

## Prometheus in Space

The story of Prometheus has been central to the development of science fiction since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818/1831), an urtext of the genre. Ridley Scott's 2012 film, "Prometheus," illustrates the development of the titan's rich story over the past two centuries of science fiction and the challenges that have arisen in retelling it. This paper argues that treatments of the Prometheus myth—especially in science fiction—in the later 19<sup>th</sup>, the 20<sup>th</sup>, and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have been unable to escape the influence of *Frankenstein*, yet have consistently endeavored to develop other elements of the classical myth, with mixed responses from audiences. The paper contributes to understanding the reception of classical myth in contemporary society by tracing the Prometheus story's frequent adaptation to the increasing role—and threat—of technology in modern society by continual incorporation of additional elements from the classical myth.

A short survey of the Prometheus story from G. A. Sala's "The Patent Woman" (1876) to J. Kessel's Nebula award-winning "Pride and Prometheus" (2008) illustrates the deep influence of Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the creative efforts to transcend that work or adapt it to modern applications of technology. Such efforts usually appeal to other elements of the very rich, classical Prometheus myth that may be less well-known to the public. Scott's "Prometheus" is the most recent example of this process and the paper will focus on an analysis of the film.

As of this writing (September 20), Scott's "Prometheus" has grossed over \$390 million at the box office, or three times its \$130 million budget ("Prometheus," Box Office Mojo). And the DVD has not yet been released. It was, as critic E. Levy suggests, "arguably the most anticipated movie of the summer (perhaps of the whole year)" (Levy). Despite its financial success, the film was less of a critical success. Weak acting was most cited, but also the screenplay, which was

considered “not only uneven, but promises more original ideas and thematic provocations than it can possibly deliver” (Levy). Scott had envisioned “Prometheus” as a project of “epic mythmaking” and artistic director Arthur Max was “always thinking classical” to incorporate elements of the Prometheus myth and visual elements linking the Engineers to classical Greece (Salisbury). Critics generally agree that there were too many disjointed ideas introduced. I argue that many of these elements derive from the Prometheus myth, added to capture the complexity and depth of the story, and from connections between classical myth and Christianity. In the end, audiences may have been overwhelmed by the plethora and complexity of references and suggestions that provided visual context and completeness for the story, but which failed to lend more complexity in the plot. Moreover, “Prometheus” not only, inevitably, retells the story of *Frankenstein*, but it incorporates a *Frankenstein* story within a *Frankenstein* story (and it may play out at a third level). The dissatisfaction of the Engineers with humans, their creation, extends to humans’ dissatisfaction with their creations, like the android David (and, perhaps, their natural children, like Meredith Vickers).

Thus, “Prometheus” represents the culmination (at least currently) of the development of science fiction Prometheus stories since Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. It demonstrates the continued vitality of classical myth in contemporary culture and the artists’ continual struggle to renew and adapt myth meaningfully for a modern audience.

#### Works Cited

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