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Another Life, season 1

Marta F. Suarez



Another Life, season 1. Halfire Entertainment, distributed by Netflix, 2019.

ANOTHER Life is a Netflix series currently awaiting the release of its second season. Its first season, released in 2019, consisted of ten 60-minute episodes. The plot is quite straightforward and moves between a narrative on Earth and a narrative in space. In an unspecified year in the future, a mysterious alien device arrives on Earth and settles on an open field in the US. Six months later, the scientists are still looking for the purpose of the artefact, only establishing that it emits code to Pi Canis Majoris. Not wanting to wait any longer, the government sends an interstellar ship to the signal's objective, hoping to make direct contact with the alien civilisation. The expedition is led by Niko Breckinridge (Katee Sackhoff), newly appointed captain of the *Salvare*. Meanwhile, on Earth, her husband Erik Wallace (Justin Chatwin), continues to lead the research to decipher the code.

The series often nods to other sci-fi screen media, moving between echoing popular scenes, emulating genre styles, and replicating familiar narratives. Its serialised structure converges with an episodic approach that gives the series a pastiche feeling. Whereas the overall plot has striking similarities with the decoding plot of *Contact* (1997), *Interstellar* (2014) and *Arrival* (2016), the individual episodes approach a variety of styles, narratives and sub-genres. For example, nods to sci-fi horror take inspiration from the aesthetics of *Nightflyers* (2018) and *Prometheus* (2012), including arachnids reminiscent of those in *Starship Troopers* (1997) or *Lost in Space* (1998). *Alien* (1979) is echoed several times throughout the series. Not only is the chestbuster scene almost replicated, but the first scenes in the *Salvare* evoke those in the *Nostromo*, yet with a darker atmosphere. If in *Alien* the crew wakes up in a quiet and serene ship, emphasised by the soundtrack and long shots (as if not to disturb), in the *Salvare*, Niko wakes up alone and weakened, in close-ups that emphasise the discomfort and dutch angles that suggest that not all is well. As it turns out, the ship is not where it should be and the events will only take it further from Earth in a plot reminiscent of *Event Horizon* (1997), *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), *Stargate Universe* (2009-2010), or *Lost in Space* (2018-). By the end of the season,

Nikko discovers that the alien race who sent the artefact, the Achaia, are decimating civilisations and implanting chips into hosts, connecting with core elements of *The Mind Snatchers* (1972) and the go'uld in the *Stargate* universes. The references are many and varied, making the series a kind of kaleidoscope where well-known tropes change shape but are still recognisable.

The originality of the series does not come from the plot. Indeed, some of it might result in clichés, and some of the characters are flat archetypes, with minimal internal conflict or character evolution except for Niko, Eric and the ship's AI, William (Samuel Anderson). One of the key differences between this and other sci-fi crews assembled to go into space is their very young age, their diversity and the YA feel to the character-driven drama that they create. If in *The 100* (2014-) the choice to depict younger characters is supported by the plot, in *Another Life* this decision brings a level of incoherence to the narrative, which suffers for it. The explanation, although given, contrasts with other aspects of the narrative. A member affirms that they have been chosen because their youth gives them the readiness to act, as opposed to a cautious disposition, which would characterise older crews. For the same reasons, space crews have abandoned uniforms, seen as outdated, and now are able to make their own fashion choices. Nevertheless, on Earth the military is still wearing uniforms, and all decision-makers are significantly older, which in a way contradicts the provided reasoning. It is also unclear why the crew only meet each other for the first time upon embarking on their voyage or why the former captain of the *Salvare* is part of the crew when he clearly is resentful of the change. The crew always questions the captain's decisions, and actions are often rushed or merely illogical. The audience is left to wonder why the government has sent such an inexperienced group to make first direct contact with the alien life, whose intentions are unclear. The series' focus on young and attractive characters and their interpersonal conflicts create narratives conventional in YA fiction, which contrasts with the space given to the internal conflicts of older characters.

The only other older member of the crew is First Officer Ian Yerxa (Tyler Hoechlin), the previous captain of the *Salvare*, who is killed almost immediately and replaced by his girlfriend, Cas Isakovic (Elizabeth Faith Ludlow). Michelle Vargas (Jessica Camacho) is the Communications Officer. Meanwhile, the engineering team is composed of lead engineer August Catawnee (Blu Hunt), Oliver Sokolov (Alex Ozerov) and computer engineer Javier Almanzar (Alexander Eling). The

Salvare's medic is Zayn Petrossian, a non-binary member of the crew portrayed by JayR Tinaco. Joining him in the medical bay is microbiologist Bernie Martinez (A.J. Rivera). Finally, accompanying the crew as a diplomat is the son of the US Secretary of Defence, Sasha Harrison (Jake Abel). On Earth, Eric looks after their daughter, Jana Breckinridge-Wallace (Lina Renna), and is often seen working alongside Dr Nani Singh (Parveen Dosanjh). The journalist Harper Glass (Selma Blair) provides conflict and creates tension. Overall, the characters among the young crew lack the depth of characterisation that we see in Eric, Harper, Nikko, or William. The dynamics between the latter two are probably the best element of the show at the narrative level. Designed not only to feel but also to combine the characteristics most appreciated by Nico, William becomes affectionate towards the captain in a relationship evocative of *Her* (2013). The dynamics in this relationship leads William to create another AI in search of love, complicating the matter further. For the rest of the crew, we are given little to no background story, being mostly differentiated by the way they dress and speak. There is a tendency to exposition and the dialogue often lacks subtext, breaking the scriptwriting rule of "show, don't tell". However, some of these characters have great potential. The show engages with issues of diversity, sexuality and gender in almost every episode. The guilt of the absent mother permeates Niko's reflections about family, the engineers soon become a threesome, the non-binary medic has sexual relationships with the microbiologist, and questions of love and free will are part of a critical sub-plot with the ship's AI. The ethnicity and cultural background of the characters is diverse, and although this does not materialise (yet) beyond the character design and into the plot, it is undoubtedly promising.

Audiences looking for a series with a robust scientific approach might be disappointed. The plot has some basic inaccuracies from the start. For example, they indicate that they miscalculated the distance to the objective because of dark matter, shown on screen as a dense thick grey cloud. Using high radiation in the ship kills alien life but is said to only impact the crew with infertility. Other elements that might feel incongruent relate to the dynamics in the ship, particularly concerning compliance to rules and following authority. The episodic structure puts the characters in situations that, for the most part, are a consequence of their own wrongdoings. We see members of the crew starting a mutiny, removing helmets in alien caves, smoking alien plants, or not using hazmat suits because the air is breathable. Because the transgressions towards leadership and regulations are so common and widespread, the audience

might be left wondering how they have all been chosen for such a critical mission.

The series, therefore, is eclectic in its influences and genre, combining elements of sci-fi space travel, sci-fi horror, and teen drama, though it has issues regarding narrative coherence and scientific background. Nonetheless, the episodes could be used in a classroom environment for discussions surrounding race and gender representation, the portrayals of authority (and its failures), and moral “what would you do?” situations, of which there are plenty. For research purposes, the series might be of interest to those working on intertextuality, the portrayal of the female action hero, the ambiguity of the alien *other*, the fear of the *unknown*, reflections over the humanity of AI, the dangers of AI, and the intersections of gender and sexuality. *Another Life* is due to release its second season in Summer 2020. While receiving very low reviews for its narrative incoherence, these issues might yet be addressed in the new episodes. Maybe, after all, *Another Life* will get itself another life.