Crisis (Re)Constructed: Ridley Scott's Alien saga as a study of organizational collapse

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Fictional narratives have been the focus of organizational research since at least the early 1990s, studied as an insight into the cultural milieu, as a reflection of organizational experiences, as a source of inspiration for members of organization, and as a representation of the sensemaking processes (Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Hassard and Holliday, 1998). Our text builds upon all these traditions, analysing two films, related but separated by over thirty years, and their construal of a fatal organizational crisis.

While all cinematography of a given period may be generally perceived as a reflection of sorts of its fears, hopes and values, the horror and science fiction genres seem to be particularly sensitive to "registers of the psychic and of the sociopolitical" (Freccero, 1999, p. 111). The films we have chosen for our analysis, *Alien* and *Prometheus,* generally classified as science fiction horror, can thus be expected to provide a singularly insightful portrayal of the anxieties (in our case, organizational ones) that they depict.

The film *Alien,* directed by Ridley Scott and starring Sigourney Weaver, debuted to critical and commercial acclaim in 1979. Through a seemingly banal and clichéd science fiction narrative, the film explored issues of gender (Creed, 1990), body (Constable, 1999), and technology (Bukatman, 1993) in ways that proved ripe for critical academic reflection over the next three decades. What received somewhat less attention was that the movie was at its core an organizational fiction—its narrative told of a small organizational division (the seven-person crew of a commercial cargo starship) dealing with a crisis situation. It was also organizational issues that provided the main complication in dealing with the alien intruder: secret instructions left by the absent and unidentified (but hierarchically powerful) managers who, driven by corporate greed, jeopardized the safety (indeed, the very survival) of the crew for a chance of greater profit.

Alien was followed by numerous sequels helmed by a variety of directors until, in 2012, Ridley Scott returned to the setting of *Alien* in a new film, *Prometheus,* starring Noomi Rapace and Michael Fassbender. This movie shares many similarities with its predecessor, notably in its most basic setup of a small spaceship crew experiencing life-threatening contact with an unknown, but hostile, lifeform, and again ask questions about basic organizational issues in the

process. Yet the current context in which the film was created is markedly different, with the world transformed by events ranging from the fall of communism, through advancing globalization and privatization of the public sphere to the current financial crisis; more generally, the transition into what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) termed the liquid modernity has reshaped the organizational world (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, forthcoming). Not surprisingly, (re)construction of the crisis and the factors contributing to institutional collapse in the newer film appear quite different than thirty years ago: the portrayed organization is torn apart by a number of conflicting (though, again, often secret) goals and agendas pursued by various crew members, and by blinkered focus on one's own objectives to the detriment of common aims (including group survival).

In this paper, we compare these two stories of organizational collapse and the milieus in which their originated (including both the academic and popular reflection on organizations as well as contemporaneous science fiction and horror films touching on similar themes), not only to provide a better understanding of the changing fears and anxieties organizations hold for their participants, but also to question the changing social construction of work organization: as a venue of shared activity, of collective sensemaking, and as a social platform for accomplishing shared as well as individual goals.

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