



## *Overtones Ege Journal of English Studies* Vol. 2 (2023)

**Scott, Ridley. *Prometheus*. 20th Century Fox, 2012.**

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Ridley Scott's 2012 *Prometheus* can be considered as a milestone in contemporary science fiction as it perfectly exemplifies the major characteristics of the genre, particularly regarding the use of special effects, the creation of alternative, new worlds and creatures and the depiction of the human will to explore beyond the confines of the known space (and the possibly lethal consequences of such a leap towards the unknown). Typical of such a genre is also its representation of villains and evil as "*dei ex machina*, external elements that enter to disturb the equilibrium, external elements that unlock doomsday" (Sardar 5) (emphasis original). The narrative is set in 2093 when a spatial expedition attempts to ascertain whether there is alien life connected to humans in a distant star system. According to archaeologists Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace) and Charlie Holloway (Logan Marshall-Green), several ancient artefacts and digs belonging to different cultures portray such a star system as an invitation to reach a race of gigantic beings. The mission, made of several scientists and experts, is commanded by authoritarian and glacial Meredith Vickers (Charlize Theron), daughter of the elder CEO of Weyland Company (Guy Pearce). Once they reach their destination and land on a barren, mountainous moon, the members of the expedition find a massive, labyrinthine structure and a space ship where the gigantic beings (named "Engineers" by Dr. Shaw and Dr. Holloway) have been exterminated by a black liquid substance that they apparently harvested in order to return to Earth to extinguish the human race. Some of the characters are killed by coming into contact with the substance, after being painfully transformed into malevolent subhumans. The encounter with the only survivor of the alien species leads to further deaths and the destruction of the "Prometheus" spaceship in the attempt to stop the alien ship from reaching Earth. The film therefore definitely exemplifies an anti-Star Trek sentiment characterizing the exploration of space as a disastrous failure.

Matters are further complicated by the betrayal of David (Michael Fassbender), an android constructed by Peter Weyland, who has a hidden agenda of his own and does not value human life. Contrary to the benevolent Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-94), C3-PO and R2-D2 in the *Star Wars* saga (1977-2019) and David in Steven Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Prometheus'* David is inimical to human beings and does not follow Asimov's manifesto for the programming of robots and androids. He rather exemplifies the cases of hostile artificial life forms such as the T-800 in *The Terminator* saga (1984-2019), the replicants in *Blade Runner* (1982) and Ultron in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) therefore, which do not prevent but even cause harm to human beings (and, in the latter two cases, their own creators). By concealing his intentions (and, apparently, his emotions or feelings), David is even more devious and treacherous than his predecessors.

*Prometheus*, as many films in Scott's long and eclectic career (including *Legend* [1985] and *1492: Conquest of Paradise* [1992]), is distinguished for what Paul M. Sammon defines as the director's "ornate, sophisticated and state-of-the-art style" (5), the meticulous attention to details (especially in the interior of the alien spaceship), the use of unusual camera angles, a gorgeous photography (revealed especially in LV-223's landscape), the use of frontlight/backlight techniques (especially inside the alien structure) and the effective realism (in the sequence depicting the violent storm, for example). As in the original *Alien* (1979) as much as in *Hannibal* (2001), the director is a master in conveying horror and suspense through the atmosphere of danger lurking on the alien moon, the depiction of the violent deaths of many characters and the focus on the graphic, abject details epitomizing the permeability of the human body. In particular, Scott conveys horror as "the perception of the precariousness of human identity, [...] the perception that it may be lost or invaded, that we may be, or may become something other than we are, or take ourselves for" (Cavell in Mulhall 17). As is the

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case of Robert Louis Stevenson's Gothic novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), evil is depicted as lying inside the human being and emerging after the assumption of a scientifically-developed substance that separates goodness from evil.

Though it was thought to be a prequel film by many fans of the saga, *Prometheus* does not have any immediate narrative link with the story of *Alien*, but precedes it by about three decades, nor does it reveal much about the race of the Engineers and their motivations. The film, as Scott declared in 2012, contains the DNA of *Alien* (Germain n.p.), a cryptic affirmation that is actually a literal definition of the narrative. It is indeed the black fluid that contains the DNA and the means of both life and death. In the opening sequence of the film, the assumption of such a liquid causes the death of an Engineer left on the Earth of an ancestral past, leading to the creation of all life as we know it. On the moon LV-223 the black liquid has instead the ability to modify the DNA to produce death, by means of alteration of the human physical structure (as much as behavioural traits) and the subsequent production (in the form of a horrific childbirth) of evil creatures that are similar to the much feared, mass-murdering aliens introduced in the original saga. In this sense, *Prometheus* both partly subverts and confirms some of the thematic concerns of *Alien* identified by Chad Hermann when affirming that "*Alien* is indeed about gestation and birth: *male* gestation and birth. Here the patriarchal imagination is not afraid of the mother; it is afraid of *becoming* mother" (38) (emphasis original). In the 2012 film gestation assumes the metaphorical sense of infection by the black fluid of the male members of the expedition and impregnation of the Engineer, but it is also literal in the form of Dr. Shaw being impregnated by an infected Charlie. On the other hand, however, whilst the alien being in the original saga "appears not so much to follow nature's imperatives as to incarnate them" (Mulhall 17), the black fluid is rather an incarnation of death as it destroys or corrupts everything alive it comes into contact with or causes a creature's transformation into an aggressive, destructive being. In comparison with the simpler cycle of contamination and birth of the alien creature in the precursor films, the evolution of the DNA represented in *Prometheus* is unfortunately rather confounding and unclear, especially when we consider that no explanation and no resolution is offered either to the characters and the viewers.

*Prometheus* can be subject to many symbolic interpretations by the critics, as was the case with the original saga, which abounded with psychoanalytical and sexual readings (Gallardo and Smith, Taubin) and religious readings (Billy, Murphy, Schemanske). The 2012 film is particularly susceptible to the latter as Dr. Shaw, the sole survivor, is the only character who has religious faith, wears a crucifix and proudly affirms: "It's what I chose to believe" when her theories are opposed by the other characters. When confronted with the fact that the Engineers' DNA pre-dates that of humans and they are therefore our creators, Shaw does not cease to be a Christian but merely moves the issue back to the creation of the Engineers. Such statements are all the more meaningful as they represent one among many different theories about the story/myth of human creation, Shaw having chosen one among many sentimental, religious or scientific theories attempting to explain the creation of the world and of life. Furthermore, Shaw is sterile, but, after being impregnated, she experiences a horrible pregnancy (in religious terms, it could be interpreted as a blasphemous pregnancy) and gives birth to a monstrous, tentacled being. The latter then "impregnates" the Engineer, who then gives birth to a phallic creature, the further embodiment of evil, the anti-Christ of space. Inescapable is also the fact that the story is set during Christmas time, a festivity that is not marked by any seasonal changes in space, and that the explorers manage to establish that the Engineers' expedition which should have destroyed all life on Earth would have left the alien moon around 2000 years ago, that is, approximately around the time of the death of Christ. This seems to imply that such beings are actually related to the Christian God and wanted to punish humanity for the crucifixion of Christ.

In terms of gender and feminist readings of the film, Shaw can be interpreted as very similar to Ripley in *Alien*, especially when we consider Cynthia A. Freeland's interpretation of the latter character, because her humanity is more relevant than her femininity and she "is a superior representative of humanity. She shows both fear and courage" (66). Shaw's emotional vulnerability makes her a believable and authentic character, but it

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also sets her against the more egoistical, cold and commercial interests of the representatives of the Weyland company, as was the case with Ripley in the 1979 film and in James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986). Moreover, and in line with the fact that science fiction often uses fantastic scenarios to represent present social and ethical concerns (as much as the horror genre does), Elizabeth's unwanted pregnancy and the rest of the crew's attempt to sedate her in order for her to carry it on are an apt metaphor of the contemporary discourses on forced pregnancies and abortion.

Noteworthy is Mark Streitenfeld's soundtrack, whose suggestiveness and potency certainly contribute to the atmosphere of the film. This is the case of melodic and enchanting tracks such as "A Planet" and "Life". The former begins softly by means of the use of a tremolo of strings over the solos of wind instruments. The subsequent deep-breath melodies are accompanied by the simultaneous use of percussion instruments in the background, which make the atmosphere darker and gloomier, an effect that is strengthened by the minor keys used to guide the harmony, whereas a larger and more triumphal dimension is conveyed at the same time through the depth given by the substantial use of brass instruments and dark strings (violas, cellos and basses). On the other hand, obscure, disturbing, cacophonous and even ominous tracks such as "Going In", "Hammerpede" and "Engineers" evoke the doubts, fears and panic experienced by the characters and are an excellent basis for the fast-paced sequences. "Hammerpede", for example, has a spectral setting created by the absence of a distinct melodic line and harmonic reference: Everything is based on indeterminate sounds that produce tension while the tremolo of violins and some "lightning" of high notes create a nervous auditory setting. In the second part of the track, the climax of turmoil and musical tension is given by the strong contrasts and dissonances made by the wind instruments. Such a tension is supported by a pressing and dynamically-wild use of the brass instruments, assisted by the tremolo of the strings or their production of fixed and raw sounds.<sup>1</sup>

Ten years after its release Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* has lost none of its attractiveness, suspense and charm. As was the case with the original saga, the film is a powerful source of critical reflections and arguments, especially after the release of its sequel *Alien: Covenant* (directed by Scott) in 2017. (Re-)watching the film is a necessary experience for all fans of contemporary science fiction as well as for the fans of Scott's work, but it certainly is also an equally pleasurable experience for those viewers who are not familiar with either, as the film is enthralling and engaging in all of its visual and thematic aspects and a worthy narrative precursor of the much-celebrated saga.

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