



INTO THE GREEN

Creeping dread pervades writer-director Alex Garland's sci-fi eco-thriller *Annihilation*

If you've read Jeff VanderMeer's 2014 novel *Annihilation*, you might view writer-director Alex Garland's new adaptation of the story as yet another expedition into the eerie, expanding, beautiful and terrifying Area X. Both stories follow the twelfth group of explorers, but Garland's film feels like a refracted version of VanderMeer's novel. Some of the pieces look the same; some of the shapes are entirely different.

Natalie Portman leads *Annihilation* as Lena, a biologist who finds herself on the fringes of Area X after the return of her husband, Kane (Oscar Isaac). He'd been gone a year, on a mysterious mission; she thought he was dead. His inexplicable return is followed by something even stranger and scarier: a team of black-clad soldiers whisking them off to a facility on the edge of "the shimmer." The border hangs in the distance — an oil spill, a soap bubble, a wall that shouldn't be.

If we need a "reason" why a solitary, talented, unhappy biologist and former soldier would be drawn to the strange siren song of Area X, this should suffice. But Garland burdens Lena with a dose of guilt — the notion that she owes Kane something for her choices while he was away.

The prominence of Lena's guilt, and the emphasis on Kane's character, would be less frustrating were it not part of a trend: the latest, promising round of female-led science fiction films seems determined to frame their female leads' choices primarily in relation to husbands and children. From *Arrival* to *The Cloverfield Paradox*, women are driven by relationships; those who aren't often don't survive their films.

To be fair, everyone's survival in Area X is in question. VanderMeer's novel is short on answers and long on an eerie, disconcerting sense of place; Garland's movie opts for more answers and more existential horror, spelling out what caused the shimmer and what's happening within.

The cast is uniformly excellent, from Gina Rodriguez as a tough paramedic to Tessa Thompson, quietly devastating in a role I wish we'd seen more of. Tuva Novotny, as an anthropologist named Cass, gracefully handles the thankless job of having to deliver pat descriptions of the other women and the weight each carries.

What *isn't* said is much more interesting: Watch Thompson's expression as she accepts the shimmer, or Rodriguez's when she suspects someone is lying. Jennifer Jason Leigh, as team leader/psychologist Ventress, observes with a cool but fragile distance that cannot hold up under Area X's strangeness.

It wouldn't do to spoil Portman's best wordless moment, but it's safe to say that by the end, when shit gets well and truly weird, Lena's narrative breaks free of Kane and is something all its own. Despite the fragmented narrative and disconcerting shifts in time, *Annihilation* isn't *weird* enough — Garland's playing with light doesn't quite make up for the parts of Area X that just look like a rainforest, and one last-act set is pure Giger Light.

But the film builds terror in other ways, some too much for a horror-averse viewer. At best, it revels in a sense of creeping dread, loss of ownership over yourself, and the fear of experiencing without understanding. ■

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