

Feminist Analysis of *Annihilation*

Films that are purposefully centered on feminist ideology often make it known that the main protagonists are strong, almost infallible women, but this is not a realistic view of human nature in itself. Women and men illustrate areas of weakness and strength in real-life; without complexity, many strong female characters are forced into the box of one-dimensionality because there is nothing else noteworthy about their characterization other than their power or perseverance. Alex Garland's *Annihilation* (2018) has an all-female lead cast and does not fall into the trap of presenting the protagonists as superheroes, because every character is very humanly flawed even though they are dealing with the supernatural elements of The Shimmer. *Annihilation* challenges the accepted standards of femininity by showcasing complex female characters and presenting the text from an anti-essentialist feminist point of view.

Lena (Natalie Portman) and the other women of the crew, who enter The Shimmer, are scientists, which separates them from the previous groups who have been military based. The gender of their group is only mentioned once towards the beginning of the film, but it is made clear that these women are chosen to investigate this alien occurrence due to the fact that they are scientists and intellectuals not because they are female. The protagonists are "flawed, complicated, intriguing characters who just happen to be women" which is important to their characterization

because every member of this crew suffers from varying forms of self-destruction (Lewis, *How Annihilation Broke the Rules*). Entering The Shimmer is seen as a mission of no return, but that is the point for the main characters, because this is their ultimate showing of self-destruction that had previously manifested itself in actions, such as self-harm and infidelity. Feminism in film is often reduced down to showing that women leads are capable of anything male leads are able to do, which is important, but complexity of character is key to truly empowering femininity. When feminist films are relegated to only allowing women to be powerful heroes or sexually liberated from the clutches of patriarchy, no character development or images of every day female struggle are provided to relate to the audience. Lena is a strong character, but her form of self-destruction is that she has an affair with another man, which causes her husband, Kane (Oscar Isaac), to volunteer himself to enter The Shimmer, because he feels as though he has nothing left in his life to care for. These are not the hallmarks of a truly sympathetic lead, but it is realistic and human, which is how *Annihilation* is able to challenge the accepted rules of what women in film are supposed to be. Lena and the other women show many instances of weakness and are slowly picked off one-by-one throughout the film by the challenges that this alien dome provides them. They are not brave heroes or the saviors of their own story; they have taken their narratives into their own hands, so they are able to decide how their chapters end.

Humanization and feminism in film intersect when it comes to showcasing women as more than damsels in distress or objects for male leads to play with. *Annihilation* is able to flip this trope on its head, because in the diegesis of the film, Lena's infidelity allows her to unknowingly be in control of her husband's self-sacrifice. Typically, the man's actions dictate the journey of the following female, but this film's use of anti-essentialist feminism, proves that women and men can have the same effect on each other's lives and their biological differences do not matter when it comes to expressing masculine or feminine traits. Despite Lena's affair, the virgin-whore dichotomy, never comes into play because she is treated the same as male characters who cheat; her actions are seen as morally wrong, but she is not persecuted for them by her society. Seeing "a lead woman as unsympathetic as Lena, as clever as Lena, shot like a male action hero in military clothing" further plays into the fluidity of masculinity and femininity, because Lena is not limited to exhibiting only stereotypical feminine traits, she is able to be strong and cold, as well as emotional and weak (Lewis, *How Annihilation Broke the Rules*). The all-male military crews who enter The Shimmer before the female scientists face the same challenges, because this is an alien phenomenon that does not recognize the world's rules about gender, which parallels the film's theme of flexible gender roles through the recognition of anti-essentialist feminist ideologies. Lena is the only survivor, but The Shimmer kills all the other members of the crews, regardless of their gender, because *Annihilation* is

allowing the audience to see that biological differences do not affect the way the human race collectively deals with the prospect of self-destruction and the unknown. Society and culture shape how femininity and masculinity interact with each other, but *The Shimmer* is able to cancel this difference out because when a person enters this alien territory their issues all become human and gender identity is disregarded in favor of amplified physical and psychological warfare.

The protagonists' humanistic nature is only amplified by *The Shimmer's* supernatural qualities due to the fact that their flaws and self-destructive tendencies have brought them to this foreign land. Garland's film is feminist in nature not only due to its representation of a diverse group of women, but he also allows the average woman who may deal with mental illnesses, such as depression or may have faced a significant loss in their life to see female characters on screen who are fallible and even in their weakness are able to showcase strength. Feminist icons are either forced to appear masculine or made to be in control of every situation they enter, yet *Annihilation* plays off of this trope by using the women's self-destructive nature to put them in control of their own fate and dressing them in military fatigues so as to add a little machismo to their aesthetic. The protagonists are not fighting off patriarchy or even trying to appear powerful, they are suffering with themselves and their enemy is their own refracted image that *The Shimmer* has created for them.

Works Cited

Lewis, Helen. "How Annihilation Broke the Rules." *New Statesman*.