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Research Article

Narrative Resonance and Ontological Instability in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*

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Abstract: This article uses narrative resonance as a theoretical approach to examine the narrative and ontological instability in VanderMeer's novel Annihilation. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on document analysis, with the novel as the primary source. The analysis is organized according to four interrelated categories: convergence events, narrative collapse, antagonistic interference, and echo entities. These categories are discussed in relation to posthumanism, ecocriticism, cognitive and unnatural narratology, and Anthropocene studies. In this study, ontological instability refers to the destabilization of boundaries between human and nonhuman, subject and environment, materiality and language, and stable and uncertain forms of reality in Area X. The results show that convergence events arise when memory, perception, environment, and language overlap to form unstable configurations of meaning. The biologist's coherent sense of identity, perception, and epistemic certainty collapses progressively, leading to narrative collapse. Antagonistic interference arises from the conflict between human systems of rational explanation and the alternative logic of Area X, demonstrating the limits of anthropocentric frameworks of knowledge and reality. Echo entities emerge from the persistent traces of past expeditions, memories, language structures, and temporal remnants that shape the current story. Together, the four analytical categories suggest that the novel's narrative and ontological instability are mutually constitutive, as narrative meaning destabilizes in tandem with the disintegration of fixed boundaries between the human subject and the nonhuman world. The study thus presents the novel as a major case of posthuman and Anthropocene fiction in which meaning is shaped through the dynamic interaction of cognitive, ecological, material, linguistic, and temporal forces.

Keywords: English Literature, Narrative Resonance, Narrative Collapse, Posthuman Narrativity

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1. Introduction

VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2024) is a unique instance of weird fiction, ecological fiction, and Anthropocene fiction. Set mainly in Area X, the novel subverts traditional divisions between human and nonhuman, subject and environment, knowledge and doubt, material reality and representation. The fragmented first-person narration, limited perspective, and ongoing ambiguity make it even harder to create a coherent story about both the narrator and the scene (Hegglund, 2020; Mattsson, 2021). These aspects make the novel particularly important to discussions on how narrative might depict experiences that extend beyond human-centered frameworks of knowledge and meaning.

The literature offers several complementary approaches to this topic. Posthumanist readings highlight the destabilization of human subjectivity and the growing salience of nonhuman agency (Allen, 2024; Kettunen, 2025). Braidotti (2013) and Haraway (2016) conceive subjectivity as relational rather than autonomous. Similarly, ecocritical and Anthropocene approaches challenge the idea of the environment as a passive background, establishing Area X as an active ecological presence that disrupts anthropocentric assumptions about agency and interpretation (Dudley, 2021). Together, these views illuminate the link between human subjectivity and nonhuman settings. Complementary to these readings are narratological methods. Mattsson (2021) discusses the biologist's limited and unreliable narrative. Hegglund (2020) applies unnatural narratology and odd realism to the novel. Richardson's (2006) work gives a wider framework for narrative forms that extend beyond realism conventions. Herman (2013) stresses the role of cognitive schemata in making narrative worlds intelligible.

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However, in *Annihilation*, such categories continuously fail to organize reality, creating formal, cognitive, ecological, and epistemological instability. Even so, a significant gap persists. Several theoretical lenses frame posthuman subjectivity in terms of ecological agency, unreliability, cognitive disruption, and epistemological uncertainty. Less attention has been paid to how memory, perception, language, environment, identity, materiality, and temporality interact within the same narrative system. Therefore, a comprehensive framework is needed to explain how these elements interact to produce both narrative and ontological instability. To fill this gap, the present study presents the narrative resonance field as a relational analytical framework. It conceives story meaning as an emergent process generated in interactions among cognitive, environmental, material, linguistic, and temporal elements. The concept comprises four interrelated categories: convergence events, narrative collapse, antagonistic interference, and echo entities. Convergence events involve aligning otherwise distinct elements such as memory, perception, language, and environment. Narrative collapse involves destabilizing coherent identity and narrative organization. Antagonistic interference involves the conflict between competing systems of meaning and explanation. Echo entities involve the persistence of memories, linguistic patterns, previous events, and temporal traces within the narrative present.

Central to this approach is ontological instability: the instability of the boundaries by which entities, identities, surroundings, and forms of reality are customarily separated. While epistemological uncertainty concerns the boundaries of knowability, ontological instability concerns the instability of categories such as human and nonhuman, subject and environment, materiality and language, and self and other. Annihilation thus calls into question not just the possibility of knowing Area X but also the adequacy of traditional categories of being to describe it. This study also examines how convergence events, narrative collapse, antagonistic interference, and echo entities work in tandem to generate narrative and ontological instability. The primary research question is: How do these four processes combine to create narrative and ontological instability in the novel? This study brings posthumanism, ecocriticism, cognitive and unnatural narratology, and Anthropocene studies into a shared relational framework to explain how narrative meaning emerges through interactions among cognitive, ecological, material, linguistic, and temporal forms of instability.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

Posthumanism provides a crucial theoretical backdrop for understanding these interconnections. Braidotti (2013) rejects the human subject as autonomous, bounded, and ontologically privileged, and instead proposes a relational model of subjectivity formed through interactions with both human and nonhuman factors. Similarly, Haraway (2016) challenges fixed boundaries between species, habitats, and forms of agency by emphasizing relationality and entanglement. Together, these perspectives offer a productive framework for reading *Annihilation*, where the distinction between human identity and nonhuman surroundings becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. Allen (2024) and Kettunen (2025) further situate the novel within this posthuman perspective by emphasizing the collapse of human-centered identity and interpretive authority in Area X. Accordingly, these approaches suggest that the novel questions not only the autonomy of the human subject but also its presumed privilege as the primary source of knowledge and meaning.

Building on this posthumanist foundation, recent critical analyses of *Annihilation* have increasingly situated the novel at the intersection of posthumanism, ecocriticism, weird fiction, and experimental narratology. Although these approaches emphasize different dimensions of the text, they converge on a central argument: the novel destabilizes traditional binaries of human/nonhuman, subject/environment, knowledge/uncertainty, and material reality/representation (Allen, 2024; Hegglund, 2020; Kettunen, 2025; Mattsson, 2021). More specifically, posthumanist approaches underline the fragility of autonomous human subjectivity, and ecocritical readings foreground the agency of nonhuman surroundings. At the same time, narratological studies examine the formal and cognitive consequences of representing a world that resists stable interpretation. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate aspects of the novel, these perspectives can therefore be understood as mutually reinforcing approaches to the same underlying instability. Together, they suggest that the novel's ecological, subjective, and narrative instabilities are mutually constitutive rather than discrete.

This destabilization of human subjectivity is particularly closely connected to the novel's ecological dimension. Ecocritical and Anthropocene approaches challenge literary models in which the environment functions merely as a passive backdrop for human action. Clark (2015) argues that the

Anthropocene's spatial and temporal scales disrupt established modalities of human perception and representation, while Dudley (2021) examines ecological transformation and painful restoration in VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy. Within this framework, Area X cannot be read as a conventional literary setting; instead, its ecological processes actively shape identity, perception, temporality, and meaning. Thus, ecocriticism complements posthumanism: whereas posthuman theory destabilizes the autonomy of the human subject, ecocritical approaches illuminate the role of environmental agency in producing that instability. Consequently, the relationship between the human and the environment becomes not one of subject and passive backdrop, but one of reciprocal formation.

This relational understanding can be developed further through Barad's (2007) concept of material-discursive entanglement. Agential realism challenges the premise that subjects and objects preexist as completely independent entities before their relations. Instead, materiality and meaning emerge through relational processes. In this respect, Barad's framework offers a conceptual bridge between posthumanism and ecocriticism, allowing environmental materiality and narrative meaning to be understood as mutually interconnected rather than separate domains. The instability of boundaries between material processes and systems of representation in *Annihilation* thus raises questions that are not only ecological and epistemological but also ontological. As these boundaries become increasingly unstable, so too do the categories through which subjects, objects, environments, and meanings are conventionally distinguished.

While posthumanism, ecocriticism, and material-discursive approaches emphasize relationality and instability, weird fiction approaches this problem from the perspective of epistemological constraint. Ersoy (2019) explores *Annihilation* through the lens of the monstrous bizarre and the breaching of borders into the unknown. Such readings underscore the failure of existing systems of observation, classification, and explanation to provide comprehensive interpretive control over Area X. Consequently, the narrative's strangeness cannot be reduced to the presence of unusual beings or extraordinary events. Rather, it reflects a more fundamental disruption of the conceptual categories through which reality is perceived and represented. This epistemological ambiguity, in turn, echoes the novel's posthuman and ecocritical dimensions, as human knowledge becomes increasingly unstable when anthropocentric systems encounter ecological and material processes that exceed their established categories.

The instability identified at the thematic and epistemological levels is also reproduced at the level of narrative form. Mattsson (2021) examines the biologist's limited and unreliable perspective and demonstrates how doubt emerges from the limitations of memory, perception, and self-knowledge. Similarly, Hegglund (2020) situates the novel within unnatural narratology and odd realism, referring to narrative forms that resist interpretation according to conventional realist norms. Richardson's (2006) theory of unnatural narration provides a broader framework for understanding narrative forms that challenge conventional assumptions about coherent narrators, stable identities, linear temporality, and objectively knowable worlds. From this perspective, *Annihilation* does not merely represent instability as a thematic concern; it formally enacts that instability through how it structures and communicates narrative experience. The novel's form therefore extends the epistemological and ontological uncertainties that characterize its fictional world.

This formal instability also has important cognitive consequences. Cognitive narratology offers a complementary explanation of how such narrative structures generate interpretive uncertainty. Narrative worlds become intelligible through interpretive schemata and mental models (Herman, 2013), which readers and characters ordinarily rely on to organize events, establish causal relationships, and maintain coherent representations of narrative worlds. In *Annihilation*, however, these established cognitive frameworks repeatedly fail to organize interactions with Area X. As a result, cognitive disturbance and unnatural narration operate in parallel: the narrative challenges conventional representational structures while simultaneously undermining the cognitive schemata through which those structures would ordinarily be understood. Alongside posthumanism and ecocriticism, this disruption can therefore be interpreted as a consequence of encountering an environment that exceeds anthropocentric assumptions about fixed identity, agency, and reality.

The interconnection among these forms of instability extends further into temporality. Area X comprises fragments from past expeditions, fragmented memories, recurrent patterns, and experiences whose relationship to chronological time remains uncertain. Derrida's (1994) concept of hauntology offers a

useful framework for understanding how remnants of the past remain active in the present rather than dissolving into a completed historical sequence. From this perspective, past events continue to shape contemporary systems of perception and meaning. Temporal instability therefore does not operate independently of the novel's ecological, cognitive, and narratological dimensions; instead, it intersects with each. Memory and material traces shape present experience, while the distinction between past and present grows harder to stabilize. In this sense, the novel's treatment of time reinforces its broader challenge to stable boundaries between human and nonhuman, subject and environment, perception and reality, and representation and materiality.

Together, these perspectives reflect a common concern with distinct kinds of instability. Posthumanism questions the autonomous and ontologically privileged human subject (Allen, 2024; Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016; Kettunen, 2025); ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies bring to the fore environmental agency and the limits of anthropocentric representation (Clark, 2015; Dudley, 2021); weird fiction and unnatural narratology reveal the limits of conventional epistemological and representational structures (Ersoy, 2019; Hegglund, 2020; Richardson, 2006); cognitive narratology accounts for the disruption of interpretive schemata through which narrative worlds are normally made sense of (Herman, 2013; Mattsson, 2021); hauntology sheds light on the persistence of temporal traces in the narrative present (Derrida, 1994). Mohseni (2024) similarly argues that *Annihilation* challenges fixed narrative structures, linking its unstable narrative organization to the broader representational difficulties of the Anthropocene.

Building on these discussions, this study develops a theory-driven framework to examine narrative resonance and ontological instability in *Annihilation*. The theoretical framework section introduces and explains the specific analytical categories in detail.

3. Method

This study uses a qualitative, document-analysis design to explore narrative and ontological instability in VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2024). A qualitative design is appropriate, as the study evaluates narrative structures, patterns, and theoretically significant relations rather than the frequency or distribution of textual characteristics. Drawing on Creswell's (2014) definition of qualitative research as an interpretive approach to complex meanings and processes, the analysis examines how memory, language, perception, environment, identity, and temporality interact to produce and destabilize narrative meaning.

The deductive coding framework was derived from the proposed narrative resonance framework. Theory-driven qualitative content analysis provided the overall deductive structure, systematic coding organized relevant passages into predefined categories, and close reading enabled detailed interpretation of the narrative, linguistic, material, and thematic features of the selected passages.

The study established four analytical categories: convergence events, narrative collapse, antagonistic interference, and echo entities. Convergence events were identified in passages where two or more dimensions—particularly memory, perception, language, environment, or materiality—intersected in ways that generated or modified narrative meaning. Narrative collapse was coded where the coherence of identity, perception, memory, narrative organization, or epistemic certainty was destabilized. Antagonistic interference was identified when competing systems of meaning or explanation conflicted, particularly where scientific or anthropocentric frames confronted phenomena that resisted classification or logical explanation. Echo entities emerged when memories, past expeditions, repeated linguistic patterns, material traces, or other temporal residues remained or reappeared within the narrative present.

The analytical procedure followed several steps. First, the novel was read thoroughly to identify its narrative structure, recurring motifs, depictions of Area X, shifts in perception, temporal discontinuities, and interactions between human and nonhuman elements. At this stage, possibly relevant sections were identified without making final interpretations. Second, these sections were categorized into the four predetermined groups. If a passage's narrative or linguistic qualities clearly matched the operational definition of at least one category, it was maintained for deeper investigation. Particular attention was paid to passages where more than one category was at work simultaneously, because the narrative resonance field understands meaning as produced by interactions among narrative processes, not as a function of isolated textual features.

Third, close reading explored the selected texts in more depth. The approach examined narrative perspective, language choices, imagery, representations of materiality and environment, shifts of perception and identity, temporal structure, and the interplay between human and nonhuman agency. Close reading, then, was the interpretative step that followed rigorous coding. Coding indicated why a text was analytically meaningful; close reading told us how the relevant narrative process worked in that passage. This distinction kept the analytical categories from becoming simple theme labels and made it possible to attend to the formal and linguistic mechanisms that generate narrative instability.

Fourth, the coded sections were compared both within and across the four analytical categories. Within-category comparison identified recurring patterns in how convergence events, narrative breakdown, antagonistic interference, and echo entities function. Cross-category comparison identified passages where these processes overlapped or influenced one another. These intersections are especially important to the study of narrative resonance, as the framework presupposes that narrative and ontological instability occur relationally. For example, an initial coding for a paragraph about the meeting of language and environmental materiality might be a convergence event. However, it might also show signs of antagonistic interference or narrative collapse. Thus, multiple coding was allowed when a passage met the operational criteria for more than one category.

The study then analyzed these patterns using the applied theoretical perspectives. Posthumanist theory guided the analysis of destabilized human subjectivity and human-nonhuman agency connections, particularly Braidotti (2013) and Haraway (2016). Ecocritical and Anthropocene views framed Area X as an active ecology rather than a passive narrative setting. The investigation of disturbances in narrative coherence, representational standards, and cognitive schemata drew on Richardson's (2006) unnatural narratology and Herman's (2013) cognitive narratology. Derrida's (1994) notion of hauntology offered a lens for understanding how past events, memories, and temporal traces persist within the narrative present. The study applied these theoretical views to the relevant textual patterns identified and closely examined, grounding the analysis in the primary text while situating the findings within broader scholarly debates. Finally, the study contextualized the interpretations with secondary literature on posthumanism, ecocriticism, cognitive and unnatural narratology, and Anthropocene studies.

4. Theoretical Framework: Narrative Resonance

This study builds on the literature discussed above and conceptualizes narrative resonance as an analytical framework for exploring the links between the cognitive, material, environmental, linguistic, and temporal dimensions of narrative. The framework does not view narrative as a linear, fixed sequence dictated by a human narrator, but rather as a relational and dynamic process through which narrative meaning emerges. From this perspective, meaning emerges from interactions among perception, memory, language, environment, identity, materiality, and temporality. These elements can strengthen one another and briefly stabilize narrative coherence, but they can also conflict, overlap, or become incompatible, producing diverse forms of narrative instability.

The cognitive dimension of narrative resonance is grounded in approaches that view cognition as an active, experience-organizing process. Herman (2013) highlights the role of mental models and interpretive schemata in making narrative worlds intelligible. Such systems arrange events, agents, temporal sequences, and causal links into meaningful structures. Clark's (2016) account of predictive processing also frames cognition as a continuous process of generating and updating models based on experience. Viewed through the prism of narrative resonance, these approaches suggest that narrative coherence depends on current cognitive frameworks' capacity to assimilate new information. When experience does not integrate into existing models, the interaction between perception and interpretation becomes unstable.

Emotion complicates this process because cognition does not act independently of affective experience. Damasio (1999) contends that emotion is an intrinsic component of cognition, attention, and decision-making. Affective states may therefore shape whether experiences are meaningful and how they are absorbed into larger systems of meaning. Within this framework, trauma constitutes a significant form of disruption. Caruth (1996) argues that the experience of trauma resists full integration into a cohesive narrative of the self. This concept is reflected in narrative resonance, which recognizes that emotive experiences that resist absorption into existing cognitive and temporal frameworks can

enhance, disrupt, or destabilize a narrative's organization. Narrative meaning is thus regarded not only as a rational structure of events but as a process molded by the interplay of cognition, perception, memory, and affect.

The concept also applies to material and environmental connections as well as to individual cognition. Ecocritical methods critique anthropocentric paradigms that see the environment as a passive background for human experience. The Anthropocene challenges dominant ways humans see and describe the world by showing ecological processes operating at spatial and temporal scales outside traditional frameworks of interpretation (Clark, 2015). This perspective matters for narrative resonance because it allows environmental processes to be seen as active agents in constructing narrative meaning. Meaning, thus, may be produced not only by human purpose and hermeneutics, but by the relations among human subjects, nonhuman surroundings, material situations, and systems of representation.

Barad's (2007) agential realism further supports this relational interpretation of materiality and meaning. Barad questions the presumption that subjects and objects are pre-existing, self-contained entities that interact with one another and stresses the constitutive nature of interactions. This position offers a conceptual foundation for analyzing instances in which the boundaries between material processes and systems of meaning become blurred. The framework does not equate narrative processes with physical processes. Instead, it recognizes that literary meaning can emerge from relations among embodied people, material surroundings, language, and interpretation. Thus, the environment is not simply the object of human vision; it may also shape the conditions under which perception and meaning are generated.

Temporality is another important dimension of narrative resonance. Narratives structure experience by linking past events to present circumstances and future possibilities. However, temporal linkages do not always follow a stable linear sequence. Memory, repetition, tangible traces, and language residues may keep former events alive in the narrative present. Hauntology, as Derrida (1994) developed it, offers a way to understand the past's persistence. From this angle, the past need not be confined to a completed chronological sequence; it can remain active through traces that continue to shape present meaning. Narrative resonance thus treats temporality as potentially layered and recursive, allowing past and present structures of meaning to interact. These cognitive, emotive, ecological, material, and temporal dimensions constitute the broader field within which narrative resonance functions. This study understands their interaction through four analytical categories: convergence events, narrative collapse, antagonistic interference, and echo entities. These categories are neither discrete narrative devices nor separate thematic characteristics. Instead, they describe relational processes through which narrative meaning may be constructed, destabilized, or transformed.

In the present study, convergence occurs when normally different dimensions temporarily align. These aspects can include, but are not limited to, memory, perception, language, materiality, environment, and temporality. Convergence matters not because many parts of the narrative happen at the same time. Rather, convergence occurs when distinct elements interact to produce a configuration of meaning that cannot be attributed to any single element. Such moments may momentarily shore up narrative coherence, but they may also unsettle existing interpretative categories by bringing previously isolated areas into contact. Narrative collapse is the breakdown of the systems that organize experience into a cohesive narrative. Such disruption may rupture identity, memory, perception, temporality, epistemic confidence, or narrative organization. Collapse does not eliminate meaning. More precisely, it refers to a state in which an existing framework can no longer organize experience effectively. Narrative collapse is therefore especially pertinent to texts in which cohesive subjectivity and stable interpretation are difficult to sustain. According to narrative resonance, collapse is the moment when established frameworks of meaning can no longer incorporate the relations operating within the narrative.

Antagonistic interference means interactions among conflicting systems of meaning or explanation that cannot be fully reconciled. Such systems can rest on widely varying assumptions about rationality, causality, identity, agency, or reality. So antagonistic interference is more than mere contradiction. It happens when two incompatible interpretative systems operate at the same time and push on each other without one fully subsuming the other. The instability points to the shortcomings of current explanatory frameworks and makes room for a struggle over narrative significance. Echo entities

echo past events, memory, language, material history, or earlier narrative structures that continue to shape the narrative present. The concept closely relates to the temporal logic of hauntology (Derrida, 1994), especially the idea that the past may remain active through traces rather than dissolving into a finished historical sequence.

Together, these four qualities constitute narrative resonance as a relational, rather than taxonomic, framework. Convergence events involve the alignment of narrative dimensions; narrative collapse involves the destabilization of established coherence; antagonistic interference involves conflicts between incompatible systems of meaning; and echo entities involve the persistence of earlier structures within the narrative present. The categories may be independent in single passages, but their analytic relevance is magnified when they overlap. Thus, narrative resonance is especially concerned with the relationships among these processes and the instabilities produced through their interaction. These interactions have a major consequence: a link between narrative instability and ontological instability. In this work, narrative instability denotes interruptions in the processes that order and make narrative experience coherent.

5. Posthuman Narrativity and Ecological Fiction

This section examines the relationship between posthuman narrativity and ecological fiction in *Annihilation*, considering how Area X challenges anthropocentric conceptions of nature, agency, and narrative representation. In the Anthropocene, ecological fiction shifts decisively away from the pastoral tradition that treats nature merely as a passive backdrop or inert setting for human concerns (Clark, 2015). Instead, it conceptualizes the nonhuman world as an active, agential, and frequently disruptive force that destabilizes anthropocentric narratives of mastery and control. In *Annihilation*, Area X is not merely a setting; its ecological vitality actively decomposes, rearranges, and reconstitutes the perceptual and psychic boundaries of the human subjects within it.

The landscape has its own ecological agency, actively shaping how memory, identity, and textual representation form and are recorded. Thus, the novel exemplifies what current ecocritical theory identifies as an ecological crisis of representation. Human narrators, confronted with an ecosystem that resists standard scientific taxonomies, find traditional narrative structures straining under the pressure of nonhuman complexity.

Consequently, ecological fiction in VanderMeer's work operates as a medium of material entanglement in which biological processes, linguistic signs, and environmental transformations become indistinguishable. The novel depicts an ecology that literally writes back through the living text of the Tower, demonstrating that posthuman narrativity and ecological fiction are fundamentally inseparable. This ongoing ecological agency continually reconfigures the narrative resonance field, requiring both the characters and the reader to abandon anthropocentric certainty in favor of a relational, entangled ontology.

6. Narrative Resonance in *Annihilation*

The narrative resonance field is especially apparent in *Annihilation* through the interplay of perception, memory, language, materiality, environment, and temporality. Area X is not just an unknown environment to the expedition (VanderMeer, 2024). More fundamentally, repeated exposure to Area X forces the characters to re-evaluate the categories through which they make sense of reality. This difference is critical for the present analysis. Epistemological uncertainty is the incapacity to know, describe, or explain a phenomenon with certainty. Ontological instability is the destabilization of the categories that separate things, identities, surroundings, and modes of existence. The study shows that these two circumstances are related but not the same. Through convergence events, narrative collapse, antagonistic interference, and echo entities, the novel gradually shifts from uncertainty about Area X to instability in the distinctions between human and nonhuman, subject and environment, language and materiality, object and organism, and past and present.

Convergence events first appear in the unstable nexus of perception and interpretation. As the biologist notes early in the voyage, "Looking out over that untroubled landscape, I do not believe any of us could yet see the threat" (VanderMeer, 2024, p. 11). The verb "see" is important because the problem here is not one of literal blindness. The expedition members are physically present in Area X and can see their surroundings, but perception does not provide interpretative competence. Vision and comprehension

are divided. The "threat" is in their perceptual field, but they cannot call on the intellectual frameworks that would normally identify danger. Herman (2013) describes cognitive schemata, which can help explain this difference: understanding narratives requires mental models that structure experience into meaningful relations. The biologist's comment illustrates a difference between sensory access and cognitive organization. Area X is something that can be experienced rather than understood.

This contrast is even clearer in the biologist's response to the Tower. She is struck by an instantaneous image of the structure in huge and complex detail (VanderMeer, 2024, p. 13). Most important is the juxtaposition of "sudden vision" and "vast and intricate detail." "Sudden" conveys immediacy, not the incremental thinking associated with "intricate detail," which implies highly ordered knowledge. The sentence unites immediacy and intricacy. The biologist seems to know something before she can know how she knows it. Her perception is neither simple empirical observation nor pure imagination. Rather, in the same instant of interpretation, intuition, sensory experience, memory, and the environment collaborate. This conflation muddies the traditional dynamic between the observer and the environment. The biologist does not merely encounter an external object to interpret it retrospectively; rather, her perception of the Tower emerges through an interaction in which Area X itself shapes the conditions of interpretation. The narrative perspective is key here, as the reader has access only to the biologist's first-person account. No narrative authority can independently verify her perception as objectively correct. The object's instability is accompanied by the instability of the position from which it is described. Convergence occurs not only in the environment but also between the environment, perception, cognition, and storytelling.

The living text intensifies this convergence and gives it direct ontological implications. The biologist discovers that the letters in the Tower are made of mushrooms (VanderMeer, 2024, p. 27). This feature throws into crisis a distinction which otherwise seems secure: the distinction between language as symbolic representation and biological matter as physical actuality. The letters are not only descriptions of organic life; they are organic structures in themselves. The concept of material-discursive entanglement (Barad, 2007) is particularly useful here because the tangible and the meaningful cannot be viewed as wholly separate entities. Language simultaneously functions as readable text, biological material, and part of an ecological system. The ontological implication of this convergence is more important than doubt as to the meaning of the words. The challenge moves from the meaning of the text to the nature of the text. If language may serve as sign and organism, then the categories of representation and materiality are no longer totally discrete. The living text thus reveals how convergence can cause ontological instability: once separate domains are not only juxtaposed but materially implicated in each other. Convergence contributes to the novel's ontological instability by eroding the barriers that usually separate language from substance and human systems of meaning from non-human natural processes. This convergence brings narrative collapse, as the biologist's ability to maintain a cohesive position as an autonomous observer becomes increasingly precarious. Her response to the living text is very instructive. She describes the experience as a struggle against "the compulsion to keep reading" (VanderMeer, 2024, p. 26). Reading, conceived as a deliberate cognitive act performed by a subject on a text, becomes compulsive. The relationship between reader and text is thus flipped or at least destabilized: the biologist reads the text, but the text seems to impose a force upon the reader. This moment matters because the biologist's scientific identity relies on maintaining interpretive distance. Scientific observation presupposes an observer who can step outside the observed phenomena. However, the compulsive nature of this interaction collapses the distance between the observer and the observed. The living text is no longer simply an object of inquiry. It enters into a relationship process that changes the biologist's attention, conduct, and self-regulation. Narrative collapse, therefore, begins not with the erasure of identity but with a gradual erosion of the mechanisms through which the biologist maintains herself as a coherent observing subject.

Her assertion that "Nothing that lived and breathed was truly objective—even in a vacuum, even if all that possessed the brain was a self-immolating desire for the truth" (VanderMeer, 2024, p. 14) further destabilizes this stance. The statement foregrounds embodiment. This challenge to objectivity is not a philosophical abstraction, but an admission that perception is the product of a living organism embedded in the same material world that it seeks to see. This moment is significant when considering Braidotti's (2013) posthuman account of relational subjectivity. The subject is not an isolated center

of knowledge, but is constituted by connections with material, ecological, and nonhuman elements. This relational condition increasingly shapes the biologist's account.

Antagonistic interference arises in a distinct but connected way. The expedition enters Area X with systems of observation, measurement, classification, naming, and recording. Such techniques imply that phenomena may, in the end, be classified into stable explanatory categories. This epistemological assurance is encapsulated in a particularly telling statement by the psychologist: "The measurements do not lie. This structure is 61.4 feet in diameter. It is raised 7.9 inches from the ground" (VanderMeer, 2024, pp. 21–22). The personification of 'measurements' lends empirical data an authority that seems independent of its interpreters. Measurement is portrayed as a safeguard against ambiguity: even if subjective experience differs, numerical or empirical data is assumed to preserve a steady account of reality. Area X does not merely discredit this empiricist system. As empirical methodologies remain operable but provide no comprehensive explanatory control, a larger contradiction develops. The phenomena they measure may not lend themselves easily to a coherent paradigm, yet the measurements may be correct in their own terms. Thus, antagonistic interference occurs between systems that remain functional but cannot be fully integrated. Categorization is a scientific-rational need, yet Area X generates phenomena that constantly destabilize the categories on which categorization rests.

This tension is especially evident in the debate over whether the subterranean construction is a tower or a tunnel (VanderMeer, 2024, p. 22). The conflicting labels "tower" and "tunnel" are not merely alternative names for an otherwise stable item. Each word carries distinct assumptions about direction, function, spatial organization, and material identity. Thus, naming represents an effort to establish ontological stability. The phenomenon is associated with an existing category of objects and assigned familiar features by designating the construction as a "tower" or a "tunnel." However, the controversy demonstrates that neither classification entirely stabilizes the structure. Richardson's (2006) account of unnatural narration is instructive here, as the challenge lies in accommodating an anomalous architectural phenomenon within representational conventions based on an assumedly cohesive reality. The structure resists such cognitive accommodation.

Temporality enters this unstable system through echo entities. Area X is not encountered as a space devoid of time. The expedition enters a space already inscribed by prior expeditions, abandoned records, repeated linguistic patterns, memories, and material remnants. Earlier missions establish a pattern of absence that nonetheless exerts influence. The subsequent expedition encounters Area X as a landscape already filtered through what predecessors had observed, recorded, abandoned, or failed to explain. The past thus reaches the present not as a finished historical narrative, but through fragments. Derrida's (1994) notion of hauntology helps explain this structure by breaking down a simple opposition between present and absent. A trace may operate without returning to the initial event or to an object of complete presence.

The narrative form intensifies the ambiguity of time. No stable history of previous experience explains Area X, but its remnants add another layer of doubt. Records and relics suggest that earlier events transpired, but they fail to provide authoritative accounts. The past therefore operates as both information and disturbance, broadening interpretation while complicating linear reconstruction. VanderMeer's depiction of Area X as "a bewildering wilderness in which anything and everything seems possible" (2024, p. 8) reinforces this condition. The designation "bewildering" explicitly connects spatial environment to cognitive disruption, while "wilderness" rejects the connotation of an ordered or human-controlled landscape. Concurrently, the premise that "anything and everything" can happen subverts expectations of predictable causality, leaving the landscape temporally and interpretively layered.

Clark's (2015) discussion on Anthropocene representation is useful in framing this temporal complexity. Ecological processes routinely surpass typical human scales of perception and historical order. The traces embedded in Area X in Annihilation similarly refuse to reduce the past to a finished sequence before the present can begin. Earlier experiences echo into present interactions through material, verbal, and memory remains. Echo entities thus contribute to ontological instability by unsettling the divide between presence and absence, and by challenging the idea that the past and the present are wholly independent temporal states. This interaction is key to understanding the ontological relevance of story narrative resonance. If the characters were just too ill-informed to grasp an otherwise stable reality, then Area X would remain mainly an epistemological concern. The analysis shows a different

pattern. The differences between human agency and nonhuman agency become increasingly difficult to discern; the observer becomes part of the observed environment; language attains biological materiality; familiar object categories no longer yield stable classifications; and traces of the past are active in the present. They are not only distinct types of uncertainty. They undermine the conceptual structures that normally order reality. The connection between narrative and ontological instability is particularly relevant here. The biologist's shifting perceptual framework, the lack of an external narrative authority to corroborate her interpretations, competing descriptions of the Tower, shifting relations between signs and material objects, and temporal traces that resist linear organization all indicate narrative instability. In this way, the textual analysis in Section 6 demonstrates how the four dimensions of narrative resonance operate relationally to displace epistemological certainty with a radical ontological instability.

7. Findings

The analysis uncovered four interrelated processes via which narrative resonance functions in *Annihilation*. These are: convergence events, narrative collapse, antagonistic interference, and echo entities. While each process creates a distinct form of instability, the data suggest that each derives its importance largely from their interplay. Together they link shifts in perception, identity, language, environmental interactions, and temporality to the wider destabilization of the categories through which Area X is understood. Convergence events occur where ordinarily disparate elements of perception become entangled. The most striking instances appear in the Tower and its living language, where perception, environment, language, and materiality no longer function as discrete realms. The biologist's reactions to Area X further show that sensory perception cannot provide stable interpretation. The biologist's identity, perception, and epistemic confidence undergo incremental narrative collapse. With each successive contact in Area X, the boundary between observer and observed becomes unsustainable. The analysis thus shows that narrative collapse is more than perceptual error; it fundamentally undermines the coherence of the perspective from which the protagonist observes and recounts her experience. Antagonistic interference arises in encounters where conventional explanatory frameworks remain operational yet prove insufficient to stabilize the phenomena of Area X. Scientific measurement, classification, and taxonomy continue to organize the expedition's investigative efforts. However, the anomalous reality of Area X continually evades total interpretive mastery. The controversy regarding the Tower, and the failure of traditional categories to account for the live text, illustrate that the problem is not merely doubt about available information. The categories used to recognize and distinguish things become unstable. The narrative present reverberates with the sustained effects of earlier expeditions, memories, language patterns, and material imprints. These characteristics make the past neither finished nor totally separate from the present. Instead, traces of past events remain active and continue to influence present perception and interpretation. Thus, the study considers temporal instability a constitutive property of narrative resonance rather than an independent feature of the novel.

Collectively, the findings suggest a movement from epistemological doubt to ontological instability. The protagonists first experience issues of knowing, as Area X defies explanation, prediction, and classification. However, repeated encounters among the four processes challenge more fundamental divisions, such as human/nonhuman, subject/environment, language/materiality, object/organism, and past/present. Ontological instability does not result from any single incident, but from the cumulative interaction of cognitive, ecological, linguistic, material, and temporal disruptions. The data therefore show that narrative resonance works relationally: each category contributes to instability in different ways, and their interplay destabilizes narrative meaning and the novel's portrayed reality.

8. Discussion

These results also contribute to earlier interpretations of the novel by arguing that distinct kinds of instability cannot be considered individually. Useful existing work also addresses posthuman subjectivity, unreliable narration, ecological agency, unnatural representation, and temporal disruption. The narrative resonance framework combines these issues, moving the analytical question from whether certain forms of instability are present to how they interact and reinforce one another. Hence, its main contribution is relational rather than classificatory.

This reading supports Braidotti's (2013) critique of autonomous human subjectivity and Allen's (2024) posthuman reading, but also expands both. The biologist's destabilization stems not from a transformation of her identity alone, but from her fluctuating interactions with environmental agency, materiality, language, and systems of knowledge. Mattsson (2021) has also considered faulty narration as a solution to key elements of epistemic uncertainty. However, the present findings suggest that the problem is not limited to the trustworthiness of the biologist's testimony. The stability of the perceiving and narrating subject itself is called into question. Thus, narrative instability functions as a formal manifestation of a broader posthuman destabilization of subjectivity.

The narrative produces epistemic ambiguity because its protagonists cannot sufficiently explain or categorize Area X. Ontological instability occurs when the categories required for such explanation are unstable. For instance, the living language matters not only for interpretation but also for the boundary between linguistic symbol and biological organism. The novel thus questions not just what can be known, but also the categories through which human subjects define which entities comprise reality. This view also links Richardson's (2006) unnatural narratology with the ecological problems foregrounded by Dudley (2021). The novel's representational instability is not independent of its environmental agency. Area X changes the conditions under which perception, classification, and narrative coherence are feasible. Similarly, Derrida's (1994) hauntology helps explain the persistence of past expeditions and temporal traces, but narrative resonance shows how this temporal persistence interacts with environmental agency and unstable subjectivity. Formal, ecological, cognitive, and temporal disturbances are thus mutually linked processes, not parallel themes.

This incorporation is the strength of the narrative resonance model. It does not aim to replace posthumanism, ecocriticism, cognitive or unnatural narratology, or hauntology. Instead, it provides a framework for investigating links between the processes those viewpoints highlight. It explains how environmental agency can destabilize cognitive frameworks, how cognitive destabilization can undermine narrative and subjective coherence, how failures of classification can reveal the constraints of anthropocentric knowledge, and how temporal traces can reanimate these disturbances in the narrative present.

9. Conclusion

This study uses the narrative resonance field to analyze ontological and narrative instability in the novel. The investigation identifies four interconnected dimensions: convergence events, narrative collapse, antagonistic interference, and echo entities. These elements interact through memory, perception, language, environment, identity, materiality, and temporality rather than functioning independently; together, they shape the novel's unstable narrative structure.

The results show that convergence events bring previously separate narrative dimensions, particularly perception, language, environment, and materiality, into relation. While antagonistic interference results from the struggle between human systems of logical explanation and the alternative logic of Area X, narrative collapse represents the gradual instability of cohesive identity, perception, and epistemic certainty. In the narrative present, echo entities show how memories, past travels, linguistic patterns, and material traces remain active. Together, these activities create a narrative framework that defies human-centered systems of meaning, linear order, and stable interpretation.

The study's main finding is that this instability goes beyond epistemological ambiguity. The term "ontological instability" refers to the breakdown of traditional categories that differentiate entities and forms of existence, especially the lines separating human and nonhuman, subject and environment, language and materiality, and presence and absence. By bringing disparate domains into relation, undermining unified subjectivity, revealing the shortcomings of established explanatory systems, and keeping historical traces active in the present, the four characteristics of narrative resonance work together to create this ontological instability.

Its main contribution is to present narrative resonance as an integrative framework for describing how various types of instability interact within a single narrative system. Finally, it illustrates how disruptions of perception, subjectivity, language, environment, materiality, and temporality synergistically undermine traditional categories of being by showing how convergence events, narrative collapse, antagonistic interference, and echo entities interact. Thus, narrative resonance offers a comprehensive framework for comprehending how the novel relates to narrative form, posthuman subjectivity, ecological agency, and ontological instability.

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