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‘Annihilation’ taps into fear of quickly changing world

Unpredictable sci-fi thriller’s main characters are smart, well-written women scientists

In good times, Lena (Natalie Portman), a cellular biology professor at Johns Hopkins, curls up on leisurely afternoons with her handsome-but-no-genius husband, Kane (Oscar Isaac).

For pleasure, she reads “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,” the true story of an African-American woman whose infinitely reproducing cells gave rise to the most famous cell line in medical research — the ultimate split-cell “herstory.”

Those are good times. “Annihilation,” based on Jeff VanderMeer’s 2014 novel and directed by Alex Garland (“Ex Machina”), is about some very bad times indeed.

Kane, on a mysterious mission, has been missing for a year. No one knows if he is alive or dead. He’s deep inside a geographical area called the Shimmer, enclosed by an iridescent biodome that

looks like a giant soap bubble.

The Shimmer is a prism. Everything inside is refracted — even DNA — causing cells of different species to collide, divide and merge with incredible speed.

On a particle level, the (inter-

net-assisted) explanation of the physics of the Shimmer goes something like this: Annihilation happens when subatomic particles collide with their antiparticles and new particles are created. Although the collided particles cease to exist, they are not annihilated in the sense that they disappear and convert to nothingness. In-



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stead, they are converted into new particles.

In the Shimmer, annihilation occurs at breakneck speed. It doesn’t matter whether the force operating there is malevolent or even sentient. It is inexorable.

Its aftereffects are sometimes

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deadly, sometimes beautiful, or both. It relentlessly borrows, divides and combines with Darwinian indifference, leaving troves of new species in its wake.

Lena joins a team of three other women adventurers to explore the Shimmer’s interior and decode its mystery.

Government psychiatrist Dr.

Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh) is their leader, followed by paramedic Anya (Gina Rodriguez), physicist Josie (Tessa Thompson) and anthropologist Cass (Tuva Novotny).

Each woman is highly skilled and has a backstory that gives her something to prove and nothing to lose. As they penetrate the Shimmer’s penumbra, they enter a disorienting world of stunning floral and coral forms, permuted beasts and scrambled mental states.

As in its cinematic antecedents “Alien,” “Predator” and “Jurassic Park,” not all of “Annihilation’s” diverse quasi-military crew will make it out alive. They will have to fight mutant creatures and then their own corporeal mutation. Their will to survive is as important as the ammunition they carry to fight the invisible enemy.

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Oscar-winner Portman, who studied neuroscience as an undergraduate at Harvard, shows Lena as a sensualist as well as a scientist. Leigh’s enigmatic edginess as the formidable, indifferent-to-consequences Ventress adds to the film’s eeriness.

It’s not the monsters (although there are enough of them) that account for “Annihilation’s” terror; it’s the uncontrollable system that creates them.

In truth, the evil antagonist of this movie is the sheer velocity of change — a fitting metaphor for our times.