

ALIENS: THE ANATOMY OF A SEQUEL

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PREFACE

Most major films have some sort of political and social orientation. They fall into two broad categories: those that support the dominant ideology and those that in some way undermine it.ⁱ What strikes me most about *Alien* [1979] and *Aliens* [1986] is their neat ideological symmetry: Each supports the ideology of their day and yet they are almost totally opposite in their individual stances. How can this be? Simple, between the making of the original films and its sequel, ideology changed.

It is wrong to assume that *Aliens* is a simple sequel to *Alien* rather than a product of the time in which it was made, almost a decade later. It seems that many viewers and writersⁱⁱ lump the two together and assume that the thoughts expressed in the second film are a simple continuation of those in the first. I strongly believe that a linking of the politics between the "original" and the "sequel" is something that must be proven and cannot be *a priori* assumed. In this essay I will point out the vast differences between the two films. Behind the gloss of action and special effects, the two films are at odds on many important contemporary issues: problem solving on both a personal and national level, the position of the intellectual in society, the conflict between materialism and humanism, the role of women in our culture, and so on.

As I once again reread this essay, I find it was originally written (in 1986) with a great deal of anger. It is now very tempting to excise and censor those angry passages and hide behind a neutral facade of editorial and intellectual distance. At the risk of offending some readers, I am choosing not to do this. My anger was real and – being directed at what happened between the films – is quite important to me.

I want to explain at the outset, however, that I am not angry *at* either of these films – I enjoyed them both and I feel they are fine examples of the best of the science fiction genre. Closer to my anger is the frustration I feel at the interpretation given these films by many of the people to whom I have spoken about them. However, at the core of my anger is the easy misinterpretation given to these films and the social conditions that have encouraged these misinterpretations. The changes in ideology that occurred in the time between the films – I repeat: personal problem solving, the role of the intellectual in society, the roles of women in our culture, the choices between human values and material values – are something of great personal concern to me. I did not realize how involved I was with these values until I confronted my anger about these films. While most critical essays remain safely in the area of the intellect, expressing rational thoughts about subjects, I will dare to openly convey my feelings. If my reader holds political or social views that differ greatly from mine, I hope that whatever readers find offensive in my diatribes will not deter him or her from seriously considering the issues that examining these films brings up, and hopefully, this essay confronts. It is not my goal to change minds, but to simply open them.

INTRODUCTION

Aliens [1979] is known primarily as the sequel to *Alien* [1986]. While in the world of film, sequels and remakes are almost universally reviled, in the other arts they have a long and proud history. Many of our most recognized artistic accomplishments are remakes or sequels. Mozart's masterpiece, *Marriage of Figaro* (1786), for instance, is a direct sequel to Giovanni Paisiello's 1782 original *The Barber of Seville* (then highly successful, but now mostly forgotten) while Rossini's more famous 1816 opera is the remake. In painting there are innumerable remakes: Very little original in terms of subject matter has been contributed to religious painting for almost a thousand years – there must be hundreds of Pietas and thousands of Crucifixions out there.

Yet in film, both remakes and sequels are almost immediately suspect, typically accused of being primarily safe money-making ventures that capitalize on an already proven commodity. A comment by Leo Braudyⁱⁱⁱ is typical, "urged on by the desire to keep the money safe and bent on exploiting the knowing audience, the film-maker spawns sequels . . ." Folded into accusations like this are myriad assumptions – lack of creativity, blind repetition, bankability, fear of breaking new ground, and so on. While recognizing that hack work exists in any field, in the following essay I want to examine in detail a filmic sequel and identify its unique properties. Most significant among these is that sequels and remakes offer opportunities for analysis unavailable in other areas of cinema.

Alien, Ridley Scott's 1979 space thriller was followed almost a decade later by James Cameron's adrenaline-pumping sequel. While there are many similarities, including a probable record for white-knuckling the audience into their seats, the two films exhibit very important differences. On close inspection, these differences almost form a paradigm for understanding the role of many sequels, namely, correcting ideology with the passing of time. While this does not quite constitute rewriting history with scissors and paste, *a la* Orwell's depressing predictions in his prophetic novel, *1984*, (or by computer in the eponymic film) the function of this type of film sequel is much the same. And the means – in this case cinematic – are far more subtle.

Many sequels bear striking resemblance to contemporary fashions, especially those that seem to come around again – the resurrected narrow ties of the 1950's, the resuscitated double-breasted suits of the 1940's, the reprised Panama hats of the 1930's, and so on. On the surface it is just what one would expect in a post-Modern era – a mining of the past for symbols in a desperate attempt to help us understand an apparently indecipherable present. But there is, I believe, more to the sequel than a knee-jerk response to the post-modern dilemma.

While these boomeranged fashions may have a surface resemblance to the originals, they are, in fact, distinctly different from the first time around. What makes them such interesting subjects for closer scrutiny is not so much their look, but the social and psychological driving forces that not only cause an often illogical resurrection, but additionally give these fashions a new meaning, one that has been, so to speak, "corrected" into the present. For instance, the current (1986) crop of backward-glancing fashions point to the '40's for adults – the last time in American political history when good was clearly distinguishable from evil – and to the '50's for the younger generation – the last guilt-free party time. Many contemporary films reflect this rear-view mirror attitude – *Back to the Future* [1985] is placed squarely and self-consciously in the 1950's while *Rambo* [1982 – officially known as *First Blood*], despite its Viet Nam setting, is nothing more than a World War II single-conquering-male-hero-film (without the benefit of being the last American war in which White people fought White people). A similar, but often more subtle situation obtains with many re-made or sequeled films.

How does this idea of rewriting history apply to futuristic films like *Alien/Aliens*? We have here, perhaps, a conundrum as complex as that presented in many time-travel stories where one meets one's previous self.^{iv v}

Few films deal in real time; most of the films we see tend in some way to distort it. Not only do we see several month's activity in two hours (not counting, of course, the intentionally invisible two to three years needed to make the film), and those months, in many science fiction films, are in the distant future. We almost always have a multiple reading of time – compression/expansion, present/future/past – that can be neatly used to disguise a transformation of ideology. But *Alien/Aliens* this device is used in an unusually interesting way.

At first glance, *Aliens* seems to be simply a continuation of *Alien*, taking up 57 years after the earlier film left off. The heroine seemingly reprises her previous "leave it to Weaver" role; the greedy corporations seem little changed; the fearful alien creatures, while increased in number, have not decreased one iota in nastiness. The nightmare/fairy tale nature of the first film is continued into the second using the same cleverly symbolic device: The action of both films is bookended with images of sleep pointing to their fairy tale nature.

Actually, the most noticeable change over the intervening half century is in men's fashions: suit collars are up this season. However, while I may treat this point flippantly, which at the surface level it justly deserves, I also see considerable significance at a deeper, more symbolic level in this single, clearly visible change.

It is tempting to conclude that nothing much transpired in the 50 film-years that elapsed between the end of *Alien* when Ripley and her cat launched themselves into both deep-sleep and deep-space and the beginning of *Aliens* when they are rescued by a profit-hungry, but sadly disappointed salvage/wrecking crew. But more significant than the non-

changes that have occurred in that five-decade span in future film-time is what did happen here on Earth in the single decade that elapsed between the two films' making.

On Earth, America egotistically comprises the whole planet in these types of films, on Earth we moved from an era of moral and political positions understood by almost everyone into a time of uncertainty and ambiguity. *Alien* was made in the sunset of what has come to be known as the "Carter Era." *Aliens*, on the other hand, is well ensconced into the era where ideology sprang from the well of Ronald Reagan. This change, as I hope to show, is reflected in subtle but important ideological changes peppered into *Aliens*. Many of the differences between the Carter and Reagan regimes are self-evident; but considering that the only surface changes evident between the two films is in something as trivial as clothing, to get at how these socio-political differences show up in these films requires a little digging.

The ideological differences I wish to deal with in these films do not reside conveniently on the viewing surface, but problematically below it. And like most messages invisibly placed (to an average viewing audience) into the psychological depths of a film, they can have a far greater affect on the audience than blatantly obvious messages (whether *a la Rambo* [1982] from the right or *Salvador* [1986] from the left). In addition, being thus submerged, these messages are often ambiguous and self-contradictory and thus far more difficult to decipher clearly. Yet attempts at interpretation, while often frustratingly inconclusive, still give considerable insight into how ideology is "corrected" by films, especially sequels.

THE FEMALE LEAD IN SCIENCE FICTION

The most obvious feature of both films is that the major character is a competent, intelligent, and brave woman. Thus, both films clearly aspire to stand together at one end of a specific but limited feminist political spectrum: that pro-feminist end rarely treated by mainstream films (future films like *Thelma and Louise* [1991] represent still another change in ideology). We need only recall the role of women in most other previous science fiction films to see the apparently revisionist stance of both *Alien* and *Aliens*.

Hollywood's visions of outer space in the '50s included such delights as alien Martian females in blue satin miniskirts or black leotards replete with plunging necklines and rhinestone chokers, and, for the those oriented to the more fringe types of fetishes, apparently rubber capes in films like *Devil Girl from Mars* [1954]. Miniskirts even became integral to the plot line in *Forbidden Planet* [1956]. With the notable exception of *Them* [1954], women in science fiction films of that era were primarily decorative, expected to undergo fantastic ordeals, scream a lot, and come out with both hair and make-up in perfect order or clothing strategically torn to tease an obviously male eye.

The '60s were little better – actually in some ways they were a lot worse. Perhaps the two most embarrassing forays of that decade were the high camp *Voyage to the Planet of Prehistoric Women* [1968] in which Mamie Van Doren is adorned with a sea-shell bra, and the low camp *Barbarella* [1967] that, no matter how you view it, makes you wince thinking of Jane Fonda's subsequent embarrassment. Wearing a dozen amazingly thin costumes that just barely clung to her body, Fonda/Barbarella fought carnivorous dolls, had sex with a blind angel, and shorted out a pleasure machine by over-sexing it. Perhaps the runner up for (s)exploitation would be Raquel Welch in both *Fantastic Voyage* [1966] and *One Million Years B.C.* [1967]. These were the decades when apparently a major part of the audition for the female leading role in science fiction films was apparently the ability to scream helplessly.

The 1979 entrance of *Alien* changed all that. We were finally presented with a competent female hero – cool, level-headed, knowledgeable, fully clothed, and non-screaming. We can see the pores on Ripley's skin as if make-up did not exist in outer space; her haircut seems to be the result of the practical but slightly inept work of one of her fellow crew members; and she even sweats. Her clothes are baggy, and we only glimpse her body briefly – once and appropriately – in each of the films.

In some ways *Aliens* extends the idea of female competency beyond that established in *Alien*. Ripley's motivation in the first film was simply survival when she had to face the creature alone. In the second film, her motivation has progressed up an evolutionary scale, i.e., she not only rescues herself, but she is also concerned with the welfare others. Competency now includes social responsibility.

Furthermore, Ripley takes command when the duly appointed male freezes – his incompetence endangering the lives of others. By taking command, making decisions, putting herself in the driver's seat (literally), she saves a contingent of male and female Marines. She does not scream, faint, or get rescued by a good-looking man. In fact, in this film, she rescues *him*!

With these ideas in view, it would be easy to conclude that both films take a strongly pro-feminist stance. Many writers have done so. However, I have reservations. While I have no doubt that it is the female-hero surface image of the films that most viewers take with them on leaving the theater, I feel they also take other, more subtle messages with them. In the long run, these more subtle, more unconscious aspects, may do more to influence the audience in their attitudes and feelings than the easily discernible surface messages.

I would now like to show that while *Alien* uses a competent female in a pro-feminist stance, *Aliens*, on the other hand, uses the same visual language to co-opt feminist ideology and use it against itself.

IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

While both films share this unusual similarity – the hero is a competent woman who depends little on men's help to achieve her goals – there are aspects to the two portrayals that differ significantly. In *Alien*, Ripley survived the ravaging attack of the creature of the title primarily because of 1) her superior knowledge of the workings of the spacecraft, 2) the nature of that expertise, and 3) her unique wit to put this knowledge to work for her. While all this can also be said of *Aliens*, there are subtle differences I find important. Let us look at each of these points and see how they differ in the two films.

In the first film Ripley is a warrant officer placed relatively high in the caste system aboard the spacecraft. Then 57 years pass. At the beginning of *Aliens*, she is demoted by the corporation because of her willful destruction of an expensive piece of hardware – the spaceship Nostromo. They find her explanation of the situation all too fantastic. They clearly demur in Ripley's believe-it-or-not session. They blame her for the deaths and destruction for which they themselves, as all who have seen the first film clearly know, are responsible. Is this the behavior we would expect from the corporation reacting to a well-trained and fully competent male officer? Certainly not. At least not from a corporation that prefers to have itself viewed as honest and upstanding. This corporation, of course, is very far from that.

Were Ripley a man, would the corporate representatives react in an equally disbelieving way? Probably not. This is the feeling we get from *Aliens*. Yet asking the same question about *Alien* would probably elicit a very different answer from most viewers. Already in the first few scenes of the second film, her position in relation to those around her has changed. This should immediately alert us to other, more significant changes in the ideology regarding the appropriate roles of women in society, changes that have taken place in the time between the making of the two films. Ripley's dressing down is just the tip of the iceberg; in what follows I will attempt to use the rest of the iceberg to sink the unsinkable Titanic, *Aliens*, carrying a cargo of primarily conservative masculinist ideology disguised as pro-feminism.

In addition to the corporation's perceptions of her, our own perceptions of Ripley also change subtly between the two films. Take, for instance, her name. In the first film she is known only by her last name – "Ripley" – her first name is never mentioned. Without

the gender indicating forename, she is on a par with all the male characters: Dallas, Brett, Lambert, Kane, Parker, and Ashe (none of whose first names are mentioned).

In the second film, during the dressing down process before the clearly corrupt, despicable, and inept board of inquiry, her first name is clearly mentioned. Being nominally labeled as a woman is part of her reduction in rank from officer to grunt. She clearly and appropriately displays her anger and disgust with the proceedings, but her feelings are plainly trivialized. This happens close to the beginning of the story and clearly taints our perception of her empowerment for the rest of the film. Perhaps subtly and subliminally, but nevertheless concretely, this minor point affects our relation to her character – it both personalizes her and weakens her.

The final confrontation in both films is strikingly similar in its broadest outlines. Ripley must face the creature and jettison it into outer space. But there the similarities end. In the first film she is faced with reprogramming a computer under the greatest pressure. Only then will the air lock open and suck the creature out. In the second film there is but a single, obvious, and red button to push. Thus, the skill needed has subtly, but significantly, changed.

The nature of that skill in *Alien* is clearly an intellectual/technical one – mainly in her knowledge of the workings of the spacecraft. In the second film, no longer is she dependent on intellectual skills. In *Aliens*, by contrast, she makes no use of her long training at the space academy (or wherever she was trained), her understanding of unimaginably complex mechanisms that run a spaceship, nor does she use her wits. As a result of her demotion, she is given an embarrassing and token job, more punishment than employment, on the corporation's loading docks and that is where she acquires the skill necessary to kill the creature . . . using a futuristic forklift! In the world of *Aliens*, intellectual pursuits no longer lead to problems solving, it is far more appropriate for women to acquire useful skills in menial jobs.

Aliens' message is clear: in a time when most people, especially women, are dissatisfied with their jobs, one must embrace one's job, no matter how odious, as if it were the holy grail. Solving the most important problem of one's life is not only just like going to work, it is at the locus of work that the solutions are to be found – clearly a message to keep the unhappy masses from grumbling too much.

Clearly, what saves the day in *Aliens* is no longer an intellectual skill of the educated elite, but a physical skill more typically associated in traditional cinema with the working class. President Carter, while in many ways masquerading as a Southern rube, still aligned himself with the nation's intelligentsia and was an out-spoken feminist. Reagan, like many right-wing conservatives, believed in the political strength and innate wisdom of the "people" while never condescending to their direct wishes.

While in a genuine democracy, the populace may be the true residence of power, it is still the elite, the top of the pyramid of power, that know best the ropes and tropes of benevolent rule. Ripley's means of conquering the devouring beast has significantly and

symbolically realigned itself with the passing of time and the changing of ideology – from the learned skill of a highly educated person to a working-class skill acquirable by almost anyone physically fit enough to do the work. In both films and in our recent history, we can trace a movement from the respect of intelligence to the glorification of labor, from thinking for one's self to taking orders, from respect for the uniqueness of the individual to the glorifying, in the safely removed abstract only, the power of the masses. Thus *Aliens*, responding to and perhaps even celebrating current (i.e., 1968) ideologies, lionizes the physical in deference to the intellectual.

The attitude of each film toward the people on-screen in terms of socio/economic distribution is also quite different. Both films present a clear class structure: *Spacecraft* have an unambiguous upstairs/downstairs caste system. As we might expect in the culture that supports space exploration and intergalactic business dealings, it is the upstairs that are an elite white minority while the many downstairs denizens are the menials. The alien of *Alien* does not at first seem to discriminate socially or ethnically – the first two to be done in by the creature are white men, one from upstairs and one from downstairs. At various points in the film, Ripley visits with both groups, learning from each, trying the suggested survival methods of each. Yet, her survival is one ultimately dependent on "upstairs" or "downstairs" values. Yet I feel that in *Alien* it is made clear that the folks upstairs had an inherently better chance of survival than their downstairs cousins. Succinctly, *Alien* supports the intellectual over the physical.

In the second film – populated as it is with largely incompetent and greedy managers upstairs, and the screaming Marines downstairs – the odds have been changed. The call is now far closer to even; compared to the ground rules established in *Alien*, no one really has much of a chance anymore. The only thing that seemingly saves Ripley in her demoted state – in terms of both intellect and power – is the Hollywood tradition that one doesn't kill off the hero, especially one that, in the end, toes the party line. And it is this "toeing of the line" that forms another significant difference between the two films. This is best seen in the nature of "expertise" as portrayed in the two films.

THE NATURE OF EXPERTISE

Corollary to Ripley's role as educated hero is the idea that to save herself and the others requires a certain expertise on her part. There is a great difference between acquiring the basic knowledge to just run a spaceship and acquiring the expertise from having done it for a few years. Just as the source of Ripley's knowledge has changed, so has the nature of the expertise needed to effectively to put that knowledge to work. In *Alien*, only the officers – the upstairs – had the knowledge to save themselves. Yet they blew it. While they all had the knowledge, they lacked the expertise and wit to apply it correctly. *Aliens* changed this. Anyone on the space dock could have learned to use the loader and acquired Ripley's "skill." Her expertise is no longer unique, it has become accessible to anyone and everyone. If one of her co-workers had been there with the Marines, they could have done as well. Just like knowledge, we see that the nature of expertise has devolve from the province of the educated intellectual to the lowest-common-denominator of McDonald's-land.

Ripley's forced adoption of more common working methods is seen throughout the film. At her best, she is shown as a glorified taxi driver, beetling about an abandoned power plant over which she has no control. She also uses male-oriented, phallic guns becoming – for a thankfully small portion of the film – little more than a Rambette or a Rambolina. Her constant resorting to physical contact of various types, so absent in *Alien*, becomes key to several episodes (where, for instance, she fights with the Alien mother and where she reaches into the gooey web to pull Newt out). While the intelligence of the script has thankfully not been denigrated to the gutturals of a Rambo, Ripley clearly no longer has the personal power and independence from male ideology demonstrated in the first film.

Let me expand on the idea that the means of solving problems has also changed. The unique and individual process of problem solving involves the application of acquired knowledge through practiced expertise. But it also requires something more than that – creativity and wit. And this, too, has changed in the psycho/political chasm between the two films. When face to face with the creature toward the end of *Alien*, Ripley slowly and quietly moves her hand toward a panel with a myriad of controls. We have no idea of what any of them do – we hope *she* does. She picks the right switch, flips it, and thus neatly flips the alien into space. The machinery was not built to do this; she invented the solution on the spot. Another flipped toggle and a burst of the rocket engines neatly turned the capsule into an outer space barbecue. These engines, by the way, are a clear symbol of Ripley's

ability to control and use power. Again, this is not the use the builders intended for their rockets. Knowledge and expertise are creatively combined to form a solution that did not previously exist. The physically superior alien is dispatched, without great physical effort, but by knowledge and the creative use of that knowledge.

We have seen that the knowledge of how a spacecraft works is limited to a few. Partial knowledge, specific to an assigned job, is incomplete. And this type of “lower class” study was not enough to save the crew of *Alien*’s Nostromo but it was enough to save *Aliens*’ Sulaco.^{vi} In addition to the sheer brain power necessary to absorb this vast amount of material, wit is required to put it to work in unorthodox ways for one’s benefit, especially under trying circumstances. None of the rest of the crew, working-class or the educated elite, male or female, was capable of this task in *Alien*. Ripley alone survived – she was unique. But in *Aliens*, the nature of “knowledge” has also changed.

Aliens almost duplicates the first film’s final encounter with the alien monster: Ripley again pushes a button to flip the alien into outer space. In contrast to 1979, in 1986 there is no need to exercise choice: There is but a single button! *We* would push that button and we know nothing about the running of a spacecraft . . . and she did not need to know either. No knowledge was needed. Any of us, no matter how technologically inept, could have done the same thing – now she is just like us. All that intelligence, knowledge, and expertise, when the chips are down, does not, in 1986, amount to the proverbial hill of beans. The decade of the '80's is no haven for the intellectual: it is an era for Jocks not Byrons; for Rambos not Remabeus.

One of the major shifts in political orientation between the Carter and Reagan eras is a reduction of social programs with a proportionate increase in attention paid to military programs, especially military hardware. While *Aliens* gives lip service to a critique of this attitude, the film itself revels in the look of military machinery. Reagan named his Strategic Defense Initiative after one of the ultimate hardware-oriented films – *Starwars*.^{vii} Knowingly risking oversimplification, I will summarize this shift as one from people to things. While there are many examples of this shift from humanism to mechanism, perhaps the most obvious is Ripley’s means of “final solution.” *Alien* was person-oriented: her knowledge, her expertise, her wit, as detailed above. In *Aliens*, on the other hand, almost all her actions are thing-oriented: guns, power stations, physical strength amplifiers, and so on. When Ripley goes to the rescue, we cheer not so much for the rescue of Newt, but that we know that the mother alien will get her just – and violent – desserts. As a counterpoint to the action sequences, during every lull the camera occupies itself by lovingly caressing the metallic surfaces of the constant display of technological wonder. But this reorientation from the personal to the physical does not stop at the surface level of problem solving, it has further implications in the personal politics of the characters shown.

In *Alien* the battle was one of wits, while in *Aliens* the conflict has degenerated to a one-on-one physical encounter. They stand there and slug it out in a manner all too reminiscent of female mud wrestling or roller derby – for where else in our media have we seen women physically fighting?

While it cannot be explored in depth here, I wonder if this is part of a common male fantasy that places women in traditionally male roles for voyeuristic pleasure? Admittedly, it is often "entertaining" to watch people ill fit to tasks perform them without grace. And this is not restricted to men: women too seem to take great delight in watching men clumsily undertake kitchen tasks or disastrously attempt to sew. This comic and clumsy crossing of gender boundaries is part of the appeal, to both men and women, of films like *Some Like It Hot* [1959] and *Tootsie* [1982]. It is used in films from the political right as well as from the left (as in the brilliant *Salt of the Earth* [1953]). While it is often used for humorous effect, here, in *Aliens*, it is not. We must take quite seriously and, as in mud wrestling, the act of gender substitution reconfirms men's superior positions since, if they were there (which they are not), they could (they assume) do a much better job.

Not only does *Aliens* denigrate the intellectual, it glorifies the physical. In the same way as depicted in many other, earlier right-wing films, such as Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* [1972] or John Schlesinger's *Marathon Man* [1976], it is clear that the intellect, or specifically the intellectual, does not have the answers to problems. Problems are solved by brute physical force, direct contact. Admittedly, *Aliens*'s Ripley did what she had to do to get the job done: join the Marines, learn how to use guns, and so on. Yet according to this crop of films, even intellectuals (and women if they want to be functional in a world defined by men) must ultimately abandon the head (and in the case of women, the heart, too) and resort to the physical. *Aliens* is quite subtle in that it posits Ripley's motivation as one of heart – the rescue of Newt. Yet once Newt is safe, the real motive – violent and senseless revenge – comes to the surface.

This retrograde evolution from brain to brawn clearly matches many of the goals proposed by the political right. Knowing which button out of a hundred to push becomes at once simplified and, more to the point, incidental to being stronger than your opponent. The difference between Ripley and Reagan is that the former bravely picks her fights with creatures bigger than she rather than militarily Lilliputian foes like Granada and Libya.

Ripley's de-evolution over the course of the film is a conservative's dream punishment for all uppity, educated intellectual feminists. She begins the film balanced: a high-ranking officer, competent, brave, victorious, yet demonstrably willing to go back into danger to save her cat. Suddenly her competence is questioned, and her experiences denied. She is demoted. For punishment, she is subjected to physical labor. Not that physical labor in and of itself is bad, but this is a job totally unrelated to her education or experience nor is it what she wants to do. The film posits as an apt punishment for any intellectual placement where physical labor is dominant, an anti-intellectual gulag. Intellectuals should be put where those effete snobs can rub up against the smelly but honest working class so they can learn life's real values. And what kind of job is she given? Ripley is asked to do the futuristic, outer-space version of housework – to move the furniture around and sweep under it. Ripley, like so many women (and men) today, is punished by being forced to perform meaningless labor.

After sufficient penance for her previous intellectual accomplishments, she is taught the value of maleness – how to learn from men, how to act like men when there

aren't men around to do it for themselves, and, most important, how to act like a woman when they *are* around. At the end of the film, when there are men around again, she returns to the full subjugation of that old-fashioned masculinist ideology: she goes home to take up the true and correct role of housekeeping and motherhood. I can easily imagine, a year or two later, Ripley quietly raising Newt, settled comfortably into a middle-class suburbia on some newly colonized planet, living off her pension supplemented, of course, by state aid for being a single, unwed mother. Rather than being concerned with aliens and corporate malfeasance, she is now occupied with the cost of orthodontics, whether Newt should be going on dates, and so on. The 1986 domestication of the 1979 feminist is complete.^{viii}

DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF CORPORATE PROFITS?

While there are clear ideological changes between *Alien* and *Aliens*, there are also notable continuations. In both films, evil is associated with the role of the mother. In *Aliens* it is quite obvious – the alien mother is clearly the enemy. In *Alien*, to get their hands on a biological weapon, the corporation considered the crew expendable.^{ix} Complicit in this plot were Ashe, the “Artificial Person,” or the A.P., and the computer, maliciously named “Mother.” In *Alien*, unbeknownst to any humans on board, the A.P. was programmed to retrieve an alien for the corporation. It was only a mechanical breakdown of the A.P. that reveals the evil corporate-sponsored plot.

But there is a further link between the robot and the mother image. Ashe attacks Ripley after she has pried the knowledge of the corporate plot from the computer. The reason for his attack takes on meaning when we realize that he is not simply protecting the corporation, he is protecting his “Mother.” His motivations are a burlesque of the mother-son relationship seen between Norman Bates and his mother in *Psycho* [1960].

The A.P.’s murder attempt is quite sexual and clearly symbolic: He attempts to kill her by pushing a rolled-up copy of Playboy magazine down her throat. I can see in this nothing but a symbolic rape by a sexually impotent man using instead of his own phallus, the phallus of the collective ideology of women as sexual objects. It is the very objectification of women that is used in this sexually oriented murder attempt on Ripley. This is a further demonstration that both films connect womanhood, specifically motherhood, at many different levels of meaning, all negative.

Thus, in *Alien*, not only were both the corporation and the A.P. evil, but they were also imperfect – the A.P. for breaking down, the corporation for using such a faulty device in addition to a hackable computer. This reflects the ideology of when the film was made – the Carter Era. It was not uncommon to cast a seriously jaundiced eye on corporations and the technology they produced. The flip side of this coin was the fashionable idea of a return to a previous and idyllic time when the military/industrial complex was not the pivot about which the American universe revolved.

All this, now clearly seen with 20/20 hindsight, changed radically with the ascent of the Reagan ideological cadre. By 1986, we were experiencing a governmental love affair with technology and its makers. (Dare we say that love is blind?) This earth-bound change in attitude toward technology is clearly reflected in outer-space doings in *Aliens*. First, the new A.P. is good, very good. He is so good, so brave, so true that were he human, he could easily have been played by the likes of a Brad Pitt or, in an earlier era, John Wayne. He is not only brave, going where even the Marines will not go (outside to pilot down the second shuttle), he also, just in the nick of time, pulls Ripley's chestnuts out of the immanent nuclear fire. Clearly the role of technology has changed: Ashe was portrayed in *Alien* as imperfect, untrustworthy, and a tool (literally) of the evil corporation to being, in second film, the originator of the only thing that even closely resembling the classical cinematic male hero.

It is noteworthy that the most advanced technologies are held in highest respect in *Aliens*. The A.P. is the technological hero – he is effective against the alien creatures. While Ashe can be seen as an upgrade of present technology, the guns used by the Marines, while of different design than those of today, are similar in their workings – still using bullets and shotgun shells. They also prove quite useless against the alien onslaught in the power station. The old stuff is not good enough to deal with a future “situation.” This clearly adds up to a cry for the modernization and technologization of our current (i.e., 1986) weaponry if we are to be effective against our future enemies. An upgrade like the one Ashe got between the two films.

In *Aliens* technology is good. If, as the film clearly asks, we identify with Ripley in *Aliens*, we see it is technology that will save us and our children – how could anything like that be bad? Ripley's opinion of technology changes over the course of the film. At the beginning of the film she clearly expresses her antipathy toward the A.P. and her liking (at least respect) for Burke, the human representative of the corporation. These values become inverted as the film progresses. The A.P. is so good that the film takes the opportunity to even posit a growing emotional relation between it/him and Ripley. The growing emotional relation between Ripley and the Ashe shows that we can all conquer our own bad feelings regarding the products of corporate technology and learn, as Stanley Kubrick advised over 25 years earlier in the subtitle to *Dr. Strangelove* [1964], to “learn to love the bomb and stop worrying.” Thus, our previous distrust toward technology (a distrust exemplified by public reaction to anything from recalled automobiles to the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl nuclear reactors) has neatly been adjusted. After all, Reagan's world is a one of “Better things for better living through robotics” (read various high-tech weapons non-threateningly called Star Wars, Peacemaker, Smart Rocks, Midget Man, and so on). It is no longer a time to be technology shy.

Are there hints in *Aliens* that Ripley feels sexually attracted to the A.P.? He is, after all, quite good looking much in the manner of the Marlboro Man – well-worn but not worn out. And he is just frail enough to make him non-threatening. To make sure that none of us men are threatened by the sexuality of machines, toward the end of the film we see the ultimate castration of the Ashe by the ultimate of devouring mothers. But even after he is literally torn in half, the A.P. still toes the ideological party line of domesticity. He

preserves the family: he saves the little girl, Newt, from death by the ravening mother. Just as Ripley has become the good mother, so the A.P. has become the good father. The lesson is that machines, the products of all those wonderful corporations, are not only non-threatening, but they will serve us – not only in the best of times – but unquestioningly even if we mistreat them in the most radical ways. Comforting, isn't it?

Most right-wing films fearfully distrust nature, far preferring culture: civilizing cowboys vs. natural Indians, civilized soldiers vs. primitive Asians, culturally endorsed police vs. hippies, and so on. These and many other films are anti-feminist simply because men are typically associated with "culture" while women are associated with "nature". But *Aliens* is not quite so simple because there are two levels of evil, one natural and one cultural, each of which must be considered individually. The alien creature is itself an obvious "natural" evil, and we will look at this shortly. We will first inspect the civilized, cultural evil. Just as the role of the robot has changed from *Alien* to *Aliens*, so has the role of cultural evil – the corporation.

The greedy corporation – the source of the sinister in *Alien* – was far removed from the characters in the film. There is no immediacy to the roots of this type of evil. The only contact we have with it was through the Ashe, the A.P. In *Aliens*, on the other hand, villainy is placed squarely on the shoulders of a single, clearly identifiable person – Burke. We never really know if he is under orders from the corporation or he is working on his own initiative, an opportunistic futuristic Yuppy bucking for a raise or an obedient corporate drone. Either way, the film is constructed in such a way as to make Burke, not the corporation, seem solely and fully responsible for the nefarious deeds that take place. While his cohorts back a headquarters are clearly not people we would intuitively trust, we really know nothing of their involvement in the plot nor where their orders came from (shades of the Iran/Contra scandals). It is noteworthy that Burke personally tries to kill Ripley and Newt (one must hark back to the melodramas of the silent era to see a villain threaten women and children in a like manner – tied to the railroad tracks or bound to a log in the saw mill). And like the two-dimensional villain of so many simplistic movies, it is he who exhibits cowardice and endangers the rest of the crew in a moment of stress. When he gets his come-uppance, we are relieved, we applaud; the one token representation of cultural evil has been vanquished. We believe that now that that lone evil person has been eliminated, all is well. Never again over the course of the film are we invited to turn a jaundiced-eyed glance at the role of the corporation in all this. The film never questions the *real* sources of greed and avarice. As has happened so often in our recent history, we are again presented with the "lone gunman" theory in the face of an obviously broader involvement.

The elimination of the corporation from blame in *Aliens* should not surprise us since it is clearly the ideology of the 1980's that, when something goes wrong, blame is placed on persons rather than on institutions.^x How else would we tolerate a political administration (1981-89) that has been plagued by more than 100 political appointee resignations under a variety of suspicious, scandalous, and embarrassing circumstances. The number of these defections is greater than in any previous administration, yet no one questions the organization itself – blame is placed on the individuals. True, the 1986

Challenger space-shuttle disaster was blamed primarily on corporate/governmental/organizational failures, but in reality, this is no exception. When the dice finally stopped rolling, no corporations were punished, no fines levied, no contracts canceled, while a dozen individuals were named, chastised, and demoted or forced into retirement.

Thus, we see the ideological changes between the two films in terms of the attitudes toward the products of corporations – the bad robot has become good, and corporate representatives – Burke become the locus of blame thus shifting the culpability away from large institutions. Let us now look at the role of an element introduced in *Aliens* that was not present in the first film – the Marines.

THE MARINES JUST WANT A FEW GOOD WOMEN

The Marines in *Aliens*, with their hyped-up shouting of inanities, often border on comic relief. Their gung-ho rantings seem to be derived from the most jingoistic of World War II movies, their dress – a raggedy partial armor – seems to be from some noble but poverty-stricken past that combines outfits of knights in no-so-shining armor with organic earth-tones, prevented by a lack of funds from protecting the whole body. While their weaponry seems to look appropriately futuristic but, in reality, is no more than the machine-guns and flame-throwers of current media fare given a surface coating of high-tech baroque. Modern on the outside, obsolete on the inside – perhaps like the ideology of the film itself. In other ways, the marines seem to represent a *reducto ad absurdum* of the direction in which our present (1986) military is heading: self-deluding through sloganeering to the point of being out of touch with reality, over equipped, under trained, and ultimately ineffective. I am sure they performed as they had been trained, did the best they could – probably very realistically – and we should be sadder for it.

Another point of note the Marines' sexual make-up – men and women seem to be treated equally and die equally. But here are not the "women" simply men with slightly different bodies? What, aside from their bodies, is female about these "women"? We will postpone a discussion of Vasquez until later.

While I see *Alien* as a primarily pro-feminist film, it is still slightly mired in an almost century-long tradition of screen women being dominated by men. The supporting female role in *Alien* – the slightly hysterical Lambert – is far too close to movie tradition. But the film more than makes up for this by giving us as the central character a competent woman who does not depend on men for her salvation, emotional or physical. Ripley is tough enough to outsmart the alien yet soft enough to go back for Jonsey the cat. With this in mind, Ripley's relation with the Marines in *Aliens* is quite interesting. She reluctantly but obediently accompanies the Marines, knowing full well from the start they are bound to fail. She is immediately and intuitively repulsed by their gung-ho, hyper-male attitude. She will, during the course of the film, slowly become their *de facto* leader. This is another striking image of a competent woman – a non-military *woman* who becomes a military leader, a female Philadelphus. The outcome, however, is paradoxical. Her feminine and

instinctive qualities (not to mention her considerable experience with the alien creatures) here are almost totally ineffective. In this film, only a few of the marines survive despite her best efforts – ultimately, she is not a good leader of men (or women).

At this point I feel I must point out that I do not perceive the loss of life among the Marines to be Ripley's fault. Blame, if it is to be placed, must burden the shoulders of the incompetent Marine commander. The Marines were trained to obey established authority unquestioningly, thus they obeyed the commander. Had power been transferred to Ripley, they might have survived in greater numbers. I cannot blame Ripley for the carnage, but at the same time I do not see her as fulfilling the traditional role of what we perceive to be a leader, a hero. Had she been portrayed as successful in her role as leader, the film would have had a far different complexion.

The ineffectiveness of the Marines in face of these strange enemies reflects many aspects of our contemporary (1968) world. The Marines are well trained, have impressive weapons, and go through their paces with drill-team precision. But to no effect. The aliens are something they have never encountered before. They are restricted in the use of their weapons by the danger of an explosion in the atmosphere processing plant. Our contemporary Marines have recently experienced enemies of a new and unfamiliar type and at the same time complained they were ham-strung by restriction of weapons use (in the same way that the military wanted to use "the Bomb" in Korea and Viet Nam). Obviously, the experiences of the Marines in *Aliens* point to, among other events, our recent military disasters in Viet Nam and the more recent lethal embarrassments in Lebanon. The hyper-gung-ho attitude of the present military establishment is called to task in this film in a burlesque that brings to mind a similar pasting the Air Force got in Stanley Kubrick's brilliant *Dr. Strangelove*.

It is pretty obvious that in *Alien* Ripley's solution was quite different from the Marine approach in *Aliens*. They want to solve the problem like macho men – to shout, "Fuck You" and go in with guns blazing. Ripley's reluctance to join with the Marines in the first place and her subsequent apprehension about the mission leads us to expect that she will come up with some more subtle, more clever, perhaps more "feminine" solution. But what does she do? She first has a man teach her how to use some guns, puts on some armor (previously reserved for men as shown by the sergeant's disbelief that she could handle the loader), shouts "Fuck You, Bitch" and goes in with her guns blazing.

Perhaps the most unique Marine portrayed in film is Vasquez. Clearly, she is equal to any man in the outfit, certainly to any of the stereotyped "jar head" Marines in this film. This is unsubtly brought home by showing women idly doing chin-ups seemingly to pass the time of day. In the Marines, men are given physical exercise as punishment; now women eat up the punishment as if it was a low-cal frozen yogurt. In addition to her chin-ups, Vasquez willingly takes the most dangerous point position on the assaults, she is a weapons expert, and so on. So, it is not that powerful women are not portrayed in *Aliens*, they are. But, if they do not conform to male ideology, they die.

Vasquez must die. I, personally, find this the greatest loss in the film. On reflection I can see that she was set up from the beginning. She is dark-skinned and dark-haired, a direct descendant of all the movie bad girls in almost every genre: Westerns, War Films, Detective Films, Spy Films, and so on. And she is lesbian to boot. So it is inevitable that for her manifold transgressions of the dominant white male heterosexual ideology, in which this film is so deeply rooted, she must die.^{xi} Imagine, for a moment, how different a film it would have been had Vasquez and not the soldier taught Ripley how to use the guns, had Vasquez gone with Ripley to fight in the alien lair, or had Vasquez and not the A.P. rescued her at the end of the foray. Clearly the aura projected by the film would have been far different from the heavy depression of the present product. At least Vasquez' death is not a single-minded sacrifice solely for the central male character. For the few moments she is on screen, she is tantalizingly delicious to watch. One must credit the writers and director of *Aliens*: she forms a hopeful portent of a greater variety of gender/sexual characterizations in films to come.

The difference between our imagined film and what we saw on the screen is the change in ideology toward women from the 1970's to the 1980's. The Reagan administration's nod toward women is that they are welcome into a primarily men's world as long as they act, not like women, but like men. But in acting like men, they must not threaten men (thus the antipathy toward lesbians). Most of Reagan's female governmental appointments have been restricted to those that do not act out of those personality characteristics we have come to associate with the feminine (a distinct quality regardless whether it is housed within a male or a female body). There is, for instance, little in the actions of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to reveal that she is a woman. Reagan might just as well have appointed a man. From some feminists' point of view this might be ok, but I do not believe the woman's appropriate role in the world is to act like a man. There is a difference between men and women, and both have unique contributions to make. We see this in Vasquez. The Ripley of *Aliens* could easily qualify as a Reagan appointee. She knows how to solve problems: go to a man for instruction, narrowly use what you have been taught, and never question the tacit assumption of masculinist dominance.

The rescue of Newt might, on the surface, seem like a typically female-oriented episode. However, in the world of film, this type of rescue is usually carried on by men. Perhaps the best example is John Ford's brilliant right-wing film *The Searchers* [1956]. The many parallels with *Aliens* in both the action and the ideology are striking. For instance, John Wayne as Ethan Edwards goes into hostile Indian territory to rescue his kidnapped niece after a rescue party has proven ineffective. Here, too, there is the fear of an "alien" taking over the mind and body of the child and making her reentry into civilization impossible. In many ways *Aliens* is *The Searchers* in outer space.

The acceptance of male roles by women is reflected in *Aliens* in other ways. Many of the most vocal and active issues in the 1980's are related to the concerns of women: the battle between those opposed to abortion and its feminist proponents is the first that comes to mind. Most politically active (as opposed to religiously active) conservative men seem to be absent from the fray. It seems that they are leaving the women to battle it out amongst themselves. Realizing this, it seems quite apt that the final battle in *Aliens* should

be between two female characters. Against the natural mother, one who only wants to lay her eggs, is pitted against the masculinized mother with her male armor, her male machine, and her male guns. Were this the 1960's or even the 1970's there might be some doubt, but the outcome is a foredrawn conclusion in the clearly male-dominated ideology of the 1980's.

But for the kidnapping of the girl, the battle between the two females could be interpreted as a pro-abortion position. Consider: Ripley, the child-less, career-oriented woman, destroys the embryonic little aliens-to-be produced by the over-fertile, population polluting mother. However, this reversal in conservative ideology does not obtain. Ripley is a mother, at least a mother-surrogate. She does not go in to wipe out the brood, she goes in to save the child. Had the child not been kidnapped, Ripley would have been pleased as punch to get the hell out of there and let all the aliens stew in their acidic juices as the plant melted down and turned them all into so much extra-terrestrial chicken Kiev. But the alien encroached on Ripley's own mother territory. She went in not to destroy children, but to save the life of a child. Whether it is in a Western in which the woman takes up her fallen husband's male rifle to help kill the "red aliens" in *High Noon* [1952] or in Joe Dante's *Gremlins* (1984) where Mom uses the very elements of feminine domesticity – a kitchen knife, a juicer, and a microwave oven – to dispatch the nasty little critters after shouting the war cry of suburbia, "Not in my kitchen." Once again in *Aliens*, the woman's role is clearly motherhood.

FROM REBECCA TO NEWT

What are we to make of the little girl, Rebecca, who insists on being called Newt? This seems to be significant, but the film offers little explanation. Let us first look at the meaning to the two names and then consider what a change from one to the other might signify.

In the book of Genesis, Rebekah is described as a "girl [who] was very beautiful, a virgin, and no man had had relations with her . . ." (Gen. 24:16). She was generous in offering a stranger water and shelter. She would make the perfect wife for Isaac. In Hebrew, the name means "very beautiful" and, in the typically misogynist Hebrew tradition, it also means "a noose or snare."^{xii}

On the other hand, a newt is any of a family of small semiaquatic salamanders. And, amongst other things, salamanders are mythical animals having the power to endure fire without harm or an elemental being, according to the cosmology of Paracelsus, inhabiting fire. In this form, the salamander appears throughout history. It is mentioned in the writings of both Aristotle and Pliny.^{xiii} Later, for example, it appears as the *impresa* of Francis I (1494-1547), king of France, together with the motto, "Notrisco al buono, stingo el reo," (I nourish the good and destroy the bad).^{xiv}

So, we have a change from Rebecca, an idealized little girl seen, in *Aliens*, in a photograph, to Newt, one who can survive fire. And survive she does. Furthermore, she knows she is responsible for her own survival. When Ripley tries to reassure her that "the Marines are here to protect you," she knowingly replies, "It won't make any difference." Newt is a young Ripley! She, like Ripley, must fend for herself and not rely on a male-dominated world for protection. The corporate masculinist world has already failed Newt once by bringing her to the planet with the colonists, assuring them all is safe. And now, it fails her again in that, as she predicted, the soldiers prove useless. It is only one of her own kind, another who can survive the fire, Ripley, that has the answers. It is Ripley that not only survives fire, uses fire, but in a sense is elemental fire itself.

Newt represents another, more subtle change between *Alien* and *Aliens*. Newt is the object of rescue that leads to the final encounter with the alien creature. A similar situation occurred in the first film, but the object of rescue Jonsey the cat! This change makes sense

within the context of the male-dominated ideology I have proposed for the second film. The cat has long been a symbol of the feminine and has, as Robin Wood points out, "runs right through and beyond the Hollywood cinema, cutting across periods and genres" and figures prominently in films from *Cat People* [1942], to *Island of Lost Souls* [1932] to *Bringing Up Baby* [1938] (the eponymous "Baby" being a leopard). In ancient Egypt, the cat was associated with Isis, the god of female wisdom. Thus, in the first film, Ripley symbolically rescues her own feminine wisdom despite that fact that at first glance it seems like a very dumb, "typically emotionally female," thing to do. In the second film, Newt clearly functions to bring out Ripley's maternal instincts. In this case Ripley protects home and family. The latter film clearly conforms to what a host contemporary films seem to be doing wholesale – championing the "family" as the locus of true value; a Spielbergian sentimentality raised to the level of ideology. In this way, the former film is far more threatening to the male establishment.

Another important aspect of Newt is that she is the subject of the rescue attempt by Ripley that becomes the central focus of the battle scenes. The fight in the lower depths of the power plant between Ripley and the Alien mother bears striking similarity to the battle in *Them* [1954] between the Army and the gigantic queen ant in the depths of the Los Angeles sewer system. *Them*, one of the highest grossing films of 1954, was typical of movies of the Cold War era that substitute perverted natural phenomena for the threat of Communist invasion and/or subversion. But not only were the giant ants threatening Democracy with the imperial social/political system of the ant nest, there was the problem of the matriarchal system of the ants. The Cold War was also an era of worries about "momism" – a term invented by Phillip Wylie in 1942 in his immensely popular book, "Generation of Vipers." Here the greatest fear was of men being feminized and overpowered by the destroying mother. I believe that *Them* also represented a fear of women's power, specifically that of reproduction (the ant queen, her drones, the ant brood, etc.). The atomic radiation that created the giant ants produced a species that, within the context of the film, the males were easy to kill but it was almost impossible to kill the queen. And, we are told, the queen, once fertilized, can lay an almost infinite number of eggs for fifteen years. Clearly it is the supermom that is the real threat to civilization both in 1954 and in the 1986 of *Aliens*.

The parallels between the super-mom of *Them* and the super-mom of *Aliens* is obvious. Where the films differ is in the solution to the problem. In *Them*, again in the context of the building security state of the 1950's, it was the competent army in cooperation with male scientists that put a stop to the runaway threatening fecundity. Males, in revenge of the feminizing control exercised by women over them, have wreaked their vengeance. They have conquered Communism and Momism in one conveniently integrated fiery swoop.

Aliens, on the other hand, pits woman against woman. The conservative of the 80's unlike that of the 50's no longer fears Mom's emotional controls over males. The more modern fear is of what women have striven to achieve for themselves: political, economic, and social power outside the family context. As in *Them*, *Aliens* must destroy the unbridled reproductive power of women without men (the Alien mother), but rather than attacking it

directly, as in *Them*, now that coopt a woman to do the job for them. Ripley, symbolic of women's achievements in the 70's and 80's, can now be used by the male superstructure as a soldier to fight another woman. By setting woman against woman, men conveniently wash their hands of the responsibility of the outcome.^{xv} Since Ripley wins, we can only assume that social and economic power is still less of a threat to men than sexual power.

THE ALIEN'S EVIL EMPIRE

Central, of course, to both films is the alien monster. After all, the films are not named after Ripley. *Alien* is a surprisingly complex film considering the outlandish thinness of its plot – the alien being chases seven crew members the length of one spaceship. In terms of the numbers alone, it stands as one of the most perverse inversions imaginable of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* [1937] (I will forego the naming of the Nostromo's crew in terms of "Grumpy," "Doc," and so on). The implications of this comparison are not something that I want to pursue in this essay; they are best left to the imagination of the reader.

What is not left to our imagination is the terror engendered in the viewer by the alien creature. The devices used to this end are quite interesting, especially when compared with the representation of other "bad guys" in other genre. First, we have a single alien against seven opponents. This is a common formulation of hero vs. opponent. For instance, on TV the opponents usually outnumber the heroes to indicate that the heroes are more powerful than the opponents. This happens not only in children's cartoons, but also in detective programs (with the prominent exception of *Charlie's Angels*, but there the detectives are women and thus formulated to be inherently weak despite their reputed individual skills). Here, on the other hand, the ratio demonstrates the weakness of the fully armed and technologically capable humans and the awesome power of the unarmed alien.

The second device used to make the creature more terrifying is its changing size and the circumstances of its transformations. It begins as an egg, turns into a lizard-sized "Road Runner", and finally matures into the giant-size toothed horror. Its growth is paralleled by the demise of the crew. Its life and growth seem related, if not dependent, on the destruction of the humans. It is as if its growth were linked – vampire-like – to sucking the life out of the human crew. The use of this very ancient myth – the vampire, the lamia – adds further to the symbolic power of the monster.

But let us return to a consideration of the changes between film and sequel. A significant transformation that has taken place between the two films is the number of "not-of-woman-born" creatures.^{xvi} In *Alien* there was but a single monster. In 1979, America thought it was faced with but a single enemy. The multiplicity of the creatures in the sequel is, to me, clearly symbolic of the multiple, real or imagined, enemies this

country experienced in 1968: the Soviet Union, drugs, Libya, child molestation, environmental pollution, Nicaragua, Apartheid, pornography, nuclear war, OPEC, unemployment, national debt and deficit, and so on. It is a jointly held national fantasy to be able to wipe these problems out in a single stroke, and a military one at that. This was attempted in Libya in reality, and in in fantasy in films like *Rambo* [1986], *Iron Eagle* [1986], or *Born American* [1986]. The desire was to be as successful as Ripley was in *Aliens*.

So, what do the aliens themselves represent? This is difficult to answer for two reasons. The first is the multiplicity of national concerns mentioned above. 1968 seems far more complex than the 1950's when, at least in retrospect, our enemies were far more clearly drawn. In the films of that era, like *Them*, the creatures – in this case giant ants – were relatively easy to identify. There were very few choices. No so in the 1980's. Second, specific identification is difficult since the enemy is never given a personality and remains throughout the film vacuously generalized. It is dangerous ascribing such vaguely constructed alien creatures a specific significance because it may reflect more on the interpreter than on the film itself. Yet even here we can detect discernible differences between the two films that inform the nature of the "enemy."

In *Alien*, there is but a single enemy that infects a single person, grows within them, bursts forth to attack others. Physical disease would be a good candidate to fit this metaphor. Well represented in the film is the horror of something alien slowly growing and uncontrollably multiplying and finally taking over one's body. These feelings, I am sure, could be easily applied to many diseases, but the one perhaps foremost in the popular mind would be cancer. Other concerns that fit the *modus operandi* of the alien creature would be toxic pollution that causes birth defects, as, for instance, in Love Canal, NY (is this why the corporations want to use the critter as the ultimate weapon, because they've already tried out miniature versions?); charismatic religious sects, especially those whose origins are in the mysterious East; the governmental sponsored breakdown in privacy and invasion by investigative institutions (as in the Ellsberg case in the Watergate scandals); and so on.

In *Aliens*, there is a clear repetition of the alien's growth cycle we saw in *Alien*, but no longer a fascination with it. This film's focus is elsewhere. Now we are far more concerned with the creature's personal attack on Newt. We know what will happen to Newt should she become a victim of the alien. This is the essence of the problem to be solved; in many films, and especially science fiction films, when the monster is conquered so is the problem facing the protagonist (for instance, once Frankenstein's "monster" is vanquish, Victor or Froderick can get married). So, what are the problems facing youngsters (and their parents) in the mid-1980's? There are many, some old and some newer. The oldest teen-age problem is sexual and social maturation. From the boy's point of view, almost all the *Frankenstein* films deal with male maturation (the monster is clumsy, anti-social, cannot communicate, keeps breaking things, hates his parents, is too big for his clothes, and has terrible skin – does that ring a bell?) and, from the girl's point of view, by all the *Dracula* films (a handsome, well-dressed foreign man comes to her bed at night, gives her ecstatic pleasure, and makes her bleed for the first time). But *Aliens* is different. This aspect of the film relates more to the escape from the eternal devouring

mother, escape from a psychic womb. Yet this is not paramount in *Aliens*, we must look further.

There are unique, contemporary problems that faced us in the ever-changing society of 1968, and the problem of drugs is not the least of these. Just as the image of cancer worked as the ultimate in destructive disease in the 1970's, so the image of the invasion of the body and mind by drugs works in the 1980's (AIDS – as perhaps portrayed in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* [1986] – probably comes a close second, threatening to overtake it in the public imagination). We can easily interpret Newt's rescue by Ripley as a protective mother saving her daughter from being devoured by mind and body altering drugs: Heroin, PCP, Cocaine, etc. This, combined with the Marine's (read government in the context of the film) ineffectiveness in combating our enemies (read drugs), the battle devolves to the individual – in the case of drugs, to the parent. Ripley thus has the potentiality of become a positive parental, though unconscious I am sure, role model to the audience of teen-agers and their parents. A decade ago our enemies battled with and were conquered by competent, trained soldiers (shades of our own delusions about Viet Nam perhaps), however in the 80's our enemies (drugs, child molestation, and so on) prey on the innocent, those least equipped to fight back.

THE ROLE OF MEN

I have attempted to show that while *Alien* was indeed a pro-feminist film, *Aliens*, on the other hand, while not totally negative, only *appears* to be concerned with feminist issues in a positive way. A surface reading of the sequel shows a woman who is, in many ways, superior to the men around her. It shows her succeeding where they cannot. It shows her independently active and powerful. Yet a closer inspection of this apparently pro-feminist surface reveals, in many ways, quite the reverse. Most of the feminine power is enveloped and restricted within the confines of a clearly male-defined scope. Therefore, to fully understand the difference between the way women are addressed in the two films, it is necessary to also examine the male roles.

We know that the ultimate foe that Ripley must face is another female – the alien queen/mother of the brood, the priestess of the hive. How different a film would *Aliens* have been had Ripley to fight a male alien, the King of Beasts rather than the Queen of the Jungle. Our knowledge of the gender of the other creatures is less distinct – they could be males, females, or in the style of the ant hill which their nesting clearly resembles – they could be drones. Our investigation here is inconclusive, but our feelings about the physical representation of the monsters gives us hints about their gender that may be clearer. There are many indications that they conform to some male's fears of females. The crab-phase of the creatures emerges from clearly labial pods (that are later destroyed by Ripley with her phallic guns). The wetness surrounding the appearance of the adult phase is not something we normally associate with maleness. While the aliens are hostile and aggressive, typically male drives, these drives are directed, if not directly toward procreation, certainly toward the developmental process – a far more female drive. We can accept and understand a female, driven by the need for the preservation of the species, going to these violent extremes – at least in typically male fantasy.

But the ways in which the alien creature represents deeply hidden male fears of women go still further. To procreate, the aliens "use" male bodies and then discard them. We saw in the first film where the men are infected, or "seeded" by the creatures. The crab phase attaches to the face of the victim/lover and forces the seeding appendage down his throat (in the film this is shown happening only to men). In essence, men are raped and impregnated by women! The "birth" of the spider phase involves the destruction of the host – a most violent form of birth involving the death of the male lover. If the female creature, in turn, is penetrated in some way, she lethally spews forth the acid that runs in her veins (a

dramatic step beyond the "ice water in the veins" cliché). In *Alien*, sexuality and reproduction are represented as forced, violent, devouring, lethal, destructive, and painful.

But his does not happen equally to all men. The more competent the male, the more symbolic the destruction. In *Aliens*, the male role most closely corresponding to hero is the Artificial Person. After rescuing Ripley and Newt from the planet, the queen creature pierces his body through the chest in a clear act of penetrating rape. She then lifts him as if he were a mere toy and tears him in two – an act of castration.

Are these fears unjustified? At a subconscious, psychological level, no. According to C. G. Jung, every personality has its hidden darker, evil side – the Shadow. In this light, the Alien Mother is the dark aspect of Ripley's, or the audience's, personality. Just as in mythology when the hero kills the dragon, death often symbolizes integration. When Siegfried, for instance, in the Wagner opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelungen* kills the dragon, he also integrates the dragon's knowledge by tasting its blood. As a result, he integrates an aspect of the feminine (symbolized by a dragon) that allows him to understand the speech of the birds. Siegfried, previously endowed only with external culture, now connects with nature, and internalizes it. Ripley's killing the alien symbolizes the integration of this brutal, primitive power, a power symbolized, among many other things, by the building of the nest in the midst of a nuclear reactor.

When the negative, shadow aspects of the personality are recognized by its owner and integrated into the whole personality, growth results. Here, the symbolic quest portrayed in *Aliens* breaks down. Ripley exhibits no growth, unless growth appropriate to a powerful woman is to retreat into a male fantasy of women's roles – subservience (dependent on males for instruction, dependent on male robots for rescue) and motherhood. While recognizing that motherhood is a natural state of the female of any species, I do not believe, as this film seem to imply, that it must be associated with weakness, portrayed as a demotion from a previously superior position – from commanding a space ship to taking care of the kids.

Again, it is a conservative male fantasy that Ripley can conquer and kill the dragon without growing personally as a result. This same fantasy is expressed in people's surprise that soldiers returning from war have somehow "changed." Any experience of depth must lead to change; it is a vain hope that it will not. This film hopes that women will do a hero's work and then be willing return to their previous innocent state unscathed.

Any woman surviving Ripley's experiences cannot return to innocence, that is, if one were willing to call Ripley "innocent" at any point in her career as portrayed in these films. The film implies that, now that the scores have been settled, a few years down the line Ripley and Newt may settle into domestic bliss. Nonsense. There is no reason a woman can't do "a man's job" (killing aliens and saving Marines) and then do "a woman's job" (i.e., mothering Newt) and then return to getting on with her life and career as a competent, intelligent, and integrated female.

CONCLUSION

Since both *Alien* and *Aliens* begin with sleep, we cannot but associated them with classic fairy tales, especially *Sleeping Beauty*. Fairy tales have a clear purpose in society: they transmit to young and impressionable individuals, under the guise of entertainment, those properties and qualities of a culture that are most valued and necessary for the survival of the individual. In the case of these films, I find this disturbing.

In *Alien*, Ripley and the rest of the crew is awakened from their sleep by a distress signal. In the fairy tale version of *Sleeping Beauty* it is the prince – the embodiment of the male ideal – that awakens the princess. *Alien* gives Ripley the opportunity to exercise her own powers, to find that balance between the masculine and the feminine that leads to her physical survival. We can only assume that this parallels her psychic survival. At the end of the film, she curiously returns to her sleep state. Perhaps this is not the end of her adventure/maturation: another, greater Prince awaits.

In *Aliens*, the awakening force is, like almost everything else in the film, more clearly personified. Here it is the odious Burke, clearly a false prince. In a reprise of the ending of the first film, Ripley again sleeps. Is she again to wait for her greater, truer prince? I am suspicious because of a slight difference between the endings. In *Aliens* the robot is taking a fatherly, overseeing role. As we have seen, the robot is the representation of the "good" aspect of the corporation. Perhaps this is the fatherly, hovering Prince the film is offering to all of us – a multinational conglomerate.

While the 1979 *Alien* was a pro-feminist, pro-intellectual film, *Aliens* has done an ideological about-face. It denigrates the value of education, thinking, creativity, and wit. It places a woman's "proper place" in a menial position. In a choice between intellectual solutions and physical solutions, it clearly opts for the later. Yet in this about-face action *Aliens* is not unique, it is typical of many sequels that attempt to correct history and march in lock step conforming to the ideals espoused by the current power structure.

We have seen that in the case of *Alien/Aliens*, the sequel's purpose is to rewrite ideology (or perhaps updating would be a better choice). There are other examples of this in the science fiction genre where a similar analysis can be made both of sequels and remakes: the ones that come most easily to mind are originals/sequels like *Westworld*

[1973] and *Futureworld* [1976]; *2001* [1968] and *2010* [1985]; the *Mad Max* trilogy (*Mad Max* [1979], *Road Warrior* [1981], *Beyond the Thunderdome* [1986]), and the *Star Trek* tetralogy; and remakes like William Cameron Menzies' 1953 version and Toby Hooper's 1986 version of *Invaders From Mars*; Christian Nyby's and Howard Hawks' 1951 and John Carpenter's 1982 versions of *The Thing*; Don Siegal's 1956 and Phillip Kaufman's 1978 versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; Kurt Neuman's 1958 and David Cronenberg's 1986 versions of *The Fly*. Perhaps as ideology continues to change, we will see further remakes and further rewritings of our ideological history.

And it is not only in the sequel or the remake that ideological changes are detectable. It is not uncommon today, in 1986, to find film directors who once penetrated deeply into the paranoia, illness, and insanity of our society, dragging it out for us all to meditate upon, who have now performed, so to speak, self-castrations of social responsibility. Compare, for example, Francis Coppola's magnificent study of paranoia in the world of technology, *The Conversation* [1974] to his 1986 Capra-esque bit of fluff, *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Compare, too, Martin Scorsese's searing *Taxi Driver* of 1976 to the 1986 Rocky-clone *The Color of Money*. Less talented film makers have followed suit, but these changes are just the tip of an ideological iceberg and but that's another story.

A film that clearly takes a dim view of women and their roles in society is easily dealt with. There are a lot of them, but they are transparent as to intent and therefore easily defused. However, far more insidious are films that appear to be feminist, co-opting feminist rhetoric, and yet are, under the surface, destructive to women. *Aliens* is such a film. In its surface glorification of women, in spite of its basic hatred and distrust of women, it resembles the great propaganda films of the past. An apt comparison would be Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 *Triumph of the Will*. I fear that these films are dangerous for even the most militant of women, those steeped in years of feminist teachings, are taken in. In the audience with which I viewed *Aliens*, women enthusiastically cheered throughout the film. Perhaps women are so hungry for positive media role models that when a likely candidate appears, they take it in unquestioningly and at face value. Before plunging into acceptance of these media-mediated paradigms, it is important to inspect them in depth to find their true significances. Only in this way can we protect ourselves from blindly accepting the dictates of a power structure clever enough to co-opt our own symbols and use them against us.

AFTERWORD & NOTES

The point I am trying to make in this rather complex analysis is that a specific film can often reflect the dominant ideology in very subtle ways. For instance, the change in orientation between *Alien* and *Aliens* parallels the change in the orientation of the most common characteristics of the right- and left-wings in American politics. Among the socio/political changes we have witnessed in the last decades are the change from intellectual problem solving to macho physical confrontation, from the emphasis on humanism to the fascination with mechanism, from a rising feminist consciousness to a suppression of the same ideas.

The real danger I fear in films like *Aliens* is the effortless identification made possible through the clever use of symbols that key so easily into certain ideologies. However, as I have tried to show, in this case the symbols do not truly reflect the expected ideologies. For instance, whenever a strong female hero is shown, the easiest association is with a feminist point of view. Most of the women to whom I have spoken about this film immediately and unquestioningly identified with Ripley. They felt she represented them – they would like to have her strength. I hope that my analysis of this film has proven that Ripley in *Aliens* does not represent the feminist ideal of a women, in fact, she represents just the opposite. Thus, there is danger in identifying with the symbol rather than the ideology beneath it.

The manipulation of these symbols can easily hide the true underlying ideology being presented. Had the mother alien not been hideous to look at, what would have been the grounds for attacking her? She was on the planet before the humans. She was raising a family on the planet, just as we humans would do. She cared for her young, just like humans. The aliens killed and fed on other animals to survive, just as we humans do. She was not unlike us in almost any way we can think of, so what was so bad about her? To me she is not a symbol of AIDS, or disease, or drugs, as other critics have postulated, but rather she is like the native Americans who had to be exterminated so that expansion of corporate hegemony would be possible. Had my female friends identified with the victim of corporate adventurism and imperialism rather than the dupe of those same corporations, I would not have been so upset, as this essay clearly shows me to be. Yet this is the power of modern films and something we all must deal with. My fondest hope is that people, rather than responding to the ready-made cultural symbols – Ripley the feminist hero – will see beyond the symbols. It is important to see that symbols can be manipulated to hide

an ideology quite at odds with the common interpretation of those symbols: *Aliens* is an anti-feminist film.

ⁱ Some films flip-flop, seemingly unable to make up their mind where they stand. Perhaps they stand on both sides to assure a profitable stance at the box office.

ⁱⁱ While the sequel is not specifically mentioned, Barbara Creed seems to unite the two films through interpretation of the image of the mother in "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection" in *Fantasy and the Cinema*, James Donald, ed., British Film Institute Pubs., London, 1989. Similarly, Stephen Neale treats the two films as a unit in "Issues of Difference: Alien and Blade Runner," also in *Fantasy and the Cinema*, James Donald, ed., British Film Institute Pubs., London, 1989.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leo Braudy, "Genre and the Resurrection of the Past," in *Shadows of the Magic Lamp: Fantasy and Science Fiction in Film*, ed. by George E. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin, Southern Illinois Univ. Press, Carbondale, IL, 1985, p. 3.

^{iv} Some of the implications of time travel are discussed in Constance Penley's article "Time Travel, Primal Scene and the Critical Dystopia" in *Fantasy and the Cinema*, James Donald, ed., British Film Institute Pubs., London, 1989.

^{vi} In Joseph Conrad's 1904 novel *Nostromo*, the port city in the fictional country of Costaguana, where the novel takes place, is name Sulaco. In Sulaco, Nostromo is an important personage among the native populace, but, despite his European heritage, is never admitted to the upper-class society ruling the country.

^{vii} In every era a large number of films are produced from variety of political points of view - from the middle, from the right and from the left. *Star Wars* was made during the Carter Era, but, I feel, did not represent Carter ideology. There were many right-wing films made during that era and the popularity seemingly increased with the public's turning away from Carter's ideas to those of Reagan.

^{viii} The further sequels to *Aliens*, of course, did not pursue this path. This type of film would draw no audience. More importantly, when the further sequels were made, there was another change in social/political ideology.

^{ix} This is similar to the blame placed, *ex post facto*, on the U. S. government in *2010* [1985] for HAL's previously unexplained breakdown in *2001* [1968].

^x Ivan Boskey's trial and conviction is a good example of a single person being made the focus of public attention in order to divert and distract attention from a more broadly based, more insidious, and more malicious corporate greed.

^{xi} A very similar death of a black, lesbian character is portrayed in the recent science fiction film *Enemy Mine* [1985].

^{xii} Flora Haines Loughead, *Dictionary of Given Names*, Glendale, CA: Arthur Clark Co., 1981, p 213.

^{xiii} James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, Rev. Ed., NY: Harper & Row, 1979, p. 270.

^{xiv} James Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

^{xv} Another recently remade film strikingly parallels this shift in ideology. The 1986 film *Fatal Attraction* is a direct remake of *Play Misty for Me* [1971]. While there was much debate about the various studio endings for *Fatal Attraction*, the one that finally reached the screen has the wife kill the woman lover who is attacking both her husband and the family. In the early '70's version Clint Eastwood, whose screen persona was quite gentle in those days, was forced to do his own killing. That this shift in the ideological role of women for both a male and female audience is not only acceptable, but desired, is evidenced in the box office success of *Fatal Attraction* – one of the biggest money-makers of 1986.

^{xvi} Actually, there are two creatures "not of woman born" that have to be considered. In *Alien* there was not only the eponymous creature but also the robot. Ashe, the evil mechanical science officer was gestated in corporation laboratories and factories. In the '70's this was considered evil. Now in *Aliens*, the corporations have become the "good mother" and it is only the outsider, the uncooperative factory worker - the alien creature in this case – that are of unnatural birth and evil demeanor.