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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Arrival of the Fittest

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Abstract

Prometheus, the fifth film of the Alien franchise, maintains narrative connections to the original four films but the inclusion of new aliens—the Engineers—radically shifts the feminist politic of the series. There is a move away from centralising the monster and the repressed feminine, through images of horror and bodily abjection, toward a politic of carnival, seen in representations of multiple grotesque bodies and subversion of the affect of primal scenes. Carnival is a space where the authority and stability of current social powers and orders are challenged and subverted. This article contends that in *Prometheus* such a process occurs in the deliberate mixing of scientific knowledge and religious cosmologies, the ambivalent relationship of horror and SF genres to science and scientific knowledge, the gendered complexities of the specific bodies of astronauts and of scientists, and disruptions of the notion of gaze and viewer positioning in the opening scenes.

Keywords

***Prometheus*; carnival theory; grotesque; feminism; science fiction**

Introduction

The Alien films have always been culturally significant feminist texts and *Prometheus* (2012), the fifth film in the franchise, is no exception.¹ Through examining production decisions and the opening sequences of the film, and looking at the figures of scientist and astronaut, this article contends that *Prometheus* supports fresh directions for feminist critical engagement. The argument acknowledges the importance to the previous Alien films of readings of the archaic feminine, developed primarily by Barbara Creed using Kristeva's abject, but reads *Prometheus* as shifting away from the abject towards a carnival aesthetic and carnival politic. The advent of the Engineers, a very different kind of alien, requires a fresh examination of some of the unifying ideas of the series and a recalibration of the dominant ideas and expressions of this particular text and its connection to the viewer. In *Prometheus*, rather than the repressed feminine returning through the abjection of the violated body and the horrific confrontation with the abyss, grotesque bodies act to undermine and destabilise scientific reliability and the heteronormative, bourgeois social and economic order that supports science. While the first four films have a more singular focus on the archaic horror of the raised monster, *Prometheus* suggests rather that monsters are compound and complex creations, produced from compound and complex social and scientific discourses and materiality, and that they are received in a compound and complex way. Questions of who is the monster, whether the creator of the monstrous is also a monster, and if monstrosity is socially distributed predominate in the film. Thus the feminist weight of the Alien story is primarily found in the disruptive and confusing politic generated through critiques of social practices of science, and gendered implications of storytelling within science.

At its most accessible level, *Prometheus* is the narrative of a discovery, made by archaeologists around the year 2089, of a consistent representation of star patterns in prehistoric human depictions of the sky. The archaeologists suspect the depictions indicate contact with a technologically superior species early in human history, and interpret the star patterns as an invitation to a location where they will meet this species. An expedition is mounted. The expedition is financed by the Weyland corporation and consists of the captain and his crew; Meredith Vickers, representing the corporation; archaeologists Elizabeth Shaw and her partner Charlie Holloway; and a number of mercenaries and scientists—notably Fifield the geologist and Milburne the biologist. The cyborg in this story—a body common to all the Alien films—is 'David', a synthetic humanoid and a creation of the Weyland Corporation. Finally, unbeknown to most members of the expedition, the head of the Weyland Corporation has been cryogenically preserved in his last days and has been shipped aboard the *Prometheus* in the hope of discoveries that will extend his life.

Contact is, of course, fatal for most members of the expedition as the astronauts and crew of the *Prometheus* discover the ship of technologically superior humanoids, the Engineers, and let loose the bioforming material that has the potential to create the monstrous and familiar Alien. Key to understanding the action in the film is the conflict between the human hope for technological and medical progress (and financial gain) through the contact, and the Engineers' determination to return to earth to destroy the life they apparently created. Thus, there are encounters with various unstable and dangerous life forms and the final human survivor—archaeologist Elizabeth Shaw—exits in an escape pod carrying the android's still functioning head in her bag. Shaw's intention, at the close of the story, is to find other

¹ *Prometheus*, dir. Ridley Scott, 20th Century Fox, 2012.

Engineers and ask them why the ones they met on the *Prometheus* expedition were on their deadly mission to earth.

Carnival: monstrous science

Feminist critique, in this article, is performed by following the shifts of narrative focus in the *Alien* series from the monster to the creation of the 'monstrous', and in considering science and the figures of the scientist and astronaut as gendered and carnivalised. While the abject, feminised body of the original monster is still a recognisable presence in this latest film, the tenor of engagement with seminal elements of the *Alien* texts has changed. Horror has been diluted and the affect and subject positioning available for viewers is more textured. Primal sequences are not so terrifying but are more intriguing, some even containing dark humour, and monstrous bodies are differentiated and distributed throughout the filmic narrative, dispersing the traditional terrifying singularity that the alien has previously presented. Echoing current political situations, terror manifests in a variety of bodies and subverts power relationships by confusing traditionally accepted divisions of creator/created and terrorist/terrorised. Theoretical possibilities canvassed here move analysis away from the horrific and abject towards carnival, a space that is also dangerous but more through unruly and irregular bodies that represent difference and defy the power of the bourgeois to police and ensure conformity and order.

In carnival theory, grotesque and transgressive bodies act as sites that disrupt or resist monumental discourses of power and particularly challenge naturalised middle-class order and hierarchies. Traditionally, medieval carnival subverted institutions like the church, education and land ownership, but more recently carnival tests the values that reinforce heteronormative, self-replicating, closed, patriarchal, middle-class systems and knowledges.² Mikhail Bakhtin states that even science is included in the disturbing possibility of carnival consciousness, a consciousness that 'frees thought and imagination for new potentialities'.³ Originally, carnival theory was grounded in a Bakhtinian reading of Rabelais. He argued that carnival temporarily freed medieval folk from the controls of church to celebrate the agrarian cosmological cycles of life and death, but the historical growth of the gothic gave a darker cast to carnival transgression, introducing ironies and satire as well as parody and more dangerous renditions of the grotesque. Exploring what could produce irregular bodies led to more layered and complex understandings when gender was factored into carnival theory. Mary Russo uses Bakhtin's ideas to develop a feminist version of carnival theory and notes, as do theorists like Kristeva and Braidotti, that bourgeois aspiration is inevitably disrupted and challenged by the reproductive woman.⁴ Women's bodies spontaneously bleed, visibly change shape, become morphologically distorted with pregnancy and, finally, become the separated flesh of child and mother at birth. Russo argues, therefore, that the female body by default presents a carnivalised challenge to the monumental, male body. The masculinised body is closed, static and represents high culture and the authoritative state of control. This is a relationship that, cyborg theorists have noted, recreates biologically male bodies as feminised when they become ungovernable

2 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 2009.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

4 See Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Routledge, New York, 1995; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982; Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subject: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994.

through bleeding, secreting, wounds, changing shape or exhibiting vulnerability.⁵ In these compromised conditions male bodies, as well as female bodies, can be read as feminised and grotesque. Reproductive tales of bleeding, shape changing, doubling and splitting, therefore, have a significant place in the dark possibilities of carnival, specifically through the scientific appropriation of procreation—which creates the notable sub-genre of monstrous creation where science and horror mix.

The original *Frankenstein* novel is a parent text to horror, science fiction and narratives of monstrous creation. In a discontinuous and composite text, Mary Shelley tells the story of Victor Frankenstein as he authors life in a discontinuous and composite body.⁶ A motherless and abandoned creation constituted from patriarchal desire, the monster created by the scientist is a patched and seamed entity or body holding the paradox of life in death and death in life. The creature is simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. Shelley's novel, published in 1818, completely undoes traditions of bodily and textual unity and it is through this archetypal text that carnival theory and the genre theory of science fiction find themselves on the shared ground of patched, partial stories, experimentation and monstrous creation. Michael Holquist argues for *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* as the poster text for carnival literature while Brian Aldiss, a genre theorist, also nominates Shelley's narrative as the first science fictional text in the Western tradition.⁷ Originally seen as a modern version of the over-reacher myth, where the misdirected Prometheus takes the power of fire from the gods for men, Victor Frankenstein's creation of the monster is now also understood as a profoundly feminist story, a text that reveals the fantasy of making women redundant in scientific pro/creation narratives, an ultimate expression of technoscientific hubris.

This usurpation of reproductive power underpins the narrative of the film *Prometheus* with respect to all the grotesque bodies of violated humans, androids and monsters, and accounts for the repeated blurring of the boundaries between life and death. Multiple paternal mechanisms provide evidence of what Mary Russo refers to as 'all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery and degradation'.⁸ The political dangers of this hybridity is that the grotesque body brings anarchy and becomes:

*democratically open and inclusive of all possibilities. Boundaries between individuals and societies, between genders, between species, and between classes [are] blurred and brought into crisis in the inversions and hyperbole of carnivalesque representation.*⁹

This 'democratic opening' of the body can be read clearly in the multi-agented reproductive sequence that is Elizabeth Shaw's story. Her fertilisation with the alien squid creature comes originally via the Engineers, arguably through the Weyland Corporation via the android David, and then through her partner, Charlie Holloway. Shaw brutally removes the creature from her own body through a caesarean she procures for herself from a medical machine designed to service only human males. The history of the conception, the attempts to force her to carry the alien offspring and her attempts to end the gestation are redolent with

5 Cynthia J. Fuchs, "'Death is Irrelevant': Cyborgs, Reproduction and the Future of Male Hysteria', *Genders*, no. 18, Winter 1993.

6 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) Gutenberg.org, EBook, #84 <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/84/84-h/84-h.htm>

7 See Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*, Routledge, London, 1990 and Brian Aldiss, *Trillion Year Spree: the History of Science Fiction*, Paladin Grafton Books, London, 1988.

8 Russo, p. 62.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

feminist pro-choice politics. However, the distributed pathway of conception also creates a crisis of paternity. After she removes the foetus, Shaw abandons it in the medical bay where it grows to maturity and, in an Oedipal parody or irony, murders its original progenitor—or, if humans are looked on as a creation of the Engineers, its grandparent. This is, at the very least, a perversion of traditional stories of conception and birth, a carnivalised pathway of conception within a Frankenstein story.

Psychoanalytic theory draws a lot of energy from familiar, fixed mythological constructions such as the Frankenstein story, but it is important not to underestimate the evolutionary possibilities of mythic narratives and their changing cultural valences. The *Alien* films contain layered stories, genealogies, images and receptions, and therefore must generate a layered critique. As a sub-genre they regularly employ specific horror conventions, but it is also important to note that *Prometheus* shifts the latest *Alien* film closer to science fiction—and also closer to science—and has, to some extent, destabilised the sub-genre as part of its contribution to the series. The benefits of reading the film through carnival theory allow these aspects to be addressed. Carnival is a theory that can visit the high culture of science, but is also able to have congress with the low cultures of science fiction and horror. In the film *Prometheus*, this means that while there is still considerable danger, something that translates across from horror to carnival, the single affect of terrorisation is lost and a more nuanced reading of different bodies becomes the focus; not just the compromised bodies of the monster and the monstereed, but also the bodies of the scientist, the body of science, the body of work that is the five films of the *Alien* series and the textual ‘body’ of this particular film. Carnival allows for a transfer from the terrifying confrontation with the totality of the archaic feminine to exploration of multiple tensions existing in the text between high discourses of formal knowledge and popularly consumed genre texts.

Carnival: recognising production and producing recognition

The first step in reorientating viewers to the new film in the series was that Ridley Scott, the director of the first, most iconic *Alien* film, was engaged to direct *Prometheus*. In several online interviews Scott says he was the only one who could have completed this project. Reading between the lines, it appears that the return of the original director was seen as respecting a pact of faith with viewers. If the franchise was to survive a shift to a new central female character (Sigourney Weaver, who played the original central character, turns 64 this year) and the introduction of new, very different aliens, the film would have to be handled by someone who understood the larger goals of the project and the intimate connections of the films to each other, and to the viewers. Scott was the ideal parent to build the backstory of his original film; he was in the best position to deal with the paradox of the first and last films birthing each other and to risk taking the genre in a new direction. Genre is the key, for Scott, and in one interview he claims it is his intimate knowledge of the genre that allows him to return to the franchise and change so much yet still retain audience anticipation and involvement.¹⁰

In another interview, Scott becomes more specific. He says the connection of *Alien* and *Prometheus* is ‘down to the DNA’. This is an interesting narrative strategy for linking the films. The word ‘prequel’ is conspicuously avoided, because it would close the story down and ally it too strongly to the other films, but what might DNA suggest to an audience committed to the *Alien* movies? DNA evokes the recent history of Western science and opens the

¹⁰ Eric Spitznagel, ‘Ridley Scott’s Star Wars’, *Esquire*, 4 June 2012, <http://www.esquire.com/the-side/qa/spitznagel/ridley-scott-prometheus-interview-9423167>

ongoing Alien story up to a carnival of mutation and change. Molecular biology, the study of DNA, is massively complex and infiltrates almost every aspect of the way the Western world conducts business in the late twentieth century. It is impossible for the audience to be unaware of DNA. The gene is central to a carnival of hopeful stories in biology, medicine and agriculture, and causes massive cultural anxiety around genetic modification, biosurveillance and biocrime.¹¹ DNA is the plot driver for the Weyland Corporation's pursuit of the alien from the first film, and it has become an icon, a map, an actor and now a prime evolutionary connector in *Prometheus*. DNA is a non-innocent narrative device—shorthand for the uniting hubris of the individual films and the franchise, and for the franchise and the culture. The immortality humans seek to steal from the gods is the bioforming material, which enhances genetic opportunism; therefore, DNA moves easily between the scientific culture and popular scientific story telling like a twisting double helix.¹² What we witness in *Prometheus* is monstrous science—a human predation on the gene as much as a depredation of monsters on humans that links the filmic texts together, and a cornucopia of phenotypical possibilities as each encounter with the bioforming liquid presents us with occasions for a different transgressive and grotesque body.

Emphasising DNA as the linking mechanism has a genre function that impacts on the narrative weight of the film and skews its affect. It affirms the film as moving closer to science and science fiction and works to disengage it from horror. As Scott says, he sees *Prometheus* 'as opening another door. A much bigger door, away from monsters and demons.'¹³ In Shelley's original story of *Frankenstein* the scientist can be admired for his genius but cannot be exonerated for his failure to take responsibility for his scientific creation. That split reflects the quintessential (post)modern condition of being caught between an infatuation with science and a desire for its possibilities, and a dread of what it might produce. This split is most evident in the post-atomic anxieties of science fiction writing.¹⁴ Dreams of futures where all problems could be solved painlessly through technology were forever compromised when technology unleashed weapons of mass destruction. Scott negotiates this split in the Western attitude by moving away from the focus on the monster, seen in the previous films of the series, and towards addressing monstrous science and the scientist in *Prometheus*. The text itself then becomes a distorted and unruly carnival manifestation of a story structure that is supposed to conform to certain expectations. Joseph Campbell contends a familiar story acts like a womb, a place that is safe and predictable. He further claims that when we are ready to leave the safety of the original story, it will be rewritten to reflect changing cultural needs and expectations. Thus Ridley Scott offers an inevitable expansion and refocusing of the Frankenstein narrative in *Prometheus* when his camera partially (but significantly) turns away from the monster, the embodiment of boundary challenges, to the creator of the confusion.

11 See Lori Andrews and Dorothy Nelkin, *Body Bazaar: The Market for Human Tissue*, Crown Publishers, New York, 2001; Robert Mitchell and Phillip Thurtle (eds), *Data Made Flesh: Embodying Information*, Routledge, London, 2013; Finn Bowring, *Science, Seeds and Cyborgs: Biotechnology and the Appropriation of Life*, Verso, London, 2003.

12 Ben Child, 'Prometheus Sequel Script Ready to Go, says Ridley Scott', *The Guardian*, 2 November 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/nov/01/prometheus-sequel-script-finished-ridley-scott>

13 Chris Hewitt and Ridley Scott, 'It's Not Just About Blood ...', *Empire Magazine*, no. 275, 2012, pp. 74–7.

14 See original accounts of this science fiction theme in articles from Gerard Klein, Darko Suvin and Leila Lecorps in 'Discontent in American Science Fiction', *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, March 1977, pp. 3–13, through to recent overviews of (among other things) the theme of atomic anxiety in Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*, Routledge, New York, 2011.

Barbara Creed flags this shift towards centralising the creator of the monster in an important discussion of the fourth film of the franchise.¹⁵ In her original analysis of *Alien*, she argues the parthenogenetic, archaic mother rules in the Alien universe, and she reads the terrifying alien as confrontations with physical dissolution outside the symbolic order, with the monster standing in for the imaginary, devouring totality of the experience of death or non-being.¹⁶ However, she argues that in *Alien: Resurrection* Ripley and the alien have become a united organism which functions as an experimental resource for scientists who aim to create weapons for the military. Creed says, 'it becomes clear that the scientists signify the true source of monstrosity in the film' as they manipulate Ripley, use her body for reproducing the alien queen and then treat it as a failed by-product.¹⁷ Creed's shift of critical attention to the flawed figure of the scientist performs the first step of the transfer of horror from monster to creator, and allows the introduction of a broader expression of the grotesque, but it is necessary to note the human figures of the scientist in *Alien: Resurrection* do not challenge the centrality of the monster in eliciting terror or representing a horror. These scientists are sinister but all too recognisable, corrupt, easily damaged and often too preposterous to carry the emotional affect of the story. In this and previous films it is hard to look beyond the monster and refocus on its creator when that creator is impotent in comparison to the monster. In *Prometheus*, Scott responds to this challenge to change focus by presenting the viewer with a much more complex, powerful and ambiguous scientist.

It is true that the human scientists on the Weyland mission are just as flawed as those in *Alien: Resurrection*—anxious, avaricious and stupid by turns—and clearly not equipped to carry the hopeful historical project of advancing human technology and scientific and medical knowledge. Milburne, in a parody of his position as biologist, approaches a dangerous alien form of life as if it were a kitten, and Fifield makes it clear his job description is analysing rocks and nothing more. Neither scientist is remotely prepared for a first contact situation. They make rash decisions, act out of fear and arrogance and, inevitably—just like the scientists in *Alien: Resurrection*—die ignominiously and quickly at the hands of monsters, or embryonic monsters in their case. It is impossible that these characters could embody the expectations of hopeful twenty-first century science. So how does Scott deal with this problematically impotent figure of the scientist and create the scientist as an empowered figure—one who can embody the rarefied ideals and principles of scientific knowledge and expose the real, socialised and imperfect practices of science, but also have the same affectual weight as the monster?

Enter the Engineers. Following a series of four films where the central alien body has been the terrifying, dark, voracious, egg-laying, mutating alien, the central alien figure in *Prometheus* is now a whiter-than-white male, cleanly asexual and self-sacrificing, a body apparently religiously dedicated to science. The first Engineer the viewer sees in the opening sequence is sleek, strong, healthy and anatomically perfect with desirable, well-developed male musculature, unmarred by hair or clothing (apart from his modest loin cloth and a cloak and cowl previously discarded). He stands on the lip of a waterfall and consumes the bioforming liquid. His consequent physical dissolution is a transcendence revealing the very core of a faith-science dilemma in the text and prompts the deep paternity questions at the heart of the narrative: are humans the creation of a loving/vengeful/all too human-like deity or are we the creation of a disinterested, accidental and mechanical universe? Who is this superman on the cliff who offers his blood and his body as the fertilising element of the virgin world?

¹⁵ Barbara Creed, *Phallic Panic*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2005.

¹⁶ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993.

¹⁷ Creed, *Phallic Panic*, pp. 58–60.

Is he a hero scientist, a divine martyr laying down his life in sacrifice? In a highly *unscientific*, panspermian fable, is he the living world's progenitor? Is he a mythic Titan, disobedient servant of the Gods? Or is he a remythologised Victor Frankenstein, an irresponsible and abandoning parent to a monster he has created? And, finally, how ironic or monstrous is this figure, this god-usurper, this scientist/engineer? His body appears to be the monumental, closed, perfect, authorised body—so what acts as the Engineer's grotesque and subversive counterpoint in this carnivalised narrative?

Carnival: head space

According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body is open and always connected to the world, existing socially and physically in a perpetual state of 'becoming'. Mary Russo more particularly describes the female body as unfolding but explores it as the permanent default grotesque, viewed through its capacity to shape change and reproduce, and its inescapable 'secretions, lumps [and] bloating'.¹⁸ Both major theorists concentrate on the non-conforming body as subversive to dominant discourses of power: Bakhtin through the irregularity of the grotesque in the face of hegemonic social control, and Russo through the challenge the female body presents to monumental, closed, masculine form. Simply by existing as uncontained, grotesque bodies challenge traditionally patriarchal and heteronormative control; however, when they move into extraterrestrial 'space' they offer particular carnival affects of distortion and humour with respect to science and the science fictional imaginary. Typically of a science fiction film, *Prometheus* produces a multiplicity of bodies—male, female, alien, cybernetic, aged, incomplete, compromised, transmogrified. While all these bodies prove themselves unstable and subversive, this section specifically considers Elizabeth Shaw's astronomical body as a significantly carnivalised and grotesque subversion of the idealised body of the hypermasculine Engineer. While the Engineer's initial bodily breakdown demonstrates a grotesque form of vulnerability, that vulnerability is ambiguous in affect. It *can* be read as an undoing of the monumental, but it can still simultaneously be interpreted as noble, and performing a redemptive service to the purity of scientific values. This is different from the ambiguities expressed through Shaw's body: her body is layered with contradictory gender iterations, and is open, hybridised and even, by the end of the narrative, an object of vulgar humour.

The astronomical body has presented as an evolving enigma with respect to gender. No doubt influenced by the exclusively male military brotherhood of the astronauts of the initial American space program, early feminist critical perspective viewed space travellers as gender neutral and asexual. Later discussions explored the more gender ambivalent astronomical 'cyborg' with its technical augmentation and feminisation due to its vulnerability.¹⁹ The extra terrestrial, astronomical body then morphs into Stefan Brandt's theoretical 'multiplicity of genders'. Brandt argues the abstracted and paradoxical gender multiplicities in the astronaut's body include Braidotti's 'nomadic subject', a female subjectivity seen as 'provisional and transitory' in resisting power structures, and a blended masculinity of cowboy and pioneer

¹⁸ Russo, p. 14.

¹⁹ See, for initial discussions, particularly Vivian Sobchak, 'The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film', in *Alien Zone*, ed. Anette Kuhn, Verso, London, 1990, pp. 103–15. For later interpretations, see primarily Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, 'Cyborgs and Space', *Astronautics*, September 1960, pp. 26–7, pp. 74–5, but then foundational developments of cyborg theorising in major collections like Chris Hables Grey, *The Cyborg Handbook*, Routledge, New York, 1995 and specific feminist theorising in Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, Routledge, New York, 1995.

figurations supported by an aggressive nationalism that reinforces current power structures.²⁰ This changing model has gradually marked the body of the astronaut as gender labile and potentially grotesque at historically accreting levels.

Shaw's body, overlaid with these shifting critical frameworks because of her space travel, also displays gender complexity in every respect of the specifics of the *Prometheus* narrative. Her status as a scientist, for instance, places her within a privileged masculinised group that controls and produces knowledge, allying her with a patriarchal history and power structures. On the other hand, the work she does is investigative, fragmented and hypothetical—which codes her as feminine when comparing her with 'hard' scientists in her own party and the Engineers, who work with technology and the laboratory-based science of molecular biology. Her reproductive status is even more central to her gender complexity. Sterility initially codes her as masculine because she has a body that is incapable of carrying a child, but her odd and circuitous impregnation with alien progeny and her subsequent self-mutilating removal of it from her abdomen goes some way to restoring her feminine or maternal status and also recreating her body as irregular and out of control. Moving between these recognisable binary gendering codes produces instability, but by the close of the film Shaw's sexual confusion is considerably more blatant, recognisably carnival and infused with vulgar humour.

When Shaw runs for the escape pod as final survivor, she carries the android's head with her in a bag. 'Head' is vulgar slang for penis, thus her gender comes into question yet again through the hybrid unit created in this moment by the joining of Shaw and David. This unit can be read in a number of ways but all suggest gender compromise. It can be seen hermaphroditic, a body marked by evidencing two genders; transvestite, a woman who has transitioned to being a man; or as a doubled, transsexual unit which gains potency from the doubling. Kimberly Jackson reads David as the hero of the film but a hero cannot be one individual in a carnival text.²¹ The hybrid entity also needs to be understood as representing duplicitous bodies with multiple gender options secreted within internal cavities. If Elizabeth Shaw's renegade body can exercise choice on questions of reproduction, perhaps it can choose with respect to gender too. Brandt speaks further on choice, referring to the 'romance of the knife'—the ultimate control the individual can exercise in creating his or her own transsexual body.²² Thus Elizabeth Shaw's cutting of her own flesh as she removes the alien can be understood not just as claiming ownership of reproductive rights but also as a performance of self-castration. Does this act then make the adoption of David's head a cyborg augmentation to replace a missing part?

The gender complexity, bodily hybridity and physical transformation of Shaw are repeatedly reinforced in further grotesque intervals using other characters and processes throughout the film. While these intervals dominate, the terror and the archaic feminine associated with the previous *Alien* movies are necessarily held at bay and the affect is altered for the audience. The carnival mixings and changes move the audience toward a liberatory experience, one that affords the pleasures of subverting and challenging official culture, but carnival is not just theory—it is a chaotic state of play that can require active participation from those who witness spectacles of possibility.

²⁰ See Stefan Brandt, 'Astronautic Subjects: Postmodern Identity and the Embodiment of Space in American Science Fiction', *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies*, no. 16, 2006, p. 1, <http://www.genderforum.org/issues/gender-roomours-ii/astronautic-subjects/>

²¹ See Kimberly Jackson, *Technology, Monstrosity, and Reproduction in Twenty-First Century Horror*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, p. 138.

²² Brandt, p. 4.

Carnival: grotesque intimacies

In carnival, a central concept concerns crossing the footlights; that is, during the carnival or the performance, there is a blurring of boundaries between spectators and viewers. Bakhtin says that carnival exists along the border between art and life, mixing both and borrowing from both, and although carnival exists for a limited time, it acts as a liberating space where all people can experience relaxed boundaries and a certain freedom. Mary Russo, who writes carnival specifically as a space of interest to feminist theory, argues that carnival is not so much a place of freedom and liberation, but rather that it exposes repressive social values and can actively subvert official authority and logic:

*Seen as a productive category, affirmative and celebratory ... the discourse of carnival moves away from modes of critique from some Archimedean point of authority without, to models of transformation and counterproduction situated within the social system and symbolically at its margins.*²³

In *Prometheus*, the initial primal scene sequence follows a series of panning shots that introduce the viewer to the womb of life. We see sweeping vistas of what seems to be an empty planet—*Terra Nullius*. There are no trees in these enormous aerial images of water and rock, and barely a hint of grass. After spectacular footage of the environment, the camera focuses on the lone Engineer—a monumental male body—standing phallus-like on the lip of a raging waterfall. As has been stated already, the body is hypermasculine with developed musculature, and the skin is an eerie white, hairless and translucent with blue veins. Above the Engineer can be seen the vast elliptical body of a ship. The Engineer consumes something from a container he has brought with him, and his body rapidly breaks down. His veins become darker and more pronounced and his flesh breaks apart, releasing clouds of black particles into the air, almost like pestilence. As he disintegrates further, he loses the integrity of his limbs and he can no longer stand. Like a snapped doll, he collapses on the rocks and falls into the torrent of water and is borne away. As his body fully dissolves, the viewer sees his blood released into the river at the bottom of the falls. The final intimacy of his death comes as the viewer witnesses strands of the Engineer's DNA breaking up and drifting into the waterways. This is not the mysterious, parthenogenetic feminine, the void out of which life is mysteriously created. This scene is an insemination. It is a deliberate, almost pornographically self-conscious masculine fertilisation of a void for a knowing audience. The planet is awesome but barren, a *tabula rasa* awaiting the ejaculatory self-sacrifice of the Engineer. This initial montage is the primal scene but not as horror; rather it is demythologising conception—almost satirising the act as the Engineer creates the human world. The devouring darkness of the alien as womb identified in the earlier films is contrasted to the onanistic self-affirmation of this *petite mort*. The mystery is not taking place in convoluted corridors of flesh or in any private spaces that mimic bodily darkness and dampness.²⁴ It is taking place in full light and in an open, 'virgin' space. Then in a carnival moment of crossing the footlights, the audience is invited into the screen to activate an educated perception of this sequence as the camera follows the disintegrating body to images of DNA strands breaking apart and moving out into the pristine environment. The mystery and fear of the primal moment is neutralised by an egoistic 'god trick'. The scientific gaze, one that has been prompted by the saturation exposure of the modern audience to classic double helix representations of DNA in textbooks, advertisements, documentaries and so forth is deliberately activated.

²³ Russo, p. 54.

²⁴ Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, pp. 16–30.

Of course, fear is not dispelled and the monsters are not gone just because the film begins with daylight and openness. The viewer has been seduced into a knowledge affect, but knows as they follow the camera immediately into the next scene that there is still a promise of monsters. We are given a future date on the screen, and the audience then watches from below and within the dark interior of a cave as Elizabeth Shaw chips open a tiny entrance. The opening of this cave/womb/tomb on earth is the second primal scene, but it offers a radical change of position for the viewer and this is a second moment in which the audience becomes part of the film and steps across the footlights. In the first scenes the audience has been accorded an omniscient position, flying over untouched wilderness before settling to watch the Engineer on the edge of the waterfall. After the lone figure disintegrates, the camera lens then simulates the visual field of an electron microscope watching his DNA disintegrate and disperse into the rushing waters. This shift of scale from aerial panorama of an empty land, to the Engineer's body, and then to the subcellular units of his body, compels complicity of the viewer with the 'scientific' gaze, but also conflates it with a 'god' gaze that can see the world at every level.²⁵ This forms a decided contrast with the cave scene where the viewer experiences darkness and then hears excited voices and tapping. When Elizabeth Shaw's tool breaks through the crust of rock that seals the cave from the outside world, as if breaking a hymen, the viewer is looking out from the cave and is confronted with the scientist's eye peering into the camera through the opening she has made.

Within a few frames, the viewer has switched from omniscience, able to see environmental panoramas and the smallest building units of life, to being a prisoner of the earth, one that is about to be released and see the light of day for the first time in a long geological period. While the 'god-trick' of the views in the first scenes offers a sense of unlimited access to an open and desirable world, and knowledge of the world at every scale and level, the darkness of the cave suggests secrets, incubation and the potential for monstrous birth. These two scenes build an exquisite moment of confusion where the altered viewpoints bring what has been seen via the camera into question, and prompts the viewer into questioning how they are positioned. Is the transcendent figure of the Engineer from the waterfall a god or a potential monster? Since the viewer has been implicated in both viewpoints, are they themselves a potential god-like creature *and/or* a potential monster as well? Are the two scenes a parody of conception as understood by humans, or a genuine recontextualisation of conception in a planet-sized frame? Are these two scenes a parody of the creation of life because that is the only way the human mind can imagine procreation? There are no ready or simple answers, only more confusion—a hallmark of carnival.²⁶ Although Bakhtin's theory appears to outline an apparent chasm between monumental authority and the subversive grotesque of carnival, the real import of the theory lies in the moments where official culture and subversive culture can no longer be clearly differentiated. The loss of the footlights and the direct involvement of the audience—their inability to sustain a disconnection from performance—is a significant manifestation of the carnival collapse of boundaries.

Gendering is central to the cinematic gaze, and this switch of viewpoints disrupts the traditional masculine cinematic gaze in a specifically confusing way. As the entry to the cave is worked into a small orifice of light, it is Elizabeth Shaw's female eye that scrutinises the

25 Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Free Association Books, London, 1991, pp. 184–201. This essay discusses the notion of objectivity, its relationship to science and contends it is 'god trick' to assume objectivity when all human activity, including science, is socially and culturally produced.

26 Bakhtin, pp. 7–8.

watching viewer through the opening. This is a carnivalisation of the extensively documented filmic tradition where the viewer assumes the default masculine gaze and scrutinises the image of the woman up on the screen. Here, however, the woman's eye is the only thing visible and it is scrutinising the audience. Certainly this cinematic introduction to the female lead in *Prometheus* is very different from the introduction to Ripley in *Alien* where early in the narrative the camera carefully studies her underwear-clad body. In this 'breakthrough' scene, the woman scientist studies the viewer seated on the chair watching the film and her eye is the only part of her anatomy visible.

The eye of a woman scientist focusing on the audience might appear to suggest a genuine alteration in social power structures, but that is too much import to lend to one filmic moment. Rather than suggesting equality or occupational power because the scientist is a woman, this scene validates the idea of carnival subversion and suggests rather that power is being ironised, and cinematic conventions are deliberately being manipulated to undermine and confuse audience expectations. With questions of gender equality in science still far from resolved in the material world that produced the film, it is more coherent to read the scene as a carnival moment in cinema and genre produced by a subversive feminist politic. The female scientist's eye is a complex metonymic image, standing in for a number of positions: the scientist voyeur viewing the primal moment—that particular Freudian fantasy moment of psychoanalysis associated with castration anxieties and trauma; a female scientist, paradoxically invested with scientific credentials, intervening or participating in the genre-driven convention of a masculine attempt to appropriate female reproduction; a female scientist enacting the process of destabilising secret, gendered knowledge and inviting the audience to destabilise that secret knowledge with her.

Carnival: secret science

These two linked primal scenes, replete with self-conscious, parodic imagery, introduce the viewer to major new players within the *Alien* universe, unsettle audience self-positioning and situate science, a patriarchal discourse of power and knowledge, at the centre of the text. The opening sequences are also a complicated riff on both scientific and religious investments in origins and gender. A secret seems to have been shared in the short introductory narrative of the film. It is the secret of the scientific creation of life on earth by alien science, but it is simultaneously infused with Christian notions of sacrifice. In two short sequences the film has moved from a masculinised but perfect alien form to its constituent DNA, then on to the opening and exposure of a dark, locked place to a woman's eye. The viewer is likely to be disconcerted by the camera work of the first two sequences, and the strong contrasts between a sense of ownership of the world and space implied by the Engineers and the cave experience where they are being scrutinised by Elizabeth Shaw.

However, it is also likely they will be cognitively disconcerted by the ideas being presented as well. Evolutionary science versus creationism is a central cultural tension for American audiences and it affects debate on religion and science worldwide.²⁷ With all the disrespect of carnival, cosmologies appear to be very quickly at stake in the opening sequence. What the audience witnesses in the initial scene of *Prometheus* is clearly a story about human origins,

27 See Eugenie C. Scott, *Evolution vs Creationism: An Introduction*, University of California Press, London, 2005 for an overall general discussion, but for specific cultural prevalence see Taede Smedes, 'The Cultures of Creationism: Anti-Evolutionism in English Speaking Countries', *Arts Disputande*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 32–4, 2014; Ronald L. Numbers, 'Creationists and their Critics in Australia: An Autonomous Culture or "The USA with Kangaroos"?' , *Historical Records of Australian Science*, vol. 14, no. 1, 24 June 2002, pp. 1–12.

but the question is, how will its ambiguities be read? Did they witness a scientific act or a religious performance? And, considering the central carnival notion of the compromised boundary between audience and performers, how should viewers negotiate their contribution to, or participation in, this narrative? How will they position themselves? Following the opening sequence, the audience is surprised into being responsible for holding privileged knowledge. But what precisely is that secret knowledge and what does it signify for them in relation to the unfolding narrative? What are the connections in this film between secrets, science and religion?

Secret knowledge and the desire for secret knowledge form the basis of modern science and are an integral part of the concealed monstrousness of science. While Mary Shelley's novel depends upon the covert work of grave digging and secret acts performed in a private laboratory, Enlightenment and modern science are not exactly an open book either. Evelyn Fox Keller and other feminist science theorists like Carolyn Merchant, Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway and Karen Barad historically critique science as a patriarchal discourse, the product of a long history of feminising nature, treating nature as an automaton, denying female agency and seeking to appropriate the secret knowledge at the heart of nature to enhance male discourses of power.²⁸ Keller speaks particularly about the significance of secrets in science.²⁹ Her feminist, psychoanalytic reading of the history of science situates the feminised body of nature and the mystery of reproduction at the heart of the conflict between religion and science. She argues that prior to the seventeenth century, knowledge was associated with divine design, and the secrets of nature were associated with the 'hidden affairs or workings of God' and intended only for initiates, so there is a strong foundational connection between religious and scientific ways of seeing the world.³⁰ In Keller's feminist reading, and for others who write about the active dismantling of nature in the history of science, a wedge is driven between nature and God. As Keller puts it, a man's:

proximity to God [is] measured by his distance from nature and his proven ability to investigate nature's mechanisms. A significant revision of knowledge and power, 'cement[ed] the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God'.³¹

Further, she argues in the essay 'From Secrets of Life to Secrets of Death' that contemporary patriarchal science has two goals: it seeks to undo the secret to the creation of life through molecular biology and it seeks to control death through the development of weapons of mass destruction.³² This is the 'monumental' knowledge of science that Bakhtin and Russo refer to when speaking of science as official culture. It is the creation of knowledge that forges rational explanations to keep the disorder of nature, the violated male body, the unruly female body and even death at bay. The Engineers of *Prometheus* offer a filmic parable of Keller's insights. With no

28 See general readers such as *Women, Science and Technology: A Reader in Feminist Science Studies*, ed. Mary Wyer et al., Routledge, New York, 2014; *The Gender and Science Reader*, ed. Muriel Lederman and Ingrid Bartsch, Routledge, London, 2001, to view writers in the field, then the following texts, which are specifically key to developing the paradigm: Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1986; Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1991; Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, Routledge, New York, 1989; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2007.

29 Evelyn Fox Keller, *Secrets of Life Secrets of Death: Essays on Language, Gender and Science*, Routledge, New York, 1992.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–56.

females of their species visible, they constitute a ‘brotherhood’—visually a priestly group—exercising a divine right to seed a barren planet with their bioforming liquid. It also becomes apparent when the humans meet them that the Engineers are intending to use the bioforming liquid to bring massive death and suffering to the same planet—the planet Earth and the life forms inhabiting it. The Engineers are vested with the power of scientific knowledge; they are the keepers of the secrets of life and death. Elizabeth Shaw is both a feminist and a carnival figure as she enacts the reversal of wanting to know about the secrets of the Engineers.

In the same way that Creed argues the archaic mother is the unrepresented presence, the ‘backdrop’ for the enactment of events in *Alien*, the patriarchal discourse of scientific control is the unrepresented presence and the backdrop of *Prometheus*. Knowledge, secrets and power never crystallise into one space, one artefact or one body. They are mobile understandings that can be pursued, mapped and understood as both the monumental, classical discourse of science and the carnival moments that invert and subvert that science. Returning to the scene in the cave, for example, the shifting nature of knowledge, secrecy and power becomes evident. Elizabeth Shaw, the archaeologist who is opening the cave, holds a contemporary, certificated, legitimate form of scientific knowledge as a woman trained in archaeology, but the one looking back at her from the cave (the viewer) also has a privileged but non-certificated secret knowledge that the archaeologist is not fully aware of, a secret about ancient science and the origins of life. The Engineers seem to hold an ultimate form of power in their knowledge of life creation, but the archaeologist also participates in the power of science and scientific discovery, and the viewer also holds particular knowledge in the story. Donna Haraway would describe this situation as the convergence of multiple and partial knowledges. The gaps between such stories are usually seen by feminist science theorists as productive spaces for new understandings, but here they seem to function more as an invitation to the viewer to experience scientific knowledge as uncertain and work to counter the perception of it as absolute. This collision (or carnival marriage) of religion and science, and alien and human beings and science, is not an invitation to calmly and collectively consider diversity and difference—it is a space of conflict, danger, struggle and indeterminate outcomes on significant questions around faith. It is a carnival of cosmologies.

Part of the carnival politic of this film is that the idealised, classic, monumental version of science—represented by the bodies and technology of the Engineers—is consistently undone by the religious tone of their actions and by the flawed social and cultural practices of both humans and Engineers with respect to science. As has been mentioned, the biologist and geologist on the expedition exercise consistently poor judgement and are preoccupied with limited, personal concerns. Their characters evince little connection to the greater enlightenment science project as goal or ideal, or even to the larger aims of the *Prometheus* project. Their technology outstrips their knowledge, capacities and judgement, but while one might expect more from the Engineers, the master species implicated in the origin of life on earth, a critical reading of the text suggests something different. The original research party of Engineers on the moon lost control of the bioforming matter and was being hunted by the creature they had created. The final Engineer—even when given the opportunity, to speak to David, who has learned his language—responds violently, pulling David’s head off and seeks to kill the humans with his bare hands, before suffering an ignominious death from yet another of the creatures that has escaped his control. One subtext of the film, then, is that while there is an evident disparity between the Engineers and human scientists and the two different technologies, the Engineers only *appear* to be more sophisticated, advanced and in control. While they present as monumental bodies in control of monumental knowledge, they are, in fact, flawed practitioners of their great art too. In investigating the apparent gap between

official and unofficial culture it can be seen they have poor judgement and make mistakes handling their technology and progress. They are masters of monstrous creation not the masters of the universe, rather ambivalent lords of nature, and confused in the sources of their beliefs and relationship to science in a similar way to humans.

Conclusion

This article examines the latest film in the *Alien* series for evidence of a feminist carnival politic. It traces connections between carnival theory, science fiction and science, and shows how to productively read *Prometheus* for genre change and for subversive narrative pathways between the authoritative power of monumental bodies and the transgressive power of grotesque bodies. Using carnival theory to understand the film also reveals a distributed and complex pathway for monstrous creation and the existence of monstrosity within science. Prior to *Prometheus*, the four films in the *Alien* series were predominantly critiqued as a horror sub-genre, with a significant focus on the abject and the powers of dissolution vested in the monster. As the series moves into fresh territory with this film, which includes radically new aliens, some of these connections need revision to assess which traditional genre markers hold and what markers suggest new models. Here, it has been useful to consider production commentary, where Ridley Scott offers signposts to follow.

Through the centrality of DNA as a narrative device, it can be seen that the genre boundary between horror and science fiction is deliberately being destabilised within this latest film. While the audience still enjoys some of the traditional affects and pleasures of horror, this film also encourages the audience to activate and question their own, educated, 'scientific gaze' when viewing the film and implicates them in the creation of the monster. The viewer 'crosses the footlights' and is given 'secret' knowledge regarding the origin of life while watching the film; however, that knowledge does not protect them from fear—particularly as they are still exposed to grotesque and unstable bodies—and there is an uneasy feeling of complicity that has been created for viewers by the initial scenes.

The film is loaded with large and important questions about the social production and values of science, the ambiguous figure of the scientist and the complex (his)stories of monumental and grotesque bodies produced by, and associated with, science. And all these questions have feminist dimensions. Using Keller's critique shows that *Prometheus* both echoes and disturbs the story of traditional masculinised science seeking power over life and death, and the film reproduces, in carnival numbers and possibilities, Mary Shelley's creative story of the masculine scientific appropriation of female reproductive power. However, the mutational load in the DNA of the story, the viewer 'crossing the footlights', and Elizabeth Shaw's determination to hold the Engineers accountable all suggest not only markers of carnival but the possibilities of radical changes in the understanding of science. Carnival is not only a short celebratory period of instability, it is often a harbinger of significant social change.

About the author

Tess Williams is the published author of two science fiction novels, *Map of Power* (1996) and *Sea as Mirror* (2000), numerous short stories, and co-edited an awarded international collection of feminist science fiction writings, *Women of Other Worlds* (1999). She is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the School of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia.

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