

Annihilation takes viewers on a bizarre sci-fi trip

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<< out of <<<<

Running Time: 115 minutes

A word of warning about the new sci-fi thriller *Annihilation*... if you're expecting a straight-forward narrative adventure, you're probably not going to like it. The latest from writer/director Alex Garland is adapted from a book series. Frankly, it doesn't have the same sharpness found in his previous film

Ex Machina

or past screenplays such as

Sunshine

and

Never Let Me Go

. However, it does work a sort of strange charm as a trippy, gonzo fantasy with some borderline psychotropic imagery. If you're able to simply take in the crazy visuals and allow your mind to ruminate on and fill in the many story gaps yourself, then you may appreciate it.

Lena (Natalie Portman) is a biologist reeling over the disappearance of her husband Kane (Oscar Isaac), who vanished more than a year ago while on a secret mission. When he reappears without warning showing symptoms of amnesia and then becomes physically ill, the protagonist finds herself roped into a follow-up trip to try and discover what happened. Led by Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and an all-female team enter a restricted area known as The Shimmer. As it so happens, Kane is the only person to have ever returned from the zone alive... not a hopeful sign for this new expedition.

And as you can imagine, as soon as they cross through a strange barrier, things go south. The story itself is narrated by Lena, slowly revealing bits and pieces of information about the people and their motivations. The film takes time to develop its characters as, well, smart but damaged

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individuals. This approach allows for some interesting thematic discussions about the self-destructive qualities of humanity and how it ties in to our biological make-up. And for those scientifically inclined, there's additional talk about cell biology development and cancer, with a brief shout-out to the HeLa cell line.

Early sections of the movie exude a palpable sense of foreboding. Things get particularly eerie as the leads find themselves slowly losing their faculties and attempting to figure out all of the strange things they're witnessing. A few scenes involving violent attacks are impressively handled, with some big jolts and effective audio cues (a bizarre, bear like creature with a human call is effectively rendered and sends chills down the spine). The movie makes a visual impact as well, with the new hybrid environments and life forms displaying unique and striking qualities.

One thing that the movie doesn't master is effectively displaying the details of what is occurring. Early on, the characters share their desperation for answers to the questions plaguing them. By the close, comments about scrambled DNA are made in a general sense, although not with much clarity. Of course, this may be the point, but it does feel lacking in certain respects. Much of the dialogue between the knowledgeable group members describe the changes witnessed as being "impossible" (and indeed, they *are*) but there are never any concrete theories offered. By the climax, events go even further into left field, taking on an impressionistic bent that is accompanied by wild visuals.

So, while there's a lot of scientific talk, the major questions raised are left completely unanswered and ultimately unfathomable (at least, upon first viewing). However, it still appealed to me as a sort of strange fever dream. It isn't in the same league as the filmmaker's previous works, but *Annihilation* does offer interesting characters, intriguing ruminations about science, psychedelic visuals and a few old-fashioned scares. Brave souls in an adventurous and forgiving mood may find something to like.

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