

# *The Myth of Pandora in Colm McCarthy's The Girl with All the Gifts (2016) and Alex Garland's Annihilation (2018)*

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This article examines the myth of Pandora as a narrative structure within contemporary science-fiction cinema. While traditionally seen as the source of chaos and misfortune, Pandora has also been interpreted as a figure of nature and transformation. Drawing on Jane Ellen Harrison's early 20th-century critique of Hesiod's dominant version of the myth, the paper explores how science-fiction films revisit and reimagine this ambiguous figure. Focusing on *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016) and *Annihilation* (2018), the analysis investigates how the Pandora myth – seen through the lens of feminist theory and ecocritical perspectives – resonates in portrayals of female protagonists who confront biological catastrophe and ecological mutation. The article introduces the concept of the "Pandora theme" as cultural DNA consisting of three core traits: pioneering femininity, transgression, and alignment with nature. These traits serve as a framework for interpreting mythic continuity in cinematic storytelling.

**KEYWORDS:** Pandora myth, myth in film, science fiction cinema, *The Girl with All the Gifts*, *Annihilation*, feminist film theory

Pandora, the first human woman in Greek mythology and the wife of Epimetheus, brother of Prometheus, is best known for unleashing the world's misfortunes, allowing them to spread. Her infamy endures, and her name remains embedded in popular consciousness through the phrase "Pandora's box" – a metaphor for something that, once opened, triggers an uncontrollable cascade of problems, disrupting order and bringing disharmony.

However, classicist Jane Ellen Harrison opens her 1900 paper *Pandora's Box*, published in "The Journal of Hellenic Studies," with a striking assertion: "No myth is more familiar than that of Pandora, none perhaps has been so completely misunderstood." Indeed, much of what has shaped contemporary perceptions of Pandora has been disseminated only since the Renaissance and originates from a single ancient author – Hesiod. Harrison highlights how later interpretations overwhelmingly rely on *Theogony* and *Works and Days* (ca. 700 B.C.), often neglecting other versions of the myth.<sup>[1]</sup> Among these is a per-

[1] Jane E. Harrison, *Pandora's Box*, "The Journal of Hellenic Studies" 1900, vol. 20, p. 99.

spective in which Pandora is not merely an agent of chaos – whether consciously or unconsciously – but rather a representative of nature itself, embodying the fundamental forces that govern it.

The cultural reception of Pandora, therefore, unfolds as a narrative of dichotomies: the natural order versus human intervention, female and male perspectives in storytelling, and, ultimately, harmony versus disharmony – or rather, the ways in which we define these very concepts.

## Aim and Scope

In discussing Pandora's story, which, as Harrison notes, "has attained such wide popularity in modern times," she primarily references literature and painting, likely without yet considering cinema, which had only just emerged. Nevertheless, cinema embraces mythological themes as eagerly as literature and painting do. What intrigues me most, however, is the realm of science-fiction films, which, much like myths, grapple with the unknown, the unexplained, and the transformations yet to come.<sup>[2]</sup> Within these narratives, a new mythology takes shape – one that often intertwines with familiar figures and motifs from established mythological traditions. In this way, Pandora continues to resurface in popular culture.

By envisioning the future, science-fiction filmmakers articulate contemporary anxieties and dilemmas, frequently drawing on the conventions of horror in the process. Pandora emerges at the intersection of two critical areas of interest for both filmmakers and film scholars. On one hand, she provokes reflections on the role of femininity in these narratives, often cast in a negative light – a theme extensively explored by Barbara Creed in her concept of the *monstrous feminine*. Creed notes that:

The horror film is populated by female monsters, many of which seem to have evolved from images that haunted the dreams, myths and artistic practices of our forebears many centuries ago. [...] Although a great deal has been written about the horror film, very little of that work has discussed the representation of woman-as-monster. Instead, emphasis has been on woman as victim of the (mainly male) monster. Why has woman-as-monster been neglected in feminist theory and in virtually all significant theoretical analyses of the popular horror film? After all, this image is hardly new.<sup>[3]</sup>

On the other hand, Pandora is linked to representations of ecological catastrophe in speculative narratives about humanity's survival.<sup>[4]</sup>

[2] See: Thomas C. Sutton, Marilyn Sutton, *Science Fiction as Mythology*, "Western Folklore" 1969, no. 28(4).

[3] Creed's book was first published in 1993, but its second edition – incorporating the latest films – was released in 2024. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 2nd ed., Routledge, London and New York 2024, p. 3.

[4] See: Andrew Milner, J.R. Burgmann, *Science Fiction and Climate Change: A Sociological Approach*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2020; *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, eds. Gerry Canavan, Kim S. Robinson, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown 2014; Grażyna Gajewska, *Ekofantastyka: Ujęcie sympojetyczne*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2023.

This paper seeks to deepen the understanding of the Pandora myth within sci-fi/horror films. While feminist and ecocritical discourses engage with this myth, they tend to invoke it only as a contextual reference, rather than subjecting it to thorough mythological analysis. Yet Pandora's story is particularly compelling in this regard, as its function as a vessel for certain ideas and narratives is not merely a modern phenomenon. This characteristic was already present in antiquity – perhaps explaining why the myth has remained so persistently "completely misunderstood."

For my case study, I have selected two films: *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), directed by Colm McCarthy and adapted from M.R. Carey's novel,[5] and *Annihilation* (2018), directed by Alex Garland and based on the first book in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy.[6] Both are British-American productions.

*The Girl with All the Gifts* is set in a post-apocalyptic world where humanity has been ravaged by a pandemic. Most people have fallen victim to the *Ophiocordyceps* fungus, which takes control of the nervous system, leading either to their deaths or to their transformation into so-called "Hungries", essentially zombies, though never explicitly named as such. This world closely resembles that of *The Last of Us* (both the *Naughty Dog* video game and the HBO series), where a similar fungal infection threatens humanity's survival.[7] The film's central human protagonist, Helen (Gemma Arterton), is a teacher at a military base where second-generation children-Hungries – born to infected mothers – are detained and studied. Unlike the first generation, these children can control their instincts and behave like humans most of the time. Among them, Melanie (Sennia Nanua) stands out; a kind and intelligent girl, she idolizes her teacher and eagerly listens to her stories about Greek mythology, including an explicit reference to the myth of Pandora.

By contrast, *Annihilation* unfolds in a world much like our own, but one that has been disrupted by the emergence of a mysterious phenomenon known as the Shimmer (referred to as *Area X* in VanderMeer's novel). This expanding zone alters everything within its boundaries, causing rapid and radical mutations in plants, animals, and ultimately, humans. The film's protagonist, Lena (Natalie Portman), is a scientist and biologist who joins an expedition to study this strange occurrence. While *Annihilation* contains no direct references to the Pandora myth, both the novel and the film lend themselves to such an interpretation. The nature of the Shimmer – along with the actions of the central

[5] M.R. Carey, *The Girl with All the Gifts*, Hachette UK 2014, e-book.

[6] Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation (Southern Reach Trilogy)*, HarperCollins Publishers 2014, e-book.

[7] In Mike Corey's book, a direct source of inspiration appears: the characters watch an actual episode of BBC's *Planet Earth* (2006), where David Atten-

borough explains how *Ophiocordyceps* spores can take control of an ant. The same episode inspired the creators of *The Last of Us*. PlayStation, *Grounded: The Making of The Last of Us*, YouTube, 28.02.2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yH5MgEb-BOps&t=80s> (accessed: 1.02.2025).

character – aligns with key elements traditionally associated with the Pandora theme.<sup>[8]</sup>

In this study, I approach myth as a narrative structure. My perspective is informed by the work of Polish literary scholar Janina Abramowska, who introduces the concept of the *name theme* (Pol. *temat imienny*), used in expressions such as the “Odysseus theme”, the “Prometheus theme”, or, in this case, the “Pandora theme.” According to Abramowska, every mythological name that can be recognized in the actions of a character within a given cultural text alludes to a fundamental situation, a specific narrative structure, or a distinctive personal characteristic or stance.<sup>[9]</sup> Thus, identifying a name theme – even when it is not explicitly referenced – carries with it a range of meanings that shape the narrative. In this study, I refer to these embedded mythological elements as *cultural DNA*.<sup>[10]</sup>

The cultural DNA of Pandora consists of key components that have endured across various iterations of the myth, forming the core of her identity. In the case of Pandora, three essential elements stand out:

1. Primal/Pioneering Femininity
2. An Act of Transgression
3. Alignment with Nature.

These elements, woven into different narratives, influence how Pandora is interpreted and reimagined across cultural texts, including science-fiction cinema.

### Primal/Pioneering Femininity

According to the most well-known version of her myth, Pandora was the first human woman. As part of his vengeance against Prometheus, who had stolen fire from the gods and given it to humanity, Zeus decided to present Prometheus’ brother, Epimetheus, with a *kalon kakon* – a beautiful evil. In Hesiod’s account, Pandora is moulded from clay by Hephaestus (in some versions, by Zeus himself). *Theogony* provides the following description of her creation:

But when he had made the **beautiful evil** to be the price for the blessing, he brought her out, delighting in the finery which the bright-eyed daughter of a mighty father had given her, to the place where the other gods and

[8] Barbara Creed further notes: “In *Annihilation* she is an extra-terrestrial force called the Shimmer (whose name recalls the classical Chimera) who produces mutated, nonhuman creations – some monstrous, some beautiful – such as crystal-like human trees.” Barbara Creed, *op. cit.*, p. 226. In contemporary genetics, a chimera is defined as an organism composed of genetically distinct cells. Homer described it in *The Iliad* as: “Chimaira, a beast of divine, not earthly lineage, a lion in front, a serpent behind, a goat in the mid-part, fearsomely breathing forth the fury of blazing fire”. [6.180–182] Homer, *The Iliad: A New Translation by Peter Green*, University of California Press, Oakland 2015, e-book, p. 124.

[9] Janina Abramowska, *Powtórzenia i wybory: Studia z tematologii i poetyki historycznej*, Rebis, Poznań 1995, pp. 36–37.

[10] The concept of cultural DNA was applied in my analysis of the Cassandra theme in my previous Polish-language publication. At the time, the identifying elements of this nominal theme were: (1) presumed madness, (2) the terror of prophecy, (3) a communication barrier. Patrycja Rojek, *Figura mitologicznej Kasandry w filmach science fiction*, “Images. The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication” 2020, no. 28(37), pp. 233–246.

men were. And wonder took hold of the deathless gods and mortal men when they saw that which was sheer guile, not to be withstood by men. For from her is the race of women and female kind: **of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble**, no helpmeets in hateful poverty, but only in wealth. [585–593][11]

Though Pandora is not explicitly named in this passage, her function is made clear: she is a trap for mortal men. Marina Warner highlights how, since the Renaissance, various authors have frequently compared Pandora to the biblical Eve. The most famous of these comparisons appears in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where Eve is described as being brought to life "in naked beauty more adorned, / More lovely, than Pandora, whom the gods / Endowed with all their gifts." [12] Warner identifies both figures as prototypes of the *femme fatale* – women who are irresistible yet blamed for catastrophe. [13] Similarly, Robert Graves dismisses Hesiod's version outright, declaring: "Hesiod's account of Prometheus, Epimetheus, and Pandora is not a genuine myth, but an antifeminist fable, probably of his own invention." [14]

Feminist discourse further underscores a crucial distinction established by Hesiod's version: Pandora was *made*, not *born* – crafted by one male god (Hephaestus) at the command of another (Zeus). This aspect is explored by Adrienne Mayor in her analysis of Pandora within science fiction, where she situates Pandora's origins within the concept of *biotechnē* – life that is artificially created. Mayor describes Pandora as "a manufactured maiden, a gift of Zeus, accepted by the 'foolish' Epimetheus, who eagerly welcomes her into his home." [15] She thus draws parallels between Pandora and cinematic female androids, such as the replicants in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), as well as the automaton Maria from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). [16]

Interestingly, neither *The Girl with All the Gifts* nor *Annihilation* explores Pandora's artificiality. Yet again, Hesiod's version is not the only one: earlier variants of the myth portray Pandora not as a manufactured being but as a figure emerging directly from the earth (an aspect I will further elaborate on in the final section of this paper). Nevertheless, in both films, the theme of pioneering status resonates strongly.

In *Annihilation*, Lena is part of the first all-female scientific expedition into the Shimmer. However, she is not the first person to enter the zone: previous missions, composed of male soldiers embodying military strength and a colonialist approach, have consistently ended in failure. What is most significant, however, is that Lena is the only member of

[11] Hesiod, *The Theogony*, [in:] *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, William Heinemann and The Macmillan Co., London and New York 1914*, p. 123.

[12] Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2000, p. 222.

[13] Ibidem, pp. 224–225.

[14] Robert Graves, *Greek Myths*, Penguin Books 2017, e-book.

[15] Adrienne Mayor, *Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2018, p. 158.

[16] Ibidem, pp. 160, 169.

her expedition to leave the Shimmer. The film's final scenes suggest that she is no longer the same person; like the plants and animals within the zone, her cells have undergone mutation. In VanderMeer's novel, these mutations enhance the protagonist, making her stronger and more resilient, ultimately leading her to a conscious decision to remain in Area X. In the film, Lena destroys the Shimmer, yet simultaneously carries its essence within her – perhaps allowing it to spread into the unsuspecting world. In the closing scene, she reunites with her husband (Oscar Isaac), who had also left the Shimmer but remained in a vegetative state until Lena's return. Together, they appear to herald a new era in human history, resembling a pair of primordial ancestors.

Meanwhile, in *The Girl with All the Gifts*, the known order of the world no longer exists – it has already been reset by the apocalypse, and a new order is taking shape. The pioneering role of the human woman, Helen, is tied to her integrity; she is the only one who treats the so-called plague offspring (the children born from the infection) with respect. However, it is Melanie who most fully embodies Pandora's fate. The novel's author, M.R. Carey (who also wrote the film's screenplay), includes a moment in which Melanie reflects that she wishes, like Pandora, she had no parents, as "the ghost of her parents' absence hovers around her, makes her uneasy."

The film explicitly establishes a parallel between Melanie and Pandora from the outset. In the exposition, as Helen reads the myth and the name *Pandora* is spoken, the camera lingers on Melanie, signalling their connection. With each choice she makes, she aligns herself more closely with her mythological counterpart, culminating in her ultimate act – opening Pandora's box. By releasing the pathogen that ensures the infection of the last remaining humans, she brings the era of humankind to an end and, in doing so, *births herself* (to use Barbara Creed's term),<sup>[17]</sup> ushering in a new epoch ruled by beings like her: highly intelligent, physically superior, and immune to the disease that decimated the old world.

## An Act of Transgression

Reflections on transgression form yet another common thread connecting the myths of the first women: the Greco-Roman Pandora and the Judeo-Christian Eve, both figures deeply embedded in moralistic discussions of boundary-crossing, in the latter case understood as original sin. Interestingly, in Pandora's case – even if we accept Hesiod's version – there remains some ambiguity as to whether the release of misfortunes could even have been avoided. *Works and Days* initially attributes the act explicitly to Pandora:

For ere this the tribes of men lived on earth remote and free from ills and hard toil and heavy sicknesses which bring the Fates upon men; for in misery men grow old quickly. But **the woman took off the great lid of the jar with her hands and scattered all these and her thought caused sorrow and mischief to men.** [90–96]

[17] Barbara Creed, op. cit., p. 198.

Yet, shortly afterward, Hesiod adds:

So is there no way to escape the will of Zeus. [105][18]

This aligns directly with the portrayal of Pandora as a trap for mortal men – a “tool” wielded by the almighty Zeus. Hesiod simultaneously places the blame on Pandora while also implying that events could not have unfolded differently. Interestingly, in both films analysed in this paper, the act of transgression by the female protagonist is performed consciously – it is neither dictated by a higher force nor the result of accident, chance, or ignorance. Instead, it is a deliberate choice. Before exploring whether this decision is made *evil-mindedly*, I would like to draw attention to one particular detail in the passage above.

In Hugh G. Evelyn-White’s translation, the phrase used is “took off the great lid of the jar.” Notably, there is no mention of a box. This discrepancy was highlighted by Jane Ellen Harrison, who pointed out that the phrase “Pandora’s box” is merely proverbial. The misunderstanding stems from a mistranslation of the word *pithos* as *pyxis*, a mistake that Harrison traces back to the 16th century:

The word jar is of course a fair translation of *pithos* so long as it is realized that *pithos* is a very large jar, that either stands on or is partly buried in the earth. It is when *pyxis* is rendered box, or still worse casket, that the mischief begins. Box connotes a certain portability, casket adds the idea of smallness and preciousness, both entirely foreign to the meaning of *pithos*.[19]

This change led to significant consequences, resulting in centuries of paintings and illustrations depicting Pandora with a small box – reinforcing the image of a curious woman peeking into a delicate container, expecting to find trinkets.

In the harsh, unwelcoming, and militarized spaces of *The Girl with All the Gifts* and *Annihilation*, there is likewise no room for a small, delicate prop. Melanie’s *pithos* is something entirely different – a plant-like structure that houses Ophiocordyceps pathogens. In the novel, Melanie herself explains:

“There are pods,” she says, pointing towards where the fungus wall is still burning. “In there. Pods full of seeds. Dr. Caldwell said this was the fungus’s mature form, and the pods were meant to break open and spread the seeds on the wind. But the pods are very tough, and they can’t open by themselves. Dr. Caldwell said they needed something to give them a push and make them open. She called it an environmental trigger.[20]

The girl speaks these words in a pivotal moment, having already ignited the fire that will serve as the environmental trigger. More precisely, she herself becomes that trigger. Melanie makes a conscious choice: she unleashes destruction to ensure the survival of those who have the potential to thrive, those like herself. She envisions them as the next generation, the ones who will rebuild the world: “They’ll be the next

[18] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, [in:] *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, op. cit., p. 9.

[19] Jane E. Harrison, *Pandora’s Box*, op. cit., p. 100.  
 [20] M.R. Carey, op. cit.

people. The ones who make everything okay again.”<sup>[21]</sup> In this way, Melanie, like Pandora, makes a decision that demands the sacrifice of the existing order but ultimately enables a new evolutionary stage of humanity.

Lena in *Annihilation* makes a strikingly similar choice. While her world is not threatened by a pathogen, it is subjected to relentless mutation. In Alex Garland’s film, the precise moment of transformation is ambiguous – there is no clear indication of when the protagonist’s body begins to change. However, in Jeff VanderMeer’s novel, this moment is explicitly defined: a fragment of a plant bursts open, releasing “a tiny spray of golden spores” that enter the protagonist’s nose. This detail reinforces the recurring fictional trope of fungi as a source of existential danger, mirroring contemporary anxieties about biological contamination and dehumanization.

The *pithos* in *Annihilation* – both in the novel and the film – is not a small physical object but a building: the lighthouse at the heart of the mutating zone. This structure extends both upward and downward, evoking a paradoxical sense of ascension and descent. In the novel, the protagonist obsesses over its architecture, noting early on: “Something about the idea of a tower that headed straight down played with a twinned sensation of vertigo and a fascination with structure.”<sup>[22]</sup> Similarly, in the film, Lena enters the lighthouse and descends into an underground chamber, where she confronts the mutating alien force. After her encounter, she does not simply escape – she carries the transformation within her, suggesting that the phenomenon she sought to destroy may, in fact, persist beyond the confines of the Shimmer.

Interestingly, the enormous size of the *pithos* is not without justification. Jane Ellen Harrison specifically described it as “partly buried in the earth”:

A large *pithos* is sunk deep into the ground. It has served as a grave, and the frequent use of *pithoi* for burial purposes is abundantly shown by excavations both at the Dipylon of Athens and at Aphidna.<sup>[23]</sup>

Harrison thus linked the opening of the *pithos* to the Athenian festival of *Pithoigia* – a ritual centred on the opening of graves, rooted in an ancient matriarchal cult of Gaia, whom Harrison speculated might have been synonymous with Pandora. The ritual, originally associated with the release of spirits, gradually came to be seen as ominous – something to be feared and suppressed. Ultimately, she concludes: “The worshippers of Zeus were the natural enemies of the All-Mother Pandora.”<sup>[24]</sup>

Positioning Pandora so definitively on the side of nature may invalid the question of her wrongdoing. If death is accepted as a natural process intrinsic to evolution, it ceases to be subject to moral judgment. The same perspective applies to the environmental trigger that Pandora’s

[21] Ibidem.

[22] Jeff VanderMeer, op. cit.

[23] Jane E. Harrison, op. cit., p. 101.

[24] Ibidem, p. 108.

counterparts provide in both films analysed in this paper. For Melanie, releasing the pathogen in the film's finale is a natural and inevitable act – one that aligns with the laws of nature. It represents the next step in human evolution. After all, the only “sin” of her generation is that they were born – born better adapted than humans to survive on an irreversibly transformed Earth. And in a struggle for survival, it is difficult to assign moral superiority to any one group over another.[25]

Similarly, the protagonist of *Annihilation*, as a biologist, understands that mutation, though in this case incomprehensible, indescribable, and uncontrollable, is also a form of opportunity. Rather than resisting it, she allows it to take its course. In the film's finale, she encapsulates this perspective when she speaks of the Shimmer: “It wasn't destroying. It was changing everything.”

The account of Pandora's creation by Hephaestus is, therefore, just one version of the myth – dominant due to Hesiod's influence but not the only one. Since Jane Ellen Harrison's early theories linking Pandora to the earth, various pieces of evidence have emerged to support this interpretation.[26] Some artistic representations of Pandora depict her emerging directly from the ground, reinforcing her connection to the natural world.[27] In some instances, she is explicitly identified as *Anesidora*, “she who sends up gifts from the soil,” a title that aligns with *Works and Days*, where Hesiod describes how, before being given to her husband, Pandora was adorned with divine gifts, including “lovely garlands, flowers of new-grown herbs” and a golden crown with “many creatures which the land and sea rear up” [577–584].[28] As early as 1890, A.H. Smith noted that this imagery suggests “Hesiod was conscious of Pandora's true significance.”[29] The epithet *Anesidora* indicates that Pandora may be more accurately described as “all-giving” rather than the widely accepted “all-gifted.” As a bestower and distributor, she was likely linked to deities associated with nature's generative and destructive forces.[30]

Both Colm McCarthy's film and M.R. Carey's novel appear not only to acknowledge this distinction but to deliberately leave it unresolved, embracing an ambiguous meaning in *The Girl with All the Gifts*. Indeed, Melanie is *gifted* – she is exceptionally intelligent, empathetic,

#### Alignment with Nature

[25] Barbara Creed writes: “Melanie's cannibalistic urges, however, are not her fault; she has been infected while in the womb. Her monstrousness is part of her nature but she draws on this as a source for her radical actions.” Barbara Creed, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

[26] However, as Flora P. Manakidou notes, this is “not unanimously accepted.” See: Flora P. Manakidou, *Pandora, Athena, the Kekropides, and the Erechtheides: Female Duality in Athenian Myth and Cult*, “Classics@” 2023, vol. 25, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HLNC.ESSAY:103900178> (accessed: 1.02.2025).

[27] For example, vase AN1896–1908 G.275, attributed to the Group of Polygnotos and dated 475 BC–425 BC.

[28] Hesiod, *The Theogony*, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

[29] A. Hamilton Smith, *The Making of Pandora*, “The Journal of Hellenic Studies” 1890, vol. 11, p. 283.

[30] The term *all-giving* is used in precisely this context by Robert Graves. Flora P. Manakidou explores this idea in greater detail. See: Flora P. Manakidou, *op. cit.*

and self-controlled, setting her apart from the other children. Yet the nature of her gift to humanity is ruthless. She makes the deliberate choice to release the pathogen, instantly eradicating the last of the old generation while securing the future of a new one – one better adapted to the transformed world. With this single act, she simultaneously unleashes destruction and establishes a new order, operating in accordance with the uncompromising laws of nature.

Lena in *Annihilation* makes an almost identical choice. As the only biologist on her team, she appears uniquely suited to engage with the unknown entity, viewing mutation not as a mere threat but as a potential evolutionary shift, or even a path to immortality. This perspective is evident in her statement long before she enters the Shimmer: “The cell doesn’t grow old, it becomes immortal. Keeps dividing, doesn’t die. We see aging as a natural process, but it’s actually a fault in our genes.” Her words suggest an openness to biological transformation, framing it not as an aberration but as a fundamental part of life itself. Meanwhile, the biologist in VanderMeer’s novel specializes in transitional environments, further emphasizing the theme of adaptation. She distinguishes between the beautiful, self-regulating changes that nature undergoes and certain human-induced transformations – those that have left the world “dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself.”<sup>[31]</sup>

Thus, in these films, change is not depicted as a disruption or deviation from harmony but rather as an inevitable and necessary process governed by its own laws. What is unnatural, by contrast, is humanity’s relentless effort to preserve the status quo at all costs, even when that status quo is no longer viable. This perspective aligns with what Richard Grusin has described as the *nonhuman turn*, a shift in thought that decouples human existence from its assumed centrality:

The nonhuman turn, more generally, is engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn towards and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies.<sup>[32]</sup>

Indeed, in both *The Girl with All the Gifts* and *Annihilation*, the individual human is no longer the priority, but humanity itself remains central – only in an altered, or perhaps even improved, form. This notion is reinforced by the fact that these transformative choices are made by two female protagonists, both following in Pandora’s footsteps. They act in the interests of humankind, but only on condition that it submits to the harsh laws of nature, embraces sacrifice, and operates in service of the *greater good* rather than individual survival.

This contrast becomes even more pronounced when compared to Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* (2014), in which a male protagonist faces a similar dilemma. With Earth dying, the most viable

[31] Jeff VanderMeer, op. cit.

[32] Richard Grusin, *Introduction*, [in:] *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. idem, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2015, p. vii.

plan for humanity's survival involves transporting a genetic seed bank to establish a new population elsewhere. Yet the film rejects this option in favour of a desperate mission to rescue all *currently existing* humans – clinging to the remnants of the old world rather than embracing transformation. While *Interstellar* affirms human exceptionalism and prioritizes preservation, *The Girl with All the Gifts* and *Annihilation* propose a different paradigm: survival through evolution, even at the cost of humanity's present form. In both films, the future is secured not by resisting change but by accepting nature's cycle of destruction and renewal – a perspective deeply embedded in the myth of Pandora.

In Minoan culture, women were intrinsically linked to nature – a reflection of the society's settled way of life, which fostered reverence for the fertile earth as the mother and sustainer of existence. Female representation in religious structures and systems of power was not questioned but rather assumed. This began to shift with the gradual displacement of Minoan civilization by the Mycenaeans, a society shaped by a male-centred ethos. As these nomadic conquerors reshaped cultural narratives, mythological stories, including those concerning women, were rewritten. Some heroines disappeared, others were vilified, and still others were transformed into monstrous figures of terror and repulsion. The mother goddess was replaced by Zeus, the patriarchal ruler of Olympus.

The myth of Pandora encapsulates this ideological shift. Her story has been shaped not only by the ambiguity of her fate but also by the ways in which different cultures have repurposed it to reflect prevailing power structures. In 1908, Jane Ellen Harrison observed:

Such myths are a necessary outcome of the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy, and the shift itself, despite a seeming retrogression, is a necessary stage in a real advance. Matriarchy gave to women a false, because a magical, prestige. With patriarchy came inevitably the facing of a real fact – the fact of the greater natural weakness of women. Man, the stronger, when he outgrew his belief in the magical potency of woman, proceeded, by a pardonable practical logic, to despise and enslave her as the weaker.<sup>[33]</sup>

In contemporary cinematic narratives, these power structures are once again being renegotiated. It is significant that both *Annihilation* and *The Girl with All the Gifts* are explicitly female-centred stories, where modern protagonists retrace the mythological path once walked by Pandora. One could imagine an alternative scenario, one where these narratives conform to traditionally male heroic archetypes, casting Lena or Melanie in the mould of Theseus, Odysseus, or Heracles. But that would be an entirely different kind of story.

## Conclusion

[33] Jane E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1908, p. 284.

Yet even as science fiction/horror films engage with the Pandora myth, they continue to explore the same underlying fears – loss of control, contagion, and the zombie-like or alien *other*. What differs, however, are the perspectives from which these fears are examined. Garland's and McCarthy's films are not tales of salvation or heroic world-saving missions. Instead, they blur the lines between guilt, disharmony, and catastrophe, refusing simplistic moral resolutions. What resonates most strongly are their philosophical reflections on humanity's deep entanglement with nature, suggesting new forms of coexistence – symbiotic relationships in which human beings are shaped and strengthened by animal, plant, or even fungal elements within their own genetic makeup. In this view, surrendering to nature does not necessarily mean being defeated by it, but rather evolving with it, embracing transformation as an essential condition of survival.

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