

Representations Of The Body In *Alien*:

How can science fiction be seen as an expression of contemporary attitudes and anxieties about human biology?

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*“Science fiction plucks from within us our deepest fears and hopes
then shows them to us in rough disguise: the monster and the rocket.”*

W. H. Auden ⁽¹⁾

*“There is no doubt at all that today we have all kinds of scientific applications which
are causing us all kinds of trouble as well as giving us all kinds of advantages.”*

Richard Feynman ⁽²⁾

Introduction

Alien is a film that, from its very inception, was indebted to the entire history of science fiction monster-movies and pulp science fiction stories that had inspired it. The story is plainly derivative – elements from *It! The Terror From Beyond Space*, *Forbidden Planet* and *The Thing From Another World* appear throughout the film. Before it was exploited in the cinema, the idea of humans discovering extra-terrestrial life was already one of the most common in science fiction writing, and the theme of several seminal works. H. G. Wells had shocked readers with the possibility of Earth being invaded by aliens in *The War of The Worlds*, A. E. Van Vogt had charted the voyage of a deep space survey ship that discovers a derelict and haunted alien relic in *The Voyage of The Space Beagle*, and Robert Heinlein had imagined an intergalactic battle for supremacy against an alien species in *Starship Troopers*.

Says writer Dan O'Bannon "A lot of people speculated as to where I stole it from... the truth is I stole it from everywhere." ⁽³⁾ In fact the speculation was fierce even before the release of the film, as journals *Cinefantastique* and *American Film* criticised it for its derivative nature ⁽⁴⁾. I would argue that these criticisms have missed the point. *Alien* is not just another sci-fi monster movie in the tradition of so many before it; this is a text that understands and knowingly employs the conventions of the films it imitates. The catalogue of story elements plundered from so many sources made the film into an amalgam of science fiction narratives and archetypes, evoking particularly the American science fiction cinema of the space race years (1950-1970). "There's a lifetime of movie-going and story reading in *Alien*" ⁽⁵⁾, agrees O'Bannon. What is distinctive about *Alien* is the way its clichéd alien encounter narrative is destabilized by a fusion of provocative themes: high technology and human sexuality.

Many critics have analysed *Alien*, more so than almost any science fiction film, and from many perspectives, but the process of analysis is almost always one of isolating interesting elements from the body of the text so that they may be discussed. James H. Kavanagh has considered the film within a Marxist framework, while Judith Newton has reappraised it in light of contemporary feminist discourses and Barbara Creed has applied Freudian concepts of sexuality to it. ⁽⁶⁾ While these critical analyses are valuable, they contribute to a sense of the film as an ultimately incoherent whole.

I believe the writing of Vivian Sobchack offers a way forward and indicates the possibility of a reading of the film that is able to embrace all its elements. Her work on American science fiction cinema has inspired much of the theory I will construct around *Alien*, particularly her investigation of the underlying sexual politics and psychology of American science fiction in her essay 'The Virginity of Astronauts' ⁽⁷⁾. My discussion is also informed by the writing of Carol Clover in her analysis of the horror genre, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, and by Catherine Constable in her essay 'Becoming the Monster's Mother' ⁽⁸⁾. Her application of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to *Alien* is a key concept in the construction of my own argument. I believe a reappraisal of the theory proposed by Constable, with reference to Sobchack and given the added dimension of historical context makes possible an alternative reading of the film. I will show that the overtly sexual aspects of the *mise en scène* and the subtler questions the story raises about our relationship with technology are actually related, and can be considered in a unified theory that acknowledges contemporary developments in science and technology at the moment the film was produced.

As is so often true in science fiction, *Alien* is not just about a time and a place in the future, but about the world we live in today. In looking to the future, science fiction amplifies contemporary attitudes and anxieties, often trapping in amber the social conscious and the technological zeitgeist in the process. Just as the atomic monsters of 1950s creature features reflected and fed off atomic-age anxiety, so *Alien* acts simultaneously as cautionary science fiction and exploitative horror, expressing the feelings of people not in the distant future, but in 1979. I will argue that *Alien* can be considered the preface to a decade in which emergent technologies would cause the flourishing of a new wave in science fiction literature and film. While the scenario of *Alien* obviously belongs to a previous era of rockets and monsters, its themes distinctly foreshadowed the works to come in the 1980s. It is a unique illustration of the ways in which science fiction can be seen to interpret and express contemporary attitudes and anxieties caused by developments in science and technology. It captures a moment in history when attitudes were changing significantly and new anxieties were emerging, and it actually represents this process of transformation on the screen by employing, subverting and exploding the previous conventions of the American science fiction film.

Notes

1. Quoted in Alien (screenplay), p. 2.
2. Feynman R. P., 1999, p. 62.
3. Interviewed in Alien Evolution.
4. Flynn J. L., 1995, p. 9.
5. Interviewed in Alien Evolution.
6. 'Feminism, Humanism and Science in *Alien*', 'Feminism and Anxiety in *Alien*', 'Alien and the Monstrous-Feminine' in Alien Zone, 1990, pp. 73-87, pp. 128-141.
7. Sobchack V., 1990, pp. 103-115.
8. Constable C., 1999, pp. 173-202.

Rockets and Monsters

In her essay, ‘The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film’, Vivian Sobchack discusses why the repression of the human – often female – body in the American science fiction film is such a prevailing characteristic of the genre from the 1950s through to the 1970s. Sobchack concedes that astronauts do not feature in all science fiction films. “Yet, astronauts are clearly those figures who centralize and visually represent the values and virtues common to all the male protagonists of the genre in a single archetypal presence.”⁽⁹⁾ If astronauts are the archetypal male heroes of science fiction then rationality and chastity is their virtue. These films insisted that to embrace the future, we must leave behind our primitive biological inheritance and become just as cool and efficient as the technology that drives us into that future. They reflected attitudes in society at large, where this psychology was part of the social conscious, most obviously throughout the 1960s. It made real-life astronauts the heroes of popular culture. “John Glenn: One Machine That Worked Without Flaw”⁽¹⁰⁾ was the *Newsweek* headline announcing Glenn’s orbital flight of February 20th, 1962. It is significant that the Soviets sent an untrained woman, Valentina Tereshkova, into orbit on June 16th, 1963 as a symbolic “defacing of the images of male astronauts”⁽¹¹⁾. The technology of orbital flight was coded as an aggressive, penetrating, phallic force, one of the ‘extensions of man’⁽¹²⁾ in the truest sense. The notion of technology as an extension of man, amplifying his power of aggression, was carried into contemporary science fiction. Communication as a successful means to resolving conflict was never featured; the solution to any conflict was physical combat and the means was the use of advanced technology as weaponry. From rockets to laser guns, visions of the future in all classical American science fiction were male oriented and distinctly patriarchal.

“The ultimate technological fantasy is creation without the mother”⁽¹³⁾, writes Andreas Huyssen – and this fantasy was also carried into contemporary science fiction, finding form in the figures of the astronaut and the scientist. Sobchack advises us that virgin astronauts are not to be taken literally, but that “the virginal astronauts of the science fiction film are a sign of penetration and impregnation without biology, without sex, and without the opposite, different, sex.”⁽¹⁴⁾ Women are a threat to this fantasy of an immaculate conception through technology because the female body, above all the sexualised female body, is a living reminder of technology’s failures.

The ongoing cycle of birth and death, the physical fragility of the human being, our continuing reliance on biological reproduction – all these failures are enshrined in the physiology and processes of the female body. For Sobchack, women “represent the Mother and the Other whose very presence points to the puny and imitative quality of male endeavour.”⁽¹⁵⁾ As if this affront was not reason enough for science fiction to banish women from its narratives, there is also another older and culturally ingrained reason, described by critic Per Schelde in his discussion of science fiction stereotypes. Throughout the history of Judeo-Christian society, discussions concerning the divide between culture and nature have always coded woman as Nature and man as Culture. “Woman the life giver, the Earth Mother, is one of our cultural icons.”⁽¹⁶⁾ And in an extract from *The Greek Women*, Nietzsche provides a succinct example of this coding:

“Woman is more closely related to Nature than man and in all her essentials she remains ever herself. Culture with her is always something external, a something which does not touch the kernel that is eternally faithful to nature.”⁽¹⁷⁾

If woman *is* nature then the ultimate technological fantasy of rendering nature redundant provided science fiction with yet another reason to make women redundant at the level of the narrative. Female sexual difference was neutralized by concealing uniforms, suppressed by chaste female characters and sexless relationships, or entirely displaced onto alien life forms. This implied that female procreative functions were no longer required, replaced by the creative activity of technology. In the reasons I have described for these tactics, the signifier-signified pattern of semiotics is functioning. Understanding the female body as a signifier for biology / sexuality is the key to understanding why it was repressed, and how the sexualised woman, simultaneously the envy and ridiculer of science and technology, became the most feared signifier in science fiction. Our cultural coding states that woman is nature, signifying all the biological processes and procreative functions that technology hopes to replace, but also signifying all that technology has failed to achieve by emphasising sexual desire and biological reproduction. Furthermore, female physiology mocks representations of the human body as a biological machine, a self-determined and secure space, by demonstrating the lack of integrity of the body as a container for the physical matter of life. Rosi Braidotti writes:

“The woman’s body can change shape in pregnancy and childbearing; it is therefore capable of defeating the notion of fixed bodily form, of visible, recognisable, clear and distinct shapes as that which marks the contours of the body. She is morphologically dubious.”⁽¹⁸⁾

Because of this, female sexual difference can be seen as the battleground for representation of the body in science fiction, with the classical American examples insisting that the human body is a closed circuit, a sacrosanct and impenetrable space. The protagonists are virtuous; their minds and bodies uncorrupted by technology or sexuality, Adams and Eves in a future Garden of Eden. This was in contrast with the antagonists, particularly the creatures of the sci-fi monster movies. In her 1970 essay ‘Monsters from the Id’⁽¹⁹⁾, Margaret Tarratt observed in the American science fiction film the pattern of repressing and displacing biology / sexuality onto alien life forms. The typical monster movie antagonist was a primitive and insatiable invader, overtly and repulsively biological, displaying a nightmarish amplification of human sexuality. Its aim was to procreate and dominate the planet Earth with its diabolical progeny. These creatures represented contemporary anxieties that the ascendance of man would be undermined by primitive human biology, that humanity could be consumed and destroyed by its base instincts. They signified monstrous nature, an image of animal desires unchecked and unrepressed. As such, they were also a displacement of age-old male anxieties about the monstrous nature of female sexuality and male horror at the susceptibility of the female body to penetration and loss of integrity. The tactic of displacement was common in the monster movie because a primitive and insatiable monster was, at the narrative level, a socially acceptable signifier for the male hero to symbolically slay and triumph over. Repression was restored, the physical integrity of the human body secure and the patriarchy upheld. The message was a reassuring one: humanity had prevailed. In the future the message would not always be so reassuring. Continuing advances in medicine, reproduction, electronics, computing and imaging would change things. New surgical and reproductive techniques, the rise of computers and the proliferation of imaging devices would begin to threaten the human body in previously unimaginable ways, causing uncertainties about the future security of the body and anxieties about the invasion of technology into the realm of human biology.

Notes

9. Sobchack V., 1990, p. 107.
10. Quoted in Primate Visions, p. 138.
11. McLuhan M., 1995, p. 338.
12. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, McLuhan M., 1995.
13. Quoted in 'From Virtual Cyborgs to Biological Time Bombs', p. 63.
14. Sobchack V., 1990, p. 108.
15. Ibid, p. 109.
16. Schelde P., 1993, p. 64.
17. Quoted in Androids, Humanoids and Other Science Fiction Monsters, p. 64.
18. Quoted in 'NITs and NRTs', p. 33.
19. Quoted in Alien Zone, p. 92.

New Technologies, New Anxieties

Alien appeared on the threshold of what has been called the ‘new wave’ of science fiction – a collective description for works displaying the new sensibilities and aesthetic that emerged in the genre during the 1980s. Although the film employs a familiar and traditional scenario, the themes of technology and sexuality explored in *Alien* anticipate the new wave, displaying a newfound interest and concern for the human body that would become a defining feature of 1980s science fiction. It was to be a decade during which the boundaries of the human body would be tested by a series of pioneering works. In 1982 a future where machines are indistinguishable from humans was prophesied by Ridley Scott in *Blade Runner*. Then in 1984 came *Neuromancer*, William Gibson’s novel set in a future where humans and machines are integrating, one of the founding works of the body-obsessed Cyberpunk genre. Also in the same years as these works were produced a fantasy of man-as-machine in *Tron* and an apocalyptic nightmare of machine-as-man in *The Terminator*. So in 1979 bold new ideas and difficult new questions were on the horizon when *Alien* appeared. The notion that we could be ‘less human than human’ to paraphrase *Blade Runner*, that humanity was less well defined than we thought, was new. Attitudes were being challenged more aggressively than ever before, and these challenges were coming not just from science fiction, but also increasingly from real-world technology.

Many of the new ideas flourishing in science fiction can be seen as a reaction to advances in science and technology that had emerged to challenge the boundaries of the body. Surgical advances such as hip replacements, organ transplants, pacemakers, heart surgery and the first heart transplant (1967)⁽²⁰⁾ showed that the ‘components’ of the body could be repaired, replaced or augmented, the application of human in vitro fertilization (1978)⁽²¹⁾ was demystifying and mechanizing the reproductive process, while the science of genetic engineering promised that one-day it would be capable of building better humans. In commerce, both the computer and the humble Xerox machine were proliferating in the workplace. They introduced new possibilities for the replication and duplication of data at a time when the human body was also being reduced to data, further promoting the idea that human biology might become equally malleable. Opened up and examined, the body was now a thoroughly contested space.

It is an indication of the extent to which science and technology was destroying the boundaries between human and artificial that audiences of *The Terminator* had little trouble accepting the machine-inside-a-man concept. Director James Cameron has said in retrospect “I think it’s just an aspect of our lives right now, that we’re so surrounded by machines, and medicine has shown us that the human body is just a very complex machine.”⁽²²⁾ The film also illustrates the new anxieties that advances in science and technology were causing, a change that was observed by Susan Sontag:

“The dark secret behind human nature used to be the upsurge of the animal... The threat to man, his availability to dehumanisation, lay in his own animality. Now the danger is understood as residing in man’s ability to be turned into a machine.”⁽²³⁾

As the unknowns of human biology were revealed, the miracle of reproduction became a laboratory procedure and the essence of human life was reduced to a string of information, it seemed that the once secure space of the human body had been compromised spectacularly. The integrity of the body was now under threat from the invasive technologies of modern medicine. *Alien* was a timely expression of this new and additional threat, as Annette Kuhn has noted:

“In *Alien*, Us/Them is unequivocally Human/Non-Human; but the non-human category subdivides further – into the techno-products of corporate culture (Ash, The Company’s android; Mother, the spaceship’s duplicitous computer system) as against the rampantly fecund, visibly Other alien, a manifestation of monstrous Nature.”⁽²⁴⁾

Possibly the most controversial invasion of all was the mechanization of the reproductive process. Many people considered in vitro fertilization to be the violation of an absolutely taboo space, and reproductive science became a focal point for fears about the reach of technology. Although it had brought the fantasy of creation without the mother closer to attainment, it had upset traditional patriarchal values by intruding significantly into the secure bodily interior. Male anxieties about the loss of bodily integrity were now a reality, but it was the female body that was threatened and again it was female sexuality that would be the battleground for representation of the body.

Alien exploits new anxieties about the integrity of the body by subverting the conventional repression and displacement of biology / sexuality in American science fiction cinema. The initial repression is extreme and intentionally made a defining characteristic of the film, while the menacing sexual imagery and the threat of alien penetration evoke a nightmare vision of reproductive science. Similarly, the images of human bodies torn open by the Alien creature elicit horror at the sight of the interior of the body revealed. *Alien* portrayed the horror of bodily invasion, corruption and destruction more explicitly and violently than any of the monster movies it imitated. Amy Taubin remarks that, “Unlike sci-fi creatures of the Cold War period, who took possession of souls and minds – even when they were called body snatchers – the Alien is an invader and destroyer of the body.”⁽²⁵⁾ And in a reversal of monster movie conventions, the patriarchy aboard the *Nostromo* (which translates to ‘Our Man’) do not triumph over the invader, but are destroyed by it.

In this respect, *Alien* is strikingly similar to the slasher movie, a genre that was thriving during the late 1970s. In her analysis of the genre, Carol Clover described it as “drenched in taboo and encroaching vigorously on the pornographic.”⁽²⁶⁾ Slasher films are all about the destruction or invasion of the body, about the horror of a body penetrated by a foreign object. But it is not the act alone that is the focus of interest. “The slasher evinces a fascination with flesh or meat itself as that which is hidden away from view... [and] the realisation that all that lies between the visible, knowable outside of the body and its secret insides is one thin membrane, protected only by a collective taboo against its violation.”⁽²⁷⁾ Like the slasher film, *Alien* trades in the anxieties caused by contemporary transgressions of physical boundaries and gender boundaries in society, and it adopted many archetypal elements of the slasher film antagonist and protagonist. Clover notes that, “In some sense, the emotional terrain of the slasher film is pre-technological... Knives and needles, like teeth, beaks, fangs, and claws, are personal extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace.”⁽²⁸⁾ This sense of a pre-technological enemy using an animalistic embrace to kill was adopted literally in the figure of the Alien. There is also a notable similarity between Ripley and the archetypal slasher film protagonist, referred to by Carol Clover as the ‘Final Girl’. She is the lone survivor who endures a climactic pursuit and confronts the killer – or in *Alien*, the monster.

Notes

20. The Cambridge Factfinder, 1993, p. 160.
21. The Hutchinson Encyclopaedia, 1999, p. 547.
22. Interviewed in 'Other Voices'.
23. Quoted in Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film, p. 39.
24. Kuhn A., 1992, p. 13.
25. Taubin A., 1997, p. 98.
26. Clover C., 1993, p. 21.
27. *Ibid*, p. 32.
28. *Ibid*, pp. 31-32.

Abjection and the Alien

One of the things that set *Alien* apart from the many films it imitated was its antagonist. “I wanted to do a film of ‘psycho-sexual’ horror”⁽²⁹⁾, Dan O’Bannon has said of his script. And undoubtedly, the Alien is a *tour de force* of sexual anxiety and overt, repulsive biology – making this sci-fi monster movie into a true sci-fi horror. This Alien invader did not want to enslave you or eat you or invade your home world, it wanted to rape you, it wanted to invade your body with its own, always killing by an act of violent penetration in an amplified and nightmarish fusion of sex and death.

To understand the relationship between the Alien, the virgin astronaut and the audience, it is necessary to discuss some of the psychoanalytic principles defined by Sigmund Freud.⁽³⁰⁾ Freudian theory considers the psyche to be two interconnected systems, the conscious and the unconscious. The architecture of the human mind is also divided into two regions, one ruled by the conscious and the other ruled by the unconscious: the Ego and the Id. While the ego forms the surface of the mind, driven by perceptions from the exterior physical world, the id is the core, driven by internal desires. When desires form that are unacceptable to the ego, they are repressed and forced to remain in the unconscious. The site of this repression is a third region where the Ego and Id merge, known as the super-ego or the ‘ego ideal’. It can be described as the moral censor of the unconscious mind, because it decides what is and what is not an acceptable desire for the ego to perceive. However, Freud also reminds us that “The repressed is only cut off sharply from the ego by the resistances of repression; it can communicate with the ego through the id.”⁽³¹⁾ If we imagine the forces of science and technology as a super-ego determining the repression of biology / sexuality in the American science fiction film, we can imagine the overtly biological and hypersexual Alien as the translation of those repressed desires: the monster from the id. Annette Kuhn has noted⁽³²⁾ that in describing the characteristics of the Alien he so admires – “A survivor, unclouded by conscience or delusions of morality” – Ash is describing the id as defined by Freud, “The id of course knows no judgements of value: no good and evil, no morality.”⁽³³⁾ Yet, it is important not to over-emphasise the association. While psychoanalysis has undoubtedly influenced authors (which goes some way to explaining science fiction’s many monsters from the id), the film is not a human mind.

What is more useful to my investigation of the Alien is Freud's work on the interpretation of dreams. ⁽³⁴⁾ As a projection of repressed human biology / sexuality, the Alien represents a multitude of characteristics and desires in a single figure. It is at once a physical composite of male and female sexual difference, an embodiment of human sexual desire and biological reproduction, and an evocation of overt, repulsive biology. In other words, the Alien is a signifier with multiple signified meanings attached to it. The very same process occurs in our dreams. A single figure, object or action in the dream world can represent a multitude of different emotions, desires and anxieties in the real world. Freudian dream analysis calls this process Condensation. However, Freud tells us ⁽³⁵⁾ that although the ego goes to sleep at night, even then it exercises censorship on dreams. All that is repressed in waking life cannot just appear in the dream and enter the sleeping consciousness. Repressed desires and anxieties must assume an alternative form in the dream world to evade censorship by the ego. Freudian dream analysis calls this process Displacement. The tactics of displacement in *Alien* are made obvious. Catherine Constable writes "human reproduction [in the film] is represented as scientific or sterile, in clear contrast with the alien's physical materiality, thus setting up an opposition between the human and the monstrous." ⁽³⁶⁾

So we have an understanding of how the Alien relates to the virgin astronauts in the film-world, but how does it relate to the audience? In her analysis of the film, Catherine Constable proposes that the Alien is a horrifying figure "because it presents the spectacle of inside as outside... raising the spectre of a viscous physicality that has been rejected." ⁽³⁷⁾ Her interpretation applies the theory of abjection devised by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* ⁽³⁸⁾. Kristeva terms the abject as that which transgresses the border between the familiar and unfamiliar, seductive and repulsive, being both at once. Abjection is our reaction of horror to this transgression, and it is caused by our inability to reconcile the two states. The abject does not validate our ideology as the Other does, because unlike the Other it does not function to define what we are not. What the Alien defines is the Other inside *us*. It represents an utterly breached body, a tangle of organs and limbs, interior and exterior confused, the boundaries indefinable. Freud termed creatures like this composites and noted how "The two representations are superimposed and produce something in the nature of a contest between the two visual images." ⁽³⁹⁾ Parker seems to be aware of this contest when he says of the Alien in disbelief "It's like a man" – but the impossible man, a man turned inside out.

The Alien can be seen as a response to contemporary anxieties caused by the emerging medical technologies opening up the body. This biomechanical horror is the projection of a nightmare future image of the body compromised. More specifically, it is a representation of anxieties concerning reproductive science. Its nesting instincts and predilection for concealing itself in dark damp spaces coiled in a foetal position identify it as a parent, a breeder, while the bundle of pipes on its back is like a set of externalised fallopian tubes. But its gender is ambiguous. Amy Taubin observed that “Its toothy, dripping mouth was hermaphroditic: while the double jaws represented the inner and outer labia of the *vagina dentata*, the projectile movement of the inner jaw was a phallic threat.”⁽⁴⁰⁾ The Alien is mother and father, a fusion of the maternal and paternal. Considering this, it is no coincidence that the Alien’s hardened body and biomechanical form suggest that it is also in part a technological monster. In contrast, the derelict spaceship that is its breeding ground displays the “ooze of biology”⁽⁴¹⁾ everywhere. The slick hardened structure is not so much biomechanical as fossilised, the death mask of an ancient organism. The bodily interior represented by the derelict spaceship is coded female and the invading force is male. In its representation of the consequences of the bodily interior violated, the Alien relates to and feeds off fears about in vitro fertilisation and reproductive technology. It is the disastrous result of an attempt by the patriarchy to usurp the role of the mother and become the lone parent.

For the patriarchy, the most terrifying aspect of the Alien is not that it gives form to repressed female physiology, but that it threatens the integrity of the male body. The Alien preys on males for most of the film and the dire consequences for the male body are the focus of attention. These violently penetrative attacks imply an act of inter-species male-on-male rape. Although male viewers may not empathise with the trauma of a female body violated, they are made to share that trauma as the film evokes predominantly male fears about bodily intrusion. While Catherine Constable considers *Alien* to be a dramatization of an age-old abjection to the hidden interior of the human body, I view it as a specific reaction to anxieties caused by contemporary advances in science and technology. These anxieties are expressed through the use of biological / sexual imagery to construct an intricate system of representation around the figure of the virgin astronaut. I will now discuss this process in a scene-by-scene analysis of the film.

Notes

29. Interviewed in Alien Evolution.
30. 'The Ego and the Id', Freud S., 1971, pp. 12-66.
31. Freud S., 1971, p. 24.
32. Kuhn A., 1992, p. 13.
33. Quoted in 'Border Crossing', p. 13.
34. The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud S., 1971.
35. 'The Ego and the Id', Freud S., 1971, p. 17.
36. Constable C., 1999, p. 173.
37. Ibid, p. 181.
38. 'Approaching Abjection', Kristeva J., 1982.
39. The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud S., 1971, p. 324.
40. Taubin A., 1997, p. 94.
41. Kavanagh J. H., 1990, p. 76.

The Body Repressed

Prior to the discovery of the derelict alien spaceship, the film details the repression of human biology / sexuality in its many forms aboard the *Nostromo*, in what can be seen as a summary of the tactics of repression employed by the classical American science fiction films it imitates. This begins with the first sequence, when the electronic chatter of a distress beacon awakens the ship's computer, Mother, and she initiates the re-birth of her human children from their technological hyper-sleep. The serene re-birth of the seven virgin astronauts is mechanized and synchronised, lit by cool white fluorescence. The astronauts emerge from the capsules fully grown and immaculately clean, their modesty protected by standard-issue underwear, the science fiction equivalent of fig leaves for the Adams and Eves of deep space. Barbara Creed notes of the scene "There is no blood, trauma or terror."⁽⁴²⁾ It is technological wish fulfilment, as the technological Mother usurps the role of the womb. Although not capable of that ultimate fantasy – an immaculate conception through technology – this Mother *is* capable of re-birthing her children into the large-scale womb of the ship's pressurised hull.

Every interior environment in the film is represented as the interior space of a body, whether biological or technological, so that the imagery of bodily invasion is evoked merely by our presence in a location. Specifically, the use of reproductive imagery codes these environments as womb spaces and emphasises the significance of their invasion. There is an abundance of biological and sexual imagery in the interior of the derelict alien spaceship, and even inside the overtly technological *Nostromo*, we can hear the constant organic rhythm of a heartbeat pulsing through the body of the ship. Immediately obvious throughout the habitation deck of the *Nostromo* is an atmosphere of sterilisation and sanitization similar to that in the hyper-sleep vault, as if to minimise the stigma caused to the interior of the ship by the human presence. Interestingly, the engineering deck is not subjected to similar environmental controls. Carbon dirt and lubricant – the bodily fluids of the machine – are acceptable. This is not an issue of defilement, but of foreignness; the humans are foreign entities in the technological womb of the *Nostromo* and their presence inside it constitutes the threat of contamination, just as their presence inside the derelict alien spaceship threatens to contaminate and corrupt that space.

In the scenes after their re-birth, the crew are clothed in standard-issue unisex flight-suits as they first eat breakfast in the mess and then discuss the situation. It is important to note that the only feature marking Ripley as a woman at this point in the film is her long hair. Lambert, the other female member of the crew, has cropped hair and appears androgynous in her flight-suit without this feminine marker. No sexual interest is shown in Ripley or Lambert by any of the males, or vice versa. They are all falling perfectly in the archetype of the virgin astronaut. In addition, the dominant trio of males – Dallas, Kane, Ash – also form a triangle of patriarchy. Dallas delegates and leads with assured authority, Kane is the embodiment of the intrepid virgin astronaut and Ash is the cerebral man of science. The presence of this power structure and the images of sanitized biology / sexuality in the re-birthing sequence make it apparent that the *Nostromo* ('Our Man') is a domain of patriarchal authority. The two women, Ripley and Lambert, are both compliant, as is Bret. Only Parker causes trouble for the patriarchal triangle. He asserts his territorial claim on his place at the table and then argues about his share of the bonus. Parker does not fall into the archetype of the virgin astronaut because he represents probably the most disenfranchised minority in science fiction – the black labourer.

The patriarchy may be dominant aboard the *Nostromo*, but it is subservient to the distant authority of 'the Company'. This is illustrated when Mother calls Dallas into the computer interface room to receive new orders and Dallas responds at once. The Company represents the force of science and technology, a force that drives the actions of the patriarchy aboard the *Nostromo*. The fact that the ship's computer is called Mother and speaks with a female voice does not mean it is a maternal figure. Catherine Constable writes "She simply mouths the commands that comply with the aims and objectives of the Company."⁽⁴³⁾ With this in mind, the orders Mother relays to reroute and investigate the derelict alien spaceship are significant. As I have stated, for all its abilities the *Nostromo* appears to be incapable of the ultimate fantasy of an immaculate conception through technology, which may account for the Company's interest in the derelict. There on the alien planet, held in that biomechanical womb are the secrets of automated mass-reproduction.

Notes

42. Creed B., 1990, p. 129.

43. Constable C., 1999, p. 182.

The 'Psycho-Sexual' Landscape

The moment the giant landing feet of the *Nostromo* imprint the barren surface of the alien planet, this technological colossus is rendered puny by the howling storm raging around it. Lashing wind-flows challenge the hull of the inert ship in a display of the immeasurably greater power of nature. The astronauts study the composition of the atmosphere as they wait for sunrise. It is primitive, “Almost primordial” observes Ash. The alien planet – the very *air* – is a representation of the archaic and immense power of nature in its most ancient and elemental form, a reminder of origins for these Adams and Eves of deep space. It is a reminder that long before their technological re-birth, they were born of a biological process every bit as ancient and elemental as life itself. The fertile landscape is a manifestation of monstrous nature, charged with the dark imagery of biological reproduction and sexual desire. It is a ‘psycho-sexual’ landscape. In *Alien*, sex can be seen to function as a signifier for both sexuality and biology, evoking through sexual imagery all the most powerful signifiers of biology: the human anatomy, sexual difference, procreation, flesh and blood, and bodily fluids. When the astronauts journey through this landscape they are journeying through the censored interior of the body.

As soon as Dallas proposes an expedition to the derelict, Kane immediately volunteers himself, and he is continually the most aggressively curious of the party during their exploration. The sequence is replete with sexual imagery and innuendo, as the expeditionary party unwittingly re-enact the basic microscopic processes of human conception and fertilization. James Kavanagh comments that as they enter the derelict, the party are “collectively imaged as three clumsy spermlike figures entering the vaginal opening between the upstretched ‘legs’ of an alien spaceship.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ Inside, they journey through the ship’s passages, through the taboo regions of a massive and seemingly archaic alien body. The party navigate through vaginal openings and along ribbed corridors that glisten with fluid, looking like “mechanised birth canals”⁽⁴⁵⁾. The derelict seems to be alive; its internal surfaces resemble hardened skin wrapped taught over arching bone structures. The surfaces are covered in glistening moisture, in the signs of condensation, of respiration, of life. Signifiers of sexuality / biology are everywhere; for the repressed virgin astronaut there is menace in the fertile landscape.

As the expeditionary party approaches the place of fertilization they find the remnants of a previous conception. Appropriately, it is Lambert, the only woman in the party, who recognises this menacing reproductive landscape as a threat, because the body represented by the derelict and being invaded by the expeditionary party is a female body. Unaware of the danger, Dallas inquisitively probes the fossilised corpse of the ‘space jockey’ and Kane pursues his forceful penetration deeper inside the alien ship. Eventually Kane, the single successful sperm, is lowered into the cavernous egg chamber. Once inside, he is unthinking in his aggression, disruptive in his eagerness to invade the womb of the alien ship. He touches an egg and the creature inside stirs. “It seems to have life – organic life” he relays fervently to Dallas. It would seem that the virgin astronaut has finally mastered nature, he has returned to the primal scene to seize the process of conception and claim it for his own. But then the process reverses in a way he could never have imagined when the act of penetration is performed not by Kane, but the egg. The censored body of this space-suited virgin astronaut has only one unconcealed orifice, the mouth, and so it is through the mouth that the creature impregnates him. His aggressive violation of the body of the derelict is repaid with a fantastic invasion of his own body.

The physiology of the ‘face-hugger’ that impregnates Kane is worthy of note. Resembling a skeletal human hand covering the mouth of its victim as if suppressing a cry for help, the creature evokes the nightmare imagery of rape – or in other words, male violation of the female body. Throughout the film there is a close correlation between bodily invasion and the act of rape. Notably, the first act of invasion was perpetrated by the males in the expeditionary party on the female body of the derelict, and I would argue that in their hi-tech spacesuits they are imaged as technological invaders. Their invasion of the derelict can be seen as a metaphor for the invasion of the human body by advanced surgical and reproductive technologies – with particular reference to the process of in vitro fertilization. The impregnation of Kane is a turning point in this respect. From then on, the film represents the threat of corrupted biology and mechanized reproduction in terms of physical / sexual attack. The invasion of the bodily interior and interference in the reproductive process has unleashed the horror of monstrous nature, previously contained by the forces of repression. This horror is soon illustrated in what I would call the defining moment of the film, the shocking birth of the Alien. The crew are sitting around a white table in the Nostromo’s mess to

eat the space food dispensed by Mother. The setting has the familiar atmosphere of sterilization and sanitization that pervades the habitation deck. Always the most virile of the seven virgin astronauts, Parker makes a misogynistic joke about what he would really like to be eating and Lambert, always the most repressed, reacts to the joke with disgust. Kane suddenly begins to suffer from convulsions and the crew clear the table in panic and try to hold him down on it. Kane's convulsions and gut-wrenching agony become worse, until blood begins to seep through his white T-shirt. The Alien bursts through his ribcage and emerges from his chest. The pink flesh of its skin resembles the internal tissue of the intestines or stomach, but the Alien is phallic in appearance.

This scene has been interpreted in many ways. James Kavanagh considers the phallic symbolism of the emerging Alien and the gynaecological confusion caused by its emergence to be the most notable aspects of the scene, while Barbara Creed has interpreted the scene as a visualisation of Freudian observations concerning the riddle of origins, and Catherine Constable proposes that it constitutes the horror of the inside becoming outside. ⁽⁴⁶⁾ Another interpretation has been proposed by Mark Kermode: "The violent arrival of the Alien dramatises fears about pregnancy and child birth, giving horrendous form to shapeless anxieties about the alien transformation which human beings regularly undergo in the process of reproduction." ⁽⁴⁷⁾ Obviously, the meaning of this scene is very dependent on perspective.

In the context of Ripley's previous attempt to deny the expeditionary party and the violated body of Kane entry to the ship, we can see how the scene represents the subsequent loss of bodily integrity that she feared. With the emergence and escape of the Alien, the secure boundaries both of Kane's body and of the *Nostromo* are now thoroughly breached. However, the imagery of the birth is also recognisably similar to human childbirth, as Kermode proposes – and the unfixed bodily form of the pregnant woman is a traditional cause in males of the anxiety about bodily integrity proposed by Constable. Certainly, the scene is trading in more than one representational trope. It is not just about the horror of bodily invasion, but also about the horror of Kane's own ruptured body, of his own innards revealed. A part of Kane, which should remain unseen, has suddenly and violently been made visible. Constable remarks of the birth "It is as if Kane's intestinal coils had taken on a life of their own" ⁽⁴⁸⁾ – a show of the internal organs of the human body, an exercise in dissection. It is also a sex education;

the birth of the Alien is an evocation of human childbirth – with all the spasms, pain and blood involved in that process – as well as a representation of the routine trauma endured by women during each menstrual cycle. The sight of Kane’s breached body is an uncompromising reminder of the monstrous, repressed, very real nature of human biology. I believe the so often cited phallic symbolism of the emerging Alien is in this scene merely a concession to visual continuity (while the later Alien is intentionally phallic headed). Unlike the phallic symbolism of the Alien, the fact that its victim is Kane, embodiment of the virgin astronaut, is significant. He provoked this retribution by pursuing the technological fantasy of usurping nature. Aggressively invading the body of the derelict has resulted in the obliteration of *his* body.

Notes

44. Kavanagh J. H., 1990, p. 76.
45. Sammon P. M., 2000, p. 18.
46. ‘Feminism, Humanism and Science in *Alien*’, ‘*Alien* and the Monstrous-Feminine’ in *Alien Zone*, 1990, pp. 73-81, pp. 128-141.
‘Becoming the Monster’s Mother’ in *Alien Zone II*, 1999, pp. 173-202.
47. Kermod M., *Alien Evolution*.
48. Constable C., 1999, p. 183.

Patriarchal Failure

If this were one of the classical narratives of American science fiction then the combination of science and technology, personal bravery and cool competence would be able to neutralize the threat. But in *Alien*, first the virgin astronauts prove to be ineffectual and then the technology reveals itself to be just as hostile as the monster. The former happens when, after the loss of Bret, the crew decide to pursue the Alien through the ship's ventilation system with the aim of trapping it and blowing it into space. Dallas, the passive and pragmatic leader, goes into the vents to drive the Alien into the trap, but his competence and stubborn cool in the face of danger begin to fail as the Alien evades and then outmanoeuvres him. Lost in the technological labyrinth, Dallas is eventually caught in his own trap. The lesson of this failure is that the Alien cannot be outthought – it is a superior predator acting on pure instinct and no amount of human scheming can outwit it. The captain of the ship, the archetypal hero, is dead, and with him dies the myth of human superiority. It seems that aggressively pursuing the cause of science and technology has released a threat the patriarchy is incapable of neutralizing. They have caused the loss of bodily integrity and unleashed the horror of monstrous nature, and this is a genie that cannot be put back into the bottle.

With the loss of Dallas, Ripley assumes command of the ship, fighting off an immediate challenge to her authority from Parker and deciding that the plan to destroy the Alien will proceed. In an unlikely alliance with Parker against Ash and Lambert, Ripley is resolute: the solution is not to study the Alien or to run from it, but to kill it. This scene marks an important change in our perception of Ripley. Having already established her ability to be callous and individualistic when she refused entry to the expeditionary party returning with Kane, she now establishes her equal ability as a leader. Lambert begs the others to abandon ship, but she is reminded that four of them remain and the shuttlecraft only takes three people. The idea of drawing straws is not acceptable to Ripley – she will fight to save everyone rather than sacrifice any of the crew. This domineering Company woman is emerging as an alternative hero figure for us to invest our hopes in. Ripley may not be a patriarchal figure, but as Carol Clover writes of the Final Girl, she certainly acquits herself “like a man.”⁽⁴⁹⁾ With the others or alone, she has the steel to survive.

Ripley goes to Mother in search of information, and in her subsequent dialogue with the computer we see the first sign that the technology is unable or unwilling to protect its children. Ripley is repeatedly frustrated in her attempts to get answers from Mother, and the stubborn refusal of the computer is the first display of technology as an obstacle to the defeat of the Alien. Ripley uses an emergency override and she is finally allowed to view ‘Special Order 937’, marked for Science Officer eyes only: **“NOSTROMO REROUTED TO NEW COORDINATES. INVESTIGATE LIFE FORM. GATHER SPECIMENS.”** **“PRIORITY ONE INSURE RETURN OF ORGANISM FOR ANALYSIS. ALL OTHER CONSIDERATIONS SECONDARY. CREW EXPENDABLE.”** Ripley and the audience have discovered the most frightening truth of all: that the technology is not unable but actually unwilling to help, it is complicit in the threat. Just as this discovery is made, Ash appears beside Ripley at the console and the threat suddenly becomes immediate.

Ash is the embodiment of the characteristics necessary to serve the cause of science and technology. Thomas B. Byers notes that like Deckard in *Blade Runner*, Ash is “strong, intelligent, competent, and above all without qualm, fear, or any other human emotional response.”⁽⁵⁰⁾ And just like Deckard, we eventually discover that Ash is not really human at all. The last survivor of the patriarchal triangle aboard the Nostromo is revealed to be an agent of the Company, which we now see absolutely in terms of its opposition to the humans. If Mother is the protector of the humans then Ash is the enforcer of the will of technology. Not passive as Mother is, not a threat because of inaction, Ash is actively hostile. He pursues Ripley, blocking her escape and trapping her in the mess room. Ripley grapples with Ash and then, with a visibly bloody nose, turns to confront him. She realises to her horror that he is also bleeding – not human blood, but a synthetic substance. Ash is a man not gestated inside a womb, but wired into existence by a robot. Our reaction is also one of realisation and horror. There is more than one monster aboard the Nostromo, and while the Alien is in part a biological horror, Ash is entirely a product of technology. He responds to Ripley’s discovery of his mission by embarking on an astonishing physical and sexual attack. For him, there is no primal scene, no moment of conception. His rape-like attack on Ripley can be seen as ‘womb envy’ inherited from the technology that created him. Apparently without reproductive ability, he simulates impregnation of Ripley using a rolled up magazine as a phallic symbol, in an act that consciously replicates the oral

impregnation of Kane. Just in time, Parker and Lambert come to Ripley's rescue. Parker attacks Ash first hand to hand and then using a fire extinguisher as a blunt weapon. Lambert drags the unconscious Ripley away while Parker strikes Ash again and knocks his head off his shoulders. This is the moment when his truly monstrous form is revealed. More horrific than the exposure of Kane's bloody innards, Ash's interior visualises the horror of a technological man, of a body utterly corrupted by the darkest ambitions of science and technology. Far from the invulnerable super-human ideal of technophile science fiction, his artificial body looks pathetic. Haemorrhaging sap and filled with bundles of fibre optics, he is a grotesque parody of human biology.

Parker and Ripley are finally reconciled and allied against the Company – but the alliance is not allowed to last. Although Parker is not part of the patriarchy, he is a figure of male domination: a physically powerful man with a gun, too closely aligned with the heroes of adolescent technophile science fiction. Per Schelde summarises this: “The hero, gun in hand, wins the heroine through acts of bravery and killing.”⁽⁵¹⁾ This necessitates Parker's death, engaged in suicidal unarmed combat with the Alien while trying to help Lambert. His sacrifice is in vain, and Lambert dies because she remains a sexually repressed virgin astronaut, frigid and androgynous, frozen by her hysterical fear of the Alien's sexual advance. It is appropriate that Ripley is spared massacre by her detour to find Jones the cat – this display of the instinct to nurture explicitly codes Ripley as a mother. Throughout the film, Jones functions as Ripley's child (in another allusion to in vitro fertilization, Jones is repeatedly threatened by the bodily corruption represented by the Alien) and as a symbol of innocent, pure biology. The significance of this coding soon becomes evident. After initiating the self-destruct sequence, Ripley finds her path to the shuttlecraft blocked by the stalking Alien and she is forced to return to the engine room to cancel the sequence. She completes the procedure moments too late and the action is not successful. Infuriated, Ripley cries “Mother, I turned the cooling system back on”. The sequence continues and in rage Ripley screams at the computer “Mother, you bitch!” This Mother has none of the nurturing instinct of Ripley, the biological mother, none of the warmth or the love. The message is that technology makes a bad parent. Ripley's fury at this final betrayal by Mother, an agent of the Company so bound by its programming that it cannot act to save itself or her, is the moment when the rejection of science and technology in the film is most absolute.

Notes

49. Clover C., 1993, p. 58.

50. Byers T. B., 1990, pp. 43-44.

51. Schelde P., 1993, p. 123.

The Body Revealed

During the countdown sequence we witness Ripley's sudden metamorphosis from virgin astronaut to woman. In flight, terrified and drenched in cold sweat, the revelation of her body to the audience – the vitality of her laboured breathing, of her muscles trembling and her skin glistening in the strobe light – is a shockingly potent sensual / sexual / animal image in a film that has been so devoid of these images in human form. The shots of the Alien regarding Jones the cat in this sequence again illustrate the nature of its threat, one of bodily corruption to the innocent biology of the animal. Ripley has no choice but to return to the shuttlecraft before the countdown completes and she is destroyed along with the *Nostromo*. Her decision to once again burden herself with Jones on her return journey to the shuttlecraft is an indication of her kinship with the animal and her affection for it. Strapped into the cockpit of the shuttlecraft, Ripley blasts off and watches as the receding *Nostromo* is vaporised by a blinding nuclear meltdown. "I got you, you son of a bitch", she whispers to the Alien she believes has been destroyed, indicating her awareness that the actions of science and technology ("Mother, you bitch!") are to blame for the horror visited on the crew.

After the shock wave has passed, Ripley unbuckles from her seat and strips out of her flight-suit. This plot device affirms the opposition between her desirable body and the abject body of the Alien prior to the final confrontation. Her exposed skin clearly defines Ripley's familiar contours as against the Alien's hideous foreignness. Additionally, Carol Clover asserts that, "Whatever else its functions, the scene that reveals the Final Girl in a degree of undress serves to underscore her femaleness."⁽⁵²⁾ Just as her show of maternal concern for Jones coded her as a mother, this show of flesh codes her as a woman – a reminder for the audience, should we be in any doubt after her manly performance. This moment of physical vulnerability should weaken Ripley, not only because of what we suspect is her false belief that the Alien has been destroyed, but also because she has exposed a 'frail' female body. However, what we perceive in this moment is strength. Vivian Sobchack proposes that "In becoming a woman at the level of the narrative, Ripley is clearly marked as a victim; however, in becoming a woman as a fleshy representation of biological difference, Ripley takes on the concrete configuration of male need, demand, desire and fear, and she commands power at a deeper level of the film than that of its story."⁽⁵³⁾ She has revealed herself

as Woman, signifier of monstrous Nature and threat to patriarchal values. However, the attempts of the patriarchy to slay the Alien have been ineffectual and disastrous. Ripley is now the only hope the patriarchy has of slaying the Alien and securing the integrity of the human body. Her exposure of a female body sets up the opposition between her and the Alien, but it also reminds us the terms of the final confrontation: monster-to-monster. For the patriarchy, Ripley is merely the lesser of two evils.

As Ripley follows the pre-flight procedures, the Alien emerges from a recess in the dark interior of the shuttlecraft to threaten her once again. What happens next is interesting. Before she confronts the Alien, Ripley first withdraws into a closet and seals her exposed body inside a spacesuit, retreating into a self-imposed repression of her biology / sexuality. The editing inter-cuts Ripley climbing into the suit with the probing jaws of the Alien. Clover has noted the willingness of the male slasher film viewer to “throw in his emotional lot, if only temporarily,”⁽⁵⁴⁾ with a woman, and we can see a similar process at work now as the patriarchy is asked to throw in its lot with Ripley. She may be a woman, but she is the only champion the patriarchy has and she is compelled to act in its interests. Catherine Constable has described how the inter-cuts “juxtapose a body re-barriered through the pristine white suit with the vicious physicality of the Alien.”⁽⁵⁵⁾ By climbing into the spacesuit, Ripley is restraining the contours of her body, securing her own bodily integrity. She has effectively thrown in *her* lot with the patriarchy by neutralizing the threat of her own body. She then ejects the other threat of bodily corruption, the Alien, blasting it out the airlock and using the shuttlecraft’s engines to propel it into oblivion. Her actions secure the technological environment of the shuttlecraft for her and Jones, but they also ensure the continued repression of female biology / sexuality for the benefit of the patriarchy.

In the final sequence of the film Ripley has almost entirely reverted to being an archetypal virgin astronaut. She diligently notes the loss of Company employees and assets in a final log entry before submitting to hyper-sleep, reliant on the life-support systems of the shuttlecraft. Her continued survival in deep space inevitably means the acceptance of science and technology, and to secure her position in this technological environment she has once again made rigid the naturally flexible boundaries of her body and (r)ejected the monstrous biology / sexuality that threatened to destroy the mechanisms of repression. As she records her log entry, the cat in her lap, she is now

transformed into a soporific, reassuringly maternal figure by the concealment of her body under the soft lines of a silk dressing gown. James Kavanagh is actually close to the true meaning of this characterisation when he writes of it satirically “Gary Cooper goes home to his little boy, and Sigourney Weaver goes to bed with her kitty-cat.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ Clover’s analysis of the final confrontation between the Final Girl and the slasher is also valuable: “We are, as an audience, in the end “masculinized” by and through the very figure by and through whom we were earlier “feminized”. The same body does for both, and that body is female.”⁽⁵⁷⁾ Ripley has not so much defended the patriarchy as defeated a common enemy, temporarily becoming a masculine figure in order to draw on the power traditionally granted only to male heroes. If any proof were needed that she becomes a masculine figure for the duration of the final confrontation then her use of a blatantly phallic dart gun provides it. Once the Alien has been destroyed, she reverts to being a feminine, and above all, a maternal figure. In this context we can see how Ripley’s fractured identity is re-stabilised in this penultimate shot by the presence of the cat, an affirmation of her femininity and a reminder of the recurring theme throughout the film. It is an image of mother and child.

Notes

52. Clover C., 1993, p. 58.
53. Sobchack V., 1990, pp. 106-107.
54. Constable C., 1999, p. 184.
55. Clover C., 1993, p. 61.
56. Kavanagh J. H., 1990, p. 80.
57. Clover C., 1993, p. 59.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued for an alternative reading of *Alien* that constructs a unified theory by applying specific historical context to the analysis. I believe this has been lacking, although not entirely absent, in the previous critical analyses of the film. Carol Clover has identified the studied application and subtle manipulation of slasher film conventions in *Alien*,⁽⁵⁸⁾ and the influence of the slasher genre is an indicator of the extent to which the film can be considered as a product of the zeitgeist. Clover has shown that the slasher genre has considerable historical specificity, and I believe the same is true of *Alien*. However, critics have been reluctant to investigate this aspect of the film – and when they have broached it they have discussed broad relations only, preferring to limit the discourse to a specific theoretical framework. James Kavanagh, for example, presents only conjecture: “*Alien* seems to take up rather enthusiastically the ideological semes of feminism and to reproduce them in an interesting form.”⁽⁵⁹⁾ In my opinion, this does not do justice to the intricate system of representation that the film constructs. I have attempted to develop a theory of the film that interprets it as a complex expression of contemporary anxieties about the new technologies opening up and invading the human body, with specific reference to reproductive science and in vitro fertilisation.

Unlike *Alien*, critics have analysed the subsequent three films in the saga with the reference to historical context that the first film has so far been denied. The sequel, *Aliens* (1986), is often cited as a film that submits to the vocal pro-life movement and dominant conservative politics of the era. Considered by Constance Penley⁽⁶⁰⁾ to be a regression from the egalitarian principles and the sexual equality introduced in *Alien*, Amy Taubin similarly regards it as “A Pentagon-inspired family-values picture for the Reagan 80s... New Age assault rifles and grenade launchers are fetishised, as is the nuclear family.”⁽⁶¹⁾ In addition, Amy Taubin has also proposed a reading of *Alien*³ that considers the film in the context of the Aids epidemic, gay activism and women’s struggle for abortion rights. Themes of gestation and contagion are explored, as the Alien preys on and decimates the outcast population of Fury 161, an off-world prison colony operated by the Company. Taubin writes “Aids is everywhere in the film. It’s in the danger surrounding sex and drugs. It’s in the metaphor of a deadly organism attacking an all-male community. It’s in the iconography of the shaven heads.”⁽⁶²⁾

Likewise, Catherine Constable has made an analysis of the imagery of morphology in *Alien Resurrection* and argued that the film references the emergent technologies of cloning and genetic engineering to explore alternate models of identity.⁽⁶³⁾ It gives the film an unexpected relevance with regard to contemporary anxieties about how these technologies will affect the future of the body as a unique and self-determining entity.

Filmmakers and critics alike have recognised the Alien as a potent figure, a representation of body horror with the power to evoke a multitude of anxieties about human biology. As the critical analysis of the *Alien* saga reveals, the precise nature of the horror changes within the context of each film, and this is what makes the Alien so powerful and enduring – and so problematic. Each film has been able to derive new meaning from the figure of the Alien, as its presence transforms each new terrain into a fertile landscape in which contemporary issues relating to the body can be explored. J. P. Telotte has argued that the ‘specular space’ of the screen and the ‘blind space’ of the psyche are combined to greatest effect in the fantasy genres of science fiction and horror. “Specifically, the normal locus of desire – the human body – assumes a new significance as both the most natural presence and potentially most menacing image in the genres’ specular field.”⁽⁶⁴⁾ The *Alien* saga has developed into one of the most effective examples of science fiction using the ‘blind space’ of the psyche to express contemporary attitudes and anxieties about human biology. It is a saga of the body in the age of advanced technology, a continuing dialogue between cinema and society. As attitudes and anxieties change, so the Alien evolves. With this in mind, it becomes all the more important to develop an understanding of the social factors contributing to the origin of the films. If the saga can be said to have a primal scene then it is *Alien*.

Notes

58. Clover C., 1993, p. 40, p. 62.

59. Kavanagh J. H., 1990, p. 77.

60. Penley C., 1990, pp. 124-125.

61. Taubin A., 1997, p. 94.

62. Ibid, p. 98.

63. ‘Becoming the Monster’s Mother: Morphologies of Identity in the *Alien* Series’,
Constable C., 1999.

64. Telotte J. P., 1990, p. 154.

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