

# A BAD MIRACLE: POSTMODERN SCIENCE FICTION HORROR AND RELIGION

## THE INTRODUCTION

A bad miracle is a term coined in Jordan Peele's 2022 film *Nope*. Bad miracles represent the contradiction and connection between the firm, hegemonic, Christian 'good' and the terrifying, consuming unknown. Postmodern science fiction horror offers bad miracles as unavoidable: the deconstruction of long-held truths, whether they be religious or scientific, are occurring all around us and are endemic to progress. This is effective in delivering horror, but it is also *affective*. While religious experiences like modern megachurches offer a space for empowerment and loud, comforting praise, postmodern science fiction horror films ask us to exercise our fear, our reason, our empathy, and our ability to sit in the intimacy of not-knowing. Through the investigation of popular postmodern science fiction horror films, the affective nature of cinema, and the rise of the megachurch, the ability for fear and film to offer growth through narrative disempowerment will become clear.

## THE FILMS

The *Alien* franchise's sprawling nature presents the apotheosis of postmodern science fiction horror's deconstructive power. In *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*, we meet Elizabeth Shaw, a devout Catholic desperate to know why her creators despise her, and Christopher Oram, a god-fearing Christian who believes his mission is biblical. Both use every scientific and religious means at their disposal to live, and both perish in their search for certainty. *Covenant* offers another critical theme: the impossibility of Eden. The search of a shining, new home is represented as providential, but ultimately doomed. Earth itself is so vulnerable that even the presence of one alien, a creature who transgresses all boundaries (gender, sexual, etc...) threatens to destroy it. The family, too, is as insecure as it is dangerous. In *Alien*, MU/TH/UR is what brings the crew their terrible fate; in *Prometheus*, Shaw must abort the fetus she conceived with her late husband as it attempts to kill her; across the franchise, artificial life is frequently portrayed as both the children of, and antithesis to, humanity.

## THE POSTMODERN

H.P. Lovecraft, often considered the father of 'cosmic horror,' detested institutions, both religious or scientific. For Lovecraft, the universe was too unknowable for rationality, worship, or witchcraft to penetrate: this is the destruction of humanity's ability to truly know anything, and worse, humanity's ability to do something about it. Longstanding narratives which have come to shape 'Western' values are being challenged: faith as soteriological, the security of the family, rationalist tendency optimism. The fearsome nature of science fiction horror is its ability to engage with the postmodern, to tear us from the comfort of narrative certainty. This extends beyond the themes of the films and into the experience of watching them. Ripley heroically escapes, only to find that the alien has made it onto her ship. Even after defeating it, she enters cryosleep on a tiny vessel, sent into the vastness space. We are not offered catharsis or certainty; we, like Ripley, are left in the unknown.

## THE EXPERIENTIAL FACTORS

Horror is watched in dark theatres, surrounded by fellow screamers there to experience extreme film. Extreme film, from a Deleuzian frame, can surpass ordinary cognition. We react prior to thought, our perception of flashing lights and sounds creates a continuum between us and the film. There is no distance between us. The fear response from a horror film is an alief, a non-rational response to stimuli that may contradict our actual beliefs: you know it is a film, but you are still deeply affected. Like Foucault's 'experience books,' watching films can be transformative. In the case of postmodern science fiction horror, surpassing ego and cognition with the deconstruction of narratives forces us to embody the fundamental insecurity of certainty. Through the collective scream of the audience, and the laugh which follows, we are further reminded that we can still go on, together, in the absence of perfect certainty. Like *samyega* in the Buddhist tradition, the direct confrontation of finitude and breakdown of trust allows deeper understanding of our position in the world.



## THE MEGACHURCH

Evangelical megachurches are booming, many of them renting out movie theatres to accommodate large audiences. Hillsong, one of the more famous megachurches, is known for their dark stadiums, only illuminated by flashing concert lights. There, preachers share personal stories of the divine, beginning with a mundane event, then building tension into a loud proclamation of faith; the structure of these stories are reminiscent of the narrative structures of horror. On the extreme end of megachurches, pastors might bring parishioners up to the stage to exorcise them of demons. Churchgoers can experience the supernatural and numinous in a controlled, secure way, ending with catharsis. In all cases, megachurches will ask their parishioners to scream out, to let God hear their voice. The dark halls, the elaborate lights, storytelling methods, and engagement in vocal catharsis allow for megachurches to be understood as a parallel to the theatrical experience of viewing a horror film.

## THE DARK ROOM

While modern megachurches are often represented as bastions of social conservatism and corruption, they remain one of the only growing forms of the church. Horror films are growing alongside them, the top horror films of 2024 being science fiction. As social collapse sets in, megachurches offer comfort through the prosperity gospel, the power of faith, and the coming of God's judgement. Postmodern science fiction horror, however, offers only the desolation of narrative, the fear that God's judgement isn't coming. One might view this as nihilistic, but the opposite is true. Studies found that horror fans were more likely to possess positive resilience to large-scale disasters, that those who seek out horror often do so in search of personal development, and that engaging in extreme rituals promotes prosociality. As people continue to seek out answers against the tide of instability, those who are not as convinced of capitalism, 'Western culture,' or God's plan may find themselves turning to film; to a dark room that doesn't offer them comfort, but the ability to endure the unknown.

## THE CONCLUSION

Bad miracles surround us. Planes fall from the air, new pandemics appear in the blink of an eye, and narratives collapse. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge that *something* is wrong: I argue this is laid bare in the genre of postmodern science fiction horror. While the megachurch offers a compelling experience and comfort, it does not rectify the feeling of uncertainty for those who see insecurity in hegemonic narratives. The affective power of the dark room, the social experience of horror, and the dissolution of security forces us to reconcile with our vulnerability, and allows us to sit with the unknown, rather than fight it.

When a crowd screams at a horror movie, afterwards, you'll often hear laughter. This is the value of postmodern science fiction horror films: the laugh after the scream.

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Bibliography

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