

## MASOCHISM AND REPRESENTATION IN MODERN HORROR: THE CASE OF *ALIEN 3*



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This essay is meant both as an analysis of a specific popular horror film, *Alien 3*, and as an attempt to counteract the excessive emphasis on the psychic workings of spectatorial identification in psychoanalytical film theory with a reading of the ideological power of the film to appropriate the spectator's psychic structure. In this as in many other cases of recent films coming from Hollywood, an appearance of progressiveness and token feminism hides an enduring tendency to construct women as monsters and massively disavow their power to create life.

Recent developments in psychoanalytic film theory have moved away from the Mulveyan model of the masculine sadistic gaze and aggressive voyeurism, because of its inflexibility and essentialist tendencies.<sup>1</sup> Although the Freudian text continues to be the main point of reference, anti-Mulveyan theorists and critics do not return to it, as Mulvey does, to denounce its complicity with patriarchy or as an explanatory model for the cultural mechanisms of patriarchal oppression of women. Rather, they revert to the seminal text in order to explore its "productive contradictions", those radical movements through which, in Leo Bersani's words, it "problematizes its own formalizing and structuralizing aspirations" (1986: 5). New readings of Freud's numerous and complex writings on sexuality and, especially, of his essay "A Child is Being Beaten" (1920), have produced new appropriations for critical theory of such crucial concepts as phantasy and masochism.<sup>2</sup> Spectatorial identification through the aggressive voyeuristic gaze has been replaced by a more mobile, multiple type of subject positioning activated by masochistic phantasies of integration with the pre-Oedipal mother. New theories of the construction of subjectivity, gender and sexuality in the cinematographic discourse incorporate, like Mulveyan theory, a feminist critique of patriarchal manipulation of filmic mechanisms but, at the same time, they identify a regressive desire of integration and self-annihilation, as well as an unconscious search for the origins of identity and desire, as the driving forces in the relationship between film and spectator. For example, Cowie's use of Laplanche and Pontalis's definition of phantasy—"the *mise en scène* of desire"—as a model for film spectatorship may help explain why a spectator finds pleasure in certain moments of films while rejecting, from a feminist viewpoint, the ideological positions that the films defend. The phantasy activated by the film is different from its ideological manipulation of it.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Rodowick 1982, Studlar 1988, Williams 1990, Creed 1993a). Mulvey's theory has been found suspect of complicity with the aims of patriarchy (Clover 1992), and psychoanalytically inaccurate (Rodowick 1982 and 1991).

<sup>2</sup> For masochism, see Rodowick 1982 and 1991, Silverman 1992, Studlar 1988, Williams 1990, Creed 1993a: 128-138, and 1993b and Clover 1992, esp. 166-231; for phantasy, see Creed 1993a: 88-121, and, especially, Cowie 1984.

Yet, while in Mulvey's theory, representation and spectatorial identification go together, since the spectator cannot choose but to identify with the positions constructed by the narrative, in theories of masochistic identification, or of film as activation of primal phantasies, there is the implicit danger of losing sight of the actual narrative strategies employed by the individual text. In other words, an excessive concentration on the psychic workings of spectatorial identification might make us overlook the narrative mechanisms used by films, the specific ways in which films work as discourses. This is what Teresa de Lauretis calls "the binding of fantasy", the way in which "cinematic representations can [...] be understood [...] as a kind of mapping of social vision into subjectivity" (1984: 8). As Carol J. Clover says in her discussion of the rape-revenge variety of the horror film, "representation does matter" (1992: 159), if only because a film theory which subordinates representation to universalizing accounts of spectatorial identification is ill-equipped to account for historical and cultural changes in the construction of subjectivity.

One of the most harrowing moments of the film *Alien 3* (David Fincher 1992) happens when the monster, after killing Dr. Clemens (Charles Dance), moves closer to Lieutenant Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), feels her face with its mouth in what almost amounts to a kiss, and, after a visual confrontation which the heroine cannot bear, walks away, clearly showing its intention not to kill her, an intention which is later logically explained when we find out that the monster's "baby", a new Queen Mother, is incubating in the protagonist's body. This brief moment is presented by means of two intense close-ups of their two faces, separated by a cutaway to a horrified onlooker. The emotional import of the close-ups depends on the relationship established between the woman and the monster. This relationship could be described as the activation of an unconscious masochistic phantasy of fusion with the other but it must not be forgotten that the textual "binding" of this phantasy, its cultural representation, amounts to an identification of the woman with the monster.

In the present essay I propose to analyse this scene in terms of the positions taken up by the spectator of the film and then expand the discussion to the exploration of the representation of the heroine and the film's ideological stance with respect to "femininity". The general thrust of my argument will be that, although the film may activate masochistic phantasies in the spectator, and through them, subvert patriarchal gender roles, it simultaneously binds the spectator's phantasy into a representation of a world in which woman is seen as "the monstrous-feminine", the ultimate cause of destruction of an all-male world. Perhaps the spectator does not need to take up this position, and certainly its presentation is fraught with contradiction, but the position is certainly there. In order to link the argument to recent theoretical debates surrounding the modern horror film, I will draw on Linda Williams's essay "When the Woman Looks" (1984) and on two more recent works, already referred to, which undertake a radical rewriting of Freudian film theory: Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992) and Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993).

The pervasive presence of female monsters in cultural representations and woman's association with monstrosity in all human societies are the starting points in Barbara Creed's study, in which she challenges the traditional view that in horror films women exist mostly as victims (1993: 3-7). The construction of woman as monstrous is related to male psychosexual fears and anxieties and textualised through patriarchal representations of women as abject or as castrators. She theorises her concept of the "monstrous-feminine" through the use of Julia Kristeva's concept of "abjection".<sup>1</sup> Creed relates Kristeva's theory

<sup>1</sup> For Kristeva, full entry into the symbolic is dependent on the expulsion of things defined as improper and unclean. These things constitute the abject. However, the abject can never be totally expelled: it constitutes the other side of socialized subjectivity and becomes the object of an am-

with cultural representations of the archaic mother, the Spider Woman, the Sphinx or the Medusa, and concludes that, in horror films, representations of the monstrous-feminine are often related to horror of the reproductive powers of woman. The ideological project of the popular horror film is a form of defilement rite: the purification of the abject (1989: 71) and of its cultural representation in patriarchy: woman's power to create new life. At the same time, attraction towards the abject, towards what has been rejected yet is still desired, constitutes the main avenue of spectatorial involvement in, and fascination for, the figure of the monster in horror films. Creed summarises her discussion of abjection and the archaic mother in the horror film with the following paragraph:

I regard the association of woman's maternal and reproductive functions with the abject as a construct of patriarchal ideology. [...] Woman is not, by her very nature, an abject being. Her representation in popular discourses as monstrous is a function of the ideological project of the horror film — a project designed to perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other (1993a: 83).

Creed goes on to analyse the first two films of the *Alien* trilogy in terms of their different representations of the archaic mother and the monster's association with the reproductive power of women as the central constituent of its monstrosity (1993a: 16-30). In this sense, the scene from *Alien 3* described above can be seen as representative of the entire text in that it powerfully visualises what the whole narrative development of the film seems to point to: the progressive identification between female heroine and monster as two equivalent representations of the abject. This identification can be seen as the culmination of an uncanny process of development in the whole of the trilogy from an initial position of antagonism between Ripley and the alien to their final proximity at the moment of death at the end of the series.

The emphasis on identification through the look in horror films that seems so central in this scene is theorized by Linda Williams who argues for an affinity between monster and woman in classical horror, an affinity which is confirmed here at the climactic moment when the heroine looks at the monster and "recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing" (1984: 85). According to Williams, the monster's power is one of sexual difference from the normal male, one in which it resembles women's position in patriarchy. When the woman looks at the monster, she shares the male's conventional fear but, in addition, she also "recognizes the sense in which [the monster's] freakishness is similar to her own difference. For she too has been constituted as an exhibitionist-object by the desiring look of the male" (87-88). At the centre of *Alien 3*, the heroine looks closely at the monster and comes to realize, maybe for the first time, that their long confrontation has only served to defer what she has probably known from the beginning: their common destiny in this often disguised but now clearly patriarchal world of futuristic dystopia.

For her part, Carol J. Clover argues that in the subgenre of the slasher film the teenage male spectator masochistically identifies with the female victim hero (1992: 21-64).<sup>1</sup> Contradicting Creed's emphasis on the female as monstrous, she argues that "there is something about the victim function that wants manifestation in a female" (12), but, through this

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biguous but powerful desire to surrender self-identity. Although representations of the abject range from bodily waste to the corpse, the primary site of the abject, that which is first expelled, is the maternal body, the feminine. In our culture the maternal body becomes the prototype of the abject because of its association with the natural world: it secretes blood and milk, it changes shape and swells and it gives birth in a violent act of expulsion (see Creed 1993b: 122-23).

<sup>1</sup> Evidence from cinema attendance statistics and a poll carried out by the author in video rental shops confirm the preponderance of young males among the audiences of the films (6-7).

manifestation, what she calls the Final Girl becomes a stand-in for the male teenage spectator to experience sadomasochistic fantasies and, at the same time, reinforce phallogocentric structures (53). In other words, patriarchal ideology is reinforced through the representation of the victim-hero as female and, simultaneously, male spectators can have their sadomasochistic phantasies activated through a sort of cross-gender identification with a heroine who is, in any case, a "boy in drag" (52n). Clover concludes that the psychic investment of the spectator of horror films cannot be theorized through a Mulveyan emphasis on the aggressive gaze but, rather, through Freud's concept of "feminine masochism", that is, the "perverse" expression of a feminine nature in men. In these films, male spectators go through a series of masochistic experiences: being copulated with and impregnated, being beaten, castrated and violently penetrated, etc., which coincide with Freud's description of the phantasies of the male "feminine masochist" (215-17). Drawing on this theory, Ripley can be seen as a figure of identification not just for female spectators but, crucially, also for male ones. In the scene of the heroine's visual confrontation with the monster, the male spectator would identify with her and, through this identification, place himself in a position of victim of the sexually aggressive monster, who not only "kisses" the spectator's "stand-in" but has previously impregnated her. That is, through this possibility of psychic investment, the male spectator would confront what Freud considers the most deeply embedded male anxiety: the fear of standing in a "feminine" relation to another man (Clover 216), and, within a masochistic scenario of desire, therefore, the most deeply desired phantasy of humiliation.<sup>1</sup>

I will now try to link these three theories together in a more integrated description of the spectator's position in the scene. Apart from the traditional sadistic involvement with the aggressor, two subject positions are offered at this point. On the one hand, both male and female, but mostly male spectators, are offered a masochistic phantasy of identification with the female heroine, a character who feels threatened by what has become her deepest embedded anxiety through her experience in the two previous films of the trilogy -her confrontation with and destruction at the hands of the alien monster- and who has, in fact, already been impregnated by it. She does not know yet about her "unnatural" pregnancy but the spectator may suspect it from the fragmentary and confusing evidence offered in the credit sequence. This is a victim position in which violence, sexual aggression and the immediate prospect of death are linked to make up a fairly typical masochistic scenario. Of the two types of gaze proposed by Clover -assaultive (sadistic) and reactive (masochistic) (1992: 175)- the latter clearly predominates, although sadistic identification with the monster must not be discarded. The spectator constructed by this scene would, therefore, differ from the spectator theorized by Mulvey through the concepts of sadistic voyeurism and female castration-based fetishism. The look is here passive and masochistic. The close-up brings the spectator closer to Ripley (and, secondarily, to the monster), and the spectator's pleasure stems from the re-enacting of his deepest fears and desires through the film's projection of those fears onto the figure of the monster. According to Clover, the position of victim is coded in our culture as feminine, so it is the female hero that the male spectator identifies with. Precisely the possibility of an identification that is not offered to males in their real lives is what makes their investment in this scene more crucial, more truly

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that in drawing from Creed's theory, I am constructing the alien as female, while in drawing from Clover's, the alien becomes male. Yet, these two apparently contradictory and simultaneous positions may coexist as embodiments of two different psychic structures in the spectator, especially in the case of a fictional character whose gender specificity is both crucial and ambiguous. In terms of representation, the monster is constructed as sharing masculine and feminine, male and female characteristics.

phantastic, than that of the female, for whom masochism is, according to Freud, not a sexual aberration at all but a condition of passivity which is the norm in their real lives.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, when Ripley looks at the monster, she realizes their similarity rather than difference within patriarchy. We must remember, as Anne Friedberg points out, that identification occurs in all object relations, that is, that all libidinal investments in an external object are accompanied by the subject's desire "to incorporate, in a bodily way, or to introject, in a non-bodily way, pleasurable external objects" (1990: 38). Desire for an other is never separated from desire to *be* the other, even if the Freudian Oedipal narrative is based on the eventual feasibility of such separation. Now it may seem far-fetched to argue that Ripley's look at the monster is one of desire, but the point is that, whether it is or not, the cinematic and narrative conventions used to represent the scene code Ripley's position as fairly similar to that of the Hollywood heroine in love. In any case, that Ripley ultimately desires to be the alien is clearly confirmed by later narrative developments. For the time being, suffice it to say, *pace* sadistic theories of the cinematic gaze, that the subject never simply wants to possess the object, to sadistically punish it for being a woman or to fetishize it, but also to incorporate or introject it, and this must apply to *all* looks, gendered or not gendered. Consequently, if an identification had been posited before between the male spectator and Ripley, it must follow that, through Ripley, the spectator not only fears and desires the monster, but also identifies with it. Now this monster is the film's representation of abjection, of what must be expelled in order for the subject to enter the symbolic and individual identity to be formed. It is, at the same time, ambiguously the embodiment of the most profound desire, a desire of fusion with the mother, of refusal of separation between self and other. In our culture, on the other hand, it is the "feminine" that is represented as abject, a representation that speaks male envy of woman's reproductive powers and anxiety of castration. In *Alien 3*, as in other horror films, it is this relationship between the monster and femininity that is constructed as abject, and it is also this construction that the male spectator is offered an identification with. After all, it is through Ripley and her look at the monster that the spectator has access to identification with the abject. Woman and monster are, therefore, bound together in the representation of abjection. Through Ripley and her look at the monster the male spectator is offered the possibility of a phantastic regression to the imaginary state from which his individuality and his male identity have stemmed.

In other words, the spectator identifies both with Ripley and the monster, but since, as the film so pointedly proves, the two fictional characters are probably not so different from one another in terms of the cultural dimensions of their representation, it would be more accurate to argue that the spectator is placed in two positions: a masochistic phantasy of total submission to the other and a phantasy of abjection, of reincorporation into what has been rejected. In our culture this double phantasy has been assimilated to femininity and the "terrible" reproductive power of the archaic mother. For a brief moment, the spectator does not only masochistically succumb at the hands of the pre-Oedipal mother, it *becomes* the archaic mother, the legendary and terrifying Medusa.

Yet, as Creed has argued, the horror film also punishes the spectator for indulging in these "forbidden" pleasures and simultaneously, through closure and destruction of the monster, offers her/him the channel to reject the phantasy. Although the discussion has, so far, centred on Ripley's look at the monster in this scene, close scrutiny will reveal that, for most of the two close-ups, Ripley does not actually look at the monster but looks away,

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<sup>1</sup> Another way of putting this could be that, since men know that there is no danger for them to hold this feminine position in real life, they are able to keep the levels of reality and phantasy separate, because there is no real risk involved for them. I am indebted to Constanza del Río for this insight.

apparently unable to stand the proximity of her enemy/object of desire. This looking away may well be compared to the position of the spectator at certain moments in horror films when s/he is, according to Creed, unable to stand the images unfolding in front of her/his eyes: "pleasure in looking is transformed into pain as the spectator is punished for his/her voyeuristic desires" (1993a: 28). Of course, Creed is referring to the spectator whereas I am referring to Ripley, the fictional character, but the spectator is bound here in an identification with the heroine which makes him, like her, confront the abject and be punished for desiring it. This punishment carries with it the possibility of rejection of that desire and reintegration in the symbolic. Reintegration is possible for the male spectator precisely because the victim is represented as female. According to Clover, he can, after experiencing the pain/pleasure of a masochistic phantasy of humiliation, coupled, in this case, with a phantasy of incorporation of the abject, disavow his personal stake since the victim/abject is, after all, a woman and, therefore, ostensibly different from him. In Clover's words, "men can eat their psychosexual cake and have it too" (1992: 228). This happens, according to Clover, in all horror films of the female-victim heroine variety, but in *Alien 3*, additionally, the male spectator will find it easier to disavow these "aberrant" identifications in the course of the narrative as it becomes increasingly obvious that Ripley must die and he, like the protagonist, "learns" to desire her death.

Clover invokes Kaja Silverman and Leo Bersani in suggesting that masochism is subversive of the phallic order of subjectivity because it "shatters" the male subject's relation to it (1992: 224). Similarly, the potential incorporation of the abject by the male spectator could undoubtedly be considered subversive because it cancels out and reverses the psychic movement towards acculturized identity. The problem, in the case of *Alien 3*, resides precisely in the powerful ways in which that relation to a different order of pregendered, or at least differently gendered, subjectivity is punished and disavowed by the filmic representation of gender. Certain psychosexual responses provoked by the film may be potentially subversive but, to repeat Clover's sentence again, representation does matter. Consequently, the film's representation of gender relationships and of femininity cannot be ignored.

Critical responses to the first two films of the series have mostly focused on two points: the issue of equality/difference in the representation of gender relationships and the nature of the monster. Constance Penley, for example, remarks that *Alien* (Ridley Scott 1979) was unique in that each role was written to be played either by a man or a woman, and Scott's direction produces a film which is "(for the most part) stunningly egalitarian" (1989: 205). James H. Kavanaugh qualifies the film as "almost postfeminist" (in Neale 1989: 214). Yet even these critics remark that in the final scene of the film, in the words of one reviewer, "we have Ripley wandering around clad only in her underwear. A little reminder of her gender, lest we lose sight of it behind all that firepower?" (Christine Schoefer, in Clover 1992: 58). Penley, however, remarks that the second film, *Aliens* (James Cameron 1986), reinstalls gender difference through an unexpected turn: Ripley develops a maternal instinct when she risks her life to save a little girl (1989: 206). Further, while trying to save the little girl, Ripley goes into a room in which an egg-laying Mother alien is constructed as the most terrifying of monsters, a scene, which in one stroke both represents monstrosity as feminine and visually associates Ripley with it (see Clover 1992: 46-47). These moments, which contradict the films' alleged gender equality and even the positing of Ripley as the Final Girl, the bravest and strongest of all the characters who fight the monster, hint at a patriarchal ideology which is confirmed and intensified in *Alien 3*.

From the moment she is rescued, Ripley is classified as female by the computer at Fury 161. When, shortly after, she asks Clemens why he knows her name, he answers that he saw it printed on her shorts, an item of clothing which is clearly associated with her

sexuality. Her shaved head, which supposedly should have erased her difference from the men on the planet, is twice referred to (by Clemens and by Bishop, the male android) as a “hair style” which suits her. Her first emotional reaction is one of intense grief at the death of Newt, her surrogate daughter from *Aliens*. Her courage and determination to kill the monster and her clear vision of what must be done at all times in the middle section of the film may work against her patriarchal classification as “feminine”. However, even more important than her leadership in the fight against the monster is the narrative development which has her realize that the only solution for the final destruction of the monster is her own death. This conviction provokes most of the moments of emotional intensity in the second half of the film, culminating with her empathic plummeting into the abyss. Although Creed, in her brief analysis of the film, sees the character’s death as reminiscent of the supreme sacrifice of an ancient androgynous god (1993a: 52-53), it is her femininity and, more specifically, her capacity for conception, that is constructed as the ultimate reason for her self-immolation. It could be argued that her monstrous motherhood is no different from that undergone by many male characters in the course of the trilogy, all of whom have also died, and that this motherhood is, in the terms proposed by the film, not gender specific. Yet, because Ripley is the protagonist, it is her death at the moment of giving unnatural birth that is narratively emphasised in the film’s closure. Unlike horror stories of the Frankenstein type, which fantasize man’s ability to create life and punish these male phantasies as unnatural, in the futuristic dystopia of *Alien 3* it is woman’s power to reproduce that is represented as unnatural and punished with death. This death, however, brings about the termination of life on Fury 161. In retrospect, it seems hardly surprising that the news of her presence at the beginning of the narrative should create such turmoil among the all-male population of the planet.

Fury 161 is an intergalactic penitentiary for dangerous male prisoners —thieves, rapists, murderers, child molesters, “all scum,” as the superintendent introduces them to Ripley— which has been abandoned by the Company, the abstract ruling power in the world of the trilogy. Most of the inmates have been taken elsewhere, but a group of them, probably the most dangerous, have decided to stay on for the rest of their lives and form a kind of fundamentalist religious community, aspiring to spiritual unity, with apparently very strict rules. An unexpected accident in her spaceship, provoked by the alien, brings Ripley to Fury 161. From the very beginning, it is made clear that the agitation she causes in the community is due to the fact that she is a woman: “What brother means to say is we view the presence of any outsider, especially a woman, as a violation of the harmony and a potential break in the spiritual unity”, says Dillon (Charles S. Dutton), the leader of the inmates, in the very first scene. From the moment Ripley arrives in the planet, even before she is seen by the men, there is a feeling of unrest and dark foreboding which the spectator may at first find curious: what kind of happiness could exist in such a dismal place that a woman may disrupt with her presence? It is part of the ideological project of the film to persuade the spectator that this is a very spiritual kind of harmony and, however unbelievable, a harmony that we are made gradually, if not openly, to accept and even sympathize with. As the film develops, the spectator may tend to forget or, at least, overlook, the fact that Dillon and his followers are dangerous criminals and contemplates identification with them in their common fight against the monster. This development of the spectator’s sympathy towards the men is crucial for the film’s representation of the monstrous-feminine. This company, made up of the worst imaginable male criminals, has managed to develop an acceptable social organization, based on an intense male bonding and the rejection of women. It is a woman, no matter how honest, intelligent and courageous, that brings evil into this community and destroys it. One might even speculate that, had there not been any women to molest, rape and kill in their past, they would not

have become criminals. It is the female protagonist and not the male criminals that is associated with monstrosity.

Creed refers to the analogies that the film establishes between Ripley and the alien (1993a: 51-53) but I would like to concentrate on a crucial scene which she does not analyse: the scene in which the protagonist makes love with Clemens. Contrary to the worn courting conventions used by the majority of films, it is Ripley that openly proposes to Clemens, in what the text flaunts as one of the numerous “feminist” touches of the trilogy. The film cuts from a shot of her as she explains her sexual “needs” to Clemens, to one of the huge fans of the air-conditioning system elsewhere in the base. Murphy (Chris Fairbank), one of the inmates, is doing cleaning work in the airshaft near the fan when he finds some sticky tissue on the floor, which the spectator immediately associates with the alien. The tissue is next to a black hole, which seems to have been burned on the floor of the shaft. This cavity is terrifying both because it is mysterious and unfathomable and because it signifies that the alien is near. As is to be expected, Murphy looks into the hole and his ill-directed curiosity is punished with a violent push from the alien which sends him rolling into the fan, where he is ripped to shreds. Cut back to Ripley and Clemens, lying peacefully after sexual intercourse.

Cutaways such as the one just described are, along with tracking movements which leave the couple offscreen, among the most common strategies used by films to simultaneously signify and avoid direct representation of lovemaking. Visual metaphors involving monumental release of energy such as the revolving fan are also usual to suggest orgasm. But in this scene, the cutaway is in a sense no real cutaway but rather a metaphoric continuation of the representation of the sexual act. The change signified by the cut from the infirmary to the airshaft is not a change in the action but, metaphorically, just a change of point of view. If Ripley’s viewpoint has been predominant so far and will remain so up to the end of the film, here we are offered a male phantasy in which sexual intercourse with a woman is presented as a terrifying experience ending in death. Several critics, including Karen Horney (1967), Susan Lurie (1980) and, especially, Creed (1993a), have contradicted Freud in his view that the sight of woman is terrifying for the male because she is castrated. Creed argues that in our patriarchal culture women are often constructed not as castrated but as castrators, as possessors of a formidable power in their genitals and an unshakable will to castrate men (see Creed 1993a, esp. 88-121). In *Alien 3*, the direct presentation of heterosexual lovemaking is replaced by one of its most common psychosexual representations in patriarchy: a male phantasy of castration and death at the hands of the monstrous female. Roughly at the same time as Clemens penetrates Ripley, Murphy “penetrates” the black hole at the bottom of which lies the beast. No need to elaborate on the broken piece of slimy tissue found on the edge, or the lurking beast within. These explicit details may seem relevant, but much more so is the fact that this association establishes an allegorical fusion between Ripley and the monster while, at the same time, it insinuates the reason for the imminent disappearance of the all-male community: female sexuality, paradoxically constructed as the ultimate destructive force in society. Shortly after their lovemaking, the monster catches up with Clemens and destroys him too, thus removing any doubt about the doctor’s future after making love to the only woman on the planet. If Ripley’s sexual forwardness was ostensibly constructed as a proof of the film’s claim to gender equality, Clemens’s untimely death—and I would argue, Murphy’s, too—soon reveals the film’s true colours: its positing of female sexuality as evil, an evil amplified by women’s “sexual liberation” in our society.

Another metaphor is used later on which is also significant of the position occupied by the “feminine” in the film. When she discovers that she is carrying a baby alien inside her,

Ripley decides to confront its parent directly and ask it to kill her.<sup>1</sup> When “85” (Ralph Brown) asks her where she is planning to find the alien, she answers that she thinks it is in the basement. “This whole place is a basement” adds the prison officer to which she replies: “it’s a metaphor”. What is the basement a metaphor for? Why is it the obvious place to look for the alien?, and further, why is Ripley the only human character in possession of this “metaphoric” knowledge? At one level, of course, Ripley knows because she has had previous experience in the earlier films, particularly in *Aliens*, when, while trying to rescue Newt, she came face to face with the terrifying egg-laying alien mother. In addition, however, the basement conjures up the idea both of the centre of the organism, the engine room, and the lower part of the woman’s body, where life is conceived and created. It is as if the alien has taken over, always takes over, the core of the system from which the existence of a society is controlled. Whoever can gain access to that room, can control the whole of society. This central area, from which life emanates, is also the womb, what patriarchy knows and fears as the only organ capable of creating life. In *Alien 3*, this knowledge is both unavoidable and unbearable. Ripley is a conformist patriarchal construct, in spite of superficial evidence to the contrary. She is an experienced alien-fighter but, also, metaphorically, has recently reconciled herself with the psychocultural paradox on which the fixed position of women in patriarchy is based: the only life-giving force is also the most formidable life-destroying force in the world. Leaving aside futuristic genetic technology, that the womb is the only human organ capable of creating life may be true, but that the female genitals are capable of destroying life by assimilation or suction—the abject mother—or by mutilation—the castrating mother—is a patriarchal phantasy which has been constructed as a male defense mechanism to justify the subjection of women (see Lurie 1980: 172). This central paradox of patriarchy is not exactly the same but equivalent to the central paradox of the film: Ripley is the only character capable of ridding society of the alien but she is, at the same time, the most dangerous threat to that society, as all the men sense from the beginning. Without woman, society will be destroyed, but woman brings destruction to society. The only way to incorporate this paradox into classical narrative and give it an appearance of coherence is to posit an impossible phantasy in which a group of men live happily without women around—precisely because there are no women around—until a woman comes and destroys their harmony. Once the woman has arrived, it is too late for any solution and that society is doomed to eventually disappear—at the end of the film, the Company closes off the base and life in it is brought to an end—but before this happens, in its most tendentious strategy, the female hero must come to terms with the destructive nature of her femininity and realize that the only way for this or other societies not to be infected by her femininity is her own sacrifice.

From the moment Ripley finds out that the alien is inside her, the narrative drive towards closure consists in an unremitting crusade against femininity as it has been constructed by the film: first the alien must be destroyed, then the female character. It is significant that the two main antagonists in the film, the alien as the evil natural force, and the Company, the world’s totalitarian and corrupt authority, are the only two “characters” that are interested in Ripley’s survival. Only those who oppose civilization or those who corrupt it want woman to survive. Like other monstrous heroines before her—for example, Irena in *The Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur 1942)—Ripley realizes the formidable

<sup>1</sup> Notice that Ripley is carrying the alien foetus not in her womb but in her head, as if her intellectual superiority to all the men in the film were also being punished and her brain were being turned into an extension of her reproductive apparatus, the part that, in a patriarchal society, predominates in woman’s body.

threat that she represents to patriarchal society and, submissive to the dictates of that society as she ultimately is, sacrifices her own life in what Creed describes as “possibly the most stunning sequence in the *Alien* trilogy” (1993a: 52). The blissful expression that a close-up of her face catches as she plummets into the incandescent furnace can be read in different ways: she is Ripley ridding the world of the monstrous creature that is, at this very moment, trying to burst out of her chest; she is also Sigourney Weaver ridding herself of a series that projected her to stardom but had now become bothersome; she is the last woman in the world, aware of the potential danger that her life represents for civilized society; and, if an interpretation which is never borne out by the text may be allowed, she is also the woman who, by not allowing her body to be used scientifically, is finally revenging herself on a culture that has constructed her as evil and has decided that she must be destroyed: without her, the world as we know it cannot go on.

In a recent analysis of David Cronenberg’s *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*, Helen W. Robbins posits male womb envy as the driving force of the tradition of those horror films which feature obsessed male scientists trying to create life. She borrows from Eva F. Kittay the term “womb appropriation,” the prevalent defense built by men to disavow their womb envy, an operation which “involves the invention and exaltation of male activities that mimic natural female functions” (1993: 135). The inevitable fate of these attempts points, according to Robbins, to patriarchy’s failure “to live up to the impossible task for which it was instituted: maintaining the illusion of fixed paternity” (137). Phallic potency can never become a proper substitute for female reproductive power (139), no matter how hard patriarchy has tried, ever since the Bible and before, to construct man as the master of creation. In this sense, Freudian psychoanalysis is only a more recent, very prestigious patriarchal attempt at privileging the male sexual organ over the female, through a psychocultural operation which psychoanalysis itself has invented a label for: disavowal. The positing of castration as the central factor of the individual’s psychic development and of women as castrated men with penis envy may, in this light, constitute a formidable operation of disavowal of what really worries and frustrates the institution of patriarchy: “the brief, merely speculative role of the male individual in procreation” (137). *Alien 3* becomes one more instance of the never-ending attempt to soothe and disavow male womb envy, in this case by turning female sexuality into the monstrous feminine and killing off the woman at the moment of conception. While Eliot Mantle, in *Dead Ringers*, explains to his twin brother Beverly that heterosexual intercourse is an unfortunate necessity of the human race and longs for a phylogenetic return to life under water, where fish do not need to touch each other in order to procreate (Robbins 1993: 139), *Alien 3* constructs the ultimate patriarchal fantasy of an all-male society in which women are not necessary, a society which is probably best defined by Polixenes in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* when he tells Hermione about his childhood with Leontes, her husband: “We were, fair queen,/ Two lads that thought there was no more behind,/ But such a day to-morrow as to-day,/ And to be boy eternal. [...] We were as twinn’d lambs that did frisk i’ th’ sun,/ And bleat the one at th’ other: what we chang’d/ Was innocence for innocence: we knew not/ The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream’d/ That any did” (I,ii: 62-71). This is a description of Paradise before Eve’s temptation. It may seem perverse to compare this Edenic state of golden innocence and ignorance of evil with the male community at Fury 161 but this is precisely what the film does when it draws the spectator’s sympathy towards the band of murderers and rapists who inhabit the planet. As in *Genesis* and *The Winter’s Tale*, this utopian well-being is broken by woman’s appearance. To quote from the same passage from *The Winter’s Tale*, Polixenes explains to his friend’s wife: “Temptations have since then been born to ‘s: for/ In those unfledg’d days was my wife a girl;/ Your precious self had then not cross’d the eyes/ Of my young play-fellow” (77-80).

The irony of these patriarchal efforts to rewrite phylogenetic and ontogenetic history is that, as Robbins points out, nostalgia for a past form of life under water conceals a desire for a return to the womb, a return to existence inside the mother's body (1993: 139-40). This desire is the same masochistic desire of assimilation with the mother with which I started this discussion of the film. The masochistic phantasy is, therefore, not only constructed by the film through specific identifications with the female victim-hero, but it is already there in the utopian all-male world within the enclosed, cosy space of the womb-like intergalactic foundry, a space which is already "female" before Ripley and the alien arrive. There is nothing objectionable in the film's activating of this regressive desire in the spectator, but to posit the fulfilment of the subject's phantasy as the central issue of the film, as some of the recent psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship might lead the critic to do, is to hide too much, to ignore the most objectionable component of the phantasy: its structural necessity to abject the woman by establishing a subtle but powerful identification between Ripley and the monster and by positing the protagonist's death as narratively inevitable and ideologically beneficial for HUMAN kind.

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