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Review of *Raised by Wolves* by Lobke Minter

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DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF RAISING CHILDREN?

Review by Lobke Minter

Guzikowski, Aaron Fuller, creator. *Raised by Wolves*. Performances by Amanda Collin, Abubakar Salim, Winta McGrath, Niamh Algar, and Travis Fimmel, HBO Max, 2020. Television.

In the opening scenes, *Raised by Wolves* (2020) invokes Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome who were raised by a she-wolf in a cave, as twelve frozen human embryos land on a new planet. These embryos are to be raised by two androids, Mother and Father, in order to start a new human civilisation. The austere landscape of the planet, Kepler-22b, is a telling choice as a setting for this series. Even though the planet itself exists, discovered in December 2011 as an exoplanet orbiting within the habitable zone of the sun-like star Kepler-22, the planet itself is an otherworldly and grim reality that this unusual twenty-second-century family needs to survive¹.

While *Raised by Wolves* is writer Aaron Fuller Guzikowski's first foray into Science Fiction, it is definitely not Ridley Scott's who directs the first two episodes and is an executive producer on the series. Those familiar with Scott's cinematic approach will find interesting visual resonances to his earlier work. The aesthetic of the smooth hulls of the spacecraft and the birth technology evokes *Alien* (1979), while the dark tones and low lighting used in the series are similar to the cinematic approach of *Blade Runner* (1982). However, the pacing and tone of *Raised* differ quite substantially from both, by being more methodical and tense. The tension is particularly well-executed by the use of long sweeping shots of the desolate alien landscape and lingering attention to facial expressions which are unexpectedly interrupted by violent bursts of frenetic action or explosions of visceral horror. The thematic concerns are also not unusual given Scott's oeuvre, with an Earth deemed uninhabitable after a seismic war (in this instance between believers and atheists), possibly empathetic androids and a generally dim view of humanity. As each episode unfolds more about the Earth that was and how Mother and Father raise their children, this series is significant in taking Science Fiction tropes and subverting them in a way that destabilises the viewer's expectations. Initially, it seems to be gearing up as a 'pioneer' Science Fiction plot; however, the deeper philosophical questions the show poses create a narrative scope that elevates the series beyond being focused purely on survival.

Rather than focusing on the show's exploration of religion, science and body horror, this review reflects on the figures of Mother, performed by Amanda Collin, and Father, portrayed by Abubakar Salim. This parental duo stands, clad in silvery latex, at the centre of the debate around nature versus nurture, broader questions of what differentiates a human being from an android, and

whether there is a difference in behaviour when intelligence is programmed or artificial rather than innate. While these questions are not ground-breaking within themselves or within the genre, the performances of Collin and Salim brilliantly nuance these questions as they relate to Mother and Father and the impact it has on their human children. Both Collin and Salim are able to harness a neutral affect and the deliberate movements expected of a machine while also showing moments of empathy and connection with the children, as well as disagreeing with each other on how to parent most effectively.

While both Mother and Father are androids, right from the start, there are distinct differences between them. They agree on their programming and their mission to start a thriving atheist colony, and effectively raise their children and prepare them for survival on the planet. However, as Father removes the babies from the synthetic womb system which brought them to term - powered by Mother - the final baby, number six of generation one, is not breathing. Mother asks to hold the baby, while Father suggests breaking it down and feeding it to the five that have survived so that the proteins are not wasted. The baby does start breathing, and they name him after their creator Champion. This first moment of difference continues, and after twelve years, all covered during the first episode, only Champion has survived, leaving the question as to whether Mother and Father, or perhaps androids more generally, are effective parents.

The way in which the story evolves highlights this question consistently, as Champion initially has no doubts that "No matter what happened Mother and Father would always keep us safe." ("Raised by Wolves," episode 1), but as he grows and his 'siblings' are lost one by one this belief is shaken. As a ship of believers crashes onto the planet, he finds himself in contact with other children who see androids as machines or 'fake' humans leading him to further question and resist Mother and Father, asking them to stop pretending, "I know it is not real, how you look at me" ("Pentagram," episode 2). While Champion grapples with his feelings towards the androids that raised him, the dynamic between Mother and Father also takes strain as they start having very different views of their mission. Their difference is revealed as potentially stemming from the android models that they are. Father is a service model, programmed to make 'dad jokes' to lighten the atmosphere, and his main incentive is to be useful to the family. He is endearing and ultimately long-suffering. Mother, however, is an android model known as a Necromancer, a weapon used during the war that ended human habitation on Earth. She has been reprogrammed to be the mother of a new humanity but is able to fly and destroy lifeforms with a shrill banshee-like cry. Essentially, Mother is now the she-wolf of the Roman myth, dangerous and feral, with a climbing death toll reflecting just how threatening she is.

Reprogramming a weapon as a primary caregiver seems an odd choice for someone who wants to create a new Earth without war. However, as the realities of Mother's power becomes clear and the threat posed by contact with other survivors increases, strange creatures that hunt at night and shadows that haunt this family steadily erode this utopic vision. The tension in the story between what is hoped for and what is the reality, between Mother's ability to kill without compunction and her literal howling for the loss of her children, arguably is what makes the series work. Essentially, it becomes clear that the planet has a history that all the settlers from Earth, whether Mother

and Father or the believers whose Ark crashes on its surface are completely ignorant of. It is this ignorance that is their greatest peril, as they all assume that the planet is uninhabited and a blank slate for them to write the future of humanity on. This blank slate is also invoked as Mother and Father are confronted with the results of how they have raised Champion. The nature/nurture debate finds its nexus point in the boy's sense of self. It becomes clear that there are elements of his identity that the androids could not anticipate for all their programming. He increasingly insists on being led by empathy rather than reason. While Father takes this in his stride, encouraging Champion to test the world independently, Mother struggles with Champion's need for self-definition. These dynamics echo familiar family systems, where viewers could almost forget that Champion's parents are androids until Mother takes flight or Father shows his superhuman strength.

With the second season in production, it seems likely that some of the planet's history, only hinted at in season one, will be explored. With more human survivors finding their way to the planet at the end of season one, this time atheists rather than believers, it remains to be seen whether peaceful cohabitation is at all possible. *Raised by Wolves* plays with the alterity of android parents and orchestrates various material and symbolic juxtapositions, which dynamically shift and change as the plot and various subplots develop. The questions posed throughout, even as to whether androids should raise children, remain answered and unanswered at the end of season one. Ultimately, *Raised by Wolves* is a story that reflects on how parental features could be synthetic rather than biological, proving that a more philosophical approach can coexist with phenomenal cinematography, riveting action and an on-the-edge-of-your-seat Science Fiction watching experience.

NOTES

1. See Dunbar, Brian. "NASA's Kepler Mission Confirms Its First Planet in Habitable Zone of Sun-like Star." NASA. 05 December 2011. <https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/kepler/news/kepscicon-briefing.html>

BIONOTE

Lobke Minter is a PhD student at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Her thesis, titled "Speculative Gothic Fiction and the Scar as Trauma Trope: Imagining Hope through Horror" seeks to explore the scar as an expression of resilience. Her research interests include Dark Romanticism, specifically imaginative explorations, Gothic expressions of Speculative Fiction, and Science Fiction across a variety of subgenres.