

## Consider the Meaning of Life Force in 'Annihilation'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 23, 2018 - 7:19am

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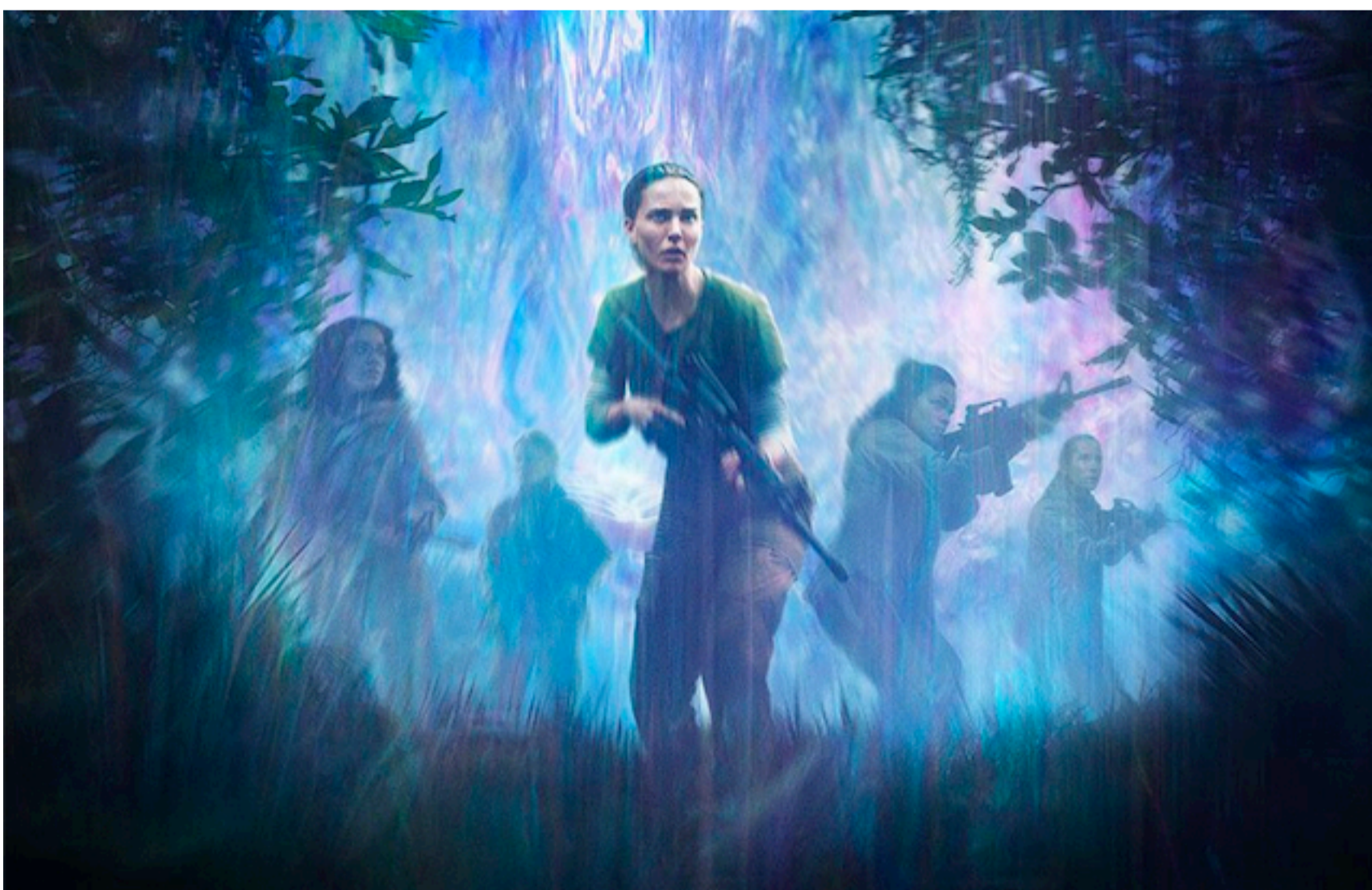


Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Alex Garland, the standout creator/director of “Ex Machina,” is back with “Annihilation,” another science fiction story. And like the previous film, it explores implications of a sci-fi event, in this case an outer space incident that restructures a cellular code, that ends up destructive.

There are shades of other films that have been seen before (like the Alien series) that waters down the plot, but the visual sense that Garland paints in the atmosphere is wholly original. It's a ploddingly paced film, with jump scares and odd creatures, and at its core is a type of Twilight-Zone type story, not a compliment. Natalie Portman is the lead actor, and the character she was portraying doesn't gel with her usual persona. Her confrontations – with her missing husband, her team and the “Shimmer” (which is the zone created by the invasion) – are the drivers for the film, and her low keyed approach dims the slow-moving plot that much more. It's not top drawer Alex Garland, but any Garland film is better at cinema-altering perceptions than most attempts.

The film is told in flashback, as Lena (Natalie Portman) relates her story of surviving the “Shimmer,” a contaminated zone that is a result of an outer space meteor hitting near a coast in America. The zone it creates is getting larger, and defeats whatever exploration team is sent into it, including a group with a soldier named Kane (Oscar Isaac). He has been missing for a year, and is Lena's husband.



Lena (Natalie Portman) Enters the Shimmer Zone in ‘Annihilation’

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

Lena is a biologist, and was coerced into entering the Shimmer with four female companions, including hard-as-nails Anya (Gina Rodriguez) and the spooky Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh). She relates their encounters within the Shimmer, and it includes fantastic hybrid creatures – like a wolf bear – and a new evolution of biology, where different species are intermingling. After traveling to the source of the meteor hit, Lena also felt a connection to a new destiny.

In “Ex Machina,” Garland presented the thesis of android feelings, through women robots developed for fantasy. In “Annihilation” – an adaptation of a novel by Jeff VanderMeer – there is a overview of life itself, found in the essence and strains of our DNA code. That’s the most interesting part, and is expressed cinematically in several exciting scenes. The plot around it, though, is reminiscent of other science fiction there-is-something-wrong-here scenarios and doesn’t have any snap.

The casting is also off, even with the reliable Natalie Portman, Oscar Isaac and Jennifer Jason Leigh. Leigh has the weirdest role, her psychologist character is so sour she had lemon juice in her veins. She delivers her dialogue with a seriousness that borders on satire, before ending up as one of the spectacular visuals of the Shimmer. The film needed a focal point, and while Portman was charged with that assignment, she didn’t feel right for it. The defining elements of her character, as ex-military and battle ready, didn’t fit her cool persona.



Science! Lena Studies New Life Forms in ‘Annihilation’

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

Yet there is something to this film, especially within meditations regarding life. Lena studies cellular structure and division, and this theme carries through the adventure of the Shimmer. The mystery in that zone is anticipatory, in spite of the pacing, and pays off that anticipation with strange and wondrous bits of mutation based on life science. Mark Digby is the production designer, and riffed on certain what-ifs in his building of the new world. The film is worth seeing for all of this, with the odder theories yielding the best visuals.

Human beings are just a series of cells, which comedian Bill Hicks aptly described as “viruses with shoes.” This evolution to sentient forms who invent iPhones can and should be considered mind blowing, when used as science fiction. This gathering of cells should also be considered as temporary, and probably will mutate into something else down the line, but that is only if our current cellular forms don’t destroy us first.

*“Annihilation” opens everywhere on February 22nd. Featuring Natalie Portman, Oscar Isaac, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Tessa Thompson, and Gina Rodriguez. Screenplay adapted by Alex Garland, from a novel by Jeff VanderMeer. Directed by Alex Garland. Rated “R”*



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Source URL (retrieved on *Feb 22 2019 - 12:16am*):

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