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## A New Nature is coming. We will be repossessed, and the Spectres of the Post-Natural will take the world. Predictions of a new Symbiotic Earth in "Fafner" (2018) by Daniel Perez Navarro

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## Introduction

A deep existential malaise afflicts our communities. What is going to happen to Earth? And what will happen to us? In the Anthropocene how to live with uncertainty is a psychological enigma that produces a flow of novel intellectual work. More than ever before, our societies debate about the future of humankind, a topic in vogue. There are myriads of concepts brought up in this ongoing discussion that decentralize the role of mankind and propose a different relationship between human beings and the ecosystem in which we live. Byproducts of this new mindset on what it means to be human in a world in perpetual crisis are concepts such as the “Posthuman” (Braidotti 2013); the status of “Holobiont” (Haraway 2016), and the experiencing of a new “Coexistence” with the nonhuman (Morton 2018). Likewise, the philosophical dialogue also reverberates in literary works, as in the two novels this paper takes on since both intellectual speculations and literary works are equally suitable reactions to the futuristic speculations of our times. At this precise crossroad, I suggest the novel *Fafner* (2018) by the Spanish author Daniel Perez Navarro as a perfect sample of the ongoing intellectual discussions happening in humanistic fields from an artistic and fictional view.

What is going to happen to Earth? What is going to happen to us? We are living through the Anthropocene (Pavid “What is the Anthropocene?”); or if you want to put more focus on the financial angle rather than on environmental views, then we inhabit the Age of Capital i.e. the Capitalocene (Parenti & Moore, 2016); or if you would rather be less inventive and more geological, the “entirely recent” Holocene (Waggoner “The Holocene Epoch”). We encounter mass extinctions (including us in the pack), global warming, geopolitical tensions with nuclear war resonances, and rampant inequality all over the planet. This sinister reality drives authors of Science Fiction to imagine worlds wherein new concepts are born out of necessity to search for decentralizing the role of mankind, and *en passant* proposing a novel relationship between humanity and the ecosystem we live in.

Using concepts from philosophical posthuman thinking, as the three aforementioned, and applying them to literary analysis, this paper will review the in-depth transformation of nature reported in *Fafner*'s narration. Additionally, it will accomplish a comparative analysis between Perez Navarro's novel and Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014). Both works, despite their pessimistic responses to the cultural *milieu* of our times, suggest speculative possibilities that re-think humanity's relationship to nature, albeit through antagonistic views. The intended goal will be to map the fictionalization of possible evolutions and adaptations of humankind due to the encounter with a nonhuman form far more predatory than what we are used to experiencing. At the same time, it will consider the effects of

symbiotic coexistence that this potential new reality could have on us, a field fruitfully open to argument and speculation.

To address these issues, I believe it is crucial to allude to Kim Stanley Robinson's<sup>1</sup> words during the ninth biennial edition of Kosmopolis 2017. KSR chooses to adopt a position against apocalyptic biases, which according to him could go too far considering the extinction of humankind. According to KSR surviving depends on each generation. When and if the terrifying predictions of the future become reality, surviving will be the matter of generations to come:

“The disasters that are coming, that we are already set in motion [...] it won't be the end, they will not sit on the ground, cast ashes on their head and cry all is lost. They will continue to try to live their lives. Whatever situation they are born into, they will consider it to be natural” (Robinson 3:59-5:05)

KSR makes the case to dedramatize the seemingly unsolvable problems of today on Earth, thus avoiding a sense of impending doom that may be the influence to blame for a certain alienation that foresees impossible universe exploratory projects and planetary colonization plans as feasible enterprises to honor humankind capabilities. The truth is that the only viable project for the near future is neither terraforming Mars nor living inside planet-like spaceships for long periods, but evolving a far better integration with planet Earth than the one we have in our present times: “The solar system is our permanent and only home and in that neighborhood, only the Earth is capable of supporting human life because we co-evolved with it. We are the expressions of Earth, and we are integrated really closely like the other organs of our body with the rest of the biosphere here including its bacteria” (Robinson 12:33-12:59). That we only live on Earth and thanks to Earth are axioms upheld by the fact that an unleashed humanity in the universe, severed from our planet of inception, will not be able to survive for long. KSR reminds us that we belong to the category of biont<sup>2</sup> and that our existence grows from the constant cooperation of other species inside and outside our bodies. Such a reality is the key to our life as we know it today. Moving off our planet is a project that will not be achieved in a thousand years in the future, if ever. Albeit there is Science Fiction not involved with reality, which could be conducive to categorizing it as Fantasy instead of Science Fiction.<sup>3</sup> Other Science Fiction works are aware of the circumstances of our species, and KSR proclaims that these works of Science Fiction are the ones that conform to today's genre of Realism, instead of the conventional fiction that tends to be understood by the general public.

“The realism of our time is science fiction, we live in a science fiction novel, the shadow of the future is on us. We can see where we are going and so history is a process that includes a trajectory and a momentum into a future

state that it is predictable for a certain number of years and then begins to spread out like a weather chart or a modeling exercise to a spread that extends from outer disaster and dystopia to a very prosperous utopia. Both are possible for now but the momentum is there so you want to write that to catch the way life feels right now. So the realism of our time is science fiction. Science fiction is the best literature of our time expressing the way our world feels [...]” (Robinson 33:39-34:33)

Science Fiction deals with the uncertainty of our present time and our near future. They tell stories that take part in imagining outcomes from real problems we have; difficulties that, according to KSR, are economic issues that can only have political solutions. KSR notes that we can only find these solutions in Anticapitalistic initiatives since our financial institutions don’t contemplate the task of saving the planet as a profitable activity (Robinson 52:05-52:24). After the words of KSR, it seems as if the creation of our future were beyond the realm of Capitalism but were well within the realm of the Realism of the XXI century: Science Fiction. Later in the paper, Maria Ptqk’s concept of “science friction” (2021) will serve us to make another point highlighting the importance of fictional narration in representing new humanistic futures beyond Capitalistic ideologies.

Since I happen to agree with KSR in his view of Science Fiction as the Realism of the XXI century, from now on I will proceed to highlight a set of concepts, the way I see them, that are fundamental to understanding a science fictional view of Nature and its engagement with our current humanity. The concepts that will follow bring about a precise portrayal of a sensibility in the realm of Science Fiction that has to do with our place in the universe but will also highlight our conceivable position within the natural kingdoms on our planet.

### **Toward a different relationship, Holobiont**

To carry on this task, I will explore the symbiotic relationship between the character Fafner in the novel of the same title, *Fafner*, and the new nature that surrounds him in Perez Navarro’s fiction (*Fafner* 2018). I am undertaking this project because I believe the novel, *Fafner*, to be an imagined portrait of a future with a different relationship between human beings and their environment. I also believe that it is interesting comparing Perez Navarro’s novel to *Annihilation*, the first installment of VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy*, to come up with differences and similarities when it comes down to nature-humankind relationships. I judge the concept of symbiosis to be of essential value to go ahead with this essay on comparative literature.

In the previous introduction, KSR referred to the term “biont”: a distinct being that needs to relate to other bionts creating a symbiosis that makes life

blossom. This term can be expanded to a more encompassing one that includes not only the subject referred to but also the necessary living surroundings that make it grow, “holobiont”: “integrated biont organisms, i.e., animals or plants, with all of their associated microbiota” (Guerrero et al. 133). This concept is fundamental because it gives us a clear idea of how even a subject is a complex system of symbiotic relationships. This idea, in turn, requires us to explore the concept of symbiosis, which could be understood as a process of “[...] living together of ‘differently named organisms’. Symbiosis is a long-term physical association of two or more partners [...] In endosymbiosis [...] one partner lives inside the other. Symbiogenesis refers to recognizable evolutionary novelties in holobionts” (Guerrero et al. 134). Precisely, I state that the main topic of *Fafner* is a premeditated illustration of a new symbiotic relationship, a new holobiont, in the anthropogenic man: the mysterious Fafner, whose mishaps are covered almost in their entirety by the novel.

*Fafner* is a novel written by the Spanish author Daniel Pérez Navarro and published in 2018 by the independent publisher Antipersona. It was nominated for the “Premios Guillermo de Baskerville” 2018 edition, although it did not win the award. Yet, Pérez Navarro had won this award the previous year with his novelette *Los príncipes de madera* (2017). In addition, he is a prolific author who has published several fiction novels, short stories, and cinematographic essays<sup>4</sup>.

In the novel under discussion, the reader follows the adventures of a mysterious feral man whom the narrator names Fafner. This man somehow lives happily in the wilderness, surrounded by nature in a post-apocalyptic environment where there are no big settlements, and the few villages are sparse and in a pitiful state of extinction. The world, as we know it, disappeared generations ago. The ominous state of this reality is due to a nature that has suddenly mutated generations before and has become far more predatory toward human beings than it has ever been experienced in the past. Fafner, thus, stands out as a modern Homo Sapiens, the next successful iteration of humankind, a sort of untried biont because he is part of a new whole holobiont: “He feels like a modern Homo Sapiens. The rules that govern him are different [...] Extinction awaits the others, whether they are men or trees” (Pérez Navarro 75)<sup>5</sup>.

Regularly the question of mass extinction and the extremely fast-paced disappearing biodiversity that comes to define the Anthropocene/Capitalocene is depicted in very realistic terms in Science Fiction novels. Humankind is massively predated mother nature and destroying it in the process. In *Fafner*, there is a subversion of this trope, where there was a tamed and benevolent nature, there is now a new nature with antagonistic features: “The only chance is in metamorphosis. No man can bend that environment, he can only aspire to become a harmless flea and hope that the host will accept it without question” (Pérez Navarro 99-100). The holobiont image, the system of symbiotic relationships, shows a reversed alteration

in the hierarchy of the food chain that does not have any more human beings as apex predators: “The new nature reveals itself multiform to the one who removes the blindfold of scientism and religiosity” (69). The novel, thus, is a representation of the complexity of associations without giving primacy to human agency, in the vein of what Donna Haraway refers to as new ways of understanding symbiosis by biologists: letting “go of the dictates of possessive individualism and zero-sum games as the template for explanation” (60). There are none of these associations in *Fafner*, since indeed, the novel is a fictional exercise of a “scientific hypothesis” (Pérez Navarro 183) of the future, as in one of the analeptic episodes when it is suggested to the diegetic possible narrator of the novel, Fafner’s grandpa<sup>6</sup>.

And in the process, Pérez Navarro shares with KSR the intuition that the creation of a future beyond the realm of Capitalism could be brought to completion by way of a realistic portrayal of futuristic possibilities. In the case of *Fafner*, this story involves the coexistence with a “New Nature” of catastrophic consequences for humankind, making it a very pessimistic alternative.

### **Coexistence with a new nature**

To understand the complexity of such a concept as “coexistence” it is helpful to reach out to Timothy Morton’s thoughts about the issue at stake<sup>7</sup>, surviving the era of the Anthropocene. Morton states that we can only survive if we opt for a new “coexistence” with nature, and that requires us to also accept the negative sides of this implication. So, we realize that life is just not about oneself:

*Dark Ecology* argues that ecological reality requires an awareness that at first has the characteristics of tragic melancholy and negativity, concerning inextricable coexistence with a host of entities that surround and penetrate us, but which evolves paradoxically into an anarchic, comedic sense of coexistence. (Morton 2018, 160)

Whereas Morton talks, defusing, about a “Dark Ecology”, in *Fafner* we have a threatening “New Nature”. Both ideas have similarities and differences though. The difference between Morton’s ideas and *Fafner*’s is that in *Fafner* the only things that matters are the living beings, highlighting a predatory ontology; whereas in Morton’s work reality is neutral and only composed of objects, since “subjects are nonexistent” (2018, 192). Divergences, though, stop here, and *Fafner*’s existence becomes the culmination of agrilogistics abandonment<sup>8</sup>, precisely this being one of the representational goals of the novel.

*Fafner*, the special biont that becomes an improved iteration of the Homo Sapiens, is understood as a poet and eventually evolves into a mock-tragic character. He believes himself to be the evolutive outcome of a new reality but that

changes with the anagnorisis at the end of the novel. Fafner turns out to be as egotistic as his ancestors, whom we know he despised deeply through the omniscient narration that composes most of the novel. Following Morton's idea that reality is only composed of objects, the reader could see Fafner as a mere object within a universe of objects, after all they are represented as his peers; these objects are contained in this "New Nature", that in turn roll up to be the result of alien imperialism. Morton renames this anagnorisis as ecognosis which "involves realizing that nonhumans are installed at profound levels of the human—not just biologically and socially but in the very structure of thought and logic. Coexisting with these nonhumans is ecological thought, art, ethics, and politics" (2018, 159). Whereas, the coexisting, in Morton, aims organically at all the objects that surround us and affect us as we affect them; in *Fafner* it reveals human beings as victims of nonhuman imperialism. Morton equates everything in our universe as being fundamentally the same. In *Fafner* human beings are demoted to objects in a reality with new extraterrestrial subjects, superior beings with an agency that exploits us in addition to all the other objects of the "New Nature".

At first, the novel seems to draw a hypothesis of how coexistence with a reality where humans are not the apex of a predatory civilization could come true. To make it conceivable, the plot describes a series of catastrophic events that bring about the arrival of the "New Nature", which eventually the reader finds out is due to an open portal from another dimension controlled by enigmatic and extraterrestrial "colonels". Before being aware of these beings from another dimension, Fafner's world resembles Morton's "Arche-lithic" (Morton 2018, 70), an era where the primacy of humans has vanished, and what is left is a myriad of relationships between living and non-living beings that have equal value and agency. Expressing via art, as a form of speculation, the experiencing of the "Arche-lithic", behind the concept of "New Nature", seems to be the main motivator for the diegetic author in *Fafner* to write, as it is as well for Morton: "If we want thought different from the present, then thought must veer toward art" (Morton 2018, 1). Ultimately, the "Arche-lithic" in *Fafner*, these many beings, and events all at once, is superseded by the arrival of the "Colonels". A new form of extraterrestrial imperialism summarizes the novel's moral: embracing the darkness the future brings us. Because after all, Fafner, the character, results in realizing humans do not matter very much anymore. With the impending arrival of the "Colonels", *Fafner* has narrated the end of the Anthropocene and the beginning of a new era, the posthuman, in which we do not take center stage anymore.

### **The Posthuman**

The concept of posthuman, as is understood by one of her more notorious proponents, the philosopher Rosi Braidotti, is a metaphor to understand our present

times. It puts the focus on the diversity of posthuman subjects, which possess different perspectives and circumstances but without privileging one over the others: “Posthuman subjects are a work-in-progress: they emerge as both a critical and a creative project within the posthuman convergence along posthumanist and post-anthropocentric axes of interrogation. [...] In doing so, they explore the multifaceted and differential nature of the collective ‘we’” (Braidotti 2019, 36).

Hence, Braidotti acknowledges reality takes the shape of a rhizome<sup>9</sup> (Deleuze), a mass of conflicting and connected ideas and phenomena that put at risk not only humankind but the entire planet. Therefore, our reality affects human and nonhuman subjects, banishing a classical humanist anthropocentric paradigm and initiating a new posthuman one that gives birth to a new divinity: “Zoe is an inhuman force that stretches beyond life, to new, vitalist ways of approaching death as an impersonal event” (Braidotti 2013, 193-194). Braidotti’s ideas oppose Capitalism within the frame of critical posthumanism, as defined by Stefan Herbrechter in Braidotti and Hlavajova (2018, 94): “Critical posthumanism is a theoretical approach which maps and engages with the ‘ongoing deconstruction of humanism’”. Braidotti perceives all living organisms as equal to human subjects putting forward an opposition to human exceptionalism predicaments. Humans are not more important in any sense than other living beings, since all living subjects are autopoietic, therefore “self-organizing”, invalidating a hierarchy where humans are at the top. By the same token, Braidotti acknowledges agency to nonhuman subjects.

I believe that Braidotti’s posthumanism is the one being portrayed in *Fafner*, or at least a very similar one in the vein of Critical Posthumanist theories. Braidotti in her preaching against self-centered individualism, promotes the idiom *amor fati*, tracing influences from Stoicism to Nietzsche. Contrarily, following Perez Navarro’s ironical play, *Fafner* introduces a paradox: it is individualism that wins, exactly the one extorted by the alien hierarchy which seems to be keener to Julius Cesar’s *veni, vidi, vici* motto. The reader can decrypt the character of Fafner’s great-grandfather, the sympathetic and pragmatic doctor protagonist of some fragments of the narration, as a symbol of that classical humanism and universalism that Braidotti rejects (2013 190). This doctor, who vanishes in the apocalyptic future to follow, embodies all the malaise of a capitalistic liberal humanism<sup>10</sup>; conversely, Fafner, the doctor’s great-grandson, is the incarnation of the ideal posthuman subject.

According to Braidotti “posthuman” is a set of new approaches to experiencing and understanding the present times. It looks to me as if Fafner’s character aims to draw this posthuman idea but in the end, ironically, it gets subverted by falling prey to a new form of alien Capitalism. The extraterrestrial conquering of our planet turns human primacy upside down which has passed from humans to nonhuman forms, the mysterious aliens. Thus, the narration shows the



demotion of humans to the category of objects, and in consequence, we are treated accordingly as we used to treat our environment: as objects to be exploited. Perez Navarro, I reckon, has a very sharp and obscure sense of humor.

One of the main points of *Fafner*, I believe, is spotting the hubris of posthumanist ideas. Fafner, the character, despite being the perfect posthuman subject, is defeated, without much fuss, by a factotum sent by the “Colonels”. Therefore, the novel puts in doubt the feasibility of the posthuman enterprise. After all, what makes posthumanists feel so certain that their view of the universe is the right one? Or the one that will emerge victorious?

Where Braidotti creates a metaphor-deity of egalitarianism, *Zoe* (2013 60); Perez Navarro introduces the “Colonels”. When Perez Navarro highlights the irony of Fafner misunderstanding his existence, Braidotti proclaims with absolute certainty her new deity of life and death. If Braidotti is against the concept of liberal individualism, the end of *Fafner* describes the ultimate fusion with a rhizomatic reality. It is to the reader’s interpretation if the latter is something desirable. According to my humble interpretation, it has more to do with hellish nightmares than egalitarian “radical immanence” (Braidotti 2013, 136).

It occurs to me that Perez Navarro’s description of the posthuman is the main image expressed in their works by Braidotti and such thinkers, either on purpose or by an accidental authorial intent on the novelist’s part. But, in an ironic turn, Perez Navarro subverts this “*conceptual personae*” (Braidotti 2013, 87), which after all is a mere metaphor, for a more tragicomical concept of alien imperialism. Though this time, the aliens’ victims are the western human subject as well as all other human beings on planet Earth.

## **Donna Haraway**

Donna Haraway, a philosopher frequently paired with Rosi Braidotti, is also against liberal individualism (though she labels it “bounded”) in this “New Nature” to arrive that will impose a symbiotic coexistence between human and nonhuman beings, in the same manner as Braidotti’s and Morton’s hypotheses. For Haraway, Individualism, akin to Supremacism, is unattainable nowadays, in the era of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene: “Here, I expand the argument that bounded individualism in its many flavors in science, politics, and philosophy has finally become unavailable to think with, truly no longer thinkable, technically or any other way” (Haraway 2016, 5).

She maintains that we are one sort of critter in a world of critters that she calls Chthulucene<sup>11</sup>. Despite the existential and planetary troubles of our times, she emphasizes that through symbiosis with other species, a set of processes she calls “Symbiogenesis”<sup>12</sup> and “Symptoiesis”<sup>13</sup>, we will be able to survive and grow as a species; although, through generations, we will become very different beings.

According to Haraway, some people are afraid of the future because they imagine the future as an apocalyptic time. But she believes otherwise, even when the future could go bad, it will be different, and consequently, there will be a future. She is against despair and pro-staying with the troubling present. She literally uses the term “Trouble” in the title of her book, and such a term is fundamental in her thinking since “staying with the troubling”<sup>14</sup> means for her to be present, therefore surviving.

I consider Donna Haraway to be a relevant theorist for literary scholars because she expresses openly her belief in the importance of Science Fiction to talk about the present times, the Chthulucene, and the future of human beings and the planet. She speculates using the genre of Science Fiction with new symbiotic relationships between human and nonhuman beings that last generations and change both subjects, humans and the critters we relate to. Haraway mints the motto “making kin” (creating new ties between humans and nonhumans) to refer to these new symbiotic bonds that will allow overcoming the Anthropocene and Capitalocene eras.

Precisely, because *Fafner* aims for the same goal, theorizing through science fiction, comparing the philosophy behind the novel to Haraway’s Chthulucenic ideas is relevant. Thus, in *Fafner*, even though there is a depiction of a possible world like the Chthulucene, it eventually fails, for the reasons previously mentioned in the section dedicated to Braidotti’s ideas, and gives birth to a new era, a sort of an “Alienocene”. If Haraway sees Science Fiction as a “practice and process” (Haraway 2016, 3) to achieve the Chthulucene, *Fafner*’s author illustrates its demise and the consequences of its failure, and the inauguration of the “Alienocene”. If Haraway’s ideas aspire to hope and nonhuman cohabitation by way of new forms of holobionts, *Fafner*’s ideas sentence us to slavery and subhuman existence under the boot of alien imperialism. Perez Navarro creates a fiction where we get a taste of our own medicine.

### **Science Friction**

So far, I have reviewed *Fafner* through the theoretical lens of the holobiont (Haraway 2016), the coexistence (Morton 2018) of these living arrangements of forms in the Chthulucenic (Haraway 2016), Arche-lithic (Morton 2018), and posthuman (Braidotti 2013) near future. And I confronted them with the subversion of these hypotheses that I believe the novel *Fafner* represents. These authors put into practice what Maria Ptqk (2021) denominates a “science friction”: a practice of creating new existential paradigms “that stem from understanding life as an interdependent network, with no superior species or independent organisms” (Ptqk 2021, 155). She points out that this “ever-renewing art of storytelling” (Ptqk 2021, 158) is a collective effort to reimagine a “pre-Copernican time” (Ptqk 2021, 159),

which in *Fafner*, as I noted before, is labeled “New Nature”. Whereas Ptqk gives an instance of new ways of representing humans in the world, diverting from human exceptionalism, along figuratively alien beings, such as the “hive intelligence” of plants and the agency of gigantic mycelia (Ptqk 2021, 157); in *Fafner* the “science friction” happens with literal alien species.

To keep up exploring deeper in *Fafner*’s treatment of “science friction” that retains Haraway’s, Braidotti’s, and Morton’s thoughts, I will compare Perez Navarro’s novel to Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*. By doing this, my ultimate goal is offering to the reader contradictory considerations of the future to come by using the very same science fiction genre as a tool akin to propaganda, even when I believe Perez Navarro’s main intention is a demystification of a posthuman future in happy (and idealistic) coexistence with our environment; and considering that VanderMeer’s open purpose is proselytizing his new iteration of ecocriticism.

*Annihilation* narrates in first person the fate of an expedition formed by a team of four women (a biologist, an anthropologist, a psychologist, and a surveyor) that explores “Area X”. This is a geographical location barred to the public for a long time that seems to contain strange natural phenomena. The female narrator is the biologist, and through her field journal, the reader of the novel gets to explore Area X as the characters do. The novel describes the quest of the biologist to understand the nature of the strange phenomena happening in Area X, which turns out to be a sort of alien remnant that as soon as it contacts living beings parasitizes<sup>15</sup> them and originates a set of mutations with unforeseeable outcomes. The nature of Area X is disclosed in subsequent installments of *The Southern Reach Trilogy*, which makes *Annihilation* (the first installment of the trilogy) have a very blurred and ill/defined narrative texture.

I am going to analyze solely the first installment of the trilogy, VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* because I believe there are many plot similarities with *Fafner*. Consequently, comparing both novels will highlight the contrasting ideological motivations behind VanderMeer’s and Perez Navarro’s narrations. The subsequent novels *Authority* (2014) and *Acceptance* (2014) do not focus as much on Area X, the space where actions are developed, and in my opinion, they do not have as much relevance for this paper.

*Annihilation* has been broadly read and analyzed by scholarly critics. One of the most popular topics treated by scholars is the concept of intelligence that Area X manifests. The biologist describes a creature that possesses nonhuman intelligence not lacking creativity either. Consequently, the women sent to explore this Area X seem to find their task impossible to accomplish because there is too much data to make sense of it. VanderMeer points out the limits of human conscience to understand the enormity of the world we live in. Even after reading the whole trilogy, we, as readers, cannot be sure if Area X is a conscient being cognitively aware. Eventually, the biologist ends up mutating into some immense

creature covered with eyes, which reminds us of the mythological Ophanim. The novel also shows a fascination with vegetal intelligence and nonhuman thinking, becoming a perfect example of posthuman postulates. The women sent to Area X cannot understand the phenomena because instrumental intelligence, i.e. human intelligence, cannot understand a nonhuman cognitive being. Thence, *Annihilation* offers a portrayal of qualitatively distinct intelligence, in any case, not inferior to ours, maybe even superior (Gormley 2019).

Another appealing theme in the novel is the nature of the encounter between human beings and aliens, such cosmic experiences (a mark of the Weird genre) are described as mystical (Wilk 2018 and Newson-Errey 2021). Elvia Wilk states that VanderMeer's fiction updates a form of mysticism, the alien could be paired as a divine figure, therefore experiencing contact with the alien is as intense as would be experiencing the presence of God (Wilk Section 1). The characters' transformations caused by having entered Area X, although most of the times hideous and fatal, could also be explained as a voluntary mystical self-annihilation facilitative to "decreation", that is the case of the biologist's transformation (Wilk Section 10). In this case, the dissolution of the I ("decreation") is the ultimate form of transcendence that can either be understood as insanity or as experiencing an alien intellect.

In *Annihilation*, this cosmic experience is not achieved through language but through the dissolution of the self (Newson-Errey 378), what is understood as human individuality. Area X, the godly figure, is described as an hyperobject<sup>16</sup>, that communicates a different quality of knowledge (374), one that is not reachable through any scientific agency, but through experiencing an ecological mysticism of the unhuman (388). The unhuman in the novel, a synonym for posthuman, enforces an ontology that mixes object-oriented, where there are no subjectivities/subjects, only objects; and vegetal colonizations (Masucci 171). That is the imposition of Area X as a colonizing holobiont, in Haraway terms, that parasites<sup>17</sup> the human subjects it gets in touch with.

Area X also represents the property of "plasticity" (Jeroncic and Willems 6) as the acceptance of the irreversibility of change, understood as mutation. The transformation that the characters must go through is also a way of recreation for the sake of survival in the time of the ecological collapse. In this sense, the successful biologist survives Area X becoming part of the same ecology that threatened her survival. Although, she becomes a qualitatively different being by coexisting genetically with the alien phenomena.

The fact that the novel is the biologist's field journal allows us to witness her symbiotic transformation and, in a sense, to experience from a linguistic point of view what can only be experienced from a nonlinguistic reception. Area X summarizes the "obscure realities" (Tabas 3) in our weird world that we cannot perceive with our human senses, which are VanderMeer's fictional engine:

[...] the more we find out about our world, the stranger it appears to be, and more complex. Someday, perhaps, we'll normalize that strangeness in our heads – and cherish it. We may even be forced to do so by the circumstances of our own poor stewardship of the planet. We may be forced to imagine the world without human beings on it in order to arrive at a point of view that allows us to continue to live upon it sustainably (VanderMeer “Annihilation: ‘Weird’ Nature.”)

The lack of perception of this “weird ecology” (Thompkins 2014) is VanderMeer’s narrative strategy for causing estrangement<sup>18</sup> to the reader to promote his ideology (Kortekallio 62). VanderMeer, then, offers an example of action, the biologist’s acceptance of her new changing weird nature after being parasitized by an invasive organism (Area X), all of this in the face of a global crisis (Westhauser and Stuit 4).

Therefore, VanderMeer’s ecocriticism, what he calls New Weird: “the idea of contamination in fiction” (Gubacsi 49), is firstly a representational device and secondly, an effort to represent the irrepresentable, and it is connected to an object-oriented ontology, and a sense of the world according to posthumanist positions. In a sense, it is Area X, the alien form, the main character of the entire trilogy, especially in the first installment, the indirect creator of an anthropological report on human beings. But, all Area X’s messages, as nature, are empty signifiers (Strombeck 1369), since we are facing an unworldly life form, curious and cognitive, but after all nonhuman. Finally, VanderMeer, with *Annihilation*, from a posthuman position, through the biologist’s experience of being in Area X, portrays a literal epistemological skepticism in favor of “nonhuman environmental communities” of beings (Prendergast 356), which I believe it to be a legitimate definition of Area X.

### ***Fafner versus Annihilation***

In this section of the paper, I am comparing both novels to highlight the distinctive ideological elements between them. The narrators explain the process of transcendence by meeting a new form of life, a holobiont, with its unreachable conscience. In *Fafner* it is named New Nature and in *Annihilation* it takes the name of Area X. These forms of life have the attributes of hyperobjects, not only are they so big that it is hard to grasp their dimensions, but they show “porosity” (VanderMeer 2016), prone to contaminate and being contaminated. But in VanderMeer’s fiction this symbiotic relationship drives the action and the chance of surviving, meanwhile in Perez Navarro’s case the porosity brings parasitism and ecocolonization, it is not a relationship among equals, but among master and slave: “They are the last before extinction. The only chance is in metamorphosis. No man

can bend that environment, he can only aspire to become a harmless flea and hope that the host will accept it without question (Perez Navarro 99-100).” In *Fafner* our world has been perforated, infected, and thus invaded to make a new ecosystem for an invasive species. Since anthropocentrism goes against porosity, the latter is one of the concepts that link both novels. And another element that associates them is their contrasting relation to Lovecraft’s influences: *Annihilation* does not follow the pattern of cosmic horror as is understood in Lovecraft-like narrations<sup>19</sup>, whereas *Fafner*, even when it feels like that for the longest time, doesn’t either, because in the end, it reveals itself as an example of nihilistic and pessimistic cosmic horror.

This contrast is key to understanding the profound ideological differences between both novels, *Annihilation* rejects human supremacism (Ptqk 159), and *Fafner* accepts it as a lesser evil until a greater one comes. I believe that *Fafner* mocks this pretension. *Fafner* is a very pessimistic novel because it does not provide humans with hope of surviving, as *Annihilation* does, and *Fafner* does not display an alternative to a system of domination either. It is either we who are the masters or others dominating us, the mysterious aliens that show up at the end. The lack of hope arises from the fact that for *Fafner*’s narrator, human beings have no “plasticity”, resilience being a more common concept, and the main character of the novel, Fafner, the *Übermensch*, deserves the same downfall as everyone else, and ends up being swallowed alive by the New Nature:

“Fafner contemplates the Black Spruce, the great tree of the North [...] Near the root, under hundreds of faces, he recognizes the one that belonged to his grandfather. The author of The New Nature has spent more than forty years embedded in the skin of that tree. Its ancestor is living black wood. [...] "He's still trying to hit with the ax when the roots have already engulfed him and he's a part of the Black Spruce.” (Perez Navarro 199-202)

Nonetheless, both novels prefer to focus their plot on biological and natural themes, rather than technological ones, which makes them somewhat uncommon in the Science Fiction field. Such reasoning is why VanderMeer does not believe he writes science fiction, but New Weird, a genre that has more to do with ecological estrangement (VanderMeer 2016) and also with the mystic experience. It is in this *topos* of mysticism where we find another fundamental difference between these novels. I have already covered the ideas of the biologist experiencing a total transformation in her fusion with the alien holobiont, permitting her to survive the ecological crisis described in the novel; whereas, Fafner, otherwise, ends up “decreated” after beholding the truth, that God is not a totality, but just raw imperial power. *Fafner*, consequently, is a nihilistic fictional work, as is announced by the analeptic author of the apocalyptic treaty that will welcome the arrival of the New Nature.

Both the biologist and Fafner experience “alteriorsensuality” (Tabas 15), but with very different consequences: the former evolves to a higher (or at least of no inferior quality) cognitive state, meanwhile, Fafner’s voice and conscience vanish into the New Nature: “Something is guessed, three impossible words because the forest has no voice and has not learned to speak: I am Fafner” (Perez Navarro 203). This last quotation from Perez Navarro’s novel is interesting for the relation of Fafner to the speaking word. Fafner barely talks and is illiterate. The New Nature, as his grandpa preached in the diegetic part of the story, has stripped any form of scientific knowledge from the world, leaving only the spoken word: “Biology books accumulate dust. They are not science, only memories, the history of the ancient world. There are no punishments that deserve my faults to regret, all that is also part of the old” (39). In the new kingdom to come, human language is futile. As it is futile in Area X, but for a different reason, where in VanderMeer’s there is the impossibility of communication and coexistence with a *xeno* intellect due to the insurmountable differences; in Fafner’s world communication is possible, but the alien colonizers are not interested in it, they only care about exploitation.

This authorial choice is premeditated, VanderMeer thinks about a potential nightmarish future where biological beings can be genetically coded to become weapons (Gubacsi 52). Nevertheless, Area X is not exactly a weapon, since in the novel it is hard to presuppose premeditated agency on its part; although in *Fafner* this is precisely the situation being narrated by Perez Navarro, a New Nature as a biological weapon that ends the human age. Where VanderMeer’s plot proselytizes a sort of animalistic regression to primitive forms of episteme, Perez Navarro draws an ironic retort to that desire to be dispossessed and animalized. As a result, *Fafner* reveals that, eventually, Anthropocenic critics mentioned before in the paper are not really talking about human behavior but universal features, they refer, indeed, to the unavoidable human volition. This is, in my opinion, the ideological leitmotiv behind *Fafner*. Ultimately, in *Fafner* it is the natural thing to exploit or be exploited.

Yet, going back to VanderMeer’s work, I also believe that Area X is far away from embodying a Godly experience, it is a subject/object that is as predatory as any human activity (Capitalocene/Anthropocene) and very similar, indeed, to the New Nature to be found in *Fafner*.

## Conclusion

Despite KSR’s words of hope and optimism with which I started this paper, *Fafner* is portrayed as a nihilistic pessimist dystopian alternative to the present: dying of self-inflicted destruction (as in our Global Warming current present) or being conquered by another imperial volition (being one of symbolic nature, referring to petrocapiatalism or any other self-inflicted planetary crisis; or literal with

the improbable coming of a colonizing alien civilization). Both alternatives indeed drive to the same ending: extinction. These two scenarios are very pessimistic. *Annihilation*, which I consider to be a sort of fictional adaptation of Morton's, Haraway's, and Braidotti's ideas, does not provide a better set of choices: suffer disintegration in the form of mystic fusion with an alien totality, or become prey to a *xeno* predator. After analyzing these texts and considering the possibilities of symbiotic coexistence with an extraterrestrial entity, I realize that both authors, VanderMeer and Pérez Navarro, offer very somber outcomes to the reader.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the initials KSR from now on when I refer to this author.

<sup>2</sup> A discrete unit of living matter (*Merriam-Webster.com*).

<sup>3</sup> This hypothesis merits a different debate altogether.

<sup>4</sup> A list of his works is contained in the works cited section.

<sup>5</sup> As far as I know, *Fafner* has not yet been translated into Spanish, hence all the translated citations are my responsibility (I apologize to the reader for their harshness).

<sup>6</sup> Pérez Navarro interjects episodic analepsis and prolepsis regularly and confuses the diegesis with the reality of the reader in an ingeniously playful way.

<sup>7</sup> The similarities in the portraits of the natural world in both works are shown even in the fact that *Dark Ecology* and *Fafner* are split in a tripartite framework. See the first, second, and third axioms of Morton (p. 48, 65, 73), as well as the “three generations” that live through the arrival of the “New Nature” in *Fafner*.

<sup>8</sup> Morton understands agrilogistics as the taming of agricultural processes that began in the Fertile Crescent 12,000 years ago and have become the large-scale agricultural and industrial practices that have caused the Anthropocene (Morton 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Braidotti declares the influences in her work of “a monistic ontology, through the lenses of Spinoza, Deleuze, and Guattari, plus feminist and postcolonial theories” (Braidotti 2013, 188)

<sup>10</sup> Braidotti is openly against “re-essentialized, centralized notions of liberal individualism” to avoid risks of falling into “neo-liberal euphoria” (2013, 102).

<sup>11</sup> *Chthulucene* [...] is a compound of two Greek roots (*kthôn* and *kainos*) [...] *Kainos* means now, a time of beginnings, a time for ongoing, for freshness. [...] *Kainos* can be full of inheritances, of remembering, and full of comings, of nurturing what might still be” (Haraway 2016, 5).

<sup>12</sup> “Symbiogenesis [...] This chapter makes string figures with the threads of reciprocating energies of biologies, arts, and activism for multispecies resurgence” (Haraway 2016, 5).

<sup>13</sup> “making-with” (Haraway 2016, 5).

<sup>14</sup> (Part of the title of her book is referenced in this paper).

<sup>15</sup> The use of this word implies a negative connotation that should be avoided since one of the points of the novel is put into question the negative associations we make with concepts such as “parasite” (Westhauser and Stuit 2021) and other natural contacts between living beings.

<sup>16</sup> “I coined the term hyperobjects to refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.” (Morton 2013, 1).



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<sup>17</sup> If it is a parasitic relationship or a mutually beneficial one is left to the reader's interpretation, even though VanderMeer's position is clear about the benefits of not respecting boundaries: "Because it's the fiction that doesn't allow for that quality you're talking about, that wants to keep boundaries that I don't respond to." (VanderMeer 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Or "rime" from a cinematic critical view (Hossaert 39).

<sup>19</sup> Regarding this topic, VanderMeer states: "This is one reason Lovecraft doesn't speak to me — his images are inert, without resonance. To some extent, it's an innate quality in a particular writer. But it's also self-awareness: how do I try to approach the world; how do I receive the world? Because without the right input, the output is a kind of lie" (VanderMeer 2016).

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