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## Alien as an Abortion Parable

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### Abstract (Summary)

The central action of the movie details the metamorphic progress of the creature, from egg, to placental parasite clinging to-and then in-its hapless host, to the savage "infant" monster that tunnels its way out of a crewman's body, to the mature lizard creature of the film's closing scenes.

### Full Text (2281 words)

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Ridley Scott's 1979 thriller was greeted with no particular fanfare by the reviewers, and if there was a critical consensus it was that the film was at best watchable pabulum-reasonably professionally handled visually and enjoy ably scary, but without significant nuance to qualify for discussion as art. Jack Kroll's comment was typical: "It's about time someone made a science fiction thriller that thrills, that has no truck with metaphysics, philosophy or theosophy and just boils everything down to the pure ravishingly vulgar essence of fright."

Aside from its manifest violence, the only aspect of *Alien* that attracted much critical fire was what one reviewer called its "gratuitous sexism." True to a two hundred-yearold tradition of gothic horror, the film relies for its most gut-wrenching effects on the spectacle of a helpless beautiful woman threatened with violence by an unspeakable, inhuman, but quintessentially masculine horror.

Significantly, one scene repeatedly mentioned as a "gratuitous" injection of voyeurism involves Sigourney Weaver's stripping down to her underwear just prior to a final attack by the alien and her subsequent blasting of the creature into space and, presumably, oblivion. The implication seems to be that *Alien* was overall good, clean, horrible but simple-minded fun, and shouldn't have been compromised by random intrusions of irrelevant sex.

A close look at *Alien*, however, reveals that not only is sexuality not occasionally intrusive in an otherwise pristine film, but that sexual symbolism and iconography of a singular kind are pervasive throughout the film and may actually be its leitmotif.

What *Alien* is about is gestation and birth. The sexuality of the film has strong reproductive overtones that distinguish it from the kind of garden variety titillation of most thrillers. The centrality of the birth process to the film is not hard to demonstrate. The very logo of the movie, used incessantly in publicity and advertisement, was the cracked alien "egg" about to "give birth" to the horror within. The central action of the movie details the metamorphic progress of the creature, from egg, to placental parasite clinging to-and then in-its hapless host, to the savage "infant" monster that tunnels its way out of a crewman's body, to the mature lizard creature of the film's closing scenes.

The monster itself is only one part of a systematic syndrome of birth motifs that informs the entire film. The opening shots of the "incubator" room on the *Nostromo* present the crew diapered in giant bassinets, and the opening action is their "rebirth," emerging from a fetal sleep into the world of the film. When the alien "infant" blasts its way out of the body of an astronaut, his comrades hold him down while he writhes and grimaces like a woman in labor.

It is the film's pervasive imagery, however, that is most evocative of the birth process. Although a relatively low budget production (without major stars, cast salary was minimal), *Alien* is one of the most elaborately and meticulously staged of science fiction films. Like the *Star Wars* series, the movie shows scrupulous attention to graphic detail and a visual imagination that puts it in a class by itself. The intricate creation of the spaceship *Nostromo* recalls the elaborate model work of *Star Wars*, but the particular ambiance of the internal settings in *Alien* is unique. The interiors of both the *Nostromo* and the derelict spacecraft on which the alien egg is found are a complex of pipes, tubes, and ducts that leave the casual viewer with a sense of disquieting familiarity. Only after we watch a while do we realize that the dominant motif of both these craft is the interior of the human body-the windings and curvings of organs and glands. (Ingmar Bergman said once that he attributed the peculiar cinematographic quality of *Cries and Whispers* to his idiosyncratic envisioning of the interior of the human soul as "a soft red membrane.") *Alien* achieves a strange balance between the cold, steely world of technology and forms constantly evocative of flesh-erotic flesh in particular. Not since *Flash Gordon* has the world of science fiction been so erotically evocative. Vaginal doorways, cervical mazes on the walls, phallic sculptures on the alien starship, and bulbous mammary projections everywhere-virtually every scene works itself out within a matrix

of sexual suggestiveness.

This is hardly surprising. The an director and set designer of *Alien* is a Swiss painter named H. R. Giger. His work, although familiar to the readers of *Omni* and avant-garde European art magazines, has not received widespread American circulation, perhaps because it consistently borders on pornography. Reminiscent of Aubrey Beardsley, Giger is himself something of a fin-de-siècle work of eldritch art. He slinks about in black with glowering eyes (one suspects a touch of phosphorous like the hound of the Baskervilles), and is an avowed devotee of the interrelated "mythos" of Cathulu mumbo-jumbo popularized by sf/horror eminence gris H.P. Lovecraft.

Giger's particular speciality is genitalia, male and female, a subject he presents incessantly. One particularly dramatic painting, *Penis Landscape*, depicting ten sets of copulating male and female genitals, has been distributed packaged with the rock group The Dead Kennedys' album *Frankenchrist* and is the object of a celebrated pornography prosecution in California. Penetration-and its reciprocal action, tubular extraction-is the visual and thematic focus of most Giger paintings. Repeatedly, Giger depicts creatures which are part human, pan monster, part machine in acts of copulation, sexual violation, or sexual activity defying categorization (is there a medical/scientific term for anal fellatio by robots?). This primal triad-man, monster, machine-in multiple combinations and permutations recurs obsessively in Giger's works. The text accompanying a popular magazine treatment of his art is not inaccurate: "Giger's years as an architectural draftsman led him to explore the startling similarities between the structure of the human body, on the one hand, and that of technological equipment, on the other. His resulting machinelike humans, or 'biomechanoids,' have had a profound influence on present-day science fiction." Sexual man (and woman) for Giger is not just in the grip of malevolent technology, he is often an extension of it. Flesh is manifest in both human and hideously nonhuman form, and there are no dividing lines between man, monster, and machine.

The violation of the female is particularly evident in Giger's work. Women-or, at least, part women-are locked into complex machines replete with tubes, wires, chains, and straps. Splayed and pinned, often with legs and arms vulnerably spread, the female body is both a target and a fountainhead for sexual motion. Giger's female figures are either penetrated at every orifice, or expelling fetal or phallic forms in obscene birth parody from groin and mouth. The artist speaks of his own "birth trauma" nightmares-dreams in which he finds himself horrifyingly enclosed in "tubes and passages," and the result is a sequence of "birth" paintings guaranteed to turn the Stomach. Notable is "Stillbirth Machine," a grisly vision of a naked woman inextricably bound to a massive, intricate instrument which apparently extracts from her groin a dead, fetal thing. Like a number of Giger's works, it is suggestive of Kafka's disturbing "In the Penal Colony," a story in which a master torturer invents the ultimate machine for inflicting punishment-a tour de force of technology-and, finding no victims for it, gives himself to the mechanism as a "moral" and aesthetic gesture.

Giger's favorite images of horror are reptilian, as is the ultimate monster in *Alien*. Scaly, tentacled things with flat, fishy eyes, claws, and snaky appendages slither through his paintings. Some resemble the classic image of the devil in medieval woodcuts, with horned head, protruding tongue, and bestial fangs. Others are more reminiscent of saurians, snakes, and more loathsome life forms. In painting after painting they ravage helpless or cooperating females.

The centrality of the birth process in a hideous and quasi-human form in Giger's work has transferred itself to become the primary metaphor of *Alien*. This is particularly evident in the core story of the film. From the beginning, the protagonist of *Alien* is the starship *Nostromo* and its collective crew. With the important exception of Ash, the science advisor who turns out to be an android-not human-the crew is commonplace, familiar through the opening scenes. Unglamorous, "real" astronauts, they live together in gruff camaraderie, grousing about food, teasing each other, dreaming of sex and pay and the end of the trip. Into this workaday world the alien intrudes, its presence commanded by the godlike "mother," the all-powerful company/government under whose auspices and direction the commercial space voyage operates. From the first the alien is unwanted by all but Ash, an inside "man" planted by "mother".

After its initial existence as an egg on a deserted planetoid, the monster finds its first fleshy incarnation within the body of an astronaut. Revealed by fluoroscope like an embryo within a uterus, it is a threatening and unwanted invader inside the body not only of the unfortunate victim, but also of the *Nostromo* and its crew, who try desperately to remove the parasite without killing their luckless companion in the process.

From the beginning, then, the creature both is sustained by its host(s) and represents a life-threatening, biologically incompatible entity within the ship. Even before the shocking explosion of the alien from the guts of its crewman "host," the creature demonstrates its chemical incompatibility when its "blood" is discovered to be intensively corrosive, making injuring the thing extremely dangerous. This alien has a very nasty rh factor.

As the alien advances through its hideous and progressively lethal stages of maturation, the crew wages the central struggle to destroy it on two fronts: one against the creature itself, the other against "mother," with whom the ship communicates by computer, and who shows an increasingly proprietary concern for making sure the creature is delivered "safely" to the parent company, presumably so that it may be studied and used for profit (along with strong feminist leanings, *Alien* exhibits distinct Marxian biases). At first "mother" commands that the alien life form be assumed into the body of the *Nostromo* against the will of the fearful crew, then flatly refuses the crew's desperate begging to be allowed to destroy the lethal thing, and finally fights desperately through its controlled android Ash to sabotage every effort to rid the spaceship of the horror.

The crew is at last reduced to a single human-Ripley, most significantly a woman (it is interesting how close the name is to that of the director, Ridley Scott). By this time the creature has assumed its final form: no more a gelatinous ooze, a

slithering amniotic and amorphous fetal being, or a curvy blob, but a distinctly masculine reptile with jaws and claws, and an obscenely phallic thrusting "member" that runs in and out of its slavering mouth in an unmistakably copulatory and invariably fatal piston-like action. For a time the creature's survival is pleaded by the technological ponderer, Ash, who speaks for "mother," first begging Ripley not to destroy the monster, then attacking her physically in an effort to save the fledgling horror, which he admires for the "perfection of its hostility." Ripley, however, now realizes the inevitable fatality of "delivering" the creature, and she is determined to reject "mother's" command. She destroys Ash in a battle in which "he" attempts to impale her orally on a rolled copy of Playboy. Then she expels the creature from the body of her spacepod, having it sucked out by the vacuum of space.

Central to the entire struggle is the concept of the "horror within" the terrible threat that is the more terrible because it invades the ostensibly safe confines of the self. Whether dealing with the body of an astronaut, or the body of a spaceship, Alien is hardly original, of course, in exploring the dichotomy between inner, "safe" space, and outer, "alien" space. HAL, the fifth column computer of 2001, the "monsters from the id" of Forbidden Planet, and (in a neatly perverse twist) the bacteria who violate the sanitary saucers of The War of the Worlds-all establish an "inner" sanctity violated by a deadly pollution from the outside. The concept of a subversive "danger within" is, therefore, not new to the horror/sci fi genre, but the nature of the lifethreatening, interior "other" in Alien is of a particular sort: it is fetal. The dramatic action of the film develops the tense struggle of a heroine to rid herself and her environment of a gestating lifeform, the maturation of which spells disaster. And from the film's pervasive gynecological imagery, through the moral tension between a young woman and her "mother" over the validity of her ridding herself of her internal burden, to the final vacuum expulsion-the fundamental leitmotif of Alien is clearly abortion.

The producers of Alien, incidentally, were apparently so taken with the idea of a science fiction/horror film based on the birth, gestation, and destruction of incipient alien life that they based the film's sequel, Aliens, on the idea as well. In that film Ripley does assume the role of surrogate mother, in this case to a little girl threatened by a manifestly female alien monster incubating a whole ghastly nursery of developing eggs. Aliens concludes with Ripley wiping out the lot of them with a flame thrower in a massive job-lot abortion just before they hatch.

As to the political and social implications of seeing Alien as a study of abortion, I am hesitant to draw conclusions. Ridley Scott is hardly an ideologue, and little about this film indicates that it is subliminally preaching, either "prochoice," or "right-to-life." It may be suggested, though, that if most couples anticipated a bundle of joy along the lines of H.R. Giger's ghastly reptilian, even fewer pregnancies would go full term.

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