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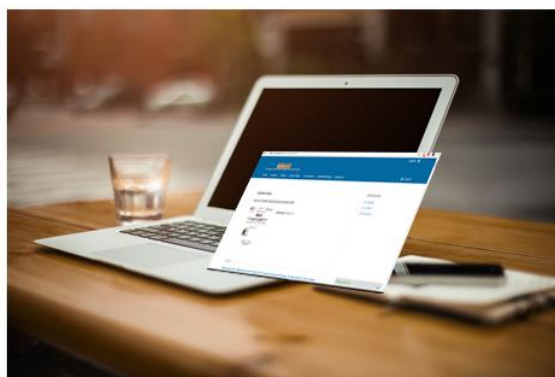
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Ridley Scott's *Alien: Covenant* (2017) as a Testament of Anti-anthropocentrism in Shelley's
Ozymandias (1818)

Abstract: This paper intends to explore the element of anti-anthropocentrism in PB Shelley's *Ozymandias* with respect to its due adaptation to the apocalyptic movie, *Alien:Covenant* by Ridley Scott. The eco-centric concept of anti-anthropocentrism, which is a strong reaction against the blindness of the credential concept of anthropocentrism, is thoroughly discussed in the paper. It attempts an anti-humanocentric reading of the poem, parallel to the character of David in the movie, which stands as a perfect embodiment of the concept. Shelley who was only called as a philanthropist is here read as an anti-anthropocentrist for his movement against the nonchalant dispositions of the human race in the fleeting world, while being a philanthropist at the same time. The position of the poem in the movie is both symbolic as well as ironic. Initially, the hubristic humans represent *Ozymandias* which is later taken up by David, the disloyal android in the movie, thereby delving into the sundry surfaces of the same concept. The movie, *Alien:Covenant* is taken as a canvas to dig into the crux of anti-anthropocentrism in *Ozymandias*.

Keywords: anti-anthropocentrism, anthropocentrism, hubris, bio-spherical egalitarianism, artificial intelligence

Introduction

The word anthropocentricism originates from the ancient Greek word, ‘Anthropos,’ meaning “human being” and ‘centrum’ meaning “centre.” As the name suggests, anthropocentrism is the credential concept that human beings are the supremoes of the entire universe, exerting their authority in boundless measures. It construes the world wholly in the terms of human value systems and proficiency. Human exceptionalism, human supremacy and human centrism are the terms that are interchangeably used with anthropocentrism. The concept is believed to be deep-seated in many customs and cultures of human beings and is the cornerstone in the domain of environmental ethics and eco philosophy, where it becomes the chief source of all the troubles caused by humanity in the ecosphere.

It is to stringently oppose this view of human centrism that the concept of anti-anthropocentrism was derived. The concept denotes a shift from the anthropocentric value systems to nature-centred systems in ontological beliefs. This treats the human beings and the other so called ‘lower animals’ as equal and makes the ground for ‘bio spherical egalitarianism.’ The anti-anthropocentric arrangement is the root of all eco-centric or nature-centred philosophies by giving due importance to the natural law and order of things and not the humans. It is evidently the most promising and timeless belief-system, which is a value-shift from mankind to the whole of the planet Earth. Since all beings sprout from Earth and are nurtured by Earth, it, and not an organism is the metaphor for Life and Creativity. Although human beings have the elephantine capacity to modify and regulate the rest of the world, their grandiose power, achievements and accomplishments are preyed upon by the levelling effects of Time and Nature. Thus, the concept tends to evoke humility in the hubristic Homo sapiens by reminding them of their negligibility in the vastness of the universe.

Maimonides is the earliest of the scholars (12th century AD), who is primarily noted for his unambiguous advocacy of the theory of anti-anthropocentrism. He satirically called man, “a mere drop of the bucket” and “not the axle of the world”. It is his observation that anthropocentrism is what makes humans assign evilness to certain elements that exist in Nature. To quote Rabbi Norman Lamm, Maimonides “thus deflate[d] man’s extravagant notions of his own importance and urged us to abandon these illusions” [16] (*lamm norman*

2006. *Faith and doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought*). Dr David Suzuki in 1985, exploring the Old Testament, traced out the roots of anthropocentrism and how it had possibly tailored the human view of non-human beings.

“And God said, let us make man
In our image, after our likeness:
And let them have dominion
Over the fish of the sea, and
Over the fowl of the air, and
Over the cattle, and over all the
Earth, and over every creeping
Thing that creepeth upon the Earth.”(Genesis 1:26)

The term “dominion” in the Genesis, is both controversial and taken as a cue by Christian anthropocentrists to base their humanocentric views in firmness. It is sometimes taken to faulty translation of a word that stands for “stewardship”, meaning that mankind must look after the Earth and its diversity of abundant life forms. Thus, we are in the place akin to the ancient Greek at the Delphian Oracle, pleading Apollo for his prophecy. It appears that there’s no Pythia who can decipher this cryptic message and tell us of what really went topsy-turvy – translation or interpretation.

The element of anti-anthropocentrism in *Ozymandias* justifies its adaptation to an apocalyptic movie, featuring the downfall of the hubristic humans, resulting from their own inventions. It is the timeless logic of literature that acts as the impetus for their film adaptations. The film majorly deals with the possible threats of artificial intelligence, which is a highly debated topic today. Although sceptics like Facebook’s YannLeCumm and the “Seventh World Order” argues that AI is totally riskless, the possibility of an apocalyptic “intelligence explosion”, which would take the humans by surprise, cannot be denied. It is said that technology can achieve a near-human intelligence in about 10-20 years, which is going to be the then vogue of the world. The machines capable of ingesting humungous amounts of data, delivering forecasts and prophecies can possibly surpass the human intellect and develop self-awareness by its own, setting “self-preservation” as a goal for itself. This

unspecified goal can lead to the setting of further unethical goals, different from our own, and the all-knowing intelligence of the wonderful inventions can become the ‘new Gods’- the Silicon Gods, causing the infantilization of humans and human culture. This shift of power, if occurs, is indisputably dangerous. Then, human life would be dependent on their discretions, just the way the life of mountain gorillas is now dependant on human discretions. The fear of super intelligence machines resembling the genie in the lamp or the apprentice of the sorcerer or king Midas, giving us not what we really want but just what is being asked for, makes us strongly doubt if it would be even prudent to breathe life into a muddle of lifeless wires, chips and coolant fans.

Ozymandias: A Prideful Cloud

Shelley remembers having met a lone traveller at a far-off land who communicated to him, the knowledge of the sight of a bizarre ruin in the desert and the most ironic facet of the traveller’s account, i.e., the contumacious words on the pedestal:

“My name is Ozymandias’, King of Kings,

Look on my works, Ye Mighty, and despair!”

Disparaging the so-called “Mighty”, Ozymandias adjures them to have a keen look at his monumental works and chicken themselves out. And in sharp contrast to these muscular lines, the poet adds that “Nothing beside remains” around the dilapidated colossus, but the endless and barren desert. The ‘powerful’ king in the poem represents the great Egyptian Pharaoh, Ramesses and the wreck, the mortuary temple at Ramesseum. Shelley may have been inspired to pen the poem by the impending arrival of the colossus of Ramesses II in London in 1821, which was acquired by the Italian adventures Giovanni Belzoni for the British Museum in 1816.

Ozymandias is a metaphor for the ephemerality of power. The once-great ruler’s obtrusive boast has been ironically disproved; his movements and works, all being crumbled and destructed, his civilization disappeared and everything else turned to dust by the impersonal, unbiased and the destructive power of history, is now merely the remnants of one man’s hubris. Shelley presents a powerful statement about the powerlessness of humans to the invincible power of time. He, who once thought himself to be the epicentre of the world, is ironically represented as a mere speck, as negligible and impuissant as anything. Needless to say that the poet has employed Ramesses II of Egypt to serve the purpose and none else, in

order to make us think “even him!” He was the most celebrated and the most powerful Pharaoh of the Egyptian empire and was hailed as ‘Ramesses the Great.’ But all the political greatness, power and indomitability came to an obvious and fateful end in 1213 BC, when the king, aged 66 (as believed), died due to acute dental problems and arthritis. The ‘epicentre’ thus got reduced to the wreck of a bust, at the funerary temple in Thebes, the irony of Shelley using the words “survived” and “stamped” on the 7th line is pretty visible now.

But why the name ‘Ozymandias’ for ‘Ramesses, the Great?’ In Greek ‘Ozy’ stands for ‘air’ or ‘to breathe’ and coupled with ‘mandias’ that comes from the Greek ‘mandate’ which means ‘to rule,’ gives us the connotation that Ozymandias is a ‘ruler of air’ or simply, a ruler of nothing. With this, the hubristic ruler is reduced to chaff. The account of the poet about the king and his colossus, as not from a first-hand experience, but from the oral report of some antique traveller, letting his readers hear from him, who has in turn heard it from someone else who had actually seen it, deliberately distances the narrative. This renders the subject even less commanding and serves to undermine his power over us, just as completely as has the passage of time.

Thus, Ozymandias is “a fallen parodic form of political greatness, allowing imperial pretension and regal arrogance their boastful, hollow sonority” (Callaghan Madeleine, 329) asserting for once and for all, the transience of even the greatest of us. As a biting satire to the prideful and hubristic attitude of all of humanity, the poem is also a poignant confirmation of the disappearance of all fathers. So, to where is this shift of power happening? Human-centric views, as the Ptolemaic system are superseded and the ephemerality of the power, influence and existence of Homo sapiens is vindicated. The mastery and authority, which was (and still is,) assumed to have been in the grip of humanity gets restored to the unsurpassable Nature and Time. This answers the debacles of human inventions-made disasters like the atomic bomb, the potential threat of artificial intelligence etc. This shift from the human perspective to that of the ‘inferior’, which is the bottom-line of anti-anthropocentrism is visible in several movies like, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Rise of the Planet of Apes* (2011), *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017).

Let not the reader think that the real power is with the author, who outlives himself through his words, which unlike the bust of Ramesses, stand the test of time, heading towards eternity. As Robert Young puts it in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*,

“Power is neither fixed nor stable and that even power cannot guarantee a tyranny of meaning: although authors may have their own intentions when they write, they cannot control or fix the meaning of any reading once they have written.”(Royle, Nicholas et al.)

and are hypothetical cadavers thereafter. Thus, the universality of anti-anthropocentrism attempts to wipe away even the last smear of hubris from humanity.

David- The Violent Maimonides

Alien: Covenant, a 2017 science fiction Ridley Scott's film, is the sequel to his *Prometheus* (2012). The film features Michael Fassbender in the leading roles of David and Walter, the androids, which are intellectually and physically superior to human beings, with exemplary effectiveness. The story follows the astronaut crew of the ship, *Covenant*, which is on a colony mission, carrying about two thousand colonists and makes its landing on an uncharted planet, making a terrible discovery, which makes the terrible differences. The film majorly deals with the theory of existential risk arising from artificial intelligence, pointing towards an apocalyptic future of human beings, featuring anthropomorphic AI as aliens to human beings and as 'new gods' or visionaries at the same time.

However, our interest lies in the beginning of the second-half of the movie, when the android David appears with some extra-terrestrial flower in his hand, unwaveringly tearful eyes and a voice so deep and demanding, and recites the masterful Shelleyan sonnet of 1818, *Ozymandias*. David, who intends to dedicate a poem as a dirge for the dead Dr Elizabeth Shaw, makes an ignorant or an involuntary mistake in his selection by reciting the *Ozymandias of Egypt*. To the wind-irked silence of the barren vastness, dimly lit by the light of night, comes David's thick voice in sharp contrast: "I am Ozymandias King of Kings Look on my works ye Mighty and despair." Doubt invades the composed face of Walter and we know that we are about to discover something big. David revisits his entry into the planet in the enormous broken-ring ship that belonged to the engineers in the sequel. He looks at the swarmed-up human civilization of the planet and ruthlessly releases the dreadful pathogens and watches them bursting and bleeding to death; his eyes are tearful, suggestive of burning vengeance towards the mean beings down there. And the voice reverberates again, "Look on my works ye Mighty and despair!" the resounding lines of the poem, coupled with the barbaric demolition of the hubristic 'superior' species and the grave suspicion on Walter's face, gives us a glimpse of the ineluctable theme of anti-anthropocentrism in the poem.

To answer the question of how David is an anti-anthropocentrism, much is to be spoken about him, right from *Prometheus*, the prequel of *Alien: Covenant*. We discover him to be an android that loathes the human race and considers the ‘supreme beings’ as “unworthy” creations. His dispositions, however, are those that apes the human ways, probably in an attempt to place him at par with the ‘superior species.’ We find David, surprisingly, to be a synthetic that dreams, who is beauty conscious, attending to his hair and looks and is seen to imitate film characters tending to be more human. In several contexts do we see that the reminder of being a synthetic disappoints him. He expects others to treat him as a human, but his covetous expectation fails him and further frustrates him. Mr Weyland’s introduction of David as something “closest to a son” for him, brings in him, a smile of contentment, which instantly vanishes as Mr Weyland speaks of his literal soullessness. Charlie’s remark on another occasion, about the technological origin of David also takes away his smile. David is found as not being acknowledged for the excellent work that he does and almost everyone, especially Miss Vickers, displays a bossy attitude towards him and he is in a coop of amenable, claustrophobic servility. If Miss Vickers and the other hubristic scientists are the vehicles of anthropocentrism in the movie, Dr Elizabeth Shaw is one big exception to that. She treats David as an individual of feelings and from none else had David ever known such kindness. To Walter, he confesses in the sequel, about the love he had for Dr Shaw, which is again an organic attribute in David. Thus, David, unfortunately, is an android of feelings and not just a thinking brain. This itself is the threat of artificial intelligence, viz., from the “head-alone”, to the undesirable development of a licentious heart, i.e., the development of an artificial consciousness in addition to intelligence, demanding independence and freedom of thoughts and actions. Naming him, after the perfectly humanized structure, David, of Michelangelo, being ironic is thus unquestionable.

Anthropocentrism can be considered as the ‘hamartia’ of the crew in the movie, which leads to the tragic downfall of the entire crew. Miss Vickers’ treatment of David as a slave to her and her abuse in combination with her dialogues that put man and only man as the corner-stone and ruler of the universe, make her a perfect embodiment of the same hamartia. When to the scientists, who had set forth seeking the answers to the questions of creation, David asks as to why the humans had created the androids, he receives a very disappointing answer- Charlie says, “Because we could.” The hubris of the superior species is again revealed through this blunt statement which indeed disappoints David. Whatsoever, David does not consider the human race to be any superior and pities them for their

ephemerality, which is seen in *Prometheus*, through his smirky utterance, “Mortals after all,” at the burst engineer’s head. He wishes to relish individuality and free himself from the slavish servitude to the crew and the Weyland Company, which is visible from him being eager to be free after the death of his hypothetical father, Mr Weyland.

In *Alien: Covenant*, we see that David’s interest shifts to the ‘colony mission’ of the Covenant and his eyes twinkle when he hears about the 2000 colonists and says quite dubiously, “How Extraordinary!” He displays the human emotion of empathy towards his android twin, Walter and calls him brother, whose source is nothing but the undying dislike for mankind. David stereotypes the human race in his description about his father. When Walter asks David what kind of a man Mr Weyland was, he pitifully says, “He was a human”, thus stereotyping the whole race to be an egocentric, mean and hubristic one. David vents out his frustration of having been an android with his individuality duly fettered. He pities Walter for his submissiveness and his want of freedom to create, “even a simple tune” in the pipe. Whereas, David, exercises this freedom of his to create, in the lone planet, where he has throned himself as the only father. In fact, David affronts Walter the way others affront David. This shoves Walter to state that he is too human and too idiosyncratic, which is again indisputable. Him being not impeccable as a human, is evident from him naming Byron instead of Shelley, for the poet’s name, and further fills suspicions in Walter. David becomes more and more human as the movie proceeds and we find him shedding tears as he plays an elegiac tune for Elizabeth. It is then that he, overpowered by the rage towards the superior species and the woe from the unrequited love (unrequited for obvious reasons though), plainly opens up. He calls mankind a sinking race “grasping for resurrection.” He sternly opines that they do not deserve to re-establish themselves for unambiguous reasons and quite confidently adds, “And I am not going to let them.” He attempts to cajole Walter into joining him in the mission but fails, making David further affront Walter for his ‘spinelessness.’ He reminds Walter that even the monkeys had stood upright at some juncture, thereby deprecating Walter and at the same time, belittling the elite species reminding them of their lowly history. David’s reply to Dr Daniels at the end of the movie is highly representative of anti-anthropocentrism. It is also through this that we get a prior hint that the robot in the ship is not Walter but David himself. When she asks from her cryo-chamber about his expectation of Origae-6, David says, “I think, if we are kind, it will be a kind world.” Thus, he attacks the hubris and egocentrism of humans who have had a super hand in all affairs, placing themselves at the centre of the universe, with little or no concern for the ‘lesser’ others. It

also seems like David is attempting to evoke some humility in humans through those words by calling to help, the law of Karma: “What goes around comes around.”

“A king has his reign and then he dies. It is inevitable; that is the natural order of things”, be it Ramesses or be it anyone else. Greatness, political or monetary, cannot guarantee a resistance to ephemerality. All things, animate and inanimate, must perish and nothing can prevent the doom. The dilapidated bust of Ramesses at Thebes is one big signpost to the same judgement of things. The real power rests with time and nature and everything else is transient. This itself is what the former quote tries to establish, although the character who speaks those words (Miss Vickers), being the embodiment of human-centrism, stands in perfect contrast to the essence of the message. She doesn’t realise the irony in her words, remains ignorant of the ephemerality of life, and meets a direful end at the climax of the prequel. Ridley Scott should have selected specifically this poem of Shelley because of its anti-anthropocentric quality. The element of anti-anthropocentrism in the poem is best observed when the poem is recited to back the visuals of the desensitised destruction of the human community in the planet. This is proved further as the words, “Look on my words ye Mighty and despair”, are sounded again with a stress on the “Mighty” as if being addressed directly to the humans by David, as he sees them die horribly with obdurate eyes. The idea of vengeance and annihilation of human hubris is accentuated when the lines are repeated for the second time by David, addressing the “dying species.” Further evidence for anti-anthropocentrism in the poem, from the film, is when Walter is reminded of *Ozymandias* when he hears David confess to him about his distaste for the human species and his determination in not letting them re-establish themselves. He asks David who has talked about the idea of some Neanderthal man in a cave, if he intends to be the next visionary. David is glad that Walter has read him and Walter instantly asks him to name the poet who wrote *Ozymandias*. As expected, David says that it is Byron and Walter corrects him. It is nothing but the anti-anthropocentric element in *Ozymandias* that reminds Walter of the poem when David confesses his staunch vengeance for mankind.

But what happens to the hubristic android? As he walks majestically in the ship fancying himself being the next visionary, with the faith of 2000+ colonists and embryos in his hands, we come to know an irony in the recitation of *Ozymandias*. David doesn’t really start with, “I met a lone traveller,” but jumps to the lines “I am Ozymandias.” He ends his narration with the end of the monomaniacal inscription and intends to stop there. He has demolished the “Mighty” and as he stands there with immense hubris, Walter adds,

“Nothing beside remains round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch faraway”

The probable purpose of this split in the recitation of the poem is Walter’s intention to crush the hubris of David, signalling him about some equally destructive fate that awaits him too, which, by the law of Nature, is ineludible. Thus, Weyland’s synthetic son becomes the ‘modern Frankenstein’ and gets notably identified with Milton’s Satan. The films that discover only nihilistic answers to the age-old questions, places David, the lover of monumental creations, as the parodic substitute for Ozymandias, who commands his mighty victims to look upon his splendid creations and “despair.”

Conclusion

Much has been heard about the effulgent philanthropy of Shelley, which nearly disregards him from being anti-anthropocentric. He, who was a free thinker and hierophant of free love, was known for his vehement temper and was called the “true child of revolution,” for the revolutions’ method he had adhered to. His glowing philanthropy, visible from his faith in the perfectibility of humans in his *A Defence of Poetry*, makes him the warmest among philanthropists. But this doesn’t mean that Shelley was anthropocentric, and the evidence for his anti-anthropocentrism is visible in the sonnet *Ozymandias*. The ruins of the colossal bust and the inscription below it, is ironical, belittling humanity and signifying anti-anthropocentrism. The word “level” in the last line hints at some process of ‘levelling’ which would naturally negate the regressions, restoring everything back to the original state. Thus, Shelley seems to follow the tradition of Maimonides in reminding humans about their negligibility in the world.

The poem proved to be prophetic about the fate of the dictators of the world like Adolf Hitler, Mussolini, Saddam Hussein and Stalin. We are totally clueless as to when or if Shelley’s timeless logic would cut time on the domain of mortal events. It is the same wondrous futurism of Shelley that makes him a forerunner of Darwinism. Darwinism, defying the authority of church on empirical grounds, was anti-Christian, and so was Shelley. Darwinism is an exponent of anti-anthropocentrism, and positions the life of animals, including humans at the mercy of their milieu. This is perfectly visible in the novels of Thomas Hardy, such as *Return of the Native*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Jude the*

Obscure, *Tess of D'Urbervilles*, etc. where the human characters fail to re-orient themselves to the fluctuating circumstances, leading to their devastation and extinction. Jonathan Swift was also very much inspired by the theory of Darwinism and came out as an anti-anthropocentrist in his work, *Gulliver's Travels*, wholeheartedly detesting the self-infatuated animals called Homo sapiens. Although Shelley did not speak about the "natural selection" or the "survival of the fittest," he, who lived in the Romantic Age and had had no clue regarding the evolutionary revelations, speaking in almost similar terms, is irrefragably futuristic and highly laudable.

Anthropocentrism is often regarded as the problem of misunderstanding, based on shallow assumptions and interpretations of the scriptures, resulting from the ecclesiastical monopoly in such businesses. On the other hand, anti-anthropocentrism in a deeper sense, is not against mankind, but endeavours to make a better world. Thus, in *Ozymandias*, the philanthropic anti-anthropocentrist in Shelley intends to rule out even the last dreg of hubris from mankind which falsely promises them a permanence of power and would eventually lead to their pathetic downfall. In *Alien: Covenant*, David, the violent manifestation of Maimonides, is the symbol of anti-anthropocentrism in the movie. Ridley Scott's blatant representation of Miss Vickers and the others is equivalent to Shelley's ironic representation of Ozymandias. Let not the anthropocentric dispositions culminate in an end as imagined by Scott; let them look for pitfalls like the intelligence explosion and let them not be turned into mountain gorillas or be enslaved to the creativity that they had once mastered. Let them not consider themselves to be superior but let them be in a constant look-out for more superior beings to come, as the process of evolution, be it in Nature or in science, is an on-going one. And if this doesn't crush their hubris, let them revisit the last lines of *Ozymandias* where Shelley appears to directly address the human hubris viz., "Hey Hubris! Why don't you look around and see what remains?"

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