

ANNIHILATION (2018)

- Released on February 23rd, 2018
- 1 Hour 55 minutes
- \$40,000,000 (estimated) Budget
- Directed by Alex Garland
- Written by Alex Garland (written for the screen), Jeff VanderMeer (based on the novel)
- DNA Films, Paramount Pictures, Scott Rudin Productions
- Rated R for violence, bloody images, language and some sexuality

QUICK THOUGHTS

- Marisa Serafini
- Phil Svitek
- Demetri Panos

DEVELOPMENT

- In 2014, Paramount Pictures acquired rights to the novel with writer-director Alex Garland set to adapt the script and direct the film in May 2015.
- Natalie Portman soon entered into talks to star in the film.
- In November 2015, Jane the Virgin (2014) star Gina Rodriguez was in talks to co-star in the film with Portman.
- March 2016, it was announced that Oscar Isaac would join the cast.
- On December 7, 2017, it was announced that due to the clashes between producer Scott Rudin and David Ellison, a financier at Paramount, and the shift in Paramount's leadership, a deal was struck with Netflix handling international distribution rather than releasing the film in theaters. According to this deal, Paramount would handle the U.S. and China release, while Netflix would begin streaming the film in other territories seventeen days later.
- Julianne Moore and Tilda Swinton were in talks to star in the movie.

WRITING (Alex Garland (written for the screen by), Jeff VanderMeer (based on the novel by))

- This film was based on the first book in the "Southern Reach" trilogy.
- "One of the producers of *Ex Machina* had bought it, Scott Rudin, and he sent it to me, and he said, "You should check this out...And I read it and immediately I was really struck by it. It's really an original book, and it's very atmospheric. And I just said, "Yeah, I'm in."" - Garland
- "I had a couple of conversations with Jeff [VanderMeer], and actually I just launched into it. And I started writing it pretty promptly." - Garland
- "Jeff [VanderMeer] was really generous and relaxed, and in a way gave me the permission that I needed to make this rather weird adaptation of his really beautiful book." -Garland
- "I think the main thematic preoccupation probably belongs primarily to the film, which is really about self-destruction. It's about the nature of self-destruction in a literal sense: cells have life cycles and stars have life cycles and plants and the universe and us. You, me, everyone. But also psychological forms of self-destruction." -Garland
- Director Alex Garland decided not to reread the novel "Annihilation." Instead, he decided to adapt it "like a dream of the book."

STORY/TOPICS

- Too intelligent?
- What is the shimmer?
- Comparisons to Arrival
- Defining annihilation
- Everyone as self destructive
- Purpose over personality
- The ending

CAST:

- The film drew some criticism for the casting of Natalie Portman and Jennifer Jason Leigh as characters who are, in the books, described as Asian and half-Native American. Garland explained that none of the five female characters' ethnicity is revealed in the first book, which is the only one of the trilogy he has read, and that the script was actually complete before the second book was published. He cast the characters based on his reaction only to the actors he met in the casting process, or actors he had worked with before.

NATALIE PORTMAN (Lena)

- The dance between Lena and her alien double was choreographed by Bobbi Jene Smith, an American choreographer and dancer.

OSCAR ISAAC (Kane)

- Oscar Isaac filmed this movie and Star Wars: The Last Jedi on adjacent studio lots. He had the same trailer for both films and would often film scenes for both movies on the same day.
- Name is Kane, which is an alternate spelling of Cain, who biblically was the first incarnation of destruction, who took his older brothers life in order to take all that he had.

JENNIFER JASON LEIGH (Dr. Ventress)

- Frances McDormand was considered for the role of Dr. Ventress before Jennifer Jason Leigh was cast.

GINA RODRIGUEZ (Anya Thorensen)

- Her hair was cut short, the side of her head was shaved, and she changed up her diet and began weightlifting to put on bulk. "My character goes through quite the transformation, and I was experiencing it in real life," says the actress.
- "Yeah, she's a lesbian, that's what she likes," says Rodriguez. "Big deal. You don't have to wave a flag."
- "In these forests, they made it look like we were stepping into a new world," she says. "It was amazing. But it was so real and terrifying. I had nightmares. Alex really puts you in a world [that makes you go], 'Where am I?'"

TUVA NOVOTNY (Cass Sheppard)

- Tuva Novotny was born on December 21, 1979 in Stockholm, Sweden as Tuva Moa Matilda Karolina Novotny. She is an actress and director, known for [Eat Pray Love](#) (2010), [The Invisible](#) (2002) and [Dag](#) (2010).

TESSA THOMPSON (Josie Radek)

- “I sat in a room in Hollywood and in came Tessa, and she gave an absolutely unbelievable reading and she was so smart and articulate and the performance was really ... it was so precise, but also so ... generous, and free-spirited in a funny way. Anyway, I just thought it was perfect. And so that’s just like old-fashioned casting. You just think, “Oh my god, she’s amazing.” -Garland
- “It was very empowering having another woman of color, another Latina around, another woman that understood the importance of our presence there and how much we weren’t taking it for granted, and to protect one another.” - Rodriguez

BOOK VS MOVIE

- THE CHARACTERS DON’T TRY TO GET ALONG IN THE BOOK
- THE MOVIE CUTS A MAJOR PLOT POINT
 - **SPOILER:**
 - One of the central plotlines – and mysteries – of Annihilation is left out of the film. In the book, upon exploring Area X, the Biologist discovers a tunnel which she calls a tower. The Biologist is drawn to this place and returns to it to discover its true purpose. The tower goes deep into the earth and on its walls are written words made from a plant like substance that appear to be alive. When the biologist gets too close to the plants they shoot out spores which infect her and in turn give her heightened senses. This is what causes her body to change and adapt to the environment, unlike in the film where all of the characters are affected inside the contaminated area.
- THE MEANING OF ANNIHILATION
 - What exactly is “annihilation”? The book and the movie give very different answers. In the book, the Psychologist has the ability to hypnotize people, a power which she uses to submit the other members of the team to her will. She uses certain phrases to cause the other members of the team to fall into a hypnotic state. The word “annihilation” in particular is to be used to cause another member of the team to commit suicide. The Biologist learns of this ability and is deeply unsettled. She questions the motives of the Psychologist and how much the other woman knows about Area X that she has not revealed to the rest of the group.
 - In the film, annihilation is described by Dr. Ventress (Leigh). “Our bodies, our minds will be fragmented into the smallest parts. Annihilation,” she says. Those who enter the Shimmer experience a feeling of disintegration in both body and mind that eventually causes them to devolve into madness. Each character has a different response to this change. Ventress tries to fight it, explaining that she wants the person who started the mission to be the same one who ends it as she

feels herself slipping away. Josie (Thompson) chooses to embrace it and becomes part of the world inside the Shimmer. Lena (Portman) tries to understand it and gets much more than she bargained for.

- **TWO DIFFERENT ENDINGS**

- The book and film versions of *Annihilation* answer the question of leaving Area X (or the Shimmer) very differently. At the end of the movie, Lena returns to Southern Reach to tell her story to the scientists there, although the state in which she returns is up for interpretation. The final shot of Portman's eye reveals that maybe the biologist wasn't so successful in defeating the Shimmer after all. The film's ending feels foreboding, leaving plenty of room for theories about what might happen next. It's a question that will likely never be answered, since Garland has ["zero plans" for a sequel](#).
- The book's ending is slightly more hopeful. After finding a note from her husband detailing his plans to travel further into the region, the Biologist decides to stay inside and follow him. The Biologist knows that the version of her husband who returned home is not who he really was and decides to look for him with a newfound purpose and sense of discovery. And because there are two more books in the trilogy (*Authority and Acceptance*) there is that tantalizing promise that this is not the end and that more will be revealed.

DIRECTING (Alex Garland)

- Director Alex Garland decided not to reread the novel "*Annihilation*." Instead, he decided to adapt it "like a dream of the book."
- Garland explains that the film is itself a type of mutation. "It shifts from being a medical thriller to a hallucinogenic sci-fi film to a mutated body-horror movie out of David Cronenberg," he says. "It's something that a subset of the audience kind of enjoys, that feeling of being wrong-footed, but the other part of the audience just feels wrong-footed and wants to know where they are."

PRODUCTION (Rob Hardy)

- Principal photography was underway by April 2016
- Location filming by Lighthouse Pictures Ltd occurred starting in late April in South Forest, Windsor Great Park
- On May 9, 2016, cinematographer Rob Hardy began sharing pictures from the set of the film
- On July 13 and 14, filming took place at Holkham Pines in North Norfolk. Shooting was completed that month
- One filming location was Holkham Beach, Norfolk in the U.K., during July 2016
- Principal photography was underway by April 2016, when actor David Gyasi was added to the cast. Location filming by Lighthouse Pictures Ltd occurred starting in late April in South Forest, Windsor Great Park. Some test shooting had already been done in St. Marks, Florida, but the vegetation in the area turned out to be too dense to give any depth perception on screen. Lighthouse Pictures have a charge arrangement registered with UK Companies House regarding this matter. On May 9, 2016, cinematographer Rob

Hardy began sharing pictures from the set of the film. On July 13 and 14, filming took place at Holkham Pines in North Norfolk. Shooting was completed that month

EDITING/VFX (Barney Pilling)

- Visual effects supervisor Andrew Whitehurst said that they gave the horrific mutated bear creature in the movie a name. Whitehurst served as VFX supervisor at visual effects house Double Negative when the company worked on the movie *Paddington* (2014), about a talking stuffed bear. Whitehurst said *Paddington* is a very nice bear named after Paddington Station in London, which is a very elegant Victorian station, so they named the mutant bear Homerton, which is a slightly rough-around-the-edges station in East London.
- The VFX are made by: Double Negative, Milk VFX (VFX Supervisor: Sara Bennett), Nviziible, Union VFX (VFX Supervisor: Simon Hughes)
- “Alex sent me the first draft of the screenplay a year before pre-production began. He sent me the script when I was about 3,000 meters up in the Alps, shooting second-unit stuff for *Spectre*. I was reading that in the evenings and then shooting Bond during the day.” -Whitehurst
- “Several elements in the movie, we fundamentally redesigned in post-production, because what we thought was going to work [didn’t].” -Whitehurst
- ALLIGATOR:
 - “The alligator initially was albino, but not particularly diseased. When we were looking at it in the context of the cut, it seemed too clean and healthy. So we ended up adding a lot of lesions, and more vitiligo and other skin-mottling effects.”
 - Tristan [Versluis]’s special effects team built a full-sized one, which we scanned and used as the basis of our digital one.
- MUTATED BEAR:
 - One of the concept artists, in a piece of 3D software, got a scan of a bear skull and a scan of a human skull, and literally just mashed the two together. We looked at that and went, “Yeah, okay, that’s horrible. That’s gonna work.”
 - We designed that in visual effects and then gave a 3D model to Tristan, and his team built a full-size animatronic head and neck that could be puppeteered on set.
- “A whole sequence got cut actually really early in the edit, and that just took like ten minutes off, just like that,” Garland said, but he stressed that no other major moments or set pieces were removed. “The rest of it was really just about refining it, zeroing in on the intention in a scene and making it just tight.” - Garland
 - The deleted scene in question occurs during the first meeting between [Natalie Portman](#)’s Lena and Jennifer Jason Leigh’s Dr. Ventress. In the theatrical cut, Ventress’ team abducts Lena after her husband falls ill. Lena wakes up in a holding room and is introduced to Ventress. The original moment, however, found Lena waking up and, before meeting Ventress, finding a way to escape the room. She knocks out a guard, steals his gun, and leaves the facility, only to realize she’s in a remote area with nowhere to run.
 - Garland explained the scene to Collider as follows:

- It's this weird thing that happens in a script to seeing it, that things make sense sometimes when you're reading it, but when you watch it, it immediately stops making sense. Essentially what happens in the sequence is that Natalie Portman, quite early on in the film is locked in a sort of chamber where she first meets Dr. Ventress and when Ventress leaves, Natalie's character Lena is stuck there and she escapes from that chamber and knocks out a guard, takes his gun, shoots her way through a glass door, makes her way through the facility and finally busts out and sees the shimmer for the first time.

SOUND/MUSIC (Geoff Barrow, Ben Salisbury)

- Geoff Barrow was born on December 9, 1971 in Walton-In-Gordano, North Somerset, England.
 - Known for Free Fire, Ex Machina, Fantastic Four
- Ben Salisbury is long established as one of the leading composers of brilliant contemporary orchestral scores for major BBC natural history programmes, including three David Attenborough series, Ben is now bringing his impressive cinematic style to drama productions. A classically trained pianist since the age of five, he has composed the music for more than 40 wildlife productions, including David Attenborough's Life In The Undergrowth, Life of Mammals and the 2008 series Life In Cold Blood. Other credits include The Nature Of Britain, Congo and the Making Waves strand of 8 'behind the scenes' programmes that accompanied The Blue Planet series.
- The musical cue:
 - In the final incarnation, it's still used harmonically throughout in orchestral themes that I did, and it has a sort of musical cousin in a guitar theme, so you'll hear echoes of it throughout the film. But for the most part, the sound you hear in the trailer now only appears in a very specific part of the film toward the end. There's an incredibly trippy standout part of the film in the third act that needs to stand apart from the rest of the film, and we thought, let's bring out the synths and put it through various processes and stuff. That was the result.
 - It started life as "the Shimmer theme," but then we decided that The Shimmer would be led by sound design instead, and then the sound got placed on a different part of the movie—if I said too much it would be a spoiler, but it's where it all comes together and Natalie Portman's character, Lena, finally comes face to face with what we've been searching for. It went through lots of names, but in that particular incarnation in the trailer, it's called "The Alien," actually.
- Composed of:
 - You are hearing synths, and as I said, it's the only time in the score that synths and electronics make an overt appearance. They do so purposefully in this part of the film so that it stands apart. It would've been done on Oberheim Two Voice and put through various secret ingredients, but it is essentially as simple as it can be. It's four notes. Sometimes the most arresting things are the simplest things. They're sort of mangled in the version you hear, but it's just four notes. It's the production of it that does it, which obviously Geoff is a master of.

PROMOTION

BOX OFFICE

- In the United States and Canada, *Annihilation* was released alongside [Game Night](#) and [Every Day](#), and was projected to gross \$10–12 million from 2,012 theaters in its opening weekend
- The film made \$3.9 million on its first day (including \$900,000 from Thursday night previews at 1,850 theaters). It ended up making \$11 million over the weekend, finishing fourth behind [Black Panther](#), [Game Night](#) and [Peter Rabbit](#)

RECEPTION

- RT: 87% based on 174 reviews
- The website's critical consensus reads, "*Annihilation* backs up its sci-fi visual wonders and visceral genre thrills with an impressively ambitious—and surprisingly strange—exploration of challenging themes that should leave audiences pondering long after the end credits roll."
- Audiences polled by [CinemaScore](#) gave the film an average grade of "C" on an A+ to F scale, while [PostTrak](#) reported filmgoers gave a 71% overall positive score
- Applauded for its science:
<http://www.syfy.com/syfywire/science-behind-the-fiction-annihilation>

NETFLIX INTERNATIONAL RELEASE

- Due to a poorly received test screening, David Ellison, a financier at Paramount, became concerned that the film was "too intellectual" and "too complicated," and demanded changes to make it appeal to a wider audience, including making Portman's character more sympathetic and changing the ending. Producer Scott Rudin sided with Garland in his desire to not alter the film, defending the film and refusing to take notes. Rudin had final cut.
- A week later, Garland expressed disappointment with the Netflix release, stating: "We made the film for cinema. I've got no problem with the small screen at all. The best genre piece I've seen in a long time was [The Handmaid's Tale](#), so I think there's incredible potential within that context, but if you're doing that – you make it for that [medium] and you think of it in those terms. Look... it is what it is. The film is getting a theatrical release in the States, which I'm really pleased about. One of the big pluses of Netflix is that it goes out to a lot of people and you don't have that strange opening weekend thing where you're wondering if anyone is going to turn up and then if they don't, it vanishes from cinema screens in two weeks. So it's got pluses and minuses, but from my point of view and the collective of the people who made it – [it was made] to be seen on a big screen."