

**Beyond the Mountains of Madness: Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror and Posthuman
Creationism in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012)**

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Lovecraftian cosmic horror is, at its core, a nihilistic view of the universe that, if accepted, threatens to unravel human epistemology as currently understood. It posits that scientific advances do not offer the prospect of a progressive future but risk revealing our insignificance and powerlessness on a cosmic scale, a philosophy outlined in the opening paragraph to H. P. Lovecraft's iconic short story "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928):

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (139)

As China Miéville notes, "Lovecraft's horror is not one of intrusion but of realization. The world has always been implacably bleak; the horror lies in our acknowledging that fact" (xiii). In such a world, belief in the intrinsic value of human life is a delusion that we cling to in order to remain sane. Thus, cosmic horror fundamentally challenges our anthropocentric understanding of the universe.

It is this unveiling of human insignificance that Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* stages, as a corporate-sponsored team of scientists follow star maps found in paintings from disparate

ancient human civilizations in the hope of meeting the mysterious Engineers that created humankind. The plot bears numerous conceptual and narrative similarities to Lovecraft's novel, *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), in which a scientific expedition to Antarctica discovers that life on Earth was created by extraterrestrial colonizers known as the Old Ones, thereby destabilizing Darwinian theories of evolution through natural selection by blurring them with a secret history of alien intelligent design.¹ If, as Elizabeth Leane argues, Lovecraft's Antarctica is "the place of ultimate enigma, introducing to the continent beings that, in their amorphousness and mutability, mimic its abject qualities" (65), Scott's narrative moves beyond the Mountains of Madness in every sense: the setting for *Prometheus* is even more remote from civilization, inhospitable, and abject, as are the beings the crew finds there. While the Engineers, in contrast to the weird physiologies of the Old Ones, are remarkably similar to humans in form, it is clear that we are not simply unwanted, accidental creations to them, but materially connected to an inscrutable alien plan. Whereas Dustin Geeraert argues that, "Lovecraft *begins* with a cosmos that science has shown not to be anthropocentric (and one which he interprets as nihilistic), and *then* presents as true many features of religion that rely on explicitly non-materialistic premises" (15-6), *Prometheus* suggests that humans are indeed significant to the beings that created us, but only as a stage in a merciless experiment. Thus, we neither understand the processes by which we evolved nor are we the creations of the paternalistic God of Christianity. I will explore the ways in which the film challenges both faith in God and science through what I conceptualize as nihilistic posthuman creationism. The prospect of the scientists meeting their makers holds out the hope of unlocking the secrets of life, but instead results in a visceral reminder of the fragile mortality of the human condition.

Joseph Bulbulia notes that there are evolutionary benefits to religious belief, including group cohesion and longevity, explaining why "for innumerable many people, powerful and

dramatic religious understandings and dramas are thickly draped over an impoverished secular reality” (680). This is evident from the way in which the scientists ostensibly leading the expedition, Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace) and Charlie Holloway (Logan Marshall-Green), interpret the star maps as invitations from the Engineers to visit them once humans became capable of space flight. They are elevated to the status of benevolent creator beings without evidence to support such an interpretation of the cave paintings. In this, the scientists’ beliefs parallel theories concerning the possibility of ancient astronauts as popularized by Erich von Däniken, who uses a thought-experiment in *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968) to extrapolate how humans could fulfill the role he claims extraterrestrials played in our evolution and in shaping our ancient civilizations²:

Our astronauts would try to teach the natives the simplest forms of civilization and some moral concepts, in order to make the development of a social order possible. A few specially selected women would be fertilized by the astronauts. Thus a new race would arise that skipped a stage in natural evolution.

We know from our own development how long it would take before this new race became space experts. Consequently, before the astronauts began their return flight to earth, they would leave behind clear and visible signs which only a highly technical, mathematically based society would be able to understand much much later. (24-5)

When a biologist aboard the Weyland Corporation vessel *Prometheus* challenges Shaw about why she is willing to discard centuries of Darwinian theory, she replies confidently, “it’s what I choose to believe.” While Shaw’s willingness to select which theories to endorse on the grounds of spiritual conviction is problematic, an accommodation of faith and scientific

principles can be found in the writings of John Polkinghorne and Nicholas Beale, who argue that, “[e]volution and astrophysics give an insight into the scientific details of *how* God [created humans], which are not what the Bible is about. The Bible gives insights into the much more important ethical and spiritual realities” (55) of creation. While Polkinghorne and Beale acknowledge that understanding divine motivations exceeds the capacity of the human mind, Shaw’s conflation of Christianity and ancient-astronaut theory encourages her to seek an explanation from her creators. This notion of planning and guidance across vast stretches of time is one that *Prometheus* develops only to confound. The remaining Engineer awaiting the expedition refuses to enlighten his race’s creations and resumes a deadly mission to Earth. The suggestion here is that human technological development to the point where space travel is possible will trigger another era of forced evolution.

A more unsettling example of the blurring of faith and science can be found in the weird mixture of sacred ceremony and aggressive biotechnology shown in the opening sequence. In a primordial lithic landscape, an alien craft leaves atop a raging waterfall a lone, robed Engineer who undresses to reveal his muscular, pallid humanoid form. Visually, the scene seems to represent some form of purification rite. When the Engineer drinks a strange black liquid from a ceremonial bowl his body is wracked with pain, as dark threads appear under his skin and his flesh begins to writhe. The camera passes inside his body to provide an extreme close-up of the helix strands of his DNA as they blacken and break apart, before abruptly pulling back in order to show the Engineer’s body disintegrating, causing him to tumble into the waterfall, dispersing in the churning waters below. From his remains, different DNA strands are created, developing into the cellular basis of new life forms. The Engineer appears to have sacrificed his own life in order to seed a planet, indicating members of this race are willing to destroy themselves in the service of a greater cause. Thus, while *Prometheus* embraces von Däniken’s notion that alien intervention shaped human cultures (as

shown in the cave paintings of giants communicating with people across a range of ancient civilizations on Earth Shaw and Holloway discovered), it goes much further. Not only does it suggest that human evolution was managed by an alien race, but also implies that we evolved from basic organisms created from their biological material in a pre-planned manner. Such arcane science ostensibly combines Darwinian theory and Christian fundamentalist belief in intelligent design while at the same time abandoning both.

Von Däniken's text itself has distinct Lovecraftian elements, including the unveiling of our relative insignificance in the cosmos and reading the Biblical Flood as a method of forced selection through direct intervention: "Seen in this light the Flood becomes a preconceived project by unknown beings with the intention of exterminating the human race except for a few noble exceptions" (60). Indeed, in *The Cult of Alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture* (2005), Jason Colavito goes so far as to argue that Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" laid the foundations of von Däniken's theories, claiming that:

The story was a milestone, both for ancient astronauts and for Lovecraft himself. Finally, Lovecraft had brought together the disparate threads of science fiction, horror, and alternative archaeology into one transcendent idea: Ancient societies mistook visitors from the stars for gods Anomalous pieces of ancient art and architecture were really the work of these visitors. (76)

While Colavito's claims are highly speculative, they offer a way of reading *Prometheus* as heightening and intensifying the Lovecraftian aspects of ancient astronaut myths, bringing the web of influences full circle. The Engineers' horrific designs to use living humans as the material necessary for genetic experiments are slowly and partially revealed to both the

expedition and audience, generating a dawning realization of how badly mistaken Shaw and Holloway were in their interpretation of the cave paintings as benign. Thus, the opening scene offers a visual representation of the recurrent theme of creation through destruction that pervades the film.

On reaching the distant moon indicated in the star maps, the crew is informed by a hologram of the supposedly deceased Peter Weyland (Guy Pearce) that “The Titan Prometheus 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.” As a Titan, Prometheus was entrusted by Zeus with the task of molding humans from clay, but then stole fire from Olympus to give to his creations. If the Engineers are Titans, this would imply that there exists some, as yet unknown, greater creative force from whom the fire of creation has either been bestowed or stolen, perhaps alien beings as powerful as the Outer Gods of the Cthulhu Mythos, such as Azathoth, Nyarlathotep, and Yog-Sothoth. Weyland’s statement is highly ambiguous, as it is unclear whom he is casting in the role of the Titan. The billionaire’s creation of synthetic life in the form of the android David (Michael Fassbender) recalls the achievement of Mary Shelley’s modern Prometheus, Victor Frankenstein, who infuses dead matter with life in *Frankenstein* (1818), thus stealing the divine spark. Like Frankenstein, Weyland recognizes a paternal connection to his creation; but, instead of rejecting him in disgust, he acknowledges the limitations of his technology on the grounds that David lacks a soul. This conflation of biotechnological advances and religious mythology is mirrored in the complex belief system of Shaw, whose faith in a benevolent Christian God is not shaken by the existence of a species of alien Engineers. Both Weyland and Shaw are motivated by hopes that they will find answers to fundamental questions about human existence. However, *Prometheus* embodies what Michel Houellebecq identifies as Lovecraft’s “conviction of the absolute futility of human aspiration,” a worldview which

embraces the inevitability that “the human race will disappear. Other races in turn will appear and disappear. The skies will be glacial and empty, traversed by the feeble light of half-dead stars. These too will disappear. Everything will disappear” (32). As the crew discover, even the Engineers are not immune to this process of entropy.

The crushing of Weyland and Shaw's hopes is a crucial feature of what I am calling the film's nihilistic posthuman creationism. Posthumanism can be interpreted as ending the Enlightenment concept of man and the related ideology of humanism, which Lewis Vaughn and Austin Dacey characterize as follows:

Philosophical humanism is a set of interrelated propositions that assert (1) the importance of humankind and human experience over things supernatural or otherworldly, (2) the value, dignity, and rights of individual persons, (3) the power of humans to understand themselves and the world through science, reason, and free inquiry, (4) the capacity of humans to make free choices and direct their own lives, and (5) the responsibility of humans to conduct their lives according to rational moral standards and to promote the welfare of themselves and all people. (8)

Michel Foucault argues that humanity, instead of embodying universal qualities, predates this concept of “man” and will leave it behind: “it was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge. As the archeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end” (29). Often, posthumanism is presented as a progressive mode of thought, in which we expand our understanding of who and what is deserving of our recognition and fellowship. In *When Species Meet* (2008), for example, Donna Haraway advocates that we recognize the similarities we share with animals, while in *Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within* (2004), Neil Badmington suggests

we willingly embrace the alien due to the blurring of the lines between the human and non-human through advances in medical technology. For N. Katherine Hayles, “[i]n the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (3). Such ambiguity in the distinction between human and machine may help explain Weyland’s belief that he and David can share the goal of his immortality, but the slippage between creator and created also opens spaces in which the android can desire freedom from his maker, remarking to Shaw “doesn’t everyone want their parents dead?”

Prometheus explores a nihilistic version of posthumanism; by merging it with Lovecraftian cosmic horror, the film unveils a universe in which the values of humans and humanism are attacked on a number of fronts. Individuals are meaningless to the Engineers encountered in the film; instead, they are treated as either experimental subjects or obstacles to be swept aside. Their biotechnology exposes the limitations of human science as the transmuting black ooze found in their facility is so alien and incomprehensible as to invoke Arthur C. Clarke’s Third Law: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic” (2). Furthermore, the Engineers want to deny the human race the freedom to choose its fate and direct its existence by bringing the black ooze to Earth. Another source of human exceptionalism, the belief that man was made in the image of the omnipotent, eternal Christian God, is challenged by the mortality of the Engineers, which shows that they are fallible and vulnerable too. It is notable that the “terrifying vistas of reality” revealed in *Prometheus* refuse either human expectations of an anthropocentric divine plan or offer humankind the freedom of rational beings that have evolved by adapting to their environment. Instead, humans are the product of nihilistic posthuman creationism, a scientific experiment that has either not gone according to plan, or is merely one stage in an

ongoing process, as suggested by David's ominous remark on the Engineers' opaque aims: "sometimes to create, one must first destroy."

When the Prometheus expedition enters the Engineers' facility, they find it filled with the dead, apparently abandoned. There are numerous parallels to Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, in which the unnamed narrator learns that the Old Ones were destroyed by shoggoths, a highly adaptable, powerful slave race they created through arcane science. It is suggested that the shoggoths' mutability allowed them to overthrow their masters as part of an unintended process of evolution:

Formless protoplasm able to mock and reflect all forms and organs and processes—viscous agglutinations of bubbling cells—rubbery fifteen-foot spheroids infinitely plastic and ductile—slaves of suggestion, builders of cities—more and more sullen, more and more intelligent, more and more amphibious, more and more imitative. (329-30)

Similarly, it is revealed that the Engineers were wiped out by some form of outbreak at their facility. An alarming hologram set in motion by David's experimentation with a control panel depicts a group of Engineers ostensibly fleeing from an unseen menace. Interestingly, they seem to be running towards what is later suggested as the source of their downfall, perhaps once again signaling their willingness to die for the furtherance of some greater scheme. Scott uses striking, evocative set design to generate a sense of the incomprehensibility of the Engineers' alien genetic engineering, signified most clearly by the contents of the chamber to which they were running. It is dominated by an enormous stone head that appears to be human, but could equally be a representation of an Engineer. The rest of the space is filled with plain metal vases, which begin to perspire due to the atmospheric changes triggered by

the presence of the team. It is unclear as to whether the room is a cargo hold, a temple, or a tomb. One unexplained image that is shown clearly depicts a figure with a head resembling the xenomorph of *Alien* (1979) in a cruciform pose, prompting the audience to ask: is there a connection between Christianity and the Engineers? Does the being depicted in this carving symbolize a warning, a prophecy, or a hope of redemption? In the tradition of H. R. Giger's set and creature designs for *Alien*, this image provokes questions rather than offer answers.

A further source of cosmic horror is generated when Shaw attempts to uncover some of her creators' secrets by examining the decapitated head of an Engineer found in a state of excellent preservation within the mysterious chamber. The revelation of our similarity to the Engineers, while already revealed to the audience in the opening sequence, creates a sense of uncanniness for the scientists as the elephantine helmet, recognizable as the same worn by the ossified figure found in *Alien*, is removed. In contrast, the Old Ones are more typical Lovecraftian monsters, which are not only inhuman in form, but also, as Miéville notes:

As often as not, ... described as 'undescribable'. This is more than sheer teratological exuberance, however: it is an assault on conventional reality. Usually, this impossible physiology is barely glimpsed, by characters who sensibly flee the scene. It is in *At the Mountains of Madness* that, uniquely in Lovecraft's canon, one of his monsters actually submits to the scientist's gaze (and the vivisector's scalpel). (xiv)

Prometheus inverts this process by making the recognizable disturbingly unknowable when subjected to the scientist's gaze. The Engineer's head begins to change once the examination begins, recalling the mutations of the opening sequence, but with greater volatility. It responds bizarrely when the scientists attempt to jolt it into wakefulness using an electrical current, recalling the cinematic adaptations of *Frankenstein*. Although no pathogen shows up

on their sensors, the flesh pulsates and writhes, while the eyes flicker open and its facial expression is pained. Black ooze starts to seep from its flesh and the whole structure becomes unstable. Returning it to containment, the scientists are startled to see the head explode in a mass of green slime. Thus, even in death, the Engineers confound their attempts to uncover the secrets of humankind's origins. However, a genetic sample from the head is tested and shows a match between human and Engineer DNA, confirming the link between the two species. The viewer is thus prompted to consider whether the sacrifice shown in the opening sequence was the beginning of this process, and where, if ever, it will end.

Eugene Thacker argues that the monstrosities populating Lovecraft's Antarctica are actually blasphemous forms of life:

At the mountains of madness we move from a concept of blasphemy as grounded in human agency (the blasphemy of Capaneus in the underworld) to a blasphemy of the unhuman ("more and more amphibious"). For Lovecraft, "it" is blasphemous – but also indifferent, incomprehensible, and in many cases unnamable ("the thing," "the doom," "the fear," "the whisperer").

At the center of blasphemous life is this idea of the living contradiction.

Blasphemous life is the life that is living but that should not be living. This contradiction is not a contradiction in terms of medical science; the blasphemous life can often be scientifically explained and yet remain utterly incomprehensible. If it is a logical contradiction, it would have to be one in which the existence of true contradictions would not only be admitted, but would be foundational to any ontology. (103-104)

If, as Leane suggests, “it is the borderless, amorphous nature of the shoggoths that is most horrifying to their potential victims” (71), once again *Prometheus* pushes these Lovecraftian tropes further. The black ooze found in the facility, which may or may not be an organism in its own right, is able to infect Holloway with a terrible, mutating contagion, accelerate the evolution of grubs into serpentine creatures with acid blood, repurpose the body of one of the scientists as an incredibly strong, tough predatory creature, and allow Shaw to conceive in spite of her infertility, giving birth to something that resembles a face-hugger from *Alien*. Despite their being difficult to taxonomize due to their heterogeneous forms and permutations, I shall refer to these diverse monstrosities as ooze-spawn in order to attempt to provide a point of comparison with Lovecraft’s shoggoths. The sheer array of effects the black ooze is capable of generating is not only testament to the Engineers’ scientific prowess—it is not suggested that there are magical properties to this substance—but also indicative of how they were able to be overcome by the unstable evolution of their creations.

Prometheus’s resistance to scientific methodology was noted by critics who disliked the film, along with its poor characterization, plot holes, and a lack of resolution. However, this resistance can be read in terms of the generic expectations that situated *Prometheus* in relation to science fiction. Instead, I contend that it belongs to the tradition of weird fiction exemplified by *At the Mountains of Madness*. As Miéville notes, Lovecraft is preeminent “among those writers of fantastic fiction for whom plot is simply not the point. The point is the weird Story is not the point: the point is wonder, which for Lovecraft goes hand in hand with horror” (xii). Lovecraft makes a similar argument in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927):

Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation. ... [W]e must judge a weird

tale not by the author's intent, or by the mere mechanics of the plot; but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point. (108)

Thus, the withholding of the Engineers' motives and confusion as to how their biotechnology functions are intrinsic to the narrative: we are meant to feel disoriented by the unfolding alien plan that the human characters unwittingly restart, for cosmic horror relies on at least partial incomprehension for its affective power.

The true purpose of the expedition is revealed late in the film, when it becomes clear that Weyland not only funded, but also accompanied it in the hope of finding a way to cure his senescence and cheat death. This is foreshadowed earlier when Weyland's daughter, Meredith Vickers (Charlize Theron), makes it very clear to Shaw and Holloway that, due to the enormous amount of money the Weyland Corporation has invested in the expedition, they do not have license to approach any living Engineers found on the desolate moon. In light of Weyland's goals, it becomes clear that David was instructed to infect Holloway with some of the bizarre black ooze found in the facility in order to explore how the human body responds to the Engineers' biotechnology. Such amoral scientific experimentation again invokes *Frankenstein*, but also the actions of the eponymous character from Lovecraft's short story "Herbert West—Reanimator" (1922), whose gruesome failed experiments do not shake his desire to unlock the secrets of reanimating the dead. As with these two texts, *Prometheus* focuses on the corporeal in its exploration of the possibility of immortality.

Weyland's plan to overcome the limitations imposed by his human form through any technological means makes him a transhumanist, which Max More defines as follows:

Transhumanists regard human nature not as an end in itself, not as perfect, and not as having any claim on our allegiance. Rather, it is just one point along an evolutionary

pathway and we can learn to reshape our own nature in ways we deem desirable and valuable. By thoughtfully, carefully, and yet boldly applying technology to ourselves, we can become something no longer accurately described as human – we can become posthuman. Becoming posthuman means exceeding the limitations that define the less desirable aspects of the “human condition”. Posthuman beings would no longer suffer from disease, aging, and inevitable death ... (4)

However, despite the advanced technology his wealth and power make accessible to him, Weyland is unable to obtain his Holy Grail of eternal life without access to the skill and knowledge of the Engineers; to become posthuman, he must first be accepted by the alien. In a reversal of Frankenstein’s development from obsession with occult alchemists such as Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus to a mastery of modern scientific principles, Weyland exploits technology in an attempt to obtain the Elixir of Life. Rather than stealing fire from the gods, Weyland is reduced to supplication before one of his creators, placing faith in their benevolence. Such an admission undermines the transhumanist faith that human technology, rationality, and the scientific method will lead to massively enhanced longevity and posthuman immortality.

Thus, a team led by David takes Weyland to a sleeping Engineer survivor, whom the android both awakens and communicates with by utilizing his superior understanding of their language and technology. Unlike the serene figure of the film’s opening sequence, this Engineer is notably more aggressive. His gigantic form, shared genetic material with humans, and visual echo of the xenomorph in the design of his suit, introduce a fascinating possibility to the narrative, suggesting that his race can be read in light of the story of the *nephilim* in Genesis. Christopher Partridge notes that the *nephilim*, thought to be the offspring of angels and female humans, “were a race of giants [who] eat all the food gathered by humans, leaving

them to starve, and eventually to turn on the humans themselves in a cannibalistic rampage” (167-68). This creates a simultaneous relationship of kinship and antagonism between the Engineers and humans that challenges Shaw and Weyland’s hopes of meeting their makers, who perhaps remain shrouded in mystery.

As Bulbulia notes, our capacity to invent deities can allow us to “shift between conceptions of just gods and conceptions of loving gods (and other conceptions) to suit circumstances” (680). Given the evidence of their plan to wipe out human life on Earth, Shaw views the Engineer as a vengeful god, asking “what did we do wrong?” and “why do you hate us?” Beale argues that “[m]uch of the evil that exists is directly or indirectly the result of human sin—that is, falling short of the glory of God” (64). It is within this framework that Shaw looks to find a meaning behind the extermination program for the human race through the lens of collective sin, but is met with bemused indifference. David initially fascinates the Engineer, whose large and powerful frame highlights Weyland’s abject decrepitude. The Engineer’s physical superiority and disdain for human endeavor are then expressed when he tears off David’s head and beats the aging billionaire to death with it. Thus, Weyland’s role shifts from Frankenstein to that of his Creature, begging for answers from a disgusted creator (or representative of a creator as yet undiscovered) who desires (but in this case has the power) to “extinguish the spark which [he] so negligently bestowed” (77). This scene exemplifies the utter pessimism that Thomas Ligotti, a modern master of cosmic horror, ascribes to the human condition:

To repeat what cannot be repeated enough: we can tolerate existence only if we believe — in accord with a complex of illusions, a legerdemain of deception — that we are not what we are: unreality on legs. As creatures with consciousness, we must suppress that divulgement lest it break us with a sense of being things without

significance or foundation, anatomies shackled to a landscape of pointless horrors.

(228)

To reinforce this point, Weyland's last words are "there's nothing," to which David replies "I know." The nihilism of posthuman creationism stems from the realization that humans are treated as mere biological matter awaiting further transformation by the Engineers.

Lovecraft's narrator in *At the Mountains of Madness* comes to identify with the alien Old Ones and pity them, even after they kill his fellow scientists:

They had not been even savages—for what indeed had they done? That awful awakening in the cold of an unknown epoch—perhaps an attack by the furry, frantically barking quadrupeds, and a dazed defense against them and the equally frantic white simians with the queer wrappings and paraphernalia... poor Lake, poor Gedney ... and poor Old Ones! Scientists to the last—what had they done that we would not have done in their place? God, what intelligence and persistence! ... Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn—whatever they had been, they were men! (330)

In contrast, after killing all the humans in the bridge of his ship except for Shaw, who sensibly flees the scene, the Engineer resumes the mission to bring the deadly black ooze to Earth. Such willingness to destroy unsatisfactory creations can also be found in *At the Mountains of Madness*, through the Old Ones' influence on the evolution of Earth's flora and fauna:

life-forms ... were the products of unguided evolution acting on life-cells made by the Old Ones but escaping beyond their radius of attention. They had been suffered to develop unchecked because they had not come in conflict with the dominant beings. Bothersome forms, of course, were mechanically exterminated. (302-3)

In *Prometheus*, humans are not “bothersome forms,” but rather designed as vessels for the evolution of new organisms. The Engineers’ sense of ownership over their creations echoes the arrogance with which Holloway treats David earlier in the film, mockingly noting that humans made androids simply because they could, to which he responds by asking “can you imagine how disappointing it would be for you to hear the same thing from your creator?” The nihilism of David’s existence is experienced by the human characters who encounter the fleshy horrors of the Engineers’ ooze-spawn, which embody the future that has been planned for them.

While the unexpected evolutionary advances made by the shoggoths allow them to surprise and overthrow their masters, it is suggested that the ooze-spawn were responsible for the slaughter of the Engineers at the facility. An unsettling link is then forged between shoggoths, ooze-spawn, and humans towards the end of the film, when Shaw unleashes the creature she gave birth to earlier, grown to a monstrous size, which implants something within the Engineer. This serves as a reminder that, on the evidence they find in the facility, the Engineers, like the Old Ones, appear to be a race in decline, linking to Lovecraft’s nightmarish depictions of degeneration and decay. Shaw’s enduring faith sees her set off in search of the Engineers’ homeworld in a ship piloted by David. In this respect, *Prometheus* differs from the tradition of Lovecraftian cosmic horror, as Shaw is not driven mad by the revelations her exploration has uncovered, nor does she flee from the “deadly light.” Whereas Holloway and Weyland succumb to nihilism on realization that their creators do not care

about them, Shaw seeks to stave off the listlessness generated by this void through holding onto the hope of finding answers to the fundamental questions about human existence.

Nevertheless, the film finishes by returning to the comatose figure of the Engineer, which is abruptly torn open from the inside by a creature resembling not only the xenomorph but also the mysterious figure in the mural. Perhaps, like humans, the Engineers are destined to be succeeded by further Lovecraftian entities. By ending on this sequence, Scott emphasizes the central importance of the weird in *Prometheus*, using our desire to know to create a sense of wonder at both the new alien creature, which has yet to reveal its nature or mature into its adult form, and whatever mysteries will be uncovered on the Engineers' homeworld. It hints that Shaw's apparent victory is merely the next step in an unsympathetic plan that has been unfolding across several millennia, designed by as yet unknown forces with opaque aims. Thus, the film's ending leaves Shaw and David set to be swallowed by the encroaching black seas of infinity, as posthuman creationism reveals a post-species universe, in which all life-forms are simply components in an incomprehensible cosmic system of evolution by intelligent design. In doing so, it offers a nihilistic revision of posthuman theory that undercuts anthropocentrism by drawing on Lovecraftian cosmic horror to highlight our ignorance, hubris, and frailty. Creationism is thus transformed from claiming the sanctity of human life to an indication of our constructed, abject nature.

Notes

1. Indeed, Meredith Woerner suggests that the similarities between *Prometheus* and *At the Mountains of Madness* are so significant that the future of Guillermo del Toro's troubled adaptation of Lovecraft's novel has been thrown into question.

2. In an interview with Chris Hewitt of *Empire* magazine, Scott talks openly about the influence of von Däniken's book and his theory of pre-visitation on the plot of *Prometheus*.

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