

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

Who's afraid of Queer Theory?

(About *Annihilation* by Alex Garland, 2018)

Everything became very close to one. For the sail, upon which James had his eyes fixed until it had become to him like a person whom he knew, sagged entirely; there they came to a stop, flapping about waiting for a breeze, in the hot sun, miles from shore, miles from the Lighthouse. Everything in the whole world seemed to stand still. The Lighthouse became immovable, and the line of the distant shore became fixed. The sun grew hotter and everybody seemed to come very close together and to feel each other's presence, which they had almost forgotten.

Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 1927

In a perfect world I would not have to be a feminist and gay activist and I could spend my life discussing H. P. Lovecraft. I am a horror story freak and a Lovecraft freak. By 'horror story' I don't mean the modern kind in which people do gory and nasty things to each other but the older kind in which the source of fear is (usually) some alteration in reality.

Joanna Russ, « On Fascination of Horror Stories, Including Lovecraft's », in *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, Indiana University Press, 1995.

In a perfect world, science fiction would no longer be of any use.
Science fiction still has a bright future ahead of it.

This text is a continuation of the work already initiated with my book *La Fiction réparatrice (Reparative Fiction, 2017)*, which proposed a queer transcendence of binary cleavages, through the study of popular cinematographic fictions. Assuming that paranoid criticism (which would persist in trying at all costs to distinguish good from bad objects, feminist and queer productions from those that would not be intrinsically so) does not offer any reparative horizon for the exercise of thought, I prefer to opt for a queer and feminist reading of objects that I do not seek to categorize. Queer is not only a question of sex and gender but has repercussions on all the systematic binaries imposed on us: nature/culture, imaginary world/real world, theory/fiction, body/mind, that I strive to repair.

In a short article published in April 2011 in the *Manchester Guardian*, entitled "Learning to Write Science Fiction with Virginia Woolf", Ursula Le Guin calls on us not to limit ourselves to a unique literary genre but to seek inspiration and stimulation elsewhere, especially from Woolf, whom she admired deeply, regularly quoting her in her essays. Woolf, as described by Le Guin, encourages us to explore other worlds, other times, as in *Orlando*; or to practice "estrangement"¹ with *Flush*, which allows us to see the world through the eyes of a cocker spaniel:

¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, Columbia University Press, 2001.

"You can't write science fiction well if you haven't read it, though not all who try to write it know this. But nor can you write it well if you haven't read anything else. Genre is a rich dialect, in which you can say certain things in a particularly satisfying way, but if it gives up connection with the general literary language it becomes a jargon meaningful only to an in-group. Useful models may be found outside the genre. I learned a lot from reading the ever-subversive Virginia Woolf."

Her connection to her favourite author is constantly strengthened in her theoretical and literary work, for example in a short story entitled "Direction of the road", published in *A Wind's Twelve Quarters*, in 1975. Le Guin, following Woolf's model in *Flush, a biography*, chose a "non-human" as the narrator of this story, an oak tree located on the edge of a busy road, inspired by a real oak tree on Highway 18, near McMinnville in Oregon. Instead of being subjected to the laws of perspective and gravity, the tree seems to voluntarily change its size and move to offer motorists the feeling of speed that they take for granted. In this short story, we find not only the practice of estrangement, that is, the development of a narrative from a perspective that is unfamiliar to us, but also something of Analytic Philosophy as present in Woolf's work, namely a questioning of the manifestations of our perception of the world and of the idea we make ourselves of the reality of things and beings.

The story ends badly, despite all the good will of the oak tree, with a car accident and the death of its driver:

"Another car, however, happened to be quite near the urgent one, and facing it, as it changed sides; and the road could not do anything about it, being already overcrowded. To avoid impact with the facing car, the urgent car totally violated the Direction of the Road, swinging it round to North-South in its own terms, and so forcing me to leap directly at it. I had no choice. I had to move, and move fast — eighty-five miles an hour. I leapt: I loomed enormous, larger than I have ever loomed before. And then I hit the car. I lost a considerable piece of bark, and, what's more serious, a fair bit of cambium layer; but as I was seventy-two feet tall and about nine feet in girth at the point of impact, no real harm was done. My branches trembled with the shock enough that a last-year's robin's nest was dislodged and fell; and I was so shaken that I groaned. It is the only time in my life had I have ever said anything out loud. [...] The driver had no time to say anything; I killed him instantly. [...] But it is unjust to require me to play the part, not of the killer only, but of death. For I am not death. I am life: I am mortal. If they wish to see death visibly in the world, that is their business, not mine. I will not act Eternity for them. Let them not turn to the trees for death. If that is what they want to see, let them look into one another's eyes and see it there."

What would have been a commonplace tragic story told by the human driver of the vehicle becomes a much more complex and horrific critique of man's relationship with nature, and nature with man. It contains both the horror of death and the seeds of repair. A horror story that is ultimately horror only if it can put into words an alteration of reality, as Joanna Russ rightly said in the quote that opened this essay.

However, the condition of women is itself a horror film, an alteration of the real conditions of life. A science fiction written by male in a male world. This is where the transformative power of feminist or queer science fiction is undeniable. This part of the SF proposes to consider other ways of life and thinking by putting into action emancipatory principles and positive affects.

We will now be able to touch with our fingers the starting point of this text and simultaneously its object and subject. Namely Alex Garland's *Annihilation*, released in 2018 and freely adapted from a science fiction novel, the very first volume of *The Southern Reach Trilogy* written by the American Jeff VanderMeer, and published in 2014.

The three volumes of this trilogy are called *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance*. A kind of programme that could respond to the criticism of the tools for disaggregating women's writing, as formulated by Ursula Le Guin in her text "Disappearing Grandmothers", written in 2011, and published in the collection *Words are My Matter*, namely: denigration, omission, exception and disappearance. In the case of Le Guin, the verbs denounce the masculinist program at work, and in the case of VanderMeer, the movements initiated in the face of the worrying strangeness of a changing world. We should leave the rampart, accept to let ourselves be invaded.

Just as Ursula Le Guin argued that a science fiction book could preferably find its sources outside its genre, especially at Virginia Woolf's, so can a genre film, here science fiction and horror.

Let's learn to watch a science fiction movie with Virginia Woolf and Ursula Le Guin.

Alex Garland's film, *Annihilation*, which I chose as an example of the legacy of Ursula Le Guin, seems to be not only an adaptation of Jeff VanderMeer's novel of the same name, but also of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, in a freely adapted science fiction version. The two books like the film thus describe a mission leading to a lighthouse whose collision is constantly being pushed back and operates as a quest as much as an obsession. In his article on the disappearance of grandmothers, Le Guin compared *To The Lighthouse* by Woolf with Joyce's *Ulysses*, noting the similarities between the two texts and the historical preference reserved for men's less committed work over women's, limited to their exceptional status.

It is impossible not to think of Woolf when watching *Annihilation*. Alex Garland had already distinguished himself in the SF genre with his previous film *Ex Machina* (2014), a mix between Bluebeard and Wittgenstein that featured an employee and the boss of the Blue Book company that employs him, in reference to Wittgenstein's *Blue Book* and Facebook. The possibility of a voluntary rapprochement, on the part of the director, of Woolf's work with that of VanderMeer is therefore not ruled out.

As with Le Guin's oak, Jeff Vandermeer is inspired by an existing lighthouse located in an alligator-rich wetland nature reserve, St. Marks Wildlife Refuge, in Tallahassee, of which Trump has just cut funding. The one the New Yorker called "Thoreau weird" is currently fighting to save it:

"It is a landscape and a series of transitional ecosystems that have enchanted me, fascinated me, and at times scared me. 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."

(The film was shot in Windsor Great Park, England, and the lighthouse that looks exactly like the screen at St. Marks Wildlife Refuge is Holkham Beach, still in England, Woolf's homeland.)

In *Annihilation*, a military expedition was set up. The narrator on board is the biologist; the expedition consists of the psychologist (head manager), the anthropologist, the geometer, and the linguist who finally gave up at the time of departure. A group composed solely of women - men who have failed in their previous mission - participates in the mission to explore a changing geographical area, a border that, once crossed, prohibits any return to normal, explorers return home sick, at best with cancer, or do not return at all.

This border is materialized by the *Shimmer* that spreads, in the film, along the American coasts and causes animal, plant, and human mutations. This queer shimmer - in the sense that it materializes the arbitrary separation between one world and another, a way of seeing, and another - simultaneously operates as an atmospheric phenomenon and an incessant philosophical and theoretical reminder, with its rainbow piercing the lighthouse, the ultimate goal of the expedition (we will learn from the reading of VanderMeer's Trilogy that the lighthouse keeper is a former defrocked, homosexual priest). The iridescent visual boundary does not exist in the book, it is practically invisible, the mutations are minute, barely perceptible, less spectacular, the strangeness arises from the descriptions that gradually stretch out in the three volumes of the series, the first volume appearing less affected than the last.

So let's go deeper into Zone X, even XX, since as the critic Kim Kirkpatrick put it: "Men may dominate the story, but to understand the story, follow the women."² This is the scriptwriting principle of Alex Garland's film, like the one this intervention proposes to follow.

To return to Woolf, there is, for example, in VanderMeer's novel, a strange tunnel, described by the biologist as a "tower", although it sinks into the Earth, like a mirror response to the lighthouse. (The tower is not present in Garland's film.) Along the walls of the tower, as it descends, it encounters strange inscriptions on the walls made of spores, self-generated by a kind of organic matter that it inspires and that will gradually change the perception it has of the world around it. VanderMeer's book here seems to echo a passage from *To The Lighthouse*:

"The words (she was looking at the window) sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves."

"The words were composed of symbiotic fruiting bodies from a species unknown to me. Second, the dusting of spores on the words meant that the farther down into the tower we explored, the more the air would be full of potential contaminants."

² in Kim Kirkpatrick, « Began Again : James Tiptree, JR'S Opossum Tricks », *Biography*, Vol 30, University of Hawaiï Press, 2007.

In the film, the flowering of words is replaced by a kind of cartographic invasion attacking or decorating the walls of the former military base located in the supposedly contaminated Zone X.

Annihilation flirts with queer theory and eco-feminism, as well as feminist science fiction, despite - or rather because of - its horrific nature.

Interactions with wildlife are particularly enlightening. An attack of mutant albino shark-toothed crocodile, not part of the book, might seem a coarse addition at first if it did not echo one of Jeff VanderMeer's bedside books, *Notes by a Crocodile* (1994) by Taiwanese queer author and feminist Qiu Miaojin. The crocodile in Qiu Miaojin's novel symbolizes the queer body: "The crocodile was both a national secret and a social outcast, at once protected and eradicated; their protection leading to their eventual eradication." The condition of the crocodile, recovered by the Taiwanese queer community, is in line with eco-feminist concerns here.

In "Being Prey", written in 1995, eco-feminist Val Plumwood recounted a 1985 crocodile attack in the East Alligator Lagoon of Kakadu National Park:

I had survived the crocodile attack, but not the cultural drive to represent it in terms of the masculinist monster myth: the master narrative. [...] The imposition of the master narrative occurred in several ways: in the exaggeration of the crocodile's size, in portraying the encounter as a heroic wrestling match, and especially in its sexualization. The events seemed to provide irresistible material for the pornographic imagination, which encouraged male identification with the crocodile and interpretation of the attack as sadistic rape. [...] Horror movies and stories also reflect this deep-seated dread of becoming food for other forms of life: Horror is the wormy corpse, vampires sucking blood, and alien monsters eating humans.

Plumwood therefore had to practice estrangement, like Woolf and Le Guin, to reread the attack, replace the crocodile in its ecosystem, and question the place of humans in the food chain.

Any modification in the plot of the agreed master narrative represents a threat, but things are not so simple, the new perceptual qualities (resulting from contamination as much as from a change of perspective) bring together in *Annihilation* human beings, flora and fauna, which arrange their cells, go beyond the marked arbitrary separations between bodies and minds, nature and culture.

Crocodile attacks or getting sick can change our perception of the world we think we live in. In terms of horrific modification, the theme of cancer presented as a metaphor spun in the book is for example much more developed in Garland's film. At the very beginning of the film, Natalie Portman, aka Lena, gives a biology class at the university and offers her students the opportunity to watch a scientific film while explaining the phenomenon they are witnessing:

"This is a cell. Like all cells, just born from an existing cell. By extension, all cells were ultimately worn from one cell. A single organism alone on planet Earth, perhaps alone on the universe. About four billions years ago, one became two, two became four, and eight, sixteen, thirty-two. The rhythm of

the dividing pair witch becomes the structure of every microbe, blade of grass, sea creature, land creature and human. The structure of everything that lives and everything that dies. [...] the cell we're looking at is from a tumor. Female patient early thirties, taken from the cervix. Over the course of the next term, we will be closely examining the cancer cells in vitro and discuss an autophagia captivity."

In her introduction to *The Left Hand of the Darkness*, Ursula Le Guin established a relationship between the state of the world, science fiction and cancer:

"Science fiction is often described, and even defined, as extrapolative. the science fiction writer is supposed to take a trend or phenomenon of the here-and-now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect, and extend it into the future. "If this goes on, this is what will happen." A prediction is made. Method and results much resemble those of a scientist who feeds large doses of a purified and concentrated food additive to mice, in order to predict what may happen to people who eat it in small quantities for a long time. **The outcome seems almost inevitably to be cancer.** So does the outcome of extrapolation. Strictly extrapolative works of science fiction generally arrive about where the Club of Rome arrives: somewhere between the gradual extinction of human liberty and the total extinction of terrestrial life."

This criticism was renewed in 2015, in her afterword to the book *The Next Revolution* by American libertarian environmental activist Murray Bookchin, in which she explained that our social system has chosen cancer as its model. Bookchin encourages us to make the environmental crisis a moment of choice, *a chance to transcend the paralyzing hierarchies of gender, race, class, nation, a chance to find a radical cure for the radical evil of our social system.*

The links between political ecology and science fiction are thus clearly established by the writing of this afterword.

Beyond the disease as a metaphor of our time, Virginia Woolf has a fine and precise understanding of the effects of the disease on our senses, and its transformative power, not only paranoid and negative. In the same year that she was writing *To The Lighthouse*, in 1926, Woolf published an essay entitled *On Being Ill* in TS Eliot's *Forum* magazine:

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us in the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers [...] Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache. But no.

The film *Annihilation* could also be considered as a film about cancer.

The reason for the illness being depreciated at the time of Woolf is now growing in both disability studies and literature. Queer theorist Sara Ahmed refers to "atmospheric walls" to describe the reaction of intersectional privileged people standing in the same room as

people of colour or with disabilities³. "Maybe an atmosphere is most striking as a zone of transition" she says. The iridescence of *Annihilation* reveals the presence of the atmospheric wall, an arbitrary separation of human bodies from a nature that is evolving faster than these bodies.

To summon Virginia Woolf and Ursula Le Guin, who claimed herself from Woolf, to propose a queer reading of a popular cinematographic object activates a principle of reparation. A repair between the film and the commentary on the film. This is about learning to watch a film with Ursula Le Guin and Virginia Woolf and not about disqualifying popular culture from great literature. The gender of objects must not reduce them to an interpretative destiny just as the gender of individuals must not block any prospect of emancipation.

(Traduction Callisto McNulty)

³ Sara Ahmed, "Atmospheric Walls", *Feministkilljoys*, 15th September 2014.
<https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/09/15/atmospheric-walls/>