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Horror's Aesthetic Exchange: Immersion, Abstraction and *Annihilation*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

To Tony, thank you for your acceptance and encouragement. I am so grateful to have you in my corner.

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Abstract

This thesis uncovers a remote entanglement of phenomenological experience and abstract aesthetics in postmodern horror, a space that historically celebrates the former and critically undervalues the latter. Framed as a case study, I mobilize close readings of Alex Garland's science fiction horror film, *Annihilation* (2018), to complicate the immersion/abstraction binary that implicitly structures much of contemporary horror scholarship. By recovering horror's distanced and decentered forms and aesthetics I point to the interdependent faculty of a composite aesthetic collaboration.

These collaborations, which I refer to as aesthetic exchanges, place pressure on the localized emphasis of horror's situated assaultive and reactive positions. I place *Annihilation's* tactile, embodied handheld found footage and the abstract, "hovering" nature of the Steadicam aesthetic into a dialogue that sutures together immersion and abstraction, as well as distance and proximity. Additionally, I mobilize the film's audiovisual arrangement to demonstrate how the exchange of on/offscreen sound manifests different modalities of vision and distant presence. By recovering these points of spatiotemporal difference, I establish a productive aesthetic exchange that renegotiates the viewing positions of postmodern horror into infinite collaborations.

Horror's Aesthetic Exchange: Abstraction, Immersion and *Annihilation*

Introduction

Annihilation (Alex Garland, 2018) opens with a wide and exposed shot of Lena (Natalie Portman), the film's protagonist, as she sits centered in a cold and unadorned room. This direct viewpoint is complicated by identificatory ambivalence and distance as Lena's interrogation unfolds. Despite her centered narrative alignment, Lena lacks agency and is othered through mise en scène and cinematography choices. This is substantiated by pushing Lena to the edge of the room and aligning her with the mobile, provisional furniture, such as the fold-out chair and the minimal, rolling table to her side. With each cut, the camera changes position, formally circling and exposing Lena's physical orientation within the space. Constructed of an expansive wall of glass, the room permits distant presence for a crowd of people, as they hover near the room's border and peer into Lena's interrogation. After Lena repeatedly answers, "I don't know" to polar questions the interrogator asks, "then, what do you know?" rendering the sequence as a meditation of epistemological struggles. This diegetic disorientation is replicated for viewers. Just as Lena is grappling with her memory and the interrogator is struggling to understand the situation, we are scrambling for an anchored alignment, pushing this epistemological struggle into an ambivalent ontology. Are we aligned with Lena, the interrogator, or are we a remote voyeur, perhaps mimicking those on the other side of the glass wall? Rather than providing a clear model of embodied identification to hold onto, *Annihilation* opens with an identificatory gap that is meant to mirror the ambivalent and fluctuating identities caught within the Shimmer.

This initial disposition then escalates into a sonic exchange. Through a sound bridge, Lena's introduction is connected to the Shimmer's extraterrestrial origination. The warm, natural sound of a nondiegetic acoustic guitar spills into the bright, blinding image of a meteor plummeting through Earth's atmosphere, an image not unlike the Skydance Media production sequence that appears before the film's opening, which also sonically spills into the diegesis. The expositional sequence begins to crosscut between an extreme wide shot of the Shimmer overtaking a lighthouse, the meteor's point of impact, and a kinetic form of organic, yet metallic matter illuminating as it expands. Here, the film visually and abstractly connects the Shimmer's vibrant expanse to its source, and further marks what was once a pillar of guidance now a point of uncertainty. The opening sequence then cuts to a simple title card, concluding the introductory trajectory of Lena, the Shimmer, and film.

Annihilation's opening manipulates aesthetic abstraction and distance to evoke unease, which simultaneously intensifies the desire for an alignment. As the onscreen interrogation intensifies into offscreen uncertainty, viewers must work through their own ontological doubt. The sound bridges that weave through the opening scenes thread the viewer's body through temporal and spatial difference and into a pattern of wavered viewer identification. This science-fiction horror film's sensuous preoccupation with the body extends beyond its diegesis and resides in postmodern horror's rich genealogy.

The horror genre stretches across film history, encompasses a multitude of styles, and even bleeds into other narratives outside the constructed boundary of the genre. Despite this ubiquitous extension, horror remains dedicated to its goal of meditating on fear, shock, anxiety, and increasingly, the body. Beginning with Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* in 1960 and intensifying in the 1970s, the genre's punctuated preoccupation with violated flesh, including but not limited

to sharp assaults, metamorphoses, and possessions has launched a frenzy of sensation. This mark of excess and “gross display of the human body” led to horror’s celebration as a body genre (“Film Bodies” 269). In her discussion of *Psycho* (1960), Linda Williams expresses this postmodern mode constitutes “new ways of seeing, and new ways of feeling films” (“Discipline and Fun” 351). Through images of the uncanny and the abject, the postmodern horror film offers onscreen confrontations between self/other, internal/external, and assaultive/reactive that then renegotiate offscreen identifications. However, in efforts to uphold confrontation and cross-identification through a feminist and corporeal lens, scholars have overlooked the *exchange* of abstract and immersive forms, the potential for an aesthetic entanglement, as well as new and compelling ways to unsettle the “monolithic” and “ahistorical” apparatus theory scholars like Linda Williams, Vivian Sobchack, and Carol Clover aimed to disarm. Framed as an intervention, this thesis redeems an entanglement of phenomenological experience and abstract aesthetics in postmodern horror, a space that historically celebrates the former and critically undervalues the latter. By complicating the immersion/abstraction binary that structures much of contemporary horror scholarship, I point to the interdependent faculty of a composite collaboration.

This binary, which renders immersion and abstraction as disparate, is suggested in Linda Williams’ introduction to *Viewing Positions* and is articulated in Vivian Sobchack’s essay “Phenomenology and the Film Experience.” *Viewing Positions* challenges the model of spectatorship found in the work of Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey and Jean-Louis Baudry with diverse, embodied positions. As an edited collection, *Viewing Positions* focuses on “the crucial relationship between visual representations and human subjectivity” (Williams, “Introduction” 5). Williams simultaneously challenges gaze theory’s “objectifying” past, historicizes the present, and projects an embodied, heterogeneous spectator into the future. This opposition is

framed as a corporeal pivot, which opposes the classical “unitary” and “vacant” gaze by redeeming a somatic and localized experience “founded in existence,” as phrased by Vivian Sobchak (40). While Sobchack’s redemption of the body manifests a sensuous “dialogical and dialectical engagement,” I argue that the localization of the body also implies a restriction, as it disregards the potential of abstract formulation (9). Fundamentally, Sobchack’s phenomenological claims reside in a justifiable critique of previous hegemonic models, however, in favoring embodiment, Sobchack structurally dismisses distance and represses abstraction. Sobchack describes this embodied existence as “situated, finite, and – by virtue of being a body – “centered” in a world” (44). Further, she theorizes, this embodied existence is “constituted as and marked by the intrasubjective and intersubjective *exchange* between perception and expression [emphasis added]” (Sobchack 44). Sobchack mobilizes an *entanglement* of perception and expression:

In a film as in life, perception and expression - having sense and making sense - do not originally oppose each other and are not separated or differentiated as distinctly binary constructs and practices. Rather, they are complementary modalities of an original and unified experience of existence that has been fragmented and lost to those interested in the ontology of the cinema and its structures of signification. (Sobchack 44-45)

My argument and redemption of an aesthetic exchange within postmodern horror values Sobchack’s entanglement of perception and expression, however, I place pressure on Sobchack’s phenomenological and localized emphasis of a situated, lived experience by uncovering horror’s latent and abstract expressions, which I claim interdependently interact with these somatic

experiences. My argument is not meant to place immersion and abstraction in a quantitative hierarchy, or to suggest one generates the other. Instead, I argue the film experience, and more specifically the postmodern horror film experience, is built upon a complex and remote collaboration between these interdependent forms and aesthetics, which then transforms the model of identification and opens up horror scholarship to the potential of abstraction.

Framed as a case study, I utilize close readings of *Annihilation*, to uncover these latent exchanges. *Annihilation*, written for the screen and directed by Alex Garland, is loosely based on the first novel of the *Southern Reach Trilogy* by Jeff VanderMeer. The film follows Lena, a biologist and former soldier, as she navigates through the Shimmer, a growing expanse riddled with alien manipulation. Lena's story begins when her husband, Kane (Oscar Isaac), suddenly appears home after an unexplained and yearlong absence following his confidential assignment in the Shimmer. Motivated by Kane's mysterious homecoming and his deteriorating health, Lena joins a team of women to study the Shimmer and uncover the truth behind Kane's condition. Through a series of flashbacks and Lena's reconstructed testimony, viewers witness the fate of the women, the Shimmer's incomprehensible DNA mutations, as animal and plant species blend together, and the Shimmer's confinement, as all forms of outside communication are refracted within the contaminated area. During *Annihilation*'s climax, the film's thematic preoccupation with identification is made manifest as Lena encounters the Shimmer and her refracted self.

While Garland's film continuously strays from VanderMeer's novel, the variances relevant to this thesis include identifying the quarantined Area X as "the Shimmer" and transforming the novel's handwritten journals into digital found footage within the film. Additionally, the characters in the film are referred to by name, rather than the novel's professional descriptions such as "the biologist" or "the linguist." While I acknowledge the

nuances between the mediums, this thesis exclusively draws upon the content and form of the film adaptation.

The binary opposition between immersion and abstraction takes shape in horror scholarship through its evaluation of visceral aesthetics to recover and destabilize previous “perverse forms of visual pleasure” (Williams, “Introduction” 2). Linda Williams approaches this redemption by marking *Psycho* as “the important beginning of an era in which viewers began going to the movies to be thrilled and moved in quite visceral ways (“Discipline and Fun” 356). Williams argues Hitchcock’s film offers an “intensification of certain forms of visuality...through the image-producing and reproducing apparatuses that were already evident in...mainstream Hollywood cinema, but which changed under the incipient pressures of postmodernity” (“Discipline and Fun” 355). These forms of visuality are then characterized by their visceral sensibility, as Williams writes, the forms are “grounded in the pleasurable anticipation of the next gut-spilling, gut-wrenching moment” (“Discipline and Fun” 356). The pleasurable embodiment and anticipation, or “discipline” then intensifies the genre’s commitment to uncertainty, disorientation and shock (“Discipline and Fun” 358). With this emerges a reorganization of pleasure previously tied to a voyeuristic-sadistic gaze. However, by renegotiating pleasure through diverse embodiment an implicit hesitation toward distance and abstraction manifests. This binary also works through the genre itself. Narratively, post-1970s horror films work toward visceral bodily assaults and weaponize forms of abstraction and potential salvation. Formally, the genre often employs handheld cinematography, embodied POV and sharp corporeal sound cues to orient the viewer in the violent diegetic space. My intervention locates and complicates embodied aesthetics to redeem the abstract and distant forms that

structure pleasurable anticipation and fear, which then ultimately disrupts the opposition into a harmonious composition.

Annihilation represses the abstract “hovering” Steadicam aesthetic as a subordinate foil to the handheld and diegetic found footage, which I view as an impulsive grasp toward presence and embodiment. This aesthetic opposition, I argue, should be understood as remotely entangled. By accentuating formal difference, both visual and sonic, in addition to their collaboration in the diegetic found footage sequences, I point to the interdependent faculty of corporeal immersion and abstract experience. When these forms are harmonized compositely, *Annihilation*’s thematic genetic entanglement duplicates as a formal and aesthetic interdependence, which, in particular, generates a composite collaboration, and in general, establishes a renegotiated postmodern horror ciné-subject.

Before I redeem *Annihilation*’s exchange and entanglement of forms and aesthetics, I should spell out precisely what I mean by abstraction and immersion. Within this thesis, I define immersion as a formal and aesthetic process that grounds viewer identification through proximate, sensuous, and often violent, embodiment. I also refer to abstraction as a process, however, unlike immersion, which orients the viewer toward materiality and presence, abstraction decenters experience through detachment and distance. Untethered to a fixed positionality, perceptual realism or bodily integrity, these abstract aesthetics and forms destabilize a defined identification.

Recent discussions of immersion often cite overt bodily participation within new, interactive media, such as virtual reality and digital gameplay. Gordon Calleja discusses immersion within game studies as a “multifaceted experiential phenomenon” that is tangled with diverging definitions. He instead proposes the alternative of “incorporation,” which “operates on

a double axis” as it acts as an “assimilation to mind, and as embodiment” (Calleja 169). I value Calleja’s intention, as he begins to implicate both the mind and body, however his framing synthesizes, rather than individually acknowledges, distance and presence. Calleja states, “incorporation occurs when the game world is present to the player while the player is simultaneously present, via her avatar, to the virtual environment” (169). This suggests player immersion requires an avatar, a bodily and finite visible presence. Additionally, the very word itself places the body in the foreground, as “incorporation” contains the Latin root word for body, “corpus.” Calleja’s argument ultimately limits immersion to active embodiment, implicates the body as primary and qualifies distance as secondary, whereas I look toward an ongoing collaborative exchange within postmodern horror.

My discussion of horror’s immersion is grounded in Scott Ferguson’s theorization of the “hyper-Newtonian” aesthetics found in the New Hollywood blockbuster. Framed by Ferguson as a “ritualized site of convergence and repair for a fractured social body,” the hyper-Newtonian, post-1970s blockbuster emphasizes neoliberal anxieties through complex and contracted moments of hyper-physical aesthetics and phenomenological immersion tactics, such as an emphasis on belief, weight, sound design, and point-of-view (10). I claim, these bodily, immersive, and impulsive aesthetics have also bled into post-1970s horror films. If the hyper-Newtonian blockbuster reigns over weighted, bass-driven collisions, then the contemporary horror film relishes in anchored and bodily assaults to phenomenologically immerse viewers. Ferguson writes this aesthetic shift toward a “material here-and-now” concretizes the “phenomenology that rules neoliberal money relations” (9, 10). This crystallization occurs through the blockbuster’s complicated ambivalence toward and negation of aesthetic abstraction. At the heart of Ferguson’s work, he contends that “critical theory must transcend” its imposed

‘thisness’ and materiality and instead “embrace money’s abstract boundless center as the source of social and ecological redemption” (36). Ferguson points to Modern Monetary Theory as possessing the “critical leverage” necessary for refusing the money/aesthetics dialectic and replacing it with curative, boundless infinitude that has the “capacity to support every person and environment it mediates” (36). My claims follow alongside Scott Ferguson’s articulation of monetary abstraction’s curative potential by redeeming aesthetic abstraction as a phenomenological, collaborative tool for horror scholarship. Extending this, I build upon Ferguson’s phenomenological aesthetics to designate immersion in the horror film as a process that materializes hyper-physical onscreen scenes as offscreen individualized proximate expressions. I then recover horror’s latent markers of distance and abstraction to renegotiate this punctuated viewing experience as a boundless, and aesthetically variegated condition.

Following this, I would like to return to my close reading of *Annihilation*’s opening sequence which introduced the film’s repression of abstract identification and the manipulated gap in identification. This is discussed and complicated in my first section as I suture the Steadicam aesthetic and handheld found footage to form a composite collaboration that points to both distant and proximate expressions. The Shimmer’s expositional scene, organized by crosscuts and sound bridges, points to my second section’s focus, as I utilize sound bridges and on/offscreen audio to demonstrate a remote entanglement of sound and somatic materiality to redeem horror’s dedication to distant presence. Within these sections and through the specific close readings, I pull at the film’s seams to reveal the interdependence of abstraction and immersion. Through this, I create a dialogue that recovers their points of spatiotemporal difference and redeems the forms as, to return to Sobchack, “complementary modalities of an original and unified experience of existence” (Sobchack 44-45).

The Identificatory Gap Made Whole

The formal gap in identification within *Annihilation*'s opening sequence is thematically carried through the film's narrative, as Lena and the women encounter transferable, unfixed duplicates of the self. These duplications are seen with the ouroboros tattoo that jumps from character to character and the overt duplication of Kane and Lena in the final scenes. The gap in identification refers to an indefinite and ambiguous alignment. In the opening sequence this gap manifests as a disembodied viewpoint for viewers. With each cut, a new view fills the frame and reveals the previous viewing position as vacant. This transferable, phantom perception feels immaterial and uncomfortable, especially within a genre so often devoted to identifiable looks, which Carol Clover classifies as the "assaultive and reactive gaze." *Annihilation* continues to manifest this gap by opposing abstract and distant aesthetics with proximate moments of immersion. In this act, the film orients both the characters and viewers toward embodiment and away from abstract mediation.

To supplement this, I begin with a close analysis of *Annihilation*'s first found footage sequence. Here, the self-existent and hovering Steadicam aesthetic, which I first discuss as an ambiguous composite of presence and absence, meets the impulsive and tactile handheld camera. This extended sequence, I argue, expresses the film's desire for impulsive embodiment. Additionally, I argue *Annihilation*'s use of found footage exploits postmodern horror's commitment to bodily immersion, or violent, sensuous acts of proximity. By redeeming the complicated nature of the found footage form as an entanglement of proximity and distance, I claim that the somatic camera does not stand in direct opposition to the abstract cinematography that permeates through the narrative. Instead, both forms should be situated as interdependently

entangled. This remote collaboration then renegotiates formal and spatial points of difference into a complex unified viewing experience, rather than the film's suggested gap or absence in identification. This viewing position and experience reorganizes the limits of postmodern horror scholarship's emphasis on localized bodily aesthetics by introducing distant forms and their remote influence as well as their potential for presence.

The sequence at hand opens with a wide shot of an abandoned military base, which previously operated as the Southern Reach's headquarters before the area was swallowed up and appropriated by the Shimmer. With their backs to the field of view, the characters walk into the frame and through the base's damaged gate. This opening shot demonstrates detachment and distance, as the women walk past the camera, leaving it and the viewer behind. This impression of distance is then reinforced in the following shot. Despite the characters' front facing positionality and their forward stride toward the camera, the women look beyond the camera's position and focus on remote objects. There is a lack of anchored connection here, similar to the film's opening sequence. While Lena's introduction included multiple viewpoints, the camera within the Shimmer haunts the space. The camera lingers around the women and avoids any sense of material bond, as the apparatus does not indulge in eyeline matches or fixed orientation, which would indicate a tethered positionality.

Juxtaposing this observation with contrasting examples from within the horror genre substantiates how *Annihilation* denies an acknowledged presence through the apparatus. For example, Jack Torrance's direct and maniacal stare in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), Norman Bates' eerie and acknowledging smirk at the end of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and Thomasin's dire realization and eyeline match in Robert Egger's *The Witch* (2015) all utilize the apparatus to illustrate presence and recognition. Whereas *Annihilation*'s predominate

cinematography floats through space, mirrors the permeating mutations inside the boundary of the Shimmer, and maintains distance and detachment. The film codes the camera's lack of precise positionality as unsettling, seen with the form's semblance to the uncanny effects of the Shimmer. Resisting this, I argue the distant and detached form reveals the limits of constraining a viewing position to finitude and uncovers the possibility of immaterial perception.

I refer to the predominate form of cinematography within the Shimmer as the Steadicam aesthetic. To clarify, I do not claim *Annihilation*'s cinematography is exclusively captured through a Steadicam device. Instead, I point to the lingering and floating camera, which is often captured through the Steadicam mount, as an ambiguous and abstract viewpoint and overall aesthetic. Invented in the mid-1970s by Garrett Brown, the Steadicam effectively removes the body's natural vibrations and effects on cinematography by countering the weight of the operator's body (Ferrara). This device essentially combines the smooth, fluid quality of a dolly with the mobility of the handheld camera but removes the solid stability of the former and the somatic impulsivity or "corporeal immediacy" of the latter (Rust 149). Moreover, Jean-Pierre Geuens articulates the device as "gear that disembodies vision" (Geuens 16). This does not dispute the Steadicam's potential for an aligned, representational visual orientation. The opening sequence of *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), which I discuss in the following section, demonstrates this potential alignment. However, when analyzing it within the parameters of immersion, as I have defined, this detached and floating camera displaces the body, both technically and phenomenologically into an ambiguous immaterial mobility.

The Steadicam's ambiguous nature is thoroughly articulated by Amy Rust. She frames the Steadicam device as a "phenomenal and psychological form of relation that organizes—perhaps even reorganizes—encounters between living and nonliving

milieus (Rust 148). This “ecological aesthetic,” Rust argues, “dislocates operator and apparatus alike” and “hinges on concretely locatable and sensuous perceptions” (149). Further, Rust accentuates Steadicam’s ability to figure both “limits and possibilities” of the neoliberal era through the “decidedly ambiguous relationships it organizes between operators, spectators, and on- and off-screen environments” (148). These uncertain encounters and precarious confrontations bridge to *Annihilation*’s utilization of a floating apparatus to confront and oppose the proximate materiality of the handheld camera.

On my reading, the Steadicam aesthetic, as utilized in *Annihilation*, continuously floats around the characters. This sense of absence, as it is weightless and unacknowledged, signals a lack. Yet, concluding here would maintain the immersion and abstraction binary I aim to complicate. Therefore, despite its material absence, the Steadicam cinematography aesthetic and its *hovering* immateriality, demonstrated by its unrestrained nature, also point to a haunting omnipresence. Christian Metz entangles this spectatorial absence and presence in *The Imaginary Signifier*. “Spectator is absent from the screen as perceived, but also present there and even ‘all-present’ as perceiver (*The Imaginary Signifier* 54). Extending this, Metz theorizes how the classical “hovering” presence implicates spectators in an abstracted, passive perception. “This presence often remains diffuse, geographically undifferentiated, even distributed over the whole surface of the screen; or more precisely *hovering*” (*The Imaginary Signifier* 54). Despite his suspicions of this hovering, all-perceiving identification, I utilize this hovering aesthetic to articulate the Steadicam aesthetics’ nuanced and ambiguous sense of presence. While technically abstracted from the camera operator’s body and aesthetically removed from gravitropic materiality, which the handheld camera contrastingly and somatically exploits, the Steadicam aesthetic cultivates an abstract, distant viewing experience and identification between diegetic

space and the viewer's body. Simultaneously absent and present, this haunted viewpoint possesses a kinetic energy, guiding the viewer's perception and arguably their body *through* space.

With this kinetic viewpoint, I return to Vivian Sobchack's redemption of the body and its implied opposition to Metz. Sobchack articulates the viewing experience as a "system of communication based on bodily perception as a vehicle of conscious expression" (41). Yet, Metz implies an embodied and tactile perception, as well, "at every moment I am in the film by my look's caress" (*The Imaginary Signifier* 54). This tactile perception is later articulated by Laura Marks, as "haptic visuality." Vision, Marks writes "can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes" (Marks xi). While Metz does not arrange the body as primary, his argument is nevertheless riddled with references to physicality. While perceiving a film, Metz states, "my sense organs are physically affected" and further locates the film's projector as an apparatus situated "behind" the viewer and "at the back of" our head, "precisely where phantasy locates the 'focus' of all vision" (*The Imaginary Signifier* 49).

Despite my own redemption of the Steadicam aesthetic as a form of aesthetic abstraction that entangles presence and absence for viewer, *Annihilation* imposes its narrative evaluation of the invasive Shimmer effects onto this formal hovering expression. This narrative judgment is demonstrated by Lena's denouncement of the Shimmer's effects and its alignment with the abstract cinematography. As she approaches the colorful spores and lichen growing on the compound's wall, Lena negatively designates the mutations as "malignant" and tumorous. The sequence cuts to a hovering close-up of the covered wall and the array of *moving* mutations. Just as the film mobilizes abstract identification to promote unease in the opening sequence, the film

continues to denounce abstraction through narrative signification. Depicting the Shimmer's kinetic mutations through the fluid and hovering viewpoint negatively links diegesis to form.

After Lena's close encounter with the mutations, the image cuts to an interior shot of the compound's mess hall. A smooth, floating shot glides parallel to the women as they enter the space, a mimetic act that substantiates an entanglement of distant observation and thoughtful reflection, or presence. The camera glides through the mess hall, a space constructed of sharp architectural lines and oversized windows - a space reminiscent of the transparent interrogation room and windowed classroom from the opening sequence. As the women begin to independently explore the space, Anya directs her attention toward an abandoned machine gun, and Lena walks over to a blackboard depicting a list of names and a hand drawn map of the base. Sheppard (Tuva Novotny) joins her and points to a marking, identifying the mess hall. "That's the building we're in?" Lena asks, also pointing to the board. The map, an abstraction of space, allows Lena and the women to identify their position within the military base, which essentially grounds them to materiality. While outside communication is warped and silenced within the Shimmer, this interaction demonstrates the latent markers of abstraction that are mobilized to ground their bodies.

This lack of communication is a narrative trope continuously used in horror films. Whether it be a faulty cell phone seen in *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) or a cut phone line in *The Strangers* (Bryan Bertino, 2008), salvation is rarely, if ever, achieved through distant connection. If the horror film is not repressing these abstract communicative tools through destruction and malfunction, then the narrative often weaponizes them. Recent examples include, *Cam* (Daniel Goldhaber, 2018) and *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze, 2014), which focus

on malevolent and deadly online chatrooms. Thus, *Annihilation*'s narrative and formal repression of abstraction is a familiar horror film characteristic. And while I have argued *Annihilation*'s hovering cinematography as aesthetic abstraction, I challenge the film's negative alignment by redeeming the entanglement of presence and absence within the abstract viewing position.

Returning to the extended sequence and the abandoned space of the mess hall, I want to shift focus to the impulsive handheld camera to demonstrate how this embodied viewpoint entangles presence and absence, proximity and distance, just as the ambiguous Steadicam aesthetic expresses. As Lena and Sheppard continue to study the map, the team's leader, Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh) approaches the transparent façade, a border that bonds the exterior vegetation to the damp interior. Her movement is depicted through a floating, mimetic shot. This boundary separating inside/outside is shattered, as the outside, mutated foliage grows into the interior space through a broken window. A smooth shot pushes in to reveal a plastic bag placed in the center of the table, its intentional placement contrasting with the scattered chairs and forgotten gear littered around the space. Dumping its contents on to the grimy table, Dr. Ventress frames her discovery as informative and expressive. "This might be able to tell us something. 'For those that follow,' I believe that means us." The film begins to cut back and forth between three different viewing positions: a front-facing reaction shot of the women huddled around Josie's camera, a close-up of this diegetic camera as it plays the found footage clip, and a full view of the violent handheld scene without the framing or overt mediation of the diegetic camera. The spatial confrontation depicted in the mess hall between inside and outside now turns explicit in the found footage clip/scene.

While seemingly interchangeable, I utilize "clip" and "scene" to differentiate between the diegetic found footage's oscillating spatial and temporal condition. "Clip" refers to the physical

and estranged nature of the video file, essentially *clipped* from experience and now tied to the memory card within Josie's camera. "Scene," then refers to the ongoing, active experience *seen* through the original camera as the events unfold. *Annihilation* exploits the physical nature of the clip, inattentive to its collection of digital and abstract information, to enforce immediacy, weight and presence, onto the distant scene. Through this, the footage renders horror's impulsive desire for embodiment and immersion as visible yet latently implicates both presence and distance in the process.

This collaborative process resides in the multiple viewing positions that structure the sequence, as the exchange of proximate, active viewer and distant, passive voyeur joins immersion and abstraction together into a composite and complementary experience. The viewer first perceives the footage as an over-the-shoulder shot, essentially aligning the viewer with the women's view. Here, the footage is tightly framed by the small LCD screen, Josie's hand naturally sways from the weight of the camera, and the footage's audio sounds muffled as it plays directly from the diegetic camera's speakers. A nondiegetic soundscape a mix of choral hums accompanies the footage, which increasingly become louder as the footage continues. The clip's first moments appear on the framed LCD screen, depicting Kane directly addressing potential viewers. A reaction shot of Lena follows Kane's address. This shot depicts Lena instinctually taking a deep breath and stepping away from the camera and her husband's image, emphasizing the clip's sense of physical presence and impact on the body. This sense of presence is heightened into immediacy as the film transitions to a full view of the footage. By removing the mediation of Josie's camera and converting the muffled audio into an omnidirectional soundscape, the footage transforms into an ongoing act and places the viewer within the violent scene. Now renegotiating the parameters of past and present through the transformed frame, the

scene depicts Kane directing his attention to a fellow soldier seated against a wall. Directed by the look of an absent handheld camera, our view points down at Kane's grip on a knife. The scene is lit by a single flashlight that follows Kane's actions and directs the camera/viewer's focus. Kane stabs the seated soldier and begins ripping the knife through the soldier's abdomen. As the soldier takes in rapid, shallow breaths, the camera begins to tilt up and down, the flashlight sporadically illuminating different sections of the assaulted body.

This proximate assault, as it occurs as a present scene becomes riddled with markers of formal abstraction, as jump cuts accentuate the scene's absent source: the camera. Kane continues to slice through the soldier's flesh before the film cuts to a steady tracking shot of the women, visibly uncomfortable. Cutting back to the handheld scene, the viewpoint becomes more and more sporadic as the assault unfolds. After a quick close-up of Kane's concentrated expression, the scene cuts to the mutilated soldier's face, now illuminated by the harsh flashlight. This cut stands as a formal wink to the abstract mediation concealed by the handheld's graphic and gravitropic quality. As a gesture of support and comfort, Kane repeatedly pats the soldier on his chest before ripping back the soldier's flesh and exposing his moving insides. Another reaction shot of the women fills the frame before cutting back to Kane. Just as Kane is cutting through flesh, the viewer's vision is sliced between clip and scene. This cleave in perception and orientation can also be turned around and argued as a visual suture, linking perception to both formal distance and aesthetic proximity. The viewer becomes consciously aware of her own body, not despite, but because of the formal transitions and cuts, or temporal abstractions, between the clip and scene.

Additionally, Kane's supportive tactile gesture within the scene manifests the punctuated preoccupation with tactility and violent connection riddled throughout post-70s horror. The

audible impact of Kane's hand patting the soldier's chest while he directs the rest of his team to "hold him down" launches into a frenzy of embodied, material presence as Kane, declares "there, there." Kane, now directly addressing both prospective and present viewers motions for the camera to closely capture the soldier's exposed insides. With one hand visibly shaking as he holds back the skin, a visual reminder of the shaking hand that props our gaze, Kane extends and points his other hand, inviting us to look. The scene cuts to a close-up shot of a third soldier simultaneously holding down and cradling the mutilated soldiers convulsing body while the scene becomes mangled by frequent cuts. The flashlight, the camera and our gaze now point directly at Kane's hand intertwined in the soldier's coiling intestines, emphasizing the unnatural movement. The scene depicts Kane's processing the sublime and graphic vision before him, his expression filled with wonderment and awe. A wide reaction shot interrupts the material clip and ongoing scene. Anya forcibly closes the camera and immobilizes the clip through physical force. The women, repulsed and confused, begin to disperse through the space, actively distancing their bodies from the proximate and present violence. Sheppard and Josie both try to make sense of the brutal images through language. "There was something inside that man." "His insides were moving." While Anya analytically dismisses it as a "trick of the light" and a "shock response." Dr. Ventress walks off and locates the physical location depicted in the footage, making sense through the placement of her body. The women follow close behind and witness the soldier's mutated corpse, an abject reminder of the footage's presence.

Annihilation's use of found footage as a distinctive plot device differs from other horror films which fully manifest through the form, such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007). *Annihilation's* divergence and the form's isolated narrative appearance provides an opportunity to assess the gravitropic

embrace or violent tactility that impulsively grasps for embodied presence. The character's remote, yet tangible confrontation with the first-person perspective, or digital testimony transforms into a proximate and immersive scene for the viewer. Through this exchange and reversibility, the clip/scene then sutures distance and proximity, self and other, as well as immersion and abstraction into a collaborative, entangled encounter.

This explicit exchange can also be traced in *Sinister* (Scott Derrickson, 2012). The film's main character, Ellison Oswalt (Ethan Hawke), discovers and encounters a collection of celluloid footage, which, like *Annihilation* also depict handheld scenes of violence. Similar to *Annihilation*'s framing, *Sinister* sutures remote viewing to proximate violence through an exchange of shots: Ellison's reaction to the film reel, Ellison's POV of the footage as it projects on a homemade screen, and a full, immediate view of the reel's scene. *Annihilation* increases the intensity of these sutures and designates spatial difference through a varied soundscape, whereas *Sinister* maintains a consistent mix of score and diegetic sound, which collapses the varied frames as sonically and spatially indistinguishable.

Following in line with its own narrative judgment and the genre's overall repression of abstraction, the value of an explicit exchange of immersion and abstraction is overlooked by the film. In its place lies a misdiagnosis: a gap in identification. The ontological unease introduced through its opening carries into the found footage scene. While I redeem the cuts within the "scene" and across the sequence as sutures, the film exploits the cuts as gaps that point to a disoriented and ambivalent ontology. *Annihilation*, in its climax and closing scene, treats this gap with a complete conflation and prescribes an embodied orientation as an appropriate antidote. This then neglects to consider the composite and creative mutual exchange between distance and presence.

Moving toward an aesthetic interdependence within *Annihilation*, specifically, and the horror genre, generally, places both abstract experience and corporeal identification into a remote collaboration that then challenges Vivian Sobchack's localized cinematic embodied vision to reckon with distance and moments of decentered experience. This reckoning, and move away from the body, opens the conversation to perceive abstraction as a plastic and contestable utility. Be it the abstract nature of money and its infinite curative potential or the spatiotemporal abstraction captured in a clip and transformed into a scene, abstraction has the potential to mediate offscreen, lived spaces.

Entangling Spatial Difference Through Audiovisual Exchange

Annihilation's remote entanglement is further explicated through an audiovisual arrangement that sutures offscreen sound to the onscreen diegesis, which then extends to offscreen, lived space. As I engage with and redeem *Annihilation's* sonic and visual points of difference as a valuable exchange, I further demonstrate the latent entanglement within post-1970s horror and point to the ongoing interdependence buried in the genre. I return to POV and the Steadicam aesthetic once more to emphasize the forms' heightened spatial difference and the ongoing exchange of on/offscreen audiovisual arrangement which demonstrates different modalities of vision. I then mobilize the film's fusion of sonic and visual incompatibility, demonstrated by the hybrid vocalization of the mutated bear, to discuss how horrific tension and confrontation is substantiated by acousmatic sound, a "hallmark" of the horror film (Fenimore 80). Through this section I continue to challenge horror scholarship to reconsider the latent markers of abstract aesthetics embedded in the genre and abstractions ability to distantly negotiate and mediate an experience.

The sequence begins with Lena's ontological discovery. Through an extreme close up, we witness Lena's DNA dividing into mutated Shimmer cells. Through this microscopic view, Lena makes sense of herself through a distanced and abstract representation of her own internal materiality. After her discovery, Lena leaves the group's elevated refuge and joins Dr. Ventress on the ground level. Now together in the lookout post, the psychologist outlines the next morning's route for Lena. Dr. Ventress' orientation calls back to Sheppard and Lena's interaction while studying the base map, which I discussed in the preceding section. This narrative reoccurrence underlines the interdependent relationship between abstraction and embodiment latently expressed with the film. The sequence under discussion narratively follows the women's encounter with the found footage. Thus, as a means to process her husband's visible violence, Lena expresses her concern in Kane's intentions of joining a "suicide mission." Dr. Ventress, a psychologist, dismisses Lena's label. "You're confusing suicide with self-destruction." Dr. Ventress continues, "almost none of us commit suicide and almost all of us self-destruct... but these aren't decisions, they're impulses." Dr. Ventress then redirects the question back to Lena. "Isn't self-destruction coded into us, programmed into each cell?" By framing this impulse as innate and predetermined, as Dr. Ventress connects it to our biological design, it reinforces immersion as fundamental to identification. This dialogue openly declares impulsive sensuous embodiment as natural and expected. Further, this narrative impulsion toward self-destruction is violently and repeatedly carried out within the diegesis, seen with the mutilated soldier's compliance, Kane's recorded suicide and Josie and Dr. Ventress' voluntary refraction into the Shimmer.

Before Lena can respond to Dr. Ventress' assertions, a loud noise followed by a deep bellow occurs offscreen. The sequence cuts back to the tower and Sheppard is seen jolting

awake. This points to offscreen sound's faculty to penetrate through onscreen space. Back on the ground, Lena grabs her night-vision binoculars and begins scanning for the threat. A direct and overtly filtered point of view shot fills the frame. This field of vision is coded as Lena's POV as the green night-vision filter matches her previous action. For Lena, the night-vision grants vision in a confined and oppressed position, while, for the viewer, the night-vision reveals the contiguous border separating mediation and immersion, as this perceptual frame points to the visual layer necessary for embodied alignment. This layer overcomes imperception for Lena yet draws attention to the limitations of impulsive embodiment for the viewer. The transition from the remote, hovering observer to immediate, embodied participant identifies a division in perspective that is categorized by different levels of knowledge. To clarify, while the embodied POV has the potential for vision, the somatic and shaky viewpoint fails to grant contextual knowledge to the viewer. Demonstrating this, the sequence quickly cuts from Lena's night-vision POV to the hovering cinematography to fully reveal the broken fence to the viewer. This formal exchange reveals viewer and character knowledge is respectively tied to different modalities of vision. However, like the cuts in the found footage sequence which I identified as sutures, the transition between remote and proximate bridges immateriality to embodiment and entangles viewer in a complex and simultaneous modality of identification. To clarify my claims, I employ "suture" within this thesis to express the act of a composite collaboration between abstract and immersive aesthetics while also acknowledging the term's rich history within both film and sound theory (Hanns Eisler and Theodor W. Adorno, Claudia Gorman).

Lena's dialogue, "something's come through the fence," audibly and diegetically reinforces the visible events. Rather than paring this exclamation to her own POV, the dialogue emanates from the remote viewpoint. Continuing the sequence, the mobile shot now moves

beyond the fence enclosure, further highlighting the form's omnipresence and immaterial nature. While this observation points to the cinematography's difference in epistemological faculty and alignment, it also reveals the two forms' entangled desire to cross through borders and limitations. Lena's POV bridges her restricted physical position to comprehensive perception, moving past visual limitations. The hovering aesthetic refines the bodily, bounded view into an autonomous and mobile entity, moving past physical boundaries. Moreover, the onscreen dialogue clarifies the viewpoint for both onscreen characters and offscreen viewers. Analyzing this sequence demonstrates how the floating cinematography decenters yet mobilizes perception through an expansive diegetic space. In contrast, Lena's POV essentially immerses the viewer within the diegesis by grounding perception to the limits of Lena's physical position. And further, to return to Amy Rust, this Steadicam aesthetic, "expresses yet exceeds the diegetic world it depicts" (148).

These observations, as well as my discussion in the previous section, are not meant to flatten the POV shot's rich history into a single claim, as POV is not exclusive to one specific genre of filmmaking, nor is it unique post-1970s aesthetics. With this said, however, the presence of POV in post-1970s blockbusters and horror films, calls attention to the mode's foundational goal of bodily immersion. This somatic experience is achieved by repressing abstraction and embracing the phenomenology of an experience. POV in both the blockbuster and horror film, promotes such immersion, as the view conflates character, camera and viewer into an embodied field of view. This phenomenological aesthetic reaffirms viewer's ambivalence toward abstraction and ultimately dismantles a chance for distant mediation.

Mark Kerins discusses immersive POV within the blockbuster genre in his article *Narration in the Cinema of Digital Sound*. Kerins identifies digital surround sound as a

transformative filmmaking form and aesthetic. This new style, coined by Kerins as the “Digital Sound Cinema aesthetic” (DSC), emphasizes a strategy of immersion. According to Kerins, “audiences are, visually and aurally, literally placed in the middle of the action” (44). To further explicate this, Kerins demonstrate DSC’s trajectory of narrative value and immersion through a discussion of the POV shots from the first two *Terminator* films. “Immersiveness is *the* fundamental characteristic of the DSC aesthetic” (51). Recognizing the POV shots in *Terminator 2* as immersive, Kerins states, “not only are we placed in the world of the film (and in the multichannel soundscape, heard from Terminator’s perspective), we are placed in his character” (51).

The opening sequence of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) contextualizes this tactic within the “hyper-Newtonian” blockbuster timeline and displays a blended, embodied perspective. Additionally, the sequence demonstrates sonic immersion and the complicated nature of the ambiguous sublime force. The opening *Jaws* begins by sonically surrounding the viewer with a natural, underwater soundscape, which is then coupled by John Williams’ deep and ominous, yet simple, score. The score’s rhythm quickens and the first visual of the film appears: an underwater POV shot. Now, the nondiegetic music is clearly aligned with a specific visual field and the sound of the water is linked to the diegesis. The seamless, flowing camera movement coupled with the score blends wonderment and dread into an ambivalent yet fluid arrangement. Immediately, *Jaws* introduces and aligns viewers with a sublime force that is both terrifying and desirable. If immersion is central to the hyper-Newtonian phenomenology of the blockbuster, then it is a perfect fit for *Jaws*, the first blockbuster, to submerge and embrace the viewer in a state of immersion. However, just as the Steadicam aesthetic in *Annihilation* decenters identification and abstracts the viewer from a tethered diegetic position, our buoyant condition in

Jaws provokes this same uncertainty. The viewer's alignment with the shark is continuously decentered by exchanging proximate POV with remote orientation. The thrill of occupying the shark's POV is heightened by witnessing the attack from a distance, which then renegotiates identification into an oscillating immersed and abstracted condition.

The post-70s horror film also utilizes POV to emphasize the proximity of terror and confront the boundary between self and other, victim and monster. The opening sequence of *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) is a prime example of an embodied POV that places the viewer "in the middle of the action." Following just a few years after *Jaws*, *Halloween* opens with a musical cue that is later aligned with Michael Myers - the Shape and perpetrator of the '78 slasher film. The viewer's perception is matched with an unknown entity, later to be revealed as the young Michael Myers, as viewer, camera and character move seamlessly through the diegetic and fictional space of Haddonfield. As we pick up a kitchen knife and cover our face with a mask, in *Halloween*'s opening sequence, viewer/character identification and bodily immersion becomes heightened. Our right arm is extended before us, knife in hand. Our masked, tunnel vision view, accompanied by close, thick onscreen breathing, perhaps mimicking our own body's reaction, focuses in on the unsuspecting victim. Again, and again, Michael's hand, and essentially our own, raises and stabs our unsuspecting and vulnerable victim. Just before Michael's sister falls to the floor, we gaze up at our extended hand, as if to confirm our assaultive embodiment. While the blockbuster registers weight and impact as points of embodiment and gravitational stability, the post-70s horror film celebrates on-screen bodies as corporeal anchors. Aligning with a body, be it victim or monster, grounds our own. Carol Clover meditates on this alignment and direct connection. Clover writes, "*Halloween* seeks to efface the intervention of the photographer...we are invited to look not through a murderous camera, but

with our own murderous eyes, listening to the beat of our heart and the breathing of our lungs” (185-186). Extending this, Clover claims these first-person killer-camera sequences give “rise to...vulnerability” as the “subjective camera calls attention...to dark corners and recesses of its vision” (187). I push Clover’s claim of vulnerable vision to also include the vulnerability of the fixed materiality of the character’s body, as demonstrated with Lena’s POV. The underlying intentions of immersion are shared, both the blockbuster and horror genre aim to substantiate a sensory and embodied experience. While moments of horror have crept into blockbuster action-adventure narratives, seen with Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *Jurassic Park* (1993), horror’s preoccupation with the body demonstrates immersive attachment is predominately established through embodied, assaultive and reactive perspectives.

Horror’s commitment to assaultive and reactive embodiment, localized by the handheld POV in *Annihilation*’s found footage sequence, is subjected to the grounded and inherent nature of Lena’s gravitropic presence in the night-vision POV. In remedy, the abstract cinematography and its accompanying audio provides perceptual visibility for the viewer and grants audible confirmation for the other characters trapped in the dark. With this in mind, I view this sequence as complicating horror’s overt dedication to embodied POV by simultaneously entangling the viewer in both modalities of perception. This epistemological difference is further reinforced through additional dialogue between Dr. Ventress and Lena.

“I can’t see anything.”

“Yeah, neither can I.”

This exchange is depicted through the remote, floating camera to confirm their oppressed perception. The vulnerability is then heightened as a powerful growl fills the space. The camera cuts to a massive bear overpowering and biting into Sheppard and in efforts to make the invisible

known, as the attack was only visually intelligible through the floating camera, Lena grabs her binoculars again. Another brief night-vision POV shot finally reveals the bear's image for Lena, further corroborating the formal alignment and epistemological difference between the two modes of view, yet also suturing and entangling viewer perception to both.

I now turn to the bear's second appearance to further uncover the entanglement of on/offscreen sound. Like the visual exchange in the first bear attack, I argue mixing on/offscreen sound demonstrates a spatial difference, which then points to an interdependent entanglement of embodiment and distance. The tense sequence begins with Anya interrogating the women over Lena's undisclosed connection to Kane. Arranged in the middle of the dark room, the women are illuminated by two exposed and harsh lights. As the camera moves through the space, the lights are refracted across the frame, connecting and cutting through the women as they sit tied to chairs and exposed to Anya's paranoia. Here, the lights extend the diegesis to the cinematic apparatus, the viewer's directed gaze and lived offscreen space. In distress, Anya expresses that her fingerprints seem to move and wonders if her insides are doing the same, recalling the disturbing found footage that she originally dismissed as a "trick of the light." As Anya points her knife at Lena, Sheppard's voice calls out for help in the distance. Anya runs out-of-frame and toward what she believes to be Sheppard and the three women attempt to untie themselves. However, their efforts are interrupted after a threatening offscreen roar fills the onscreen, visible space. The bear's thick, heavy breathing and weighted footsteps fill the soundscape and its lurking shadow precedes its somatic appearance. After approaching the women, the bear opens its mouth and releases a human scream, which reveals, through death, Sheppard's voice has refracted through and into the bear. The bear walks into the exposed lights and reveals its abject image. Resembling the hybrid alligator depicted earlier in the film, the bear's form appears

mutated, as if in the process of decay. A human skull is embedded within the uncanny, decaying face, along with dark, sunken eyes, and a diseased, bloody snout. Now facing Josie, the bear cries out a harrowing blend of human scream and aggressive growl before biting into her shoulder.

This interchanging vocalization, as well as the exchange of on/offscreen sound demonstrates how *Annihilation*'s diegetic onscreen space interacts with distance and acousmatic sound to entangle proximate perception and decentered, incongruous expressions. In discussing Paul Schaeffer's theorization of the acousmatic, "sound one hears without seeing their originating cause," Michel Chion addresses "the opposition between visualized and acousmatic provides a basis for the fundamental audiovisual notion of offscreen space" (Chion 73). *Annihilation*'s exchange of acousmatic and visualized sound, as seen with the bear, extends the diegesis beyond the visible frame and I argue, points to the ongoing and developing collaboration of abstraction (distance) and immersion (presence). If the presence of the found footage scene is made manifest through the decentered, hovering reaction shots of the women watching the clip, then, the dense and destructive presence of the bear is heightened by its ephemeral aural cue- a cue that essentially hovers over and sutures on and offscreen space. Christian Metz expresses this expression and extension. "Sound is simultaneously 'in' the screen, in front, behind, around, and throughout the entire movie theater" ("Aural Objects" 29) While the bear is initially distant and unseen in both scenes, its sonic entrance and its shadow, an abstract warning for its bodily thread, reveal horrific tension is an entanglement of distance and the potential for onscreen proximity.

Sheppard's aural presence within the visible bear also serves as a horrific confrontation between self and other, and further, this sonic hybrid reinforces horror's commitment to bodily

confrontations. For example, Regan's grotesque and demonic inflection in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and Cheryl's deep and malevolent vocal declaration in *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981) depict postmodern horror's assault of bodies through aural presence. I claim, *Annihilation* inverts this by refracting the assaulted (Sheppard) through the assaultive (the bear). This then manifests a sonic bridge as visual and material, as Sheppard's present screams call back to her past death and previous scene. Just as the film weaponizes the unsettling and hovering cinematography to produce a gap in identification, the disconnect between visual and aural during the bear attack scene is mobilized to disturb a defined identification through incongruity.

This incongruity, while graphically manifested in *Annihilation*, also appears throughout the genre. For example, *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) utilizes sound to align viewers to the victim's fear and vulnerability in the opening sequence. The sequence's audiovisual arrangement highlights points of spatial difference, as the subjective sound of the phone call does not align with the scene's visual and voyeuristic orientation. But this does not negate the mere existence of the stalker, rather it underlines the sound's distant capability to enter onscreen space and implicate both character and viewer in the action. Following this claim, the bear's sonic entrance in *Annihilation* is still arguably a presence, despite its offscreen quality, or more accurately out-of-frame positionality.

An additional scene also demonstrates this audiovisual arrangement in which oppositions, such as proximity/distance and diegetic/nondiegetic are renegotiated into a collaborative interdependence. The scene depicts Lena and a colleague discussing weekend plans. As the conversation ends and Lena begins to walk away and out of frame a nondiegetic song fills the

onscreen space. The folk song, “Helplessly Hoping” by Crosby, Stills and Nash, then bridges the bright, public college campus scene to a floating wide shot of the exterior of Lena’s home. The nondiegetic song continues to play over a montage of floating voyeuristic shots depicting the space’s warm interior, moving from the living room, to the bottom of the stairs and then to a neatly kept bedroom upstairs. A mobile shot moves across an arrangement of framed photographs, a collection of proximate objects abstracted from a distant and ephemeral moment. The song continues as the camera moves toward Lena seated on the couch. She clutches a locket with Kane’s image inside and the scene begins to cut to past moments of her and Kane together. After the flashbacks, the scene cuts to Lena upstairs before cutting back down to a view of the staircase. Kane walks into the frame and the nondiegetic, expansive music that bridged spatiotemporal moments together transforms into a distant, yet spatially linked diegetic sound. The film transforms the abstract nondiegetic sound into a grounded emanation. I argue, this transformation, like the cuts in the found footage and the collaborative on/off screen sound in the bear attack simultaneously demonstrates sound’s omnipresent, abstract capacity and its embodied condition. To return to Metz in the theater, the sound is always localized “in” the screen, but it is also always hovering around the space of the theater. A nondiegetic sound bridge, a possessed hybrid vocalization, and the refracted scream of Sheppard suture abstraction and embodiment and distance and proximity into a collaborative and productive experience.

Conclusion

Annihilation’s gap in identification is mobilized throughout the plot to provoke epistemological and ontological unease in both the diegetic characters and offscreen viewers. Remedying this gap by entangling perceptual and aural difference into a sutured whole then

bridges presence to absence, self to other, immersion to abstraction. As I have articulated throughout, the latent and often negated exchange between immersion and abstraction within post-1970s horror should be renegotiated into explicit entanglements. An aesthetic interdependent collaboration, rather than conflation, maintains formal and spatial difference, yet also rearranges the cinematic viewing experience into a complementary process that recognizes somatic and abstract experience simultaneously.

By way of conclusion, I critique *Annihilation*'s final moments and its problematic crystallization of abstraction. After witnessing Kane's final recorded clip, Lena discovers Dr. Ventress in a cavern at the base of the lighthouse. Dr. Ventress explains she has encountered the Shimmer's source, "it's inside me now...It is unlike us.... Our bodies and ours mind will be fragmented into their smallest parts until not one part remains. Annihilation." Lena watches as Dr. Ventress dissolves into a cascade of colors, essentially completing the process in which Dr. Ventress previously described and a malleable, undetermined hovering illuminated form fills the psychologist's place. A shot from within the alien form depicts Lena, now fully transfixed and a droplet of Lena's blood is drawn, almost magnetically and innately, into the metallic presence. The film calls back to the repeated microscopic views, as an extreme close up portrays the droplet of blood dividing into mutated, colorful Shimmer duplicates. Following this demonstration, a metallic human form emerges and Lena, reacting in fear, attacks before retreating back up to the lighthouse's ground level where the humanoid being is already waiting. Lena struggles to move past the mimetic being, as it follows her movements and intentions. Lena reaches for the tripod, attempting to fight the physical, humanoid form with the handheld camera, a form the film has established as a tangible and present opposition to abstraction. The humanoid hits back and knocks Lena to the ground. As this sequence continues, the mimetic

humanoid progresses from simply mirroring Lena's movement into adopting Lena's image, and fully transforming into Lena's physical doppelgänger.

This impulsive turn to conflation concludes on a somatic grasp toward bodily immersion, which is literally manifested with Lena's and Kane's mutual embrace in the final frame of the film. *Annihilation's* trajectory from abstract repression to crystallized embracement collapses into a pure bodily integration, which dismisses a possible composite collaboration altogether.

My close readings of *Annihilation* and overall intervention directs horror scholarship to consider how both abstraction and immersion suture the offscreen body to onscreen experience. My claims, which recognize an aesthetic interdependence, renegotiate limited viewing positions into infinite collaborations. To continue to flesh out these collaborations and their faculty, I am interested in engaging with the recent horror film, *The Lodge* (Veronika Franz, Severin Fiala, 2019) and its formal and narrative synthesis of past and present to explore how contemporary horror constructs diegetic proximate space through repetitions and representations of distant memory.

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