

QUEER NEW MEDIA

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
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Master of Arts

Cinema Studies

by

Chase Alexander Menaker

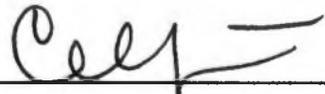
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Spring 2019

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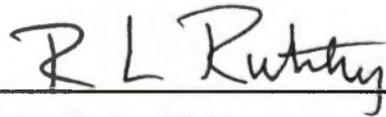
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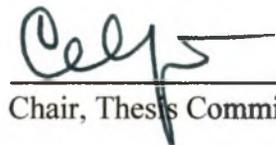
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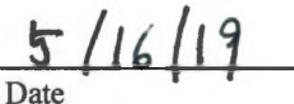
# QUEER NEW MEDIA

Chase Alexander Menaker  
San Francisco, California  
2019

At the dawn of the 1990s, queer as identity marker and political stance entered the cultural lexicon amidst the dot com boom and a proliferation of digital technologies. In what ways are these two events intertwined? Is it possible to queer digital media? Conversely, how might digital media invigorate a queer praxis? Offering a brief genealogy of both fields, I examine how a proximity to capital has ensconced queer studies and commercial technologies in neoliberal rhetoric. By exposing this tendency, I locate contingency as the driving animus behind the most salient aspects of queer theory and through a close reading of the 2018 film *Annihilation* imagine the possibility of a queer technology.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis

  
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Since its inception in the early 1990s, queer studies has been a vibrant cornerstone of the humanities, encompassing a breadth of topics, theories, and research. The plasticity of the term *queer* has maintained the field's relevancy, facilitating a rich mélange of scholarship. Yet *queer* seldom encounters a similarly manifold field particularly concerned with plastic: that of new media. Unquestionably, we exist in an increasingly digitized society, which therefore begs the question of how digital technologies might inform queer epistemologies. In a brief essay titled "Queer OS" for a special "In Focus" issue of *Cinema Journal*, theorist Kara Keeling stages such an encounter, she states: "... the materiality, rhetorics, forms and ontologies of new media readily lend themselves to a theoretical encounter with queer theory that might enliven and enrich both film and media studies and queer theory..."<sup>1</sup> She proffers "Queer OS" as a methodology for wedding queer theory with new media studies, while acknowledging the handful of artists and scholars already working within this framework. Keeling's conception of "OS" draws upon Tara McPherson's description of "operating systems of a larger order," a dual understanding of operating systems as both technological and cultural in nature.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, a Queer OS understands sexuality, gender, race, disability and other axes of oppression as being mutually constitutive with digital technologies, and therefore exists

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<sup>1</sup> Kara Keeling, "Queer OS," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (2014): 152.

<sup>2</sup> Tara McPherson, "U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX," In *Race after the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 21.

as a subversive praxis, field of scholarship, or potential social order that can unsettle systems of oppression.

In line with a “Queer OS,” I aim to further incorporate the discipline of queer theory with an understanding of digital media technologies in order to invigorate queer praxis and elucidate the most salient aspects of the queer project. Keeling declares that such an undertaking demands an acknowledgement of its position within the dominant order while still working towards transformation.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, I find it necessary to uncover the imbricated genealogy of these disciplines, offering a historical trajectory of queer studies parallel to that of new media, and, to a lesser extent, scholarship concerning new media. In doing so, I demonstrate their inherent interconnectedness and later clarify how a proximity to neoliberalism has problematically influenced the rhetoric of each. Through this critique, I elucidate the strengths of each discipline’s core tenets to consider the mobilization of a potential queer technology, suggesting the crux of their political viability to be a propensity towards the contingent. The 2018 science fiction film *Annihilation*, directed by Alex Garland, anchors these observations, through a rereading of the film’s alien force as a potential queer technology.

Why choose a Hollywood production if queer, as it is usually posited, is anti-authoritarian? Why discuss new media through old media? Indeed, there are many visual artists issuing incisive projects at the juncture of queerness and digitality. However, the

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<sup>3</sup> Keeling, “Queer OS,” 154.

answer to these questions lies beyond a classically queer predilection for irony, as my reading of *Annihilation* could be understood as an act of disidentification. Coined by José Esteban Muñoz in 1999 the term describes a process wherein marginalized subjects paradoxically identify with cultural texts that propagate their own subjugation and ultimately dismiss these incongruities to recuperate and invest new meaning in the work.<sup>4</sup> Thus, through disidentifying with the malevolent astrobiological force in *Annihilation*, I extrapolate how the alien entity might facilitate a productive understanding of a queer technology, contending that *queer* is at its most politically salient when it propels us towards the unknown, and that new media may provide the lubrication necessary to render *queer* all the more lascivious.

## Queer | New Media

Throughout its relatively young history queer theory has been decidedly self-reflexive, issuing repeated theses evaluating the shortcomings, advantages, and permutations of the discipline. In one such piece from 2003, pointedly titled “The Normalization of Queer Theory,” theorist David Halperin deftly establishes the originary impetus of the field as in opposition to prior gay and lesbian projects that were

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<sup>4</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 4.

considered assimilationist.<sup>5</sup> Coined by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990, “queer theory” was intended to upend binaristic discourses of homosexuality in favor of a mode of critique that disturbed the foundations of identity politics and upended the supremacy of white, gay male analysis. In her survey of the discipline, Nikki Sullivan links this approach to the wave of poststructural thought flooding the academy throughout the end of the century, which sought to undermine any notion of a universal humanist subject.<sup>6</sup> As a result, queer theory has doggedly eschewed associations with sexual identity, intentionally eliding the impulse to declare a singular object of study and effectively rendering the discipline an oppositional project always at odds with dominant culture.

Due to this propensity for indefiniteness, broad themes, rather than defined subjects or disciplines, emerge from a holistic evaluation of the literature, particularly in the work of foundational theorists such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michel Foucault. Social constructivism, owing to Butler and Foucault, an aversion to binarisms and subsequent valorization of multitudes, as present in Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, and Foucaultian power dynamics largely buttress scholarship labeled as “queer.” Lauren Berlant and Michael Waner’s 1995 essay “What does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?” implicitly establishes queer world-building as another

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<sup>5</sup> David Halperin, “The Normalization of Queer Theory,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2-4 (2003): 341.

<sup>6</sup> Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Melbourne: Melbourne Publishing Group, 2003), 39.

essential project of the discipline.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent utopianism, emphases on alternative kinship formations, and identitarian concerns, are all emblematic of the literature. Still, queer theory has in many cases succeeded in repudiating a specific object of study, despite denunciations that such intentional elusiveness too easily collapses back into white gay male homosexuality. In *Social Text*'s recent recapitulation of the field titled "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?," distinguished theorists David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz cement the mutability of the discipline as its defining characteristic, stating: "What might be called the 'subjectless' critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent."<sup>8</sup> In other words, queer theory is defined through a flexibility to tackle any pressing issue of the moment, rather than being centered on a single topic. Indeed, capitalizing on indeterminacy fuels the discipline in a manner unlike other social theories, but may also render the term vulnerable to the very cultural processes that it seeks to critique. I will return to this point in greater detail later, here noting that a subjectless indeterminacy is foundational to the field.

Despite, or perhaps in light of, such indefinability, queer studies has maintained a rigorous self-awareness since its inception, while new media remains a relatively fresh

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<sup>7</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?" *PMLA* 110, no. 3 (1993): 349.

<sup>8</sup> David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text* V, no. 84-85 (2005): 3.

field lacking such appraisals, although increasingly less so. Lev Manovich's foundational text *The Language of New Media*, published in 2001, defines "new media" as being composed of digital code and thus linked to computation and programmability, as opposed to "old media" which initially relied on industrial technologies for production and distribution (i.e. the printing press, film photography).<sup>9</sup> New media therefore comes under the purview of the digital humanities, a field whose timeline is hotly contested, and readily lends itself to a non-linear history in which multiple fields intersect. For example, *A Companion to the Digital Humanities* offers a broad historical trajectory beginning in the 1960s with the development of the first computer,<sup>10</sup> while Lisa Nakamura traces the emergence of new media out of visual culture studies and by extension art history in *Digitizing Race*,<sup>11</sup> and Manovich grounds his project in film studies.<sup>12</sup> A multitude of alternative histories exist beyond these texts, but nearly all are unified in underscoring the arrival of the public Internet in 1995 as a pivotal moment transforming information technologies, visual culture, and their attendant scholarship. It is at this historical juncture that both queer theory and digital technologies gain traction as distinctive discursive fields.

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<sup>9</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 19, 27.

<sup>10</sup> *A Companion to the Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, John Unsworth (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, XV.

Nakamura describes how theoretical texts concerning the Internet were initially preoccupied with the formation of virtual communities coalescing around common interests.<sup>13</sup> Attendant notions of world-building and utopianism conceived the Internet as a malleable frontier for new forms of democracy. Akin to queer scholarship, such perspectives were bolstered by identitarian concerns. The prospect of digital avatars lent a sense of agency and vast possibility to an infrastructure in its infancy, notwithstanding the fact that such subjectivities, once again, generally collapse back into the universal white male.<sup>14</sup> However, such idealistic ideations have lost their sheen in recent years, as prescient poststructural theories of networkability and control have been realized as Internet-connected digital devices become increasingly accessible across the globe.<sup>15</sup> Figurations of the network as social structure and control apparatus have subsequently become inescapable in new media scholarship, with Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and Steven Shaviro issuing significant treatises on the matter. Just as consumers await an “internet of things” enmeshed in the quotidian, it has become increasingly difficult to think beyond the network as a core paradigm of twenty-first century life.

Thus, there exist clear thematic parallels between scholarship in new media and queer theory, including identity construction or curation, alternative community

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<sup>13</sup> Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59, (1992).

formations, and a propensity towards networked or decentralized structures. Moreover, both subjects have historically been blind to minoritarian concerns involving race, disabled, trans, or otherwise marginalized subjectivities, albeit queer studies less so. It is therefore crucial to observe the analogous material emergence of the discipline of queer theory alongside the absorption of the personal computer in the public marketplace and the introduction of the Internet to the general public during the massification of neoliberalism in the 1990s. Although discourse around these events would not formally converge until the new millennium, their congruent development was imbued with the ethos and rhetoric of neoliberalism, to which I will later return.

I am here deploying neoliberalism to describe a system of economic and social practices Western in origin and predicated on privatization, free markets and trade, and globalization. In his definitive treatise on neoliberalism, David Harvey describes these values as contrary to Keynesian policies of government-funded social and economic programs that regulate the market and foster redistribution of wealth.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the neoliberal ideology is one in which personal freedom is understood in terms of the free market, so that entrepreneurialism and the encroachment of private capital into all aspects of existence is believed to ensure a broader social good.<sup>17</sup> Thus, neoliberalism is not

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<sup>16</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3,4, 5, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (New York City: Picador, 2008), 226, 240, 243.

simply an economic system, but a hegemonic structure influencing economics, cultural, and private life.

In her polemic on the matter, Lisa Duggan states that neoliberalism “was invented during the 1970s and 1980s, and dominated the 1990s,” which mirrors the development of computer code and the eventual commercialization of the personal computer, and, by extension, the solidification of new media and the digital humanities as academic disciplines.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Nakamura traces the evolution of political rhetoric surrounding the Internet throughout the 90s, demonstrating how democratic and liberatory claims were abandoned in order to promote the Internet as a lux service economy facilitating access to commodities.<sup>19</sup> As illustrated earlier, this is roughly reflected in the literature as a general move from utopian conceptions of community-building to paranoid critiques of surveillance societies. In recent years, Sedgwick has similarly critiqued queer studies’ propensity to assume what she terms a “paranoid position,” wherein macro theories seeking to unveil an external threat consequently foreclose the ability to imagine feasible political insurrection on a personal scale.<sup>20</sup> Given these similarities it is indeed strange, as Keeling notes, that queer studies and new media have barely begun to cross-pollinate,

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<sup>18</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), XXI.

<sup>19</sup> Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 126.

especially given the frequency with which feminism and critical race studies stage encounters with digital technologies.<sup>21</sup> Considering these parallel trajectories as well as the degree to which new media structures contemporary life, it is crucial to the efficacy and longevity of the queer project to incorporate an understanding of digitality.

Two years after “Queer OS” was published, the cohort of artists and scholars Keeling named as forging the field of queer new media, including Fiona Barnett, Zach Blas, Micha Cárdenas, Jacob Gaboury, Jessica Marie Johnson, and Margaret Rhee, issued a response piece in the form of a speculative user’s manual for the theoretical operating system. Although “Queer OS: A User’s Manual” is structured along the core properties of a computing device (interface, user, kernel, applications, memory, I/O), the authors wish to avoid a prescriptive approach, amusingly describing it as “theoretical vaporware, speculative potential-ware, [or] ephemeral praxis.”<sup>22</sup> They declare:

Our goal is to continue to advance a theory of queerness as technological, operative, and systemic, derived from individual interests, mutual concern, and discussions that have emerged from collective presentations, virtual discussions, and queer dreams. It is to engage with the challenge of understanding queerness today as operating on and through digital media and the digital humanities. Our

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<sup>21</sup> Keeling, “Queer OS,” 155.

<sup>22</sup> Fiona Barnett, Zach Blas, micha cárdenas, Jacob Gaboury, Jessica Marie Johnson, Margaret Rhee, “Queer OS: A User’s Manual,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew Gold and Lauren Klein (50-59. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 51.

intervention therefore seeks to address what we perceive as a lack of queer, trans, and racial analysis in the digital humanities, as well as the challenges of imbricating queer/trans/racialized lives and building digital/technical architectures that do not replicate existing systems of oppression.<sup>23</sup>

Extrapolating queer theory's impulse for denaturalization, their queer operating system is figured as ontologically unstable, destructive, or prone to collapse, rendering it difficult or impossible to realize in a material sense. Such theoretical vaporware therefore mobilizes the imagining of related projects, as it is deployed here. Through an analysis of the film *Annihilation*, I wish to elucidate the most potent aspects of a queer OS and also consider how dominant operating systems of a larger order might already function queerly.

## ***Queer Annihilation***

*Annihilation* is an adaptation of the 2014 novel of the same name by Jeff VanderMeer. The film was a box office flop domestically, spurring parent studio Paramount to push the film to Netflix for international release. It therefore joins the likes of *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) as recent studio-funded sci-fi flicks that have bombed at the box office despite favorable reviews. The determining

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

factors are beyond the scope of this essay, but it is worth noting that paranoid sci-fi thrillers have been thriving on streaming platforms in Western countries throughout the late 2010s, and these films may be contextualized within this movement.

While thematically similar, the plot of VanDermeer's novel and the film adaptation wildly differ, with critics universally noting the film's narrative similarities to Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). Indeed, the film is a journey into a metaphysical zone of alien origin termed "the Shimmer," although located in the American South. Protagonist Lena is a soldier-cum-cell biologist whose disappeared soldier-husband mysteriously returns from a classified mission. His near-immediate organ failure results in government intervention and the couple is forcibly brought to Area X, a facility monitoring the Shimmer. Predictably, Lena's desire to avenge her husband drives her straight into the heart of the Shimmer, accompanied by a team of experts led by the psychologist, Dr. Ventress. A monster-filled joyride ensues, revealing that everything within the alien zone is mutating on the cellular level, causing boundaries between plant, animal, human, and object to blur. As the body count rises, Lena alone makes her way to a lighthouse struck by a meteorite, the epicenter of the afflicted area. Once inside, the denouement explodes into a psychedelic blaze of metaphoric imagery before returning to standard psychological realism, allowing Lena to burn down the Shimmer and save the day. Of course, the possibility of a sequel is suggested (albeit foreclosed by lack of box office success), as the film concludes by hinting that Lena and her husband may have become alien themselves.

The Shimmer begs a queer reading. Visualized as a translucent, rainbow-tinged border evoking the viscosity of sexual fluids, everything that falls under its purview is effectively “queered,” scrambled, rendered unusual. These logics are phantasmagorically realized through the leitmotif of the rainbow. Within the Shimmer grow vibrant plant and wildlife evocative of a Pride parade; kaleidoscopic beams of light caress the mist of the forest, and variegated lichens sprout from every surface. Lush cinematography rife with slow pans and long shots elevate the Shimmer to spectacle. Despite the visual feast supplied by the set design and cinematography, the logic of the film understands the Shimmer as an invisible monster that must be extinguished.

Following film theorist Julia Kristeva’s seminal essay “The Powers of Horror: An on Abjection,” the alien force at work in this environment is the quintessence of abjection. Kristeva describes the abject as a state of being related to “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>24</sup> The Shimmer is not a discrete object, but a force that makes porous all within its reach, realizing a permanent and universal in-between state for all earthly matter. Similarly, homosexuality has historically been linked with abjection and the wholesale destruction of the social order. Queer theorist Lee Edelman illuminates how literal readings of queerness as not producing life in the form of the

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<sup>24</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

patriarchal family unit undergird such assumptions and inscribes queer sociality with a death drive. Conversely, he understands heterosexuality as imbuing the sex act with meaning in the form of “reproductive futurism.” All politics inform this logic wherein the social order is constantly reified for an imagined beneficiary “Child.” Therefore, reproductive futurism and the death drive are antagonistically structured, and the propagation of the social order hinges upon the negation of the death drive and by extension homosexuality. Edelman’s theory is propelled by queer abjection as a site of resistance, advocating a queer oppositionality against all politics, identities, linear histories, and structures, including oppositionality itself.<sup>25</sup> As it is impossible to fully embody the death drive, Edelman advocates queerness as abject signifier, mobilizing its ability to disturb the infrastructures of identity and social order. Embracing this negativity abandons queerness as a process of becoming in favor of a radical ecstasy “beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning and Law.”<sup>26</sup> Through genetically blurring everything within its reach, the *Shimmer* similarly contradicts a reproductive futurism, and is therefore portrayed as malicious. While the first half of the film externalizes this threat in the form of bloodthirsty beasts mutated to unreal proportions, the conclusion of the second act locates the danger within the researchers themselves.

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<sup>25</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3-20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

While heavily implied throughout the film, the nature of the Shimmer is finally revealed to the team as they descend upon an abandoned homestead. A sweeping CGI-enhanced birds eye shot reveals the extent to which the natural environment has consumed the forgotten buildings before cutting to a medium shot of the characters trekking through the detritus. A rainbow-inflected solar flare obscures part of the screen and the crackling of boots tromping flora amplify the tactility of the scene. Several glossy pans fetishizing the degradation of the town eventually give way to a long shot of a family of plants grown into the shape of humans. The spectacular literalness of the figures finally leads to a conversation where physicist Josie discovers: “The Shimmer is a prism and it refracts everything. Not just light and radio waves; animal DNA, plant DNA... all DNA.” Lena confirms the abnormal metamorphosis of her blood under a microscope and the team retires for the night only to be awoken by their paramedic accomplice, Anya, holding them hostage. Anya has been driven mad with the realization of her fingerprints actively mutating, and has bound and gagged the team. She accuses Lena and Dr. Ventress of impropriety regarding the nature of the mission during an emotionally tense sequence replete with low lighting and hand-held camera. In a serendipitous turn of events, Anya is mauled by a mutant bear and the team is freed. This sequence is structured as the conclusion of the second act, functioning as a pressure valve exposing the mysteries of the film and propelling the characters in new directions. Its narrative importance and dramatic impact demonstrates the severe abjection posed by the Shimmer. A confrontation with the death drive, literalized as an alien force slowly

queering their biological makeup, leads to a breakdown of the group of women within the film. With Anya dead, Josie verbalizes that Dr. Ventress and Lena respectively want to “face” and “fight” the invisible force gestating in the lighthouse. Josie, on the other hand, chooses not to resist her inevitable transformation and disappears into the wilderness; a significant choice to be revisited at the conclusion of this essay. With Dr. Ventress already en route, Lena mounts her expedition alone. Lena’s will to fight is thoroughly entwined in a desire to avenge her heterosexual love and secure a reproductive futurism for humanity.

The death drive is also realized in the film’s title. Midway through, Lena confronts Dr. Ventress on her husband’s motivation to join what she now understands as a “suicide mission.” In response, Dr. Ventress waxes poetic on humanity’s propensity for self-destruction. “Annihilation” then becomes a metaphor for the dissolution of subjectivity prompted by the Shimmer and perhaps already programmed within all “living” things. Such notions are similarly coded into “Queer OS: A User’s Manual” in the form of “iterative failure” that “offers no permanent solutions, only tactical interventions.”<sup>27</sup> This approach departs from Edelman’s wholesale contempt of political projects predicated on futurity, preferring a stance approximate to Jose Muñoz’s brand of queer utopianism. The authors understand a queer OS as facilitating the imagining of new possibilities via ethical interactions, lending the operating system a fluid ontology that is

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<sup>27</sup> Barnett, et al., ‘Queer OS: A User’s Manual,’ 58.

concomitantly emergent and commemorative.<sup>28</sup> Of course, the Shimmer functions similarly in that constant cellular refractions perpetually produce new beings, yet vestiges of the past remain.

In her book *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan Meets\_OncoMouse*, Donna Haraway famously channels Marx's commodity fetishism to assert her own theory of corporeal fetishism. Whereas commodity fetishism describes how social relations become divorced from a fetishized exchange value, corporeal fetishism describes how the body becomes fetishized as a discrete unit divorced from the complex network of environmental processes that determine and produce life. According to Haraway, scientific maps such as genetic coding falsely conceptualize the body as autonomous and separate from its situatedness within a larger ecosystem.<sup>29</sup> The Shimmer literalizes and accelerates Haraway's thesis that the body is susceptible to transformation as it encounters other bodies and objects in the world. The authors of "Queer OS: A User's Manual" likewise conceive of the theoretical operating system as facilitating a radical relationality. They proffer an operating system with an interface that forgoes traditional one-directional input between user and machine in favor of something mutually beneficial, while acknowledging that doing so might further deceive the user/s.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan@\_Meets\_OncoMouse*<sup>TM</sup> (New York City: Routledge, 1997), 146-163.

In other words, traditional interfaces are limiting and illusory insofar as they translate preprogrammed input from the user into computer data, making the entire process invisible. In contrast, a queer OS would foster reciprocity at the risk of heightening the invisibility of the interface itself. In order to avoid the negative consequences of an invisible interface (namely surveillance, data mining, propagating system of oppression), the theoretical operating system would make apparent the mediated nature of all interactions.<sup>30</sup> As demonstrated, the Shimmer bears striking similarities with such potentialware, yet its ability to refuse the impulse to naturalize its mediations remains questionable and opens the alien force to an alternative reading.

### **Capitalist *Annihilation***

Thus far, I have cast the Shimmer as a queer operating system of sorts, insofar that it may function as, or allow queer subjects to imagine the functioning of, a potential social system, technology, or praxis. Indeed, the Shimmer checks many boxes from Keeling's piece and "Queer OS: A User's Manual" such as an impulse to proliferate relationality among beings, constant emergence or becoming while commemorating the past, and the dissolution of fixed identity. Yet the keystone to all these qualities remains absent: consent.

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<sup>30</sup> Barnett, et al., "Queer OS: A User's Manual," 53.

In theorizing “operating systems of a larger order” McPherson demonstrates how racism of the 1970s was programmed into the Unix operating system, exposing how ideologies of a specific time period seep into all aspects of cultural output.<sup>31</sup> Following this notion, it is important to contextualize queer studies and the mainstreaming of digital information technologies as emerging during the historical moment of the 1990s and the emergence of neoliberalism. The neoliberalization of the entire social body, that is, the defining of social relations in economic terms, has informed the rhetoric of queer theory and new media studies, as well as the ontology of new media itself. Moreover, these parallel tenets or inclinations are all the more insidious today, and are phantasmagorically realized in the mainstream production *Annihilation*. Drawing these rhetorical comparisons is not meant to denounce queer studies or queer identities as politically ineffective and certainly should not foreclose their innate potentiality. Moreover, I do not wish to construe patriarchy, white supremacy, or heteronormativity as somehow irrelevant or no longer structuring systems of oppression. In pushing *queer* to uncomfortably chafe alongside a disputatious term like *neoliberalism*, I ultimately, and cautiously, hope to recapitulate and strengthen an understanding of queer studies’ political efficacy.

The neoliberal impetus of *Annihilation* is clearest at its crescendo, when Lena finally reaches the lighthouse. The foreboding edifice bares the wounds of the meteorite that blasted through its external wall and burrowed into the ground. The interior is largely

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<sup>31</sup> McPherson, “U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX,” 21.

deserted sans veiny tendrils emanating from the latter entry point and a burnt corpse. Via camcorder, Lena discovers the corpse to be her husband, who committed suicide by grenade while an entity revealed to be his doppelgänger looks on. A spectral wail entices Lena to enter the womb-like opening in the ground, and she descends a cavernous hallway to discover Dr. Ventress kneeling on a stone landing. Their encounter spurs an expository monologue by the Doctor, culminating in: “It’s unlike us. I don’t know what it wants, or if it wants. But it will grow until it encompasses everything, our bodies and our minds will be fragmented into their smallest parts until not one part remains.” This prophecy is immediately realized as a golden light erupts from Dr. Ventress’ mouth and she begins to convulse. A long shot languishes on the tendrils of kaleidoscopic viscera gushing from her body and swirling about the cavern. The luminosity of the computer-generated substance becomes increasingly intense until it overwhelms the frame with a misty golden hue. The swelling orchestral score acquiesces to softer string instruments as the camera slowly pans into a close up of Lena dazzled by glossy droplets of the aureate substance wobbling in midair. The film’s opening shot of cell division is evoked, but instead of the microscopic clinical view of actual cells, the particles are rendered in fantastic CGI with pulsating organelles under translucent skin. The particles soon disperse and reform as a gargantuan bubbling mass. As Lena stares directly into the amorphous form, the score transforms into an electronic throb evoking impending doom.

In this sequence, Dr. Ventress’ body is infiltrated by the alien force haunting the Shimmer and ultimately reduced to molecules before reconvening as a substance or entity

beyond human recognition. Following my initial reading of the Shimmer as queer technology, the literal atomization of Dr. Ventress can be read as the abject threat of queerness pushed to the extreme, to comprehensive obliteration of society and the self. If understood as the final confrontation with the interface of a queer technology that collapses the boundaries of self and other, then the Doctor indeed undergoes a radical relationality. However, this is problematized by her seeming reluctance to do so. The doctor has been irreparably changed regardless of choice.

In his stunning polemic, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, Paul Preciado describes atomization under contemporary capitalism as occurring at the molecular level as pharmaceutical and media industries exert somatic and semiotic influence over all of Western culture.<sup>32</sup> Such molecular control hinges upon the transformation and disciplining of biology. The Doctor's forced dissolution might more so resemble what Preciado describes, a thorough and involuntary reduction of bodies into vehicles for capital, than it does the reciprocity suggested in my prior analysis. It begs the question of whether the Shimmer is truly able to function queerly while also resembling operating systems of a larger (in this sense, dominant) order.

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York City: Feminist Press, 2013).

Preciado's formulation of what he terms the pharmacopornographic society is largely indebted to Foucault and Deleuze's respective disciplinary and control society, a brief summary of which may crystallize the neoliberal critique began at the outset. Foucault locates disciplinary societies as emerging alongside industrialization at the close of the nineteenth century and thus preceding our current era of digitization. He describes this societal formation as hierarchical in nature and organized around the production of commodities. Consequently, subjects are funneled through discrete locations such as factories, schools, or hospitals, wherein their actions are surveilled and disciplined by higher-ranking individuals, ensuring the successful production of commodities, practiced bodies, and regulated identities.<sup>33</sup> In 1992, Gilles Deleuze identifies a paradigm shift, which he terms societies of control, occurring throughout the twentieth century and accelerating with the dawn of neoliberalism in the 80s and 90s. He notes how the institutions of the disciplinary society, with their specific interior laws, are becoming irrelevant as subjects are increasingly immersed in a surveilled network where such interiors are always accessible. The veritable explosion of mobile devices across Western countries in the last decade has realized this notion, inducing individuals into a constant state of activity, with the ability to seamlessly jump between working, learning, socializing, etc. He describes this through a principle of modulation: "Enclosures [institutions of disciplinary societies] are *molds*, distinct castings, but controls are a

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<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 16.

*modulation*, like a self-forming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point.”<sup>34</sup> Deleuze understands control as stretchy or malleable, intuitively regulating a population’s choices, desires, and movement as informed by data. Preciado builds upon this, elaborating the extent to which capitalism relies on the production of desire, controlling and transforming the subject’s psyche and physicality through audiovisual and molecular means. In this light, the proclamation within “Queer OS: A User’s Manual” of an interface which takes self-modification of both the system and the user as its primary ontological principle, when isolated from the rest of the text, might seem like a description of our current reality.

Following the spectacular dissolution of Dr. Ventress and her subsequent fusion with the source of the Shimmer, the film briefly gives way to a metaphoric sequence in which Lena must confront her own incorporation with the Shimmer. Within the underground chamber, Lena gazes into the gargantuan force before her, its gelatinous exterior molting around an interior sphere vaguely resembling a human iris, webs of celestial tissue churning within. The soundtrack shrinks to a soft electronic hum overpowered by the thunderous warped throb of a synthesizer, assaulting the senses as cross cuts between Lena’s stupefied stare and the ambiguous mass fill the screen. Each shot is framed closer to its respective subject until the camera is positioned within the

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<sup>34</sup> Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," 4.

psychedelic substance, creating an effervescent vignette around the protagonist. This is complemented by an extreme close up of Lena's eyes as the synthesizer acquiesces to a cold ambient hiss. The silence signals danger, as a droplet of blood bubbles to the surface of Lena's skin, threatening to escape her body towards the magnetic pull of the alien mass. At last, several beads of plasma discharge and glide through the air, punctuated by the return of the skittering synth, and are subsumed into the alien force.

A similar lack of consent, pervasiveness, and eerie totalitarianism lends theories of the control society an affective charge similar to that of the Shimmer. Deleuze describes the civilian's reduction from the disciplined *individual* to the atomized and quantifiable *dividual*, as crucial to the modularity of this system. The Shimmer literalizes this process, reducing individuals to mere molecules and controlling these pieces according to its own logic.<sup>35</sup> In sum, mobility, modularity, and flexibility are central to the functioning of the control society. More, these qualities define neoliberal labor, wherein precise modulation is sustained through the ideological extension of market values into the realm of the social, with unceasing innovation and disruption subsequently valorized.<sup>36</sup> Distressingly, rhetoric lauding these values has been programmed into the discourse of queer studies and new media.

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<sup>35</sup> Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," 5.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 240-243.

## Paranoia

Thus far, I have provided two interpretations of the film's unseen antagonist: the Shimmer as queer metaphor and the Shimmer as neoliberal capitalist metaphor. In the former, I understand the alien force as propelling a queer drive away from normative social structures, inciting surprise encounters with utopic possibilities. In the latter, I connect the Shimmer's malignant metamorphosis of the environment with the neoliberal imperative to convert all human relations to paradigms of market value and investment. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," establishes a dialectic that further differentiates these interpretations and illuminates queer theory's rhetorical similarities to neoliberalism and corporate technologies.

As mentioned at the outset, Sedgwick offers a critique of queer theory's tendency towards a paranoid stance that too often stunts political action. She understands critical omniscience as the foundational principle of this vantage point, insofar as the paranoiac refuses surprise through the constant anticipation of disaster.<sup>37</sup> The conundrum at the heart of queer theory, according to Sedgwick, is the inability to assume anything prior to the reification of sexual difference, leading to what she describes as an "anticipatory mimetic strategy whereby... sexual differentiation must always be presumed or self-

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<sup>37</sup> Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 130.

assumed... on the ground that it can never be finally ruled out.”<sup>38</sup> Such a strategy comprehends through replicating that which it interrogates to better forecast what is perceivably inevitable. In this sense, it implicitly reproduces dominant power structures in an effort to comprehend the past and predict what is to come. The chief concern and liberatory function of this approach becomes the exposure of an external threat and subsequent vanquishing of the audience’s naiveté. Sedgwick illustrates the impotence of this methodology in a culture where power imbalances are not always clandestine, but sometimes overexposed media spectacles. Regardless of the exposure’s reception as genuine surprise or cynical knowing, paranoia is always validated as the most sensible response.<sup>39</sup> This propels a self-replicating structure as far reaching as the Shimmer, incurring unilateral political action at best, and apathy or anomie at worst.

It is through paranoia that queer theory adopts neoliberal rhetoric and logic. In one of the first surveys of the field from the debut issue of *GLQ*, Judith Butler describes *queer* as “...never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively.”<sup>40</sup> Building off Butler’s formulations in a more recent appraisal, Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz emphasize

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<sup>38</sup> Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 133.

<sup>39</sup> Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 142, 144

<sup>40</sup> Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *GLQ* 1, no. 1 (1993): 19.

*queer* as yielding to the political urgency of the moment.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, Halperin's evaluation of the discipline recommends queer insurgency, "reinventing its capacity to startle, to surprise..."<sup>42</sup> These are only a few rhetorical examples that, when divorced from their context, ring of a Silicon Valley press release as much as a theoretical tool. In his book *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek outlines how digital economies are predicated upon the ability to disrupt long-standing industries, with continued success achieved through sequential iterations and planned obsolescence.<sup>43</sup> In this regard, the proposed lifecycle of *queer* too easily mimics that of the latest app or smartphone.

Drawing these rhetorical comparisons in no way renders the aforementioned essays and theories moot nor does it entirely speak to the philosophies contained therein, but illustrates a troublesome rapport between queer studies oft-touted flexibility, adaptability, and ambiguity with the flexible and mobile labor at the core of neoliberalism. Ultimately, this tendency does a disservice to the validity of the field. Sedgwick implies as much in her powerful condemnation that tautological paranoid theories function as "a shield against humiliation" for the theorist. Indeed, advocating rhetoric of infinite adaptability might implicitly respond to the increasing precarity of an academic trajectory, ensuring the relevancy of queer theoretical works.<sup>44</sup> Purported

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<sup>41</sup> Eng, et al., "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?," 3.

<sup>42</sup> Halperin, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," 343.

<sup>43</sup> Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, 96.

<sup>44</sup> Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 136.

ambiguity and iteration of the term *queer* neatly support the “publish or perish” ethos of the humanities in which robust adaptable theories capable of coalescing around any object of study are most advantageous. Although such rhetoric is born in an environment of economic competition and austerity, it cannot be allowed to infect the philosophy itself. Therefore, when figuring a queer technology, it is integral to elide the paranoid impulse and negate corrosive neoliberal inclinations. Appropriately, the dénouement of *Annihilation* demonstrates what is at stake when we succumb to paranoia.

The film crescendos during Lena’s encounter with an anthropomorphized alien presence. Once the bead of the heroine’s blood enters the spherical bubbling mass, the camera pushes in for a microscopic view of the quivering droplet of hemoglobin as it splits in two, and then four, once again referencing the film’s introductory shot of cell division. The electronic score sizzles as Lena witnesses her plasma infinitely divide, the camera eventually pushing back to reveal the master plan of the molecules. Frightened, she stumbles backward as an anthropomorphic being emerges from the mass, faceless with skin like tourmaline. She emits a guttural “no” and fires several rounds into the being’s torso, generating no reaction beyond sparks in its dazzling luminescence. Silence engulfs the cave and the two face each other for several moments. As the being takes its first step towards Lena the throbbing score returns and the protagonist darts out of the cave to discover the entity already inhabiting the lighthouse. Another silent standoff ensues as the two evaluate the other’s presence. What follows is an acrobatic struggle between the protagonist and the austere figure, with every move uncannily mirrored by

the other, culminating in Lena's collapse. Eventually, she and the double reawake, stand, and side step towards the edge of the room simultaneously. With caution, Lena kneels to grab a grenade lying next to the burnt corpse of her husband. She joins hands with the doppelgänger and its visage macabrely transforms into Lena's own. Ethereal chanting graces the audio track, lending the moment an air of mysticism, as Lena curiously observes the full transformation before pulling the pin from the grenade and escaping the lighthouse. An extended sequence luxuriates on the doppelgänger's return to its underground chamber crosscut with Lena watching the landscape of the Shimmer succumb to flames. An abrupt jump cut finds Lena back at Area X, questioned by the authorities. Once released she embraces her husband while the camera lingers in close up. Lena's iris undergoes a psychedelic mutation, suggesting it was the doppelgänger that survived, and the credits roll.

Within the diegesis of the film, the Shimmer is the antagonist of *Annihilation* and Lena's presumed death validates the paranoia encircling the omniscience of the alien force. Sedgwick cautions that the paranoid position's political potential is stunted by assuming the worst, implicitly suggesting that remediation is only possible once social and political life have declined so drastically that revolution is the only option left.<sup>45</sup> Correspondingly, the Shimmer has yet to cause national panic having only infected a relatively small swath of land. If the Shimmer is our neoliberal order, the film suggests in

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 144.

its final moment that no matter the battles fought, no matter the extent of resistance, the future is fixed. One can never be paranoid enough.

Altogether, queer theory, the Internet, and digital media emerged or found mainstream recognition during the thickening of neoliberalism throughout the 1990s, absorbing the affective energy surrounding the prospects of globalization, increased mobility, and their attendant paranoia. Discourse around both phenomena congealed in the form of rebellious iconoclasm established through iteration. Just as Halperin notes the unprecedented speed with which queer studies was incorporated into the academy, Srnick notes the unparalleled rate of financial investment in digital technologies during the 1990s.<sup>46</sup> As the fashions and aesthetics of the 90s inevitably resurface in our contemporary era, producing a slew of paranoid science fiction media such as *Annihilation*, it is important to question the enchanting delirium of the paranoid conspiracy. Simultaneously, it must also be acknowledged that anticipatory mimetic strategies can effectively comprehend the intricacies of socio-economic structures and that paranoid thinking has produced a wealth of fruitful academic and artistic works, informed political movements, and influenced some of the most important cultural actors throughout humankind. Inexorably, my own intoxication with the affectations of paranoia, the delectable rush of connecting the dots to an astonishing big picture, is what drew me to these texts. However, when this is the predominant cultural outlook

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<sup>46</sup> Halperin, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," 340; Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, 22.

programmed into theoretical texts and popular media, we risk casting neoliberal capitalism as a totalizing structure with an irreversible past, fixed present, and unavoidable future.

## Contingency

The recent spate of cerebral science fiction thrillers preoccupied with digital technologies and alien life forms suggest a rising paranoia in the ether. Yet, as public concern rises and a bastardized incarnation of the “Cyborg Manifesto” appears within reach, we might consider how the technological world is fallible, far from absolute, and vulnerable to queer rupture. Thus far, I have figured contemporary digital technologies at the service of corporate needs as contrary to a queer project and the whole of humanity, while inevitably influencing our desires, actions, and personhood. Such a relationship could be considered symbiotically paranoid, with the living organism suspicious of being surveyed and culled for data and technological devices distrustful of organic instability. It is through this relationship that a queer technology can be imagined, for organic instability expands possibility, with human longing and desire propelling individuals in multitudinous directions. Further, it is longing and desire that remain at the heart of the queer project, enabling unforeseen encounters and utopic possibilities, and is therefore central to the imagining of a queer technology.

As demonstrated through Sedgwick, the problem with the “present paranoid consensus” is primarily its pervasiveness, eclipsing other forms of thought and producing a stagnant subject.<sup>47</sup> Her counterpoint is reparative reading. Both approaches can be varied and shifting with many texts, if not most, inhabiting these positions simultaneously. Whereas paranoia attempts to negate surprise through an omniscient temporal paradigm, a reparative response embraces the possibility inherent to revelation, no matter the reception. A reparative stance is therefore one rooted in potentiality and open to mistakes or misunderstandings. It abstains from a cynical anticipation in order to proliferate new meaning, resourcefulness, and opportunity.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the most ecstatic moments of queer theory are fueled by desire and anchored by the ability to imagine something new, to experience genuine surprise. Such possibilities are suggested during a brief scene midway through *Annihilation*.

A peculiar moment at the conclusion of the second act of the film suggests the force behind the Shimmer may not warrant the hostility and paranoia bequeathed by its protagonists. Following Lena’s revelation of cell mutation, Josie, noticing botanical life emerging from her scars, embraces melding into the Shimmer. Cinematically, this moment is treated ambiguously, with ebullient mise-en-scene of dewy flowers contrasted by a hollowed ambient drone. A medium shot follows Lena from behind as she journeys into the foliage seeking her compatriot. The protagonist steps into a close-up, gazing

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 149.

upon the environment as the drone peaceably fades into silence. Josie's serene consolidation with the Shimmer stands in marked contrast to Dr. Ventress' agonizing scream before her dissolution, or the other character's deadly confrontations with mutated wildlife. The disparity is especially pronounced compared to the agonizing slowness of Lena's incorporation, wherein the terror of mere molecules of blood escaping her skin is pushed to the utmost dramatic intensity. A lack of consent bolsters the abject horror of every confrontation with the Shimmer, except Josie's. Filmicly, Josie's decision remains ambiguous, if not favorable, compared to those who were forcibly transformed.

In her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed turns toward the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to develop an understanding of how queer orientations become "orientated" towards objects and others. Akin to Butler's theory of gender performativity, she considers how repetitious behaviors inherited from family and culture put some things within reach and at a distance. She describes how "orientations we have towards others shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, queerness is often experienced as "disorientation," for repudiation of normative life paths bring unusual things into view. In this sense, queer desires compel contingency, insofar that queerness occurs through contact with other beings and objects, contact that shapes one's orientations toward the world while also

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<sup>49</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

giving those orientations shape.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Sedgwick illuminates that if paranoid thinking is linked to the inevitable, reparative acts “attune... to the heartbeat of contingency.”<sup>51</sup> The contingent therefore expands possibility and access to the unknown. Surely, all human relations are contingent, but non-normative identity formations have the propensity to propel subjects into new or unheard of spaces. As illustrated by Josie’s embrace of the alien environment, such moments can be as alluring as they are terrifying. Ahmed expounds:

After all, phenomenology is full of queer moments; as moments of disorientation that Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests involve not only “the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our contingency, and the horror with which it fills us.”

*Phenomenology of Perception* gives an account of how these moments are overcome, as bodies become reoriented. But if we stay with such moments then we might achieve a different orientation toward them; such moments may be the source of vitality as well as giddiness. We might even find joy and excitement in the horror.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 93

<sup>51</sup> Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 147.

<sup>52</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 4.

In this sense, Josie's decision is a reparative act exemplary of the most dangerously euphoric moments of queer theory. The power in such texts, Sedgwick describes, is the ability to imagine alternative futures and to entertain "such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently than it did."<sup>53</sup> These moments can be found throughout this essay's citations, including the appraisals of the discipline that flirt with neoliberal rhetoric. Indeed, the act of following desire into the unknown is fundamental to queer theory, and must remain so regardless of iterative reinvention. Accordingly, at its most simple, a queer technology is one that agitates how bodies move through space and time.

Paranoia, on the other hand, is dependent on a linear temporal trajectory that is structurally similar to liberal notions of progress, though cloaked in cynicism. Previously described through Edelman, the heteronormative family structure begets a linear temporality predicated on patriarchal transference of power. Ahmed similarly understands the family unit as structuring a compulsory heterosexuality that places certain things within reach and others out of reach. The heterosexual family is understood as a frame that, when orientated traditionally, allows movement along normative lines or paths with ease, while the repudiation to heterosexually reproduce is cast as a threat to the social order.<sup>54</sup> When Lena and Josie discover the true nature of the Shimmer, Lena continues down the line she began at the start of the film. Within the diegesis of

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<sup>53</sup> Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 146.

<sup>54</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 91.

*Annihilation*, and within popular media more broadly, the rescue of the heterosexual love appears the only option, demonstrating how heterosexual orientations precipitate movement through space and time. For Josie, the Shimmer acts as an interface to realize the unknown, facilitating unpredictable occurrences. A queer technology would function similarly, rendering the exuberance of all options available while potentially throwing the subject “off-line.” The ability to divert and instigate discordance is key, for it permits happenstance and allows new imaginings.

Corporate-produced technologies function antithetically. If, according to Sedgwick, the paranoid theory is tautological insofar that it self-justifies through mapping an inescapable big picture, one might consider how mainstream technologies are similarly tautological in their avid corporeal fetishism. By aiming to predict and anticipate any need of its subject, while implicitly guiding those needs, such technologies harvest data that can be individuated, calibrated, and mapped into a cohesive vision. To this extent, the input of users shapes the digital network as the digital network shapes what users input. In a phenomenological sense, the digital realm is an extension of the non-digital. Most contemporary electronics function similarly to what Ahmed terms “straightening devices,” familiar or culturally inscribed points of view that neutralize the disorienting effect of queerness. Through ensuring an easy transition through space, virtual or otherwise, these devices negate contingency.

A queer technology would not circumscribe the user in this way, siloing them into a closed loop of input and output while extracting data at the service of capital. Rather, it would facilitate happenstance, embracing errors in its code. A queer technology would disregard the corporeal fetishism of straight programming, understanding the individual as infinite and irrational, promulgating chance encounters and multiplicities. Prone to promiscuity and fuelled by desire, such encounters are sites of metamorphosis that implode conceptions of identity and self. As the authors of “Queer OS: A User’s Manual” state: “Far from the extractive impulse of contemporary (digital media) systems that mine and surveil, it is an act of consent and mutual transformation. It is that which allows us to enter one another and be in-formed—that is, to be shaped from within.”<sup>55</sup> A queer technology is a reparative practice endowing abundance to those involved and expanding a radical mutuality inherent to our mutability. Ahmed reminds us that difference is what keeps each sex in line, while sameness and the risk of merging structures homophobia as lacking, particularly in regard to women.<sup>56</sup> A queer technology therefore rebukes the masculine ideal of liberal individuality in favor of amalgamation. Correspondingly, a singular user should not be taken for granted. Colorful confluences, mobs, and queer counterpublics can proliferate with exchanges of desire and data. Such a technology can be glimpsed every time a straightening device fails. Every time a computer freezes, or data is leaked, or the Wi-Fi cuts out, we are uncomfortably tossed out of routine and

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<sup>55</sup> Barnnet, et al., “Queer OS: A User’s Manual,” 52.

<sup>56</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 96.

forced to choose a different route, perhaps an entirely new direction. Even the fantasy of failure unfurls unknown futures. Amidst the paranoid hysteria of Y2K, for instance, queer societies were envisaged. The purported collapse of the digital infrastructure spurred unconventional movement within the social body as the “what if” of a radically different society permeated our collective fantasies. Sadly, on January 1<sup>st</sup> the cynical counterweight to paranoia prevailed, confirming business as usual.

Under the purview of the Shimmer all matter appears oblique, and the omniscience of paranoia is rendered moot. While Lena implements straightening devices (cell biology, heterosexual love, good versus evil) to make sense of the chaos, Josie chooses to dwell in the ambiguity, to find “joy and excitement in the horror,” disregarding generational logic and strengthening “the force of contingency itself.”<sup>57</sup> Her decision to linger on the contingent is a reminder that nothing is absolute, not theories, not society, not matter, and that although our socio-economic system may function similarly to the Shimmer, it is not alien in nature. It is constructed by humans and constituted by our actions. If corporate digital technologies and new media are endemic to the present era then a confrontation is imperative, one that is programmatically contingent, and quintessentially queer.

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<sup>57</sup> Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 4, 147.

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