

Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*: Shutting Pandora's box?

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Directed by Ridley Scott, written by Jon Spaihts and Damon Lindelof

Prometheus is a prequel of sorts to the 1979 science fiction-horror film *Alien*, also directed by Ridley Scott. The new film, the fifth installment in the *Alien* franchise, takes place in the year 2089 onboard the spaceship, *Prometheus*. The crew of the ship, some of whom are scientists while others are employed by the fictional Weyland Corporation, are en route to discover the origins of humanity on a planet far from Earth.

Archaeologists Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace) and Charlie Holloway (Logan Marshall-Green) have discovered artifacts from early civilizations suggesting that humanity was visited (and perhaps created) by extraterrestrial beings, nicknamed “engineers.”

Prometheus' captain, Meredith Vickers (Charlize Theron) does not share the scientific outlook or interests of Shaw and Holloway and is only committed to realizing the goals of aging CEO Peter Weyland (Guy Pearce), who believes the “engineers” might hold the secret to prolonging his life. Accompanying the crew on their journey is an android named David, masterfully brought to life, as it were, by Michael Fassbender.

When the crew of *Prometheus* arrive at their destination and discover the remains of the “engineers” inside a large, cavernous structure, they come into contact with a vicious creature and soon the crew members are fighting for their very survival.

From a technical standpoint, *Prometheus* is impressive. The cinematography, sound and special effects have something menacing and otherworldly about them. *Prometheus* is not overly bombastic in this

regard, unlike many other films today. Scott allows his audience members some time to think instead of overwhelming them with various pieces of eye candy. Although certainly violent, *Prometheus* is not as blood-spattered as, say, a Quentin Tarantino film or many others in the current “slasher” genre.

Having noted that, what can one say about a work whose only memorable character—when all is said and done—is a robot? Ultimately, the primary weakness of *Prometheus* is that it fails to move or provoke much thought in its audience.

More than thirty years have passed since the release of the original *Alien*, and yet that film still manages to convey a genuinely frightening and claustrophobic atmosphere. Moreover, the crew of the mining ship in *Alien*, including Sigourney Weaver, Tom Skerritt, Harry Dean Stanton, Ian Holm and John Hurt, left an impression on the viewer. When each character in turn faced mortal danger, the moviegoer actually cared. And yet back in 1979, there were hardly any such things as computer-generated effects, only actors and puppets.

This is not to say the original *Alien* is without fault. In fact, its plot is essentially the same as *Prometheus*: a spaceship crew ordered by commercial interests on Earth to investigate possible alien life is attacked by the latter and hardly any of the main characters live to tell the tale.

In passing, and at the risk of sounding too didactic, it seems significant that the creators of both *Alien* and *Prometheus* find it impossible to imagine a future in which interplanetary space travel is conducted without the profit motive involved, as opposed to Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, for example, or even *Star Trek*.

Furthermore, what is the end result (and subtext) of each film? In *Alien*, the crew is ordered to investigate a distress signal coming from another planet; while in

Prometheus the crew is searching for humanity's origins. In each film, curiosity (or compassion) kills the cat. The original *Alien* might be read as a partially unconscious, but essentially conservative response to the social and cultural unrest of the previous decade, as if the filmmakers wanted to say: enough of discovery and going into the great unknown, that path only leads to death and disappointment.

The ideological banality of *Prometheus* is bound up with a lack of artistic and dramatic urgency. After all, in an earlier era it was possible to tell a somewhat retrograde story in an intelligent and emotionally gripping way. J. Lee Thompson's *Cape Fear*, Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* and even Brian De Palma's *Carrie* come to mind. However, *Prometheus* lacks any real suspense or foreboding, in large measure because the audience knows it has seen all this before.

This makes co-screenwriter David Lindelof's comment, "Good stories, you don't know where they're going to end," unintentionally ironic. In another revealing comment, Lindelof reportedly said, "Nobody wants to see a movie where people are floating in space talking about the meaning of life." Obviously, a pedantic film in this regard would entertain or enlighten no one, but the problem with *Prometheus* is that it pretends to sophistication without containing any genuine substance.

Take for example the fact that the film story was inspired in part by the long-ago discredited *Chariots of the Gods* by Erich von Däniken (1968), which argued that the technologies of various ancient civilizations were created by aliens revered as gods by these societies. This hypothesis sets aside natural selection (and common sense) and inevitably has a mystical-religious component at heart, i.e., the emergence of human society is accounted for by some external (in one way or another, divine) force. This would help explain director Scott's empty-headed comments to the *Hollywood Reporter*: "NASA and the Vatican agree that [it] is almost mathematically impossible that we can be where we are today without there being a little help along the way."

Thus we end up with the film's implicit defense of "spirituality" (the main character Elizabeth steadfastly carries a cross while all the other "atheistic" characters die off), even if the gods in question may not be benevolent.

Fantasy in the arts is entirely legitimate. Great science fiction tends to discuss the here and now. Indeed, due to various social and ideological difficulties, subversive plots and ideas could often only find distorted expression in Hollywood in animation, science fiction and horror.

Prometheus is not in that tradition, however. It is a remarkable sign of the times indeed that the figure of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods in Greek mythology and stood as a great figure of rebellion to the Romantics (Percy and Mary Shelley, Lord Byron), among others, has been recycled in the service of such stale and retrograde ideas.

The time will come when filmmakers hold their audiences in higher esteem than they do now and not treat serious ideas as mere plot devices.



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