

# Unpicking the monstrous: a psychoanalytic and marxist analysis of alien essay sam...

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Barbara Creed states that the convergence of psychoanalysis and cinema studies initiated at the end of the nineteenth century. Since the 1900s, psychoanalysis has endured a complicated history because of its elusive concepts and theoretical influences, particularly in post-1970s psychoanalytic film theory. Throughout the 1970s, psychoanalysis informed and contributed to other cinematic critical approaches such as post-colonial theory, queer theory, feminist film theory and body theory (Creed in Hill and Gibson, 2000: 75-77). *Alien* (dir.

Ridley Scott, 1979) is a significantly psychoanalytic film, symbolically underpinned by a range of psychoanalytic notions such as sexuality, the unconscious, phallicised, primal phantasies (Lebeau, 2001: 7), the woman as an actively sadistic monster and the cinematic voyeuristic male gaze at the expense of female sexual objectification (Taylor in Jancovich and Hollows, 1995: 151). However, *Alien* cannot only be interpreted through the critical approach of psychoanalysis. *Alien* can also be critically read from a Marxist perspective.

John Storey argues that Marxism is centred on the ruling classes or bourgeoisie as the dominant force that governs society over the subordinate classes (Storey, 1993: 99). This is emphasised by Matt Perry who suggests that Marxism positions society as a 'two-way relationship between the exploiter and the exploited' and says that the ruling classes are primarily interested in material objects and disregard the exploited proletariat, resulting in class warfare (Perry, 2002: 44). This is highlighted in *Alien*, where the Company exploits its Nostromo mine workers in a degrading fashion.

The Company is only interested in the alien as a commodity of weapons research, irrespective of its unique killing abilities and indestructible power. Therefore, this ultimately leads to intergalactic class warfare between the terrorising, bourgeoisie Company figure of the alien and the working-class labour workers. Thus, what makes *Alien* an interesting analytic example is the film's diverse range of symbolic psychoanalytic imagery, which is often associated with horrific connotations concerning the alien as castrating Other.

This profound use of psychoanalysis is located within the Marxist zone centred on the economic horror of the alien and the social horror of intergalactic class warfare. Interestingly, the way that these two critical approaches of psychoanalysis and Marxism are applied to the film may suggest that these are two separate tools of analysis, without any theoretical relationship. However, during the 1970s, Robert Miklitsch argues that there was a theoretical convergence between psychoanalysis and Marxism, labelled 'psycho-Marxism,' where the two discourses enjoyed a profound and highly interactional relationship (Miklitsch, 1998: 227-228).

Thus, *Alien* could be interpreted as a film that visually illustrates the amalgamation of psychoanalysis and Marxism. This is particularly realised through the gendered representation of the alien: the psychoanalytic castrating Mother and as the terrorising Marxist Company man. One of the chief psychoanalytic elements of *Alien* is the portrayal of the primal scene. The primal scene is represented in many different forms, for example, the

primal representation during the film's opening shots and when Kane fatally gives birth to the alien.

The first instance of the primal scene is where the mother's inner body is symbolically indicated by the cinematography during the film's opening sequence. The camera slowly pans across the insides of the 'Mother' ship, creating a sensual atmosphere. This inevitably results in an appropriately long tracking shot of a vaginal corridor. The corridor leads to a womb-like chamber, where the Nostromo crew members are hyper-sleeping (Creed, 1993: 18). 'Mother' awakens the crew by turning on the lights and opening up the glass pods.

Their eventual awakening from hyper-sleep is indicative of the primal scene, depicted in a hospitalised, antiseptic and clean manner. Thus, unlike real child births, the crew's (re)birth is free of blood, pain, agony and is well regulated. Thus, this representation of the primal scene conforms to Creed's theory, signified as an idealised vision of the primal phantasy. This phantasy is where the human is fully developed at birth and intercourse has been completely avoided (Creed, 1993: 18), perhaps as a religious modern materialisation of the Immaculate Conception (Koloft, 2002).

This scene also epitomises the image of the archaic mother, where the father is metaphorically absent and mother takes full control as the provider of all life on earth and primary parent (Creed, 1993: 18). The alien ship is where another manifestation of the primal scene occurs. When the three crew members are approaching the ostensibly derelict and enigmatic spaceship,

they tread through a vaginal-like entrance; metaphorically like two long legs spread wide open (Creed, 1993: 18), resembling a fantasised imaginary vision of the 'Mother' alien (Carveth and Gold, 1999).

Kane, one of the crew members, is lowered into a huge womb-like chamber. He immediately notices copious amounts of eggs, devoid of any sense of fecundity. However, when he touches one of the eggs, the process of fertility begins. It opens and reveals an amalgam of organic flesh. When Kane peers into the egg, the alien monster abruptly leaps out and attaches itself to Kane's helmet, piercing Kane's mouth to instantly begin the process of fertilisation inside his stomach (Creed, 1993: 18-19).

This symbolic portrayal of the primal scene corresponds to Freud's primal phantasy notion where Kane, the subject, subliminally travels back to the womb and visualises his parents' copulation. Kane violates the mystery of private intercourse by voyeuristically peering into the uterus at the point of fertility. Interestingly, when he participates in the primal scene, he inadvertently becomes the mother. Therefore, as a result of his violation, his body becomes grotesquely feminised as the archaic mother, capable of giving birth (Creed, 1993: 19).

Thus, as a result of his phallic transgression, the alien is born from Kane's stomach and he dies in suffering. The alien's birth also complies with Freud's theory that children believe that the mother is accidentally impregnated through the mouth via a tablet and the baby grows in the stomach. What is presented in *Alien* is a horrific infantile version of the primal scene, inverted

by the alien being conceived orally by the 'father figure' of Kane, symbolically as the archaic mother (Creed, 1993: 19). Roger Dadoun describes the archaic mother as:

A mother-thing situated beyond good and evil, beyond all organised forms and all events. This is a totalising and oceanic mother, a 'shadowy and deep unity,' evoking in the subject the anxiety of fusion and of dissolution; a mother who comes before the discovery of the essential balance, that of the phallus. This mother is nothing but a fantasy inasmuch as she is only ever-established as an omnipresent and all-powerful totality, an absolute being, by the very intuition – she has no phallus – that deposes her... (Dadoun in Creed, 1993: 20).

Dadoun's argument is highly appropriate to the representation of the archaic mother throughout *Alien*. Her existence is obsolete and symbolic, rather than explicit. Dadoun also uses his notion of the archaic mother to decode the unconscious subtext of *Dracula*. *Dracula*'s black cape, pointed teeth and rigid body produces a symbolically erected phallic image. Thus, *Dracula* is the penetrative, fetish manifestation of the phallus, a substitute of the mother's absent penis (Dadoun in Creed, 1993: 20). This phallic representation of *Dracula* can also be applied to the symbolic image of the alien.

Clearly, the alien creature is the fetishised phallic monster, portraying mother's penis and is also symptomatic of the ubiquitous archaic mother (Creed, 1993: 21). Although Creed describes the alien as a phallic, sexualised monster, Harvey Roy Greenberg suggests that there is not an

implicit 'erotic intention' until the film's denouement between Ripley and the alien. However, Creed's psychoanalytic interpretation of the alien is an implicitly phallicised monster, possessing phallic power, without erotic intentions. What Greenberg is suggesting is that Alien's sexual content is neutral (Greenberg, 1993: 158).

This is emphasised by Daniel Dervin who argues that the characters in Alien have asexual names, such as Ripley, Dallas, Ash and Lambert and the women wear full body astronaut suits, where explicit sexuality has been concealed (Dervin, 1985: 175). Greenberg suggests the eroticism of Alien initiates with Ripley's pseudo-nude body, when the alien instantly appears to attack and kill Ripley (Greenberg, 1993: 158). During the final scene of Alien, the audience are rather bluntly reminded that Ellen Ripley is a woman, where predominantly throughout the whole film; Ripley is coded as a figure of masculine authority.

Her role as Lieutenant is described by Vincent Canby as 'impressive, intelligent and efficient,' (Canby in Gallardo and Smith, 2004: 20), signifying her professional performance as a masculinised character. Her blunt revelation of visual femininity is realised as she undresses and reveals her 'supple, creamy female body' (Gallardo and Smith, 2004: 54). Therefore, this scene becomes highly voyeuristic and sexualised. Ridley Scott's use of cinematography during the finale is sexually significant, for example, the camera shows her back, legs and 'erect nipples' under her white shirt.

The camera also depicts her underwear that apparently seems to be a few sizes too small, appropriately to reveal her buttocks. There are also close-up shots of Ripley's face, the alien's tongue as the symbolic phallus and vaginal shots of Ripley (Gallardo and Smith, 2004: 55). This is not intentionally pornographic, however it does conform to what Andrea Dworkin calls the 'male erotic trinity,' a somewhat pseudo-pornographic subtext centred on the face, phallus and vagina, indicated by the close-up shots of Ripley and the alien (Dworkin in Gallardo and Smith, 2004: 55).

This scene signifies Ros Jennings's notion of a tokenised 'objectification of the female body for the viewing pleasure of the male audience' (Jennings in Gallardo and Smith, 2004: 55). The climax concludes when Ripley manages, with an almighty orgasmic scream, to press the control panel that blows open the hatch. Her dramatic diegetic scream creates a copulative, hyperbolic atmosphere, augmenting the visually implicit sexual action. She discharges the alien in an ejaculatory fashion by striking the alien in the chest, fleeing it into space.

Greenberg argues that the implied male spectator voyeuristically experiences a powerfully phallic and sexually stimulating finale (Greenberg, 1993: 158-159). This somewhat 'pornographic' climax intertextually echoes the slasher film as it symbolically portrays a rapist and sexual finale, with Ripley representing the 'Final Girl.' This is highlighted when the alien is positioned behind Ripley with its metallic, extendable phallic tongue associated with sexually vulgar overtones.

The diegetic scream from Ripley at the sight of the alien behind her, alludes to the Final Girl image depicted by Laurie Strode in *Halloween* and Nancy in *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Gallardo and Smith, 2004: 54-57). Dervin also argues that the new equilibrium of *Alien* is so cathartic and reassuring, that Ripley's pseudo-nude body carries innocent and harmless connotations, is whole and fully proportionate. There is not any sign of the vagina dentate. Thus, this diverts the audience's attention away from the horrifying oral-sadism, which predominates the film's terrorising value (Dervin, 1985: 179).

This unconscious depiction of sex and female objectification relates to Laura Mulvey's notion that psychoanalytic-feminist film theory is linked to passive, sexual fetishism and voyeurism. In particular, Ripley's representation produces what Jackie Stacy calls a 'sexual spectacle' for the male cinematic gaze, where men look and women are looked at (Mulvey in Hollows and Jancovich, 1995: 152). The alien could also be interpreted as contravening certain notions associated with Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud's patriarchal notion of female fetishism is centred on the castration of femininity.

On the contrary, the alien as archaic mother actually has the power to castrate, which becomes the locus of the horror throughout *Alien*. The metaphor of the 'mother alien' inscribed into the alien has the indiscriminating killing power of destroying humanity and producing alien offspring (Creed, 1993: 22). This castrating power is apparent when Dallas experiences the alien in the womb-like air corridors, where the alien's razor-sharp teeth and oceanic, over-domination, creates an 'all-incorporating' phallic, fetishistic power; a metaphor of the all-dominant mother.

The mother is also portrayed by the life-support voice of the Nostromo 'mother' ship and appropriately ignores Ripley's instructions of deactivating the ship's self-destruct system, during the climax. This results in Ripley shouting at mother saying 'mother, you bitch!' (Kavanagh in Kuhn, 1990: 76-77). Thus, the mother figure that is signified through the images of the alien and computer voice represents a deviant, mechanised and somewhat evil figure that is devoid of humanised emotions.

This corresponds with the horror of the alien itself as a scientific commodity for the Company (Creed, 1993: 23). The primary Marxist reading of Alien is the way that the film portrays an imaginary vision of intergalactic class warfare. The ideological battle is between the bourgeoisie Company and the proletariat mine workers. The Company is associated with multinationalism and working-class exploitation, concentrating on using the alien as a commodity for weapons research and exploiting the mine workers in a negative and disregarded fashion, as negligible personnel.

Judith Newton suggests that Alien depicts Marxist anxieties in an imaginary late-capitalist society. Her argument is based on the late-capitalist notion that in the mining business, which is portrayed in Alien by the Nostromo delivering mineral ore back to earth, individuals from the working-class sector are disenfranchised and presented with unpleasant tasks. The unpleasant, terrorising obstacle that confronts the mining proletariat is the alien (Newton in Kuhn, 1990: 82). Furthermore, the Company in Alien represents late-capitalism as dehumanised and computerised.

This is epitomised by Ash, the robot sent from the Company to ensure that the alien is transported back to earth for weapons research, where the crew's lives are nonessential. This representation of Ash not only creates a dystopian view of the Company as a bad Father, however, it also illustrates the film's imperialistic and antimilitarist qualities by the Company's implied imperial, multinational rule and its eschewal of a powerful military fortitude by having a single robot in charge of protecting and scientifically investigating the anatomy of the alien (Kavanagh in Kuhn, 1990: 78).

Class warfare is not the only way of applying Marxism to analyse Alien. The application of Marxism also positions the film associated with James Kavanagh's notion of a 'production of an ideological reality' (Kavanagh in Kuhn, 1990: 78). The ideological reality is constructed as anti-humanist, where the priority is to transport the alien back to earth. The representation of the humanity, the crew, has been marginalised and disregarded. For example, the workers' disenfranchisement is highlighted in the film's opening sequence.

The camera reveals empty coffee mugs, the helmets are computerised by the reflections from the computer screens and the initial absence of crew members portray the Company as anti-humanist (Kavanagh in Kuhn, 1990: 83). Kavanagh also argues that the ideological reality that is represented in Alien is contradictory, centred on the problematic notion of humanism/anti-humanism. This is epitomised by the portrayal of Ripley. Her anti-humanism is suggested when she potentially jeopardises the life of Kane through adhering to scientific and factual quarantine regulations.

However, her rescue of the cat produces a contradictory ideological representation. For instance, the fact that she does save the cat is metaphorically being humanist. This positively promotes the 'I brake for animals' ideology, where humanism has been substituted symbolically as salvaging a human baby. Thus, this rescue acts as a fundamental signifier for an ideologically constructed humanism, demonstrated through the portrayal of Ripley and the cat.

This ironic depiction of Ripley accentuates Kavanagh's humanism/anti-humanism problematic notion, as an ideological power conflict between her factual, anti-humanist devotion to the airlock quarantine rules and her eventual emotionalist, humanist heroics of saving her cat and blasting the alien into space (Kavanagh in Kuhn, 1990: 79). When she does blast the alien into space, Judith Newton theorises that two specific fantasies are implicitly revealed.

Firstly, her heroic individualism acts as a utopian climax and has triumphed in the resolution of the apparent social and economic horror concerning the dehumanising and imperialist power of late-capitalist labour, metaphorically portrayed by the alien. Secondly, the fantasy that Ripley metonymically stands for archetypal white, middle-class women, that once institutionalised in a labour-working environment can conquer and save 'us' from the mechanised and dehumanised vision of late-capitalist labour.

Thus, the fact that Ripley does defeat the Company's weapon of the alien, locates Alien in the twentieth century ideology that white women from the

bourgeoisie can make the world a better place for mankind. However, it must also be noted that perhaps Ripley only saves herself, a filmic echo of 1970s cinematic cynicism of saving her own humanity. Therefore, Marxism conveys a positive ideological depiction of Ripley (Newton in Kuhn, 1990: 83-84). Thus, this interpretation of Ripley's ideological character is centred on humanist and emotional development.

Her initial portrayal is based on facts, science and being anti-humanist, by not allowing her friends to penetrate the airlock to prevent any infections from entering the Nostromo. Ripley ultimately changes to become more emotional and humanist, using natural impulses to save her cat. Ripley's triumph at the film's closure signifies a victory for humanism and a personal celebration for middle-class femininity where Ripley strokes her cat. The way that psychoanalysis and Marxism converge in *Alien* is contradictory, occurring through the unconscious representation of the alien itself.

Psychoanalytically, the alien is depicted as a feminine mother with a phallic weapon, portraying the absent phallus. However, a Marxist, capitalist analysis corresponds to Newton's notion that the alien is a 'Company man,' and a 'bad father,' a mechanised, masculinised figure displaying power, authority and strength (Newton in Kuhn, 1990: 83-85). In conclusion, psychoanalysis and Marxism have a theoretically profound and powerful influence of how the 'monstrous' metaphor is unpicked throughout *Alien*.

Psychoanalysis is evidently an approach that conveys symbolic and unconscious representations of the primal scene, the alien as the monstrous-

feminine Other and how the denouement exemplifies ultra voyeuristic and implicit sexual action between the alien and Ripley, as a sexually stimulating scene for the cinematic male gaze. However, these psychoanalytic elements are associated fundamentally with horrific connotations. The alien signifies the archaic mother, where the father is appropriately absent, since the mother is the all-powerful, all-dominating monster that terrorises the lives of the Nostromo crew.

The alien itself represents symbolic power, illustrated by its metallic, toothed phallic weapon, symbolically as the mother's missing phallus. What makes the alien even more terrorising is that its depiction contravenes Freud's psychoanalytic notion of feminine castration. The alien is portrayed as a hermaphroditic, rapist-like powerful and faultless organism that castrates males and females, stalking its prey in a serial killer-like fashion, without any remorse.

Alien also demonstrates the transposition of classic Freudian primal phantasies into the cinematic genre of the science fiction horror film, such as the primal representation of Kane's fatal fertilisation and the alien's oral conception and iconographical blood-spilling birth from Kane's stomach. The psychoanalytic reading of the film also demonstrates how Ripley, the coded slasher Final Girl triumphs at the film's finale by thwarting the alien's phallic power by blasting it orgasmically into the chasms of space.

However, it is the application of Marxism to Alien that encompasses the psychoanalytic reading of Alien. Ironically, Marxism depicts the alien as a

bad Company man, in an imaginary world of intergalactic class warfare. The sense of science-fiction horror is how the multinational, imperial and antimilitarist rule extends beyond the boundaries of the earth. The economic horror is centred on the alien itself, as a metaphor for the Company's dystopia and imperialist multinational power and ruling dominance.

The class warfare is represented as a conflict between the deviant Company intentions symbolised by Ash and the mother computer voice on the Nostromo, and the subordinate proletariat signified by the mine workers, in an imaginary late-capitalist society. However, it is Ripley that conquers at the film's end, as a triumph for middle-class femininity that they can ideologically can save 'us' from world damnation of the Company, and from the psychoanalytic castrating mother. Ripley's humanist heroics castrate the alien and simultaneously save humanity from the fear of the castrating, phallicised mother.