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The Contendings of Alex Proyas and Egyptologists: A Review of 'Gods of Egypt'.

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Popular interest in Ancient Egypt continues with *Gods of Egypt* (2016), directed by Alex Proyas and following closely behind three other films featuring ancient Egypt in recent years: *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), *The Pyramid* (2014) and *X-Men Apocalypse* (2016). The plot is very loosely based on an Ancient Egyptian story entitled *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*. In the original story, Horus and Seth present their cases to be king after the death of Osiris to the Ennead, a group of nine gods, in a court setting, and they take part in competitions to determine the rightful ruler. The film follows two mortal characters, Zaya and Bek, as they help Horus to reclaim his place as king of Egypt after his uncle, Set, murders his father and blinds him. Financially, the film was a costly failure grossing just \$150 million worldwide only slightly above its huge \$140 million budget, and even before the film's official release, there was a public outcry over the casting of white actors in lead roles when the studio released promotional posters in early November 2015. Both the studio and Alex Proyas issued separate apologies soon after.¹ *Gods of Egypt* (2016) is of some interest to those studying receptions of Ancient Egypt, but it is a dismal film by itself with several shortcomings that are irrespective of its subject matter and this writer's interests. Historical fiction, in whatever form of media it takes, does not necessarily have to take its source material, whatever that may be, seriously in order to be successful - and indeed many do not since their purpose is not to inform but to entertain, and that is why it is interesting to study them and the choices a production team makes. In this instance, *Gods of Egypt* displays the director's clear interest in Egyptian material by his choice to adapt an ancient myth and some of his subtle references to historical practices discussed later, but it also shows his uneasiness, particularly in his casting decisions and reliance on established tropes.

The film begins with a narrator introducing the background exposition of the plot over footage of a shadowy space filled with vaguely Egyptian-looking statues and

¹ *Forbes* 2015: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2015/11/27/exclusive-lionsgate-responds-to-gods-of-egypt-whitewashing-controversy/#19d02e2531f4>.

carvings that are revealed through light to illustrate the narration. The scene then cuts and the camera dramatically flies over a CGI landscape introducing us to the fantasy Egypt of the film. Unfortunately, throughout the runtime the audience are never really active discoverers, since the film's side-plots, character motivations, and back stories are all told to us through narration or character dialogue, and as a result feel very unnatural and clunky. Dialogue between characters is never natural or believable and at times it is faintly embarrassing. The screenwriting leaves a great deal to be desired overall. Consequently, the decision to drive the story this way makes for rather uninteresting filmmaking and as a result of it, plot points can be missed upon first viewings. Multiple viewings are not recommended.

This over-use of passive discovery may be explained by the film's video game style. Nowadays, cinema and video games share very similar qualities, with video games becoming increasingly cinematic in their scope and quality. *Gods of Egypt* could have easily been a cinematic video game, rather than a film and with a mobile game released shortly after it opened in cinemas it does make me wonder whether this was deliberately explicit.² Traditionally in video games, players view storylines through cut-scenes before engaging in an interactive sequence. There is a similar set-up in *Gods of Egypt*. The 'cut-scenes' involve characters receiving instructions or otherwise gaining information or items to assist them preceded by expensive set-pieces; for example, Bek stealing Horus' eye after defeating several traps, numerous fight scenes in various 'exotic' locations, and an attempt to solve the Sphinx's riddle. All of these scenes had distinct imagery that reinforced the idea of a game such as the ease of movement to areas of widely varying geographical features with little explanation. In one fight scene the action is slowed down in certain places to emphasise hits, and the fight moves themselves are reminiscent of similar sequences in games such as *The Prince of Persia* and *Assassins Creed*. The connection to video games was made abundantly clear by this exchange between Bek and Horus when facing gigantic worms sent by Set; 'How do you know they have a weak spot?' 'I don't. But they must, right?' This style made the overall structure of the film feel very disjointed at times. The relevance of scenes and their relation to one another was not always clear and could feel jarring. The editing

² Hannley 2016: <http://www.hardcoregamer.com/2016/02/17/gods-of-egypt-movie-tie-in-game-gets-a-surprise-release/193462/>.

between scenes could have solved this problem slightly by making the transitions easier for the audience to follow. Instead, the editing and choice of scene order exacerbated an already confusing film. Whilst many films follow a similar style pattern, they do so with a much better degree of success, as *Gods of Egypt's* overall narrational execution was clumsy throughout.

The world of the film is obviously a fantasy world in which a version of the myth plays out, a point the director, Alex Proyas, stressed in several Facebook posts:

I do not care much for reality. What I love about making movies is that I can create worlds - a bit God-like isn't it? When I set out to make GODS OF EGYPT [sic] I looked at the "givens" of the project - god-like beings who could transform into armoured "battle-beasts", and thought about what kind of world they would exist in. It sure wouldn't be the earth as we understood it - so I decided the story would not take place on Earth at all.³

For Proyas, this, along with the tried and tested 'artistic license' excuse, seemed ample enough reason to explain his predominantly white cast:

My movie is not intended to be "history". It is inspired by myth, a fantasy film - a work of the imagination. Therefore, under the rules of creative license and artistic freedom of expression, I cast the actors I considered right for the roles.⁴

These comments, made after his apology, betray Proyas' lack of basic understanding of the issue he was apologising for. The issue was less about the film being historically accurate in its casting than it was about representation. A film set in Egypt, even a fantasy Egypt, should have diverse casting. There should be no debate on that point, and it is distasteful to the extreme for directors to point to aspects such as financial concerns and production limitations as reasons for their decisions; something both Alex Proyas and Ridley Scott did when they were

³ Proyas, *Facebook*, 16th March 2016.

⁴ Proyas, *Facebook*, 28th January 2016.

criticised.⁵ Proyas has an obvious interest in Ancient Egypt and its culture, but does not want to insert Egyptians into his narrative, choosing instead to distance his vision of the myth from its origins in a very visual way. Additionally, most of the actors maintained an indistinctive British accent for the roles which is a routine feature of other films with similar subjects, thus further distancing a project from reality. Both directors explained that their films needed famous actors to get them made in the first place. However, in 2012 *Life of Pi* was released and featured, amongst its lead actors, a CGI tiger and the then unknown actor, Suraj Sharma. It went on to gross \$600 million worldwide, won an Oscar and was critically acclaimed, proving that you can indeed make a film with an unknown, diverse cast.

Although Proyas has stated that the film is a complete fantasy, there are moments where it is evident that some homework has been done. In one scene Bek travels to confront Horus who has taken refuge in his parent's tomb. Outside, on the tomb steps are offerings of food and flowers left by the mortal population. This was a nice visual nod to actual religious practices from Ancient Egypt that had been re-worked for the purposes of the film and is an example of morally acceptable artistic licencing that Proyas got confused with diverse casting. The film's interpretation of the afterlife as a physical journey taken by the deceased was also a good concept - albeit leaning heavily on horror mise-en-scene. There is even an attempt at Egyptological humour when Thoth tries to deduce the 'truth' of lettuce and Horus rips it away from him yelling, 'It's lettuce!.' In the myth, *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, lettuce plays a vital role in the final verdict of the legal battle between Horus and Seth and was associated with fertility and the god, Min, which has led to some overanalyses of lettuce by popular publications. The Egyptian mise-en-scene that appears in the film follows a standard used by the majority of films featuring Ancient Egypt in that it is used to create an exotic space over creating 'authenticity', and it usually carries connotations of excess and indulgence influenced by Victorian paintings, such as the works of Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Edwin Long. Indeed, much of the film speaks of excess overtly and covertly – the excessive budget, the huge obelisk Set commissions and the sets all convey indulgence which is popularly associated with Ancient Egypt. However, in two instances, the physical journey of the afterlife and

⁵ Foundas, *Variety*, 25th November 2014.

Ra's Sun Boat, Proyas seems to have specifically chosen and thought about two difficult Egyptian concepts to render on screen with success. This may be because these two concepts resonated with Proyas' fantasy vision, but it is interesting to see one director's take on complex Egyptian theology in a popularised setting.

Cinematic costume for Ancient Egyptians is usually one of the details that can cause headaches for filmmakers. The Ancient Egyptian military, in particular, are usually coded in a very 'Romanised' way with red cloaks, armour and shields. While none of those garments are explicitly Roman, the visual language that has built up in ancient world cinema has meant that combining these elements together gives a specific tonal connotation. In one scene Set addresses his army who are clad in dark red armour with gold face masks carrying suspiciously Hoplite looking shields. In *The Egyptian* (1954), Victor Mature, as Horemheb, is given a similar treatment and looks much more like a Roman General rather than the Egyptian General he plays. The casting of Gerard Butler as Set further reinforces the visual similarities to films such as *300* (2006). Further to this, there is a tendency to make overt and covert references to the extra-terrestrial in cinematic Egypt ranging from *Stargate* (1994) to subtle mise-en-scene details in *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016). In *Gods of Egypt* it is in Ra's sun boat that we find these references. I praise the rendering of a difficult concept on-screen – the daily journey of the sun boat was actually very good in this film, but the mise-en-scene of the scene alluded to space and by association to aliens. To non-specialists, Ra's sun boat could have easily been interpreted as a spacecraft and it was certainly visually coded that way. From the comments made by Proyas, he clearly did not intend for his world to be seen as an earthly environment. The fringe theories of Ancient Egypt's supposed connections to the extra-terrestrial have been circulating for decades and cinema's continued use of these theories perpetuates the idea that Ancient Egyptian culture is somehow descended from space in popular spheres.

The characterisation of the gods was understandably simplified to serve the specific needs of the story but Élodie Yung, who plays Hathor, was probably the best thing about the film. She gave a convincing performance and created subtlety and nuance in a film that desperately lacked both. Hathor was a surprise in a movie whose main villain was, at times, very disparaging towards women. Hathor enters into a

relationship with Set in an attempt to save herself from the fate of the other dissident gods. Throughout the runtime she is undermined by other characters and is the subject of sexist comments. During one scene, Set goes to murder his ex-wife Nephthys and tells Hathor that they 'will end up like that one day'. One of Set's demons snubs Hathor with her line 'Pretty girl, you don't belong in battle' before Hathor rescues Bek and Horus from the giant worms the demons ride. Later when Hathor reunites with her lover Horus, he accuses her of dressing to please Set before she dryly informs him that she dresses to please herself. This line from Horus is even more grating when it is considered that Hathor's costume has hardly changed throughout the film. Hathor could have been a very one-dimensional character full of the clichés and tropes that a label like the goddess of love would attract, however Yung's performance allowed her to step away from the more obvious pitfalls and gave some refreshing and unexpected twists to the character.

Gods of Egypt, at a fundamental level, suffered from a complete lack of directorial self-restraint. Every whim and fancy seems to have made it into the film. The gods appear physically taller than the mortal population, bleed gold and can transform into mechanical animal headed humanoids. Whilst some of this fits well with Ancient Egyptian art conventions, the overall effect was of a sensory overload, especially when coupled with the heavily CGled sequences. Alex Proyas, like the Wachowski sisters with *Jupiter Ascending* (2015) before him, created a world that was too big for the runtime. The studio and director had hoped that *Gods of Egypt* would begin a series of films and the ending would suggest this as the story was left with open questions,⁶ and I believe this is why some scenes felt displaced and explains the excessive exposition relayed through narration and dialogue. The film was hoped to be an introduction to a much bigger world and story which thankfully never materialised. Despite Alex Proyas's hopes of creating an independent franchise, this film deviates very little from the status quo of films featuring Ancient Egypt relaying the usual tropes audiences have come to expect; exotic indulgence, oversized sets, mysticism and fantasy. Sadly, the use of white actors and British accents are also hallmarks of such films; for example Evelyn Carnarhan in *The Mummy* (1999) and

⁶ Faughnder, *Los Angeles Times*, 2016: <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-movie-projector-gods-of-egypt-20160224-story.html>; Groves, 2015 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/dongroves/2015/12/15/the-gods-of-egypt-alex-proyas-grapples-with-a-size-issue-in-fantasy-adventure/#57ff18c05e6a>.

Helen Grosvenor in *The Mummy* (1932) are both Egyptian characters, but are played by white Europeans using British accents for the role. This fantasy world building that draws on the ancient world has been argued by Tony Keen in his blog, *Memorabilia Antonina*, to be influenced by *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.⁷ He argues that ancient world films need to be seen in the wider of genre of fantasy epic and that to non-specialists the lines between the two are not as clear. He states:

The shadow of *Lord of the Rings* means that creators of cinematic epics with a pre-modern setting are looking for other stories with magic or monsters.⁸

This certainly seems to be the context in which *Gods of Egypt* was made and would fit with some popular impressions of Ancient Egypt overall. The choice to adapt an Egyptian myth and to include concepts such as Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife and Ra's Sun Boat indicate an interest in Egyptian material from the director, but the awkward screenwriting, disjointed scenes and inexcusable whitewashing mean that this interest was not as well realised as it perhaps could have been. As discussed earlier, historical fiction does not need to take its source material seriously or promote a 'true' re-telling of events. *Gods of Egypt* certainly does not because it is much more dynamic than *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* where much of the myth is taken up by court scenes and lengthy discussions. Future projects may well see more ventures into Egypt as it is fertile ground for pre-modern settings featuring magic or monsters.

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⁷ Keen 2015: <http://tonykeen.blogspot.co.uk/2015/09/an-alternative-model-for-looking-at.html>.

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