

## In the Beginning ... : "Prometheus" and "Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted"

Written by Mike Schulz  
Monday, 11 June 2012 07:42

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### **PROMETHEUS**

After many months of speculation, the question of whether Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* is, in fact, a prequel to the director's

*Alien*

can finally be answered: Hell

*yeah*

it is. And a good thing, too, because the enticing echoes of that 1979 sci-fi/horror essential are among the scant few elements that truly resonate in this visually extraordinary but only fitfully engaging endeavor.

Could my mostly lukewarm reaction to the film – and trust me, I was praying *not* to have that particular reaction – have anything to do with exhaustion, considering I caught

*Prometheus*

at a 12:15 a.m. screening that, with commercials and previews, didn't conclude until after 2:30?

It's entirely possible. It's also possible, maybe even probable, that my response stems from unreasonably high expectations about the movie's potential greatness, based on perhaps unreasonable excitement about seeing it in the first place. Not every movie – okay, over the past 15 years, not

*any*

other movie – gets this middle-aged man's ass to the cineplex after midnight on a Thursday. (A

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little context: Since first viewing

*Alien*

at age 12, I've seen Scott's film at least two dozen additional times, have seen 1986's

*Aliens*

even more times than that, am among the few who really liked 1992's

*Alien 3*

, and am among the

*really*

few who liked 1997's

*Alien Resurrection*

. I can even stand, though barely, those humdrum

*Alien Vs. Predator*

mash-ups that were forced upon us a couple times. I'm a lifer.)

Yet while I'll readily own up to my complicity in my disappointment, I'm not letting the director and screenwriters John Spaihts and Damon Lindelof entirely off the hook, because for all of its marvels, and there are many of them, *Prometheus* still feels unshaped and sketchy. (A friend opined, and he was right, that the movie is like the grudgingly released version we're stuck with before Scott adds 20 or 30 clarifying minutes to his inevitable director's cut.) A lot happens in the film, and God knows it's all evocative and portentous. Far too often, though, it's also maddeningly vague – a series of loosely tied concepts about genetic mutation and creationism and faith and corporate greed and the dangers of performing your own C-section presented without a cohesive or coherent through-line. We worshipers at the altar of

*Alien*

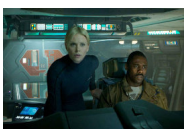
can't help but get a charge out of much of it, but we'll likely also be more frustrated than those entering the auditorium without their fan-club cards. What's missing from

*Prometheus*

is just about everything – the visual spareness, the narrative economy, the lucid motivations, the gut-wrenching terror, and, above all, the

*empathy*

– that makes the original so bloody good.



Like Scott in his pre-release interviews, I'm being deliberately circumspect about the movie's storyline, because there actually are surprises on hand – even though the majority of those surprises, such as the depth of involvement of Charlize Theron's pernicious bureaucrat, don't wind up *meaning* that much. Suffice it to say that, in the year 2089, a pair of Earthling researchers (Noomi Rapace and Logan Marshall-Green) discover signs of extraterrestrial life in a number of seemingly unconnected drawings, and become convinced that cave-painting aliens were responsible for the genesis of humankind. (Strangely, though, evolution is the only option

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discussed; at no point does it occur to these scientists that humanity and the extraterrestrials perhaps originated *separately*.) Eventually, the researchers join a team of space travelers voyaging toward the beings' planet, a crew that includes Theron's Meredith Vickers, Idris Elba's ship captain Janek, and Michael Fassbender's android David. They subsequently land on the planet, and I probably don't need to mention that complications – dimly lit, misty, frequently gooey complications – ensue.

For a lengthy stretch – at least for this *Alien* fanatic – this is all pretty fantastic fun. The titular spacecraft is reminiscent of a more spit-shined version of the *Nostramo* that fatefully housed Sigourney Weaver and company, and Fassbender's turn as the inscrutable android is spectacularly witty; though his look and "personality," as we're shown, are modeled after Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*, the actor also suggests Ian Holm's *Alien* robot, albeit with a puckish sense of humor. Once on the foreign planet, there are gorgeous, giggle-inducing images that directly mirror shots in Scott's original: the bony "space jockey" forever trapped in that downed spacecraft; the subterranean site that resembles *Alien*'s (and *Aliens*' ) hatchery of insidious eggs. Even composer Marc Streitenfeld's generally impressive score has more than a dose of the *Alien* DNA, with its siren-like wailing sounding just like the warning signals that erupted in the minutes before Weaver's Ripley blew the *Nostramo* to bits.

These ultra-satisfying fringe touches, however, still don't lead to a satisfying whole. Scott directs a number of its scenes with exceptional skill – the beginning-of-man prelude is haunting and rapturously beautiful, and Rapace's self-inflicted surgery sequence is a true stomach-clencher – but he and his accomplished cast can't overcome the one-dimensional nature of the characters, or the narrative dawdling, or the many questions that are raised only to be ignored or blithely discarded. Why is this assemblage of incredibly bright scientists so stupid about not following proper safety regulations or protocol? Why does Rapace's Elizabeth Shaw cling so strongly to her faith (symbolized by the gold cross dangling from her neck) even though she's convinced that it's the aliens, and not God, who are "our makers"? Why does David – seemingly the most level-headed one on the ship – engage in such a nebulous experiment with one of the crew members when his motivations are neither prepared for nor subsequently explored? (And on a completely unrelated, production-level note: Why is the craggy, old-age makeup foisted on an

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unrecognizable Guy Pearce so irredeemably awful?) Maybe we'll get some of these answers in the *Prometheus* sequel that's all-too-conveniently prepped for here. But for now, Scott's film feels like little more than a great-looking, ambitious undertaking that eventually runs out of ambition, and that left this *Alien* devotee dispirited for the opportunity wasted. In space, I guess, no one can hear you sigh.



### **MADAGASCAR 3: EUROPE'S MOST WANTED**

The best I can say about Dreamworks' animated sequel *Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted* is that it's obviously trying much, much harder than 2008's dully serviceable *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*.

Its vibrant colors and computerized renderings of European cities and marketplaces are utterly remarkable, one chase through Monte Carlo streets is legitimately breathtaking, and with the presence of the French animal-control sadist voiced by Frances McDormand, the movie delivers a gloriously, hilariously nutjob villain, one so single-minded and unrelenting that you almost end up rooting for her. (In the character's – and certainly McDormand's – finest moment here, she rouses her troops with a full-throated rendition of Edith Piaf's legendary anthem "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien," even finishing the number with arms raised and mascara dripping. Piaf, and Marion Cotillard, would be proud.)

The worst I can say about *Madagascar 3* is that its improvements, for me, still didn't matter much; given the sickly puns and bland moral uplift and narrative redundancy, I'm beyond bored by the continued adventures of Ben Stiller's lion, Chris Rock's zebra, David Schwimmer's giraffe, and all the rest. (In truth, the only characters that amused me this time around were newbies: McDormand's pelt-Nazi, and the European circus animals voiced by Bryan Cranston, Jessica Chastain, and Martin Short, the latter of whom is prone to weepy outbursts such as, "I'm just an emotional whoopee cushion for you to sit on!") It's all easy enough to sit through, but the overly innocuous *Madagascar 3* is mostly just more of the same tired shtick ... though at the screening I attended, it

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*did*

prove somewhat informative. At one point in the film, we're shown a wall of animal heads gracing McDormand's living room, and the sheer

*volume*

of decapitated critters – mammals, fish, birds – made me think, "Hmm ... that's kind of funny." It was at this exact moment that the grade-schooler sitting behind me murmured to his mom, "Wow ... that's really scary." Apparently, kids got their own

*Prometheus*

this weekend, and I didn't even realize it.

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