

Alien: Covenant, dir. by Ridley Scott (Twentieth Century Fox, 2017)

Alien: Covenant is the sixth instalment in the much-celebrated and critically acclaimed science-fiction/horror saga initiated in 1979 by Ridley Scott's *Alien* and consisting also of James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), David Fincher's *Alien³* (1992), Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) and the prequel film *Prometheus* (Scott, 2012).¹ *Alien: Covenant* is also the twenty-fourth work by the eclectic eighty-year-old British producer and director, whose work has successfully spanned all cinematic genres, from science fiction (*Blade Runner*, 1982), through costume and historical drama (*1492: Conquest of Paradise*, 1992, and *Kingdom of Heaven*, 2005) and fantasy (*Legend*, 1985), to the detective film (*Black Rain*, 1989), the road movie (*Thelma and Louise*, 1991) and comedy (*A Good Year*, 2006).

Covenant is a sequel to *Prometheus*; the earlier film depicts the search for the origins of the human species by a group of scientists, explorers, and the leading members of the Weyland Corporation, tracing their encounter with a being belonging to the race of the so-called Engineers. In *Prometheus*, the explorers discover near the end of the film that the last surviving Engineer had been frozen into hyper-sleep thousands of years earlier, preventing him from destroying Earth, a mission that he fortunately does not complete upon awakening. *Prometheus* is filled with references to religion, specifically Christian beliefs (allegedly, the Engineers' mission to destroy our planet was ordered around the time of Christ's death), the creation of life (the protagonist is sterile, but she gives birth to an alien life form), and, in a nod to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the horror of a creator refusing his own progeny. The film builds ruthlessly towards its monumental finale: after the excitement of the journey through space and the promise of discovering the origins of humankind – a question that remains unanswered in the end – only the female protagonist of the story, Dr Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace), survives the encounter with the hostile life forms. At the end of the story, she journeys in the company of the seriously damaged android David (Michael Fassbender) towards the Engineers' planet in search of answers – personal, ethical, and theological.

Covenant begins in 2104, ten years after the previous expedition, and focuses on the crew of the eponymous starship transporting 2000 colonists and 1140 embryos to the habitable planet Origae-6. After a neutrino tempest damages the ship and kills its captain, the crew receives a rogue transmission from a nearby planet, which apparently also possesses all the characteristics for being inhabitable. The new (reluctant and insecure) captain of the

¹ I have excluded from the count *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) and *Alien vs. Predator: Requiem* (2007) as outside of the *Alien* 'canon'.

vessel, Chris Oram (Billy Crudup), accompanied by a group of crew-members – including the second in command, the previous captain’s wife, Daniels (Catherine Waterstone) – thus descends on the planet. Here, they find the crashed starship that carried Dr Shaw and David; this of course is actually the Engineers’ home planet. They are accompanied also by Walter (Michael Fassbender), a more attentive and efficient version of the David android. During the exploration of the planet, two crew-members are infected by the spores of a local plant and die soon after, by ‘giving birth’ to hostile, albino hybrid creatures that attack the members of the expedition after the sun sets (dusk falls rapidly on the planet). A hooded David intervenes to help the group of explorers, and leads them to an abandoned city filled with the carbonised bodies of the Engineers, all frozen in tragic poses. While the team attempts to contact the ship in orbit, David confronts first his own brother, Walter, and then Captain Oram. The android admits having raped and killed Dr Shaw and having experimented with the pathogen for the creation of the alien life forms, which he defines as ‘gorgeous’. The captain is deceived by David and attacked by a facehugger, a crab-life creature that can ‘impregnate’ other life forms. He then gives birth to the darker-coloured form of the alien that the spectators of the saga are familiar with. In the meantime, David fights against Walter, while the remaining crew-members attempt to leave the planet. The film ends with a predictable twist eliminating the possibility of a happy ending, in spite of the multiple victories against the xenomorphs. The biblical meaning of the term ‘covenant’ as a bond agreed upon by two groups or parties thus assumes a negative connotation by the film’s end; the bond has been broken by David’s betrayal of the human species at large and his probable attempts to create a colony of xenomorphs out of the bodies of the colonists.

There is, therefore, no redemption at the end of *Covenant*, no positive hints at the future progress of humanity or the development of science. In this sense, the film confirms Ziaddun Sardar and Sean Cubitt’s definition of science fiction as ‘both afraid of science and in love with science’.² The technological advancements that, according to the fictional universe of the *Alien* saga, have allowed human beings to create artificial intelligences and to travel through space have only produced the potential for the annihilation of humankind, and have led to David’s probable future reign of terror on Orega-6. As Matt Zoller Seitz has noted, the film ‘only looks like a hard sci-fi film about technology and rational thought. In its heart it’s more of a dark fairy tale about destruction and creation, death and birth, parents and children (biological and figurative), and sexual violation and monogamous love (many of the

² Ziaddun Sardar and Sean Cubitt, ‘Introduction’, in *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. by Sardar and Cubitt (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp.1-17 (p. 5).

crew are married).³ Questions relating to parenthood are indeed central to the plot of *Covenant* and emphasise the link of the film with its predecessors. On the one hand, this film confirms the tendency of the previous instalments of the saga to elide the anatomical distinction between males and females on which our culture is based, as aliens are given birth to mainly by male characters. *Covenant* is therefore about male gestation and birth, an inversion of parental roles that could terrify some male spectators because, as Chad Hermann has argued about *Alien*, ‘here the patriarchal imagination is not afraid of mother; it is afraid of becoming mother’.⁴ On the other hand, a narrative investment in a female protagonist is evident in the many parallels that can be established between Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), the main character and ‘Final Girl’ of the first four films, and Daniels, the female protagonist of *Covenant*. Both characters can be defined as admirable human beings and not as an amalgam of stereotyped masculine traits in female disguise, as Cynthia A. Freeman argues in relation to the depiction of Ripley.⁵ Indeed, Ripley and Daniels display both fear and courage, expressing resolution when fighting against the aliens, but also crying for the death of their companions, therefore encompassing what are considered to be ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits.

Beyond these issues, *Covenant* has generated many opposing reactions from critics. Guy Lodge praises the film as ‘roaringly, repulsively effective’ in its capacity to impress and thrill its spectators.⁶ Both Christopher Orr and Mark Keizer appreciate the simplification of the story’s plot, in contrast to the philosophical questions asked (and left unanswered) by its predecessor *Prometheus*.⁷ According to Keizer, the film corrects the mistakes of the 2012 film, criticising its attempts to link the origins of the xenomorph to that of humankind as unnecessarily complicating the horrific premises of the story, through constant allusions to the act of creation and the relationship between the two androids (who mirror Cain and Abel). By contrast, Christopher Llewellyn Reed believes that, in spite of the well-choreographed action sequences, *Covenant* fails because of its ‘far less successful [...] attempts to weave

³ Matt Zoller Seitz, ‘Alien: Covenant’ <<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/alien-covenant-2017>> [accessed 14 April 2018].

⁴ Chad Hermann, ‘“Some Horrible Dream About (S)mothering”: Sexuality, Gender, and Family in the *Alien* Trilogy’, *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, 16.3 (1997), 36-50 (p. 38).

⁵ Cynthia A. Freeman, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), p. 64.

⁶ Guy Lodge, ‘Alien: Covenant Brings the Franchise Back to Its Sci-Fi Horror Roots’ *Newsweek*, 20 May 2017, <www.newsweek.com/2017/06/02/ridley-scott-alien-alien-covenant-sigourney-weaver-michael-fassbender-612842.html> [accessed 10 April 2018].

⁷ Mark Keizer, ‘Movie Review: *Alien: Covenant*’, *Cinegods*, 15 May 2017 <cinegods.com/movie-review-alien-covenant/> [accessed 10 April 2018]; and Christopher Orr, ‘*Alien: Covenant* Is the Best Installment Since *Aliens*’, *The Atlantic*, 19 May 2017 <www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/05/alien-covenant-ridley-scott-michael-fassbender-review/527319/> [accessed 10 April 2018].

transcendental musings on the nature of existence and the hubris of playing god into what ultimately boils down to a high-production-value slasher pic'.⁸ Megan Basham dismisses the plot of the film as 'a been-there, done-that mad scientist resolution'; and Thelma Adams criticises the human characters as 'shades of shades of past sci-fi heroes that have gone before, hardly differentiated'.⁹ Finally, Richard Brody argues that 'what Scott delivers in *Alien: Covenant* is the simulacrum of seriousness without the sense of self-conscious silliness, a grim earnestness that's reinforced by a thudding, grandiose aesthetic that utterly lacks originality'.¹⁰

I, however, feel that the grandiose aesthetic is an undeniable merit of the film and transforms the experience of viewing *Covenant* into an impressive visual spectacle for the viewer. As is typical of many films by Scott, *Covenant* is characterised by rich details, beautiful photography (especially the frames depicting the starship being shattered by storms), elaborate settings, vivid colours (the computer screens aboard the starship are set against the blue-filtered and almost chiaroscuro landscapes of the Engineer's planet), convincing characters, and realistic special effects. The latter, in particular, effectively convey the loathing and disgust provoked by blood (which here is even darker and more slippery than in the previous films), and by guts and saliva. The alien creatures are very much alive here, and their constant aggressiveness and malignity are astonishingly affective: their attacks on humans produce moments of genuine horror characterised by fast-paced action, and punctuated by rapid cuts.

However, the actual villain of the story is David, whose will to procreate has led to the creation of a hideous progeny, thus realising the worst fears of the protagonist in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. David had already demonstrated his personal agenda in *Prometheus*, where he disobeys direct orders and ruthlessly sacrifices his human companions to experiment on the properties of the black liquid created by the Engineers. However, his almost childish enchantment with both the human world and the alien life forms has been replaced in this instalment by cold cynicism, detached scheming, and deviousness. His

⁸ Christopher Llewellyn Reed, 'Film Review: The Android's the Thing, in *Alien: Covenant*, for Better and for Worse', *Film Festival Today*, 18 May 2017 <www.filmfestivaltoday.com/film-reviews/film-review-the-androids-the-thing-in-alien-covenant-for-better-and-for-worse> [accessed 10 April 2018].

⁹ Megan Basham, 'Design Flaws: Horrifically Violent *Alien: Covenant* Doesn't Deal with Weighty Concepts', *World Magazine*, 19 May 2017 <https://world.wng.org/2017/05/design_flaws> [accessed 10 April 2018]; and Thelma Adams, 'Lost in Space: *Alien: Covenant* Creeps and Crawls', *Observer*, 19 May 2017 <observer.com/2017/05/alien-covenant-movie-review-michael-fassbender-ridley-scott/> [accessed 11 April 2018].

¹⁰ Richard Brody, 'Alien: Covenant Bursts with Pomposity', *The New Yorker*, 24 May 2017 <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richardbrody/alien-covenant-bursts-with-pomposity>> [accessed 10 April 2018].

motivation, only alluded to in the first film, is revealed in *Covenant*, particularly in the flashback sequence at the beginning of the story in which David confronts his own maker Weyland (Guy Pearce) about the search for human origins and immortality. David's dialogue with Walter fully reveals the former android's semi-contained hatred for his creator, who has denied him the capacity to reproduce. This is expressed through his recitation of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1818 sonnet 'Ozymandias'. Percy Shelley's depiction of the decadence of great empires and emperors is perfectly rendered on the visual level by the poisonous realm that is now the Engineers' ruinous city, and is interspersed with flashbacks depicting the android's genocidal destruction of the alien race – motivated, it seems, by personal revenge.¹¹

In addition to these visual elements, one of the greatest merits of the film is the soundtrack, composed by Jed Kurzel, who has also worked on the music of Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), as well as his brother Justin Kurzel's films *Macbeth* (2015) and *Assassin's Creed* (2016). In *Covenant*, the soundtrack blends musical elements from both *Alien* and *Prometheus*, further underlying the narrative and visual links between the films. In its alternation of moments of ecstatic delight, delicate interventions from a piano, ominous crescendos of strident strings, and martial hammering beats, this film's music provides an excellent accompaniment to the images. The track 'Spores', for example, perfectly marries the octopus-like movements of the black powder entering one of the explorers' ears and infecting him. The extreme close up of the insides of the human ear depict the contagion as a much more insidious adversary even than the alien creatures of the saga. Rather than being a metaphor for the lethal spreading of cancer or AIDS, as critics such as Ellen Bishop and Amy Taubin suggest, the black liquid/powder created by the Engineers to destroy entire civilisations can therefore be interpreted as a metaphor for both the contemporary spread of epidemic diseases in general, and for the effects of chemical weapons of mass destruction.¹² In this sense, the film directly relates the fictional threat to human life to contemporary concerns.

Visually and aurally stunning, *Covenant* is a film that will certainly conquer its viewers' attention and appreciation, whether they are familiar with the previous instalments

¹¹ According to Brody, 'David, the older model of android, [...] [also embodies] a repugnant stereotype, the high-culturally effete and seductively evil gay man – he puts the tip of a wood flute into Walter's mouth ("You have symphonies in you, brother.") and kisses him on the lips'. Also, as Adams has noted, the relationship between the two androids is a reminder of the fratricidal bond between Data and Lore in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-94).

¹² Ellen Bishop, 'Alien Subject/Alien Thought: The Female Subject in the *Alien* Films', in *Critical Studies on the Feminist Subject*, ed. by Giovanna Covi (Trento, IT: Dipartimento di Scienze Filosofiche e Storiche, 1997), pp. 127-63 (p. 162); and Amy Taubin, 'The Alien Trilogy: From Feminism to Aids', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), pp. 93-100 (p. 96).

in the saga or they have just 'come out of their cryogenic tubes', as it were, and encountered this film first. In spite of its narrative link with its predecessor *Prometheus*, the 2017 film is enjoyable on its own, and will provide a memorable experience for all fans of science-fiction and horror films.

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