

Kenya and had almost the same experience with gazelles. Our Land Rover would be going down a road across a plain at something like thirty miles per hour and a gazelle would see us and would run in an arc just to cross the road six feet in front of our speeding car. I mean, there might be two or three cars on this road a day and this gazelle just had to cross the road at the instant a car was passing. The near-miss is clearly intentional. Is it possible that gazelles are doing this specifically because it is so dangerous? What possible survival value could it have for a squirrel or a gazelle to intentionally put itself into danger?

Well, let's look at a third animal behavior and it could be the key to the other two. A large predator bird is chasing a small bird that is its intended prey. Superficially it would seem that the bird being chased should just do what it could to outrun the bird chasing it, but often that is not what it does. Rather than putting as much space as it can between it and its stalker, it does nearly the opposite. It starts going through a complex flying maneuver right where it is. The predator loses interest just as when he could be catching up. If this little bird has so much energy to waste, he is going to be hard to catch. The little bird flirts with death to prove to this and other predators that he is going to be a hard catch. Maybe even to prove it to possible mates. Maybe even to prove it to himself. The same goes for the gazelle and the squirrel. Now what does this say about human behavior? We have our own fascination with behavior that is dangerous for the sake of the danger and as a show of prowess. Midnight graffiti raids, kids walking on railroad trestles, any number of sports--couldn't these all be instinctive signals to predators that no longer really exist that we are bad choices as prey? By flirting with danger we let the world know we are prepared for it. [-mrl]

ANNIHILATION (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: Alex Garland, who wrote and directed the excellent *EX MACHINA*, has co-written and directed a second film. A strange expanse has turned into "the Shimmer," a square-miles-wide region where the laws of physics no longer work. After scores of men have failed to return from the Shimmer, a team of five women enters. (Take that, Bechdel Test). Garland gives the film a tone that may not be really alien, but is very foreign. A lot of the film is incomprehensible or requires repeated viewing. I hope it does well at the box office, but a downbeat title like *ANNIHILATION* will be a hard sell to an audience who may not even be able to spell it.
Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

The Shimmer. What is it? A few square miles on the Eastern seaboard have become alien territory. It follows none of the physical world laws we know. Several assaults have been made to understand the field, but as yet nobody has ever returned. To try a different approach, the government assembles a team of five women to take on the suicide mission of entering the Shimmer to attempt learning its secret. The main character is Lena (played by Natalie Portman), who had lost her husband to the Shimmer. The main timeline is the story of the team's visit to the Shimmer. The film jumps around from that timeline to flashbacks of Lena with her now-missing husband, Kane (Oscar Isaac). It also jumps forward to Lena's de-briefing after she is the first and only human ever to escape the Shimmer.

Like the film *STALKER* by Andrei Tarkovsky, much of *ANNIHILATION* takes place on what might well be abandoned landscape that the script gives science fictional importance. That might significantly ease the budget. These are some scenes in which our team is threatened by what can be considered monsters and they are created visually believable without letting special effects dominate the film

My wife pointed out two flaws in the script. It seems unexpected and a little convenient that in the military there are five advanced scientists who also happen to have experience with armaments like assault rifles. I guess we are to assume that the weapon creates the action hero. Also the government would not send a team into the Shimmer for days on their first time in. They may start with a goat on a rope and send the goat in for two minutes; then pull it out and see if it still lives. Then it might try three minutes and gradually increase the exposure.

ANNIHILATION is a rarity. Among other unusual things it is a science fiction film in which an intelligent woman is the main character. The only other such films that come immediately to mind are *CONTACT* and the rare film *ADVANTAGEOUS*.

This is one of those films that will require six or so viewings before it starts to make sense. Ironically though, the tempo of this film is slow--do not look for *STAR WARS* pacing--there are a lot of ideas packed into the film. So the viewer is never bored. It is more complex but still not up to Garland's *EX MACHINA*. However, expecting a film of that quality is setting the bar very high. I rate *ANNIHILATION* a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2798920/reference>

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/annihilation>

[-mrl]

MOBY DICK (letters of comment by Paul Dormer, Kerr-Mudd John, and Keith F. Lynch):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on MOBY DICK](#) in the 02/23/18 issue of the MT VOID, Paul Dormer writes:

Moby Dick seems to have that effect. I re-read it beginning of the year and several times there were answers in The Independent crossword that connected with the book. The answer "chowder" occurred the day after I read the episode at the inn where Ishmael is served chowder, and the day after I read the description of the sinking of the Essex, this clue appeared:

Essex sailor sleeping at home after cold (8)

The answer, of course, was "Coffin", a reference to Owen Coffin, the unfortunate sailor on the Essex eaten by his shipmates.

Kerr-Mudd John observes:

I'm not very good at crosswords, esp. if I'm looking for an 8 letter word and the answer turns out to be 6 long. [-kmj]

Paul replies:

Oops! Typo.

Mind you, I'm in good company. Yesterday's Azed in The Observer was set on an 11 by 13 grid, but some clever person at the paper decided that that couldn't be right and didn't print the final two columns of the grid. (Fortunately, there was an on-line version that had it correct:

<https://www.theguardian.com/crosswords/2018/feb/25/azed-2385>

[-pd]

Keith Lynch notes:

Today's xkcd.com cartoon references Moby Dick. More synchronicity, or just a coincidence? :-) [-kfl]

And Paul responds:

Indeed, I saw that. And then I started reading an old copy of Analog--I'm several years behind--and there was a story in that called Moby Digital, about a virtual reality version of Moby Dick.

And the John Houston film version was on television just a couple of weeks ago.

It's taking over. [-pd]

Evelyn adds:

I suppose this is as good a place as any to mention that I am up to Chapter 126 in my annotating of MOBY DICK, with Chapters 1 through 105 posted at <http://leepers.us/evelyn/mobydick.htm>. [-ecl]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

ESSAYS AND REVIEWS by Edgar Allan Poe (Library of America, ISBN 0-094050-19-4 consists of Poe's reviews and non-fictional writing about various subjects. I was looking forward to it, but when I got it I discovered that the reason most of Poe's reviews were unknown is that most of what he is reviewing is unknown today.

Nevertheless, there are a few choice items. In "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe describes the process of writing "The Raven", with details such as why he chose a single-word refrain and how he came to select "nevermore" as that word.

Other essays of interest include "Maelzel's Chess-Player" and "A Few Words on Secret Writing" (on ciphers and codes). These two show a scientific point of view of Poe that one does not normally associate with him.

THE DISPATCHER by John Scalzi (ISBN 978-1-59606-786-8) has an interesting premise, but the problem is that it is a ridiculous premise. Even if one accepts the basic framework, the details are clearly contrived to fit the story. SPOILERS AHEAD! The idea is that at some point in the future, things change and people who are murdered resurrect back in their own beds. People who just die or commit suicide do not. There is no explanation for either the resurrection or the teleportation, and someone like Ted Chiang would spend his time examining the theological and philosophical implications. Scalzi mentions these implications, but really skims over them to spend most of his time on the plot, involving the details of what all this means in terms of how it is used (and mis- used). The first effect is that the job of "dispatcher" is created; a dispatcher is

authorized to kill someone who is about to die, so that they will resurrect. For example, if someone is about to die after being hit by a car, a dispatcher can kill him, thereby letting him come back to life. There is a certain amount of reset as well--clearly coming back to life in the same condition one was one second before dying is not very helpful.

All this has its own appeal (the same appeal that C.S.I. has, for example), but the artificiality of the "rules" Scalzi sets up detract from it. Recommended, but as a physical "what if" rather than a philosophical work. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I loathe people who keep dogs. They are cowards who have
not got the guts to bite people themselves.
--August Strindberg

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