In the belly of the mechanical beast: Technological environments in the Alien films

Steffen Hantke. **Journal of Popular Culture**. Bowling Green: Winter 2003. Vol. 36, Iss. 3; pg. 518, 29 pgs

Abstract (Summary)

Hantke discusses technological spaces in the "Alien" films, direct by Ridley Scott, and the relationship between technological space and class. Since the crew is essentially a group of factory workers, Hantke suggest that the film endorses a working class perspective.

Full Text (11380 words)

I. Living Rooms in Outer Space

In a recent stand-up routine, comedian Tom Rhodes skewers one of the cherished pretensions of science fiction by suggesting that the future is merely a dressed-up version of the present at its most trivial. In itself, this is of course not such a scandalous notion, but Rhodes finds a way to make the joke hit a particularly sensitive spot. Using Gene Roddenberry's Star Trek as the target of his sarcasm, he points out that the bridge of the star ship Enterprise is really nothing more than a bourgeois living room. In front of the big-screen TV, sprawled in his Lazyboy recliner, resides the pater familias; he gets the best seat in the house while the rest of the family is milling around him trying to please and mollify his every whim. This scene of middle-class life is, of course, not to be confused with the gospel of upward mobility according to Martha Stewart or the genteel idylls of Better Homes and Gardens. The middle class Rhodes is talking about is what the French call petit bourgeois and the Germans Spiessburgertum, both terms that imply a stuffy, narrow-minded self-righteousness for which American English, reflecting a culture based on the erasure of social class from social consciousness altogether, lacks an equivalent expression.

What makes Rhodes' routine funny and insightful is only superficially connected to the prediction that the trivial trials and tribulations of bourgeois family life will continue to play themselves out in a future which, according to Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry, is supposed to be a technologically more advanced, and thus, more harmonious and enlightened place than the present. After all, it does not require much armtwisting to convince members of a bourgeois society that their social and cultural experience represents the universal drama of human existence rather than a specific historical manifestation of concrete social and political forces. Even when a trope as specific to a science fiction as "the future" is conceived as a utopia, our ideological limitations still apply; every utopia, no matter if it is located at a historical or a geographic distance, reflects the social conditions under which it is conceived. In order to see our yearnings for "a perfect place elsewhere" satisfied, however, we are well advised to suppress our awareness that our utopian imagination is grounded in historical specifics; our ideas of perfection must feel universal though in reality they are not.1

The question remains if there is anything beyond Rhodes' basic irreverence that makes his observation funny. Basically, his analogy between the supposedly glorious utopian future and the trivial present is accomplished by superimposing one specific social topography onto another-the bourgeois living room on the one hand, and the high-tech bridge of the Enterprise on the other. If Rhodes' comedy can claim to touch a nerve, it is because it openly articulates an analogy between two spaces which commonly goes unacknowledged. Since we need to recognize the validity of this analogy in order to be "in on the joke," i.e., since the analogy itself is fairly obvious once it is openly stated, our laughter comes from our own sense of transgression. It's not that we don't know that there is a similarity between these two spaces; it's that we have learned to abide by a cultural injunction against openly acknowledging this similarity. In other words, the transgression at the root of our laughter is cultural and not cognitive. Our laughter marks our relief when we are allowed, in the carnivalesque discursive space of comedy, to acknowledge as analogous what we were compelled to perceive as incongruous before. It's one of those instances of individual empowerment in the face of cultural conditioning, of pointing out that the emperor isn't wearing any clothes.

But Rhodes' comedy routine reveals something about the significance of spaces as genre markers. While we are apparently willing to accept members of a bourgeois family bickering with each other in outer space as an inevitable manifestation of the human condition, we tend to be startled by the assertion that the spaces in which this drama plays itself out are equally universal. Somehow, Rhodes is asking much from his audience, which is sufficiently competent to recognize the conventions of science fiction, even if it is not comprised entirely of fans, when he urges them to acknowledge that the high-tech spaces of the future are nothing more than the late twentieth-century middle-class living

rooms. These are, after all, the concrete spaces in which this audience finds itself when it consumes these utopian visions. Whereas character and plot can be reabsorbed into the discourse of ahistorical universality, spaces must be reserved for signifying "the future" as a trope of historical specificity. If this rule is broken, what results is not only a transgression against the genre conventions of science fiction, but, more significantly, a kind of profanation or trivialization of the trope of the technological space in the larger cultural context.2

The play between perceived incongruity and repressed analogy in Rhodes' comedy also points to a larger, more general process by which we recognize and assimilate the discursive spaces of science fiction, such as "the future" that are marked as imaginary. The author and the audience's ability to extrapolate plays a significant role here, not so much in the sense of a temporal or logical forward motion in which writers engage when they imagine "the future" for us. Rather, extrapolation comes into play when the audience retraces the author's steps, asking how and from which premise he or she proceeded. Hermeneutically speaking, extrapolation always involves play in both directions simultaneously. Future technology, for example, is always conceptualized in terms of an older, already existing technology (e.g., computers are seen as more sophisticated typewriters or calculators; space "ships" are imagined as variants of their sea-going vessels). This cognitive process of translating the unfamiliar back into familiar terms tends to cease when a new conceptual paradigm allows for new ways of utilizing that same technology or new social conditions call for such a shift. Until this moment, however, imaginary, "future" technology and already existing, real technology share the same conceptual paradigm. Within this paradigm, the imaginary technology functions as an extension (or extrapolation) of the real one, as either its validation or its critique. This provides science fiction with the crucial metaphor with which to comment critically on the technological environment in which it is produced, distributed, and consumed. Hardly ever, I would argue, does science fiction "produce" any genuinely new technology and thus advance or violate the paradigms within which it is produced itself-as much as the community of science fiction fans cherishes this notion and will insist that it validates the existence of science fiction as a valuable contribution to technological and social progress. For the star ship Enterprise this means that, for the time that our imagination is constrained by the paradigm of bourgeois family dynamics, the bridge is indeed nothing more than a living room.

This should serve as a reminder that spaces, no matter if they are late twentieth-century living rooms or high-tech command centers, do not exist outside of or separate from social practices. Spaces in their full significance are produced through the experience of specific social agents inhabiting them, as well as through the interactions among these social agents, interactions that are so closely linked to these spaces, either by their very nature or by force of habit, that they can very well be said to be indigenous to these spaces. In this sense, no space can be experienced as such, without the mediation of experience embedded in social practice. Henri Lefebvre's model of "a natural or physical space" constituting the "initial basis or foundation of social space" (402) is helpful in this context. As natural space is gradually replaced by "successive stratified and tangled networks which, though always material in form, nevertheless have an existence beyond their materiality" (403)-in other words, as the ecosphere is permeated, and eventually replaced by, the technosphere in the course of history-active and passive human experience of these networks invests them with social significance. "Each network or sequence of links," Lefebvre concludes, "and thus each space-serves exchange and use in specific ways. Each is produced-and serves a purpose; and each wears out and is consumed, sometimes unproductively, sometimes productively." For the genre of science fiction this has two distinct implications. First, science fiction deploys technological spaces as metaphors. In this function, they may, for example, serve as an externalization of a character's state of mind or as a trope standing in for an abstract concept like "history" or "civilization." Second, since technological environments are humanmade, they are literally products of human creativity and ingenuity. In some cases, they are imagined as existing without a preceding or underlying natural foundation; the technosphere has replaced the ecosphere, and nature has disappeared completely. For many forms of science fiction, especially recent ones like cyberpunk, no conceptual leap between the sphere of technology and the sphere of consumer culture is necessary any longer. Spaces, like any other form of technology, are commodities. We must therefore ask questions about who owns them, with what intention they were produced, who the intended consumers are, and what the conditions of their production, distribution, and consumption are.

As much as this critical stance applies to all technological spaces produced within a capitalist economy, the production and consumption of the imaginary spaces of science fiction, as Lefebvre would have it, are complicated by one more factor. Unlike our own living rooms, the bridge of the Enterprise is the product of careful cinematic staging. It is not accessible to direct physical experience; we cannot move back and forth through it at will, retrace our steps, change direction, settle in one place or another for as long as we like. Mediated and directed by the camera, by the sequence and duration of cuts and the intervals between them, and by the selection of shots, movements, and angles, our own gaze produces the imaginary spaces of science fiction. More importantly, it reproduces them in accordance with a template produced by the set designers, lighting technicians, camera operators, and editors responsible for creating the images on the screen. The space we experience visually may have no direct physical equivalent; light need not conform to the laws of physics, our gaze is anchored in spots that our bodies could never occupy, and we may travel through walls that are not really there in the first place. Even though we are still producing the spaces, in the sense of Lefebvre's definition, our production is shot through with traces of an earlier production, which simultaneously enables and limits our own freedom as producers of space.

II. Technological Spaces in the Alien Films

Ridley Scott's 1979 film Alien, which will be the main focus of my analysis throughout, almost single-handedly established a new visual grammar for the science fiction film. With the inside of the space ship Nostromo, it provided its audience with glimpses of a fully technological environment from which all traces of nature, in the sense in which Lefebvre uses the term, had been erased; a space that had come into existence, fully formed and without a history, as pure

technosphere. Much has been made of H. R. Giger's biomechanical contributions to the film's design, but what probably remains the most vivid visual memory most viewers have taken away from the film is its gritty, smudged, well-worn look. Raised on the geometric visibility of spaces like those on Star Trek or the clinically white, sterile smoothness and cool, clean surfaces of Kubrick's 2001, science fiction audiences were stunned by the film's visual novelty. This was not the future as it used to be. Since the film's look has been so frequently imitated that, by now, it constitutes a visual paradigm in itself, it takes the words of a critic like John Beard to recover some of the film's innovative impact. "From 1980 to 1990," Beard writes, "the imaginary vision of the future that dominated American film turned almost universally dark, broken, and decaying-and audiences loved it"(2). To some degree, this vision of the future is more informed by images of the American city borrowed from film noir than from the traditions of science fiction, a crossover that also becomes prevalent in the rise of the cyberpunk movement, especially in its canonical texts such as Gibson's Neuromancer from 1984.4 Beard goes on to speculate that, after the 1950s, American popular culture becomes so saturated by new technologies, most of them the technological by-products of the Cold War economy, that "a more sophisticated, forward-looking audience demanded a more realistic and detailed future."3 What Beard, somewhat problematically, identifies as "realistic" in this context, is the very thing director Ridley Scott himself, together with his set designer for Scott's even more cyberpunk-- influenced follow-up film Blade Runner, Syd Mead, has called "retrofitted utilization"(5). The term refers to "strange mixtures of old and new technologies," their uneasy coexistence or interpenetration. A specific aspect of this radically new vision of technology, which Scott himself already anticipates in his earlier film Alien, is described by Beard in detail:

... in the science fiction tims ot the future which appeared in trie Eighties, technology seems to have a much more practical purpose, and it is usually far from elegant in its design. In fact, exposed circuits pop and spark, conduits drip loose cables and lubricating fluids, and machines often break down or need to be reformed into newer (although funkier) versions. The technology is accessible ... technology is subject to greasy hands, patching, mechanical manipulation and innovation on a daily, if nor hourly, basis. Machines are certainly not magic. (11)

This radically new look, which Scott's Alien helps to establish as the visual paradigm for science fiction films to come, reflects a shift away from the gee-whiz optimism that 1950s technological progress helped to bolster. While technology used to provide the future with the rosy tint of utopia, it now epitomizes the dark underside of the technological logic of the Cold War. Instead of the promise of a better life through technology, we are confronted with technological gadgets that are deficient, malfunctioning, and obstinate. Being able to see their insides, we are robbed of the sense of awe and wonder so often cited as the crucial emotional underpinning of science fiction. However, this demystification of technology explains only in part the specific change in visual style. After all, Stanley Kubrick's 2001 already subscribes to a more sober attitude toward technology. When HAL 9000 breaks down like a cheap toaster or an old car, plunging into psychosis and turning against the crew he was designed to protect, Kubrick's technophobia is all the more chilling for the superficial visual sterility of the machine in question. Superficial perfection is ironically played against the hidden pathology of internal imperfection, the sleek outside perhaps even creating a higher degree of distrust and technological paranoia. In other words, imperfect machines can still look stylish; that they are "not magic" is not sufficient to explain why they look like the inside of the Nostromo.

How does technology look in the Alien films? Surprisingly, it seems curiously absent from the films; the weapons used by the crew of the Nostromo are improvised, the space suits worn during the expedition to the alien ship seem relatively primitive, and the medical technology we see used on Kane while he is in the grip of the alien is easily recognizable as a haphazardly updated version of the good old x-ray machine. Assorted technological props make an appearance but they hardly draw attention to themselves. The one single piece of technology that dominates Scott's film is the space ship itself in which the events take place, the technological environment through which the protagonists move and parts of which they interact with. That all traces of nature are erased from this environment is treated as a given, which explains why the Nostromo hardly registers as a machine for most viewers. The Nostromo is second nature, a set of physical conditions that are "just there." This is also true for the three following installments in the series, each of which posits one or two environments (another space ship, a compound of buildings that are part of an outer-space colony, or escape shuttles), that are so fully technological that they function as one vast, omnipresent machine.

What makes this machine in Scott's Alien so unique, and what constitutes such a radical departure from the then dominant visual paradigm, is that it is in fact not a space ship at all; it is an industrial installation designed to travel back and forth between the natural resources it is built to process and the market, Earth, for which its product is destined. The Nostromo is like a drilling platform or refinery that can relocate to a new oil field whenever the old one is depleted. Like most industrial installations, it requires a group of human operators, workers, or engineers, but its functional design is not determined primarily by the requirements of this crew. Its design is determined only by its productive function and therefore neither elegant in any aesthetic nor aerodynamic in any pragmatic sense. It is hardly symmetrical, an amorphous shape covered with bumps and protuberances. The Nostromo is not meant to transport human beings from one place to another, which is why the metaphor of the space ship is inappropriate to describe it. Neither is it a vehicle in the service of space exploration, scientific research, or military expansion-the favorite reasons of, for example, Gene Roddenberry for transporting human beings into outer space.

Just as the outside of the Nostromo is shaped as the product of functional thinking, its insides, which provide the crucial setting for the film, are conceptualized as an industrial machine. This means that human beings are accommodated by its interior design primarily as operators, as workers. Hence, the spaces the Nostromo provides for its crew are primarily operating interfaces. Since virtually all operating interfaces between bodies and machines constitute soft, malleable, and partially yielding boundaries, every interaction between machines and human bodies leads to a mutual exchange of characteristic features. Machines must provide an operating interface that conforms to the requirements of the human

body. This interface must conform to the size, velocity, flexibility, range of motion, strength, and motor skills of the human body. It must provide a complement to as wide a range of its performative capabilities as possible. A computer keyboard, for example, accommodates, among other things, hand-eye coordination, the distance between wrist and fingertips, the size of the fingertips, and the exactly defined range of strength with which the human hand can operate. Shape, size, and strength of the human body can be easily deduced from a keyboard. Future anthropologists could reverse-engineer the human body from the traces left by its inscription on the machines it used to interact with. Conversely, the machine and its precision in performing and accurately reduplicating a task enforces a rigid mechanical discipline on the body of its human operator, a discipline that manifests its re-shaping influence on the body, for example, in work-related ailments unique to specific professions. Inserted, for example, into our cars during the morning commute, our bodies are subjected to the requirements of the combustion engine. An extensive operating interface, which covers more or less our entire bodies, moderates our interactions with the engine: we are partly immobilized and partly activated, positioned simultaneously to screen out and process information, passing it back to the machine through the movement of hands and feet, a regulation and feedback loop integrated into the machine.

How relevant these considerations are to the understanding of technological spaces be comes obvious in what may very well be the most famous jump-cut in all of film history, that between the bone, used by an early ancestor of humankind as an instrument to bludgeon his enemy to death, and the space ship, thousands of years later, dancing gracefully through outer space in Kubrick's 2001. Among the many implications of this jumpcut is the analogy that both objects, though separated by long periods of historical progress, are basically tools, shaped by the form and mobility of the human body just as much as by the ingenuity of the human mind. Though both tools differ in complexity, they extend the range of human activity in particular directions, reflecting the human mind while marking the boundaries of its possibilities. The tools of aggression and imperialist expansion, as Kubrick's famous jump-cut across centuries and technologies implies, not only reflect humans in their innate capacity for aggression, but also determine their path into aggression and expansion. Given this exchange of human and mechanical properties across the boundary between the body and the machine, it is hardly surprising that one of the prime commentators on technoscience, Donna Haraway, has remarked that "mind, body, and tool are on very intimate terms" ("Cyborg Manifesto" 165). Machines in the late twentieth century, so Haraway says,

... have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (my emphasis 152)

Haraway's analysis poignantly captures a sense of the technological environment as a kind of grand-scale prosthesis, as in Kubrick's 2001. Though the interiors of Kubrick's space ships may strike us as coldly clinical and impersonal, they are still meant to wrap themselves protectively around the human body. Their dimensions, angles, connections, and surfaces are determined by the shape, the size, and the mobility of the human body. They are geared toward fulfilling its needs, expanding its range of motion, protecting it from the hostile environment outside the hull while they are transporting it from one place to another. Whatever additional spaces inside the ship coexist with these human quarters are necessary to sustain human habitation: work spaces, machine and engine rooms, the inside of the central computer's "brain," etc. In contrast, Haraway's description falls curiously short of the spaces on board the Nostromo. Since the Nostromo is basically an industrial installation rather than a "ship," its insides are not primarily anthropometric, and thus anthropocentric. The predominant color is a drab gunmetal black, there is no consistent lighting, condensation drips down walls. Characters often travel through air ducts, past cooling towers, or heating vents. Ceilings are either disproportionately high or low, so that human bodies almost always appear spatially disproportionate, inducing a sense of either claustrophobic or agoraphobic unease. These spaces intersect at times with the corridors and rooms inserted into the larger machine as spaces of human habitation; both types of spaces coexist and are equally available for moving about the ship. Consequently, movement is not restricted to two dimensions; the characters climb up and down as much as they run, and the Aliens come busting through the ceiling or the floor in climactic scenes as much as they approach horizontally. For more dramatic effect, lights are often attached to the floor rather than the ceiling, illuminating the scene sharply from low angles.5

The fact that the crew of the Nostromo nevertheless finds itself confined to this space, where it must willy-nilly make a home for itself, is the source of great conceptual tension. How can human beings find themselves inside of a large structure that shelters them from a hostile environment outside and not think of it as a home? This is the question Gaston Bachelard raises in The Poetics of Space when he examines the largely unconscious assumptions we all make in accepting houses as the archetypal images of human habitation. According to Bachelard, all "really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (5). This means of course that even spaces we in habit involuntarily, spaces that may not be entirely suitable for habitation, bear this mark. The house, according to Bachelard, "is the human being's first world. Before he is `cast into the world,' as claimed by certain hasty metaphysics, man is laid in the cradle of the house. And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle ... Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house" (7). Bachelard's description of what he calls "the maternal features of the house" (7) sound like he had the Nostromo's computer, Mother, in mind when she gently awakes the crew from their cryogenic cradles at the beginning of the film.6

If Bachelard is correct, Scott leads us deliberately to imagine the Nostromo as a house and thus invest it with the deeply meaningful and complex significance of a "home." This is the line of thinking that leads us straight back to Tom Rhodes and his joke on the living room in outer space-no house is without a living room, even if it floats through outer space. However, this deep-seated need for cultural investment is never allowed to unfold. Though the Nostromo invites anthropometrization, it also frustrates this desire at every turn of the film. As I argued before, the inside of the Nostromo

is not a place fit for human habitation. Humans are an afterthought to its spatial design, a marginal consideration. Their presence is accommodated only to the smallest degree necessary. They are foreign bodies inside the machine. Our desire to feel at home is brutally curtailed by this functional, and thus spatial, reality. If Haraway's diagnosis, that in all our interactions with machines human and mechanical characteristics are freely exchanged, applies to films like 2001, then the opposite must be true for the inside of the Nostromo. Here we have an obstinately inert environment in which human bodies uneasily assert the fact that they are alive.

This dynamic finds its most dramatic expression in the ways in which space and time are linked in the film. Time is dramatized through the plot device of the "race against time," represented by the frantic efforts of the steadily dwindling number of surviving crew members to leave the Nostromo before its self-destruct mechanisms blows it sky-high. The spatial corollary of this plot device is the labyrinth into which the Nostromo is transformed by the survivor's need for speed. Labyrinths provide surprises, usually unpleasant ones. Theseus tracks his way, with the help of Ariadne's thread, through the labyrinth housing the Minotaur, generating Alien's mythological blueprint along the way. Labyrinths posit space that is only partially visible. Its spaces cannot be extrapolated in linear fashion and are thus continuously unpredictable. An excessive amount of visual detail, packed tightly into the frame of the film, is coupled with a darkness denying full visual control of this same space. Floors are often merely grates, which means that the surfaces on which characters walk are transparent and individual segments can be removed, suggesting impermanence and lack of solidity. While doors, gates, and airlocks appear massive, the alien creatures often come breaking through the walls or the ceiling, making those spatial boundaries appear permeable and untrustworthy. A continuous sense of dislocation follows from this array of, at times paradoxical, spatial features. Sometimes, it is virtually impossible to reconstruct the actual spatial dimensions of the film's settings because the element of subjective distortion, the diminished experiential dimension, is so prominent. These interiors are not spaces to be contemplated, measured, and committed to memory. They are spaces designed for an experience above or below the sensory middle-ground necessary for convert; an experience so intense that it continually borders on visual trauma. The result is, in critic Nicholas Christopher's words, "bewildering and inscrutable enmeshments of time, space, and chance ... [a] set of conditions that produces amazement" (17).

The labyrinthine aspect of the space also ties it into the dimension of time, according to Paul Virilio's thesis that recent advanced technology aims for the control of time rather than the control of space. Throughout a number of books and essays, Virilio has been exploring the cognitive and epistemological implications of this extension of human control over time by means of technology. Speed, Virilio argues, "not only allows us to get around more easily; it enables us above all to see, to hear, to perceive and thus to conceive the present world more intensely" (Open Sky 12). With this assertion, Virilio transfers Lefebvre's notion that space must be produced to the dimension of time. The possibility of projecting ourselves to any place instantaneously, by means of cybernetics, information technology, and media substitutes speed as an experiential category for that of space; it is not the space we traverse that becomes part of our experience but the "here/there" switch that occurs in the blink of an eye. This experience of speed is exacerbated in a fully technological environment, such as the inside of the Nostromo, in which the conventional axes of spatial orientation become insubstantial; our sensory array has, after all, developed in response to the need to orient ourselves within a predominantly natural, and not technological, environment. With "the recent acquisition of the speed of liberation from gravity" (2), not only the mobility but also the morphology of the human body is up for grabs. "The original reference point for sight," and therefore also for spatial orientation, "is therefore not what the Italian masters said it was, that of vanishing lines converging on the horizon, but one bound up with the delicate balancing act of a universal attraction which imposes on us its gearing towards the center of the Earth, at the risk of our falling" (1-2). "Our sky," as Virilio puts it succinctly, "is vanishing" (2). What better space in which to stage the drama of this paradigm shift than the inside of the Nostromo, a space from which all traces of the outmoded "vanishing lines converging on the horizon" and their false promise of a predictable, comprehensible geometric order are absent. Just as gravity itself must be a technologically produced effect on board the Nostromo, there obviously never was an open sky on the inside of the machine. Without a horizon, there is no ultimate frame of reference that enables the body to orient itself through the physical experience of the steady pull of gravity downward and of vision forward.

Virilio points out that "physiologists will discover that the faster you move from one place to another, the further ahead your eyes adapt. From then on, the old `vanishing lines vertigo' is coupled with the projection involved in focusing one's eyes" (29). Hence, the race against time in the Alien films imposes two contradictory imperatives of perception on the viewer. On the one hand, it increases the urgency with which a character must move through the labyrinth inside the machine, thus increasing the relative velocity of the body through space. This increase of velocity is communicated to the viewer by the actor's frenzied body movements, by the camera's increased proximity to the actor's body, by the decreased intervals of time in between cuts, and by the accompanying soundtrack as well as light and sound effects. We the viewers are made to share the increase in speed, which means that we, like the characters racing toward the exit, are invited, even pressured, to focus our eyes on a horizon which moves into the distance faster and faster. On the other hand, the spaces that we must traverse together with the character tend to be small, or, if they are in fact comfortably large, they are experienced as claustrophobic because our eyes require a further point of orientation. Hence, it is not the actual space itself that appears labyrinthine or claustrophobic; it is the speed that determines our perception of this space which makes it so.8 To make matters worse for the viewers and the characters, Scott adds physical immobility to this sense of spatial disorientation. Scattered throughout the Nostromo are electronic computerized mapping devices showing its topography and, at times, the location of bodies within it. The characters repeatedly consult these maps to plot their path through the labyrinth toward the exit. Having access to the information contained in these maps means more or less direct control over the space represented. This electronic mapping of space, which may be considered as a kind of technological self-referentiality, promises what Paul Virilio calls "action at a distance" (16). Coupled with remote control technology, the map is more than just a scaledown, miniaturized representation of the

space the protagonist needs to traverse; it is also a means of directly controlling that space. It opens and closes doors, kicks operating systems into gear, and tracks others walking the labyrinth. In this sense it constitutes what military jargon refers to as C3, a concept that combines communication, command, and control in one seamless technology. While promising, however, the instantaneous projection of the protagonist's will across vast or obstacle-ridden physical distances, these devices increase our sense of claustrophobia. They fail to provide an electronic surrogate for the missing horizon inside the ship, emphasizing the human body as an object constrained and confined. Scott accomplishes this by playing exactly on the discrepancy between the slowness and excruciating entrapment of the protagonist's physical body on the one hand, and her disembodied, technological projection across distances on the other. A place of safety, a way out of the labyrinth, appear all the further away for being so closely visible. For as long as this cognitive tension remains unresolved, the "race against time" accomplishes exactly what Virilio demands from speed-it creates an experience in which time supersedes space. The type of speed that is the foundation of the "race against time" "enables us above all to see, to hear, to perceive and thus to conceive the present world more intensely."

III. Technological Space and Social Class

What should have become obvious from this account of the technological spaces in Scott's Alien is that the visual paradigm of the bourgeois living room in outer space has been replaced with something else. Hence, Tom Rhodes' stand-up routine no longer applies. What takes its place is the image of the industrial machine, which itself can be read either of two ways. Either there is no room at all for human beings on the inside of this machine; the human body is nothing but a grain of sand in its gears. Technology has reached a state of self-sufficiency, a degree, as Haraway would have it, of animation, that requires human beings neither as operators nor as consumers of its final products. They are no longer functionally relevant. Or, instead of erasing humans from the equation altogether, the image of the machine relegates them to an adjunct status to the machinery surrounding them. Retaining a limited degree of animation, which is at best comparable to that of their environment itself, they must conform to the physical requirements of their environment and not vice versa.

The first of these two interpretive models is reminiscent of cyberpunk, which often posits a technology so advanced and self-sufficient that it requires a concentrated effort, sometimes against the specific intentions of its creators, in order to become relevant to human beings. One of William Gibson's favorite ideas-that of the computerized networks achieving selfconsciousness and thus performing the next step up in the evolutionary ladder, articulated both in the Neuromancer trilogy and in his collaboration with Bruce Sterling, The Difference Engine-stands out as the epitome of this vision of technology; human beings have been outpaced, outgunned, and left behind by their own technology. The second interpretive model is derived from film noir and its unique vision of the modern urban environment. Visually, the Nostromo is the epitome of the noir city-dark and labyrinthine, an endless array of blind alleys, an ugly surprise behind every corner, a place of stark lights and shadows, of fear and alienation, and of lurking death. This unique sense of place translates easily into the genre conventions of science fiction, supporting Paul Schrader's theory that film noir must primarily be understood as a visual style.9 It is this visual style, and it alone, that is being passed from film noir to Alien; other elements of noir are notably absent. Unlike the noir city, the Nostromo is not home to the teeming millions; instead of social diversity and anonymity within the modern urban crowd, there is a vast, looming, complex structure which is virtually empty of human life.

The noir setting is essential in allowing Scott to escape from the paradigm of the bourgeois living room. Conceptualized as an urban nightmare in the throes of the daily drama of capitalism, the Nostromo is a place of labor, of money, of production, and of the friction and differentiations produced by this process. As much as the stage of advanced technology allows, the majority of the labor Scott shows us is in fact physical labor. The crew is essentially a group of factory workers; differences in rank are not so much those between blue and white collar but between worker and foreman. All characters are concerned with bonuses and pay. This economic motivation overrides any curiosity that the plot could absorb into scientific curiosity, which is, after all, the prerogative of middle-class entrepreneurial expansionism, and thus associated with the faceless Company that owns the Nostromo and pays the crew's salaries. Ash, the android placed among the crew without their knowledge, stands for this bourgeois entrepreneurial spirit, which avails itself of scientific curiosity and the institutional structures and protocols it engenders. With the help of the ship's computer, he reroutes the journey back to Earth into an investigation of the Alien life form, while the rest of the crew resents the interruption of their usual job responsibilities.

At first glance, the characters and their working-class affiliations mark a decisive shift away from the bourgeois context in which science fiction conventionally imagines human beings and their machines in outer space. But I would be hesitant to go so far as to say that the film therefore endorses a working-class perspective, whatever that may turn out to be in specific detail. To the extent that a shift of this type can occur in a mainstream American film at all, audiences are well advised to moderate their expectations. Representations of class in American popular culture are often imbued with a vision of social mobility, preferably an upward one, that is so enthusiastically endorsed, or so deeply written into the ideological subtext, that the resulting distinctions or conflicts can only be articulated obliquely. After all, the capital necessary to produce a film with a special effects budget like Alien, the machinery of production itself, and the creative minds behind the story and its execution hardly come from a working-class background. And just as the film's creators are middle-class, it is a middle-class audience they are targeting. Instead of presenting a narrative that is grounded in a marginal class sensibility, the film addresses the issue of social class by making "class" one of its themes, whatever perspective it ends up adopting in the final instance. The dimension of space, yet again, is of crucial importance for this purpose.

At first glance, the inside of the Nostromo still shows traces of the distinctions that structure bourgeois space, such as

the one between public and private. There is, for example, a mess hall where the crew takes meals together, just as there are the cryogenic chambers where the crew stays in hibernation during transit. We also see signs that public spaces have been privatized, for example when a coffee mug is prominently displayed on one of the consoles in the cockpit. Residual influences of the living room in outer space, which Tom Rhodes was poking fun at, are still visible in these small details. But these private spaces are almost always problematic. In discussing the relationship between spatial organization and technology in the postmodern conspiracy thriller, Fredric Jameson raises this question: "How there could be private things, let alone privacy, in a situation in which almost everything around us is functionally inserted into larger institutional schemes and frameworks of all kinds, which nonetheless belong to somebody..." (Geopolitical Aesthetic 11). Since all spaces inside the Nostromo are technological, they are produced; and since they are produced, they are the property of somebody. Hence, even the spaces marked as private by the crew's social practice are in fact not private at all. Though they bear marks of personal appropriation, they are ultimately defined by the relations of ownership into which they are "functionally inserted," to use Jameson's words. The Nostromo and everything inside of it, as is perfectly clear, belong to a kind of absentee landlord, the Company, that epitome of industrial capitalism. Jameson's question-"how could there be private things, let alone privacy?"-inside a space like that is largely treated as a rhetorical question by Scott and his fellow directors in the series. The answer is simple-there is none.

Hence, what initially looks like a distinction between private and public is quickly dissolved into a single homogeneous space. When Jameson talks about technological environments in the thriller, he sees a "secret underground world, ... a vivid, if paranoid, cognitive map" (15) of communication, command, and control. This map is hidden inside the visible technology; phone lines, for example, provide simultaneously a network of legitimate communication and covert illicit surveillance. Inside of these virtual technological fields, there are what appear to be privileged sites, distinct location where the networks' secret function is exposed and the tables can be turned on those in power-places where, says Jameson, "the hero is able to tap into the circuits and bug the buggers." Discussing the noir city, Nicholas Christopher outlines the same vision of hidden depth beneath the inconspicuous surface. "Every American city," Christopher writes, "is always a tale of two cities: the surface city, orderly and functional, imbued with customs and routine, and its shadow, the nether-city, rife with darker impulses and forbidden currents, a world of violence and chaos. The one superimposed uneasily over the other" (36). Not so in the technological topography of Alien, where the Company's surveillance of its property is up-front and out in the open. The Nostromo is a vast surveillance device, charting and recording its surroundings as well as its internal functioning. By foregrounding this function of the machine, Alien eschews the double-layered structure of depth versus surface by playing up the issue of social class. Since we are inside an industrial installation, all space is workspace. Since all workspace is designed according to efficiency, all space is monitored and all information gathered is fed back into the machine. Given that this space is identified right away as the property of the Company, there is no need for a cover-up of its structure and purpose.

Jameson himself acknowledges that there is what he calls "ghostly proletarian content" (14) in Scott's film when it stages an "inscription of collective non-alienated work that passes the censor by way of its rewriting in terms of crime and sub-generic entertainment" (14-5). Presumably, what Jameson refers to in this comment is the crew's collective effort to escape from the Nostromo, which, at the behest of the Company, has been deliberately contaminated by the alien organism. Jameson's guarded optimism, however, fails to acknowledge that, as the crew's collective efforts to rescue itself are almost completely defeated, the narrative shift from collective effort to individual heroism, making Ellen Ripley, Sigourney Weaver's character, into the lone hero and thus effectively into the bearer of the franchise. The attenuation of the theme of social class can be felt immediately in James Cameron's direct sequel, Aliens. The great commercial success of Cameron's film comes at the expense of Scott's subversion of social class within the genre formula, yoking, in the words of critic Thomas Doherty, "science fiction to action adventure and [reflecting] the military's restoration to public esteem in the Reagan era" (190). In Cameron's film, the working-class collective is replaced by a group of space-age marines. There are still marginal traces of social difference; there is constant friction, for example, between the ineffectual commanding officer on the one hand and the enlisted marines on the other. Yet the overarching collectivity of this group is defined by military and not social structures. These structures function, at least in the public perception, as a social equalizer, overriding the civilian social identity of which the soldier is stripped during basic training. This move reinscribes the social dynamics of the first film into a post-Vietnam narrative. The story is a familiar one: a highly trained, technologically advanced platoon of cocky marines is being defeated and humiliated by an underestimated enemy fighting with nothing more than its own body and cunning.10 A remnant of social difference can at best be found in the larger juxtaposition between the military, represented by the soldiers, and the civilian world of industrial capitalism, for which "the film reserves its deepest hatred" (Doherty 192), most notably represented by the yuppie-ish Paul Reiser character who, to the cheers of the audience, finds a well-deserved grisly end at the hands of his projected investment. In the wake of Cameron's film, Jameson's phrase of the "ghostly proletarian content" of Alien seems even more appropriate. In every succeeding film, social class is always relegated, still visibly yet discretely, to the background. In Alien 3, it is written into the thematic background of America's rapidly increasing prison population and the accompanying privatization of the prison system; in Alien Resurrection, it appears as an aspect of post-Cold War small entrepreneurship as a supplement to the restructuring of the military-industrial complex in which the distinctions between "military" and "industrial" tend to become increasingly blurry. After the first film, in which the characters are literally workingclass, the cast of characters in every following film undergoes what can at best be called proletarization, a mere shadow of what was merely "ghostly proletarian content" to begin with.

With the use of technological space, the issue of social class is channeled back into a bourgeois perspective, as the plot of Scott's film and, to a lesser degree, its successors, conceptualizes this absence of middle-class prerogatives as loss or trauma. We are not supposed to experience the absence of privacy as simply the condition under which a specific social class exists within the larger system of capitalism. Instead, we are supposed to be outraged at the

violation perpetrated upon a group of characters deserving better. The conditions under which they exist are to appear inhuman. The crew discovers gradually to what extent it is being brutalized by these conditions, first when Ash is exposed as non-human, and second when Mother's prerogative, to sacrifice the crew in the pursuit of economic advantage, is discovered. The Company's utilization of its human resources-a term that, despite its frankness about the relative value of human life as part of the production process, hardly raises an eyebrow in contemporary American usage-and its surveillance are presented as a betrayal of its employees. What could potentially serve as a critique of the conditions imposed upon a particular social class is transformed into a narrative in which the bourgeois prerogative of certain rights and privileges must be recovered. The narrative universe of Alien is out of balance, though only for as long as it takes to re-establish an order whose legitimacy appears to derive from morality but does derive from social privilege.

In this context, the inside of the Nostromo functions as a metaphor for the body of the parent and thus the body of authority itself. Introduced by Ridley Scott's scriptwriters Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett, the Nostromo's ubiquitous onboard computer, the long arm of the Company, is named "Mother" in the first film. Joss Whedon, scriptwriter of Alien Resurrection, picks up the clue and, appropriately, names the on-board computer of the Auriga "Father." These choices suggest that we are to think of the Nostromo and the Auriga respectively as the mechanical body with which industrial capitalism has equipped itself, its technological reification, if you will. To make sure that we do not miss the point, Whedon invests "Father" with even more significance by having his mainframe accessed, of all possible places, from the Auriga's chapel, the symbolic center of Western Christianity, the religion of the white male patriarchal God.

Feminist critics with a psychoanalytical perspective have made much of the psychological implications of being trapped inside a parent's body, as the characters in the Alien films habitually are. Freud himself, in his comments on the family romance, has described best the ambiguity inherent in the attempt to leave the parent's body, and thus to achieve the next step of individuation, and the labyrinthine structure, coupled with Bachelard's description of the house as womb and cradle, which holds the characters in place and allows them no exit into complete separation. Freud writes:

If we examine in detail the commonest of these imaginative romances [in which the child robs "those born before him of their prerogatives"], the replacement of both parents or of the father alone by grander people, we find that these new and aristocratic parents are equipped with attributes that are derived entirely from recollections of the actual and humble ones; so that in fact the child is not getting rid of his father but exalting him (300).

Seen in the context of the representations of social class in Alien, Freud's comments shed light on the film's persistence in showing the technological environments as inescapable. With every moment of revelation in the course of the plot and with every sordid secret about the Company's use of its human resources that is being un covered, the presence of the Nostromo becomes more oppressive and unalterable. By reverting to a middle-class perspective, the film exalts the power of the Company and the economic system it represents rather than diminishing it.

This symbolic investment pushes the boundaries of the trope even further, as the films establish another analogy, this one between the body of the machine and the body of the human beings inhabiting it. Gaston Bachelard would argue that this analogy is almost inescapable and begs to be explored further. As a side effect of the experience of houses as spaces of intimacy, we project human characteristics upon them. Faced with the hostility of the elements outside the Nostromo, "the house's virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues. The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body ... Such a house as this invites mankind to heroism of cosmic proportions. It is an instrument with which to confront the cosmos ... Come what may the house helps us to say: I will be an inhabitant of the world, in spite of the world" (46-47). The exchange of metaphorical properties between the body of the machine-Bachelard's "instrument with which to confront the cosmos"-and the body of the heroic warrior bracing himself, or in the case of Alien, herself, against overwhelming physical resistance, becomes literalized through the discourse of science fiction. Consequently, just as the humans are alien inside the machine, their own bodies are colonized by machines or machine-like organisms. Just as the alien creature inside the human body is always contaminated or invisibly colonized by forces of industrial capitalism, so the body of the machine is always already colonized by the same forces. Just as the alien organism needs to bust out violently from the body of the humans, so the humans need to bust out/ be ejected with violent force from the body of the machine. Just as the ejection of the alien's body destroys the human body, the ejection of the human body/ies destroys the body of the machine (the Nostromo in Alien, the colony in Aliens, and the Auriga in Alien Resurrection all blow up in the climactic moment of the films).

The contamination of one body by another proceeds according to a principle of repeated and continuous insertion: the alien creatures are inserted into the human bodies, which are in turn inserted into the body of the machine, which is in turn inserted into the "machine" of industrial capitalism. This logic of repeated insertion is spelled out most clearly in a moment like the one at the beginning of Alien Resurrection: the opening credits are superimposed upon the writhing coils of the monstrous body, which is later revealed to be the body of Ripley #7, a half-human, half-alien organism. As the camera keeps traveling over the surfaces of this body, the spaces traversed appears to go on and on. Then we cut from the credit to the film's opening shot: a similarly endless view of the Auriga, the space ship that serves as the setting for the entire film. This cut arranges the two sequences into a position of analogy: two bodies that are analogous and yet are inserted into each other. The sequence following emphasizes this point even further. In great detail we witness the removal of the alien fetus from Ripley's body. Then we witness the emergence of Ripley's body from a membrane in which she is contained, locked yet again inside her prison cell, while she is recovering from the surgical procedure.

This extension of the technological space outward, through the labyrinth, and inward, through the repeated insertions of bodies, would seem to lock down the narrative of Alien and its sequels into a model of industrial capitalism from which

there is no escape-neither into the freedom of inner space (the freedom of the imagination or of privacy), nor into the freedom of an outside. And yet it is the escape to the outside that the films persistently offer to the characters and the audience as a locus of hope, safety, and narrative closure. To escape from the inhuman control of the Company, embodied by the technological environment of the Nostromo, the crew simply needs to abandon the ship and get out. The race against time, which makes up the climactic moments of Alien and all of its successors, is a race to get out of the machine.

To determine whether the Alien films hold out the promise of escape, we must decide between two basic interpretive choices. On the one hand, we can read each film in the series as a self-contained narrative. In this case, Ridley Scott and each one of the directors following in his foot steps makes it clear that there is no escape because there is, properly speaking, no outside. To survive in outer space, human beings need to entrust their bodies to yet another machine. Her escape leads Ellen Ripley from the Nostromo to the escape pod, which is yet another technological space on a par with the one she just escaped from, not to mention that the alien creature follows her into the escape pod. The film's original promotional tagline-"In space, nobody can hear you scream"-emphasizes this point even further; there is no safe "outside" to which the characters can escape. Even when we expand our angle to see the films in their intertextual connectedness, they still insist that, from one installment in the series to the next, the characters merely make it from the fire into the frying-pan. Ripley travels from the Nostromo and its escape pod at the end of Scott's Alien straight to the Company's space station and the Sulaco at the beginning of the second film, James Cameron's Aliens. From the escape pod at the end of Cameron's film they proceed to a literal prison in Fincher's Alien 3. And from this penal colony, they move on to the Auriga in Jeunet's Alien Resurrection. Every one of these technological labyrinths is under the control of the Company, and so one text, and one technological space, opens up right into the next. As the spatial dimension of the technological labyrinth itself is extended, so is the temporal dimension that determines our experience of these spaces. The race against time, now construed as a narrative that encompasses all films so far, is one long trajectory headed toward the prospect of final escape. Consequently, the technological environments in all four films function as a trope for intertextuality, drawing attention to the films' mode of production, distribution, and consumption within the boundaries of the very critique the films themselves articulate.

Consequently, it is the latest film in the series which extends the promise that this goal of escape is in fact attainable. Read as part of a continuing intertext, Jean-Pierre Jeunet's Alien Resurrection is finally headed for a moment of resolution. The film ends with an approach to Earth, the destination for which Ellen Ripley has been heading since the beginning of the very first film. Jeunet even goes so far to show us a glimpse of Earth through a window, as the escape vehicle, the Betty, is penetrating the cloud cover and preparing for its final descent. The sight granted to us from the shuttle's perspective is composed of brilliant sparkling greens, blues, and whites, all colors that stand in stark contrast to the visual grammar the series has introduced into popular culture. This is a space that, at least from a distance, is neither technological nor enclosed. This may be space outside the control of the Company. For the very first time, there is an "outside" to which escape is genuinely possible.

If there is to be a sequel to Alien Resurrection, which most likely will then be the final episode in the series, the yet-to-bedetermined director needs to make a crucial choice, picking up where Jeunet left off. The imaginary final installment could stay true to the spirit of its predecessors. This would mean that Earth, the little glimpse of hope, turns out to be yet another extension of the technological environment we have seen throughout all of the films so far. Like all the other films so far, it would have to start with the sobering realization that what looked like successful escape only would lead into another part of the labyrinth. This decision would indicate that there is no escape from the vast machinery of industrial capitalism because all external alternatives and internal lacunae have been fully colonized. And it would mean that the space on the inside of this machine is egalitarian in the sense that all social distinctions are subject to a type of downgrading in which bourgeois ideologies persist despite working-class conditions of existence.

In combining this persistent vision of social reality with a new visual paradigm, which could be emerging with the glimpse of Earth at the end of Jeunet's film, the imaginary last installment has the potential of breaking genuinely new ground. That it would not have to return to the outmoded trope of the "living room in outer space" should go without saying; for that, the visual paradigm of the "belly of the mechanical beast" that has taken its place since Ridley Scott's Alien is a far too familiar, and far too successful, visual paradigm by now. As much as most audiences would like to see the series end with a glimpse of hope-and most critics would like to see what specific solution to its ongoing social critique the series would have to offer with its final installment-what is at stake is the economic viability of the franchise. Visual and ideological consistency are part and parcel of how a film does at the box office. Given the astronomical production costs that special-effects projects tend to run up these days, few directors are in a position to demand economic risks from their sponsors. This creates a situation in which another stand-up comedian, taking his or her clue from Tom Rhodes, is sure to poke fun at the technological spaces according to Ridley Scott. Jeunet has taken the series to a point where it has the potential of avoiding this fate of overfamiliarity and, following closely in its wake, cultural obsolescence. Whoever will take charge of that last installment in the series, he or she may yet point the way out of the labyrinth.

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1 In this sense, the utopian impulse, which is connected to the practice of projecting the space of utopia into the spatial or temporal distance, is infused with elements of nostalgia, as Susan Stewart defines it in her book On Longing. "Nostalgia, like any form of

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narrative is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack" (cited in Gonzalez "Autotopographies" 137). Stewart's commentator, Jennifer Gonzalez, concludes, "Like the Lacanian notion of desire, nostalgia is always a desire for desire itself." This statement strikes me as appropriate for describing utopian yearning as well, especially since Gonzalez herself emphasizes the spatial manifestation of this desire by choosing the term "autotopography"-a self-contained, often imaginary spatial construct reflecting the psychic condition of its creator.

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2 In his study The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of, Thomas Disch argues that science fiction has long permeated American culture to a degree that its tropes are hardly even perceived as genre-specific any longer, and that it has thus begun to shape public discourse in a variety of fields. In his discussion of Star Trek and its "parables of success-through-team-effort that can [also] be found on such later workplace-centered sitcoms as The Mary Tyler Moore Show and Designing Women" (Dreams 101-02), Disch suggests that the hidden analogy of a show like Star Trek is that of the corporate workplace. "Turn down the sound, and look at the show's sets," Disch recommends with an irreverent glee bordering on that of Tom Rhodes. "Where in real life would one be likeliest to encounter an environment so brightly and blankly geometric and uniformly lighted? Dress everyone in suits instead of pajamas, and it's clear that the Starship Enterprise is actually an office disguised as the Future. What other future, after all, is a likelier destination for most of the younger viewers who will graduate to the Enterprise from schoolrooms that are also visual analogs to the show's sets?" (101). The board room and the living room are not unrelated, however. The corporate structure, with its paternalistic authoritarianism and hierarchical ranking, is modeled on the bourgeois family with the benevolent tyrant of the pater familial at the top. Though this conceptual leap is a relatively short one, Disch's analysis is presented in the tone of critical analysis and not, like Rhodes', that of ridicule. This indicates that the analogy with the board room is still more dignified, and hence more acceptable within the genre boundaries of science fiction, than that with the living room.

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3 It is useful to amend Lefebvre's definition of the production of space by placing it in the context of Michel de Certeau's work in The Practice of Everyday Life, which stresses that consumers of space are not limited in the range of possible uses by the authoritarian

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impositions that the producers have placed on their product. Being a consumer, de Certeau reminds us, is an active, creative process in which new and unforeseen possibilities are constantly generated. See The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984).

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4 Nicholas Christopher, in his book Somewhere in the Night, points out that the two traditions do not exist separate from each other but that there is a crucial overlap in urban imagery from the very beginning. Fritz Lang's Metropolis is the crucial text in this line of historical development, creating the urban imagery that is to reappear in both film noir and science fiction (64-65).
5 The few spaces that appear to contradict this impression, such as the cryogenic chambers where the crew is "stored" for the duration of the flight, ultimately re-enforce the relative insignificance of the human body. The crew is expendable for the purposes of the industrial process; could the process be conducted without a human crew as a backup system in case of emergency, cost efficiency would dictate that there would be no crew at all. As human beings are marginal to the functioning of the machine, so their bodies are largely irrelevant to the design of the machine. In this sense, even the cryogenic chambers are not, properly speaking, private spaces.
6 Bachelard's description of daydreaming makes it very clear that the "passionate liaison of our bodies, which do not forget, with an unforgettable house" (15) is the poetic analog of our memories of the body of the mother. In the larger Freudian framework of his discussion, this memory cannot be recovered or accessed directly any longer; it can only be recovered through poetic activity. There "exists for each one of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past" (15).
7 Virilio indicates that this discussion of the reference points of spatial orientation is an on going project: "Hence," he reminds his readers, "[his] repeatedly reiterated proposal to round off the chronological (before, during, after) with the dromological, or, if you like, the chronoscopic (underexposed, exposed, overexposed)" (Open Ski 15).

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8The inside of the machine contains almost exclusively two spatial proportions: either it is claustrophobic, harking back to such prototypically gothic writers as E. A. Poe and the fear of the live burial, or it is of a size that dwarfs the human beings moving around in it, a concept reminiscent of early forms of the technological sublime, as in Piranesi's famous etchings in the Carceri. These spatial proportions correspond to two preferred camera shots: the camera

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moved in to an extreme close up on the one hand, and the camera removed to the distance of the conventional establishing shot on the other. There are few middle distance camera shots throughout all the films. If we use the body as the measurement of our spatial experience and our sense of spatial orientation, then the preferred use of these two camera perspectives and the absence of middle-distance shots emphasizes simultaneously the vastness of the surrounding machine and the tight enclosure of the human body inside of it.

9 Nicholas Christopher summarizes Schrader's argument and, as many later critics, of film noir works out the point of departure for his own reading of the genre from that of Schrader's; see Christopher, Somewhere in the Night, 239.

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Indexing (document details)

Subjects:	Motion pictures, Science fiction & fantasy, Motion picture criticism
People:	Scott, Ridley
Author(s):	Steffen Hantke
Author Affiliation:	Steffen Hantke has written extensively about popular genres and contemporary literature and culture. He currently teaches at Sogang University in Seoul.
Document types:	Feature
Publication title:	Journal of Popular Culture. Bowling Green: Winter 2003. Vol. 36, Iss. 3; pg. 518, 29 pgs
Source type:	Periodical
ISSN:	00223840
ProQuest document ID:	322872851
Text Word Count	11380
Document URL:	http://online.library.marist.edu/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=322872851&sid=5&Fmt=3&clientId=14836&RQT=3 09&VName=PQD