



Michelakis, P. (2018). The Future of Epic in Cinema: Tropes of Reproduction in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*. In F. Macintosh, J. McConnell, S. Harrison, & C. Kenward (Eds.), *Epic Performances : From the Middle Ages into the Twenty-First Century* Oxford University Press.

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[Chapter forthcoming in in F. Macintosh, J. McConnell, S. Harrison & C. Kenward (eds.) *Epic Performances: From the Middle Ages into the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press]

## **The future of epic in cinema: tropes of reproduction in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*\***

**Pantelis Michelakis**

The terms 'epic' and 'epic science fiction' do not normally appear in science fiction encyclopedias. However, as Lorenzo DiTommaso points out, there is a whole group of science fiction films that must be distinguished from 'the standard "space opera" or heroic fantasies' because they display thematic and aesthetic preoccupations associated with 'largeness of scale and the connexion between the protagonists and the race, nation, or empire of which they integrally are a part and whose future course they help determine.'<sup>1</sup> Such films have close affinities with 'film epic' as understood by Gilles Deleuze to bring together the monumental, the antiquarian, and the ethical, not least in terms of setting forth a 'strong and coherent conception of universal history.'<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which the generic label of 'epic' might be deemed relevant for one such film, Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*, and more broadly for the ways in which a discussion about the meanings of epic in early twenty-first century cinema might be undertaken outside the genre of 'historical epic.' The discussion proceeds in two stages. The first section argues for the need to explore how 'epic science fiction' operates in Scott's *Prometheus* in ways that both relate and transcend common definitions of the term 'epic' in contemporary popular culture and entertainment industry. The second section focuses on the unorthodox models of biological evolution with which the film's narrative engages and suggests ways in which they can help with reflection on methods of film analysis and genre criticism. What models does biology provide for the interpretation of contemporary artistic narrative and for the interpretation of the history of a genre? In what ways and to what extent can the analogy between genres and species be sustained? In addressing such questions, I argue for the morphological flexibility of epic that explains its reemergence in contemporary cultural production and creativity, and more specifically for the need to relate it to practices of copying in the age of genetic and digital reproduction and to the anxieties they generate.

### **Science fiction and epic**

Ridley Scott's film *Prometheus* was released in late spring and early summer 2012 across more than 80 countries. An extensive advertising campaign preceded it, that included not just conventional promotional trailers, posters and interviews but, most effectively, teaser video clips that disseminated online via video-sharing websites, social media, and email. Upon its

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\* Earlier versions of this chapter were presented in Bristol, Oxford, Paris and Warwick. I am very grateful to the to the organizers and audiences of those occasions for stimulating discussions. Research for this chapter could not have been undertaken without the generous support of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Bristol and the Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies at Princeton University.

<sup>1</sup> DiTommaso (2007) 284-85 referring to Gunn (1988) and Clute & Nicholls (1993). On attempts to define science fiction, see also Gunn (2002) vii, Asimov (1995) 286-87, James (1994) 103-13 and, in relation to classics, Rogers & Stevens (2012a) and (2015) with bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Deleuze (1986) 141-59. On the use of the word epic as a generic label in cinema and in contemporary culture, see also the seminal work by Elley (1984) and Sobchack (1990) and more recently Santas (2008), Hall & Neale (2010), Burgoyne (2006) and (2010), Paul (2013), and Elliott (2014). On the emergence of epic as a generic label in early film criticism and publicity, see Michelakis (2013a).

release, the film was met with financial success and extensive critical responses, both in print and online.<sup>3</sup> Since then, *Prometheus* has maintained a strong presence in online discussion groups, supported by the release first of a single-disc DVD edition with deleted scenes, then of a single-disc Blu-Ray edition, a book on the making of the film, a four-disc 3D edition with more special features including in-depth documentary and audio commentaries, inclusion in DVD box sets, and ongoing speculation about a possible sequel.

‘But what is this genre?’ asks Geoffrey O’Brien in the *New York Review of Books*, to which he provides the following answer: ‘Call it the speculative science fiction epic willing to flirt with cosmic pessimism; the eternally recurring saga of the space voyage toward our point of origin or ultimate destiny (they generally turn out to be pretty much identical); the drama of metamorphosis in which animals become human and humans become machines; the proleptic chronicle of a future depicted as so endangered it may not even come to pass, and so unappealing we might well wish it wouldn’t.’<sup>4</sup> The marketing and critical discourses around Scott’s *Prometheus* suggest that the word ‘epic’ is by no means the only generic term used to describe the film. But the term is used persistently, in a variety of contexts, to describe a range of different aspects of the film and its production. For instance it is used to describe the ambitious scope of the film’s narrative, its atmosphere, and the big themes it addresses: ‘A big-deal, serious science-fiction epic’ is Quentin Tarantino’s assessment of the film;<sup>5</sup> and his view is shared by many reviewers who call it ‘Ridley Scott’s recent sci-fi epic’;<sup>6</sup> ‘Scott’s scary new 3-D space epic’;<sup>7</sup> and who associate it with an ‘epic landscape’<sup>8</sup> and ‘epic cosmological mysteries.’<sup>9</sup> The word ‘epic’ is also applied to the technologies behind its cutting-edge visual effects and the scale of its gigantic sets: ‘The HD cameras used exclusively on the shoot were the RED EPIC systems, which are capable of extremely high 5k resolution’;<sup>10</sup> ‘The set is all around you. It’s as big as a soccer pitch’;<sup>11</sup> ‘We were able to shoot a lot of live action around something of an enormous scale which suggested something of an even more enormous scale’.<sup>12</sup> In marketing and critical discourses around *Prometheus*, then, the term ‘epic’ is used in the way it is commonly understood in popular culture and especially in the entertainment industry to denote magnitude, the spectacular and the fantastical.

The film itself, however, does not confine itself to this rather conventional understanding of epic. Rather it makes specific allusions to the world of mythology, and more specifically to the world of Greco-Roman mythology in numerous ways, both visually and verbally. The film’s iconography associates this world with the god-like beings from which the human species is supposed to have originated. This is the world of larger-than-human characters with ‘marble-white skin and exaggerated muscle definition recalling classical statuary’;<sup>13</sup> figures reminiscent of ‘Greek Titans’,<sup>14</sup> whose remains crumble or weather like

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<sup>3</sup> On the box office success of *Prometheus*, see the relevant data at Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=prometheus.htm>>, last accessed on 15 August 2016. A list of online reviews can be found in the film’s entry on the Internet Movie Database: <<http://gb.imdb.com/title/tt1446714/>>, last accessed on 15 August 2016.

<sup>4</sup> O’Brien (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Tarantino quoted in Wales (2013).

<sup>6</sup> Britt (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Hart (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Hart (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Scheib (2012).

<sup>10</sup> ‘Ridley Scott’s ‘Prometheus’ Uses Red Epic Cameras’ <<https://loyalstudios.wordpress.com/tag/red-epic/>>, last accessed on 15 August 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Salisbury (2012) 21.

<sup>12</sup> Salisbury (2012) 70.

<sup>13</sup> Stevens (2012).

<sup>14</sup> Crocker (2012).

stone, a world of subterranean temples with giant portrait statues, urns, murals, and celestial spheres (as well as pyramids, subterranean caverns, and primitive paintings).

The film also makes explicit *verbal* references to the world of Greco-Roman mythology. ‘The Titan Prometheus,’ explains the elderly CEO of the corporation that funds the expedition to his crewmembers, ‘wanted to give mankind equal footing with the gods and for that, he was cast from Olympus. Well, my friends, the time has finally come for his return.’ If *visual* references to classical antiquity are related to the world of gods from outer space, *verbal* references to classical antiquity are related to the world of the human characters. Prometheus features not simply in a passing mythological reference (even if a well-established one through the attention it receives in the first of the film’s promotional video clips, ‘TED Talk 2023’<sup>15</sup>). He is mentioned again and again as the name of the film’s spaceship. As a cutting-edge, deep-space exploration vehicle, Prometheus becomes the technological vessel that propels the narrative of the film forward and makes possible the transportation of the characters and the audience to the distant planet where the action of the film takes place. The spaceship ‘Prometheus’ is associated not only with technology and progress; its landing on the surface of the distant planet of its destination ‘had an almost anthropomorphic quality to it,’ says the film’s production designer, ‘the Bridge was the head and the legs were the engines.’<sup>16</sup> The destruction of the spaceship at the end of the film to save planet Earth goes a step further in bringing out the associations of the Titan with daring, punishment and suffering for the benefit of humanity.

Moving beyond specific visual and verbal allusions to classical antiquity, the film shows a preoccupation with epic material that ranges from myths of origin and creation to myths of succession and cosmic struggle between good and evil, myths of successive races, and myths of gods, mortals and monsters. The film draws on a number of ancient civilizations, fusing diverse images, symbols and narratives from Egypt, the Mayas, Sumeria, Babylonia, and Mesopotamia. If the film privileges Greco-Roman references, it also displays a strong tendency towards mythological syncretism and an equally strong Christian undercurrent which includes discussions among the characters around faith (‘Even after all this...you still believe, don’t you?’), passing references to the crucifixion of Christ (‘we thought it was a little too on the nose,’ admits Scott on the more explicit references to the Crucifixion initially envisaged<sup>17</sup>) and John Milton’s religious epic poem *Paradise Lost* as a source of inspiration (‘I started off with a title called *Paradise*,’ says Scott in another interview).<sup>18</sup> *Prometheus*’ narrative is at once eclectic and universalizing. As such it can be seen as satisfying an encyclopedic desire that the return to epic seeks to satisfy, a desire that goes against both realism and the modern scientific perspective in their compartmentalization of knowledge and in their separation from the modern individual of things that become religious dogma or moral law.

Ridley Scott’s interest in epic as a genre with specific associations with classical antiquity and mythology while also encompassing a wider range of cultural references, is not surprising in view of the rest of his film work. The director of cult science-fiction films such as *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982) is also the director of commercially successful and critically acclaimed historical epics from the New-World story of *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (1992) to the Crusades-inspired *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and the biblically inspired *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014). Most relevant for the purposes of this discussion is *Gladiator* (2000), the film that single-handedly brought the genre of historical epic back to

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<sup>15</sup> Available online at < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jb7gspHxZiI> >, last accessed 15 August 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Max in Salisbury (2012) 69.

<sup>17</sup> Jagermath (2012).

<sup>18</sup> O’Connell (2012).

the big screen.<sup>19</sup> If according to Burgoyne, the formal characteristics of historical film epic have to do with ‘its design-intensive mise-en-scene, its use of spectacle and its style of sensory expansiveness—as producing an affective and emotional relation to the historical past, creating a fullness of engagement and amplitude of consciousness,’<sup>20</sup> *Prometheus* shows how some of the those characteristics can thrive in other environments as well, such as that of science fiction. Like *Gladiator*, *Prometheus* engages with features that Burgoyne associates with the kinaesthetic experience and political righteousness of epic cinema, nostalgia on the one hand for a certain moral code and for family values and ‘a powerful sense of anticipatory consciousness’ on the other hand.<sup>21</sup> The transfer of epic operations from the sand of the Colosseum to the dust of a remote moon may seem to require a huge leap of faith, but in fact the two films expose very similar preoccupations with infrastructures of political and/or corporate power. What is more, they both show how a quest for freedom or knowledge needs to exploit such infrastructures (in the way a virus takes over its host, to anticipate one of the tropes to be discussed in the next section) if epic is to be rewritten not from the center but from the periphery.

Ridley Scott is not unique among film directors to have made his reputation in both science fiction and epic. Zack Snyder made his films of the Persian Wars (*300* in 2006 and *300: Rise of an Empire* in 2014) in the same period that he also produced fantasy films such as *Watchmen* (2009) and *Man of Steel* (2014). Similarly, Stanley Kubrick directed *Spartacus* in 1960 and *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968. Jean-Luc Godard directed his adaptation of the *Odyssey*, entitled *Contempt*, in 1963, just two years before his noir science-fiction film *Alphaville* in 1965. Fritz Lang, director of seminal science-fiction films such as *Metropolis* (1927) and *Woman in the Moon* (1929) also directed epics such as *Die Niebelungen* (1924) - not to mention his role as film director of an *Odyssey-within-an-Odyssey* in Godard’s *Contempt*. And Georges Méliès, director of what is arguably the first science-fiction film in the history of cinema, uses the same optical tricks in *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) as in one of the earliest film adaptations of a literary epic, his *Island of Calypso; Odysseus and the giant Polyphemus* (1905).<sup>22</sup>

In cinema the generic universes of science fiction and epic are not just parallel but they also interconnect or even converge. The work of any of the above directors could be used to demonstrate this point. Science fiction films have been identified as epic in critical and advertising discourses for most of cinema’s history. Their narratives are often filled with allusions to mythological stories, characters, and themes from around the world. And they often collapse the distinction between future and past by being set “long, long ago... in a galaxy far, far away,”<sup>23</sup> a narrative topos that often goes hand in hand with ‘a nostalgically backward looking to earlier visions of the future’<sup>24</sup> on and off the cinematic screen. The opening line of George Lucas’ *Star Wars* films stands for a much wider group of films that belong to this category. This conflation of future and past is a feature that science-fiction films share with science fiction as a literary genre but also as a broader artistic and cultural phenomenon associated with folk tales, fantasy adventure, the gothic novel, historical romance, crime, horror, and popular science. Consider, for instance, the role of Prometheus in an unacknowledged influence on Scott’s film, Mary Shelley’s gothic novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*.<sup>25</sup> Or the persistent popularity of another, this time acknowledged,

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<sup>19</sup> On Ridley Scott and the rebirth of the historical epic, see most recently Richards (2014).

<sup>20</sup> Burgoyne (2006) 109.

<sup>21</sup> Burgoyne (2006) 111.

<sup>22</sup> On Méliès’ *Island of Calypso; Odysseus and the giant Polyphemus*, see further Michelakis (2013a).

<sup>23</sup> Sobchack (1998) 276.

<sup>24</sup> Sobchack (1998) 276.

<sup>25</sup> Rogers & Stevens (2012b).

influence on the film, Erich von Daeiniken's pseudo-scientific claims about extraterrestrial influences on early human culture in books such as *Chariots of the Gods?* and *Gods from Outer Space*.<sup>26</sup>

The film's engagement with the temporalities of nostalgia and the allure of totality, moving forward by seeking to restore political and social structures, ethical values, and regimes of knowledge that may have never existed, is at once creative and regressive. If *Prometheus* is 'a movie about creation,'<sup>27</sup> as one of the film's screenwriters puts it, it is less about the wonders of creation and more about its unanticipated horrors and unattainable ideals. This chapter cannot do justice to the parallel histories and the many points of contact and convergence between the two cinematic genres of epic and science fiction. Nor can it trace the complex ways in which those histories and points of contact and convergence are internalized within science fiction or epic as cinematic genres, let alone as broader artistic and cultural phenomena.<sup>28</sup> What it offers instead is to explore how, in Scott's *Prometheus* at least, some of these issues are played out against an intense concentration of biological tropes. The modern conditions that make the cinematic return of epic a necessary but unsuccessful venture - and the film itself another example of modern epic as failed epic<sup>29</sup> - are linked in the film to anxieties about identity, agency, technology and ethics in the age of genetic engineering.

### **Genre criticism and the genetic imaginary**

In criticism, artistic genres are often seen in biological terms. This can be traced from contemporary ecocriticism all the way back to the organic unity of works of art in the writings of ancient authors such as Aristotle and Plato, via Franco Moretti's 'Literary Evolution,' Richard Dawkins' discussion of cultural transmission in terms of genetic transmission in the *Selfish Gene*, biological metaphors that inform much of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, botanical and zoological analogies in Vladimir Propp's structuralist approach to narrative, and the organic forms in Samuel Coleridge's Romantic criticism.<sup>30</sup> As Tzvetan Todorov points out, 'the concept of genre (or species) is borrowed from the natural sciences.' However, there is a profound 'difference between the meanings of the terms "genre" and "specimen" depending on whether they are applied to natural beings or to the works of the mind.'<sup>31</sup> As Todorov puts it, 'the impact of individual organisms on the evolution of the species is so slow that we can discount it in practice.' In the realm of art, on the other hand, 'evolution operates with an altogether different rhythm; every work modifies the sum of possible works, each new example alters the species.'<sup>32</sup>

In artistic practice, genres from different ages and different stages in their historical development are routinely mixed together in ways that embrace anachronism and defy historical logic. Rick Altman addresses in a head-on manner the metaphor of evolutionary biology that often informs critical discussions of genre: 'in the multi-era imaginary world of a Jurassic Park . . . the categories of a previous evolutionary state continue to exist. In the genre world . . . everyday is Jurassic Park day. Not only are all genres interfertile, they may at any time be crossed with any genre that ever existed.'<sup>33</sup> Taking its cue from Altman, my

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<sup>26</sup> Scott in Salisbury (2012) 13.

<sup>27</sup> Damon Lindelof in Gilchrist (2012).

<sup>28</sup> For perceptive discussions of some of the issues around this larger topic, see DiTomasso (2007) and Rogers & Stevens (2012a) and (2015).

<sup>29</sup> Moretti (1996).

<sup>30</sup> Moretti (1996) and (1988); Dawkins (1976); Frye (1957); on Propp, see Steiner & Davydov (1977); on romantic ecology and its legacy, see Coupe (2000).

<sup>31</sup> Todorov (1973) 5.

<sup>32</sup> Todorov (1973) 6.

<sup>33</sup> Altman (1998) 24.

discussion here focuses less on classificatory and taxonomic distinctions between science fiction and epic and more on issues of generic interaction and change. Rather than asking questions about the common features that hold together films under the same generic label, the discussion undertaken here considers the role of what Jackie Stacey calls ‘the genetic imaginary’ in drawing up and naturalizing family ties and boundaries between genres as distinct classes.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the discussion proposed here examines processes of dissemination and transformation of genres and the often-paradoxical ways in which genealogies in the biological sense of procreation and reproduction and in the metaphorical sense of heritage and cultural patrimony begin to intermingle.

Scott’s *Prometheus* begins at the beginning, with a myth about creation. Mighty rivers, gigantic valleys and glacial cuts surrounded by big mountains provide a sense of the dawn of time. A self-sacrificial male descends from the sky and disintegrates into primordial waters. Human life is born out of this act. The scene begins with bird-eye views of the vast landscape below. It continues with views of the humanoid witnessing his own disintegration. And it concludes with microscopic views of fluids gashing through lesions, of particles flowing through the air, and of strands of DNA breaking apart, swirling through the water, then rebuilding. The scene brings together the macro-level of mythological archetypes and the micro-level of biology, creationism and evolution, fiction and science. This is not simply the film’s theory for how human life appeared on Earth but also a reflection on the film’s own genesis. As the strands of DNA begin to rebuild and blood cells to multiply, clean white lines appear gradually, forming letters that spell the film’s title, *Prometheus*. The narrative of the film is born out of mythological imagery broken down and reassembled as biological spectacle for an age of genetic engineering.

With a gigantic flash-forward spanning more millennia than the opening of Kubrick’s *Space Odyssey*, we next find ourselves in the year 2093CE, on board ‘the trillion-dollar ship Prometheus ... en route to a distant world.’<sup>35</sup> The humans on board ‘Prometheus’ think they have an invitation to visit the world of the so-called Engineers, but contact with them turns out to have unintended and unanticipated consequences. The arrival of the spaceship ‘Prometheus’ in the distant planet sets in motion processes that lead to disorder and chaos. As the film progresses, the clear distinction between the engineers, the humans and their robots begins to break down. Humans experiment on engineers, and robots experiment on humans: ‘It’s a weird family tree that the movie constructs as the end of the movie gives birth to the progeny of all three generations – this is what happens when an android gets involved in ‘fertilising’ something that was invented by The Engineers with a human host which then has sex with another human who gives birth who then recombines with The Engineer.’<sup>36</sup> Contamination leads to death, violent mutation, and the birth of monsters. Bodies are ‘invaded, transmuted, tortured, split open, devoured.’<sup>37</sup> As the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the body collapse, what separates humans from their ancestors and robots is no longer clearly defined. Similarly, the distinction between science and fiction, between epic, futuristic adventure, mystery, and horror become confused.

By the end of the film, all that is left on the remote planet of this encounter between different species and genres is a post-apocalyptic landscape of death and destruction in which the monstrous children of mutated humans and their superhuman ancestors roam free. The only survivor of the spaceship Prometheus is the female protagonist of the film, the scientist Dr Shaw, who together with the remains of the robot David, prepares for her final exit.

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<sup>34</sup> Stacey (2010).

<sup>35</sup> Ebert (2012).

<sup>36</sup> Damon Lindelof in Lyus (2012).

<sup>37</sup> O’Brien (2012).

As we take our eyes away from the post-apocalyptic landscape of the planet that the film has failed to make its home, and we look upwards, through the clouds, towards the blue skies beyond, epic reasserts itself through the most conventional of devices, that of the voice-over. An all too vulnerable female narrator records a brief, prosaic report on behalf of a vessel that no longer exists, about a point of origin that should be avoided, with the help of a medium whose transmission and reception by an audience is only speculative:

Final report of the vessel Prometheus. The ship and her entire crew are gone. If you're receiving this transmission make no attempt to come to its point of origin. There is only death here now, and I'm leaving it behind. It is New Year's Day, the year of our Lord, 2094. My name is Elizabeth Shaw the last survivor of the Prometheus. And I am still searching.

However, the film also ends with the promise of a narrative reboot, with a proleptic return to origins, the launching of another attempt to recover epic. The conversation between Dr Shaw and David points towards a world where humans can meet gods, where religion can coexist with knowledge, fiction with science, the future with the past:

*Dr Shaw:* You said you could understand their navigation...use their maps.

*David:* Yes, of course. Once we get to one of their other ships finding a path to Earth should be relatively straightforward.

*Dr Shaw:* I don't want to go back to where we came from. I want to go where they came from. Do you think you can do that, David?

*David:* Yes. I believe I can. May I ask what you hope to achieve by going there?

*Dr Shaw:* They created us. Then they tried to kill us. They changed their minds. I deserve to know why.

*David:* The answer is irrelevant. Does it matter why they changed their minds?

*Dr Shaw:* Yes. Yes, it does.

*David:* I don't understand.

*Dr Shaw:* Well, I guess that's because I'm a human being and you're a robot.

The ending restores the taxonomical distinction between gods, humans and robots as well as the hierarchical distinction between human hope and desire **in** the driving seat and an emasculated technology at their service (and literally in the bag). The ending is both an averted end of the world as we know it and an attempt to redraw the boundaries of time. What appeared at the beginning of the film as the dawn of time proves part of a much larger continuum that only now we can begin to grasp in its entirety. As the world of horror is left behind and the blue skies of another quest for origins open up ahead of us, the ending reestablishes order at all levels, including that of genre.

The film, effectively, presents us with two views of epic. One is based on the fantasy of recovering epic as a singular, pure genre. The other is based on the practice of genetic contamination between different genres and of genetic mutation within genres. The former approach can be associated with the imagined, desired origins of science fiction as offspring of an ancient and illustrious poetic type. The latter approach relates to the realities of science fiction as a genre that flirts with numerous other genres, past and present, among which epic is only one, engendering offshoots 'like the alien life-forms that proliferate in the black corridors of' the film.<sup>38</sup> At the end of the film, the traditional search for origins, continuity, and coherence is reinstated even if the rest of the narrative deals 'a blow to a regime of truth

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<sup>38</sup> O'Brien (2012).



that denies the ambiguous beginnings, vicissitudes, and incongruities of [generic] existence.<sup>39</sup> But the fantasy of recovering epic played out at the end of the film, no less than the reality of generic mutation in the middle, is busy performing another genetic experiment. It collapses the distinction between engineers, gods, parents, kings and artists. It also collapses the distinction between humans, children, machines, subjects, and works of art. Effectively, it collapses the distinction between religion, biology, technology, politics, and art. The ethics of reproduction, the fears and anxieties of unchecked replication, the loss of singularity and identity may be scrutinized by the plot and the characters at one level, but they are also given free rein at levels beyond or below the thematic preoccupations of the plot and the characters.

In *Prometheus* heretical or outdated models of evolutionary change take center stage whereas ideas associated with Darwin's evolutionary theory, with their focus on random variations and selection pressures, are pushed to the background. While this reasserts in certain ways the stereotype that fiction and science are not very compatible, it also demonstrates how the scientific orthodoxies of biological evolution and the artistic realities of cultural evolution work in different but symbiotic ways:

- (a) Mutation. In opposition to the slow evolution of Darwinian theory, mutation leads to sudden and large-scale transformations and the instantaneous establishment of new species through an accelerated evolutionary tempo. Sudden leaps in evolution come at a cost for the organisms involved, and they are associated with transgression, violence, and variation leading to genetic decline. At the end of the film and against such a depiction of mutation (and its channeling through contamination, non-consensual sex, violent births, and sexually transmitted disease), an assumed norm of chronologically and hierarchically separate species that do not interbreed emerges as a horizon of (epic) expectations.
- (b) External forces. Mutations and the genetic and narrative complexity that accompanies them are not the symptom of spontaneous variations, nor are they driven by internal forces and developments. Rather they are the result of external factors (as with interstellar visitations - when aliens bring life to a primordial earth or when the film's human characters bring destruction to a remote moon), external socio-economic and technological conditions ('My company paid a trillion dollars to find this place and bring you') and environmental pressures ('...the murals are changing. I think we've affected the atmosphere in the room')
- (c) Agency. By contrast to the Darwinian sense of inability to foresee what would be advantageous and 'the interplay of random mutation and blind selection,' external forces 'transform the concept of selection from the traditional passive filter to a far more activist, deliberate, foresight-endowed entity.'<sup>40</sup> Evolution is taken in the hands of a self-sacrificial Engineer whose genetic material fertilizes a primordial earth, a self-interested multi-billionaire that wants to extend his life, and a robot whose artificial consciousness makes it wanting to kill its creators. Despite the number of characters that behave as if they were gods only for their limitations to be exposed and punished, the principle itself of the benevolent creator does not go away. If anything, it survives as the ultimate origin and point of destination at the film's end.
- (d) Stringing together. The stringing together of a new genetic code, that is the rearrangement of chromosomes that leads to a large systemic mutation, visualized emblematically as the film title emerges in the opening scene, raises questions about

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<sup>39</sup> Quinby (1995) xii-xiii.

<sup>40</sup> Winthrop-Young (1999) 33.

the creation of the film's narrative that can be related to and seen as the equivalent of 'the formalist notion of nanizyvanie or 'stringing together,'<sup>41</sup> but also as the equivalent of stitching as a metaphor for epic composition.<sup>42</sup> The film thematizes the device of stringing together, of the use of separate stories related to biology and mythology as raw materials for the construction of a new artistic reality.<sup>43</sup> The tinkering that necessitates 'to work with whatever material happens to be at hand rather than the omnipotence to design every thing anew,'<sup>44</sup> and that makes possible for a genre 'to absorb novelties or survive geographical transplantation without disintegration',<sup>45</sup> is practiced extensively throughout the film but in such ways as to advocate the rejection of most regenerative processes associated with it.

## Conclusion

The possibilities that *Prometheus* opens up for the encounter between a classical genre and biologically inflected modes of reproduction need to be set against other examples of contemporary science fiction that turn to classical antiquity to make sense of the contemporary fascination with and anxieties around genetic engineering. From Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) to Michael Winterbottom's *Code 46* (2003), Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium* (2013) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015), a whole range of recent science fiction films retrace generational fantasies and discords in a variety of classically-inspired contexts (from Sophoclean tragedy to Ovidian mythology), from the biological to the theological, and from the literary to the historical. In doing so, they scrutinize the replication of biological information and the reproducibility of the art object in ways that have a direct bearing on contemporary anxieties about genetics but also on the cinema's own post-celluloid aesthetic of imitation and artifice. While a more detailed discussion of how these films relate to one another in their engagement with classical antiquity lies outside the scope of this chapter, a brief consideration of *Code 46* alongside *Prometheus* can shed light on points of convergence and divergence between the two.

*Code 46* is an art-house film rather than a global blockbuster, and the classical genre implicated in it is tragedy rather than epic. The 'film explores the dangers of the end of Oedipus in a world of fetal cloning,' but 'it simultaneously enacts an Oedipal return' as the protagonists vainly attempt to escape 'to an outside' which makes their subsequent punishment and 'exile seem like an inevitable repetition.'<sup>46</sup> While the film airs tragically modulated anxieties about desire in the age of genetic engineering, it also performs its own impulsive love affair with the maternal body of a canonical text of Western literature and thought. 'Multiplicity...threatens the singularity and individuality which lie at the heart of modern aspirations of subjecthood,'<sup>47</sup> but at the same time it seems to open up new possibilities for artistic creativity: 'Diet, climate, environment, chance, surgery, the stars, God. We aren't prisoners of our genes,' claims a DNA analyst in a sequence half way through the film, at the same time that dark clouds begin to gather above the narrative and its protagonists. If in *Prometheus* the focus is on anxieties about change (how humans/texts or species/genres can cope with violent change), in *Code 46* the focus is on anxieties around

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<sup>41</sup> Winthrop-Young (1999) 31.

<sup>42</sup> Ford (1988).

<sup>43</sup> On this formalist concept introduced by Victor Shklovsky in 1925, see Shklovsky (2009).

<sup>44</sup> Winthrop-Young (1999) 28.

<sup>45</sup> Winthrop-Young (1999) 28.

<sup>46</sup> Stacey (2010) 173.

<sup>47</sup> Stacey (2010) 150.

cloning (how humans/texts or species/genres can cope with the violence of non-differentiation).<sup>48</sup>

What a biological and more specifically evolutionary model of film analysis and genre criticism does is to create pressure to search for an equivalent of the microscale analysis undertaken by genetics. That equivalent might well be some form of formalism.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, the use of a biological model of evolution creates pressure to look for an equivalent of the large-scale analysis undertaken by histories of the *longue durée*. Oscillating between the two levels of analysis, one may do well to ask what is the object of such a critical project. Is it the work of art itself or something at once smaller and bigger? At microscale level, there are genre markers such as themes, techniques, or devices operating within texts, whose function is prone to change. At macroscale level, there is the concept of genre itself as something transcending individual texts and creating shifting expectations with which individual texts must engage. What introduces further variation into the complexities of the relation between biology and art is the fact that Scott's *Prometheus* draws on competing models of biological reproduction and evolution. The film does not engage with specific epic texts. It does not support a dialogical model of reception where the interaction or convergence between species and genres is mutually illuminating. Epic appears in nightmares of genetic engineering that spiral out of control and in nostalgic fantasies about benevolent, self-sacrificial fathers begetting obedient and grateful offspring. Like Dr Shaw we can search for a deeper, more unifying lesson in the distant origins of generic or cultural evolution. Or we can search for a deeper, more unifying lesson in the polyvalence of epic in the present of genetic engineering. Either way, the film suggests that when it comes to cinematic intertextuality, a discussion about generic taxonomies and transformations cannot be conducted at the beginning of the twenty-first century without reflecting on the tropes that cinema animates and the fears it enacts at the heart of our genetic imaginary.

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<sup>48</sup> For a more detailed discussion of *Code 46* in relation to Greek tragedy, see Michelakis (2013b) 222-24.

<sup>49</sup> Winthrop-Young (1999) 31 on Moretti's model of literary history (1996).

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