connection with the whole planet, rather than just with the place of local living. During the third wave, the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth emerged, stressing that we are “all part of Mother Earth, an indivisible, living community of interrelated and interdependent beings with a common destiny” (Marland 2013: 855). People harm the environment, but plants, animals, insects everything feel this influence and usually not equally.

The fourth wave is about material ecocriticism and trans-corporeality. Alaimo defines trans-corporeality as a construct that deals with “the material interchanges across human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider material world” and that has engendered “a new materialist and post-humanist sense of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments” (‘States’, 476). According to Marland, this wave foregrounds three key issues that are vital for an ecocritical reading of contemporary fiction: first is the premise that there is a shared materiality between the human and non-human world that renders obsolete the distinctions between human and environment, moving beyond the construct of ‘nature’ altogether; second is the idea that all of this shared matter has agency; and third is the ethical and political challenges the complexity and hybridity of these material

interminglings suggest (Marland 2013: 856). This fourth-wave ecocritical framework is useful for analyzing *Annihilation*, especially the biologist's bodily transformation in Area X. When she inhales the spores in the Tower, her body becomes materially connected to the environment, and the boundary between the human body and the nonhuman world begins to collapse. This moment can be read through the concept of trans-corporeality, as the environment is no longer external to the biologist but becomes part of her body and perception.

1.3 Nature's Voice: Silence and Representation

Despite the fact that eco-horror as a genre presents a narrative about nature that contrasts with that of ecocritical literature, the question remains whether it is truly possible to give a voice to nature, or whether it remains silent. Christopher Mane's "*Nature and Silence*" (1992) suggests that Western cultures have perceived nature as silent and unable to represent itself. This perception supports the anthropocentric idea that human beings are superior to nature and separate from it. He suggests that what often reads as silence is a cultural construction, one that eco-horror potentially subverts by giving nature agency, even in grotesque or violent forms. Nature is not silent; it simply communicates in ways that people are not used to. At the same time, Vogel (2006: 145) insists that "those who are able to speak deserve our respect as moral agents; since nature does not seem to speak, we feel justified in denying it such respect. But if we listened carefully and expanded our conception of what speech and language involve, we would come to see—or rather, to hear—that nature and natural entities in fact do speak, and so do deserve moral respect". This supports the idea of nature's voice and contradicts Manes' ideas. However, Vogel (2006) does not claim that nature *talks* to us, because representation does not mean communication in the conventional sense. It is impossible to have a true dialogue. He questions whether any attempt to "give voice" to nature is inherently a human imposition. Eco-horror gives nature a voice, but is this truly nature's voice—or just a human perception of how nature *might* sound, imagined through a human lens? This critiques the notion that non-human entities can engage in meaningful communication, arguing that true dialogue requires accountability and reciprocity, which non-human entities lack. In this thesis, nature's voice is therefore not understood as direct speech, but as a literary representation of nonhuman agency, affect, and material influence.

1.4 Eco-horror as genre, meaning of AH

Scholars in environmental humanities increasingly examine eco-horror as a cultural response to ecological crisis. Rust and Soles, in their work *Ecohorror Special Cluster* (2014), describe that eco-horror motifs are most often found in “revenge of nature” narratives (2014: 509). Based on their statements, “ecohorror reaches across media (literature, film, etc.) and works with concepts (Gothic, ecophobia, agency, etc.) that many ecocritics are currently thinking about. The term ecohorror has been in use since at least the mid-1990s to describe works of literature and film in which human characters are attacked by natural forces, typically animals and plants that have been altered or angered by humans in some way” (2014: 510). In the case of *Annihilation*, what makes the text particularly captivating is that nature does not take revenge openly, as it does in other eco-horror narratives. For instance, in *The Happening* (2008), people commit suicide because of a toxin produced by plants and spread through the wind. This is an example of classical eco-horror, whereas in *Annihilation* nature influences people in a different way, which will be discussed later. In addition, Rust and Soles describe eco-horror as a fictional expression of contemporary ecological crisis that awakens emotional responses toward nature and encourages readers to take environmental issues into account, even when nature is depicted as cruel or exaggerated.

Relying on ideas of the ecohorror genre, Clark in his article (2020) describes the difference between “ecological grief”, which is grief for the loss or threatened destruction of a specific landscape, place or species (2020: 61), and “Anthropocene horror”. Unlike grief, AH is not specifically connected to the one place, but rather a feeling of fear that can be felt in different ways by the same person. It is not the same fear which is felt while seeing a monster in a movie, but it is the specific, unsettling realization that the world as we knew it has changed forever, and we are trapped inside that change. Clark claims that “grief” may still suggest a lack of implication in the loss, but “horror” is more appropriate when part of the sadness at issue is from living in a context of latent environmental violence and feeling personally trapped in its wrongs (2020: 62). Even though everyday life may seem peaceful, hidden “latent” violence is inflicted on the planet through consumer capitalism, industrial development, and carbon-intensive ways of living. Clark suggests the idea of AH as being lived as a pervasive affect in daily life, not as an easily compartmentalized emotion. It need not be a response to some obviously perceptible assault on the natural environment but may even or perhaps especially affect someone living in and surrounded by a “developed” infrastructure. “Grief” may still suggest a lack of implication in the loss, but “horror” is more appropriate when part of the

sadness at issue is from living in a context of latent environmental violence and feeling personally trapped in its wrongs (2020: 62). The sense of horror is vitally important for analyzing VanderMeer's *Annihilation* where Area X just does not cause traditional fear in characters, it changes their entire "affective" state. The "brightness" the biologist feels in her chest is not fear; it is like a transformation and realizing that the world is not the same anymore. Clark also claims that fear is usually felt more by "developed" infrastructure, which in *Annihilation* is a fear from authorities and people outside the Area X. In addition, Clark's concept of "latent environmental violence" is one of the keys to analyze the environment as an active narrative presence rather than simply a background.

The genre of eco-horror prompts people to reflect on issues they tend to ignore, and through this concept of grief, Clark emphasizes that the genre can be seen as a call to action. As Armerio (2021) claims in his article, that our common home is on fire, and we must all work together to save it. Eco-horror narratives use exaggeration to reflect the anxieties of the Anthropocene. "We are located on our own blind spot, in the darkness of the lived moment, whose darkness is ultimately our own darkness" (McEwan, 2021). Eco-horror narratives that present the environment as a character therefore connect ecological anxiety, latent environmental violence, human responsibility, and the idea of nature as an active force rather than a passive background.

1.5 Space, the New Weird, and Hyperobjects

Jeffrey Clapp (2021) analyzes *Annihilation* through the lens of "infrastructural inversion." In such gestures of critical "infrastructuralism" (Peters 2015), the background is foregrounded, the invisible made visible, the neglected focalized (Clapp 2021: 414). Clapp describes the concept of new weird which "undercut anthropocentrism" by attending to the domain of the "nonhuman". This narrative lays bare and challenges the limits of imagination, and explores how to expand, transform, and evolve beyond those limits. That is why the weird is such a promising literary stage for the Anthropocene. He also introduces a new perception of reading VanderMeer's *Annihilation* through the influence of the gaming world. "The answer, I want to argue, is very fundamental: the influence of open world gaming on VanderMeer shows in the way he constructs plot (or deigns to do so) and in his substitution, for plot, of spatiality and movement through space" (Clapp 2021: 419). Clapp claims that *Annihilation* does not have

a specific structure, namely plot, development, climax and final. Because of the open ending, he compares *Annihilation* to the video game world, where the gamer does not have one right and specific way, where everything happens based on a space a place characters are in, so that means that environment is the one which is the driving force of the story. Like in *Annihilation* where characters do not have specific plans and just have to adapt to the environment. VanderMeer's *Annihilation* serves as a bridge from the game world to this fiction or narrative of presenting the environment as the main character. Clapp shows that in *Annihilation* the story develops through movement in space rather than through a traditional plot, but he does not consider whether this spatial agency can be understood as a form of environmental communication.

This shift from traditional plot to spatial dominance, as described by Clapp, finds its theoretical foundation in Timothy Morton's (2013) concept of hyperobjects. The term hyperobjects refers to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. It can be for instance a black hole, the Lago Agrio oil field in Ecuador, or the Florida Everglades, the biosphere, or the Solar System, the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium, could be the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism. (2013: 1). So, hyperobjects are "hyper" in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not. They are so big not just in size, but in time and space that it is impossible to see them as a single object, but it is easy to feel their effect. Morton describes main features that all hyperobjects have in common. "Hyperobjects have numerous properties in common. They are viscous, which means that they "stick" to beings that are involved with them. They are nonlocal; in other words, any "local manifestation" of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject. They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to. In particular, some very large hyperobjects, such as planets, have genuinely Gaussian temporality: they generate spacetime vortices, due to general relativity. Hyperobjects occupy a high-dimensional phase space that results in their being invisible to humans for stretches of time. And they exhibit their effects interobjectively; that is, they can be detected in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects" (Morton 2013: 1). Although Morton's *Hyperobjects* does not directly analyze *Annihilation*, as the novel was published after Morton's book, the connection between the two is confirmed by a later conversation between VanderMeer and Morton. In this conversation, VanderMeer highlights: "The thing that was fascinating to me is that it (*Hyperobjects*) appealed to both the organic and the mechanical sides. The mechanical side made me understand what I

had written better because the very term ‘hyperobject’ kind of encapsulated what was going on organically in *Annihilation*” (Hageman et al 2016). This conclusion makes the concept useful for interpreting Area X as a phenomenon that resists categorisation, operates across multiple scales of time and space, and surpasses human perception. First of all, the viscosity Morton describes can be seen in the “stickiness” of the Area X, which gets into the characters using its spores like in the case of biologist, and because of this it is no longer an external landscape but an internal reality. It “sticks” to her, blurring the boundaries between human and environment. Also, Morton calls them nonlocal, which in context of Area X reveals when it is impossible to make one and objective map of the area. So on the one hand it exists here with some markers like the Lighthouse and the Tower (or tunnel) but at the same time the area itself is much bigger which human eyes can not catch. As Morton describes hyperobjects having their own temporality, Area X is not an exception. There was no need to use a clock in the area, because time goes differently from the normal one. While outside the zone it could be a couple of days, for expeditors it could last for years. Hyperobjects are invisible for humans, the same for Area X which is not possible to cross without hypnosis.

Relying on Timothy Morton’s concept of hyperobjects, Kaisa Kortekallio, in her work “Becoming-instrument :Thinking with Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton’s Hyperobjects (2019)”, applies this theory to VanderMeer’s novel. She uses it to explain how Area X is experienced through the body and through the first-person journal form of the novel. Kortekallio suggests the idea of “becoming an instrument”, meaning that the human body helps feel and show the influence of the hyperobject. Since the novel is written as a biologist’s journal, the reader experiences Area X through her perception, uncertainty, transformations and bodily sensations. Kortekallio (2019) describes the enactive approach to literature, which involves distributed agency and co-constitution: both the text and the reader bring something into the reading event, and the reader is to some extent “played” by the text (Kortekallio 2019: 2). Through this narrative perspective, readers of *Annihilation* can “enact” the biologist’s perception of Area X, which makes the reader feel closer to what is happening, while also showing that it cannot be fully understood. She describes the influence of ‘hyperobjects’ on human beings, in this case Area X is hyperobject influencing biologists mostly. As Kortekallio writes, “The human body thus becomes a measuring device, and the rhetorical self becomes a phenomenological instrument – an affordance, a handle by which you can grasp a hyperobject and communicate the feel of it” (Kortekallio 2019: 10). This perspective of reading is also close to the topic of nature and voice, because instead of speaking in a conventional linguistic sense, the environment communicates through affect, bodily sensations, and transformation.

More recently, Virtanen (2025) also notes that it has become relatively common to interpret Vandermeer's fiction through Morton's ecological theory. Although Vandermeer only began reading works such as *Hyperobjects* after the publication of *Annihilation*, Virtanen points out that critics have repeatedly linked Vandermeer's fiction to Morton's concepts, including Kortekallio's interpretation of *Annihilation* and *Hyperobjects*.

The psychological impact of such a hyperobject is further explored by Gözde Ersoy in her article "*Crossing the boundaries of the unknown with Jeff VanderMeer The monstrous fantastic and 'abcanny' in Annihilation*" (2019) which describes *Annihilation* as an example of the genre of the "New Weird." Ersoy defines it as: "New Weird is a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy. [...] New Weird fictions are acutely aware of the modern world, even if in disguise, but not always overtly political" (Ersoy 2019: 253). The genre is interesting because of the mixing of reality and imaginary elements. In *Annihilation* Area X is like a fictional environment, but at the same time it feels like a real place in the world that could possibly exist or exist for sure. The first thing that came to mind is Chernobyl in Ukraine. In this type of narrative world looks like the normal one, but like it is broken or changed which makes stories even more terrifying because it feels like it is real. "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (Ersoy 2019: 256). When it is a zombie or a murderer it is clear which action can be done next, but the fear which is described in *Annihilation* is completely the opposite because it is even hard to give a name of the creature they meet. Characters have no idea how to act in Area X and the fear of the unknown is the biggest part of the plot. No control of the action and even mind so the only way to stay "safe" is a hypnosis which they used to cross the Border and later as well. Sometimes it was used for psychologists to control the others but it is a different question and maybe she used it to know that she can at least control the people she came with and it is a little bit of something familiar and a little bit of control in that alien and frightened area. Mark Fisher notes: "weird fiction always presents us with a threshold between worlds. The centrality of doors, thresholds, and portals means that the notion of the between is crucial to the weird" (Ersoy 2019: 261). Crossing the Border was the last action that characters could control, but still not fully as the hypnosis was used. Even after crossing the Border characters appeared in "between" no longer normal human beings but still no part of Area X. It is not about the real Border but about the state as well. There are three "portals" in the novel: the Border, Tower(tunnel) and the Lighthouse. It is important to keep in

mind while reading the novel, it is not just places but rather transition points for characters and especially for the biologist.

ANALYSIS: THE ENVIRONMENT AS AN ACTIVE NARRATIVE PRESENCE IN *ANNIHILATION*

The analysis of VanderMeer's *Annihilation* consists of four main parts: the analysis of the Border, Area X, the Tower, and the Lighthouse. These places are the most important to analyze in order to see nature's voice and the ways in which it communicates and influences the characters. The analysis starts from the Border, which is the first step not just in entering the mysterious Area X, but also the beginning of an invisible transformation of the expedition members. The analysis of Area X itself brings to light the environment as a character and not simply a background of the story. The Lighthouse reveals information about previous expeditions and Area X, which is important in order to understand its influence, and the Tower is the main point of the novel, depicting transformation, acceptance or punishment by Area X, and a place of anomaly. The aim of the analysis is to bring to light nature's voice and the environment as an active presence.

2.1 Main Characters and Narration

Before starting the analysis of the Border, Area X, the Lighthouse, and the Tower, it is important to briefly discuss the main characters and the way in which the story is told. *Annihilation* is a first-person narrative told from the perspective of the biologist, who is one of the members of the twelfth expedition to Area X. The novel is written in the form of her journal, so the readers see the events only through her feelings, thoughts, and observations. This form makes the narrative subjective and unreliable, as only one point of view is present.

The expedition consists of four women: the biologist, the anthropologist, the surveyor, and the psychologist, who is the leader of the group. There were supposed to be five women, including a linguist, but she did not appear without any explanation. Names and any personal belongings were forbidden in Area X by the Southern Reach. The Southern Reach is a government agency responsible for researching and observing Area X. It organizes expeditions, controls information about the area, and tries to control the unknown environment through scientific observation, hypnosis, and strict discipline. All rules are created by the Southern

Reach, including the erasure of names and the conducting of training for the expedition members.

The psychologist is the leader of the twelfth expedition and represents the authority of the Southern Reach. She knows more information about the expedition and Area X in general than the other members. She controls the expedition through hypnosis, which she uses to lead the group across the Border and to control the expedition members' minds in her favour. The biologist finds her suspicious right from the beginning of their expedition.

The surveyor is a former member of the military, which makes her more practical. The anthropologist dies after the psychologist secretly hypnotises her during the night and sends her to complete an extremely dangerous task: taking a sample from the Crawler for future research. As the expedition continues, relationships between all of the women in the twelfth expedition become more tense because Area X affects both their perception and behaviour.

The biologist's husband was a member of the eleventh expedition and died shortly after returning from Area X. The readers find out about their life together before the expedition through the biologist's memories and stories, which she tells throughout the novel together with the main plot. Her husband's journal, which the biologist later finds in the Lighthouse, allows her to learn more about his experience in Area X.

There were twelve expeditions in total, as the Southern Reach officially claims. The twelfth expedition was the first one to consist only of women. Before that, only men were allowed to go to Area X. The Southern Reach decided to reformulate the group in order to create different dynamics and hopefully achieve better results, but these changes were ineffective.

By the end of the novel, the biologist is the one who remains "alive." She does not die in the conventional sense, but is completely transformed and becomes a part of Area X, which begs the question: is the narrator also Area X as it become absorbed in the biologist, and vice versa.

2.2 The Border: Crossing into Transformation

The practical analysis of *Annihilation* should logically begin with the twelfth expedition crossing the Border into mysterious Area X. At this moment, characters leave the familiar anthropocentric world and enter into the environmental 'hyperobject' if we were to use Morton's concept (Morton 2013). The Border in the book is not just a physical barrier, but the

first trial for the characters. Expeditors were trained to cross the Border: “To reach the border, we each had to enter a separate bright white room with a door at the far end and a single metal chair in the corner. The chair had holes along the sides for straps; the implications of this raised a prickle of alarm, but by then I was set in my determination to reach Area X” (VanderMeer 2014: 9). The training of the expedition members aims to impose order, discipline and control in advance of entering Area X, an environment that resists all forms of structure and predictability.

The story is told from the biologist’s perspective, who is one of the members of the expedition that consists of herself and three other women: an anthropologist, a surveyor and a psychologist, who was the leader. The women’s names are unknown, because during training, they were instructed not to reveal all personal information, including their names. The idea was that “anything personal should be left behind” to keep focus on their purpose. Names belong to the outside world, while Area X does not pay attention to individual identities of the novel’s characters.

At the beginning of the novel, readers find out that, in order to cross the Border, members of the expedition are placed under hypnosis, to make sure that they remain calm. The psychologist is the one who operates the hypnosis, and as the leader of the expedition, she is permitted to use it during their time in Area X if necessary. As a result, the presence of hypnosis makes later events more ambiguous and difficult to interpret. The use of hypnosis to control people's behaviour and perception suggests that human agency is already limited before entering Area X. “The actual nature of the border had been withheld from us for security reasons; we knew only that it was invisible to the naked eye”(VanderMeer 2014: 10).

For a biologist, whose main task is observing, eyes are the main instrument. But the Border is invisible and unattainable through senses, including vision, while all members of the expedition are under hypnosis. It is impossible to see, touch, or hear the Border directly. Before crossing into Area X, all members of the expedition are placed under hypnosis by the psychologist in order to keep them calm and prevent panic during the transition. However, the crossing itself remains physically and psychologically challenging. According to the psychologist, direct perception of the Border could be dangerous and lead to madness. The direct reason for this is not given, but because the Border exists beyond human understanding, crossing it without preparation, in this case hypnosis, appears impossible. “You might be immune to hypnosis—you might—but what about the veil already in place? What if I removed that veil so you could access your own memories of crossing the border?” the psychologist asked. [...] “Would you like it or would you go mad?” (VanderMeer 2014: 128)

The mystery surrounding the crossing of the Border, in turn, destabilizes the objectivity of the narrative. From the moment of entering Area X, the Border resists direct human perception, as the expedition members are unable to clearly see or comprehend it during the crossing into Area X, which highlights the environment's control over human perception. The use of hypnosis in the novel shows how the human body can be easily controlled and influenced, suggesting that it is not autonomous. As a hyperobject, Area X is too complex to be perceived directly, and hypnosis functions as a means of mediating this encounter. Hypnosis is not meant to help members of the expedition to understand Area X, but to protect them from direct encounter with it. It is the way to regulate perception rather than the environment itself, reflecting an underlying fear of what unmediated perception might do. Moreover, by preventing direct perception of the Border, hypnosis suggests that such an encounter may be not only dangerous but also transformative.

At the same time, the biologist breaks the rules and turns around trying to see the Border: "I don't quite know what I saw. It was hazy, indistinct, and already far behind us—perhaps a gate, perhaps a trick of the eye. Just a sudden impression of a fizzing block of light, fast fading"(VanderMeer 2014: 11). She could not explain what it was, and at the same time the Border is shown not as something material, but rather as an impression of something. Hypnosis can be perceived not only as a way to make crossing easier, but as a way in which people from the Southern Reach try to maintain some control over the situation by controlling others through hypnosis.

The fear of the unknown in case of *Annihilation* is even more frightening than seeing a monster. It is difficult to comprehend where mysterious Area X starts, because the Border is an indistinct boundary between natural phenomena and the human world. The government's attempt to "protect" the expedition members can be read as an effort to impose categories on unknown phenomena that in reality exceed human understanding. It produces an illusion of control rather than real safety.

In the twelfth expedition, the psychologist is the one who places the members under hypnosis, and as the leader of the group, she has access to more information about Area X than the other women. As a representative of the Southern Reach, she serves as a tool through which the government attempts to keep some level of control within Area X. This highlights an anthropocentric approach toward the environment, where Area X is treated not as something to understand, but as a force that must be controlled and managed. Hypnosis is one of the methods through which the expedition members are protected from the direct influence of the

environment. In this sense, what is presented as “protection” may instead reflect an underlying fear of nature and its influence.

The expedition members appear to resist what the environment might communicate, attempting to avoid direct interaction with it. Crossing the Border marks the point at which the slow violence (Clark 2020) of Area X begins to manifest. This violence is not immediate, but gradually affects perception, the body and identity. While the Border of Area X itself cannot be mapped, it serves as a beginning of transformation because characters not only change their location, but also move into a different ontological state where the distinction between human and environment begins to blur. The Border can be understood as the site where the environment begins to control and influence characters, although the expedition members do not fully recognize or accept this process. At this stage, characters are no longer fully human in the common sense, but still not part of Area X. They are in a transitional state between the past and an unknown future. This moment also marks the beginning of memory loss and subjectivity, as suggested by a psychologist when she talks with a biologist about memory implantation: “How many of your memories do you think are implanted?” [...] How many of your memories of the world beyond the border are verifiable?” (VanderMeer 2014: 128).

The Border appears in the novel not only at the beginning, but at the end as well. It is described as “something” immense and impossible to define, and the question of whether it is a Border cannot be fully answered. At the end of the novel, the biologist is left alone, as the other members of the expedition have died, yet she goes down into the Tower to find answers, as her curiosity does not allow her to leave and she realizes that there is no option to leave. When she descends and experiences an interaction with a creature called Crowler in the Tower, which will be described later in this analysis, she encounters something vivid and strange. This marks the moment of the strongest transformation in the novel, after which she states:

A few minutes later, a tiny rectangular block of fuzzy white light began to take form, shape, far below. As I descended, it became larger with a reluctance I can only call hesitation. After another half hour, I thought it must be a kind of door, but the haziness remained, almost as if it were obscuring itself. The closer I got, and with it still distant, the more I was also certain that this door bore an uncanny resemblance to the door I had seen in my glance back after having crossed the border on our way to base camp. The very vagueness of it triggered this response because it was a specific kind of vagueness.... An hour later, as that shimmering white rectangle became larger but no more distinct, I was filled with such a feeling of wrongness that I suffered nausea. The idea of a trap grew in my mind, that this floating light in the darkness was not a door at all but the maw of some beast, and if I entered through it to the other side, it would devour me[...] (VanderMeer 2014: 183).

It is difficult to claim that this is a description of the Border, but its earlier description at the beginning of the novel, as well as the hints throughout the narrative, make it possible to interpret it in this way.

If the expedition goes wrong or some emergency happens, the members of the expedition were told that they have a chance to cancel it and go back to the Border, where they would await extraction and be transferred back home. The only problem is that no one knows where the Border is exactly. It was just one suggested place where members of the expedition should go in order to be taken back home. The biologist knew that it was again only an illusion of safety because of what happened to her husband and because of the psychologist's warning that directly perceiving the Border could lead to madness. Her husband was a member of the eleventh expedition and he returned home after it, but based on the biologist's account it was not him anymore. It was his body, but someone else's mind inside it. She never talked about it out loud to the other members of her expedition, including the surveyor, who hoped to go back home, but knew the truth. "I didn't say what I was thinking: that it might not be that simple. That she might make it back across the border only in the abstract sense that my husband had, stripped of what made her unique. But I didn't want her to feel as if she had no way out" (VanderMeer 2014: 71). Although it is indicated that there was no way out of Area X, the biologist, for some reason, saw the Border and the possibility of an escape at the end of the novel.

When her husband was on the expedition, he wrote a journal in which he talked about his experience in Area X including the phenomena of the Border. In his expedition, there were eight members, all men. They decided to observe Area X and separate in pairs to do that. He and the surveyor had the task of mapping a territory, meaning that at some point they should find the Border. "They wandered up the coast for an entire week, mapping the landscape and fully expecting at some point to encounter the border, whatever form it might take—some obstacle that barred their progress. But they never did. Instead, the same habitat confronted them day after day" (VanderMeer 2014: 122). It was expected that they would reach the Border one day, but nothing happened, which suggests that the Border is something more abstract and not everyone is ready to "reach" it. It does not follow any rules or expectations. "Yet he knew that 'by all rights, we should have encountered the border by now'" (VanderMeer 2014: 163).

The difference between entering and exiting Area X suggests that the Border does not function as a stable threshold, but as a one-directional transformation. While entry seems to be controlled and organized by the Southern Reach, exit is either impossible or results in a loss of identity, which challenges the idea of human control over space and the environment and a solid sense of self. While talking about the Border, the psychologist states: "The border is advancing. For now, slowly, a little bit more every year. In ways you wouldn't expect. But maybe soon it'll eat a mile or two at a time" (VanderMeer 2014: 129). The expansion of the Border cannot

be directly observed because it is impossible to see it; instead, it becomes visible only through its effects on the surrounding environment and human experience of it. Instead of being a clearly defined boundary, it manifests itself through changes in the landscape, the disappearance of familiar structures, and the transformation of those who encounter Area X, which makes it impossible to return to a previous life, which was seemingly stable and under human control, before the expedition. This explains why it was impossible for the biologist's husband and other members of the expeditions to truly go back home.

The reason the biologist sees the Border again at the end of the novel may be because she was ready for it. She has a brightness inside her body, she encounters the Crawler in the Tower, she accepts that there is no way home because there is no physical border to cross. She is not the same person she was before entering Area X, that is why the Border was revealed to her, but still she could not see it clearly and recognize it without any hesitation. The biologist refuses to control the situation, to find answers and accepts the reality, which makes her a part of Area X, leaving anthropocentric ideas behind. It is still not for her to understand the Border or control it; the Border just allows her to feel its presence. At the same time, she does not feel relieved or happy after she feels the presence of the Border. "The idea of a trap grew in my mind, that this floating light in the darkness was not a door at all but the maw of some beast, and if I entered through it to the other side, it would devour me" (VanderMeer 2014: 183).

By describing the Border as a trap, the biologist suggests that it does not allow people to go outside, but rather absorbs and transforms. It is like a living creature, like a "beast," meaning that nature is not passive — it hunts, it controls, it absorbs. It breaks the illusion of safety, while the Border, which is supposed to be an exit, appears to be a danger. Area X breaks people's logic and understanding because it is unpredictable and independent. "Devour" in this sense does not specifically mean death, but transformation and loss of identity, as in the case of her husband.

In this sense, the Border does not simply separate two spaces, but marks the limit of human knowledge, control and identity, beyond which the environment can no longer be understood or resisted in anthropocentric terms.

2.3 Area X: The Environment as Hyperobject

Area X in *Annihilation* is introduced not as a threatening space, which challenges the characters' expectations of this place. "Looking out over that untroubled landscape, I do not believe any of us could yet see the threat" (VanderMeer 2014: 3). The biologist's expectations

about it were that it could be a place of vast cities, peculiar animals, and, once, during a period of illness, an enormous monster that rose from the waves to bear down on their camp (VanderMeer 2014: 8). However, after crossing the Border, the members of the expedition faced a beauty which cannot be understood or described without being there, a beauty which changes something inside. “Desolation tries to colonize you” (VanderMeer 2014: 6). If ‘desolation’ usually has a negative meaning, in this case the biologist uses it to show her admiration of Area X, where nature is free from human control. Her feeling of desolation as colonization switches the common roles of people who are perceived as colonizers to the power of nature, whose influence is higher than she imagined before. This process became more evident when Area X colonizes the biologist with its “brightness,” but the feeling of Area’s domination was present long before this moment.

Area X shares characteristics with Morton’s concept of the ‘hyperobject,’ as it resists direct perception and can only be understood through its effects on the environment and human experience. It is impossible to describe it in conventional terms, as it can only be experienced rather than fully articulated. This is one of the reasons why previous expeditions did not succeed, as they attempted to understand it through observation and measurement. However, as a hyperobject, such methods cannot be applied. Instead, it operates through feelings and transformations, as in the case of the Border which is one of the manifestations of hyperobject. The biologist starts feeling the beauty of Area X because she stops resisting its unquantifiable influence.

It was forbidden by the Southern Reach to bring any modern equipment to Area X. There was a rule for expedition members which prohibited all kinds of outside contact because of fear of some irrevocable contamination. There were no cell or satellite phones, no computers, no camcorders, and cameras required a makeshift darkroom. There were no complex measuring instruments except for strange boxes which expedition members had on their belts. The reason for having these boxes was to check if the light on the measuring equipment turned red; it meant danger and the members of the expedition had to go to a “safe” place, but they were not told what kind of danger it represented or what that safe place actually was. The boxes were described as tools for safety, but without specific information about when and how to use them, they become another example of the illusion of control, similar to the use of hypnosis. Later in the novel, the psychologist states that this measuring equipment serves no real purpose, reinforcing the idea of an illusion of safety. The absence of modern technologies can also be explained by the fear that Area X could use them against humanity.

As for weapons, members of the expedition had “knives, a locked container of antique handguns, and one assault rifle, this last a reluctant concession to current security standards” (VanderMeer 2014: 7). The presence of weapons suggests that, in case of danger, they were expected to be used to protect the expedition members, reflecting anthropocentric ideas of controlling and defending against the unknown environment. However, guns and knives prove to be useless against spores, air, and the environment of Area X in general. The presence of weapons creates only an illusion of control and safety, which as a result turns against the members of the expedition themselves, as previous expeditions showed that members often resorted to violence against each other. In *Annihilation*, Area X influences characters not through visible threats that can be “killed” or shot, but through transformation and invisible processes, which Clark describes as “latent environmental violence” (2020). Such forms of violence cannot be resisted or destroyed by conventional weapons.

The inadequacy of the expedition’s equipment is directly acknowledged by the surveyor who shares her thoughts with the biologist:

What bothered me the most. It’s not the thing in the tunnel or the way you conduct yourself or anything the psychologist did. It’s this rifle I’m holding. This damn rifle. I stripped it down to clean it and found it was made of thirty-year-old parts, cobbled together. Nothing we brought with us is from the present. Not our clothes, not our shoes. It’s all old junk. Restored crap. We’ve been living in the past this whole time. In some sort of reenactment. And why? (VanderMeer 2014: 69)

This passage emphasizes that the Southern Reach has no idea what they are fighting against, and they just send people with artificial weapons to create an illusion of safety. The expedition can be interpreted as a form of reenactment, meaning that old mistakes are being made again and again, and there is no understanding of the clear aim of the expedition, because every member just goes there to explore, but nothing concrete is given. It is perceived as attempts to control the environment rather than just understand it and its power. The use of outdated weapons and equipment highlights the crisis of the Anthropocene by showing how people attempt to confront future ecological threats using methods that are no longer effective.

While Area X actively takes more human territory every year, the outside world continues to live in an illusion of safety. The phenomena of this space are not the first topic of public discussion, and a large amount of people have no idea of its existence in general from the moment it first appeared. “The government’s version of events emphasized a localized environmental catastrophe stemming from experimental military research. This story leaked into the public sphere over a period of several months so that, like the proverbial frog in a hot pot, people found the news entering their consciousness gradually as part of the general daily noise of media oversaturation about ongoing ecological devastation” (VanderMeer 2014: 94). It emphasizes how people are living inside a catastrophe but do not realize the scale of it, how

serious it is and tend to pretend that nothing is happening. Changes are noticed only when it is too late. While people think that it is nothing serious, authorities continue sending expeditions because of the fear that the Area will absorb other lands as well, which it is actually doing based on the psychologist's last words: "I'll give you this scrap: The border is advancing. For now, slowly, a little bit more every year. In ways you wouldn't expect. But maybe soon it'll eat a mile or two at a time" (VanderMeer 2014: 129).

The perception of time in Area X appears to be different. This is reflected in the surveyor's observation that they have been living in the past, suggesting a disconnection from the present moment. Area X, as an example of a hyperobject, shows that time there is not linear and is different from human perception of it. Based on what has been said about Area X, it exists for only a couple of years, and this is only the twelfth expedition going there. However, the real time of existence of Area X appears to be the opposite of what the Southern Reach used to tell.

During the biologist's way to the Lighthouse, she talks about the landscapes around her, and there was also a village on her way. She describes that the warping and level of ruin depicted a place to be abandoned for much longer than a few years.

Only a few roofs remained on the twelve or thirteen houses, and the trail through had crumbled into porous rubble. Some outer walls still stood, dark rotting wood splotted with lichen, but for the most part these walls had fallen away and left a peculiar glimpse of the interiors: the remains of chairs and tables, a child's toys, rotted clothing, and ceiling beams brought to earth, covered in moss and vines. Some of the houses had, over time, slid into the canal to the left and looked, in their skeletal remains, like creatures struggling to leave the water. It all seemed like something that had happened a century ago, and what was left were just vague recollections of the event (VanderMeer 2014: 96).

This description of the village reinforces the idea that time in Area X does not function in a linear or predictable way. Although the anomaly is relatively recent, the landscape appears to have aged far beyond what would be expected. This creates a sense of temporal distortion, where the distinction between past and present becomes blurred. The ruins suggest not only abandonment, but an accelerated process of decay in which human structures are rapidly absorbed into the natural environment.

In addition to time phenomena in Area X, the memory about human life in that area before the emergence of Area X is completely erased by nature which shows its power over the human world. In this description of the village the boundaries between human-made things and nature completely vanish and show how man-made things become a part of the forest. This process of decay is further emphasized in the description of the environment: "There was a sharp smell of chemicals in that place, and more than one dead animal, decomposing into the mulch. Some of the houses had, over time, slid into the canal to the left and looked in their

skeletal remains like creatures struggling to leave the water” (VanderMeer 2014: 96). This passage highlights not only the physical decay of the environment but also the presence of an ongoing transformation, suggesting a form of ‘slow’ or gradual environmental violence that does not simply erase human presence but actively transforms all forms of life within it. Here, nature does not acquire human features; instead, houses and furniture return to a ‘natural’ state. The smell of chemicals serves as a marker of human activity that existed before Area X appeared, persisting even though no one is left there. In Area X, houses, material objects, and even the biologist and members of previous expeditions become instruments of the area. The deconstruction of the village is not the end of civilization; rather, it is the beginning of ‘becoming-instrument’ (Kortekallio 2019). This is why conventional weapons or measuring devices which were described earlier are useless in Area X—the body itself becomes the primary instrument of perception.

The first expedition was the one which described Area X not as a threat, but rather something new and interesting: “They discovered a pristine wilderness devoid of any human life. They found what some might call a preternatural silence. ‘I felt as if I were both freer than ever before and more constrained,’ one member of the expedition said. ‘I felt as if I could do anything as long as I did not mind being watched’” (VanderMeer 2014: 95). Area X seems like a place where people feel free, but at the same time, it can be felt only as long as the rules of Area X are not broken by constant curiosity and the will to control the territory. The roles are switched, meaning nature, which is usually observed, becomes the observer itself.

The biologist’s understanding of Area X transforms not only due to the influence of the environment but also because of her disappointment in the outside world. She draws a clear comparison between her feelings in Area X and her previous life:

The air was so clean, so fresh, while the world back beyond the border was what it had always been during the modern era: dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself. Back there, I had always felt as if my work amounted to a futile attempt to save us from who we are. The richness of Area X’s biosphere was reflected in the wealth of birdlife, from warblers and flickers to cormorants and black ibis. I could also see a bit into the salt marshes [...] (VanderMeer 2014: 30).

While Area X is expected to be a frightening place, it is actually filled with animals, plants, fresh air, and sea creatures. The biologist’s willingness to accept the transformation of Area X arises from a deep disillusionment with the modern world and its ongoing ecological crisis. For her, the process of physical decay of human dwellings in the village is an outward manifestation of her inner feelings. In this context, Area X represents a space where nature is more powerful than human influence, offering a sense of relief from the ‘dirty and tired’ world she left behind.

Area X does not simply destroy human structures but transforms and reconfigures them. The village and the Lighthouse, which will be described later in this analysis, are not only ruins but spaces that have been changed and absorbed into a new ecosystem. This process can be understood as a form of mimicry, in which elements of human and animal life become part of the environment and take new, unfamiliar forms. When the biologist describes species which she encounters in Area X, she emphasizes that some of them have familiar features. One of the examples is the dolphin which she saw in the water. “As they slid by, the nearest one rolled slightly to the side, and it stared at me with an eye that did not, in that brief flash, resemble a dolphin eye to me. It was painfully human, almost familiar. [...]” (VanderMeer 2014: 77). Creatures such as the dolphin with human-like eyes suggest that Area X does not preserve existing forms, but reorganises them, blurring the boundaries between species. She believes that the dolphin she saw was her husband, who did not die but rather transformed because of Area’s influence. In this sense, Area X functions not as a site of destruction, but as a system that reprocesses biological and material elements into new configurations.

When members of the expedition enter Area X, one thing that grabs their attention is the unnatural and almost human-like moaning which they hear every night. The biologist encounters the creature which produces this sound, and it appears to be an enormous wild boar. Rather than representing a normal animal, it becomes something unsettling and difficult to categorize.

I was continuing to watch through the binoculars, and as the boar came closer, its face became stranger and stranger. Its features were somehow contorted, as if the beast was dealing with an extreme of inner torment. Nothing about its muzzle or broad, long face looked at all extraordinary, and yet I had the startling impression of some presence in the way its gaze seemed turned inward and its head willfully pulled to the left as if there were an invisible bridle. A kind of electricity sparked in its eyes that I could not credit as real (VanderMeer 2014: 16).

The description of the boar highlights the idea that Area X does not simply change the landscape, but reconfigures life itself, blurring the difference between human and non-human forms. In addition, the suggestion of “inner torment” of the boar implies that transformation is not only on the physical level, but also affects the inner state of the creature. Not only the landscapes are difficult to describe, but it is also hard to find any logical explanation for the creatures inside Area X. This creates an uncanny effect, as something recognisable becomes deeply unsettling.

In this sense, Area X transforms how humans see spaces, and their own role in the spaces they inhabit, as Area X clearly transforms perception, changes identities, and blurs boundaries between human and non-human, real and imaginary, logical and illogical. It resists attempts to control and categorise it, challenging the limits of anthropocentric understanding. Within Area

X, human-made structures do not remain unchanged, but also become a part of the process of transformation. One of the most significant examples is the Lighthouse, which, although initially perceived as a stable and familiar structure, gradually reveals the extent to which it has been altered by the influence of Area X.

2.4 The Lighthouse: Archives, Memory and Failed Control

The Lighthouse in *Annihilation* appears as one of the few remaining human-made structures within Area X, suggesting a sense of stability, orientation, and control. Traditionally, a Lighthouse functions as a guiding point, helping to navigate uncertain and dangerous environments. However, within the context of Area X, this structure no longer fulfills its original purpose. At first, it is not described as a threat or danger. The Lighthouse appears right from the first sentences of the novel and tends to define a familiar place in the alien Area X, because all of the members of the expedition were told about the Lighthouse and shown its location on the maps, which serve as one of the orienting points and make the environment less unknown. This sense of familiarity is emphasized by making the Lighthouse a point of psychological reassurance for the members of the expedition, who rely on its recognisable form and expected function. It serves as an example of control and imaginary safe place:

We assumed that the structure in question was a lighthouse because the map showed a lighthouse at that location and because everyone immediately recognized what a lighthouse should look like. In fact, the surveyor and anthropologist had both expressed a kind of relief when they had seen the lighthouse. Its appearance on both the map and in reality reassured them, anchored them. Being familiar with its function further reassured them (VanderMeer 2014: 21).

This reaction highlights how strongly expedition members depend on familiar structures to keep a sense of control. The lighthouse does not provide any safety or understanding but creates an illusion of stability, as in the example of artificial measurement equipment or outdated weapons. The illusion of control is depicted through the use of maps and training, which shape the expedition members' perception of Area X before they even enter it.

Always, we were directed to the map, to memorizing the details on the map. Our instructor, who remained nameless to us, drilled us for six long months on the position of the lighthouse relative to the base camp, the number of miles from one ruined patch of houses to another. [...] Now that I knew the extent of the hypnotic suggestion that had been used on us, I realized that the focus on the map might have itself been an embedded cue. That if we did not ask questions, it was because we were programmed not to ask questions (VanderMeer 2014: 66).

In this context, the mapping and the Lighthouse serve more as a way of controlling the expedition members by the Southern Reach to avoid excessive questions and curiosity before

the expedition. The map is not a tool of orientation like the Lighthouse, but a planned mechanism that actively shapes perception. Mapping limits critical thinking, as expedition members tend to accept the given structure of the environment. In this sense, the Lighthouse is a constructed focal point that reinforces the illusion of control, because all of the distances and surroundings are mapped from the Lighthouse as the main point, rather than the base camp, which would be more logical.

The physical condition and structure of the Lighthouse challenges the idea of stability and control. It does not function as a simple navigation structure, but based on the biologist's description the Lighthouse appears altered and fortified, suggesting a history of conflict and defensive behaviour. The question is who is fighting against whom, which makes the Lighthouse a space of ambiguity and confusion rather than a place of safety. The biologist describes the Lighthouse as:

Up close it gave the strong appearance of having been converted into a fortress [...] When within an eighth mile, I had taken a look with my binoculars and noticed an approximately ten- foot circular wall rising from the landward side of the lighthouse that had clearly not been part of the original construction. [...] On the seaward side, another wall, an even stouter-looking fortification high on the crumbling dune, topped with broken glass and, as I drew near, I could see crenellations that created lines of sight for rifles (VanderMeer 2014: 99).

The description of the Lighthouse shows it as a symbol of fear and defence rather than safety and familiarity. The presence of walls and militarized features emphasizes that the members of previous expeditions tried to protect themselves from an external threat. However, the nature of this threat remains unclear and unknown, which highlights the level of absurdity of humans' struggle. The idea of fortifying the Lighthouse was another example of control or resistance to the environment, but in Area X such attempts are useless and ineffective, as it turned out.

In addition, complete ignorance of specific features of the Lighthouse, which were hidden from the members of the expedition, and the complete falsification of facts to hide the truth highlight the Southern Reach's fear. All members were aware of the Lighthouse as the main navigation point, but had no information about its condition. At the same time, in interviews with members of previous expeditions, there was nothing specific or helpful about the Lighthouse, and, even more, it was highlighted that nothing abnormal was happening. "The interviews were fairly short, and in them all eight expedition members told the same story. They had experienced no unusual phenomenon while in Area X, taken no unusual readings, and reported no unusual internal conflicts" (VanderMeer 2014: 34). It is different from the truth. This contrast between the official reports and the actual condition of the Lighthouse shows how the Southern Reach manipulates information. It suggests that knowledge of Area X is not only

limited but also deliberately controlled in order to prevent a full understanding of the nature of the environment before entering it.

Despite countless attempts by the Southern Reach to take control and maintain a sense of order, once the biologist enters the Lighthouse, this sense of control is completely destroyed. The interior of the Lighthouse is initially presented as empty and desolate:

The outer rooms at the base of the lighthouse were empty. The sound of the wind was muffled, the walls thick, and only two small windows toward the front brought any light inside[...] As my eyes adjusted, the sense of devastation, of loneliness, grew and grew (VanderMeer 2014: 100).

The emptiness of the Lighthouse challenges the idea of this place as safe and stable. The absence of human belongings or any visible features of life inside it suggests that it no longer functions as a human space. It is supposed to be a place of safety, but instead is described as devastated and lonely. It emphasizes that human presence in Area X is not sustainable. The thick walls do not protect, they only isolate, turning the Lighthouse into a hollow monument to a civilization that has already been erased by the environment.

In addition, the appearance of the Lighthouse inside is marked by traces of violence and destruction:

Here stout oak tables had been overturned to form defensive barricades. Some of the tables were full of bullet holes and others appeared half-melted or shredded by gunfire. Beyond the remains of the tables, the dark splotches across the walls and pooled on the floor told of unspeakable and sudden violence. [...] More bloodstains, mostly thick smudges as if several people had bled out while trying to escape attackers from below. Sometimes dribbles of blood. Sometimes a spray (VanderMeer 2014: 101).

The overturned tables, which served as barricades, symbolize desperate attempts to impose a human boundary against the encroaching unknown. However, it appears that their weapons were useless in such conditions, and instead of being explorers and defending themselves from an unknown kind of danger from outside, the members of the expedition likely succumbed to paranoia and internal conflict, turning their aggression on one another. The Lighthouse is a place where human identity is ruined and only thick smudges and pooled blood are left. In Area X, explorers are dehumanized, and the Lighthouse as a place of observation itself turns into a place of human violence. “Someone, too, had carved their initials into one of the tables: “R.S. was here” (VanderMeer 2014: 101) emphasizes the human need to leave a trace of existence even in the face of collapse. While names and other personal belongings were forbidden in Area X, this attempt at marking the initials appears meaningless.

In contrast to these anonymous traces, the biologist encounters a more personal sign of human presence during her observation of the lighthouse “entrails.”

Opposite it, a faded photograph in a broken frame, dangling from a nail [...] The black-and-white photograph showed two men standing at the base of the lighthouse, with a girl off to the side. A circle had been drawn with a marker around one of the men. He looked about fifty years old and wore a fisherman’s cap. A sharp eagle’s eye gleamed out from a heavy face, the left eye lost to his squint. A thick beard hid all but a hint of a firm chin under it. He didn’t smile, but he didn’t frown, either [...]

But there was also some quality to him, perhaps just because of the strange way the dust framed his face, that made me think of him as the lighthouse keeper (VanderMeer 2014: 103).

The photo is the first seemingly “objective” element in Area X which is something familiar for human beings. The photograph introduces a more individual and human dimension to the space, in contrast to the anonymous traces found earlier. It represents a specific person and a possible past connected to the Lighthouse. However, the image itself does not provide any understanding of what happened to him or what he has encountered. The biologist suspects some facts about the man's life, but it is not known for sure. In this way, the photograph emphasizes the gap between memory and knowledge, showing that even personal traces fail to restore meaning within the environment. It is hard to say how long ago the photo was taken, so it remains unknown, as well as who circled the man's face—whether it was a member of a previous expedition or someone else.

I took the photograph out of its frame, shoved it in my pocket. The lighthouse keeper would come with me, although he hardly counted as a good-luck charm. As I left the landing, I had the peculiar thought that I was not the first to pocket the photo, that someone would always come behind to replace it, to circle the lighthouse keeper again (VanderMeer 2014: 104).

Her idea that she is not the first to take the photo suggests that the Lighthouse is a place where every explorer is doomed to repeat the same observations and the same failures. By taking the photo with her, she connects herself with those who came before. The keeper becomes a symbol of what will happen to everyone who enters the Lighthouse: they will be marked and eventually replaced as the environment absorbs their memory. At the same time, the photograph itself remains as one of the few preserved traces of human presence within Area X, suggesting that the environment does not completely erase the past but instead transforms it into remains.

For every member of the expedition, it was important to write their journals, writing down what was happening, how they reacted, some important findings, and observations. At the same time, sharing notes from the journal with other members of the expedition was strictly prohibited. It was done in order not to lose objectivity and not to have any connections between members of the expedition. The Southern Reach claims that it is the twelfth expedition, but the biologist sees contradictory evidence in the Lighthouse, makes it clear that there were many more expeditions than they expected and had been told. While she was continuing inspecting the Lighthouse, she turned her attention to the chairs and table, trying to search for at least something familiar or something that she could understand. During this, she saw a rug, and when she pulled it back, a square trapdoor measuring about four feet per side lay hidden there, whose latch was set into the wood of the floor.

The trapdoor opened onto a space about fifteen feet deep and thirty feet wide.[...] No, what had me gasping for breath, what felt like a punch in the stomach as I dropped to my knees, was the huge mound that dominated the space, a kind of insane midden. I was looking at a pile of papers with hundreds of journals on top of it—just like the ones we had been issued to record our observations of

Area X. Each with a job title written on the front. Each, as it turned out, filled with writing. Many, many more than could possibly have been filed by only twelve expeditions (VanderMeer 2014: 106). The fact that only job titles, without any names or gender, were mentioned on the journals covers showing how the identity of expedition members is being erased and forgotten. In the pile under the trapdoor, all of the titles become meaningless. All of the members believed that their recording was a unique contribution to saving humanity, but in the end, they all became just “insane midden.” This pile of journals functions as a powerful metaphor for the Anthropocene.

While in the contemporary geological epoch human impact on Earth is measured through durable remnants of human activity that will persist in the planetary strata long after humanity’s extinction, the journals in Area X are not subjects of scientific discovery; instead, they become a literal geological layer within the lighthouse. In Area X, human life is not depicted as something valuable, but rather as a biological marker, such as a deposit of paper and ink which will be composted by the environment.

Erasing human names and identities highlights that in Area X humans are compared to plastic in the ocean and reduced to interchangeable units of data. While the biologist looks at the cemetery of words, it highlights the core irony of the Anthropocene: while it is used to perceive people as powerful and able to change the environment, climate, and natural processes, in the novel’s humanity is compared to merely another layer of debris in the earth’s crust. The transformation of journals into a material layer supports the idea that knowledge in Area X does not accumulate in a meaningful way, but rather becomes absorbed by the environment itself. Rather than being useful for humanity or perceiving any human experience in Area X, the journals lose their original function and turn into part of the landscape, which challenges the notion of human dominance over nature in a visible way. The process of decay is further emphasized by the physical condition of the journals:

The journals and other materials formed a moldering pile about twelve feet high and sixteen feet wide that in places near the bottom had clearly turned to compost, the paper rotting away. Beetles and silverfish tended to those archives, and tiny black cockroaches with always moving antennae. Toward the base, and spilling out at the edges, I saw the remains of photographs and dozens of ruined cassette tapes mixed in with the mulch of pages (VanderMeer 2014: 111).

The process of environmental absorption is highlighted by the physical decay of the paper itself. The biologist notes that “places near the bottom had clearly turned to compost, the paper rotting away,” suggesting that journals are no longer tools of communication. The distinction between culture and nature is completely erased. The process of composting shows how human written language, one of the main features that differentiate humans from animals, is literally digested by Area X.

Writing a journal is an act directed toward the future, for future generations to be heard, but the enormous amount of abandoned journals proves that the Southern Reach never expected these voices to be heard. In the epoch of the Anthropocene, millions of data are left, but they make no sense because there is no one who can comprehend them, like in the case of the journals in the Lighthouse.

While the Southern Reach insists on having a journal as a tool of objectivity and a scientific approach, it appears to be a way to separate members of the expedition from each other, making their journals their only interlocutor, which increases psychological pressure in addition to the uncontrolled Area X. It suggests one of the ways authorities control the expedition members' minds by limiting their thoughts, by not sharing them, and by enclosing a person in their own kind of "objectivity."

The presence of the pile of journals also means the complete collapse of the concept of scientific progress within Area X. It is expected that research is linear and moves toward truth, meaning every expedition reveals something new, and every journal serves as a small discovery. However, in *Annihilation*, the enormous number of identical notebooks suggests that research is circular. The Southern Reach is not advancing and is stuck in a loop of repetition. While hiding the truth, the authority creates an image of a fresh start for each expedition, while in reality every expedition just adds another layer to the pile of failed observations. The act of writing the journal appears to be a process rather than a way to communicate or preserve knowledge. Thousands of the same information recorded without any purpose lose their value and act like "white noise." It depicts how, in the epoch of the Anthropocene, a big amount of data is produced, but it leads to no meaningful changes or results. The expedition members document the process of their own disappearance, thinking that they are conducting research in Area X to help future generations. But it appears to be only an illusion of control, while the actual situation remains unsolved.

The journals in the Lighthouse function as physical death certificates rather than scientific records. Each journal represents a life which was consumed or transformed in Area X, but while the large number serves more like statistics, as there is no information about these people, the biologist also finds a personal loss in the pile of anonymous journals. Among the thousands of rotting pages she finds her husband's journal, who was on the previous expedition before her.

With a kind of lurch in my stomach, I kept rummaging, knowing that it was inevitable what I would stumble upon, and I was right. Stuck to the back of another journal by dried blood or some other substance, I found it more easily than I'd imagined: my husband's journal, written in the confident, bold handwriting I knew from birthday cards, notes on the refrigerator, and shopping lists (VanderMeer 2014: 118).

For the Southern Reach, her husband was nothing more than one more member of the expedition whose death does not influence their well-being, but for the biologist, finding the journal transforms “white noise” into a painful voice. She realizes that the destiny of being in Area X is not fighting with it to bring “valuable” results for authorities who wait outside without any regret for people’s wasted lives, but that it is important to accept her own inevitable transformation into Area X.

When the biologist found her husband’s journal, she was afraid to read it and was not quick in her decision.

But rather than looking forward to reading that account, I felt as if I were stealing a private diary that had been locked by his death. A stupid feeling, I know. All he’d ever wanted was for me to open up to him, and as a result he had always been there for the taking. Now, though, I would have to take him as I found him, and it would probably be forever, and I found the truth of that intolerable (VanderMeer 2014: 118).

Her fear is not merely rooted in the grief of his death, but at the same time, perhaps for her, she was expected to find answers to the questions she lived with for a long time. She has no idea why her husband wanted to join the expedition, she does not know the kind of person he came back home after it either. At the same time, reading the journal will take her away from objectivity and will serve as an example of the records of a person whom Area X has already transformed or annihilated. It is hard for her to read the journal because she will find some “remains” of her previous husband, still full of life energy and willing to discover. She is afraid to read what Area X did to him, how he transformed, or what he had to encounter. For the biologist, reading a stranger’s notes feels completely different than reading the notes of a person with whom she shared her life. The biologist hesitates to read her husband’s journal because it represents not only a record of his experience, but also a confirmation of her loss. Reading it would force her to confront both his transformation and her own possible fate within Area X.

In the novel, the journals do not represent knowledge, progress, or communication, but rather transformation, repetition, and loss of control. Although every journal aimed to be a unit of scientific record in Area X, their purpose has completely vanished. The amount of journals suggests not growth of understanding, but rather the lack of information and the impossibility of describing Area X by any scientific terms. The journals appear to become a part of the environment itself, absorbed into the landscape and reduced to material remains. It suggests how people tried to impose order and meaning on Area X, but it appeared to be an “insane midden,” supporting the idea that hyperobjects cannot be described, studied, or controlled.

The Lighthouse, which is supposed to be a symbol of guidance and stability, ultimately reveals itself as a space of collapse, repetition, and failed human intervention. Rather than providing orientation, it reveals the limits of scientific knowledge, control, and understanding

within Area X. It stands not as a place of safety, but as a reminder of human attempts to impose order and meaning on an unknown and uncontrollable world. It leads to the analysis of the Tower, which depicts the “voice” and the main visible place of transformation in Area X.

2.5 The Tower: Living Script and Bodily Transformation

The Tower in *Annihilation* functions as the central space of transformation within Area X, the place where boundaries between human and nonhuman begin to collapse. Unlike the Lighthouse, which creates an illusion of orientation, familiarity, and control, the Tower appears from the first sentences of the novel and is described as something “which was not supposed to be here,” resisting stable definition from the very beginning. Even its name remains uncertain because the biologist calls it a Tower, while for other members of the expedition it is a tunnel: “I don’t know why the word tower came to me, given that it tunneled into the ground. I could as easily have considered it a bunker or a submerged building.” (6), highlighting not only the difficulty of applying familiar human categories to the environment around them, but also the subjective nature of perception within Area X.

The tower in the novel is described as:

Surrounded by a fringe of scrub grass, half-hidden by fallen moss off to the left of the trail: a circular block of some grayish stone seeming to mix cement and ground-up seashells. It measured roughly sixty feet in diameter, this circular block, and was raised from ground level by about eight inches. Nothing had been etched into or written on its surface that could in any way reveal its purpose or the identity of its makers. Starting at due north, a rectangular opening set into the surface of the block revealed stairs spiraling down into darkness (VanderMeer 2014: 6).

The physical description of the Tower depicts it as an assimilation of the artificial and the natural, characteristic of Area X. The Tower is made of a mix of cement and ground-up seashells, emphasizing how human technology is repurposed into a new, hybrid form of matter. The biologist, as a scientist, attempts to apply rational measurements by describing its precise diameter and orientation to the compass, but it is only an illusion of understanding the object, while this information still does not give a clear idea of what is inside the Tower, what it is for, and who made it. While the entrance is completely dark and unknown, measurements make no sense. The name Tower for a structure that plunges into the ground points to the inverted world of Area X, while the Lighthouse reaches upward toward an illusion of control, the true transformations and nature are hidden below in the unknown, deep, and dark Tower.

When the biologist encounters the Tower for the first time, she describes it as her first irrational thought—a vision that the Lighthouse and the Tower are part of a single and displaced structure:

Yet as soon as I saw the staircase, I remembered the lighthouse on the coast and had a sudden vision of the last expedition drifting off, one by one, and sometime thereafter the ground shifting in a uniform and preplanned way to leave the lighthouse standing where it had always been but depositing this underground part of it inland (VanderMeer 2014: 7).

This intuition suggests a strong connection between the two main places of the novel, depicting the Tower as a “submerged” analog of the Lighthouse. When the biologist imagines the ground shifting in a “preplanned way,” she acknowledges that Area X is not passive land but rather an active agent which changes, and transforms objects inside it. This moment is marked as the beginning of the collapse of her scientific objectivity. The Tower in this sense is not a building but rather an ability of Area X to manipulate space and perception, emphasizing that the Southern Reach’s maps and statistics are outdated and inactive for a constantly moving space. The Tower’s resistance to human categorization is further evidenced by its absence from the Southern Reach’s official maps. While maps serve as tools of control, the Tower exists as a “deliberate exclusion,” suggesting that the environment is either actively concealing its structures or generating new ones in defiance of static documentation. At the same time, this absence may also indicate that the existence of such an unknown structure in Area X provokes fear within the authorities, leading them to withhold this information from future expedition members in order to preserve a sense of control and the illusion of safety.

When members of the expedition go down into the Tower, it resists not only categorization, but also the idea that it is a fixed, inanimate structure. Not all of the women go down into the Tower; the psychologist remains upstairs in case of any “danger” that may come from the outside. The first thing the biologist, the anthropologist, and the surveyor notice when they enter the Tower is that the walls are covered with green vines. However, as they descend deeper, the biologist realizes that these vines are not merely plants, but a form of “living script.” “Then, as I stared, the ‘vines’ resolved further, and I saw that they were words, in cursive, the letters raised about six inches off the wall” (VanderMeer 2014: 23). The words are written not by a human hand but are formed through biological processes, which makes the Tower a literal site of nonhuman inscription. The text is not static like a human book, but it has a “loamy smell” of “rotting honey” and moves “like sea grass in a gentle ocean current” (VanderMeer 2014: 24), suggesting that in Area X, language and biology are visibly inseparable. The complexity of this “living script” is further revealed through its biological structure. The biologist observes that the words are not just moss, but a type of fungi or other eukaryotic organism. It is a miniature

forest. Other things exist in this miniature ecosystem. “Half-hidden by the green filaments, most of these creatures were translucent and shaped like tiny hands embedded by the base of the palm. Golden nodules capped the fingers on these ‘hands’” (VanderMeer 2014: 24). The text is a part of a dynamic ecosystem. It is not static; it has its own smell, it moves, and it makes the text a living environment rather than a fixed message. Moreover, the words on the wall are not just a random mix of symbols or a made-up language:

As I came close, did it surprise me that I could understand the language the words were written in? Yes. Did it fill me with a kind of elation and dread intertwined? Yes. I tried to suppress the thousand new questions rising up inside of me (VanderMeer 2014: 23).

The moment when the biologist realizes that she is able to understand the language on the walls makes the question of nature’s voice more complex and confusing. Her emotions of elation and dread highlight the terror of encountering a non-human intelligence which speaks in human terms. This challenges anthropocentric ideas of language as a unique human domain and the idea that the environment communicates in ways that people are not able to understand. By communicating through biological ecosystems, Area X reveals itself as an active agent rather than a passive background. Area X appears more intelligent and complex than the human perspective about it, combining elements of hyperobjects and human language to express itself. The environment does not simply contain meaning, but actively generates it. In this sense, the Tower “speaks” through growth, movement, and sensory experience, challenging the notion that nature is silent. However, the biologist’s attempt to suppress the thousand new questions highlights the limits of scientific interest, and at the same time the fear of the unknown and uncategorized process which is happening in front of her eyes. It means that the tower functions not only as a site of inscription, but as a mechanism through which Area X influences perception and understanding. The Tower is the place where rational thinking goes into the background and only curiosity is the feeling that helps to be motivated to return to the Tower more than once.

During the first descent, the biologist is able to read short passage of the text: “Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that...” (VanderMeer 2014: 23). Even this fragment had a profound impression on her, as she noted that only because of the anthropologist’s questions was she distracted from further reading. She emphasizes that these initial phrases were already “infiltrating my mind in unexpected ways, finding fertile ground” (VanderMeer 2014: 24). The words act like one of the preparatory steps of her future transformation.

The biologist's curiosity and willingness to reveal the unknown script on the walls becomes a trap for her. Driven by the "thousand new questions," she leans in too close, admitting she was "someone tricked into thinking that words should be read."

Triggered by a disturbance in the flow of air, a nodule in the W chose that moment to burst open and a tiny spray of golden spores spewed out. I pulled back, but I thought I had felt something enter my nose, experienced a pinprick of escalation in the smell of rotting honey" (VanderMeer 2014: 25).

At this moment, the environment shifts from being external to directly entering the human body. It is no more an object of study, but rather a part of the biologist herself. Curiosity is stronger than common sense and caution. The level of preparation and background knowledge is not vital in Area X, where things happen unexpectedly, which is proved by the biologist, who knows how to work with chemicals and various kinds of dangerous substances, but still is the first one influenced by the spores. The release of the spores represents the first direct interaction between the environment and the body. It presents the environment not as passive, but as reactive and aware. Organisms actively respond to the triggered movement, and when the spores enter the biologist's body, the boundary between human and nonhuman begins to dissolve. The biologist becomes a part of Area X, although she still does not know whether she is lucky or not. This describes transformation as a frightening and, at the same time, captivating process.

The inhalation of the spores marks the beginning of what the biologist calls "the brightness." She describes weird changes inside her body:

The brightness infecting my senses had spread to my chest; I can describe it no other way. Internally, there was a brightness in me, a kind of prickling energy and anticipation that pushed hard against my lack of sleep. Was this part of the change? But even so, it didn't matter—I had no way to combat what might be happening to me (VanderMeer 2014: 68).

While describing it as a prickling energy that she cannot control, she highlights the total surrender of her physical autonomy to the environment. This can be understood with Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, where the boundary between human and environment dissolves through material interaction. The inability to control the brightness highlights the loss of human control. The body is no longer autonomous, but becomes a site through which environmental forces operate. Brightness functions as a nonhuman communication, but which uses the human body for its voice.

The impact of the brightness goes beyond a mere feeling of energy; in addition, it completely reconfigures the biologist's physical and psychological existence. It is important to mention that these changes happen gradually, in spite of the biologist's expectations: "Nothing radical had yet changed in me [...] I gradually relaxed and told myself that the spores had had no effect ... even though I knew that the incubation period for some species could be months or years" (VanderMeer 2014: 29).

First, the brightness gives her unnatural endurance, allowing her body to function well despite the lack of sleep or extreme exhaustion.

In the morning, I woke with my senses heightened, so that even the rough brown bark of the pines or the ordinary lunging swoop of a woodpecker came to me as a kind of minor revelation. The lingering fatigue from the four-day hike to base camp had left me. Was this some side effect of the spores or just the result of a good night's sleep? I felt so refreshed that I didn't really care (VanderMeer 2014: 37).

It highlights that the brightness does not weaken the body or is tolerated as a serious illness as it was expected, but rather suggests that the biologist's body is no longer operating within normal human limits. Furthermore, the process does not appear immediately as dangerous, which makes it more difficult to recognize and resist.

More importantly, the brightness acts like a biological shield, making the biologist immune to the psychologist's hypnotic suggestions. "I was resistant to hypnosis—especially since it meant any underlying conditioning hidden in our training also was affecting me less and less" (VanderMeer 2014: 34). It signifies a definitive break from human authority for the biologist. After the inhalation of spores, she is no longer a tool of the Southern Reach because non-human domination in her body is stronger than human social control. At the same time, her transformation was visible, because the psychologist calls her "little flame," and the biologist does not realize why, but later it becomes visible as she says that her skin gave off a faint phosphorescence against the darkness (VanderMeer 2014: 143).

Finally, the brightness makes the biologist more hypersensitive, allowing her to perceive the hidden rhythms of Area X:

I saw each drop fall [...] I could smell the sea[...] The wind was like something alive; it entered every pore of me and it, too, had a smell [...] my senses still seemed too acute, too sharp [...] I remembered that just a day ago I had been someone else. Even the darkness seemed more alive to me, surrounding me like something physical (VanderMeer 2014: 74).

This hypersensitivity signals the final stage of the biologist's detachment from her human self. By describing nature around herself in such a deep way, she illustrates a state of total environmental immersion. Her senses no longer serve for the scientific gathering of data, but as a way for experiencing the vitality of Area X. She claims that she was "someone else" just a day ago, highlighting the irreversible nature of this change. The brightness takes control over her identity, replacing it with more-than-human awareness, where the boundaries between the self and the environment are completely erased.

The next descent into the tower, but under the influence of the brightness, opens the biologist's eyes to other things which she could not perceive the first time. Her scientific detachment is replaced by a direct connection to the environment, and she realizes that the Tower is not an inanimate object, but something alive:

The tower breathed, and the walls when I went to touch them carried the echo of a heartbeat ... and they were not made of stone but of living tissue. [...] The tower was a living creature of some sort. We were descending into an organism (VanderMeer 2014: 41).

By recognizing the Tower as a breathing creature, the biologist confirms that Area X does not simply imitate human architecture, but uses the idea of a building as a biological entity. The descent into the tower is no longer a geographical movement, but a journey inside an enormous non-human organism. The biologist, going down into the tower, no longer observes a building, but instead becomes a part of the entity she tried to measure before.

The biologist was the one from the expedition who realized that the Tower is a living creature. “Soon, too, the sound of the heartbeat through the walls became so loud to me that I stopped to put in earplugs to muffle its beat, choosing a moment while the surveyor’s attention lay elsewhere” (VanderMeer 2014: 44). This moment highlights the difference between the biologist and the other members of the expedition. While the surveyor remains deaf to the environment’s vitality, the biologist is overwhelmed by it. She is forced to hide her new reality from the other members, marking her final transition from a human explorer to a part of the organism she is meant to study.

The biologist’s attempts to get rid of the sound of the Tower’s heartbeat serve as a parallel to the Southern Reach’s attempts to control the impact of Area X by putting members of the expedition under hypnosis. In both cases, there is a profound human desire to remain “deaf” to the environment. It suggests that nature in Area X is not silent; rather, it speaks with such intensity that humans must rely on psychological and technological filters just to maintain their sanity. In the case of the biologist, the earplugs are not useful anymore, as the brightness inside her body has turned the environment into an internal reality that can no longer be silenced. The characters want to stay in a world of anthropocentric ideas where they are able to control, measure, and explain, but Area X completely erases this with its communication.

The Tower is not only breathing, but constantly rewriting itself. “The walls minutely rose and fell with the tower’s breathing [...] the colors of the words shifted [...] there existed a ghosting of prior words [...] these layers of words formed a watermark” (VanderMeer 2014: 48). It suggests that the Tower is an organism that exists in a state of constant movement, where the environment is not a fixed message but a dynamic process of growth and decay. It renews and transforms, and there is no information about how long this text has been written on the walls—days, months, years, or even decades. The text is never “finished”; it is an ongoing metabolic function of the Tower. This effectively destroys the possibility of a traditional scientific conclusion, as the object of study transforms even as it is being observed.

The understanding of the Tower is even more complicated by the surreal, prophetic nature of the message itself. As the biologist descends, she reads the passages of the living script which flows without any punctuation and which is not given to the reader as one coherent text:

Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that...(VanderMeer 2014: 23) that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives while from the dim-lit halls of other places forms that never could be writhe for the impatience of the few who have never seen or been seen ... Why should I rest when wickedness exists in the world ... God's love shines on anyone who understands the limits of endurance, and allows forgiveness ... Chosen for the service of a higher power (VanderMeer 2014: 49).

There is just a part from the text, but it still reads like a surreal, archaic sermon. The passage does not consist of any data or measurements, does not give information about Area X, but rather sounds like a biological prophecy. The repetition of terms like “spirit,” “sun,” and “seeds” creates a cycle of meaning that mirrors the cyclical nature of Area X itself. The text does not require any analysis or scientific research; it demands to be felt. For the biologist, these words are not merely information, but they provoke feelings and increase curiosity. The text acts like a catalyst for her transformation, as she inhales spores which are inside the text. The content of the words further reinforces their unsettling nature. Phrases such as “the strangling fruit” and “seeds of the dead” evoke a biblical and ritualistic tone, yet their meaning remains obscure and fragmented. It raises the question of who or what is responsible for these words and how this communication should be perceived.

While the words themselves are confusing and provoke fear and anxiety, the appearance of their creator does not make the situation any clearer. She describes “the thing” that writes words as the Crawler, a name that, much like “The tower,” is an example of a human label for a non-human reality. This creature killed the anthropologist when she tried to take any samples of its body. However, this death highlights the gap between human scientific methodology and the reality of Area X. The anthropologist's attempt to “sample” the Crawler was an attempt to measure the thing, and the act of violence in this case serves as a resistance to being categorized or studied. The Crawler cannot be understood as a conventional living being or a human-like author. Its writing does not serve as an intention of communication in a traditional sense, but rather appears as a biological process inside the Tower. Its body resists clear description and classification, which proves that it is not an independent organism, but rather a function of Area X or the living force of the Tower. This idea is further supported by the biologist's reflection:

First, that the words—the line of them, their physicality—were absolutely essential to the well-being of either the Tower or the Crawler, or both. [...] This process might feed into the reproductive cycle of the Tower or the Crawler. Perhaps the Crawler depended upon it, and it had some subsidiary benefit to the Tower. Or vice versa. Perhaps words didn't matter because it was a process of fertilization, only completed when the entire left-hand wall of the Tower had a line of words running along its length (VanderMeer 2014: 92).

By this reflection, the biologist left the idea to decipher the words and find any meaning, which strips the words of their human-centric meaning and redefines them as biological fuel. The appearance of the words and the way of their production is more important than their message. It shifts the Crawler's role from a messenger to a biological worker within a symbiotic relationship, where the act of writing is a necessary condition for the Tower's "well-being" and reproduction. It means that the Tower itself is living and evolving by making language a literal building block of the environment. In this sense, while the anthropologist was the one who was willing to take the samples of the Crawler for future studies, the biologist perceived it as a process and trusted her feelings over scientific curiosity.

What was the interplay between the words and the tower-creature? Were the words a form of symbiotic or parasitic communication between the Crawler and the Tower? Either the Crawler was an emissary of the Tower or the Crawler had originally existed independent from it and came into its orbit later (VanderMeer 2014: 72).

If the Crawler is an "emissary," it acts as the Tower's voice and hand; if it was "independent," it has been colonized by the environment to serve as its perpetual scribe. In both ways, the Crawler is devoid of its autonomy, becoming a biological function, the main purpose of which is the ongoing growth of the Tower. This interplay suggests that the "living script" connects the Crawler and the tower, forming a single living system.

The biologist's attempt to describe the Crawler's physical form reveals the limits of human perception. Throughout much of the novel, the Crawler remains an unseen, continuously writing creature, while the biologist does not face it directly. After the anthropologist's encounter with the Crawler, the biologist described her as:

A faint golden glow arose from the anthropologist's body [...] There wasn't much left of her face, and odd burn marks were all over the remaining skin. Spilling out from her broken jaw... was a torrent of green ash that sat on her chest in a mound (VanderMeer 2014: 61).

The Crawler resists not only theoretical categorizations, but violent physical interaction as well. When the anthropologist attempts to interact with it, the Crawler kills her by a force that transcends conventional violence. The Crawler does not just kill; it incinerates the human subject, turning flesh into the same inorganic-organic matter that composes the Tower itself. The anthropologist dies because of the green light, which destroys her from the inside. The Crawler rejects all attempts to measure or categorize it. For the biologist, it is a sign that to study the Crawler is to risk being reduced to the "ash" that lines the Tower's walls. But despite the anthropologist's experience, the biologist is in a different conditions, with brightness inside her body and a clear idea that she can do nothing, and her curiosity leads to a different kind of interaction with the Crawler.

This difference becomes most evident in the moment when the biologist finally faced the Crawler directly:

No words can ... no photographs could ... As I adjusted to the light, the Crawler kept changing at a lightning pace, as if to mock my ability to comprehend it. It was a figure within a series of refracted panes of glass. It was a series of layers in the shape of an archway. It was a great sluglike monster ringed by satellites of even odder creatures. It was a glistening star. [...] The shape spread until it was even where it was not, or should not have been. [...] What can you do when your five senses are not enough? Because I still couldn't truly see it here, any more than I had seen it under the microscope, and that's what scared me the most [...] This moment, which I might have been waiting for my entire life all unknowing—this moment of an encounter with the most beautiful, the most terrible thing I might ever experience—was beyond me. What inadequate recording equipment I had brought with me and what an inadequate name I had chosen for it—the Crawler (VanderMeer 2014: 177).

This passage marks the final collapse of the biologist as a distant observer. By admitting that her five senses are not enough to comprehend the Crawler, it can be categorized as one of the manifestations of a hyperobject, something that exists far beyond human dimensions. It at the same time appears to be a “sluglike monster” and a “glistening star,” to be both a miracle and an enormous threat. She agrees that the name she gives it and the measurement equipment she brings to the Tower are revealed to be a pathetic human attempt to domesticate something that is essentially an infinite, shifting process. The consequence of this realization is not fear, but a complete transformation toward which the biologist slowly moved throughout the whole novel. Unlike the anthropologist, who died, the biologist experiences the Crawler as a moment she had been waiting for her entire life. At this stage, she accepts that the brightness inside her body prepared her for this moment. She is not a scientist anymore, but a little part of an ongoing process.

The price of the integration is a traumatic deprivation of her identity and former self. When she stares at the Crawler, she comes through horrible agony, which signals the final stage of the transformation. “It was the most agony I have ever been in [...] the brightness inside experienced no such interruption [...] the Crawler tossed me aside [...] I was recognizable to the Crawler now. Apparently, I was words it could understand” (VanderMeer 2014: 182). It is not the destructive violence that killed the anthropologist, but a painful “annihilation” of her human boundaries. She feels unbearable pain at the moment when she is in the Crawler's field of vision. After a peak point of transformation, the biologist creeps away from the Crawler, and after a “short rest,” when she comes back to it to go out of the Tower, she realizes that she can see it better and it does not react to her anymore. In this state of increased perception, she finally sees what lies at the core of the entity:

I saw, barely visible, the face of a man [...] I saw on those features the endurance of an unending pain and sorrow, yes, but shining through as well a kind of grim satisfaction and ecstasy. I had never seen such an expression before, but I recognized that face. Trapped within the Crawler, the last lighthouse keeper stared out at me [...] the lighthouse keeper had not aged a day since that photograph was taken more than thirty years ago [...] Did he know what he had become or had he gone mad long ago? (VanderMeer 2014: 187)

This discovery provides more information about the Crawler's identity. It is not a native inhabitant of Area X, but a victim of its ongoing reconfiguration. The lighthouse keeper does

not simply die but was absorbed into a biological function to serve as the Tower's eternal scribe. By recognizing the man, the biologist accepts her own destiny, meaning that staying in Area X means losing her own name and identity and becoming another tiny cell of the environment around her. Because of this, her agony can mean not a death, but a birth of her new existence, where the boundary between human and nonhuman is completely erased.

The fact that the biologist becomes words that the Crawler could understand suggests that she left behind her previous life and sheds the "skin" of her humanity, much like the lighthouse keeper did decades before. Her decision to stay raises a question: is this outcome a gift or a tragedy? From a human perspective, this decision may seem undeniably tragic. The biologist loses her name, her past, and all connections to the human world. It suggests that she is no longer an owner of her own destiny and becomes a part of Area X, which she cannot control, resist, or comprehend. However, on the other hand, this can be perceived as a gift, while throughout the novel she expresses a deep dissatisfaction with the limitations of human science and the inadequate recording equipment of her own senses. The brightness gives her something that no other human is able to possess: a true, unmediated experience of a higher reality. She is no longer a lonely observer, but becomes a part of the nature living beyond all anthropocentric beliefs she used to have.

By seeing the lighthouse keeper's face within the Crawler's core, it emphasizes the stark contrast between the Tower and the Lighthouse as a choice between two parallel realities. The Lighthouse serves as an orienteer for the expedition; a familiar landmark marked on maps that offers a sense of relief. As noted by Clark (2020), it is an object that can be easily described, creating an "illusion of safety" for those who still cling to human definitions:

We assumed that the structure in question was a lighthouse because the map showed a lighthouse at that location and because everyone immediately recognized what a lighthouse should look like [...] Being familiar with its function further reassured them. With the tower, we knew none of these things" (VanderMeer 2014: 21).

While the Lighthouse serves as a symbol of familiarity in the mysterious Area X, it represents death and dusty archives as a static monument to human presence. In contrast, the Tower is undefinable, lacks certain measurements, and its purpose remains hidden from the detached observer. While the Lighthouse is above the ground and it is easy to see it from far away, the true transformation happens in the hidden depth of the Tower. The biologist's decision to return to the tower instead of the Lighthouse is the final rejection of human orientation in favor of biological integration.

Ultimately, the Tower is not a place to be explored, but a process that transforms those who enter it, dissolving the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. The breakdown

of boundaries in the novel is highlighted by the inability of human language to control and explain reality. The living script in the Tower, made of spores and fungi, depicts Area X as included in language, while writing is usually perceived as a human tool of communication. In *Annihilation*, this voice is not created to help humans understand nature. Instead, it confuses and oppresses them. The “living script” becomes almost like an infection of human language. It shows that in Area X, language is not just a way of communicating. It is a physical, living force that changes the person who reads or watches it.

CONCLUSION

The thesis examined Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* through the frameworks of ecocriticism, eco-horror and narratology in order to analyze how the novel represents the environment as an active narrative rather than a passive background. The central aim of the thesis was to explore how Area X functions as a force that transforms, communicates, and resists human attempts at control. The analysis was separated into four sections describing the Border, the Lighthouse, the Tower as a manifestation of the hyperobject, and Area X as a hyperobject itself. The concept of the hyperobject used in the thesis is suggested by Morton and serves as one of the theoretical tools for analysis. Two main research questions were addressed: How does *Annihilation* depict the environment as an active character within the narrative structure? In what ways does VanderMeer's novel challenge traditional concepts of nature's silence and human control over the environment? The analysis of the selected four places depicts how VanderMeer's novel challenges traditional ideas of nature as silent, passive, and submissive to human knowledge and control. Instead, *Annihilation* presents the environment as dynamic, which shapes the narrative, affects characters' feelings, bodies, and perception, and which blurs the lines between human and nonhuman life. In addition, selecting these specific places, such as the Lighthouse, the Tower, and the Border, was done in order to show how the influence of the environment increases and becomes stronger as the novel evolves.

The role of the environment becomes visible from the moment the expedition members cross the Border into Area X. The Border functions not only as a physical boundary but also as the beginning of psychological and bodily transformation. To cross the Border, the expedition members are put under hypnosis in order not to perceive it directly, which demonstrates the environment's control over human consciousness and memory. The Border cannot be categorized through human concepts and cannot be fully understood through rational explanation. The crossing of the Border marks the moment when the characters lose their previous sense of stability and control, while Area X begins to influence their perception, memories, and understanding of reality. In this way, the Border functions as the first manifestation of the environment's power and agency within the narrative.

Another important manifestation of environmental agency is the Lighthouse, which functions as a place of memory, trauma, cyclicity of the expeditions, and instability. The pile of journals from the previous expeditions, which the biologist finds, transforms the Lighthouse into an archive of environmental influence and human weakness in front of Area X. The

Lighthouse in the novel increases the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty and demonstrates how the environment shows the consequences of previous expeditions in Area X. It serves as a place of human loss of identity, while the journals, which had to be a useful contribution, appear to be a dusty pile of papers. The Lighthouse becomes a narrative force through memory and trauma.

The Tower in the novel serves as the clearest manifestation of the environment as an active force. It plays with human perspective from the first mention, as only the biologist describes it as a Tower, while for the others it is a tunnel. The Tower in the novel is a place where visible transformation starts. Because of the brightness inside the biologist's body, she is able to see that the Tower is breathing, has its own heartbeat, and is a living organism rather than a building. The unique thing that the members of the expedition encounter in the Tower is a living text written on the walls by little ecosystems and spores. The way in which the Tower communicates is not through direct language, but through transformation and the characters' emotions. Because of the inhalation of the spores, the biologist becomes more susceptible to the environment's "voice." It highlights that the Tower acts like a living organism with agency, rather than a setting where actions are happening.

The analysis of Area X is extremely important, as it depicts that the environment in the story is not a passive background. Area X itself functions as a dynamic ecosystem that constantly changes landscapes, affects temporality, and transforms both human and nonhuman life. Throughout the novel, the environment resists human control and understanding, as traditional systems like mapping, language, and scientific explanation become useless inside the area. The transformation of humans, animals, living ecosystems, and especially the biologist in Area X demonstrates that it actively influences both the body and the mind. In addition, there is no traditional plot in *Annihilation*; the narrative itself depends on and develops through movement in space, which supports the idea of the environment as the main narrative force of the novel. It makes Area X an active ecosystem that shapes the story and the characters, which erases the idea of human control over nature. In this sense, VanderMeer represents nature as an active force that exceeds human systems of knowledge and control.

The environment in the novel does not communicate through direct human language, but through biological transformation, bodily experience, and emotional influence, and is narrated via the biologist's perspective. The spores which the biologist inhaled in the Tower, the hypnosis which was necessary to cross the Border, and the constant changes and transformations which the members of the expedition experienced highlight that Area X has its own form of communication.

At the same time, the novel challenges traditional ideas of human dominance and control over nature. Throughout the narrative, scientific explanations, mapping, language, control of nature, and psychological control over the members of the expedition become unreliable inside Area X. The failure of the expedition, and of the previous expeditions as well, the number of abandoned journals inside the Lighthouse, the measuring equipment which does not measure anything, and the weapons which are useless in Area X demonstrate the inability of human systems, concepts, and knowledge to fully understand or dominate the environment. Instead of controlling nature, the characters were forced to adapt to it and accept Area X's rules.

The concept of the hyperobject suggested by Timothy Morton is important for understanding the role of Area X in the novel. Area X functions as a hyperobject because it is beyond human understanding and cannot be fully perceived, mapped, and explained through traditional human concepts. Its nonlocality is revealed through the impossibility of creating clear borders of Area X, and its unstable temporality is explained by the members of the expedition and their observation that time goes differently there, as in the example of the abandoned village. Moreover, the members of the expedition cannot fully understand its influence or Area X's actions, which are unpredictable, highlighting it as something beyond human understanding. The roles are changed in Area X, which suggests that the Anthropocene perception is destroyed. By applying the concept of the hyperobject to Area X, this thesis tried to prove that nature is presented as something larger, more complex, and more powerful than humans can understand or control. In the novel, Area X is a hyperobject, while the Border, the Lighthouse, and the Tower are parts of its manifestation.

The eco-horror genre is important for analyzing *Annihilation*, as the main fear emerges not from a traditional monster or terrifying creature, but from the environment itself. VanderMeer presents horror through the loss of control, transformation, inability of clear perception, and understanding of Area X. The fear which the members of the expedition feel emerges from the collapse of anthropocentric systems and the understanding that humans are no longer dominant over nature. That is why, while the novel is eco-horror, it also consists of Anthropocene horror elements as well. In this way, eco-horror becomes an effective way of representing ecological anxiety and environmental crisis. Area X provokes fear by making nature an active agent and independent from human control. The fear of the unknown is stronger than expected human scenarios like violence or shooting, which the members of the expedition expected from Area X. The novel demonstrates how eco-horror literature can challenge traditional human-centered narratives, and the usage of horror makes this influence even more

visible. Rather than remaining silent, the environment in *Annihilation* constantly influences human perception, bodies, emotions, and understanding of reality.

The thesis contributes to the discussion of eco-horror and environmental humanities by combining ecocriticism, narratology, and the concept of the hyperobject in the analysis of VanderMeer's *Annihilation*. While previous studies focused on posthumanism and fear of the unknown, this thesis focused on the environment as a main character and its active narrative presence. The analysis showed that Area X is not represented as a passive background where all actions of the novel take place, but as a force which structures the narrative, transforms characters, influences characters' perceptions, and challenges anthropocentric ideas of human dominance over nature. Moreover, the thesis demonstrates that nature in the novel has its own voice. The topic is relevant nowadays because it fits into the context of ongoing discussions about ecological crisis. Through the analysis of Area X, this thesis sheds light on how literature can become a way of rethinking the relationship between nature and humans, challenging anthropocentric ideas of control. The research can be developed into a more precise analysis of the whole Southern Reach series or compare the novel and film adaptation by Alex Garland (2018). In addition, the thesis can be developed by applying different methods, such as, for instance, corpus-based analysis focusing on environmental representation in the book. It gives the research a new angle, which can lead to captivating results different from the close reading technique.

In conclusion, Jeff VanderMeer, in his novel *Annihilation*, demonstrates that the environment is not a passive background for human actions, but an active narrative force which controls the plot, characters, and acts like the main character of the story.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Mariia Zakharova

Eco-horrors in Environmental Humanities: The Environment as a Character in *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer. Keskkonnahumanitaarteaduste ökohorrorid: keskkond kui tegelane Jeff VanderMeeri romaanis *Annihilation*

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Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva magistritöö peamine eesmärk on analüüsida keskkonna kujutamist aktiivse narratiivse tegurina Jeff VanderMeeri romaanis „Annihilation“ (2014). Eesmärk on uurida, kuidas romaan seab kahtluse alla traditsioonilised antropotsentrilised arusaamad loodusest kui passiivsest taustast ning kujutab seda hoopis narratiivi liikumapaneva jõuna, mis mõjutab, muudab ja suhtleb tegelastega.

Uurimistöös on ühendatud ökokriitika, ökohorrori uurimine, narratoloogia ja Timothy Mortoni hüperobjektide kontseptsioon. Töö on jagatud kaheks põhiosaks. Esimeses osas kirjeldatakse teoreetilist raamistikku ja romaani varasemaid analüüse. Teises osas esitatakse põhjalik analüüs Area X neljast peamisest ilmingust: piirist, majakast, tornist ja Area X-ist endast.

Analüüs keskendub sellele, kuidas keskkond suhtleb inimestest sõltumatute vahendite kaudu, nagu bioloogilised faktorid ning nende mõju psühholoogiale füüsilisele. Analüüs kirjeldab inimeste teaduslike ja keeleliste süsteemide kokkuvarisemist autonoomse ja võimsa Area X ees.

Uuringu tulemused näitavad, et romaanis „Annihilation“ on keskkond pigem domineeriv narratiivne tegelane kui pelgalt tegevuspaik. VanderMeer kasutab öko-õudusžanri, et näidata, et uskumus inimese ülemvõimu kohta looduse üle ei ole tänapäeva ühiskonnas enam asjakohane.

Märksõnad: ökohorror, keskkond, hüperobjektid, Area X, muutumine

Lihtlitsents

Lihtlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja lõputöö üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks

Mina, Mariia Zakharova,

1. annan Tartu Ülikoolile tasuta loa (lihtlitsentsi) enda loodud teose

Eco-horror in Environmental Humanities: The Environment as a Character in *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer,
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Lõputöö on lubatud kaitsmisele.

Eret Talviste
Tartus, 12.05.2026