

# The complexity of Southern Reach Trilogy (and Area X)

Jeff VanderMeer: *Annihilation, Authority, Acceptance*

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## Abstract

Analyses of Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation* testify that the work, operating with many perplexing effects, puts the acts of coherent meaning formation to the test, and the sequels further exacerbate this productive uncertainty. Our study attempts to show that VanderMeer's text should be read slightly differently than classic science fiction adventure novels. The reception of popular literature and science fiction has traditionally become a scheme following the renouncing of the combination. However, the works of VanderMeer and many writers of similar calibre (e.g., Iain M. Banks, William Gibson, China Miéville, Kim Stanley Robinson, Dan Simmons) warn that this habituation can be overcome, dismantled, and transformed. The modern and postmodern differentiation of science fiction has no regard for maintaining the aesthetic place of literature; it speaks of zones and spaces that contribute more to the interdisciplinary and intermedia relativisation of human centres. We should, therefore, reflect on the reading for preliminary genre codes (or value preferences). In the Southern Reach Trilogy case, no normative background can be created that would not conflict with the function of a specific element of the story. Along with this type of fragmentation, the non-human and material dimensions confront us with the fact that incomprehensibility is not a lack of value but a consequence of mixing (our) world with foreign elements. The above also means that to describe the stratification of the VanderMeer trilogy, on the one hand, the category of popular literature may prove to be scarce, and on the other hand, the reading technique may function as data management in which the fiction-creating act of combination can make further and more transpositions of the text. Due to this hybridising dynamics, VanderMeer combines the Lovecraftian horror of culture and the posthumanism of modern biological science fiction so that while the story remains flawed, the mosaic effect generates eco-level issues in the face of alienation. This process, which can be grasped along complexity, can be evaluated as one of the essential new weird fiction features.

**Keywords:** complexity; science fiction; new weird fiction; Jeff VanderMeer; Southern Reach Trilogy

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The reception of Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation* testifies that the work, operating with many perplexing effects, puts the efforts to form a coherent meaning to the test. It seems evident at first glance that VanderMeer's text should be read slightly differently than classic science fiction adventure novels. First, we will outline briefly, in four points, why. Then, we will also take a quick look at the other two parts of the trilogy. (We extend the interpretation of the third part a bit because of one of its thorny questions, the issue of consciousness and communication.) First, however, we must briefly define what we mean by the term complexity indicated in the title.

In cultural studies, it can be observed that analysts understand complicity under the term complexity and seek to either simplify or increase the experienced complexity during interpretation. However, complexity can also be understood as the behaviour of a system going beyond the mere sum of its parts. In this sense, examining different levels in a novel, for example, can be fruitful if we consider not only the elements (e.g., linguistic formulation, motifs, and rhetoric) but also the patterns and systemic dynamics that emerge from the relationships between them. Studying the details can lead to different levels, but highlighting a single detail can be misleading, generating misinterpretation and unproductive hierarchies, so we try to avoid this trap.

## Annihilation of the intellect?

*Verification.* In connection with the *Annihilation*, it may arise that the biologist's diary consists of many unsubstantiated claims. This is acceptable, but the novel thus makes indefinability its theme and, through this, the failure of verification strategies. The uncertainties in describing what happened do not necessarily stem from the narrator's position (the biologist tries to document the plot several days after the events). Instead, it results from an unknown, unique experience that arises from encountering an alien life form and people, for which one cannot prepare. "By the time we were ready to cross the border, we knew everything... and we knew nothing." (VanderMeer 2014, 45). Direct contact with the region leads to unpredictable and cognitive distortions for the characters, but how we access this through narrative levels is a different matter. It is not advisable to mix or swap the two.

*Hallucination.* Interprets of the novel usually associate said indefinability automatically with the functioning of hallucinatory consciousness. According to this, the members of the expedition are under hypnosis, so their data management is unreliable and contradictory. This is partly justified, but at the time of the diary writing, the biologist is no longer under hypnosis; her consciousness is more determined by the encounter with the unknown. This contact occurs in the medium of flora and fauna, a seemingly non-anthropomorphisable life form, i.e. it can be described as a deanthropomorphic infiltration. (It is worth noting that the novel's film adaptation, Alex Garland's production, is not necessarily simplistic in this context because it captures environmental complexity along with botanisation and builds the visual world on it. Instead, it can be approached by replacing the novel's ecological com-

plexity with another, which can be understood as a visual-media decision.)

*Hybridisation.* The result of the relationship with the stranger is well captured in Szilvia Sz. Molnár's study: "One of the sites in the Southern Reach is Area X, which is unknown why, when, and by whom it was created. Those who enter here are assimilated, copied, and hybridised by nature. [...] They suddenly transform." (Sz. Molnár 2014, 37) This process takes place in such an unprecedented way that the merging of the two ecosystems (humans can be called that, too) is based on the principle of mutual transfer (interpenetration), i.e. self-construction (auto-poiesis) also uses the components of the other party. This affects consciousness, which is probably why human brain tissue appears in the tunnel wall. Hybridisation, however, is not a mere action-level process but precisely one of the technologies that results in complexity that is not limited to a privileged area. In addition to the identity of the characters, it can also characterise the asymmetry consisting of the alternation of narrative perspectives or the genre syncretism of the whole trilogy.

*Annihilation.* Like annihilation, i.e. collective obliteration (as a physical phenomenon), occurs when matter and antimatter meet, so natural and human identities fall apart in X Space. Ordinary language seems incapable of reproducing this, but the biologist attempts the impossible and does not give up the scientific explanation that goes beyond personal observations. The result is contained in her diary, but if the reader cannot follow her sensual logic, the meaning can indeed be destroyed. Therefore, the title and its application extend the process that shows the meaning that can be assigned to signs in origin and destruction from the physical to the imaginary. This approach is metaphorical and metonymic simultaneously; better put, it does not fit into a stable causal scheme.

Thus, the virtues of Jeff VanderMeer's novel can only be fully exposed if we are not looking for a static, safe point from which events (and genre codes) can be deduced. This construct feeds on insecurity, establishing associative chains (e.g. with the associations of the "thread in the brain," to which we will return later). However, the unknowable dimensions precisely suggest that by reading the biologist's diary, we need to rethink bio-culture and the place of the human participant in it. The living world, just like the universe, does not have to seem meaningful to us, nor does the study of the environment (the world of Area X) correspond to a taxonomy introduced from the outside. The desire to make sense of blind mechanisms is a human peculiarity evident from the Southern Reach perspective but fails in Area X.

## From authority to defoliation

Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Authority* is an outdoor continuation of Area X research (if the Annihilation operating with the biologist's diary is defined as indoor). So, after the strange zone, we are now wandering in the outside-the-border world of the Southern Reach, on the one hand. On the other hand, if VanderMeer hybridises the metaphorising, self-reflexive literary technology out of the sf-procedures in the first volume, he unravels the fictitious-realistic narrative along the quotations from the former in the second volume. Let us also look at what else is worth paying close

attention to (although that would be enough because it puts the reader's strategy to the test).

The *Authority* could perhaps be thought of as a system of loops based on a network of events that keeps recurring around the new director of the Southern Reach. The loops, of course, swing toward the mystery of Area X and then – walking the path of the unknowable – lead over and over again back to where they started: the lack of central code. However, this makes the researched zone and slice of history more complex, while the final explanation seems closer at times and more distant at other times (depending on the responsiveness and applicability of the mosaic piece emerging in the loop). From this point of view, *Authority* is (also) the history of data management for Area X, which is not limited to the subject matter but also captures an essential aspect of reading.

A characteristic fragment follows from a file containing theories about the mystery of Area X. "Slow death by aliens. Slow death by the parallel universe. Slow death by malign unknown time-travelling force. Slow death by an invasion from an alternate earth. Slow death by widely divergent technology or the shadow biosphere or symbiosis or iconography or etymology. Death by this and by that. Death by indifference and inference. His favorite: »Surface-dwelling terrestrial organism, previously unknown.«." (VanderMeer 2014, 216) Ironic apocalypse, at the same time, apocalyptic irony. Its conclusion, however, reveals the need for ecological cognition. The reading strategy will, therefore, vary depending on which version of the world of Area X one is trying to explore, but none of them can be totalised.

The data archiving system (video recordings, audio materials, pictures) also forms a specific maze; there is no perfectly reliable source of information, and in the end, for lack of a better one, the topographic anomaly remains a candidate, but this too only rubs against the surface. Sometimes something seems sharper (e.g. Ghost Bird is a copy of the biologist, the lighthouse figures seem identifiable), but it also transforms the system, resulting in new questions. Nevertheless, the biggest question in the story is about the boundary, which moves dynamically (approaching the characters) in a novel that makes the very borders airy. The Area swallows up the research institute specialising in its discovery. The border is not an authority. This moment thus also functions as a self-reflecting figure, while allegorically, it can also be interpreted as a procedure that disturbs the reader; more precisely, it interferes with the interpretive activity and objectivity.

A related extract from the novel: "There was not much about the border in her notes, but that white spiral, that enormous space, did not leave him completely. There was an odd synchronicity as he worked that linked that spiral to his mother's flash of light across the sky, the literal and the metaphoric joined together across an expanse of time and context so vast that only thoughts could bridge the gap." (VanderMeer 2014, 233) This meaning-generating passage may also suggest, in a self-reflexive way, that making various artificial connections between events and images is an operation that, while filling in the gaps with immateriality, is the most potent cultural technique we know. More precisely, it is a technology characterised by dual mediality: simultaneously, the language's communicative immateriality (thought) and the materiality of its recorded version (writing). At this point, the novel

metaphorically links Authority's activity and its self-createdness and parallels them with the medial nature of literature.

## Accepting a disaster

Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Acceptance* articulates polyphonic approaches to the formation and research of Area X through several narrative voices. The most obvious consequence of this polyphony (the story of the director told in the second person, the lighthouse keeper's biography, the tracing of Ghost Bird's activities in the area, the biologist's letter) is that the story's disparate nature perpetuates. Moreover, the temporality of the figures (theories) thought to be central now points definitely in the direction of what Authority experiences during contact (or annihilation): "[...] nothing about language, about communication, could bridge the divide between human beings and Area X". (VanderMeer 2014, 572) This is because any communication would only work at the level of components and, far from reflecting the overall complexity, it could only be a detail of the Area, based on indistinguishability of the natural and the artificial: "A blade of grass. A blue heron. A velvet ant." (VanderMeer 2014, 573)

Due to the lack of a total and untouched point of view, the self-commentary layer of the plot is thus unable to capture the complexity of Area X. However, the polyphonic, i.e. another level of complexity, can create new segments in some places, and among them, several can become redundant and enter the interpretive range, and then their projection on one another can create a pattern of area interpretations. A more distant text passage referring to the limitations of human consciousness can be related to the above communication situation. A sensational train of thought (said in connection with Ghost Bird) that, moreover, runs into one of the mysteries of consciousness research and recalls the issues of Thomas Nagel's famous essay *What is it like to be a bat?* (cf. "I assume we all believe that bats have experience. After all, they are mammals, and there is no more doubt that they have experience than that mice or pigeons or whales have experience. [...] Even without the benefit of philosophical reflection, anyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally *alien* form of life." [Nagel 1973]) It is worth quoting at length.

Membranes and dimensions. Limitless amounts of space. Limitless amounts of energy. Effortless manipulation of molecules. Continual attempts to transform the human into the non-human. The ability to move an entire biosphere to another place. Right now, if the outside world existed, it would still be sending radio-wave messages into space and monitoring radio-wave frequencies to seek out other intelligent life in the universe. But Ghost Bird didn't think those messages were being received. Another way people were bound by their own view of consciousness. What if an infection was a message, a brightness a kind of symphony? As a defense? An odd form of communication? If so, the message had not been received, would probably never be received, the message buried in the transformation itself. Having to reach for such banal answers because of a

lack of imagination, because human beings couldn't even put themselves in the mind of a cormorant or an owl or a whale or a bumblebee. (VanderMeer 2014, 490)

Through the Nagel reference, the novel raises the question of the inconvertibility of the mind and, in part, connects the non-anthropomorphizability of the non-human dimension to this. In neuroscience, the phenomenon that consciousness is a secret to itself is called cognitive closure. For our survival, we are excluded from our own brains. This situation is because consciousness itself should recognise the pattern that allows itself. Researching this pattern is a vast interdisciplinary undertaking<sup>1</sup> that has led to the birth of many theories (pl. computational theory, disciplinary schema theory, integrated information theory, global neuronal workspace hypothesis); however, for the time being, none of these are entirely accepted (although most argue in favour of the latter). In VanderMeer's novels, the question of the uniqueness of consciousness is projected on the unidentifiability of foreign intellect. As a result, we cannot talk about self-evident communication between consciousness and consciousness and between conscious and unconscious.

Suppose we pay particular attention to this horizon, which thus confronts us at a theoretical level with what we understand by communication. In that case, we can also highlight, among the asymmetrical fragments and complementary possibilities, those that, on the level of rules, patterns, and data, also juxtapose the incommunicability and non-human presence with a cosmic catastrophe, "a nostalgic sign of an extra-terrestrial ecosystem". "She saw or felt, deep within, the cataclysm like a rain of comets that had annihilated an entire biosphere remote from Earth. Witnesses how one *made* organism had fragmented and dispersed, each minute part undertaking a long and perilous passage through spaces *between*, black and formless, punctuated by sudden light as they came to rest, scattered and lost – emerging only to be buried, inert, in the glass of a lighthouse lens. And how, when brought out of dormancy, the wire tripped, how it had, best as it could, regenerated, begun to perform a vast and preordained function, one compromised by time and context, by the terrible truth, that the species that had given Area X its purpose was gone."<sup>2</sup> (VanderMeer 2014, 555) From this point of view, Area X is, therefore, a zone of signs with lost signified, messages of lost medium, and the zone of deprivation of meaning. The novel comes into contact with a cosmic perspective but does not seek to represent it accurately; however, it focuses on depicting the desanthropomorphic side of the situation (or, as we have seen, that transforming signs into messages is an arbitrary and questionable undertaking). Furthermore, the medium of the latter would be VanderMeer's language.

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1 Some fields where the problem of consciousness arises: physics, chemistry, genetics, embryology, cognitive ethology, neuroscience, medicine (neurology), cybernetics, informatics, artificial intelligence research, complexity theory, network theory, evolutionary psychology, anthropology, linguistics, memetics, systems theory, philosophy of consciousness, media studies.

2 Cf. Information from outside the visible universe comes from its perfect unknown domain. (The term "away from the ground" may also refer to this.)

In the third part of the trilogy, several similar integrative operations can be performed, as we could start from the contradictions and paradoxes. VanderMeer's work thus presents the understanding of what happened as a constellation while only foreshadowing the pattern (through the Ghost Bird), i.e. not stabilising the latter but fitting it into the said polyphony. (The "splinter in the brain" metaphor chain indicates this situation, while as a Matrix reference or Gibson motif [cf. *Pattern Recognition*] also provokes context building. In the latter, the Clip is born from the pain caused by a T-shaped splinter piercing the brain.) If the reader accepts that the causal system of the story is unable to come to a standstill, they can see that based on the Southern Reach trilogy, one can boldly conclude that science fiction writing and reading is beyond the identically repetitive formal technique. VanderMeer's performance along the lines of alienation and communicative catastrophe – in the spirit of Lovecraft – can liberate science fiction from the constraints of an anthropomorphising vision while making the economics of sci-fi's subject matter dependent on the efficiency and layering of its approaches.

## Confusion instead of conclusion

Jeff VanderMeer's trilogy (and other pieces of the oeuvre) is also considered new weird by reception. The validity of this category will not be explored here because we do not have to assume that the end result of reading will be the identification of a sometimes presupposed genre. (Below, however, we will make a technical clarification in this regard.) The Southern Reach Trilogy is tied to the weird with many threads, but also to something else (e.g. to different types of polyphonic or postmodern novels, respectively; it runs many proceedings that can be discovered in speculative fiction), and the work's fiction of border violation can also be related to the messing up the genre codes. We are likely to be productive by putting the complexity of the novels on a level with a creative explosion that also puts reading in an open space. In this, by the way, there is nothing unexpected in itself, let us think about with what Wolfgang Iser anno supplemented the act of selection in his famous book: "A complement to the act of selection is the act of combination, which is also an act of fictionalising, marked by the same basic mode of operation: the crossing of boundaries." (Iser 1993)

However, in the case of the reception of popular literature, following the scheme and giving up the combination has become a tradition. (This is particularly striking in the academic register.) However, the works of VanderMeer and many writers of similar merit (e.g. Iain M. Banks, William Gibson, China Miéville, Kim Stanley Robinson, Dan Simmons, and more) warn that this innervation can be overcome, broken down, and transformed. Therefore, we should reflect on reading for preliminary interpretations (or value preferences and ideologies). In the case of the Southern Reach Trilogy, no normative background can be created that would not conflict with the function of some aspects of the story. Along with this type of fragmentation, the non-human and material dimensions confront us with the fact that incomprehensibility is not a lack of value but a consequence of mixing (our) world

with foreign elements. The modern and postmodern differentiation of science fiction has no regard for maintaining and justifying the aesthetic place of literature; it speaks of zones and spaces that contribute more to the interdisciplinary and inter-media relativisation of conventional human centres.

In any case, due to multilevel hybridisation, the Lovecraftian horror of culture and the posthumanism of modern biological science fiction in VanderMeer meet in a way that although the story remains holey, the mosaic effect, confronting us with alienation, generates eco-level problems<sup>3</sup> in which those who experience the events do not know how these incidents happened to them, just as the reader cannot see the whole universe. Of course, it is possible to recognise some functions, but many elements cannot be inserted into an image whose every segment is understood. With this solution, the above paths of power cannot cross the boundaries of the art world identically, which, from a theoretical point of view, also means that, on the one hand, the category of popular literature may be meagre to describe the stratification of the trilogy. Reading technology can act as data management in which the fiction-forming act of the combination performs transference of the text time and again, and the details of information organisation, on the other hand, heterogeneize and suspend the automatic applicability of weird clichés. (The *new weird* is flexible enough for interpreters to stay in that category. It is a tempting but convenient solution. However, this process, which can be grasped through complexity, can be evaluated as one of the most essential features of new weird fiction.) Depending on the complexity of the approach routes, the genre code may also change, overturn, disappear, and rebuild. Therefore, thematically but also pragmatically, the reader is confronted with unfinished research during the plot of the work.

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<sup>3</sup> We did not cover it, but the inspiring source for the trilogy was the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, one of the oldest wildlife reserves in the U.S. in Florida.



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